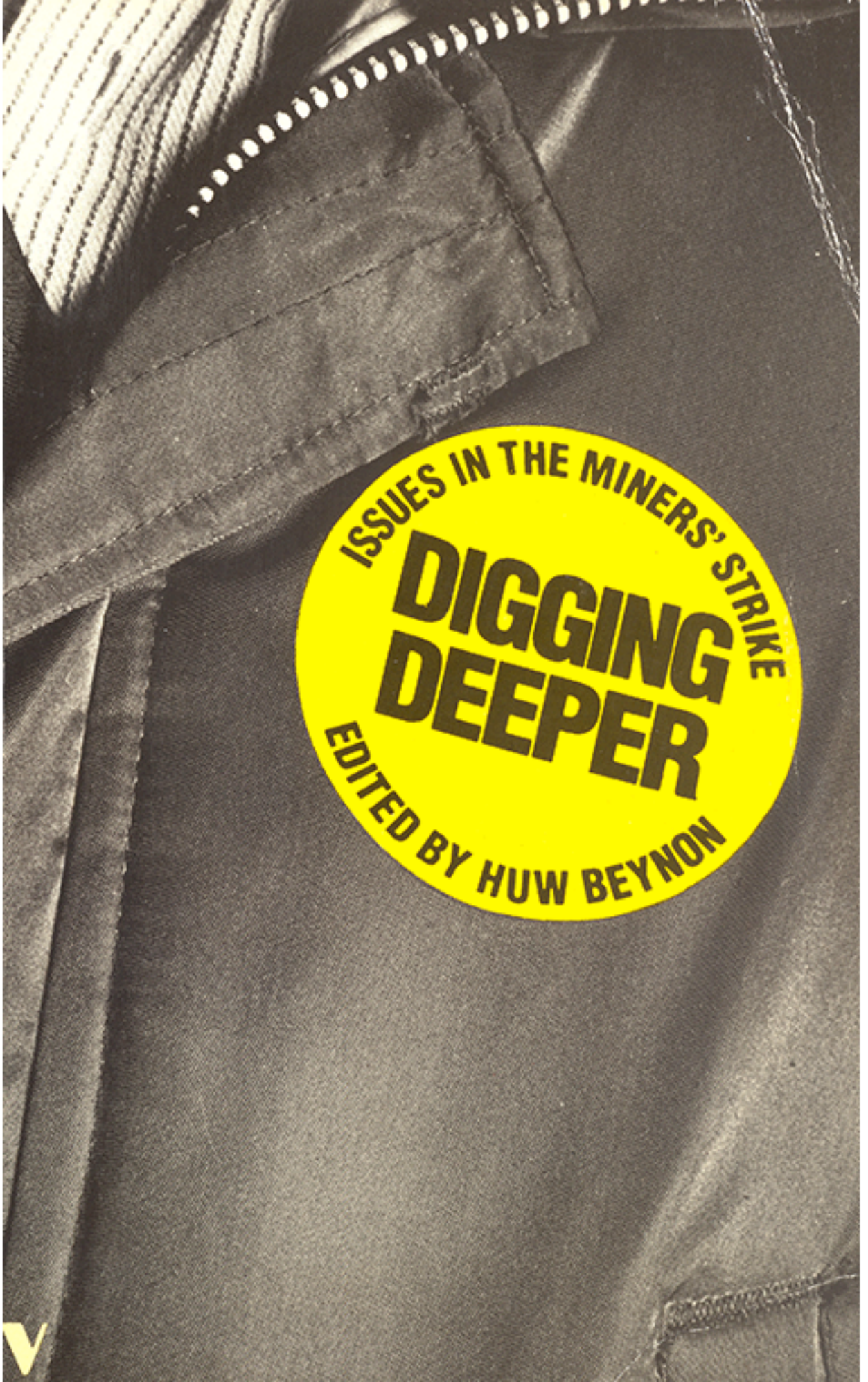
ISSUES IN THE MINERS' STRIKE
DIGGING DEEPER
EDITED BY HUW BEYNON

Introduction

Huw Beynon

The miners' strike of 1984–5 is a landmark in the political and economic development of post-war Britain. In the breadth of the issues involved, and in the drama of its action, it stands out — even to the casual observer — as a major social and political event. In its compass it is quite staggering. Initiated by a threat to cut capacity and jobs in the coal industry it is the first major strike of any duration to be fought over the question of employment. Viewed in the context of the near calamitous decline of jobs in manufacturing industry, and the sharp rise in unemployment, the strike stands like a beacon. In the sincerity of the people involved — women and men — as they talk about the threat to mining villages, to 'whole communities' and to the futures of their children, the strike evokes a deeply human response. Since March 1984 this response has been forthcoming from supporters, in groups and as individuals, throughout Britain and Europe. The yellow stickers of the NUM ('Dig Deep . . . ', 'Coal not Dole') have spread far beyond the coalfields.

The Experience of the Strike

There are many things to say about this strike. Most important, perhaps, is what it has meant for the people who have been directly involved; the miners, their wives and their families. To capture this experience in a few words is a simple impossibility. It would take a book, and more. When people stop and reflect over the months of the dispute they astonish themselves with just how much has happened. A lot of people say that they've never experienced anything like it. Ever. It has been the major event in their lives. None of them will forget it.

In one sense the strike has been full of confusion and contradiction. In a strike over 'jobs' many men made it clear that they had no desire 'to go back down that stinking hole'. Still, those people, at the beginning of the strike at least, talked of that hole as '*our* pit'. *Our* pit and *our* village. It was a national strike but not a national strike. A strike characterized in the media by 'violence' yet one in which wives, girlfriends and children became deeply involved; in many places these people were at its very centre.

The strike has been full of pathos. In Durham, support groups met to discuss the county's 'Boot and Shoe fund'. In Sunderland the 'Mayor's fund' was discussed, again in the context of children's shoes and clothes. On waste heaps and railway lines, men crawled on their hands and knees 'picking coal'. Children who wouldn't believe that 'Father Christmas was on strike' were equally convinced that 'things will be alright when my dad's back at work.' Across Britain union officials played Father Christmas in welfare halls; not a few of them were close to tears at times.

In spite of the hardship, the deep problems of survival, there has also been a lot of humour. On a picket line in Nottingham men were told that it was an offence to shout 'scab' and 'bastard' (when they asked what *was* permissible to shout they were told 'bounder'). One group split into two and stood on different sides of the road — one lot shouted 'bas' the other 'tards'. At a court case in St Helens the prosecuting lawyer described how Durham miners were shouting 'Hya we gow; Hya we gow . . . ' Local miners shouted in that accent for weeks. On that coalfield when it looked as if the deputies might possibly be called out on strike a wag pointed to the personal column of the *Sunderland Echo*, it read:

'**NACODS** Wearmouth Branch. General Meeting. Sunday October 21, Barbary Coast Club, 20.30 a.m.

