



EASINGTON AUGUST '84

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THE STRIKE

In the summer of 1983 the newspapers were filled with the rumour that the new Chairman of the National Coal Board would be Mr. Ian MacGregor. MacGregor had served on the board of British Leyland where he had built up a reputation of toughness. At British Steel Corporation, he extended this image and became identified as the man who most clearly represented the economic arm of Thatcher's political philosophy. Both Companies, under his guidance, were cut back, and over half their Labour force paid off. The idea of MacGregor moving across to the National Coal Board dominated conversation in the Clubs, in the Union Offices and on street corners. Most people thought the appointment unlikely: "I don't think they'll do it. It would be so provocative, let's face it. I don't think the NCB would want that and I can't see MacGregor wanting it — why would he want to come in here and take on Scargill." But he did. He took the appointment and to many people this put the writing on the wall. One man put it like this:

"I think if I had to put a date or a time on when I decided that Scargill was right it was when Thatcher appointed MacGregor. Let's face it we knew then. It was obvious we were either going to have one hell of a fight or go the way of the steelworkers."

John Cummings, the Leader of Easington District Council, and Secretary of the Murton Lodge of the Durham Mechanics put it like this:

"What you have to do when you come up against an opponent is to question his motivation — what makes MacGregor tick, what does he get out of life? He's seventy two, he doesn't live with his family, he clearly doesn't value the human things in life. What is his motivation? And I think his motivation is power and to use it by breaking the independence of the British Trade Union movement. That's what he tried to do at British Leyland where they sacked Derek Robinson and that's what he did at British Steel. He wants to take away our independence and our cultural heritage, our village life and our club life. All this is our heritage, and I'm not prepared to let him take my heritage away from me."

MacGregor's appointment set the scene. This was the context of political and union discussion across the coalfield in the Autumn of 1983. It was this which convinced people — churchmen, traders, office



workers that the East coast of Durham could end up like Consett. For the miners the reaction of the new Chairman to their pay claim simply confirmed their worst suspicions. Bill Stobbs, the Chairman of the Easington Lodge and the newly elected representative on the Union's National Executive Committee. He remembers how:

"It was my first meeting with them and I remember thinking that if our members could see the contempt shown by the Board for their Union representatives we would be on strike tomorrow! The Union presented a detailed case (in line with resolutions passed at our Annual Conference in Perth) and the Coal Board asked for an adjournment. After half an hour they returned; all our claims were turned down flat. In response they produced a bombshell — a 5.2% wage increase linked to an agreement on the closure of uneconomic pits! So much for the caring Coal Board."

The Overtime ban followed. Supported by every area at a National Delegate Conference, it went into effect on November 1st 1983. It bit into production — but the attack on 'uneconomic pits' continued. In Scotland, Monkton Hall was followed by Polmaise; in Durham the New Herrington pit and then Sacriston; in Yorkshire the bombshell of Cortonwood. All of this has been placed in a national context by the National Coal Board in its meeting with the trade unions on March 6th 1984. Four million tonnes of capacity to be cut; 20,000 jobs to go. Over a third of the cuts to come in the North East.

It was all clearly confirmatory. The



axe was going to come down, and few people believed that it would be a once and for all blow. At Easington they looked down the coast to the winding gears of Blackhall and Horden. Blackhall, once a major colliery, closed in 1981. Horden the major pit in South East Durham now weakened (possibly fatally) after a severe rundown in manpower. Was Easington next in line? Preliminary suggestions by the Manager that the pits manpower would have to be seriously reduced did little to quell those fears. So too the suggestion that the 'E' and 'F' seams faced closure.

On March 10th the Miners Welfare Hall in the village was packed with over a thousand lodge members. They were asked to strike. The Area Executive Committee and the Council of the Union (in view of the threat to Herrington and the strike in the Yorkshire coalfield) had voted in favour of strike action. The men were asked to support these decisions. Rule 41 of the NUM gave them that right. The men, while sympathising with the call, asked questions about a national ballot. Why was there no ballot vote? After two hours of discussion it was agreed; the pit was on strike, the lodge officials would press the Area to ask for a national ballot. As the men argued and discussed the issue, Arthur Scargill was addressing Wearmouth Miners in Sunderland. Speaking at the Barbary Coast Club, he told them clearly that at the last NEC meeting:

... "everybody agreed — it was the Board who were exacerbating the situation. Members of this Union are at the cross roads, and there are no easy options."

