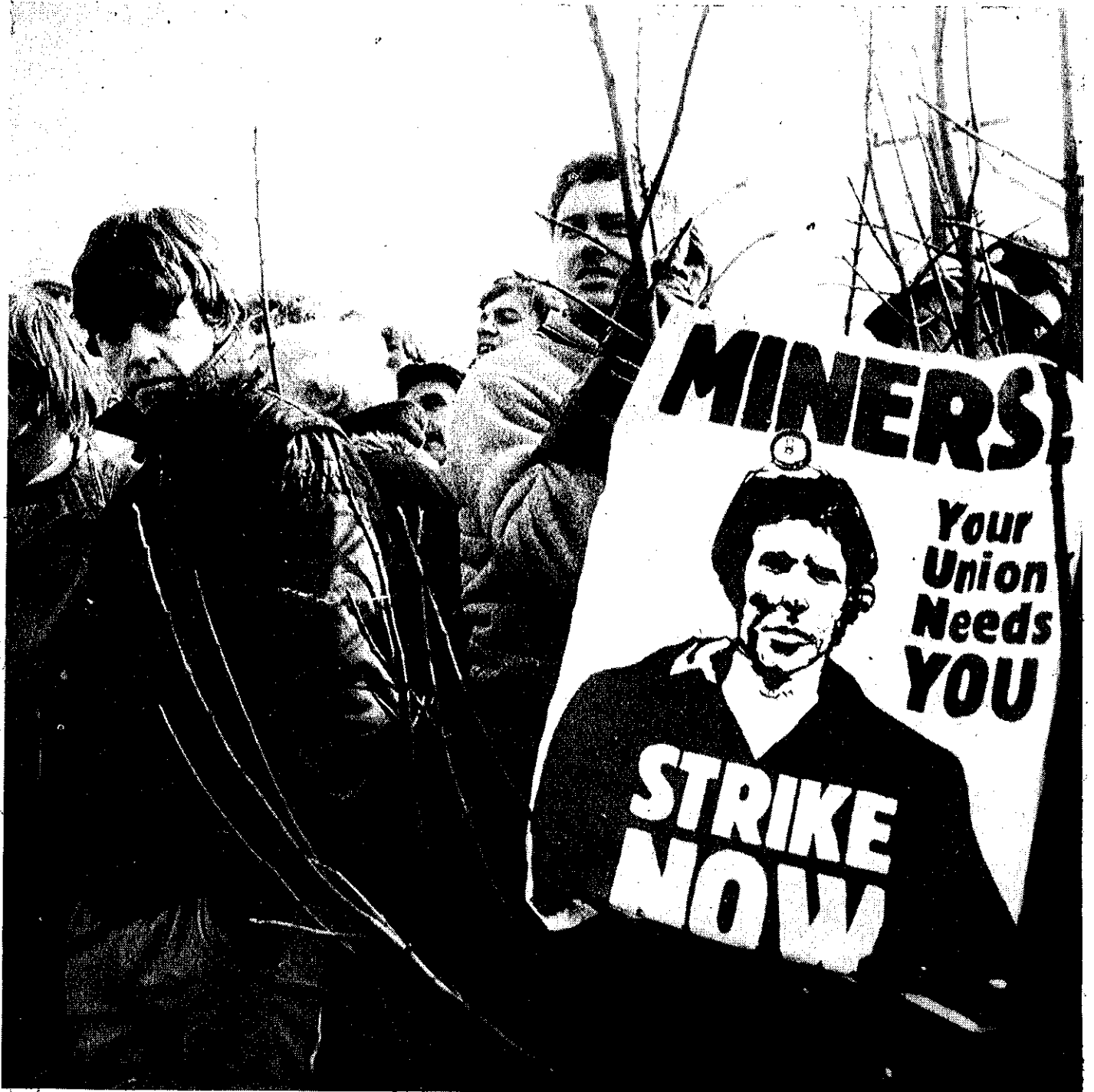


12 MONTHS THAT SHOOK BRITAIN



THE STORY OF THE STRIKE

MacGregor's assault

IN THE small hours of Monday March 12 1984, hundreds of Yorkshire miners moved across the border from Yorkshire into Nottinghamshire. Their destination was Harworth pit, and by the evening shift they had picketed it out.

Over the next few days, hundreds of Yorkshire pickets came down over the border again and spread out across the Notts coalfield. Their mission was to persuade Nottinghamshire's miners to join them in a strike to stop the pit closures announced by the National Coal Board chief, Ian MacGregor. Their tactic was to picket Notts to a standstill.

In the great miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974, miners had picketed coke depots and power stations. In 1984, for reasons which we will examine, it had to be miners picketing out miners. That fact dominated and shaped the course of the strike.

Within hours, 1000 extra police had been thrown into Nottinghamshire against the picketing miners. Within days there would be 8000 extra police — highly mobile, centrally-controlled, semi-militarised police — moving around the coalfields of Nottinghamshire.

The state had spent a dozen years preparing for this strike and everything had been made ready. Plans to beat mass picketing had been refined; police had been trained; special equipment had been assembled; and a national police nerve centre had been prepared and readied for action.

The Tory government had manoeuvred for years to avoid a premature battle with the miners. In 1981 sweeping pit closures were announced, and then withdrawn

industry.

After years of slump and mass unemployment the labour movement was in a weakened condition. Its morale was low, its combativity declining, its leaders more

Every local Labour Party, every union branch, every stewards committee must, in the next few days, put the miners' strike at the centre of all their activities.

Victory to the miners! Intensify the picketing! Boycott all coal movement! Bring out the power stations! TUC: call a 24 hour general strike! Organise for an all-out general strike!

Socialist Organiser Industrial Special,
April 4, 1984

concerned to undercut, sabotage and burke militancy than to fight the Tories. The NUM had been weakened too.

Between the miners' bloodless victory over Thatcher in 1981 and March 1984, 40 pits had been closed or merged. Morale had been eroded. The closures of Kinneil (December 1982) and Lewis Merthyr (March 1983) provoked only limited local

struggles.

Arthur Scargill was elected NUM president in December 1981 with 70 per cent of the vote; but in January 1982 miners rejected a leadership proposal to strike over pay by 55%. In October 1982 61% of miners voted not to strike over pay and pit closures — despite a campaign by Arthur Scargill for strike action. In March 1983, when the strike over Lewis Merthyr began to spread from South Wales, the National Executive Committee called for a national miners' strike, but 61% of miners rejected the proposal.

Arthur Scargill repeatedly warned miners that the NCB had a secret 'hit-list' of 70 or so pits marked down for closure, but either he lacked credibility with them or the miners no longer had the stomach to defend themselves.

That's how the Tories read it. So they decided that the time had come for a showdown with the miners.

In September 1983 Ian MacGregor became chair of the NCB. MacGregor had carved up the steel industry for the Tories. In America in the 1970s he had master-

The miners' strike is a tremendously important mobilisation, the most important working class battle for many years. (...)

Once again, the miners — despite their divisions — are the shock troops and standard bearers of the working class. Once more the miners are telling a foul anti-working class Tory government that they can't run things exactly as they like and that the miners are calling them to account. It is the most vital and direct interest of every worker in Britain to stand on the line with the miners and help them win.

Socialist Organiser Industrial Special,
April 4, 1984

when a wave of strikes swept the coalfields. The Tories were determined that the battle would come when the government was ready and thought the time right. In 1981 they weren't ready. The labour movement had not been softened up enough. So Thatcher backed off from a showdown with the NUM.

In 1984 they were ready. Now they would provoke the miners to fight back by giving them the alternative of surrendering and letting the NCB do as it liked with the



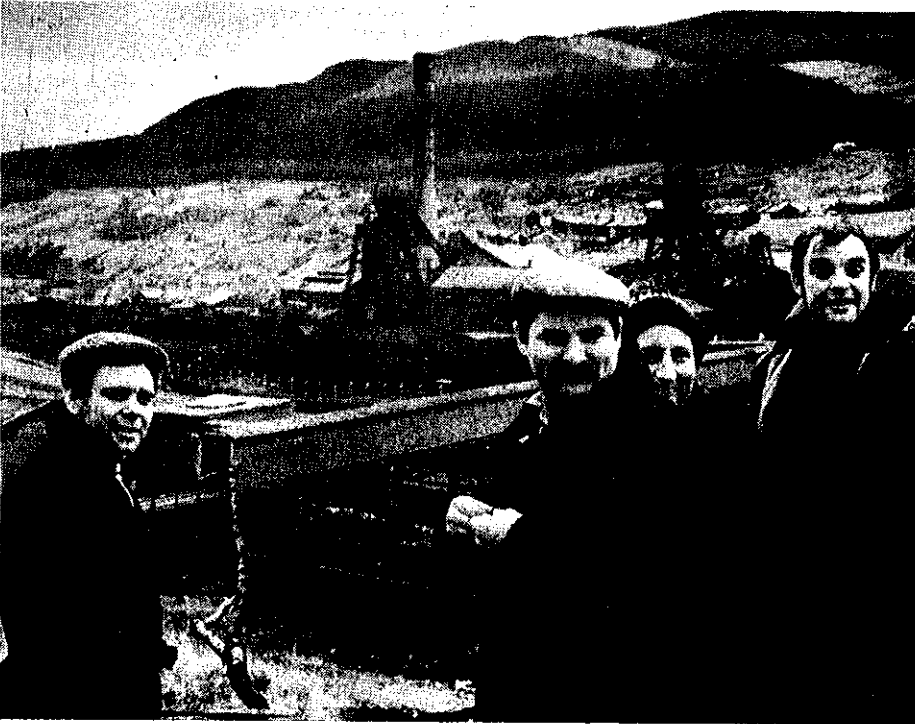
Picketing out Thurcroft colliery Yorkshire on March 5

minded the employers' campaign in one of the most brutal labour wars of recent American history — the successful war to break the miners' union in Harlan County. MacGregor was to be the Tories' pit-butcher and union-buster. His appointment was undisguised preparation, if not an outright declaration, of war.

But was the NUM ready for war? The

election for NUM secretary in January 1984 showed only a small margin in favour of the victorious left-wing candidate, Peter Heathfield, over his right wing opponent John Walsh. The miners still seemed in the mood to retreat; the militant leaders of the NUM increasingly out of line with their movement.

So the Tories attacked.



Lewis Merthyr closed in spring 1983

Picket or ballot?

Should they have a national ballot? The executive was in the business of mobilising the miners to resist MacGregor's attack, not out to demobilise those who had decided to act. So the executive voted 21 to 3 against a ballot.

They were 100 per cent right to refuse to go to a ballot at that point. It was the responsibility and the duty of the executive to respond to MacGregor's attack and to give a fighting lead — not to paralyse the NUM in the face of the challenge thrown down by the Tory hit-man MacGregor.

If Britain were engaged in a conventional war, having to respond to an attack, and with battles raging over a wide front, then the Tories, and the Dennis Healeys and Neil Kinnocks, would reject with indignation and scorn the idea that a national plebiscite should be held to determine whether the people wanted to fight or not.