SUICIDE, despair! Day or night talk to the Samaritans in complete confidence.'

Throughout the strike, miners and their supporters collected food and money outside local supermarkets. In Mountain Ash a group stood with their collecting bucket and a trolley full of tins of food. An old lady approached them and asked 'For the miners is it bach?' and reached into her purse for a ten pence piece. She placed the money in the bucket and took a tin of corned beef from the trolley. Peter Evans, one of the collectors, commented: 'I hope she doesn't tell everybody!'

Humour and pathos built around the need to survive, as for month after month miners and their families, with no strike pay and little or

no help from the DHSS, held out on strike. Viewed in terms of endurance alone it is an extraordinary achievement. To Mrs Thatcher, who expressed the view that she would personally find it quite unbearable to be in a situation without a regular income, it must have been an experience quite beyond comprehension. But it has happened, and in its happening, for all the worries and the hardships, some extraordinary things have occurred. In village after village across the coalfields the story is the same. Miners' welfare halls, clubs and school halls have been taken over. Women, with men as helpers, pack tins of food, potatoes, sugar and breakfast cereals into boxes or polythene bags — 'the parcels'. This is the food supply. Canteens have been set up to provide hot meals; stalls are set out with clothes for the children. Everywhere co-operative effort and an incredible depth of organizational ability has been put to the task of survival. And they have survived — with good grace and often with a smile. They have gone through Christmas, and many of them insist that it was a *good* Christmas, 'better than normal because we're all together more.' The women say they would never have thought that they could have done what they have done; never have believed that it was possible; it would never have occurred to them that they would have the kind of experiences they've been through in 1984/85. It has been quite extraordinary. And as one young man put it, and this was in a *very* gloomy moment, 'one thing we can say, we can take a lot of pride from what we've done in 1984. A lot of pride.'

I mention this man's gloom because the strike, for those involved in and affected by it, has been an incredibly emotional and all-consuming event. One miner registered for a part-time university course found it impossible to do his preparatory essays through the summer: 'It's impossible, I can't get down to it, I just can't stop thinking about the strike.' Women became avid watchers of the news, and video recorders taped the documentaries which covered the strike and every one of Arthur Scargill's interviews. And they were all discussed intensely.

Little surprise, therefore, that for many of these people the strike has been an educative process. They learned a lot; about the miners, the union, the coal board — about how political power operates. They learned a lot about the industry too: Durham miners will proudly tell you that they have picketed in every coalfield in the country except South Wales. Often the extent of their awareness has taken people by surprise. James Fox, for example, visited South Wales in December and produced an evocative account of the way the people there lived and organized. He begins his story at the Bruce

Hotel in Mountain Ash in 'a bar of picturesque shabbiness': 'It is, in fact, more like a shebeen than a bar, and is known to its customers as "The Shed". The discovery I made at the Bruce might surprise Mrs Margaret Thatcher and Mr Peter Walker . . . as much as it surprises me. Its customers are striking miners . . . many of them I soon learned knew the contents or had their own grubby photocopies of the *Economist's* leaked version of the Ridley Report — the Tory Party study drawn up in 1978, which mapped out its policy to dismantle the nationalized industries . . . Given the vulnerability of the South Wales Coalfield (this document) meant one thing to them: an attempt to destroy their church, the National Union of Mineworkers.'[1]

Fox registered his surprise. Others have expressed similar feelings as they have listened to men and women from the coalfields talk at meetings about subjects as diverse as the production of coal, the need for an energy policy, the threat of nuclear, the power of the press, and their fear of the police and the rise of a national force.

It was the police force which occupied people's minds most vividly in 1984. For all that the Deputy Chief Constable of Yorkshire complained that the 'trouble makers' were not 'true miners', hundreds and thousands of just such 'real miners' have described in detail and talked endlessly about the unfairness of their treatment at the hands of the police and the magistrates' courts. Visitors to mining villages in the summer and autumn have been regaled with stories of unfairness and injustice, all told with intensity and conviction. Many of those villages have experienced 'police occupation'. At Easington in Co. Durham, for example, the police referred to the colliery offices as the 'command centre'. In South Yorkshire, keen observers described a state of near 'civil war'.

In 1984 almost nine thousand miners were arrested. Two miners were killed on picket lines. The leader of the Kent miners spent ten days in jail for picketing. The South Wales area had all its funds sequestered. The National Union was taken over by a Tory Councillor from North Derbyshire who, on the instruction of the courts, declared 'I am the NUM'.

It's hard to register the horror, the dismay and disbelief which overcomes people when they mull over facts like these. Ironically, mining communities are, and have been for a long time, self-regulated, orderly places. Within them life has a pattern of its own, people know the rules and transgressions are dealt with in one way or another. In these places, people will tell you that 'we know each other'. They know each other and they know where they come

from; they also know where they belong. These are the people who march together in parades and galas, the same people whose banners have been captured, evocatively, in television news broadcasts and documentaries. These are also the people who risk their lives in what is still the most dangerous of jobs and who appear as heroes in stories of mining accidents and tragedies. It is the same people who have steadfastly refused to return to work in spite of the orchestrated blandishments of money from the NCB. It is these same people who have been described as 'the mob' by Mrs Thatcher and other members of the cabinet. 'The mob' and 'the enemy within'. The transformation in images is quite incredible and to many in the mining communities it is an unspeakable violation of themselves, their lives and all that they stand for. It has made them angry and very, very bitter.

In all these ways the miners strike has been an astonishing event. And its complexities don't end there. As a major struggle for jobs and employment undertaken by a union in the teeth of an offensive from the most right-wing Tory administration in living memory it would seem, on the face of it, to have all the makings of a *unifying* force within the British labour movement. Yet almost the opposite has happened. Within the NUM itself, areas refused to join the strike, and as time passed this division increasingly raised the spectre of a permanent split in the organization of the miners. For all the show of solidarity and support at the TUC conference, many union leaders were soon to admit privately that they 'couldn't deliver' the support of their members in strike action. To many it seemed that they had not tried very hard. At that conference, predictably, the electricians and the power station engineers registered their opposition to the strike and the leadership of the NUM. The Labour Party leader, speaking at the TUC and later at the Labour Party conference in Blackpool supported the miners while, by implication, criticizing them. These are the most telling of ironies and they deeply affected the viability of the miners' struggle.

Perhaps the most significant conflict, in human terms, took place within the mining communities themselves. From the beginning the coalfields in the Midlands were divided by the dispute. Nottingham and Staffordshire were split quite decisively while in Leicester and South Derbyshire only a handful of men joined the strike. In Leicester they called themselves the 'Dirty Thirty' and were determined to hold out until the end. In South Derbyshire the strikers were spread in ones and twos across the coalfield. Isolated but politically convinced of the justice of their action, they cast a badge

of their own. Distinctively shaped, it carried the motto 'Time — the Avenger'.