At the pit gates at Easington on the Sunday night the pickets knew this all too well. It was, they said, "us or them now." "They've put us in a corner and if we don't fight our way out there'll be nothing left anyway." "If we lose now we lose everything. It's to the death this one." "If we lose this strike we can forget about the union; they'll be able to do what they like with us."

And the Thatcher Government — with its image of inflexibility and of little compassion — reinforced these views. Coalfield areas are still predominantly Labour in voting preference, and in Durham it's hard to escape the feeling "she doesn't give a damn about us." It's a feeling put graphically by one man, talking in the Miners Welfare Hall in Easington the first week of the strike:

"O.K. so she's won the Election and if they're in Government for another five or ten years — alright. I

can accept that. But they shouldn't dictate. And that's what she's doing. She is dictating and no Government should do that. I don't care if it's Tory, Labour or Communist. No Government should dictate over the people. That's why we've got to stick it out. To stop her dictating to us."

Even in these early days, people talked of being out "for as long as it takes." While the Area Director of the NCB spoke of a "breakdown in communications" it was clear that the sources of the dispute went much deeper. In truth it would have to. There could not have been a worse time for a strike. The winter over and coal stocks high; the recession still biting upon the market for coal. Miners knew those things. At Easington they can see the stocks. But they came out, and as the strike developed, their determination, their deeply felt resolve, hardened; for them and for their families. In May, the leader writer of *The Times* commented on the "head of steam that is surprisingly strong" in support of the dispute in the strike bound coalfields. He saw its source to lie in two main issues — "the emergence of semi-permanent mass unemployment" and the attack on trade union rights represented in the policing of the strike. Both these factors (and others) have been at work at Easington and across the Durham Coalfield. They have produced an uncompromising amalgam of solidarity and bitterness: emotions so intense that "this will never be forgotten; not in my lifetime anyway. It will never be forgotten."

THE WOMEN

The Coal Industry remains one of the few in which all production jobs are carried out by men. It is still an all-male industry, and much of its folk-lore and its culture derives from this fact.

But women have always played an important, and underestimated role, in coalmining life. Never more so than during a strike. Heather Wood made this comment at a SEAM Meeting in March, soon after the strike had started:

"We need leaflets for the women. The NUM leaflets are not sexist in the way they are worded, but when they write about 'a miner' we automatically think of the man. And all the attention is directed at the man. But it's the women who get hurt in a dispute — much more so than the man. It's the women who have to take care of the household, to take care of the children, to make

sure that they're fed. The women have to be involved in the dispute."

The SEAM campaign had argued from the beginning that mining jobs represented a community resource; they were the basis of community life in the Easington District. The jobs were, in a sense, 'everyone's' as were the pits; nationalised 'on behalf of the people.' In relation to the strike, the Campaign Committee was determined to ease the burden on the families of miners — to mobilise the collective support of the village communities. The Colliery Canteen was transferred to the Colliery Club. Local fish and chip shops peeled potatoes and bakeries provided the use of their ovens.

"What we decided was that if everybody could have a hot meal a day then they could survive. They wouldn't be starved back. In Easington with there being so many miners we could put on a kitchen and a cafeteria. In the other places with just a few miners in each village travelling to work, the support groups distributed parcels. In Easington we put most of the effort into the cafe."

"The cafe"; not the "soup kitchen" the women were quite insistent about that. It was going to be hard but they weren't going to be forced back to the 1930's. Enormous supplies of food were collected to provide 500 meals per day. "It's bedlam. It all starts at 10 o'clock in the morning and its pandemonium from then on". Especially during the summer. In the school holidays, the Durham County Council provided financial support and access to the school kitchens. More facilities, but more mouths to feed too. Eight hundred meals a day.

Fourteen village communities eventually came together under the SEAM campaign. The women from the kitchens meet regularly to discuss their experiences and their problems. To keep themselves together letters of support are read out. Some women read their poems, others keep a note of the best and the worst thing that happens to them. They tell each other their stories.