They would say that anyone who wanted such a plebiscite *intended* that the country, and in the first place its 'leadership', the government, should be paralysed, and was, therefore, deliberately or unknowingly, helping the enemy. *They would be dead right about that, from their point of view.*

The advocates that the NUM should have held a plebiscite instead of immediate action when the Tories unleashed the war they had spent many years preparing against the NUM either wanted the NUM to be paralysed or didn't care whether it was or not. None of them demanded of MacGregor and the Tories that there should be a ballot to see how many miners voted for

pit closures. Neither the establishment politicians, nor the press, expressed indignation in 1977-8 against the introduction of area incentive schemes *despite* a national ballot vote against such incentives. They were keen to take advantage of a division among miners which, in part, resulted from those schemes. In the case of Notts, this was a major factor in the strike.

The miners' NEC refused to let themselves be paralysed. And now that the lines were drawn, the miners responded magnificently. Encouraged by the executive, the strike spread. On March 9 Durham and Kent called area strikes. A South Wales delegate conference recommended that South Wales should strike, but over the weekend of 10th-11th pits in the area decided by about two to one not to strike.

A MORI opinion poll showed 62% of miners wanting a strike.

The Notts delegate conference declined to take action before an area ballot, and the Northumberland and Leicestershire leaderships voted against a strike.

That was the situation on Monday March 12 as flying pickets went into action to make it a national strike and to enforce the area strike decisions. Despite their branch votes, most of South Wales came out immediately. The South Wales miners would prove to be obdurate, solid and immovable throughout the long year of hardship and deprivation that was to follow.

By Wednesday March 14 the NCB admitted that 132 out of 174 pits had been shut.

On March 1, when local management announced the closure of Cortonwood colliery in Yorkshire, South Yorkshire miners immediately went on unofficial strike. On March 5, with half the Yorkshire miners already out, the Yorkshire area council called an official strike from March 9.

But South Wales miners had come out over the closure of Lewis Merthyr — and Lewis Merthyr had nevertheless closed. More than local action was needed. Miners had been this far towards confrontation before without an all-out fight.

On March 6 the Scottish area council called on Scottish miners to strike from March 9. Polmaise pit had already been out for three weeks against closure.

Now Ian MacGregor took a hand, pouring petrol on the fire. On March 6 he told the NUM that 20 pits would close in 1984, that 20,000 jobs would be cut, and *that there might be compulsory redundancies.*

MacGregor was telling the NUM either to back off, or to try to stop him closing down 20 pits. The Tories, not the miners, chose this fight. But — after the rejection of their proposal for a national strike over Lewis Merthyr exactly a year before — did the NUM national executive have any alternative but to back off and let the Tory juggernaut roll unopposed over the 'uneconomic' pits and coalfields? To their eternal glory they thought they did have an alternative.

On March 8 the executive endorsed the decision of the Yorkshire and Scottish areas to strike, and they endorsed in advance the decision any other area might take for strike action.

But Notts was the major problem. The Yorkshire flying pickets had some initial successes. When Yorkshire miner Davy Jones was killed picketing at Ollerton, on Thursday March 15, the Notts leaders called an area strike — until the following Sunday.

By Friday March 16 only 11 collieries were working normally, according to the NCB itself.

On Thursday March 15 and Friday March 16 ballots were held in many areas. Northumberland voted for a strike. Right-wing Cumberland, Midlands, South Derbyshire, Lancashire, Notts and North Wales voted not to strike. So, narrowly, did North Derbyshire. On Sunday 18th a Notts delegate conference decided to go back. On March 20 the result of a ballot showed 90% against a strike in Leicestershire.

The miners were split, without a common line. What happened next would be determined by the strength of the picketing by striking miners and their supporters, and by how the miners in areas which voted not to strike would respond when confronted by pickets from the striking areas. The press and politicians set up a tremendous din, telling the miners that they should not strike without a national ballot. The ballot was democracy and anything else was not democratic.

Newly elected Peter Heathfield put the issue squarely when he said this about the demand for a national ballot: 'Can miners in successful areas have the right to vote miners in less successful areas out of a job?'

To make a national ballot the essence of 'democracy' here was to make democracy into tyranny, and to deny the right of a minority — if miners who wanted to strike were in fact the minority: an opinion poll said that 62% wanted to strike — to defend itself.

The Tories tried to use the framework of the NUM as a straitjacket to imprison miners whose jobs were threatened. They could only fight, these strange democrats said — and not only the Tories, but Kinnock and Hattersley too — if they could get a national majority in the federal union to agree to fight. If they could not, they should lie down and let the Tories walk all over them, smash up their communities and

devastate whole areas like Kent and South Wales.

The call for a national ballot was never a democratic demand, but a demand to repress and straitjacket the militants. (Tactical considerations about the ballot are a separate matter, dealt with in the section, 'Critics of the NUM leadership').

The provisions about balloting in the new Tory trade union laws are designed precisely to make the unions into machines for repressing militancy. The pseudo-democrats in the Labour Party leadership who joined in the propaganda against the NUM leadership over the ballot stood throughout the miners' strike — and stand now — on the grounds and within the framework of the Tory anti-union legislation.

Once the militants had struck they had every right to appeal for basic working class solidarity to other workers — and in the first place to miners. South Wales, which voted not to strike, showed what was possible here.

Or didn't they have that right? If not, why not? Those who say they didn't stand yet again on the ground of the new Tory legislation, which forbids 'secondary' picketing.

Of course a united NUM would have been better by far. The fundamental thing about the NUM in March 1984 was that it was not united, and nevertheless its leaders and militants had to fight back against the well-timed Tory offensive.

The miners divided

The first part of the miners' tragedy — and that tragedy would unfold inexorably for a full year until the last moving scenes in March 1985, when singing miners, escorted by their families and by bands, marched back to work — lay in this: that, the NUM being divided, the militant, fighting part of the NUM had to appeal for basic working-class solidarity in defence of their jobs and their communities first to *other miners*, to members of their own union — and that solidarity was refused them.

Scab miners crossed picket lines, sheltered behind the police, played the media's game against the strikers, and used the bosses' courts against their own union and its embattled members and leaders.

The second part of the tragedy was that most of the labour movement did pretty much the same thing as the NUM's scabs.

Both the broad labour movement and the miners had had some of the fight knocked out of them by the slump and mass unemployment. But more than that was involved in the heartland of scabbing, Notts, where it was claimed they scabbed because they were refused a national ballot.

Most of the Notts scabs did not scab because of the ballot, or because of violence by pickets. That was the 'good reason', not the real one. It keyed the Notts working miners into the Tory propaganda offensive against the strikers, and it allowed the scabs to think of themselves as peaceful democrats and not as scabs. The real reason was that they were scared by the daunting battle ahead, they didn't feel their jobs were threatened, and they had been doing well under the area incentives scheme.

They made a religion of the national ballot because they needed a respectable excuse for refusing to help the threatened miners to defend their jobs and communities.

A majority of both South Wales and Notts voted against the strike. That's what they had in common in March 1984, though their motives were most likely very different. The magnificent one-year stand that the miners of South Wales can look back on in March 1985 pinpoints where the difference between them lay — in the absence of gut class loyalty among the majority of prosperous, unthreatened Notts miners. Only a minority of Notts miners had the self-respect to stand with their class.

The scabbing in Notts shaped the strike. As well as supplying coal throughout the strike, the 'working miners' gave the NCB



Picketing Daw Mill colliery, Warwickshire

a powerful hard core of scabs to build on. Without Notts the Leicestershire and other scabs would not have counted for much. When Notts went back to work on Monday March 19, after one day out, the NCB could claim that 42 pits were working normally.

With the miners split, the fate of the strike would be determined by the outcome of battles on two fronts — the battle of the pickets against the centrally-controlled semi-militarised police, who turned some coalfields into something like police states; and the political battle in the labour movement for solidarity from non-miners. In the battle for solidarity the propaganda front was the decisive one.

Never in the living memory of the labour movement had the police behaved as they did in the miners' strike. They concentrated in large masses, deployed and controlled from a centre at Scotland Yard. They set up roadblocks to stop Yorkshire miners moving into Notts and Kent miners into the Midlands. They stopped, searched, and arrested at will. They used thuggery and violence on a scale not known in any modern labour dispute in Britain — not even the Grun-

wick strike of 1977. They behaved as wreckers and bully-boys in certain pit villages as if they were understudying the British army in the Catholic parts of Northern Ireland.

And something else was new — organised scab-herding, on a vast scale backed up by a very loud barrage of propaganda.

Many railworkers and dockers refused to move scab coal. On March 29 the transport workers' leaders recommended a total blockade of all coal. But decisive solidarity lay in the hands of the power workers and steel workers to give or withhold — and they withheld it. On March 21 the power unions (including the GMBU) advised their members to cross miners' pickets. Steelworkers, fearful for their industry and bruised and battered from their own 1980 strike, crossed miners' picket lines.

The propaganda war against the miners was waged fiercely so as to limit and to try to stop workers supporting the miners. Picketing miners who were at the receiving end of the violence that police officials had spent years preparing for, were pilloried and denounced as purveyors of mindless and gratuitous violence. Miners fighting for their jobs were denounced as undemo-

cratic because they were on strike without sanction of a national ballot — and those who denounced them were industrial autocrats and dictators who were using massed armies of police to try to force the miners to accept the ruin of some of their communities!

Though the Labour Party gave its support to the miners, the high-profile leaders of the Party hemmed and hawed, joined in the calls for a national ballot — the cutting edge of the propaganda war — and denounced violence, meaning pickets who stood up to the police.

By Monday March 26, when the NCB claimed that 38 pits were working normally, the strike had reached a steady level. The strike would strengthen slightly after the NUM conference on April 19, but the contours of the battlefield were already visible, the areas of strength and weakness of either side known, the balance of forces stabilised. An unbudgeable minority of miners — the NUM said about 25,000 — refused to strike. Scabbing miners, picket-crossing power and steel workers, and far too limited general solidarity, forced the miners to dig in for a war of attrition. They knew it would take time. They could not have guessed just how long their war of attrition with the Thatcher government would be.

The 1974 miners' strike lasted just over a month — from February 9 to March 11. Just over a month after the start of the 1972 strike, Saltley coke depot was closed by mass pickets and the government was on the run. (It appointed the Wilberforce inquiry, which finally brought about a settlement on February 28. The strike had started on January 9).

By late March it was already clear that 1984 would be a much longer and more grim affair. Miners talked about "staying out until Christmas". The Times reported (April 18): "Mrs Margaret Thatcher is willing to spend any amount of money to ensure that the Government is not again defeated by the miners' union". Chancellor Nigel Lawson would later publicly explain that the money spent on beating the miners was a "worthwhile investment". They would spend over £2 billion on it directly, with indirect losses of perhaps another £3 billion.

But the miners were as determined as



Kent miners collecting in London. Photo: Stefano Cagnoni (IFL)

the government. Kent area NUM executive member John Moyle voiced their determination:

"No one should be in any doubt about what is at stake in this dispute. We are up against the most basic facts of this government's philosophy — they care about profits, not people..."

"The rank and file will fight on under any circumstances, and they will win. The only question is how long it takes. We are not looking for a victory for the miners, but for the whole working class" (SO 174).

Arthur Scargill appealed to other workers: "Stop merely saying you support us. Come out and join us. We are facing a fundamental challenge to the whole working class, not merely miners. We are facing the organised might of the state machine" (Nottingham, April 14; SO 175).

A Kent miner told SO in mid-March: "Once we've got our own people out solid, we'll go to the rest of the movement and say: 'give us your support. Let's have you all out and deal with this government'."

A general strike?

"Yes, if that's what you want to call it" (SO 171).

