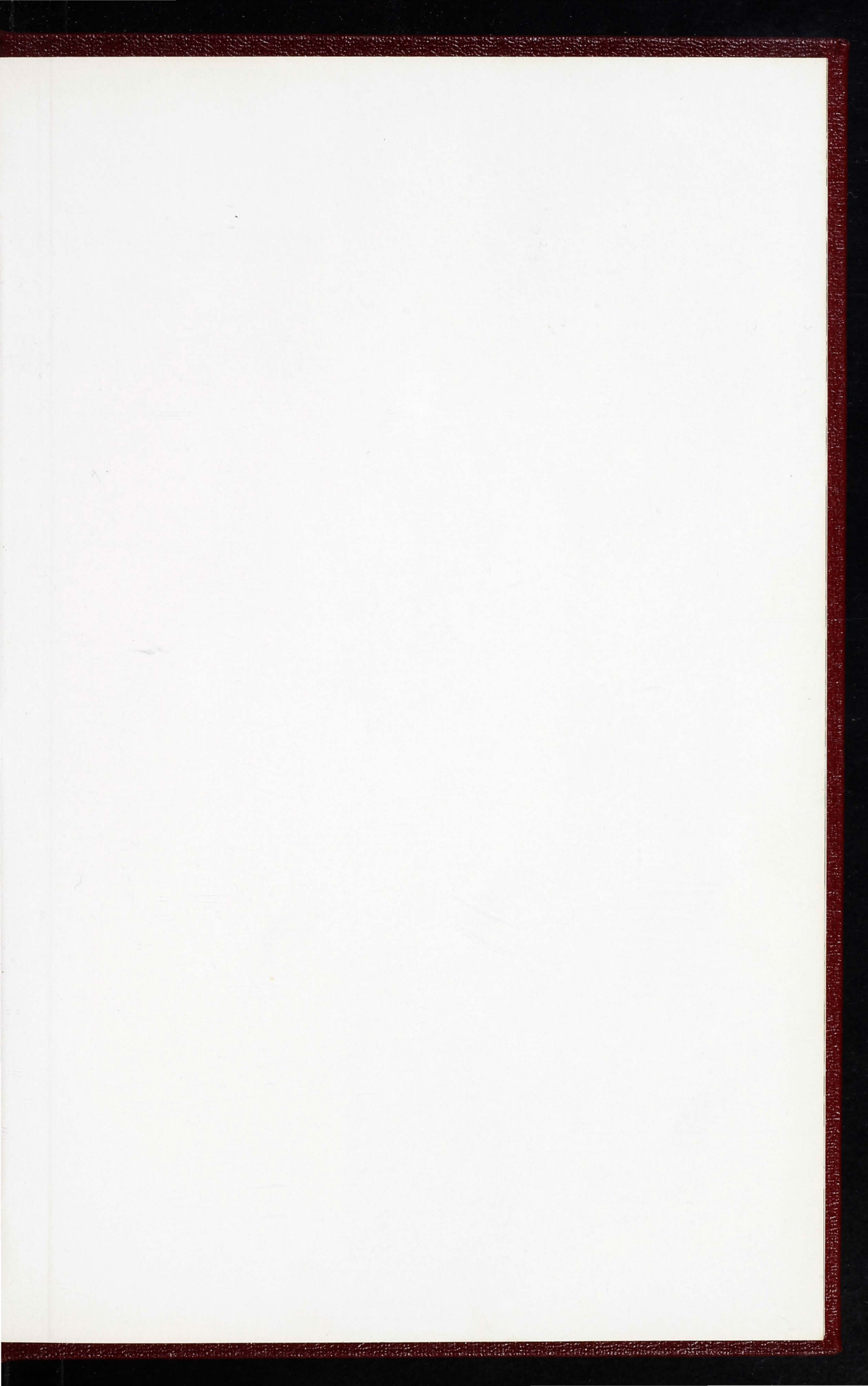


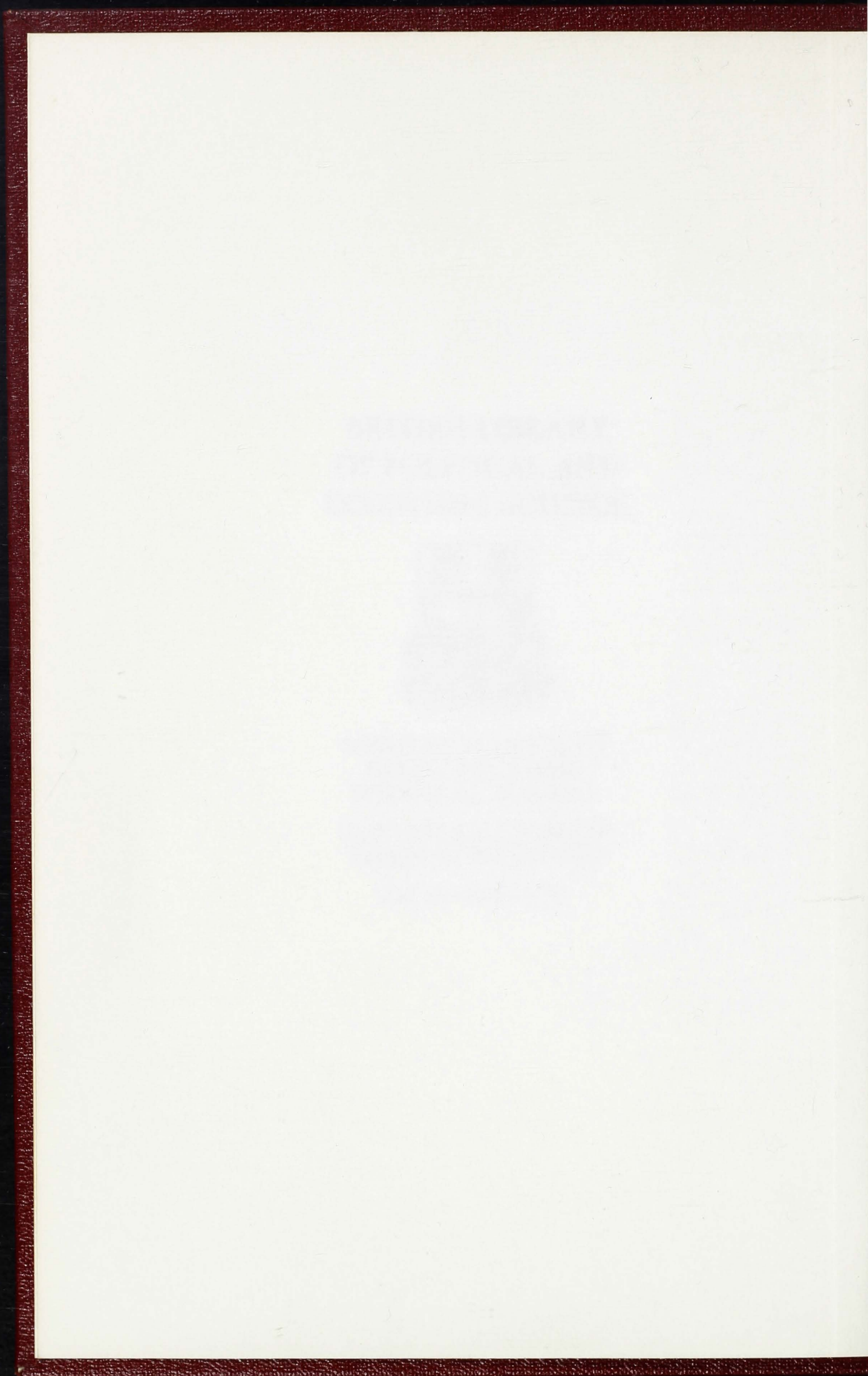