"Sometimes we have a bit cry together. Sometimes the pressure is terrific and it is hard work. But we have some laughs as well."

Across the County of Durham and across the British Coalfield Support Groups have been established to support miners families during the strike. Canteens have been set up, houses have been turned upside down to accommodate tins of food for the parcels; everywhere people collect money — first with buckets, increasingly with official collecting tins. And the women are central in this. It's something which the men recognise. "The Women" they say "have been tremendous". At Support Groups meetings "Chairperson" has become an accepted form of address. In the home men have noticed a change:

"Our lass was always very quiet. A bit Victorian I suppose; very respectable. She looked after the home, I went out to meetings. That was the way it was. Now she's around the town, shaking tins collecting and arguing with people about the strike. She's really changed you know."

At a meeting at the Easington Miners Welfare, Mick McGahey the Vice President of the NUM addressed an audience which contained a large number of women. He swept his arm across the front row and referred to the "housewives in the County who understand the problems." The first question was asked by one of these women. She made the situation plain: "we no longer regard ourselves as 'housewives' we are soldiers in the struggle."

HARDSHIP AND HAPPINESS

The strike has involved enormous hardship. That is the one undeniable fact. Living without a wage from the pit, men have received no social security payments and their families were assumed to be in receipt of £15 strike pay. A couple with one child found themselves to be £39.10 a week worse off than a family on supplementary benefit in similar circumstances. Problems of debt, of hire purchase commitments; mortgage repayments; gas and electric bills. Problems of surviving.

In some ways the single men are most vulnerable — they receive nothing. But neither do they have the worry of watching others (their children — their dependants) going without. The Lodge Committee handles the difficulties and the problems associated with relative hardship. It distributes food parcels.



The Lodges own hardship fund made occasional payments of £5.00 to people in need.

Again there are the lists. The names, the amounts and the dates. Everything has to be above board. Everything has to be fair. Everything has to be accounted for. Peter, the Lodge Treasurer, finds himself drained by the worry of it. He's one of the pigeon men in the village.

"By Friday I'm on the bottom. The pressure is that intense. So much to keep track of. But on Saturday I'm up the garden and with the pigeons and by Sunday I'm ready to start again. That's right — you need to be able to get right away from it — forget about it just for a day. It's that intense."

For all the hardship. For all the worry and the doing without, people are not broken — in body or in spirit. If anything the opposite is true. Men joke of never wanting to go back — "not after this summer. I've never felt so fit." They talk seriously of seeing much more of their wives and children than they ever have. More and more frequently do conversations turn to the demands of the miners' charter — especially those which relate to early retirement and a shorter working week.



PICKETS

There is so much activity associated with a strike. So many things to sort out; so much to take care of; so many lists. Picketing has received the greatest scrutiny in the press and on television; but even this is little understood.

The pit has to be picketed around the clock. While no miners or mechanics are expected to go in, the COSA section of the NUM has not joined the strike. Its members at Easington agreed not to cross the picket line; so week in week out the pickets have stood on the gate. They sit in their hut, they keep their fire burning, they talk. The Managers and deputies stop briefly and pass on into the pit. The pickets sit it out.

In Durham the men are paid a daily subsistence allowance — £1 for picketing at Easington, £2 for any other part of the County. There's no doubt that they need this money, but equally there is much more than money involved. Picketing is one way in which those men stick together. They'll tell you that the picketing keeps them going, the buses that take them away are filled with the banter of the pit. Late arrivals can expect hoots of derision. 'Picket of the Week' competitions are



set up. In nearby Murton the Mechanics Lodge has its own 'Clown of the Week' and a weighty medallion to be worn by the picket who makes the biggest mistake. It's crazy "but it keeps you going; that's what it's all about man."

Picketing in Durham during the strike has had one main target — stopping the movement of coal. Miners recognised the problems posed for them by the stocks of coal. Deep down they know that they'll not be near to winning until the supply of coal at the power stations becomes critical. For miners the question "are we winning?" has most often linked with another, "When will the lights go out?"