The pickets never did get the whole coalfield out solid. The scabbing in Notts would be a terrible drag on their efforts to get solidarity from other trade unionists.

But the energy of the strike was still expanding, and it became stronger. On April 12, the executive faced down right-wing calls for a national ballot, and the right wing Notts area president, Ray Chadburn, emerged from the meeting to tell his members: "Get off your knees and support the strike!"

On April 14 7000 miners and supporters marched in Nottingham to demand 'Police out of the coalfields'. On April 16 a Notts rank and file strike committee was formed. If the scabs in Notts disgraced themselves and the labour movement, the Notts strikers summed up everything alive and good in the labour movement. Led by Paul Whetton and others, they kept the flag of militant labour flying in the Notts coalfield. Intimidated, assaulted, deprived, the hard core never let themselves or the NUM down.

April-May: the strike gets stronger

To stop miners striking the bosses relied, as we have seen, on a vicious caterwauling of propaganda about democracy in general and about a national ballot in particular. The rank and file of the NUM had the chance to reject their NEC's policy at the NUM special conference which met on April 19 — the first of eight to be held during the strike — lobbied by tens of thousands of chanting, singing, cheering miners. In fact the special conference called on every area to join the strike.

It boosted the strike. Midlands and Notts NUM leaders then declared the strike official in their areas, and more miners stopped

work, though in Notts a majority or something near that continued to scab.

There was now a surge of solidarity. The rail and transport unions had promised to boycott scab coal. Railworkers in Coalville, Leicestershire, enforced this boycott throughout the strike, in the midst of the most solidly scabbing coalfield in the country (30 strikers out of 2000 miners). Notts railworkers began stopping coal trains on April 16.

The Labour Party national executive voted on April 25 to support the strike and to ask every Party member to donate 50p a week.

By the end of March, steel production at Scunthorpe had been cut by half, and by early May three major power stations had been taken off the grid — West Thurrock, Aberthaw and Didcot. By massive use of oil, nuclear power, and imported coal, the Central Electricity Generating Board was in fact able to last out the entire strike without crippling power cuts: but that was not at all clear at the time. The strike was making progress, albeit slowly.

From May to August the strike was at its peak. About 80% of miners were out. There was some drift-back in this period (the strike was already a long one by usual

standards); but it was marginal. Notts suffered a drift back after the High Court, on May 25, ruled the strike unofficial in the county: by late August only 20% of Notts miners were out, as against maybe 40 or 50% at the peak. In Staffordshire the strike was fraying at the end of May, and over 50% were scabbing at every pit except Wolstanton by early August. Lancashire weakened.

In the vast majority of pit communities, however, the strike was solid, and becoming more determined and confident.

This was a strike in which something in excess of a hundred thousand workers and

their families found themselves up against a pitiless, relentless, determined government which had all the advantages on its side: entrenched power and wealth; the police; the deprivation and sometimes hunger that gripped miners and their families a few weeks into the strike. To stay in the fight the miners and their families had to find in themselves reserves of strength, determination, fortitude, and creativity. The mining communities had to rouse themselves completely and throw everything they had into the class war. The strike had to become more than a mere strike. And it did.

Leicestershire's 'Dirty Thirty'

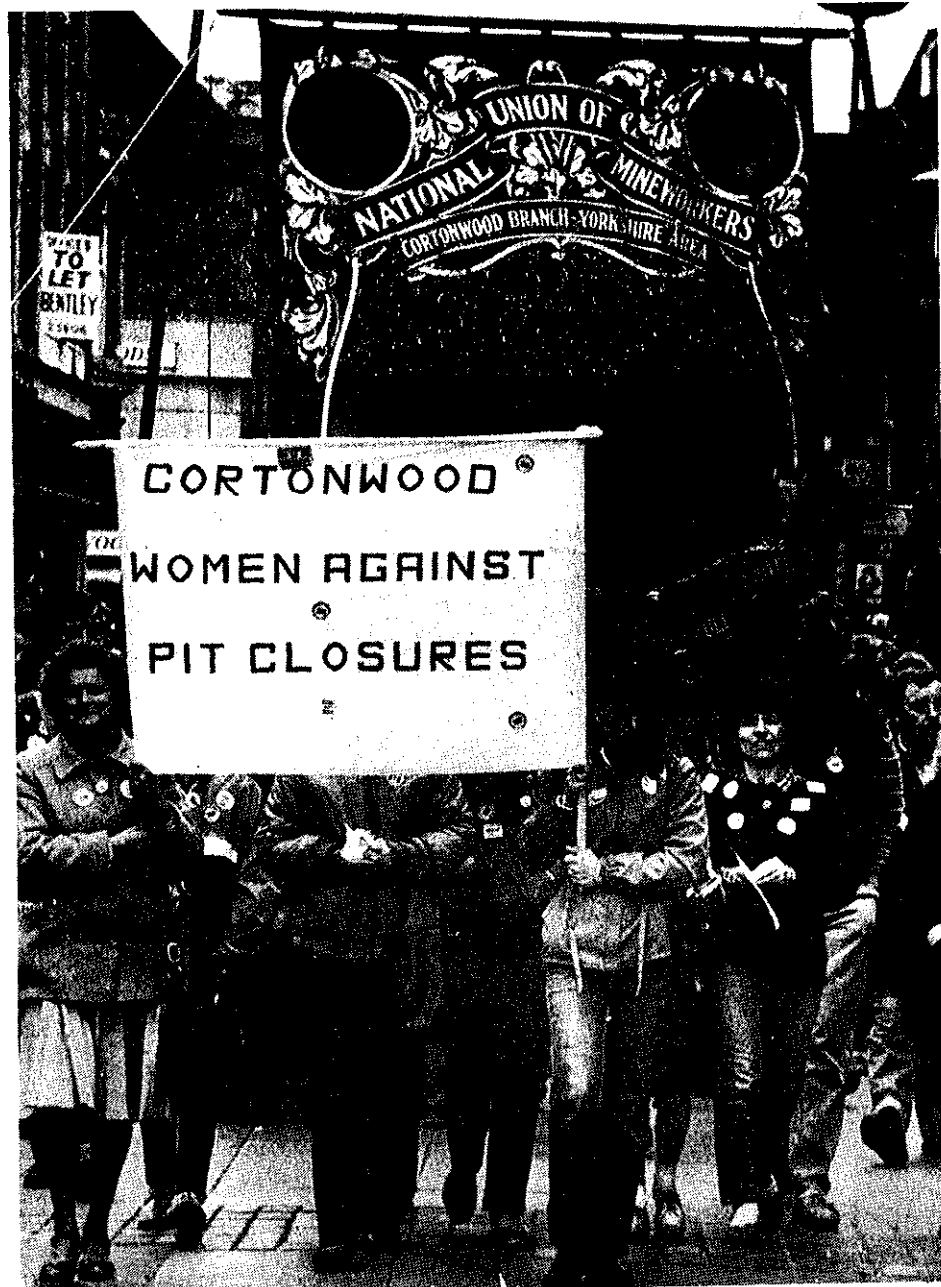
We are a small band of striking miners in Leicestershire given the name of 'The Dirty Thirty' by the 2,000 who are still working.

The name was meant to be a derisory title but we are proud to be so named because it identifies us from the rest who are prepared to see their pits close and the future of their families put in

jeopardy by not supporting the strike and NUM policy.

We say: No surrender. The strike goes on till we achieve victory on our terms.

Statement by Leicestershire striking miners to NUM delegate conference carried in Socialist Organiser, August 16, 1984



10,000 women demonstrated in Barnsley on May 12 1984

The outstanding new thing in the miners' strike was the involvement of the women of the mining communities.

By early May the pit villages were full of militant women's groups

The women's groups ran communal kitchens or food-parcel centres — and many of them went out on the picket line: that hadn't happened before. On April 30 there was a 150-strong women's picket at Thoresby colliery, Notts. They broke through police lines twice, and a local miner commented: "If the women had been there from the beginning, the strike would have been won by now" (SO 177).

Women's pickets were a regular feature of the strike, and on May 12 the streets of Barnsley were swamped by an exuberant women's demonstration.

Repeatedly the pit women would cite the women's peace camp at Greenham Common as an inspiration. Direct links were made between the normally somewhat isolated, conservative, male-dominated pit villages, and feminists who might never before have seen class struggle as anything central to politics.

For a lot of people, the strike shook up their ideas in a way that normally happens only in great semi-revolutionary struggles like a general strike. Opposed to the Tory class-warriors, the police chiefs, the Fleet Street editorialists eulogising the heroic scabs, here at last was something more than the quibbling, middle-of-the-road, trimming whines of Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock. The miners were a pole of opposition, and inevitably they became a magnetic pole of attraction for the oppressed.

Spitting boldly in the teeth of all Tory philosophy, the miners rallied round them all the movements, impulses and rebellions against that philosophy and against the system it defends. The miners inspired and gave focus to an across-the-board challenge

The Coalville railworkers

Out of it have come good things and bad things.

On the bad side you've got train crews in the East Midlands, not at Coalville, who are moving coal trains. They are breaking every condition of service.

But it won't deflect us from what we are doing. Because it is more than compensated for by good.

We've made friendships with other railway depots, particularly in London. We've forged an alliance with the 30 striking miners in Leicestershire: we even share the same office. That's a strong alliance and that will remain even when the dispute finishes.

These friendships will stand us in good stead when the miners' strike is over and if the railway unions get involved in their own dispute.

Railwaymen's wives have become friends with striking miners' wives. So you've got these marvellous bonds and these marvellous friendships which more than outweigh the bad.

The miners' strike is not just about pit closures. It's become a question of solidarity, a question of loyalty, it's become a question of trade unionism and standing up for what you believe in.

Roy Butlin, secretary of Coalville NUR. Socialist Organiser November 28 1984.

May: women invade Barnsley

On Wednesday May 12 Barnsley was invaded by some 10,000 miners' wives, marching to oppose pit closures.

It was very much a women's march, not just in its constitution but in its atmosphere.

Women from all over the country — Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Northumberland and South Wales — came together to give a very lively and resounding NO to MacGregor's closure plans.

Not your boring run of the mill trudge, this... chants of "the miners united will never be defeated" and "I'd rather be a picket than a scab" continued throughout the march. Drum majorettes provided more noise and colour. And I don't think anyone in Barnsley centre escaped without getting a 'Coal Not Dole' sticker plonked on some part of their anatomy.

Socialist Organiser, May 17, 1984

to Toryism; and that challenge became an increasing part of their own awareness of the world.

Thatcher did have an 'enemy within'! And hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people rallied to it. Many of them were shocked by the Tories' remorseless drive to compel the miners and their families to let her offer them as human sacrifices to her savage god, Mammon, the god of profit and lucre; and shocked at the will of the police to use any means necessary to beat the pickets. They started to think about

alternatives to Thatcherism.

Jenny Dennis, from Kiveton Park, Yorkshire, told SO in November:

"Mining communities are traditionally male-dominated. It's the men that work and the women that do: having babies, washing and making snap is our lot. Then it changed.

"It was as though we'd been sleeping for hundreds of years. We awoke, we realised a new political awareness.

"Organising food, raising money, speaking. Men have acknowledged that we, as women, are vital to that victory. We're an active part of that struggle, side by side with our men in the battle's frontline.

"We are witnessing something amongst the women which I can only compare with the suffragettes. We are living and making history. We won't return to the status quo. We can't.