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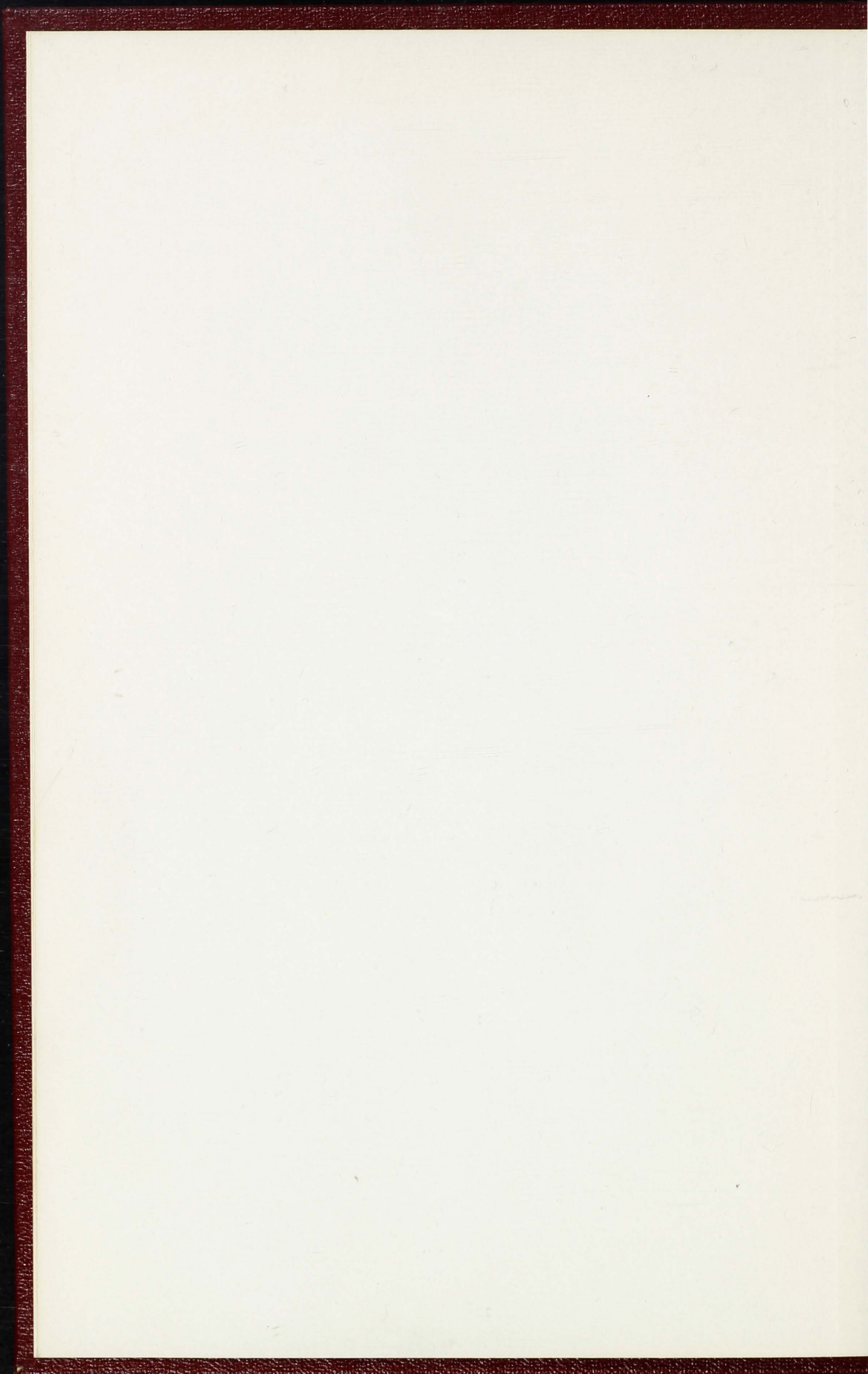