The Government realised this too. The power stations have dramatically increased the supply of electricity generated by the nuclear stations and by the main oil burning power stations along the South Coast. The costs here have been enormous. All available coal has been directed to the stocks of coal-fired stations. In August the private opencast and mine operators supplied the CEEB with 100,000 tonnes of coal. Easington miners spent the first four months of the strike attempting to check the movement of this coal, most especially from Bank's site at Tow Law in West Durham. More recently attention was directed at the Steetley Cement Works in West Cornforth. The dominant position of the CEEB has meant that other coal users — domestic heating, cement works, steel and iron foundries and furnaces — have come to rely increasingly upon coal imports. Poland is a main supplier and the irony of this isn't lost on the strikers: "they've broken Solidarity now they're helping to break us!" Coal for Steetley's was docked at Hartlepool but the Dockers and the hauliers agreed to black it. The next shipment docked at Gunnars Wharf near Scunthorpe, from where it was taken North in lorries to Durham.

Picketing day after day. Six pickets in a line. The others hemmed in by police. Six pickets asking lorries to stop; asking to see Union cards; asking for support. Mainly the lorries drove through. Sometimes at speed. Day after day. Shouting abuse; attempting to do something.

Week after week; month after month. On strike.

At the Philadelphia Stores of the National Coal Board, COSA members continued to work through the strike. They walked through picket lines. Occasionally they laughed at the men who were jeering them. It was at Philadelphia



that the first pickets were arrested. That was the first moment that Durham miners saw policemen marching in formation; police with chin straps on the helmets; police with staves drawn. 'Philly' was the first flashpoint. It pointed to the problems that were to come.

'Secondary picketing' was made a civil offence in the Employment Act. But the Act has hardly been used in this dispute. Instead secondary picketing has been controlled by the police, and by the use of the criminal law.

SOLIDARITY

From the moment that the three Seaham pits joined the dispute, during the first week, the Durham Area remained firmly on strike. Tom Callan, the Area's General Secretary made it clear. "Durham", he said "is in the front line." It became a matter of pride. The Area, for so long steadfastly "moderate" in its approach had allied itself firmly with the strike against pit closures. In doing so it called upon the loyalty of members. It had become a matter of pride that "no scabs are working in Durham pits."

In July, the managers of each of the pits in the North East signed a letter addressed to each of their workers. "Dear Colleague" it began. The strike had run its course, the pits were opened, the buses would be running. Everyone could start work on the day shift. They could work a week and qualify for holiday pay. All they had to do was return to work. After four months the Board was trying to break the strike.



Since the War the Durham Coalfield has experienced successive waves of closures. Pits in the West closed down and with the closures younger miners migrated eastwards. In 1984 only Sacriston Colliery remains in the West. All the jobs in mining are now located along the East coast — sixty percent of them in Easington District. As a result thousands of men are bussed into the coastal collieries. "It's like a bloody bus depot here first thing in the morning." These are the "travellers", sometimes called the "woolly backs." These are the men who live in a village whose pit has died and who travel to another — another pit, another village. "Strangers" is a word that's sometimes used.

On July 9th there was a carnival atmosphere in Easington and at the other pits on the coalfield. In spite of the lure, the promise of money and an easy job, **no-one** arrived for work. At some pits pickets availed themselves of the free transport. At Easington the buses didn't arrive. Office Street and Seaside Lane were filled with people: men and women, teenagers and children. Eight o'clock in the morning. Hundreds of them. Happy in the sunshine. Happy that no-one had tried to break their solidarity; their togetherness. There is a strong suspicion that the management was pleased too.

Six weeks later the Board tried again. The buses would recommence at the end of the holiday period. On August 20th the pits would be open. All men should arrive for the 'back shift' at eight in the morning. Again there were the jokes. Everywhere in every club someone was going to go back. "Why aye." I'll be there. I've not worked back shift for years. I'll be there alright." The jokes and the repartee. "I'll be the first in that bloody cage on Monday lad." "Well it will be the only time you've been the first man there in your life Geordie." And so it went on. The strike was tough and in many ways they'd be glad if it would end, but 'Silver Birch' appeared to have little organised support in the villages of Durham. Most people still were prepared to stick with their Union. For while they may criticise it, and argue about it, and while some of them would curse Scargill, few of them thought that MacGregor was an adequate substitute. After the experience of July 9th, none expected the buses to arrive.