"Personally it has made me realise that not only must we fight our injustice but others too.

"Because we have lived through media lies we ask ourselves: 'What other lies have they made?'

"Look at the injustice in Ireland. What really happened in Toxteth? In Brixton? I realise the black community is struggling against injustice.

"After we win we must turn and right other injustices".

'Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners' set themselves up in June, and found miners coming to their meetings, saying things like: "Since the strike their ideas had really changed, and perhaps now the 'traditional' labour movement should go to black people and lesbians and gay men to relearn what socialism is all about" (SO

199). But the lesbians and gay men had things to learn from the miners, too: the strike drew a class line among lesbians and gays.

Black groups organised to help the miners; and miners came to understand better what black communities feel about police harassment.

Frank Slater of Maltby NUM (Yorkshire) put it like this:

"What did we do when blacks were being harassed? We said — it's not us. But we're ethnic minorities now" (SO 200).

The local miners' support committees were never anywhere near having the weight, in official labour movement terms, to organise strikes in support of the miners.

Usually they were run by the Labour Left. (The Communist Party organised its own activities, often trying to exclude or suppress more active people to its left. The Socialist Workers Party continued its 'splendid isolation', pouring scorn on the 'left-wing Oxfam' and 'baked beans brigades' of the support committees, until October, when it readjusted and joined in. 'Militant' never joined in.)

But, if the support movement was organisationally weak and ramshackle, it was

'Outcasts of the state'

We, as lesbians and gay men, black people, the organised working class, are a threat to the power of the state — and their main weapon is the police and they use it.

We've got to fight together because there's no way we're going to be able to beat them if we're divided.

The miners from Dulais Valley who've met us have said just that. They've said that they are now outcasts of the state — we've seen what the police and media are like.

Mark Ashton and Mike Jackson of 'Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners': Socialist Organiser October 4 1984.



NUR-ASLEF picket at Coalville, Leicestershire

the umbrella for a vast amount of individual activity. Workplace collections, door-to-door collections, street collections, pub collections, football ground collections; benefits, demonstrations, mass pickets; visits from miners, visits to pit villages...

The 'Coal not Dole' sticker, the bundle of 'The Miner', and the collecting bucket became the standard hardware of political life. Hundreds of thousands of people who did nothing more than give donations or wear a badge were stirred and inspired by the miners' fight. Labour activists miles from any coalfield found themselves talking, thinking, breathing, living the miners' strike week after week.

In Basingstoke, Hampshire, for example, the miners' support committee became the centre of political life. In May Carla Jamison reported on their links with the Notts strikers: "Long after the benefit night was over [one of the Notts women] was still sitting up talking over the issues with the SO supporters she was stopping the night with... It was a great and inspiring weekend for us [the visit of the first strikers' delegation], and hopefully for the delegation too..."

"For us it hadn't just been a one-off visit, it has been very special and we will hopefully be seeing them again soon... Like Chris Whelan said, they have probably done more for us than we did for them".

Joe Green: killed by a scab lorry

"There's blood on coal", people say, meaning that many miners die or suffer terrible injuries working to bring the coal to the surface.

Now the saying takes on a different meaning, in the fourth month of the strike — the blood of miners killed and injured fighting to stop Thatcher and MacGregor wrecking the coal industry. The blood of working class martyrs in the fight against Toryism. The blood of militants prepared to stand up against the state.

Last Friday, 15th, Joe Green was the second miner to die in this strike. Joe was 55 and he died picketing Ferrybridge power station at Castleford, Yorkshire. He was pulled under the back wheels of a scab lorry and crushed to death.

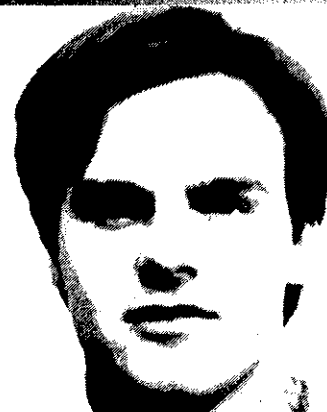
Arthur Scargill, who was himself to be injured and hospitalised as a result of a police attack outside Orgreave last Monday, said this about the death of Joe Green:

"Joe Green gave his life for the right to work — every miner, every trade unionist in Britain must ensure that he did not die in vain."

Socialist Organiser, June 21, 1984



On Thursday March 15, Davy Jones, a 24 year old Yorkshire miner, was killed on the picket line outside Ollerton colliery Notts. Arthur Scargill wrote to Davy Jones's parents. 'In a few years time, those who inflicted damage on our industry and were directly responsible for the tragedy that befell David will have been forgotten, while David will be remembered...'



May-July: the strike at its peak

Could the labour movement have been rallied to the miners in sufficient strength to tip the balance against the Tories? Yes they could — if our movement had been headed by leaders who wanted to fight. The response to the local and regional activities called (and inadequately campaigned for) by TUC bodies proves it.

Between May 9 and July 13 there were regional TUC days of action in every major region except the Midlands. Railworkers, hospital workers, council workers, dockers and shipyard workers struck; demonstrations in London and Manchester were up to 50,000 strong. But there was no centrally organised campaign to develop the potential shown by the days of action. Len Murray denounced the days of action in advance. The central TUC leaders stood on the sidelines, sharpening their talons, eyeing Scargill and Heathfield with hatred. But the miners, keeping their distance, had not yet approached the TUC.

It was the miners' picketing that mainly drove the struggle forward. On May 2 the police (probably exaggerating) estimated 10,000 pickets at Harworth colliery, and on May 3 almost as many at Cotgrave (Notts). On May 7 1000 miners picketed Ravenscraig steelworks, near Glasgow. On May 14, 40,000 marched in Mansfield. Between May 29 and June 18 thousands of pickets and police fought battles outside Orgreave coking plant, near Sheffield: coke runs from Orgreave were suspended on June 18.

On June 7 the transport unions agreed

not only to boycott coal and coke, but also to block substitute oil movements. On June 9 union leaders Jimmy Knapp and Ray Buckton persuaded railworkers at Shirebrook depot in Notts to follow this policy; by July 13 Knapp could announce that only 10 coal trains were running daily in Britain, out of a normal 356. On June 25 railworkers stopped iron ore supplies to Llanwern steelworks (South Wales); on June 28, to Ravenscraig.

From early June the Tories became visibly alarmed. They had schemed and prepared for years, waited patiently for the right moment to strike; they had split the miners; they had thrown many thousands of

specially trained police at them; they had mobilised the entire press to engulf them in a barrage of lies, misrepresentation, libel and hate-filled propaganda — but still the miners remained in the fight and seemed to be advancing steadily, though slowly. They could fight epic battles like the one at Orgreave, near Sheffield, and hold the cops to a draw, forcing — temporarily — a halt to coke movements there.

Thatcher saw that, like some fabled 'British square' of soldiers on the battlefields of the Napoleonic wars, the miners could take a tremendous pounding, stand in a swirl of smoke and shell, and then move forward on the offensive. The Tories had

Arthur Scargill's demands

Last week, Arthur Scargill set out his demands for the pit strike:

* A complete withdrawal of the Coal Board's closure programme announced on March 6 aimed at reducing capacity by 4 million tonnes.

* A reaffirmation by the Board and the government of the Plan for Coal, the expansionist plan agreed between the government, Coal Board and unions in 1974.

* Development of 40 million tonnes new capacity.

* New investment to expand all existing pits.

* Rapid development of new coal burning technologies.

* The introduction of a four day week.

* A substantial increase in wages.

* Retirement age brought down to 55.

* A scheme to protect wage rates.

• Consolidation of the incentive bonus scheme

The demands for the four-day week and for scrapping the incentive scheme are particularly important as part of a working class programme to defend jobs and unite mineworkers.

Socialist Organiser, June 21, 1984

good reason to be worried. So they stepped up the counter-attack.

MacGregor sent a letter to every miner. The NCB talked about organising a ballot over the heads of the NUM.

There was a new and sinister development of police thuggery, directed not against miners on the picket line but against miners and their families in their home villages. Police began to act like a hostile army of occupation in some pit villages.

On the night of May 16-17, 160 police in riot gear terrorised Thorney Abbey Road, Blidworth, Notts. Annette Holroyd and Pauline Radford told Socialist Organiser what happened:

"They managed to get Terry [Terry Dunn, a Yorkshire picket] over the driveway onto the road and about four or five got hold of his arms and got him into the van.

"Everyone asked why they were arresting him. They refused to give an answer and said, 'We don't have to tell you'.

"Then they chucked him in the van and all the men ran up to the van but they slammed the doors in their faces. One of the lads said, 'Come on, take me. If you're going to lift him you should lift the lot of us. They just drove straight off'.

"I went over to see my baby-sitter. She was terrified. It was my house just next door. I asked her what was the matter. She said, 'There's been five or six policemen knocking on the door, and asking questions: Where's my dad? Where's my husband? Where is everybody?'

"I calmed her down and by then there were thirteen or fourteen police vans out in the road. There were policemen lined up across the road. I've never seen so many policemen — hundreds of them.

"I was terrified, as was everyone else. I kept clinging hold of my husband so he wouldn't go through the gate. If they went through the gates they'd get lifted.

"All the men said, 'What are you doing here? We're not causing any trouble'. The police said they'd had a report about a disturbance — they need at least 13 police vans to check out a disturbance, 160 police in riot gear!

"The union official said he saw another 20 vans in the next street waiting to come round.

"I feel the police wanted all the Yorkshire lad to go over the gate into the road and get into a riot with the police, and then they'd do them all for rioting.

"It was definitely an act of deliberate provocation".

The tone of Tory denunciations got more and more shrill and hate-filled, until, on July 19, Thatcher denounced the NUM as 'the enemy within', a domestic equivalent of the Argentines she had fought in the Falklands war. Other Tory speakers followed up the attack, and the 'Times' editorialised: "There is a war on".

On June 13, with the battle of Orgreave still in full swing, Arthur Scargill had set out an expanded set of demands for the strike, including a four-day week. By June 25, Tony Benn was calling over the heads of the union leaders for other workers to strike immediately alongside the miners, and the next day in Parliament Labour MP Martin Flannery spoke of an "inexorable march towards a general strike... now under way".

Tony Benn was right to appeal over the heads of the union leaders for workers to back the miners. But that it was Benn the MP who did it was also the measure of the



The picture that said it all

weakness of the official trade union leadership.

The NUM special conference on July 11-12 was jubilant, endorsing Scargill's expanded demands and approving a rule change which could be used to discipline scabs.

Miners had a right to be proud of what they had so far achieved against great odds.

They knew that if they could build on what they had done, and develop from where they were, then they could win. But the miners could not themselves do it — they could not at will generate the irreplaceable help of others in the labour movement. They didn't get the help. And the Tories counter-attacked, putting the miners on the defensive.

A Notts striker at Orgreave

There was plenty of blood. I went to the assistance of a young miner who was lying in the grass. He was bleeding profusely from the head. I knelt on one knee beside him. I could give no useful medical assistance other than trying to comfort him.

I called to the police for an ambulance. The police lines were no more than 15 yards from this injured man. An Inspector shouted over, "We've got an ambulance coming, son". They made a gap in their ranks for an ambulance to come through.

I was still knelt there waiting for the ambulance when a black policeman ran through this gap and straight to me. As he reached me I looked up and he was above me and flashing through the air was his truncheon, which he brought down on the back of my neck. There was a sickening, deadening pain in my neck, and as I was trying to get to my feet I saw this black policeman run back through the

gap in the police ranks. The police closed ranks and stood behind their riot shields.