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Fabian Society No. 504

Understanding The Miners' Strike

John Lloyd

PHLET COLLECTION

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Fabian Tract 504

Understanding The Miners' Strike

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John Lloyd is Industrial Editor of the Financial Times. His reporting of the miners' strike led to him being named Journalist of the Year by Granada Television and Specialist Writer of the Year in the British Press Awards. He is writing a book on the strike, with Martin Adeney, to be published by Routledge & Kegan Paul in March 1986.

This pamphlet like all publications of the Fabian Society represents not the collective view of the Society but only the views of the individual who prepared it. The responsibility of the Society is limited to approving the publications it issues as worthy for consideration within the labour movement.



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1. Introduction

This pamphlet is an attempt to understand some of the import of the miners' strike for the Labour movement.

To do this, we need to have in mind the structures within which it took place — for it was in very large part about long term changes in these structures. Thus Chapter 2 describes the agitation among miners for a mining industry taken out of private hands: the establishment of the National Coal Board after the second war; and its progress to the early 1980s.

Chapter 3 describes the policies adopted by the first Thatcher Government towards, in particular, the trade unions — and the unions' response to these; points up the rapidly growing cash and market crisis facing the Board in the early 80s; and the NUM's apparent inability to resist the early measures the Board adopted to lift the crisis.

Chapter 4 uses the personalities of Ian MacGregor, the NCB Chairman and Arthur Scargill, the NUM President to illuminate the position of both sides of the industry at the beginning of the strike, and shows that both saw themselves as radicals, breaking with their predecessors' past practice.

Chapter 5 draws out the main themes of the strike for the pamphlet's purposes: the lack of a ballot; the failure of industrial support; the new political forces and alliances bred by the strike; the issue of uneconomic pits; the use of the law and the working miners.

Chapter 6 summarises the points made, and draws two main conclusions:

- the NUM leadership's attempt to act as the industrial and political vanguard of the Labour movement, an attempt openly signalled and campaigned for by that leadership, was never fully supported by the bulk of the Labour movement — though that was not made clear by most Labour and trade union leaders. This lack of political clarity deluded the miners — but the nature of the dispute, and in particular its ending, points up the necessity for greater discrimination in the future.
- the NCB is being shaped for possible privatisation by being transformed into a profit oriented business corporation under the leadership of Ian MacGregor. This project will necessarily destroy the base of the nationalised coal industry established by Labour in 1947. Confrontation has not and will not stop it: the 1984/85 strike probably assisted it. Attempts by the mining unions to become more

involved in the industry's realities and problems through the consultative machinery would be a belated attempt to widen the scope for industrial democracy — but represents the only strategy other than (as it presently appears) impotence.

2. Public Ownership and Industrial Democracy

The National Coal Board was established as a wholly state-owned corporation by the 1946 Coal Industry Act, passed by the Attlee Government: on January 1, 1947, assets owned by some 800 different private companies, including 980 collieries, passed into public ownership. On the boards outside the pits, the legend ran: "This colliery is managed by the National Coal Board on behalf of the people of Britain": The Risca lodge, in South Wales, put on its banner the emblem of a rising sun with "The dawn of a new era" above it and "Nationalisation, 1947" beneath it.

The case for the ownership of the mines by other than private hands had been made for decades. In the 1870s, a Derbyshire pit — Shirland — was briefly a workers' co-operative: like many since, it succumbed to the next recession.¹ In the early part of this century, miners shared in the awakening interest among some workers in socialist and syndicalist ideas: the South Wales Miners' unofficial Reform Committee produced, in the "Miners' Next Step",² an argument both for class struggle with the coal owners and for workers' control of the mines.