At Easington Colliery the men gathered. No-one had gone away picketing today. But there weren't many there. A lot of people were

taking a lie in. No-one expected anyone to arrive for work. In the early morning sunshine men talked quietly with each other. They had noticed the three police transits parked in the 'Visitors Only' car park. That was different. Few police had bothered in July.

At 7.30 a.m. a TMS bus pulls in. All eyes shift Westward; up Office Street towards the stationary vehicle. The tension is in their faces. Someone is on the bus. Who? How many? "It's the same one. It's that bastard from Bowburn." The police move forward; quickly effectively surrounding the man in a wedge formation. There as the shadows move thinly he stands. Alone amongst the uniforms and the helmets. His bait bag slung over his shoulder. Across the tarmac he stands there chewing, staring ahead. Bill Stobbs and Alan Cummings the Chairman and Secretary of the Lodge approach the group. He doesn't want to talk with them. "Piss off" said one of the constables. "You and Arthur's Army."

Paul Wilkinson lives in Bowburn. He has only worked at Easington for a few months, having been transferred here in July 1983 when the East Hetton pit was closed at Kelloe. Gordon Parnaby worked with him at that pit. "it would **have** to be someone from Kelloe — but he's not a Kelloe man."

The previous week he had volunteered for picket duty on one day; and climbed over the wall into the pit yard on the next. He's said to be unhappy at the pit. His workmates at the East Hetton pit confess that "it's difficult to have a conversation with Paul; he's all over the place. It's really hard to talk to him."

Today he has turned up for work.

The tension caused by his arrival soon passes. The lads have built a barricade across the pit gates. Bus loads of men arrive from Horden Colliery to the cheers of women. Other women roundly condemn the police; telling them they don't belong in the village, that they should leave people in peace. The joking starts up again. "Let's get through — I've never seen a scab before." "I wouldn't mind but he's probably made his bait up with a food parcel." "Is that him; him with the shakes." It carries on. In the sunshine. But underneath it's serious. A young man tells a policeman: "He's not getting in here. This is **our** pit. He's **not** getting in here."

Like opposing armies. No negotiations. Little contact or discussion.



Police reinforcements arrived, and they move forward on the picket line. A shove and a heave. "The Miners, united, will never be defeated..." Police helmets in the air. Wilkinson thrown bodily into a van and away. Back up Seaside Lane to Bowburn.

The tension subsides. Women and children are everywhere. Talking and laughing; looking back up Seaside Lane.

INDIVIDUALS, UNITED AROUND THEIR PIT

On Tuesday morning, the Easington pickets are out in force. A few of them have worked through the night building a barricade from drums and a collection of wasted scrap metal. Strategically it may be limited but it stands there; a symbol of their defiance. This is **their** pit. "All this, all this for one bloody man."

Wilkinson doesn't arrive. The Kelloe men have gone out to talk with him; to reason with him; to ask him "Why?" They explain that he's being kept up at the village. That he hasn't got his bait bag. He's not going in. The Union Officials have discussed the situation with the Manager. He agrees that there will be nothing sneaky; Wilkinson will enter through the main gate or not at all. The Deputies have agreed to be bound by their Union's Area policy: "they will not supervise scabs." A face off. It's the same on Wednesday and Thursday. Men and women — "the mob" to some — sit around, talking, reading papers; some argue intensely about "tactics." Individuals, united as one around **their** pit.

In Wearmouth, along the coast in Sunderland, COSA members are being taken into the pit at high speed. Piers Merchant the Tory M.P. for Newcastle complains that a similar effort is not being mounted at Easington. This worries the women. "I hope to God they don't try to bring him into the pit. Ee. It will be terrible. I just hope they don't." On Friday they did.

HE'S IN OUR PIT

On Friday the pattern is different. There are more police. Many, many, more. Paul Wilkinson boards the bus with his bait bag and is transferred into an armoured van at the edge of the village. The tension mounts in front of the pit. The men wait.