As I was walking from the scene, a solitary policeman riding a grey horse rode his horse straight at me, swinging his baton freely. The horse knocked me down and the mounted policeman struck me across the right thigh and knee. He then rode off...

I got home at 8 p.m. When I got sat down with a cup of tea I thought about my experiences since the strike began and determined that whilst I could stand, police violence would not keep me from the picket lines.

I arose this morning, though on crutches and wearing a surgical collar and in severe pain, I made my way to Bevercotes Colliery to stand on the picket line.

And when I can't walk, I'll crawl.

Notts striker Robert Cooper, writing in Socialist Organiser, June 28 1984



Scab lorries at Ravenscraig. Photo: Rick Matthews, IFL

South Wales NUM funds seized

The forward-movement phase of the strike ended on August 1, when the High Court ordered the seizure of the South Wales NUM's funds. The union had defied an injunction against picketing granted to two haulage firms.

The Tories were upping the stakes. The seizure of a trade union's funds was a matter for the whole labour movement, not for that trade union alone. It was an attack on the whole labour movement — and only the whole labour movement could hope to confront and beat the government that stood behind the courts.

Miners occupied the area NUM headquarters and demonstrators gathered outside to hear area president Emlyn Williams explain what the labour movement needed to do:

"We hope trade unions will show solidarity with the miners, and as of today throughout the country there will be a general strike" (SO 190).

Arthur Scargill called on the TUC for "physical support". But nothing happened.

As Socialist Organiser commented: "The startling thing about the savage fine on the South Wales NUM is that the other unions haven't come to their defence. The cry for a general strike should have rung through the labour movement at every level. Instead we have a numb silence at the top" (SO 191).

After all the clamour and the uproar of

the summer, suddenly there was numb silence. Some days later, Ron Todd of the TGWU did start talking about plans for a 'big bang' of trade union solidarity, but nothing came of that. The same numb silence would happen again, and more damagingly, in November, after the central NUM funds were sequestrated, and in December after a Tory lawyer was declared 'receiver' of the NUM's finances.

Why?

Just a week before the seizure of the South Wales funds, Notts striker Paul Whetton had observed this "numb silence" in microcosm. He told an SO meeting in Ollerton:

"I spoke with Dennis Skinner in Basingstoke, and of course everyone was clapping and cheering everything Dennis Skinner said.

"Dennis Skinner made the point that we were begging not only for money and for food, but for solidarity action. He said: there is nothing to stop you taking action now. [And the applause stopped].

"People were taken right up to the edge of it, and when it was put point-blank to them, they hesitated and drew back. That's a natural reluctance. They fear the machinery of the state, they fear the machinery of the employers and all the rest of it" (SO 189).

So, by failing to respond to the seizure

of funds, the movement went into retreat, and the miners began a new phase of their war of attrition with the government — the phase in which the balance, inch by painful inch, was turned against them.

The sceptics and defeatists will say: the NUM leadership should have known in

Eric Heffer backs the law-breakers

If you've got legislation of this kind, then it's quite clear that workers are bound to come up against those laws. They're bad laws, they're class laws.

Whether the Labour Party thinks they ought to come out against those laws or not, the workers are going to do so. And when workers are in struggle against bad laws, it is my feeling that the Labour Party has got to support those workers, while at the same time pressing for a change in those laws.

The Tolpuddle Martyrs — the people for whom we march around with banners saying how marvellous they were — they broke the law. We have a trade union movement in this country because people were prepared to stand up against bad laws and break them.

Eric Heffer speaking on TV-AM, August 1, 1984

advance that it would go like that; the labour movement was in no condition for an all-out fight. Some of them — like the Socialist Workers' Party — will add that nothing better could have been expected from the TUC.

When something has already happened and is now history, then it naturally seems in retrospect to have happened inevitably — and that all the pieces fell into place as they had to in the circumstances. But that is to substitute hindsight for an examination of the actual course of events. *There was no-*

thing inevitable about the isolation of the miners.

At a number of points dotted across the middle of 1984, great possibilities for broadening the struggle came into existence, before vanishing unrealised. The most important of these were the two dock strikes, but there were others. The leaders of the NUM tried again and again to link up with other workers and broaden the struggle. Again and again they appealed for solidarity, to the broad labour movement or to particular groups of workers.

On May 9 Arthur Scargill appealed to railworkers, then due to start an overtime ban on May 30: "If ever there was a time to join with this union, to come out on strike... now is the time".

In the event the NUR and ASLEF settled for a miserable 4.9% rise. Paul Foot later printed documents in the Daily Mirror showing that Thatcher had instructed the British Rail bosses to make whatever concessions were necessary to avoid a 'second front' with the railworkers.

Why was solidarity inadequate?

But the most dramatic point in the struggle to broaden the front came in July, when the dockers came out on strike on July 9. Mrs Thatcher must have remembered the fate of Edward Heath.

Dockers struck against the use of non-dockers to unload iron ore for Scunthorpe steelworks at Immingham. The fire had jumped from the miners to the dockers.

Britain's dockers are in trouble. Shifts in trade patterns have redirected traffic away from the old ports and into new ones where dockers do not have the job security long ago established in the older ports and enshrined in the National Dock Labour Scheme. One Tory minister said openly in mid 1984 that the Dock Labour Scheme should be scrapped. The jobs of many dockers were — and are — under threat.

On the docks, as in the mines, the basic issue was jobs. Here were ready-made fellow-fighters for the miners. And dockers had the power to close down Britain very quickly. Within weeks of a solid docks strike the Tories would either have to surrender or use troops — and that would have escalated the conflict further.

Competent leadership could have welded the dockers to the miners in a common fight for jobs. The dockers' leaders, whatever good intentions they may have had, bungled it.

The TGWU did not even formulate clear demands for the strike. The basic demand should have been extension of the National Dock Labour Scheme to the new, unregistered ports.

When the strike was on, Socialist Organiser called for the creation of joint action committees of dockers and miners. But the NUM did not make much initiative to link up with the dockers. It was difficult for the NUM. The leaders of the TGWU were protesting that their dispute was quite separate from the miners', and would not have welcomed any such initiative.

On July 19 anti-strike lorry drivers threatened violence against dockers in Dover, where the strike was shaky anyway, and the dispute collapsed. The press that had been screaming against 'violent' miners either gloried in the threats against the strikers or reported this in a matter-of-fact way: the police had no comment! Instead of organ-

ising flying pickets, the mighty TGWU crumbled.

As we have seen, solidarity also failed in the steel industry. The steel unions had been unresponsive from the start. When the NUM and the rail unions applied their blockade in June, Tommy Brennan, convenor at Ravenscraig, said he would work with scab deliveries of coal and iron ore. Peter McKim in Llanwern said the same. ISTC general secretary Bill Sirs, according to the Financial Times (July 2), "sounded almost like a British Steel spokesman".

Uniting dockers and miners

We need to coordinate the action of striking port workers and striking miners. The best way to do this would be immediately to set up — in areas where that is practicable — action committees. We should also invite railworkers' and seafarers' representatives to join them.

United, dockers and miners can massively augment and increase each others' strength. We must unite. Unity will bring us victory".

Appeal from Paul Whetton to dockers' delegates, August 24 1984.

From late June British Steel started running huge convoys of scab lorries into Ravenscraig and, especially, from Port Talbot to Llanwern. Miners' picketing in Port Talbot soon tailed off, and was token at Ravenscraig. The steelworks kept running at full, indeed increased, production.

Many miners were critical of the area NUM leaders on this. In South Wales, for example, where area president Emlyn Williams had publicly criticised Arthur Scargill's effort to mobilise for Orgreave, Mark Thomas of Penrhiwceiber NUM told Socialist Organiser:

"The leadership [of South Wales] — or the majority of the — are failing to give us a determined lead. This comes out most notably in the way they have handled the steelworks situation and the scab miners at the Point of Ayr colliery in North Wales. Increased picketing is not only essential to win the dispute but key to keeping the mem-

bership involved. Many people have drifted off, not because they have lost interest, but because of the token nature of the activity we are involved in.

"There are 4000 steelworkers at Llanwern. Not all of them can be Bill Sirs fans. [There should be] a regular bulletin attempting to speak inside the plant, leafleting of the pubs and clubs in the area..." (SO 187).

Stopping steel would have been difficult with the best tactics from the NUM, given the steel unions' attitude and the steel workers' recent experience. But some of the NUM leaders were so overwhelmed by the difficulties that they practically gave up.

In rail and docks, too, problems of leadership had combined with problems of confidence among the rank and file.

Having seen the miners on strike for four months, railworkers, dockers and steelworkers knew what was involved in a serious battle with the government — the risk of months of deprivation, legal threats, police violence. The prospect was especially daunting in the steelworks, where the workforce was a shattered remnant, reduced in numbers by a half since 1980.

Railworkers and dockers were still often willing to take a stand for principle: to show solidarity when they were asked to handle coal. But to link their fate more fully with the miners in an indefinite strike? There was, in Paul Whetton's words quoted above, "a natural reluctance". London dockers, for example, told SO that they just did not believe that the extension of the Dock Labour Scheme could be won under a Tory government.

In addition to all this there was the deadening effect of the Labour Party's role in the strike. The Party rank and file were with the miners. Labour Party activists, premises and equipment were involved in the miners' strike to a degree probably not seen in any dispute since the 1920s. The National Executive Committee backed the miners and called for a levy to support them. Conference condemned police violence and defied Kinnock's request to condemn pickets' violence.

But what most people saw, courtesy of TV, was the public weaseling of Kinnock, Hattersley and others. We should not underestimate the role played by this in

dampening the spirits of the labour movement.

To rally around the miners and against Thatcher, the movement had to have the feeling of being a movement, the feeling that it could win, that its leaders wanted to win and would fight. It had to have its leaders saying, with political boldness to match the boldness of the NUM's industrial challenge to Thatcher: 'There is an alternative to Thatcher'. The leaders had to say it, mean it and fight for it, and in the first place back those already engaged in the fight against Thatcher.

A politically confident movement could have boosted the industrial solidarity by countering the fears, depression and hopelessness that held back many workers from acting who sympathised with the miners. Kinnock and his team played a fatal role here. Instead of creating a movement against the Tories around the miners, they made the emergence of such a movement impossible. They acted like acid corroding the links and sinews of the movement.

The leadership could have swayed it. A leadership which puts the issues squarely and is visibly prepared to fight to the end can rally the faint-hearted. In the charged atmosphere of summer 1984, there was a lot of potential militancy that could be rallied.

The union leaders were inadequate, too.

The ISTC leadership was positively opposed to a struggle. Having sabotaged the steelworkers' chance of saving jobs in their industry in 1980, Bill Sirs now preached no option except the strictest cooperation with management to preserve 'viability'.

The TGWU leadership had made some gestures towards supporting the miners. The ineffectiveness of its boycott on coal movements by road was partly due to the inherent difficulty in organising an industry like road haulage, with a multitude of small employers. But TGWU Scottish secretary Hugh Wyper is reported to have sent 52 union cards to scab drivers at Yuill and Dodds, the main firm involved in taking supplies into Ravenscraig. On payment of a £10 fine, the scab drivers have had full union membership restored.

And the way the TGWU leadership ran the docks strike was a disaster.