In 1919, when the pits were under state control — having been taken into it during the first world war — the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) evidence to

the Coal Industry (Sankey) Commission, strongly influenced by guild socialism, argued for a National Mining Council (NMC) run by a minister and a government appointed board, each of whose 10 members would be eligible for re-appointment every 5 years: the district and pit councils below the NMC would be 50 per cent composed of miners' representatives. Justice Sankey with the miners' representatives on his Commission recommended nationalisation — but the majority were against. The pits were returned to private control and the MFGB badly beaten in the 1926 strike — but the ambition for some sort of control over the industry remained.

Nationalisation

During the second world war, the most effective propagandist in favour of a nationalised industry was Harold Wilson, a young economist who had been secretary to the Green Committee on miners' wages in 1942, and who published, in 1945, a part scholarly, part polemical work called "The New Deal for Coal". It argued for an 11 member National Coal Board, with joint councils at national, regional and pit levels. These councils would be "indicative of the kind of partnership of the various types of state employees in the industry, rather than, as at present, a carefully balanced representation of the two sides of the class struggle". Nationalisation, Wilson concluded, would "show not only that socialism and efficiency were compatible but also that socialism, properly applied, is the *only* means to full efficiency".³

Coal's last decades in private ownership were, in fact, far from *laissez faire*: the state *had* attempted to bring some – if not "full" efficiency into the industry. The Samuel Commission of 1926 rooted the problems of the industry – which had resulted in falling markets, surplus capacity, attempts to cut wages (the cause of the 1926 strike) – in the multitude of competing and inefficient companies, and this was echoed in a Mining Industry Act of the same year which gave the Government vague, and in the event unused, powers to promote amalgamations: the 1930 Coal Mines Act was a little more more effective, in securing mergers, though only at most 300 of the 1000 coal companies merged to reduce their numbers to 65. There were legitimate doubts about the project on the part of the coal owners (whom Lord Birkenhead, in a much-quoted remark made during the General Strike, called the stupidest men in England): more importantly, and a telling commentary on *our* times, "at a time when unemployment was already abnormally high, no Government was prepared to accept the heavy social costs which the latter option (of widespread mergers) in-

evitably involved".⁴

But the 1930 Act also gave the Government powers to control the production supply and price of coal, and to intervene in disputes: in 1936, the control of sales was centralised – arguably retarding the industry's modernisation.⁵

War time strengthened these controls considerably: in 1940, a Coal Production Council was established: in succeeding years, the major problem to plague Ernest Bevin, then the Labour Minister, was to secure a supply of manpower – never wholly overcome, despite the Bevin Boys. In 1942, a White Paper on coal ushered in full state control of the mines (though they were still privately owned): The Minister for Fuel and Power chaired the newly created National Coal Board. Regional controllers were created, who worked through regional committees composed of representatives of the owners, workers managers and technicians; at the pit, joint production committees were established.

"State capitalism", with a measure of industrial democracy, was thus already established by the end of the war: Labour's programme to nationalise the mines (together with such sectors as banking, transport, electricity, iron and steel, agriculture and water supply) built further on existing developments. The 1935 election programme had stressed that "the public acquisition of industries and services would involve fair payment to existing owners": but did little to accommodate that strong strand of thinking within the mining community which supported workers' control, or industrial democracy. The 1935 Programme says that "employees in a socialised industry should have a right, which should be acknowledged by law, to an effective share in the control or direction of the industry". Commenting on the passage, Evan Durbin, an influential but prematurely-stilled voice, gave a stern gloss when he wrote: "Workers' control is to be reduced, as it should be in the view of everyone except a syndicalist, to workers' *representation* on the board of an industry, and nothing

more. Industries must be controlled by, and operated in the interests of, the community; and not by and for the minority of workers employed in it".⁶

Production

The Act gives the NCB monopoly rights to produce coal in the UK: charges it to break even "on an average of good and bad years"; provides for a Board with a chairman and not less than 8, nor more than 14 board members of whom not more than 8 will be full-time: requires it to conform with the general directions of the responsible minister; and lays on it the duty to establish bargaining, arbitration and consultation machinery with "organisations appearing to it to represent substantial proportions of the persons in employment".

The personnel at Board and senior level of management were, necessarily, often drawn from the ranks of the old colliery companies – though, bit by bit, the NCB began to grow its own management, and many young managers and trainees who had begun work for private companies were enthusiasts for the new order.

Expansion in production was all in the first years, since the existing capacity was inadequate to supply home and export needs. In this period, many of the 980 pits were preserved which should have closed if the industry were to be modernised – simply to get production.

Production reached a peak of 228 million tonnes in 1952, but declined sharply after 1957, largely because of the competition from cheap oil. Successive Plans for Coal in 1950, 1956, 1959, 1965 and 1967 all proposed or forecast expanded output targets, none of which were met: the Coal Industry Acts of 1965 and 1973 wrote off very substantial amounts of debt. Throughout the 1960s, the industry's capacity was cut back sharply: between 1966 and 1968, pits were shutting at the rate of one a week.