Pickets who entered these areas in the early months of the strike were surprised, sometimes shocked, by the lack of response they found from the men who continued to work: 'How could they pass through picket lines?', 'How can they drive past and see us penned in by police — like animals?' These questions, allied to ideas of solidarity and bound up in words like 'scab', were asked repeatedly. They drew from Roy Hattersley the admission that, were he a Notts miner, he would be on strike. They became more and more painful as the NCB pressed to break the solidarity and divide the miners in the strike-bound coalfields. The scale of the anguish as families divided against each other and life-long friends broke irrevocably was enormous. It became a moral and political struggle *within* the working-class movement. A struggle over the legitimacy of action — in which the men who worked, who defied the picket lines, the 'scabs', made repeated references to 'the ballot'.

The Question of the Ballot

Throughout the year of the dispute, a view persisted that the strike was, in some way, tainted by the absence of a national ballot. Certainly this was one of the sticks used, and used persistently, by members of the Tory Government to attack the NUM and its leadership. If that was the extent and limit of the criticism it could be dismissed as simple prejudice. However, similar criticisms (always accompanied by suitable caveats recording support for the miners) have also persisted within the labour movement. Few Labour Party or union branch meetings which discussed the strike have not raised the issue of 'the ballot' at some time or another. At their best these criticisms turned around a real worry that perhaps the union leadership had been involved in a bending of the rules and that this would rebound upon the miners in their attempts to build support both within the NUM itself and thereafter from other sections of the labour movement. At worst the persistent reference to the ballot has conjured up images of an unscrupulous union leadership, manipulating, even coercing miners to act against their better judgement and interests.

In considering these views it is important to recognize that they are not entirely ill founded. Wrong they may be, even malicious, but there is some substance to them which needs to be dealt with. For

example, it *is* the case that in South Wales most of the lodges were reluctant to strike and that the miners there joined the strike largely as a result of picketing by striking miners from other parts of the area. Equally, in Durham, while the men at the two pits, Herrington and Sacriston, seriously threatened with closure voted to strike, men in the other pits agreed to join the dispute only so long as there would be a confirming national ballot within the foreseeable future. In that area, most people anticipated that the national executive committee would be calling a national ballot in May or June, certainly after the special delegate conference decided to reduce the necessary vote for strike action from fifty-five per cent to a bare majority.

With hindsight, the decision *not* to hold a ballot at that time might be seen as a tactical mistake. One man — totally loyal to the union and deeply committed to the strike — noted how: 'On looking back now I think we should have had a ballot then. It would have taken a lot of pressure off us. It has been like a monkey on our backs. Everywhere we've gone we've had to answer the question of the ballot: not the strike and the issue of jobs and nuclear power — the ballot. And I think we would have won it. I think we would have won it at fifty-five per cent let alone fifty per cent.'

There is some support for this view, certainly on the likely result of a ballot. In areas which *had* voted (mostly those least likely to support the strike), the 'swing' since the last ballot in March 1983 was around ten per cent. Yorkshire had polled a poor vote for a strike in that ballot; in 1984, with a Yorkshire pit directly affected, a call for strike action could have been expected to receive strong support in this, the biggest area of the NUM. One of the features of the dispute (and to reflect upon this is to ask quite a different series of worrying questions) has been that public opinion polls have rarely tested opinion amongst the miners. Where it has been done (by MORI for 'Weekend World', by the *South Wales Echo* in South Wales, and by the *Liverpool Echo* in Lancashire and North Wales), the results have shown a support for the strike which was deeply set and surprisingly strong. To have called a national ballot could well have been to poll a vote for victory. To an important extent this is 'water under the bridge'. The man quoted earlier ended his comments with just this phrase, and *everyone*, even those in the striking coalfields who spoke out forcefully for a ballot in March, agreed that subsequently it became an academic issue. It is something that history will have to judge, and with an eye on this it is important to add a few more points, to try to understand *why* there was no ballot.

The more even-handed of journalistic commentators admit

that 'the right' whilst in power in the NUM were particularly adept at manipulating things in their direction. They also concede that 'the left's' experience of the antics of Joe Gormley, the 'Battered Cherub', goes a long way to explain many of their present attitudes. Attitudes which are captured in comments to the effect that 'we have the presidency now'. However, it is less than adequate to move from this to a view of the strike which is simply Machiavellian as Michael Crick does, for example. He describes how 'Arthur Scargill simply outmanoeuvred the right with a move that Joe Gormley would have been proud of . . . In the course of five weeks Scargill and the left had pulled off a brilliant piece of political footwork. They had been able to call a national strike but without holding a national ballot'.[2]

There is no doubt that there are 'left' and 'right' factions within the NUM, nor that these factions meet occasionally in caucus; nor even need it be contested that there are people on the left and right who understand the union as a machine whose levers of power require firm manipulation by those in control. But to see the NUM entirely in these terms and to interpret the present dispute simply at the level of manipulation and backstage meetings is to miss a lot; maybe the most important things. To begin with, the left and right factions are nothing like as homogeneous within the union as they were in the 1970s. The rank and file NEC representation from Durham, and the election of Bill Etherington as general secretary of the Durham Mechanics (a union which, to quote the *Financial Times*, was once 'a byword for extreme moderation') were important events which reflected more than 'left organization'. They were part of a process whereby miners and their families were reacting to the issue of pit closures and the future of employment in the North. This point is verified by the role played by Sid Vincent ('El Sid' as he was described in the *Daily Star*) in Lancashire. Steadfastly of the 'old right' he remembers the pit-closure programme of the 1960s and, almost in spite of himself, has recognized that the 1980s represent a crisis of a similar order for the NUM and regions like Lancashire.

The issue of pit closures, its nature and its consequence, deeply affected the options open to the NUM. In this it has been held firmly in the grip of its past.

The idea that the NCB intended to close pits at a faster rate could have taken no-one active in the mining industry by surprise. Arthur Scargill fought his presidential campaign on precisely this question. In meeting after meeting, in every coalfield, repeatedly, he hammered out his speech: The government was out to attack the industry; there was no getting away from it; nuclear challenged coal

. . . again and again. And always with the same ending: 'If you want someone who will prostitute his principles for office get someone else because I'm not interested . . . I'm sick to death of leaders who say one thing and do another. I will not compromise . . . ' Again and again and always tumultuous applause; always packed meeting halls; always the young miners smiling, laughing, joking: 'Newcastle have got Keegan — we've got Arthur Scargill'. He won that election with the highest percentage of the vote ever recorded in an NUM national election. Normally tight-fought affairs, this one was a landslide: seventy per cent of the miners voted for Scargill. He swept through area after area. Chadburn and Bell were not in the frame. These are important points to remember. A general public whose access to the strike, to Scargill and to the miners is limited by the inadequacies of our national media probably lack any sense of the rapport which Scargill built up with NUM activists during the early 1980s. For them, his meetings (for all the grimness of his predictions) were something of a liberation. He voiced their feelings about the board. His humour — always deeply mocking and iconoclastic (Hobart House, NCB Headquarters, was regularly pilloried as 'that big loss-maker in London', 'the only pit they've been near is a pulpit'), relying heavily upon mimicry and detailed accounts of 'private' meetings — was quite revelatory. Scargill was different from the old left. He had a kind of star quality. He was certainly different from the old right.