In July, and again in August-September, when there was a second docks strike, the TGWU did not even put forward any precise demands for the strike. It argued that the disputes had nothing at all to do with the miners. Nobody believed them, least of all the dockers whose solidarity with the miners had triggered the dispute. Many other dockers — men who could have been won to a fight which linked their own threatened jobs to the miners' fight for jobs — felt they were being manipulated.

In November, TGWU members struck again, at Austin Rover: the union leadership supported them, after a fashion, but did nothing at all as the AUEW and EETPU pressurised the strikers back to work. When the High Court fined the TGWU for supporting that strike without a ballot as prescribed by Tory law, the union leadership again opted for masterly inaction. It didn't pay the fine, nor did it organise any action in defence of the union.

The TGWU leadership, in other words, did not fight to raise the confidence of their members. They reflected the lack of confidence, in the debased form of bureaucratic

Why steel was crucial

British Steel chair Robert Haslam said after the end of the strike:

"I have the temerity to believe that if our employees and management had not responded so positively in those early days of the strike, our production would have been halted very quickly with immediate, serious ripple effects for the motor, food and many other key industries."

"Also, other unionised employees would undoubtedly have been encouraged to show much more solidarity with the National Union of Mineworkers. Thus the evolution of the strike would have been very different and the pressures on the National Coal Board and the Government would have been immeasurably greater."

Sir Robert said the corporation had to resort to extraordinary measures to keep going, including massive lorry convoys and the use of armadas of small ships delivering imported coal to small ports on the River Trent and the River Usk.

Financial Times, March 13 1985

cowardice; and thus became a factor against action.

The rail union leaders likewise. They gave official support to a boycott of coal movements, although the militants in the front line of that boycott — as at Coalville — were highly critical of the lack of support from the leadership against British Rail harassment. But when they had a chance of going out in front themselves — over pay in May, and again over workshop closures in September — they shrank back.

If the NUM had had leaders like the rail unions or the TGWU, let alone the unspeakable Sirs, then the miners themselves would probably never have had a national strike.

As Dennis Skinner told Socialist Organiser in July: "I don't think the NUM would be on strike now if it hadn't had some very competent leadership" (SO 188).

The truth, as Dennis Skinner put it, is that only competent leadership got even 80% of the NUM out. The basic difficulty was not this or that tactical device, but that in the political and industrial situation of March 1984 the odds were extremely daunting.

At the start of the strike (editorial of March 29) Socialist Organiser had said bluntly: "The strike cannot be won in the pits". Solidarity was irreplaceable. And on April 4 John McIlroy wrote: "It would be self-deluding to pretend that today's miners' strike is anything but an uphill

struggle. The miners are divided. The price is now being paid for the weaknesses of the past period. Conditions are very different from those prevailing in the victorious struggles of the early '70s'".

The editorial of April 19 added: "Only a general strike can stop the Tories. The alternative is to let the miners get mauled in a strike that could stretch into next winter".

Miners understood this too. No wonder sections with weak area leadership and more apparent security from closures — like Notts — were not keen to go on strike.

The wonder is not the weaknesses of the strike, but its strength — the stubborn courage with which the miners defied all the iron laws and the iron fists of this soulless government of exploitation and repression.

It is true that the NUM paper, 'The Miner', which had the job of rallying, encouraging and fortifying the striking miners, sometimes gave an impression of over-confidence, as if victory would be certain if only the miners stuck firm for a few weeks. But Arthur Scargill, in an interview on June 15, made it clear that he had a lucid view of the odds.

"Faced with the Coal Board's closure plan, the progressive elements in the NUM discussed two options. One, you accept the plan and allow pits to close. Alternatively you fight it. If you fight and you have lost, at least you fought it..."

It is this combination of realism with willingness to stand on the line which raises Scargill — and the other NUM left-wingers — head and shoulders above the other leaders of the trade union movement. And Scargill consistently did what was necessary in the situation.

"If I am the last person left rejecting the closure plan, then that will be my position. If I am right, I'll stick there. I don't know how some people can fudge and compromise on... a principle" (Financial Times, June 15).

And right from April 14 onwards Arthur Scargill appealed repeatedly and urgently for other workers to strike — both through their union leaders and over their heads.

He was not able to do more than make appeals. Scargill's great predecessor as NUM leader in the 1920s, A J Cook, was a leading figure in a cross-union rank and file movement, the so-called 'Minority Movement', as well as being the miners' president. He thus had an organisation to campaign for solidarity in other unions. Scargill had no such organisation: one major lesson from the strike must be the need to build a new Minority Movement.

The Scab as Hero

The typical hero of Mrs Thatcher's brave new Britain is the scab. No-one in Britain today is more honourable or respectable, the mass-circulation newspapers tell us, than the "men who take their courage in their hands and, braving the violent savagery of crazy left-wing-led pickets"...crawl on their bellies to lick their bosses' boots and help them defeat and beat down their fellow workers.

No trade is more honoured than that of the scab-herder, no force more highly praised than the militarised ranks of police thugs who protect them.

No, the working class heroes are still the men and women who dare to take on this vicious government despite the pressures of slump and mass unemployment. They are the dockers who fight for their own concerns, but also want to help the miners. They are the millions of loyal trade unionists who resist the pressure and the hysteria with the grim determination of people who know what the capitalists and their government are trying to do in Britain right now.

Socialist Organiser, August 30, 1984

The balance begins to shift

The lack of such a rank and file movement was the basic reason for the failure to stop steel. By late June all the major steelworks were fully supplied, and set to stay that way.

The docks strike, the solidarity which stopped almost all coal trains, and the six well-supported regional days of action (well-supported considering the lack of official campaigning) offset the failure in steel.

On July 16 the well-informed Financial Times wrote: "There is now a substantial lobby in the Coal Board — though not in the government — for a settlement before the end of autumn, even if a settlement means conceding that pits cannot be closed on purely 'economic grounds'..." These tensions in the NCB would erupt later in sackings and resignations of top officials.

But nevertheless from early August, as we have seen, the balance began to shift. The government had used its legal bludgeon on a section of the labour movement, and discovered that it could get away with it without the TUC responding on behalf of the whole movement. Now it could confidently wait its time to use the bludgeon again.

The shift in the balance was, however, slow and unstable. The miners put up a fierce resistance. They were still solid, and would remain fundamentally solid until November.

No-one quite knew how near or remote power cuts were. The debacles at Llanwern and Ravenscraig had marked a reflux of solidarity, following its high point, but the rail action was still strong — and, indeed, additional solidarity action was still developing in late 1984 and early 1985, in the form of new mass pickets of power stations. In the huge furnace of the strike, new flames were constantly leaping up.

Women

For example, at Florence colliery, North Staffs, the first women's picket in the Midlands took place as late as October 11. "150 women descended on the picket line armed with song sheets, candles, streamers, and bags of enthusiasm. The all-male police presence were at first slightly bemused, but soon called in a couple of dozen women PCs.

"The non-stop singing and jeering turned three scabs back, but much more than that, the whole atmosphere generated vast quantities of energy, confidence and determination.

"As a grand finale, the 150 women joined together to form 'The Miners' Strike Conga', and danced and sang around the main road to the pit. The police found this 'intimidating'..." (SO 201).

Meanwhile, the longer the miners stuck out, the more likely was a 'second front' which would put the screws on the Tories. (The second docks strike, for example, ran from August 24 to September 18).

From June, and more intensely from August, the Tories and the NCB mounted an offensive to break the strike. Backed by



In August, at Silverwood in Yorkshire miners set up a blockade of the pit entrance in order to stop scabs

all the propaganda the tabloid press could put out — backed up none too subtly, though less crudely, by TV — they launched a back-to-work drive. Scargill-baiting and NUM-bashing became the obsession of the press, in a campaign of unbridled hatred against the miners' leader they could not cow.

To match and balance their demonology against the best leader any section of the labour movement has had in decades, the press in 1984 (in August, especially) discovered the representative working-class hero of Mrs Thatcher's new Britain — the scab.

An atmosphere of hysterical pressure was built up in the country, resembling almost the atmosphere in the big marquee during an evangelical revival meeting when the call goes out for sinners to get up and 'testify for Jesus'. Instant glorification, if not on-the-spot canonisation, awaited the man who would step forward to 'testify' for Thatcher and for strikebreaking. He would be dubbed with some would-be glamorising name like 'Silver Birch', or the 'Dockers' Silver Birch'.

Drive

The back-to-work drive had little success in June. Then from July North Derbyshire NCB area director Ken Moses started a campaign of unprecedented ruthlessness. Miners living outside the main pit villages were singled out. They were written to, phoned, visited, systematically pressurised.

Moses' effort produced few results until November. But in late August a 'National Working Miners' Committee' was set up, under the wing of Thatcherite whizzkid David Hart. A Notts 'Working Miners' Committee' had existed since the end of May.

Ominously, towards the end of August a few scabs appeared in South Yorkshire. Huge numbers of police descended not only on the picket lines but also on the pit villages, which in the following months were transformed into mini police states.

Sue Carlyle penned this picture of life in Kiveton Park, where it sometimes seemed as if the entire might of the British state were being mobilised to ensure that *seven* scabs would get to work.

"To support and defend their right to scab, and help the Coal Board break the strike, the village has been turned into a mini police state.

Guards

"The scabs now have police guards back and front of their houses, or hiding in their garages and back gardens. After each shift the scabs are taken home in convoys consisting of from three to five transit vans loaded with police.

"As you look through the guarded windows at them speeding past, the scabs hold their heads down...

"Every morning in the early hours between 2,000 and 3,000 police drive in to barricade the pit from pickets. The picket line is physically pushed every morning from the pit entrance into a country road away from the village. The police make charges through the old people's estate and parade horses and riot gear through the main street, endangering local people, young and old."

From late August, a second wave of mass picketing was mounted by striking miners — not to spread the strike but to stop scabs at their own pits, where, as soon as one single scab could be found, the government would send hundreds of police to bully and intimidate the community.



A thirteen year old boy is dragged away by riot police in the early hours of the morning in Grimethorpe, Yorkshire - October 17

The TUC congress

This was the situation when, six months into the miners' strike, the TUC congress opened at Brighton on September 3. By now even a David Basnett was worried enough to make a seemingly sincere speech about the responsibility of the TUC to stop the government in its manifest desire to destroy the NUM.

The ball was at the feet of the TUC. There was still time to rally the working class to the miners. But, of course, the TUC leaders had made it clear months before that they would not support the miners. They wanted

to get themselves in as mediators between the miners and the government, so that a deal could be fixed that would end the strike.

The congress, despite all its bureaucratic limitations, would want something better. The miners' strike had gripped the imagination of militants and activists throughout the movement. So the leaders trimmed and faked.

The NUM had put down an amendment calling for "industrial action involving all trade unions". The furniture union FTAT

called for a 24 hour general strike. But, under pressure from the TUC leaders, these were withdrawn in favour of near-unanimous resolution recommending — conditional on the agreement of each individual union concerned — a boycott of coal, coke or substitute oil moved across NUM picket lines.

The resolution was passed with great enthusiasm from the floor.

SO commented: "Either this TUC congress will mark the beginning of a new rallying of the working class around the

miners. Or it will go down in history as one of the worst examples of vile left-talking fakery in the history of the labour movement.

"The reflex of every militant with an ounce of sense will be to regard the almost-unanimous vote as mainly an exercise in left-fakery by the leaders of the TUC..."