Rumours spread. He's already in. He's been taken in through the Baths Entrance. It's confirmed. Bobby Anderson the Chairman of the Mechanic's Lodge happened to be passing. He tried to talk with Wilkinson but was pushed aside. He's already in.

Alan Cummings and Bill Stobbs ask to see the Manager, "Is he in?" No-one knows. Who runs the pit? What is happening? Paul Wilkinson is at work. He's in the baths — on the instructions of Mr. Burn from Team Valley, acting on the advice of the police. Wilkinson is inside the pit. The Union officials ask: please take him home. Outside eggs filled with paint are lobbed at the police. There's a lot of tension but it's quite good humoured. It's not ugly.

The Lodge Officials come to the top of the office steps. Strained faces. He's in. The management won't send him home. He's in.

He's in our pit.

Some lads climb the wall. Bricks fly through the air. Cars are overturned; windows broken. Uproar.

The riot police arrive. Marching through the street; with helmets and shields; in through the pit offices; into the yard; staves drawn; advancing.

Everyone running; everyone throwing things; fire extinguishers turned on. Stones, bricks anything that comes to hand. Everyone running. Along the street, through the gardens. One woman noticed how:

"When this lad went into the garden he was running but he was jumping from foot to foot to avoid the flowers. Then the copper following him — the riot policeman went straight through the lot. It's not their village you see. They don't care."

By midday things had subsided, the police and management had moved the barricade. Office Street was cleared and the approach to the pit was blocked off by a police line. Women were standing there shouting: "Black Bastards"; "Bloody Pigs." Jack Dormand the local MP looked grave. He had been here all morning. In his view the action by the police had been unnecessary and irresponsible:

"They are acting on instructions from the Home Secretary. The



Home Office has told him to get his men into his pit at whatever costs. I'm quite sure about that. The manager of this pit is well thought of in the village. He had a clear agreement with the Lodge officials about bringing his man in through the main gate. He's been overruled. The police are acting under direct instructions of the Home Secretary."

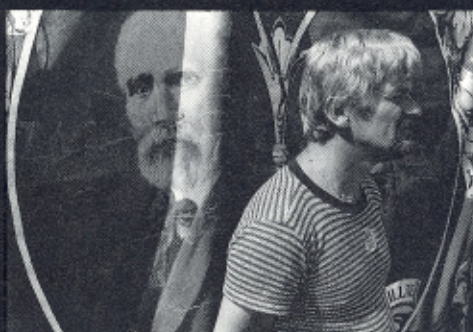
Inside, the offices are in disarray. Broken glass lies everywhere along with pieces of masonry, brick and lengths of steel chain. The management look shellshocked; "it was as if they were walking around in a daze. As if they didn't know what had happened to them."

Bill Etherington, the General Secretary of the Durham Mechanics Association was in the building with the officials of the Durham Miners. They would have to discuss the situation with the Coal Board. Six of them would travel across to Team Valley for a meeting immediately. It was a situation of extreme urgency. The Coal Board agreed, but they would only meet with four representatives of the unions; Mr. Atkinson was quite clear about that. Four and no more. There was no meeting that day.

OCCUPIED

The barricade gone, in its place a police Transit stood parked. Day and night. For three days of the following week police road blocks sealed the village off in the morning. Even the dinner van for the kitchens was turned away. Nothing was allowed in. "We're following instructions." In the village it's as if everything has changed. Alan Cummings:

"The police are around the whole time. And people hate anything like that. They hate having the police in the village. It's like when you go in the Club and there's been a fight; you can 'smell' the bad feeling, the bad blood in the air. It's a horrible feeling."



For three days police marched through the village. Gwent Police; police from Northampton. Strangers. One woman spoke for many when she said:

"I never ever thought I'd see scenes like this in Britain. I never thought I'd see what I've seen on the streets of Easington. We're occupied. We've been occupied by the police. We've had violence in the village. We'll never forget this — never. Not after this."

The men ponder on the future. One thing is clear. They'll not work with Wilkinson. They've lost all their trust in management. Their feelings toward the Coal Board have turned from mild suspicion and distrust to deeply felt resentment and hostility. Whatever the outcome of this strike, things will never be the same again.

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