Many people thought that he'd change — that office would change him, of necessity. For his part he has been singularly determined to remain the same — King Arthur. The first two years of office explored this tension. In July 1982, in the County Hotel in Durham, he'd never been better. He'd just returned from the NUM Annual Conference in Inverness. At that conference 'the left' had swept the board. It wasn't so much that 'the right' was in disarray, they simply hadn't fielded a side. Speakers at the conference repeatedly supported the progressive approach of the new leadership. Scargill commented, 'It's going so well I'm just waiting for something to go wrong.'

It started to go wrong in November 1982 with the negotiations over the pay round. The coal board insisted during these negotiations that the rate of colliery closure would have to increase. A special delegate conference decided that the membership be balloted in a way which combined the two issues. Miners were to be asked to vote against both the wage increase and the threat to collieries. Clearly the two issues were linked. Certainly they were linked in the

mind of the coal board: they were prepared to greatly increase the wages of men in the super-pits on condition that the loss-making pits close. Equally certain is the fact that many members of the union objected to the way the issues were combined on the ballot paper: 'It might be wrong, but the way a lot of people look at it is that there were two issues on the ballot paper and they only had one vote. A lot of men objected to that, "It's my vote", that's the way they think. And a lot of genuine lads felt that. The other thing of course is that it give "the shit" a let out. The sort of people who are always looking for a way out of doing anything; them sort of people were able to say "I would have voted for the pits but I only had one vote and I wanted the wage increase".'

Whatever the reason the ballot saw the union's recommendation defeated heavily. The scale of this defeat had a severe effect upon the thinking of miners and union officials in the South Wales and Scottish coalfields. Scotland virtually caved in when faced by a pit closure programme that can only be described as an all-out assault upon mining employment in the area. South Wales, on the verge of a path-breaking 'investment strike' overwhelmingly supported by a ballot vote, stopped at the brink. The fear of isolation in these threatened areas was intense. It was matched only by the deep feeling of frustration induced by the increasingly assertive approach of the coal board, and the almost desperate state of local employment in the mining villages.

In March 1983 a group of men 'sat down' underground at the threatened Lewis Merthyr Colliery in South Wales. 'Sit downs' are emotive issues in the South Wales area, and hark back to the desperate struggles of the 1930s when members of the Miners' Federation struggled against company unionism. In the spring of 1983 the men of Lewis Merthyr obtained support across the coalfields of South Wales. The NEC supported the strike, and called for a national ballot. At that moment the South Wales area took a bold and imaginative decision. Miners from the area would visit every lodge and pit in the country to explain the case on pit closures. Buses left for Scotland, Durham, Lancashire, for Yorkshire and Nottingham; across the Midlands and for Kent; two thousand Welsh miners attempted to explain the case for saving Lewis Merthyr and assuring the security of mining in the 'peripheral coalfields'. This phrase was used a lot as miner met with miner and talked about the issues. Everywhere, they said, the reception was good. Many of them learned a lot about different things, especially wages: 'Some of the places we stayed in Nottingham were like palaces — miners' houses

worth £60,000 or something like that. I stayed with a Nottingham miner and he was telling me the bonus that they earn at his pit was £24 a shift. We don't get that in a month at our pit.' They felt they were given the PR treatment by the Nottingham area. 'I think a lot of it was guilt money. They made promises and they treated us well but I don't think they really went out to argue our case for us. They said they would, but I don't think they did.'

These events need more detailed study and reflection than is possible here. Whether the Welsh strike was tactically right or not is something which still divides people. What unites them is an understanding that the union faced an increasingly difficult, even traumatic, period.

Again just thirty-nine per cent had voted for the strike and again the main source of opposition to the strike was certain groups, like COSA, the white-collar section, and areas like Nottingham and Leicestershire. The scale of this defeat forced miners in South Wales and some of the other threatened areas to ask deep questions about strategy. In doing so they looked at the ballot upsets of November and March and came to a number of conclusions. In March only fifteen per cent of COSA and nineteen per cent of Nottingham members voted 'Yes'. In Leicester the percentage was eighteen per cent; in South Derbyshire twelve per cent. Notts and the Midlands, so many people argued, would *never* support threatened miners in South Wales, Scotland and the North East. The March ballot vote was seen to condemn them almost out of hand — 'only twenty per cent of the fuckers would vote to help save the job of another man — that's fucking disgraceful that. It is mind. It's disgraceful.'

In this way the March vote was a truly decisive event, a marker. It produced a deep feeling amongst miners in the threatened areas that they were on their own. To some, this meant that they were finished: 'I think I know how the coal board are thinking now. All their investment will be going into the central areas such as Yorkshire and Nottingham and before long there'll be no pits left in Durham, in South Wales and Scotland. It will all be grassed over. It will be as if there never were any mines in these places.' Others, and at times this included the majority of the active union members in those areas, felt that there was now nothing left to lose. 'Over the top' was one phrase used. Another was 'backs to the wall', and 'it's us or them'. One man from South Wales reflected that the ballot vote itself was wrong. South Wales had come out on strike, constitutionally and in defence of jobs. The NEC had recognized the area's right to fight. The NEC should have left it at that. South Wales

should have been allowed to fight on — alone if need be. At the time it was argued that South Wales pickets could have built on the contacts they had made and carried the idea of the strike into the other areas. 'Everything that was done up to the ballot was done right. It was the ballot that was wrong. The NEC should have left South Wales to carry on the fight for jobs.'

A number of things are important here. To begin with it's a matter of record that those things *were* being said and that they had an influence upon the thinking of leaders of the NUM. In 1983 the Scottish area was given permission, under rule 41 which allows areas to take strike action on their own, to pursue its defence of the Monkton Hall Colliery in the manner that it felt most able. More complex is the question of the structure of the NUM and the issue of colliery closures. Jimmy Reid, for example, has been a harsh critic of the NUM's conduct of the dispute and a strong advocate for a national ballot. Along with his supporters he has contrasted his own experiences with the UCS occupation and the idea that the unity achieved there and the support obtained from outside was linked to a ballot vote. What Reid and others have underplayed, however, is the way in which workplaces — like UCS — were allowed, under the constitution of the confederation of unions involved in the shipyards, to fight their own fight. Reid was not obliged to obtain a national ballot vote for a strike amongst all shipyard or engineering unions. In this, and many other ways, the situations are not similar.