The latest Plan, proposed by the NCB

in 1973 in response to the quadrupling of the oil price, was advertised by Eric Varley, the Energy Secretary when Labour took Office in 1974, as "point(ing) the way to a new future for coal", since "the economic conditions for a thriving industry are right for the first time in 20 years". The Plan, endorsed in two reports of a tripartite committee in 1974, called for a £600 million investment to stabilise and expand production (then running at 113 million tonnes from deep mined pits) to 120 million tonnes or more (plus 15 million tonnes from opencast pits) by 1985: in a further report in 1977, the tripartite group foresaw an output of between 170 million and 200 million tonnes by the year 2000. This was not endorsed by the Government: but a 1978 Green Paper accepted the need to generate 4 million tonnes of new and replacement capacity a year into the 1990s.

The new Conservative Government of 1979 made reassuring noises about the coal industry: however, it was set, together with other nationalised industries, tighter external finance limits (EFLs): the Board's financial objectives are now expressed in terms of an EFL and a specified deficit grant, under the 1980 and 1982 Coal Industry Acts.

Production has always been seen as the paramount necessity for the Board: in the first ten years of its life, indeed, demand was so high that marketing, in the sense of attracting customers, was simply redundant. It was not until the slump in the coal demand in the 1960s that the Board began to study the markets it was in – domestic, generating, steel (coke ovens) industrial – and not until 1973 that a Central Planning Unit was set up to develop an energy model to cover all fuel markets. Derek – now Lord – Ezra, (Chairman 1971–82), himself a former marketing director of the Board, introduced substantial changes: but not enough to satisfy his successor Ian MacGregor, who saw the Board he came to in September 1983 as introverted, productionist and only formally interested in the market. Much of that he ascribed to the dominance of the industry by NCB-raised

mining engineers – a dominance he would cut at a stroke (or a series of strokes) from a large majority to two out of a Board of ten.

Industrial relations

Of particular relevance here is the industrial relations policies and events over the past years to the present. Nationalisation of the pits clearly brought goodwill from the miners: Arthur Horner, the first – Communist – Secretary of the NUM, was tremendously conscious of the advances public ownership had won, as were his successors. The historian of the industry's industrial relations says that "the coal mines were nationalised because the miners were no longer prepared to work for the private coal owners".⁷ Cliff Shephard, then Board member for industrial relations and a former miner, told an NUM Conference on Workers' Control in Harrogate in December, 1977 that the industry had been nationalised "in response to pressures from the trade union movement and its political wing, the Labour Party".⁸

Strikes in the industry did not cease, however – though the pattern since 1947 shows a much higher incidence of major strike activity during Conservative Governments. Activity rose in the late 40s and 50s to a peak in 1956/57 when nearly 75 per cent of all reported stoppages were in coal. These were nearly all confined to one pit at a time, and were mainly over wages – especially the rates set by piecework. The reform and progressive standardisation of the wages system, culminating in the National Power Loading Agreement in 1967, tended to work against these strikes, and they declined in the 1960s – in spite of the high rate of closures.

From the late 1960s, strike activity grew again: between 1969 and 1972, the NUM leaders had to run to keep control of a wages militancy which surprised and temporarily disoriented them. There were a series of disputes in Yorkshire in the late

1960s; and the failure to get a national strike in 1970 (when a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority was required) did not stop strikes in South Wales, Scotland and parts of Yorkshire. The 1972 strike, sparked off by a wage claim (the qualifying percentage for a strike vote had been lowered in 1971 from $\frac{2}{3}$ to 55 per cent) was preceded by an overtime ban and lasted from January 9 to February 28: it resulted in the Wilberforce inquiry granting much of what the miners had asked for – including increases of between £4.50-£6 a week for men earning an average of £25.20. Average mining earnings jumped from £25.20 in 1971 to £30.90 in 1972 and £33.60 in 1973. In 1974, after a second national strike and a general election which brought further substantial rises in minimum rates, average earnings went up sharply once more to £43.40 in that year and to £61.50 in 1975. From lying 13th in the manual workers' wages league in 1971, they leapt to the top spot in 1974 and 1975, with gross earnings in the latter of these years standing at 125 per cent of average manufacturing earnings.⁹

The strike wave between 1969 and 1975 showed miners that strikes generally worked well – and worked, when nationally organised, spectacularly well. The mid-late 1970's saw a steady incidence of local disputes, many – over half in 1978/79, for example – over the working of the incentive bonus scheme which was introduced (in spite of a ballot vote against it) in 1977.

In 1981, the NCB proposed the accelerated closure of 23 pits in order to stay within the Government's new cash limit: on the threat of a national strike ballot however, and evidence of the beginning of area strikes, the Government backed away: tripartite talks were held, the closure programme was withdrawn and the Board agreed to stick by the lengthy review procedure agreed in 1972 as the medium for shutting pits. (Once again, strike action – even the threat of it – had been seen to be successful).