"[But] the TUC decision is a lever which miners can use to gain solidarity. For it to be effective rank and file militants should start organising to use it now" (SO 195).

Vile left-talking fakery it was. The rail-workers and seafarers had already been giving such support for months. Some power stations likewise. A few more power stations did start boycott action, but, as it turned out, not enough to be decisive. The EETPU and the power engineers' union voted against the TUC resolution and did nothing to implement it: the GMBU and the TGWU, who had the majority of coal-handling workers in power stations, did practically nothing.

Arthur Scargill complained in mid-January: "I did ask the leaders of the major power unions if they would arrange meet-

ings of shop stewards in the major power stations. Although there was no rejection of this idea, it has not been put into operation" (SO 212).

The TUC resolution strengthened NUM appeals for solidarity, and was thus something to build on. But it wasn't much. The question arises: would it not have been better if the NUM leaders had pushed the call at congress for a general strike? It would have given a rallying point for the militants and the Left, at least. Socialist Organiser thought at the time that they should have pushed the general strike resolution, and in hindsight we think we were right.

But the lack of an organised rank and file movement was especially critical in the weeks after the TUC. This lack ensured that the solidarity produced was no more than the TUC leaders intended.

The first week after the TUC was occupied by talks between the NCB and the NUM — shifting to and fro between Edinburgh, Selby, Doncaster and London. Many rank and file strikers were bewildered and disturbed.

Stan Crawford of Bevercotes NUM, Notts, wrote in SO: "The main problem during the week of NUM-NCB talks was not knowing what was going on... All we knew was what we saw on television or read in the papers. We were left to guess."

"I would like to see talks held in the open, as they were during Solidarnosc's negotiations with the Polish government four years ago. Then, the discussion was broadcast to the membership as and when it was happening" (SO 197).

Then, once more, the prospect opened up of other workers decisively tilting the balance in favour of the NUM. The pit deputies' (overseers') union NACODS decided on September 12 to ballot its members on strike action over the two issues of pit closures and pay being stopped for deputies who refused to cross picket lines. If NACODS struck, every pit in Britain would stop.

The result of the ballot — 82.5% for a strike — was announced on September 28. The same day the High Court declared whole NUM strike 'unlawful' because there had not been a national ballot.

Labour Party conference

The Labour Party conference opened at Blackpool on October 1. Labour Party conference is less tightly sewn up than the TUC, and it overturned and overruled the platform line on the miners' strike.

Arthur Scargill got a tremendous reception. Neil Kinnock had given the impression for six months of slinking around on the edge of the great working class battle, waiting for a good chance to savage Arthur Scargill; but now the Labour Party conference rejected his 'statesmanlike' even-handed condemnation of violence, by which primarily he meant pickets' violence.

Conference condemned police violence, called for police to be removed from the coalfields, and thus implicitly sided with the pickets. (SO supporters originated the crucial clauses).

Albert Bowns (Kiveton Park NUM) commented: "We got the support we wanted from the rank and file, but we certainly didn't get the support we wanted from the leadership, particularly Kinnock."

"I thought he was very skilful, the way he skirted round the issue — it was a typical politician's answer."

"Kinnock is concerned only to put forward policies he thinks people will vote for and so, of course, he was worried about the violence. But the present situation is the perfect opportunity to put forward socialist policies. Instead the leadership... think that all working people are 'moderates'. But what is happening now is not moderation..."

Two scab miners had applied for a High Court declaration that it was unlawful for the NUM to run a national strike because its rulebook required a national ballot for a national strike. The legal action paralleled the new Tory anti-union law which had come into force in the course of the strike, requiring ballots for all strikes, but that law

was not actually used. The court took it upon itself to interpret the NUM's rulebook, and declared the strike unlawful.

On October 1 the NUM leaders were served with a court order, as they sat in the Labour Party conference, declaring that they were in 'contempt of court' for continuing to call the strike official. They responded by insisting that the strike was official according to the rules of the NUM, and that they would not let the court dictate to the union. On October 10 the court fined the NUM £200,000. When the union would not pay, it ordered the seizure of the NUM's entire funds, on October 25.

The day before, October 24, NACODS had called off strike plans with a miserable compromise, slinking away while the miners fought for jobs. Now, for the NUM, blow followed blow.

Police violence in the Yorkshire pit villages was stepped up dramatically. The screaming, spitting gutter press was now witch-hunting and agitating about an NUM official's fund-raising visit to Libya (although many British firms, and even the NCB itself, have links with Libya). The TUC leaders did nothing to help the NUM. Congress was over for a year, so fake militancy and fake concern for the survival of the NUM was no longer at a premium.

TUC chair Jack Eccles said publicly that the TUC should pressurise the NUM into accepting the NACODS deal. Several top trade union leaders agreed — off the record. TUC general secretary Norman Willis went through the motions of dissociating the TUC from Eccles' rambling. He did nothing to help the miners.

At the time union leaders who backed Eccles did not even dare go on the record about it. But now many people in the labour movement or on its journalistic fringes are trying to set up in business as wise

men and sages with the thought that really the NUM would have been best advised to accept the NACODS deal in October. After all, the NUM did end up in February offering to accept that deal and being told by the Tories that now they had to have something worse.

Such a philosophy would rule out almost any serious struggle. In October the strike was still around 80% solid. The strikers were still confident and strong. The Coal Board was visibly in trouble: NCB official mouthpiece Michael Eaton was suspended on October 29, and director of information Geoffrey Kirk was sacked on October 31. A second front was about to be opened up by Austin Rover and Jaguar car workers striking over pay from November 1. Only a faintheart could recommend settling for the miserable NACODS deal.

Even as it turned out — with the Austin Rover unions leaving their members in the lurch, and the TUC remaining inactive even when the High Court appointed a receiver over the NUM's finances — the miners did not end up worse than they would have done by settling in October.

If, by some quirk, the NUM leaders had gone for the NACODS formula and bulldozed the strikers into accepting it, then many miners — certainly, the militants who were the heart and soul of the strike — would have gone back feeling let down and shamed, if not betrayed. They would feel that they had accepted defeat in mid-battle. Such an outcome would have been worse for the miners, and for the labour movement as a whole, than the defeat which actually happened.

In any case, there was not a single voice within the NUM for accepting Eccles' line. Right-winger Trevor Bell talked about a ballot on the NCB's proposals in mid-November, but that was all.

November: onto the defensive

With the start of November, the strike went decidedly onto the defensive. After months of chipping away, the Coal Board finally claimed a breakthrough with scabbing in North Derbyshire. The NCB offered a massive Christmas bribe to miners — who had not had a wage packet for eight months, and were now suffering serious hardship — if they returned to work. By November 19 the NCB was claiming a record 2282 miners returning to work on a Monday. Two pits which come under the Yorkshire NUM but are geographically in Notts — Manton and Shireoaks — suffered major back-to-work moves.

The NUM was organising a series of regional strikers' rallies. These showed the tremendous continuing determination of the hard core of the strike, but also their bitterness about the official leaders of labour. At Aberafan on November 13 a symbolic noose was dangled in front of TUC general secretary Norman Willis; 'Ramsey Mac-Kinnock' was pilloried for refusing to speak at the rallies.

Now there was a growing note of anguish in Arthur Scargill's appeals: "We have to translate resolution into action. I am not going to appeal to the barons of the TUC — I want to ask the ordinary men and women of this country to give industrial action support to this union."

"How much longer can you stand to one side and see this union battered? We are asking you to come out now and stop scab coal being delivered into power stations" (Birmingham, November 14: SO 206).

At police-battered Kiveton Park, there were still only 26 scabs in mid-November. But branch delegate Albert Bowns, a leading militant, told SO how things now looked to him:

"I think a general strike is less likely at the moment than it has been in the past... I just can't see anything happening through the TUC."

"I was hoping for something more from the national delegate meeting [of the NUM on November 5] than these rallies. I was hoping for, perhaps, a national mass picket on particular collieries or particular areas. Now, we're just sticking to our own collieries and it's making us weaker..." (SO 206).

The labour movement was shamelessly leaving the NUM to its fate in the struggle against the government. So the Tories pressed relentlessly on.

On November 30 the Tories delivered what they hoped was a knock-out punch. Tory lawyer Herbert Brewer was appointed by the High Court as receiver of the NUM's finances. Brewer declared, "I am the NUM".

Legally, he was the NUM. But there was another NUM, not the notional legal entity now embodied by the High Court in the unlikely figure of the former Tory councillor, but the 140,000 striking miners and their families. And that NUM refused to go down under the new blow. They refused to surrender the union's money, which they had moved overseas.

Four days previously, on November 26, the High Court had fined the TGWU

£200,000 (to be paid by December 10) for supporting the Austin Rover strike without a ballot in Tory-prescribed form. All the other car unions wriggled out (including the Communist-Party-led TASS, whose general secretary, Moscow-liner Ken Gill, told the court that he had wished to obey the injunction to withdraw support from the strike — but since he had not been supporting it anyway, he had not known what to do). But the TGWU would not pay the fine.

Unfortunately, it would not do anything positive either. The meeting of its executive in early December decided to take no action against the threat to the union. If passive endurance could beat the Tories, then the TGWU would have done the workers of Britain a great service in 1984. But passivity — even defiant passivity — is not enough.

Now Arthur Scargill's efforts to rouse the labour movement and to make it aware of what was happening reached a new peak of desperate urgency. Again and again he appealed for industrial action to back the miners. "There must be the most massive mobilisation of industrial action our movement has ever known, and we must have it now."

"There is no other way to stop the court's attempt to destroy the NUM" (SO 209).

Other voices on the Left augmented and supplemented Scargill's. Tony Benn (reportedly on the private urging of Scargill and Heathfield) called for a general strike; so did Dennis Skinner.

But the TUC leaders did nothing. They went sleep-walking on. Neil Kinnock had earlier refused a request by the Labour Party NEC to speak at the November series of NUM rallies. Now he condescended to speak at a miners' rally in Stoke on November 30, to put "the case for coal" (as dis-

tinct from the case for the miners!) and — faced with jeering, baiting demands from Mrs Thatcher and her press that he do so — to denounce pickets' 'violence'.

Things were going badly for the miners, but, despite all the miners' difficulties, the Tories were still scared of a second front. That was shown very clearly by the careful way the courts handled the TGWU, using an official called the 'Queen's Remembrancer' to take £200,000 rather than seizing the union's whole funds. Despite everything, even a limited initiative from other unions could have swung the balance against the government.

Socialist Organiser proposed a campaign for a recall TUC, which might call the leaders to account for their failure to implement the decisions of September. A campaign for a recall TUC could be used to focus discussion of the miners' strike in the trade union branches. We argued that, if a full general strike were not possible immediately, then as a first step a 24 hour general strike should be called by the pro-NUM unions or even by the NUM itself.

"I'm not sure", objected Paul Whetton. "It's a hell of a gamble. A call for a strike could rebound on the NUM if the NUM itself called it... For the NUM to call a one-day general strike would be the last card. It always is the last card in a shop steward's or a branch secretary's hand — if you call a strike and nobody answers, then you have played your last card" (SO 210).

That 'last card' could have rallied and helped to organise the hundreds of thousands of active supporters that the NUM had won in the labour movement. But scepticism was understandable. Albert Bowns, for example, disputed the demand for a recall TUC.