The NUM is an *industrial* union and is the clearest example of this form of organization in Britain. Industrial unionism has been seen by the syndicalists, and other supporters of a strategically operated and militant trade unionism, as the most appropriate form of organization for dealing with modern industry. To an extent that is true. It does however have drawbacks. General unions can develop strike funds which allow members on strike to be supported by members not involved in the dispute; this is more difficult in an industrial union when all the members are likely to be on strike together. But in terms of formulating a policy and strategy for an industrial sector — formally at least — it has some powerful advantages. The NUM, however, is also a *federated* union, and the extent to which federalism — the independence and separateness of areas and groups — dominates the industrial logic of the union, affects its veracity as a powerful national body. The organization of the industry means that regional office staff (in COSA) rarely meet to discuss issues with miners on a day to day basis; miners in Nottingham never meet with miners in Kent. The structure of the union has

done little to help break down these barriers of experience. Since the introduction of area incentive payment schemes in 1977, this separateness has increased to the extent that, in the 1980s, thoughtful union activists concede that 'we are a national union in name only.' Worries of this kind induced Jack Taylor's remark to the effect that he 'didn't really trust' the Nottingham area. The feeling had grown (rightly or wrongly, but out of experience, and the struture of the union, not out of malice) that Nottingham would *never* vote for strike action, and that on an issue which didn't directly affect them, like colliery closures, they could not be relied on to adhere to a national decision.

If the issue at stake in March 1984 had been a wage increase or cut there would not have been a strike. The issue was colliery closures and unemployment. It is for those reasons that Peter Heathfield has argued passionately and with great conviction that 'it cannot be right for one man to vote another man out of a job'; that a ballot on wages is a ballot which everyone enters on an equal basis and everyone is affected by equally; on jobs it is a different matter, especially when the jobs are at risk in some areas and not others. A political parallel with Ulster might be helpful: clearly an individual ballot vote taken throughout Ulster on the future of the Catholic housing estates would not be seen as democratic, and it has been accepted that built-in safeguards for minorities which go beyond the ballot box are an essential adjunct to the democratic process however defined. The miners' union faced precisely such a problem in 1984. The jobs issue cut deeply into its very bowels and there was no easy solution. Arthur Scargill put it well at the Barbary Coast Club in Sunderland on the critical weekend at the beginning of the strike: 'members of this union are at the cross roads and there are no easy options.'

Picketing and Politics

There is now little doubt that the Tory Government, aided by clear and long-term tendencies within the British State which are anything but benign, prepared carefully for a confrontation with the miners. Part One of this book explores the dimensions of this preparedness, and it shows how the Tories were able to view the development of the dispute with confidence. In 1974 a Tory Government had gone to the country in the middle of a coal strike; in 1981 the Thatcher Government had back-pedalled rapidly in the face of such an escalation. *Private Eye* carried a front cover with Heath

smirking at Thatcher's discomfort. In 1984, there was no possibility of either course being followed. It was going to be a long strike or nothing.

In June, while attending a Conservative student lunch at the Three Tuns Hotel in Durham City, the Home Secretary, Leon Brittan, was gently barracked by a group of miners from the Horden Colliery, along with women from other pit villages in the area and their visitors from Nottingham. He agreed to meet a deputation of six people. They went in to talk with him; when they left their emotions were running high. One of the men had wanted to explain to Brittan about picketing and to ask the Minister why he had made such provocative statements on the subject: 'I tried to explain to him what it was like to live in this area and how we were all dependent upon the pit in the village. I tried to get him to understand what it was like from the standpoint of the ordinary working man; the ordinary working fella . . . But he didn't want to know. He just didn't want to know.' One of the Nottingham women was deeply upset. 'All he said to us that I can remember is "You can't win". I kept saying "We're going to win". For him though it was a question of winning and we couldn't win.'

Given the scale of the coal-stocks, the pattern of voting in previous ballots, and the kind of preparedness which ran right through the state, Brittan's confidence was perhaps well-founded. Certainly the way it was flaunted was characteristic of the new Tory style. Given this it might be asked — and many have — why did the NUM strike in such forbidding circumstances? The idea that the NUM was out of its mind to strike at the end of winter, and wilfully wrong to provoke the power of the Thatcher state, held a great deal of currency amongst political activists on the left and centre of British politics. Often in discussions with engineering workers there was a sense of admiration (which trade union in Europe could sustain a strike this long under these conditions?), but also of disbelief (how could the NUM win against these kinds of odds?). Time and time again, in car plants, engineering workshops and textile mills there had been campaigns against closures but never with success. Almost always they ended in bitterness. But now, so late on, the NUM was standing out. How was it possible?

These points need answering; and again they need to be treated with some care. To understand the 1984 miners' strike as a provocative, offensive strike by a vanguard section of the working class is to miss the point — almost completely. In terms of *its* strategy, the NUM leadership wanted to fight in 1982. The stocks were low, it was

the beginning of winter and the writing was clearly on the wall for pit closures. (On that ballot, Joe Gormley broke with all established NUM protocol and procedure and wrote an article in the *Daily Express* which deeply undermined the position taken by the NEC. That too is water under the bridge.) Any plan the leadership had for 1984 rested with the overtime ban. Such a ban, which did not require a national ballot, was seen as an effective way of cutting back production. It was introduced in November, and in January Scargill seemed content to keep it in force for the whole of 1984.

During this period, Peter Heathfield was involved in his election campaign for the position of general secretary. In January the overtime ban was causing all kinds of problems for the union but, at bottom, he felt that 'it was better than a strike'. The NUM leadership was not spoiling for a fight in 1984. The election result for the general secretary (when the left's senior figure, Peter Heathfield, barely scraped home against John Walsh, a union agent from North Yorkshire) confirmed the feeling of caution. It was the widely leaked NCB plan for colliery closures which affected the situation decisively. The strategy being followed by the NUM was a defensive strategy, and the strike, when it came, was a defensive strike.

In March 1984 the union was placed in a difficult position. On 6 March, the NCB announced to the joint representatives of the constituent unions, the NUM, NACODS and BACM, that there was to be a cut in capacity of four million tonnes and that a third of this was to come out of the North East area. (In Durham the blatant unfairness of this was often raised and people would ask 'why?'. The answer often given 'because they think we're a soft touch' says a lot about people's attitudes and feelings at the time.) The four million tonnes reduction was to be on the *actual* production totals for 1983/4. This total was four million tonnes below output targets because of the overtime ban. The cutback to 97.5 million tonnes represented a *capacity* cut of eight million tonnes. As far as the NCB was concerned, this was not a negotiable situation. The cuts were a *fait accompli*. As if to make this clear the Yorkshire area announced the imminent closure of Cortonwood Colliery. Located in an area of high unemployment, the pit had an established life of over five years. Men who had been transferred to the pit within the previous fortnight had been promised a secure spell there before it closed. The announcement of closure broke all procedures established in the industry for dealing with questions of capacity reduction and colliery performance. It was a deeply provocative act.