Workers' control

The strand of thought within the miners' unions which favoured industrial democracy has never wholly disappeared from the industry: indeed, in the 1970s, it seemed set for a new flowering. In the immediate post-nationalisation period, both the Board and the Labour Government were keen on consultative machinery and on a closer involvement of the NUM with the Board. The union, however, was not: Arthur Horner was against workers' representatives taking the place of management while the economy as a whole was still largely capitalist; and from the right of the Labour movement, Will Lawther, the NUM President, told the 1948 Labour Conference that "We as a miners' organisation do not want to have people in the ridiculous position that we see on the continent where the President or the secretary of a miners' organisation is also on the coal board running the industry, so that he has on occasion to pass a resolution to ask himself to give himself something ... the position for the trade union is to remain independent of the Coal Board and independent of whatever Boards or executives may be set up".¹⁰

The debate did not die. A number of leading officials — including the present General Secretary, Peter Heathfield — continued to hold, or developed, ideas of workers' self management. In December 1977, the NUM staged a Conference in Harrogate at which the issues of industrial democracy/workers' control — then on the labour agenda because of the preparation of the Bullock Report on industrial democracy — were discussed.¹¹ Tony Benn, then Energy Secretary spoke on his current offer to the NUM for substantial influence over the Board's planning functions (as well as an effective veto over pit closures). He told the Conference that: "we have to realise that nationalisation, without the NUM being involved at the heart of the industry's policy, without an integrated fuel policy and without real change at the place of work, fell far short

of what was expected ... if it is really true that the NUM wants nothing to do with the management of the mining industry until socialism is created, what in heaven's name are you doing sponsoring NUM members of parliament in the hope that they will run an economy that still falls far short of socialism?"

Arthur Scargill, the Yorkshire President, gave Benn *his* answer: he provided a typically vivid example of a miner at a Barnsley area pit who had been dismissed after his case had gone to the joint union-management absentee committee: he appealed to his branch for support, got it — but could not be represented by his branch officials because they had participated in the decision to dismiss him. "In effect, the rank and file at the pit were challenging not only the NCB at local level, but also the NUM at local level. The men at the colliery threatened strike action and the result was that the management had a rethink about the case and the man was re-instated ...". Generalising, Scargill said that "It is impossible to have workers' control within a capitalist society. We have to change the system otherwise workers' control cannot be obtained. What we *can* have within our society is class collaboration and compromise with the mixed economy".

Peter Heathfield, then North Derbyshire Secretary, was similarly concrete, giving examples of management failure. But his central point was that information was power for the NUM: "How," he asked, "can it weaken us to learn how decision are taken?" The case Heathfield made then, and since, was for *involvement* so that the miners could have some purchase on the present, and on the future. "Many miners have positive views on what's going wrong, but their opinions are not listened to in management quarters.

"Because of the dangers and hazards of coal mining, there is no doubt that we should be at the top of any wages table going; but beyond maintaining that position, we have to develop an outlook which goes beyond the next couple of years. We

have to start looking ahead to the time when North Sea oil and gas are really moving.

“A proper fuel policy is essential; for that we need to cooperate with other unions involved to work out the problem of how we are to have access to the facts, the information used by both Government and the management of the oil companies, the NCB and the CEGB to make their decisions — because these decisions are presently taken way above and beyond our knowledge and control, and will crucially affect the coal industry and the coal miners”. (see chapter 6)

Consultation

Consultation was of course practised: under Ezra, consultative machinery blossomed, though in the 1950s, and 1960s, management put more stress on coalfield conferences (which introduced power loading) and on (limited) direct communication with the miners. Management, with its own staff college and a very large industrial relations cadre, became more adept at communicating with its workers.

To the pit consultative committees and to the national level consultative council Ezra added the national level Joint Policy Advisory Committee; together with national committees on health and safety and recruitment, training and welfare. In any given year, a minimum required number of joint meetings would amount to 17 at national level, 72 at area level and around 4,000 at pit and workshop level. Joe Gormley, whose Presidency after the 1974 strike and the adoption of the Plan for Coal marked the closest relationship between the Board and the union in their joint histories, was a convinced advocate of the consultative approach.

The colliery review procedure, on which much attention was focussed during the strike, was a test bed for consultation. As outlined by the Board in November 1972, it rested on a quarterly area review

by the Area Director and area union officials at which both sides would seek to improve results from the area pits: where the Director identified a pit or pits where special action was required, a subsequent meeting, convened specially to discuss this pit, would give it “special attention”. Where “special attention” could not save the pit, the manager would propose closure: where the unions did not agree, they could make their own technical inspection and appeal to the Board — the final arbiter. Where the Board upheld the manager’s decision (normally), the pit was given a further 4 months as notice of closure: the whole procedure was reckoned to take 6½ months.