Scab-herding in North Derbyshire

"From the start of the strike, the management armed itself with names, addresses and telephone numbers of workers and plotted their residence and likely attitudes on large maps."

The plan was to concentrate on workers living outside the immediate area of the pit villages. The management also drew up lists of men believed to be strongly hostile to the strike, or even those who had worked a lot of overtime and might therefore be finding things particularly difficult financially.

The management began telephoning and visiting those likely to return. After organising the men into groups, buses were arranged to pick them up at central points.

'Putting transport on was a key', said Mr Moses. So was the growing role of the working miners themselves in breaking the strike. Mr Roland Taylor, from Shire-

brook and a member of the national working miners' committee, was responsible for court actions preventing disciplinary action by the union.

He said: 'Everything that is happening now has been tried in Derbyshire. I've thought things through with management at my own pit. They suggested we use phones to call people up — they gave us lists and lent us vans. Shirebrook has been a well-oiled team'.

NUM activists complain that the area has three working miners on full pay doing nothing but knock on people's doors. 'We try to go round and counter it, but we cannot provide them with the instant gratification of over £600', said Mr David Crowther, an NUM delegate from Warsop.

The scab-herding operation in North Derbyshire, as described in the Financial Times, November 14 1984.

"We all hoped that we would get a good reaction from the TUC when its congress met. We hoped that they would get everyone out alongside us. Since that hasn't happened, I just can't see anything happening through the TUC" (SO 206).

"I think we've got to call for a recall TUC conference", said Paul Whetton, but without any illusions — "put the arguments again and give them one last chance to come in with us".

The NUM leaders followed up their November rallies with a speaking tour in the pit villages during December. The back-to-work drive tapered off, collections increased as Christmas came nearer, and at Christmas itself the pit communities celebrated with defiant solidarity. Despite all the hardships, many strikers and many strikers' wives insisted that it was their best Christmas ever, because of the warmth and comradeship. Instead of isolated families each slumped in front of their television, whole communities came together to support each other and celebrate.

But the turn of the year brought back the grimness. Energy minister Peter Walker confidently claimed (December 29) that there would be "no power cuts in 1985". Although the City and East London were blacked out for some hours on January 7, the policy of oil-burning and maximum use of nuclear power did in fact see the CEBG through to the end of the strike without any crippling cuts. As if to rub brine in the miners' wounds, the Tories marked New Year's Day by giving peerages to Len Murray and former electricians' leader Frank Chapple — the symbols and representatives of everything in the labour movement that had combined with the slump and effects of mass unemployment to allow the Tories to impose the sufferings of a ten month strike on the miners and their fami-

lies, and would ultimately allow them to win the strike.

The steady dribble back to work was now usually to be measured in hundreds per day. Neil Kinnock decided that the strike had gone near enough to defeat for him to visit a picket line (by chauffeur-driven car) in the same way that he might attend commemorations for the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

But the miners were very much alive. The indomitable spirit of defiance of capitalist 'normality' was still strong.

At Kiveton Park the strike started to break up seriously from January 21, after 10 months out and five months of heavy police occupation of the village.

When people set out together on a difficult, testing struggle, and some of them break and give up or change sides, those who continue to fight are forced to think hard and define for themselves and others just what they think they are doing. Albert Bowns did that when Reg Moss, a branch official at Kiveton Park, started scabbing in late January and allowed the Daily Express to proclaim the fact and use him against the strikers. Albert Bowns published an open letter to Moss — and to others who had given up the strike — in Socialist Organiser:

Reg Moss had said he wanted to return to 'normal life'. But: "What is normal about having to accept mass redundancies? What is normal about having to accept pit closures on economic grounds (possibly Kiveton Park)?"

"What is normal about craftsmen being de-skilled...? In effect, what is normal about running to accept every crumb which the management might, and I say might, condescend to offer us?"

"That is the 'normality' which you will have to return to if the rest of us follow your example.

"The Kiveton Park NUM was directed to fight against this kind of 'normality' and will continue to do so until the final outcome" (SO 214).

Socialist Organiser tried to present an accurate picture of the stages the strike went through as it unfolded. We refused to voice any of the pessimism or defeatism rampant in sections of the Left (in Socialist Worker, for example). Even so, by February 6 we had to admit: "Whatever the exact number of new scabs, it is true that a steady stream of strikers seem to be giving up and letting themselves be driven back to work. Inevitably this drift back puts pressure on the strikers and encourages Thatcher's belief that her lust for the NUM's blood can be satisfied" (SO 215).

In this adverse situation, South Wales NUM official Kim Howells floated the idea of a return to work without an agreement (February 6). Whatever the possible merits of this as a tactic once the union was collectively convinced that a further attempt to maintain the strike would only tear shreds off the NUM, to raise it there and then through the hostile media was highly counter-productive.

Paul Whetton commented: "To make that statement on the eve of a crucial meeting of the executive showed exceedingly bad judgment, at best, and at worst an attempt to scupper any cohesive policy... When it came over on the news, the reaction amongst the Notts striking miners was one of horror. Absolute horror... In fact the Notts striking miners lobbied the executive meeting... to oppose the suggestion coming out of South Wales" (SO 216).

The executive did not even discuss the idea, and Kim Howells was removed from his job as an area NUM spokesperson. But damage had been done. And then the TUC stepped in with its final blow.

Tories out to shred the NUM

On February 19 seven TUC leaders scurried to Downing Street, not even bothering to conceal their glee that they were back in contact with the people who had just sent Len and Frank to the House of Lords. They eagerly took on the job of acting as messenger boys to the NUM. The message from Thatcher said, in essence: 'Surrender, or else. No negotiations, no concessions: surrender!'

When the NUM rejected this document, the TUC let it be known that they were washing their hands of the miners, and retired to let Thatcher urge her surrender terms under the title of 'the TUC document'.

Few things in the strike were more sickening than the cat and mouse games played by the government from November to the end. First they offered the Christmas bribe to needy miners, and howled with indecent glee when some miners deserted the strike. They were showing their displeasure with Scargill's undemocratic methods, said the press, as the broken men slunk back to work.

Then the Tories played the game of the on-off negotiations, raising the hopes of the miners and then, having softened up a

few, slamming the door and waiting for more miners to give in. Having said for months that the NACODS deal was on offer to the NUM, they withdrew it at the point, at the end of the strike, when Arthur Scargill said he would accept it.

The Tories now did not want a settlement. They wanted to shred the NUM.

Commenting on the great Dublin lock-out of 1913, the employers' leader in that struggle, William Martin Murphy, cynically identified the fundamental disadvantage for labour in any long industrial war of attrition. The workers, he pointed out, soon have difficulties getting enough to eat; the employers rarely have that problem. By March 1985 Britain's glorious miners had that problem.

The Tories had all the resources of the ruling class at their disposal. The miners, some 2 per cent of the labour movement, had to fight 100% of that centralised ruling-class power with insufficient support and sometimes downright sabotage from the leaders of the other 98%. That was the cause of the defeat.

On March 3 the eighth NUM conference since the strike began met to decide what to do. South Wales proposed a return to work without an agreement. Arthur Scargill

opposed the return to work, and so did the executive. They argued instead that, with over 50 per cent of miners still out, the strike should continue until 700 sacked strikers got their jobs back.

The majority of delegates felt that there was a danger that a big acceleration of scabbing would further erode the union's bargaining power on the 700 (and everything else), and result, ultimately, in a return to work with the union in tatters. They decided to stop that happening.

Starved, battered, but still defiant, they voted by 98 to 91 to return to work without a settlement, but as a still-intact union.

To go back without the 700, and fight for their reinstatement in local negotiations, was a bitter and agonising decision to have to take. In the circumstances the conference had little viable alternative. This was confirmed a few days later when the first wave of Labour councils failed to deliver on their promises of opening up a second front, instead collapsing ignominiously.

Once the decision was taken, Scargill and the left-wingers on the executive urged a united return to work, and most areas went back on Tuesday 5th.

Kent, and a few pits elsewhere, stayed out for a week after the national return to



Mass picket at Frickley, Yorkshire, February 1985

work. Polmaise, in Scotland, the first pit out in 1984, did not go back until Tuesday March 12, after one year and four weeks on strike.

The greatest strike in British history was over. But the miners' strike was one battle in a war, and the war is far from over. "The fight goes on", said Arthur Scargill after the decision to return had been taken. The NUM has been forced to retreat to 'guerilla' struggle — "like the Resistance in World War 2", as Scargill put it.

The fight goes on

It was a defeat; and what we said during the dispute about the heavy implications of a defeat for the whole labour movement was true. But it was not just a defeat; nor was the struggle in vain. And it is not the end of the fight.

Despite all the horrors and hardships suffered by the pit communities during the strike, and the further horrors and hardships that will be imposed on them and on the whole working class in the immediate period ahead as the Tories improve on their victory, many good things have already

come or can yet come out of this struggle.

In the first place, the Tories were shaken. We still do not know how close they were to crippling power cuts at the end of the strike. They certainly had to sacrifice over £5 billion for the dispute, and they have built up a vast fund of working-class resentment against themselves.

Thatcher's success so far will reconcile the ruling class to the huge costs of this strike as a 'worthwhile investment' in crushing class struggle once and for all. But class struggle never can be crushed once and for all. And the ruling class will not lightly agree to Thatcher taking them into further ventures if they look like rousing resistance similar to the miners'.

History shows a standard pattern after serious working-class defeats in struggle: first, a period, often not very long, when matters go from worse to worse and reaction reigns; then a revival during which it sometimes becomes clear that the defeated struggle chastened the ruling class more than at first seemed.

Studying the very terrible defeat of the Paris workers' uprising in 1871 (30,000 supporters of the Commune were massacred, and many others deported), Marxists later argued that despite defeat the uprising actually did achieve limited gains, in that it tipped the scales towards a republic in the long debate during the 1870s on whether France should be a republic or a monarchy, and helped thereafter to safeguard France's republican constitution.

They also hailed the uprising as a great political inspiration for future generations.

The 1984-5 miners' strike will inspire not only future generations but this one. The miners have shaken Britain and remodelled the political landscape. Class conflict, class bitterness, and class hatred on a level

not seen here for a very long time have been brought into the centre of British politics. The ruling class starved men, women and children for a year, and now Mrs Thatcher gloats in public over her triumph. But the miners' strike has stored up memories and hatreds — not only among miners and their families — that the ruling class and the Tories will live to regret.

Tens of thousands have learned that capitalism is a soulless system that sacrifices people for profit; tens of thousands of new militants have learned to hate capitalism and those who run it.

Coming out of jail after a week of being locked up simply because she insisted on picketing, despite police 'cautions' and despite bail conditions, Nottinghamshire striking miner's wife Brenda Greenwood spoke the language and expressed the feelings that live in thousands who have gone through the miners' strike.

This is not, as the editorial writers fondly believe, the language of the past, or of a stage in the history of the labour movement which the miners' strike has brought to an end. It is the language of the future.

"The shattering experience of being sent to prison will be etched on my memory for as long as I live. But I am in no way deterred, nor has my spirit been broken.

"The time has come for the working class of the 1980s to stand up and be counted. We must not be afraid to face the machinery of the state head-on in defence of our rights.

"We must fight on every front in defence of all the rights and standards that have been won for us in blood, sweat and tears by the working class of the past.

"It is our duty to defend, protect and uphold all these rights and standards, and it is our proud heritage to hold them in trust for future generations of our class".