In the period which followed the 'successful' strike of 1981, when

the NCB last announced a pit closure programme and were forced to withdraw it, the NCB proceeded to close pits at an accelerating rate. In 1982 they broke the back of the Scottish area with the closure of Kinneil. What followed, in what has always been thought of as a 'hard core' area for the union militants, was a year of union frailty in the face of the tough approach of its crew-cut area Chairman, Albert Wheeler. Commenting on his approach the *Scotsman* noted that 'viewed dispassionately as an exercise in aggressive management (his) tactics and record in directing the Scottish coalfield command a certain kind of black admiration. In just thirteen months he has slashed the number of Scottish pits from fifteen to nine with only one new colliery being opened up in the future.'[3]

At least, in Scotland they had *one* new pit. In the North East and Wales there was no such consolation. The South Wales area headed by Philip Weekes (the boyhood idol of Neil Kinnock and a man who had been closely involved in the Welsh Labour History Society conferences of Llafur) had taken a softer line. There, of course, the board had burned its fingers in 1981 and in 1983. Also the specialized coals found in that coalfield acted as a check upon the narrowly financial enthusiasm of the NCB. This enthusiasm ran unchecked in the North East, however, where another aggressive Scotsman, David Archibald, had, in his tight-lipped no-nonsense style, slashed the area dramatically in the year that followed the 1981 dispute. Houghton, Blackhall, Boldon, Marley Hill, South Hetton, all closed; other collieries on the way down. All of this, looked at from the standpoint of the board, was plain sailing. South Wales demoralized, Scotland finished. The North East — with its history of moderation — not really a starter were it to come to a showdown. All that was left was Yorkshire.

In 1981, when Scargill was president, the Yorkshire area ran a campaign against pit closures. It organized an area ballot in which Yorkshire miners were asked to agree that the area would strike immediately a pit in the area was threatened with closure outside the framework of agreement laid down in the pit review procedure. Yorkshire miners insist that the eighty-three per cent vote in support of that resolution saved pits and jobs in Yorkshire. They also insist, and with sound logic, that the Cortonwood closure was a *political* decision, (i.e. more to do with the balance of power than the economic or geological logic of coal production), aimed at isolating the Yorkshire area and finishing off opposition for good and all.

To an extent, of course, this is speculation. However it isn't *wild* speculation. The NCB, under MacGregor, was clearly set upon a

course of action in relation to pit closures. Scargill, equally clearly, represented a focus for opposition when the powerful Yorkshire union (over sixty-thousand miners and his home base) could be the muscle needed at a crucial moment. To get Yorkshire out on strike and isolated at a bad moment could be the finishing touch of MacGregor's strategy and provide the basis for an unhindered move towards profitability and privatization.

The Tory Government had clearly prepared for this dispute, but it is most unlikely that they anticipated or prepared for a strike that would last a year and demand such intensive and costly counter-measures. They had planned to defeat the NUM quickly. They didn't succeed.

But the NUM, for its part, was fighting on a different terrain from that which brought it victory in 1972 and 1974. In the early 1970s unemployment was still under one million, at the beginning of 1984 it was nearer four. British manufacturing industry has virtually collapsed — nowhere more dramatically than in the West Midlands, the scene of the mass picket at the Saltley Coke Works. Ten years ago shipyard workers and miners were able to call upon the support and loyalty of engineering workers at picket lines and also at rallies and parades. Today many of these workers have either been forced to change jobs (via the sack or 'redundancy') or they are out of work. Those in work are increasingly oppressed and frightened by the threat of closure and redundancy. While many workers have refused solidarity action because 'the miners can't get their own members out', equal numbers have hesitated because of the vulnerability of their own jobs and the companies they work for. The way in which this fear in the minds of, say, steel unions and the oil-fired power station workers links into the question of the legitimacy and nature of the NUM's tactics during the dispute is an issue of central importance.

The NUM's strategy for a successful strike rested largely on two assumptions: that Nottingham could be involved in the dispute and that the Triple Alliance, so carefully developed in the early 1980s, would produce the muscle necessary to throttle the coal economy. However, both came unstuck. The kind of police presence exercised at Warrington for the NGA picket in November 1983 was a clear signal that picketing in 1984 was going to be a lot different from 1972. With the closure of exit points on the M6, the use of police in riot gear, the stories of direct and unprovoked attacks by police on pickets, and the destruction of the NGA's communication van, the writing was clearly on the wall, and with hindsight was written

in very big letters indeed. To cope with the scale of the police organization the union would have had to mount its own military-style operation. And in spite of repeated statements from the Home Office ministers to the effect that the NUM was organizing a national conspiracy, the structure of the union precluded the emergence of such a command network. Within the union each area was responsible for its own picketing operations. Pickets were paid a daily subsistence fee and this came out of area funds. Although a national co-ordinating committee was set up at Sheffield, it was never able to take the strike by the scruff of the neck and direct it. The only 'national' event, as such, was the mass picket at the Orgreave coke works. That event was significant for the fact that the police force allowed the buses of miners to arrive in Sheffield, and then confronted them with the immense power of an organized military operation — something which no one who witnessed it will ever forget. What emerged was a series of more or less *ad hoc* arrangements built up around area autonomy. One such arrangement found the Yorkshire area mostly responsible for picketing in Nottingham, and as a strategy for halting the movement of coal this failed. However much its extent and significance was played down, it was clear that if bridges couldn't be built with the Nottinghamshire miners the production of coal there would continue to be a problem for the union. It untied the knot of support with the NUR and ASLEF whose members supported miners in the striking areas while moving coal to power stations in the Midlands.

Not quite as damaging, but damaging enough, was the link with the third party to the Alliance — the steelworkers. Within the logic of the Alliance, these workers should have agreed to limit their intake of coal; they should have cut production and supported miners on strike. It didn't work out like that. With good cause the miners in the striking coalfields (and *all* the coking coalfields were on strike, *no* coking coal being produced from the deep mines) felt disgruntled. They could point to the ways in which they had supported the steelworkers during their confrontation over wages in 1980. Perhaps however, and with hindsight again, this was predictable enough. For although steelworkers and miners live in the same areas (Scotland, South Wales, the North East and Yorkshire), they tend to live in separate worlds. The steel plants are all on the coast and three of them are linked to deep port facilities for the importation of coal, coke and iron ore. The Triple Alliance, (for all its formal statements and undertakings), had organized few meetings which actually brought together workers from the pits and the steel mills to

thrash out a common understanding. Local agreements had been built up between areas of the NUM and the ISTC and the variations between them became quite critical during the strike. The steelworkers, remember, had already been savaged by the cutbacks in capacity imposed under MacGregor's chairmanship. Of the five supermills that remained open, rumours persisted that one, or even two, might have to close. As one miner put it: 'the steelworkers are shell-shocked after what has happened to them.' So shell-shocked were they, in fact, that the threat by BSC of catastrophic damage and plant closures was enough to weaken any resolve that existed for a fight in support of the coal industry. Certainly there is no excusing the lack of integrity shown by ISTC leader Bill Sirs, but as one man put it at a meeting in the North East 'it's like asking for a blood transfusion from a corpse.'