Two further comments may be made here; while Gormley has come to be seen as an establishment figure, his accession to power was seen by the NCB at the time as potentially destabilising. The old consensus was based on consultation and co-operation, a highly responsible NUM Executive and a union rule which demanded a 2/3 majority for strike action. Gormley reduced that qualifying vote to 55 per cent, and led two national strikes (the second reluctantly, to be sure) within three years of becoming President. Consensus was resumed after the 1974 Plan for Coal gave the miners security, but the Gormley/Ezra relationship had costs for both. The NUM President had to struggle — at crucial times, unsuccessfully — to contain his powerful left-wing and deliver national level peace: while NCB managers were often frustrated by the slow pace of change, and by Gormley’s inability to deliver every time he promised to. Long before MacGregor came, there was a solid core of NCB senior managers willing to “have a go” at the NUM — though their ideas and those of their Chairman-to-be were often different as to how.

Second, the history of many mining strikes is a history of the ranks and file. Again and again, it is pit level militancy — led, of course, very often by radicals but enthusiastically supported — which dictates the time of a strike and its extent.

This is of course not unique to miners but the frequency and rapidity of its occurrence and the determination and militancy of the action is out of the ordinary. Further, as the 1984/85 strike showed once again, the ability of the miners to take huge material and physical sacrifice in pursuit of their aims is enormous: it often seems, to non-miners, to be out of all sensible proportion. That is one measure of their apartness from others: a characteristic which is played up and romanticised, not least by the miners themselves — but which has a powerful core of reality.

Summary

- The NCB, perhaps more than any other nationalised industry, has been the result of an ideological ferment, as well as the focus of the deeply-felt hopes of miners for a more secure, better paid working life.
- the history of industrial action, especially between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, was one largely of success.
- the strain of argument for workers' control/industrial democracy lost out to the socialised-managerialist school, partly on the grounds that the latter better serves the public interest, partly because both right and left in the NUM opposed it.
- the Board developed, especially in the 1970s, a close participative style in industrial relations: at the same time, its main aim was the production, not marketing, of coal.

3. Government Actions and Union Resistance

The election of a Conservative Government in May 1979 on an anti-union ticket, and the deepening recession in the coal industry (among others) are the backdrop against which the 1984/85 strike took place. Certain elements of that backdrop must be understood if we are, in turn, to understand that strike.

The Conservative Manifesto listed "Five Tasks" for a future government: three had a direct bearing on the trade union movement within the context, set in the Manifesto, of a "society on the brink of disin-

tegration", during the Winter of Discontent.

These were: — "Striking a fairer balance between the rights and duties of the trade union movement"; restoring "incen-

tives so that hard work pays"; to "uphold Parliament and the rule of law". The unions were clearly in for a hard time.

There were tensions within the Conservative Party over this approach. James Prior, Employment spokesman and the first Employment Secretary of the new Government, favoured a gradualist approach to tightening legal discipline over the unions: Norman Tebbit, the second Employment Secretary, critical of that approach when in Opposition, adopted it in part in Government. The Tory radicals, of whom Mrs. Thatcher was herself one, agreed with F. A. Hayek that: "The whole basis of our free society is gravely threatened by the powers arrogated by the Unions".¹² The Winter of Discontent, in which a range of strikes and other industrial action threatened health and other essential services, gave a powerful moral force to the anti-union position.

The Conservatives — especially those, like Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Prior who had served in the 1970-74 Cabinets — had, of course, searing memories of the miners: the second strike had been interpreted by Edward Heath as a challenge to "who runs the country?": the election called on this theme had been narrowly won by Labour. Joe Gormley was a reluctant victor: Roy Ottey, his close colleague and long-serving executive member (for the Power Group) recalls that, after the NUM Executive had voted in February 1974 to reject the Government's terms and to strike, that a "tear ... slid down Joe's face as we walked towards the door and out into the falling snowflakes to meet the ever present journalists ... as a result of the miners' claim being settled by the in-coming Labour Government, I feel that the following years produced an inflationary spiral by leapfrogging wage claims from which the economy has not yet recovered".¹³

The Ridley Plan

The Conservative opposition were not un-

mindful of those factors. Besides undergoing a substantial and vigorous review — even, renaissance — of politics and policy under the tutelage of Sir Keith Joseph, less idealistic figures were looking at the practicalities of pushing through a radical programme. In May 1978, the Economist magazine published details of the final report of the Conservative Party's Policy Group on the nationalised industries, drafted by Nicholas Ridley, a right-wing MP. It became famous as the "Ridley Plan": miners on picket lines displayed photocopies of the May 27 Article.

The plan involved the Government specifying a set rate of return on capital employed in the State industries, and being "totally inflexible" in demanding it be adhered to. The document classifies industries into "three categories of vulnerability" to strikes: sewerage, water, gas, electricity and the health service in category 1; railways, docks, coal and refuse collection in category 2; other public transport, education, posts, telephones, air transport and steel in group 3. It recommends that boards should be made supervisory with a majority of part-time members; that statutory monopolies (such as the NCB's over coal production) be ended; and that de-nationalisation should be embarked on with vigour (workers' cooperatives were held out as the cure for the ills in the pits).