With this two-pronged strategy in tatters, the NUM's prosecution of the strike was in severe difficulties. If the strike was not going to be a knock-out blow for the NCB, neither was the NUM going to get a quick victory. For the NUM to place a tourniquet upon the flow of coal, it needed something better than the Triple Alliance. Best of all, of course, would have been an Energy Alliance which linked miners with workers in the oil and gas industries and the power stations. Such an alliance however, while clearly expressing the new *economics* of coal, cut against the historical and political grain of the NUM and other unions in the TUC. Without such a link the NUM was deeply vulnerable. The more so given its isolated position within the international coal mining unions. While Belgian and Australian miners and dockers gave support to the NUM, deliveries of coal from Poland, West Germany and the USA escalated. Coal flooded up the Humber and the Trent (where the hedgerows and verges were blackened with coal dust) and to virtually every unregistered port from Inverness southward along the east and south coasts. In this respect the contrast between the NUM and, for example, the union organization at Ford is quite startling. At Ford, the international structure of the company produced a form of trade unionism which, when necessary, could seal off imports from Europe. Ford workers, however, almost certainly lack the community forms of organization necessary to sustain a strike for as long as a year.

By the late summer the strike had become a war of attrition. As a strategic exercise in controlling the movement of coal it had almost ceased to exist. In the strike-bound areas coal stockpiled at pit heads and on open-cast sites stayed put; elsewhere it moved more or less freely, and 700,000 tonnes a week were delivered to the power

stations in the Midlands. In this period, the pickets were pushed back on the gates of their own pits or diverted to the task of organizing support meetings and collections, and speaking at rallies across Britain and Europe. Many of them had been bound over or were free on bail conditions which severely limited their movements. The strike had become a test of endurance; it also became increasingly political. As John Lloyd put it, the issues were 'basic, fundamental, ideological and apparently unbridgeable.'[4]

Put in this way, the main features of the strike can be reassessed. A defensive strike fought under difficult conditions by a union which, unlike all other national unions, had not been savagely cut back as the recession bit in the late 1970s, the strike represented not so much the front line as the last ditch. In its continuation and strength it rested to an enormous extent upon the will-power, imagination and organizing abilities of the people who live in the mining villages. This 'community' strength and loyalty was the NUM's ace; a card that represented years of historical experience of struggle and strikes, reflection and story-telling. Throughout the 1984 strike the people of the mining communities young and old, men and women, talked about other struggles and about how this strike differed from 1972 and 1974. They asked questions about 1926: How long did it last? When did it start? In all this they gained a strength from the fact that they, or their parents and grandparents, had been through such a struggle before. It could be done again.

The Politics of Unemployment and Change

Margaret Thatcher was right about one thing. This has been no ordinary strike. If the right to strike for jobs causes problems for union ballots, so too does conflict over jobs and the survival of communities raise questions which go to the heart of our political system.

Harold Macmillan, Lord Stockton, described the miners as 'wonderful men . . . they'll never give in'. The strike, he said, was breaking his heart. More ironic perhaps were the views of Enoch Powell. Speaking to Manchester Conservatives in November he expounded his theme, talking of a deeply dangerous society caught in the grip of 'gloomy resignation and passive acceptance of inevitable catastrophe', of resentment building up 'at the apparent wilful blindness and ignorance of those in authority'.[5] If the action of the miners and their families in defence of their stricken communities touches

chords in the old Toryism of the right (a form of politics now blocked by the ascendancy of the Thatcher group) it is truly ironic that sympathetic developments have been so limited on the left of the political spectrum. Here, all too often, the view of history is dominated by technological imperatives. This was the case in the 1960s and the modernizing period of Harold Wilson. Today the talk is of a post-industrial society. In his article in *The Spectator*, Jimmy Reid wrote that: 'the labour movement must come to terms with the new technological revolution. It must see it as a means of liberating workers from dirty and dangerous jobs. The right to work must mean shortened working hours for everyone. In the long term this cannot be achieved by claiming a person's right to work at a specific job for the rest of his or her life. This would freeze the division of labour and would preclude any economic or technical progress. If jobs had been frozen two hundred years ago, we would still have thousands of stage-coach drivers in Britain today, presumably driving stage coaches. By the end of this century I would hope that modern technology, among many other things, will have ended the need for human beings to work like moles in the bowels of the earth. To envisage people working down the pits for evermore is not just Luddite, in the worst sense of that word, but thoroughly reactionary.'[6]

This view of technology as a neutral, and essentially liberating force, echoes the statements made by Peter Walker that the future is one of an 'Athens without slaves', and represents a shared understanding of what is happening inside the British economy and where it will end. Reid recognizes that in the late 1970s 'things started to go wrong', but he seems convinced that in the late 1980s 'the world capitalist economy' will get things right again. However, this view is not shared by many of the people who live in the threatened coalfields. The extent to which the strike, for all its problems and hardship, has retained support is related to the attachment which miners and their families feel towards the places where they live, and to their assessment of the likelihood of continuous employment in the mines *or elsewhere*. In the coalfields of the North East, the valleys of South Wales, and the dense mining areas of Yorkshire, there is no sign of new technology providing a basis for new and expanding employment. Workers can look to Ebbw Vale, to Consett, or to Sheffield and see the aftermath of steel closures, a reality which makes fantasy of Reid's predictions. New technology, where it has penetrated mining regions, has been tied to low-waged work for women; routine, demanding work performed for em-

ployers antagonistic or at best lukewarm towards independent trade unionism. If BSC Industries had little success in invigorating the economies of these towns, what hope for the belated, and underfunded, NCB Enterprises?

All of this was confirmed by the Tory Chancellor when he explained that: 'We must not be seduced by the wonders of high-tech into overlooking the fact that many of the jobs of the future will be in the labour-intensive service industries which are not so much low-tech as no-tech.'[7] Such qualifications were well made given the fact that Britain's trade deficit in electronic products quadrupled between 1979 and 1983. It has to be said clearly, and in the strongest terms, that for many of the people who live in the stricken coal-mining regions, the future (in the wake of a defeated strike) looks grim indeed. That is why they asked, throughout 1984, 'are we winning?'

The argument doesn't stop there. It may well seem 'reactionary' to stand in the way of beneficial developments in science and technology, but to see 'technology' as an independent source of progress displays naivety. Certainly the development of technologies which utilize the energy of coal as it lies in the seam are to be welcomed — in human terms alone the benefits would be enormous. Whether this is the kind of development that will take place in the British energy sector is quite another matter. The likelihood is that under the policies outlined by this government we will be saddled with nuclear power stations as a source of electricity (and warheads) and with the sterilization of countless millions of tonnes of precious fossil fuel.

The leadership of the Labour Party, even in its own electoral terms, has missed the boat in 1984. The revelation, by John Torode, that the outpourings of James Reid were little less than the private thoughts of Neil Kinnock was disturbing enough. More worrying perhaps was an attitude highlighted by the comment of one political correspondent to the effect that the Labour leadership was looking at the miners' strike 'through the rear view mirror.' The strike was seen as a re-enactment of the 1926 confrontation, with the ending preordained. (Kinnock's reference to Gallipoli was revealing in this context.) But history never repeats itself except as farce — and this strike was no farce. It was clearly serious, with many people's lives hanging on the result. To many of them the failure of the Labour Party to initiate action in support of their cause; to point vigorously to questions of unemployment and energy policy; to raise clearly important issues about civil rights and the workings of the police force and the legal system, was not simply treacherous, it was incomprehensible.

The unhappiness felt about Neil Kinnock's leadership amongst the miners who have been most active in the strike is hard to exaggerate. One man put it like this: 'I worked hard in our constituency to get Kinnock nominated. Most of the people in our branch wanted Hattersley. I really thought that Kinnock would do a decent job like. Particularly as he represented a mining constituency. But he has done nothing to help us. He's hindered us really. The way I look at it, he'd have been better off saying nowt than the tripe he's come out with. I didn't think I'd ever say this, but I feel now that I'd rather have Hattersley as leader. At least he says what he means; you know where you are with him'

In July, Kinnock spoke at a national rally organized in Durham. It replaced the annual gala which the miners have held in the city since 1869, and which has become a central part of the Labour calendar. Kinnock had the difficult task of speaking last after Scargill, Heathfield and Skinner. During his speech the normally attentive Durham audience thinned noticeably. There was no heckling. People walked quietly away, some shaking their heads. That the executive of the Durham Miners' Association (the union which ranks above all others in its loyalty to the Labour Party) should be discussing in January 1985 a letter requesting that the union withhold an invitation to the July Gala from the party's leader is the most telling evidence of how deeply let down the miners feel.

This sense of disappointment is made all the more galling by the fact that the strike made possible a new approach to political thinking and struggle. Jimmy Reid is quite wrong to suggest that the miners and their union are 'Luddite', with no policy for technical progress and development. The NUM has argued strongly for a new approach to technology in the mines, one which takes account of the needs of people as workers and the needs of local communities. In its opposition to nuclear power, in the links it has built between coalfields and between miners and other groups of supporters in the cities and abroad, the miners' strike presented the possibility of organizing a new kind of radical alliance around energy, peace, and urban decay. It can be argued that much more could have been made of these issues by the union as the strike progressed, certainly as it became clear that no simple form of words was going to unlock the dispute. The NUM was involved in a political struggle, and in Europe, in the Northern countries especially, this was seen clearly and the strike fired an imaginative response within trade unions and progressive parties. For one thing the struggle for jobs, and for communities, along with a demand for an ecologically sound approach to the

extraction of coal and the use of energy, fitted well into the 'green' politics which are of growing significance in Europe. For another, many people are increasingly aware of the deeply intertwined nature of the capitalist states and the economic crisis which affects them. One German reporter, visiting the North East, put it this way: 'People understand that Mrs Thatcher and her monetarist policies are an *international* phenomenon. They affect all the industrial states in the West. Mrs Thatcher is seen as the leading advocate of those policies and to many people in Germany and in Scandinavia the miners are involved in a struggle that will affect everyone by its outcome. That's why everyone watches it so closely.'

This assessment of the critical significance of the miners' dispute is revealed by the scale of international support received by the NUM. The international picture is a mirror image of Britain. Workers in threatened industries, organized in unions unaccustomed to taking risks or to entering a political dialogue with their members, have been reluctant to strike in solidarity. However, the mobilization of support beyond the work-place — through collections of money, food and clothing, through exchange visits, and through regular and sincere messages of support and solidarity 'against Mrs Thatcher and her policies' — was a major factor in keeping the strike going.

The NUM is the only trade union in Europe that could have entered a strike of this kind, and sustained it for so long. The particular nature of the coal industry, a nationalized industry based in labourist areas and interconnected communities, meshed with the scale of the British crisis and the determination of the NUM leadership to produce a unique event. It has shown up a lot of things for what they are. Without any doubt, it has been a turning point for us all.

This collection was put together, very hurriedly, during December 1984 and January 1985. At the time the 'drift back to work' strategy was underway and the national media was performing herculean tasks as a PR organ for the NCB. At that time everybody involved in the book felt that the themes and issues which ran deeply through the strike were being masked behind the shallowest of interpretations. So much was this the case that the union's leaders, both nationally and in the regions, felt strongly that the political lessons and the implications of the strike had barely touched the wider audience of workers and their families. As such we felt that a book which attempted to bring together some of the social and political research relevant to the dispute would be both useful and an important act of solidarity. This is our attempt at it.

Before saying what it is that we are trying to do in this book, it is important to make clear what we have not done. This is in no sense a definitive account of the strike or an evaluation of the countless experiences which have gone into its making. Such accounts will be produced in time and they will be based upon the amazing range of insights and understandings which the people at the centre of the strike have developed for themselves. It is their story and we shall have to wait for them to tell it.

The book is organized into three parts. *Part One* focuses upon the way in which the strike served to highlight important political questions about the state and the organization of power in our society. It raises questions about the role of the police and the law courts. Clearly these are burning issues in the dispute. Less well understood is the way in which the nationalized industries and the Welfare State have been turned as a weapon against miners on strike. In these ways, the strike can be seen to raise fundamental questions about how trade unions organize, now and in the future.

In *Part Two* the book shifts more directly to the experiences of people in the dispute, and offers an initial assessment of their impact on the development of politics in the future. The strike has, in all sorts of ways, pointed to real weaknesses and inadequacies in what Gavin Laird referred to in Brighton as 'this great movement of ours.' The theme of this part is that 'the movement', if assessed from the standpoint of the TUC or Labour Party headquarters, is in pretty bad shape. However, and the keen optimism of these chapters is important, another 'movement' may have been brought to life and been tapped by the strike. It has a future.

Part Three turns to the mining industry and the question of energy. Its main theme is that coal mining and the coal-mining regions could play a significant part in the future development of Britain, but they are under real threat. This threat can be seen in the use of nuclear power, the use made by the NCB of new technology, the expansion of open-cast operations, privatization, soaring unemployment, and the sterilization of valuable coal reserves. The starkness of this threat contrasts with the hopes and possibilities presented by an environmentally sound energy policy and a political understanding of how production can be organized not for profit but for the common good.