The most-remembered part of this report is an annexe to it in which Ridley anticipated a "political threat" from groups who would be "the enemies of the next Tory government". He predicted coal, electricity or docks as likely fields of battle; and set out a five-part strategy for dealing with it: the first two were to pay well above the odds in vulnerable industries and to choose the field of battle, not allow it to be chosen. These were conventional safeguards. But the last three were uncannily accurate and prescient anticipations.

The Economist report said that: "The group believes that the most likely battleground will be the coal industry. They

would like a Thatcher government to (a) build-up maximum coal stocks, particularly at the power stations; (b) make contingency plans for the import of coal; (c) encourage the recruitment of non-union lorry drivers by haulage companies to help move coal where necessary; (d) introduce dual coal/oil firing in all power stations as quickly as possible.

“The group believes that the greatest deterrent to any strike would be to “cut off the money to the strikers, and make the Union finance them”. But strikers in nationalised industries should not be treated differently from strikers in other industries.

“There should be a large, mobile squad of police equipped and prepared to uphold the law against violent picketing. “Good non-union drivers” should be recruited to cross picket lines with police protection”.

Defiance

This remained below the surface, largely forgotten, except in left-wing circles, as Jim Prior, then Norman Tebbit, brought in Employment Acts which narrowed the immunities accorded to trade unions, especially on secondary action such as picketing, constrained the maintenance and spread of the closed-shop, made it expensive to sack a worker who would not join such a shop, made union funds liable for the unlawful acts of their officials, and made it easier to sack strikers. The unions, of course, objected to this: their objections reached a climax when, at the Wembley Special Conference of union executives on April 5, 1982, they determined on a course of both passive and active defiance of the law: the key one of the eight recommendations was the fifth, which read:— “Where the General Council receive a request to assist a union faced by or experiencing legal action by an employer, and are satisfied that assistance from the movement is justified, they are empowered (i) to co-ordinate action by

other affiliated unions in support of the union in difficulties, including, if necessary, calling for industrial action against the employer concerned, or more widely: (ii) to provide financial assistance to a union which experiences severe financial problems as a result of damaging actions”.

It was a remarkable occasion. Union leader after union leader came to the rostrum to pledge militant resistance to the laws: an unseemly competition developed as to which could most movingly commit himself to prison in advance for breaking the laws.

The Annual Congress later that same year underscored this militant rejectionism: but the days of action and other protest organised by the TUC were ill-attended, while the 1982 Health Service dispute — though disciplined, well-publicised and supported — did not result in any gains to the health service unions. In May, 1983, the Labour Party was thrashed in the polls, gaining only 28% of the vote, 2% ahead of the Alliance.

New Realism

The period of reflection which followed produced, largely at the initiative of Len Murray, TUC General Secretary, a strategy which became known, to Murray's irritation, as “New Realism”: while introducing it at the TUC Congress in September, 1983, Murray made as important a speech as the Labour movement has heard yet in the 1980s. He said:

“Ever since 1945 we have made two fundamental assumptions. The first was that everyone saw full employment as a primary, even as a dominant, objective. The second assumption was that the welfare state was accepted as a binding force in our society. But now these assumptions are being called into question and we have to win back ground that we had assumed was safe forever ...

“Apparently many of (our members) did not find intolerable the results of Conservative rule. But they have voted and we

respect that. We cannot talk as if the trade union movement is some sort of alternative government, Brother Bonny Prince Charlie waiting to be summoned back from exile. We are representative organisations, and being representative means knowing and respecting what our members want and expect from their unions — not the Government's unions, not the Labour Party's unions, not even our unions, but the members' unions.

“In setting out our objective it is just not good enough to say more for everybody. Our members expect responsible and realistic leadership, and they want intelligible answers to the questions which they rightly ask about jobs and savings, about health and education, about income for retirement and about how these things are to be paid for. The employers have not got the answers, and the Government obviously has not got the answers, and we have not yet convinced our members that we have. We cannot just say that our policies are fine and that it is our members who are all wrong”.

In a speech to the “New Realism” motion later in the debate, Alastair Graham, General Secretary of the Civil and Public Servants Association, talked of a “watershed in our affairs” and said that, “we must challenge those who would ignore the lessons of the last General Election by telling us it was the messenger rather than the message that was at fault; and that only with a bit better education will our members in due course rise up in wrath to destroy this Government. If we adopt that analysis it is much more likely that we shall be trapped into a slow, miserable decline as our members vote with their feet”.

Congress carried this motion by a 1.8 million majority (in 9.8 million votes): a couple of months later, the divisions between the “Wembley-ites” and the “New Realists” boiled up over the matter of the National Graphical Association's dispute with the Stockport Messenger: the root point at issue was the provision of solidarity with the NGA in a planned national newspaper strike which, being possibly

unlawful, might render the TUC's action unlawful and put its funds at risk. Murray, forcing a decision on the General Council, won a 29 to 21 vote supporting his stance against the risk of illegality, but weakened his position in doing so. When, in February, 1984, the Prime Minister refused, at a meeting with Murray and other senior TUC colleagues, to lift the ban on unions at the Government's Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham, Murray's initiative — which depended on Government coming some of the way in towards the centre ground to meet him — was scuppered.

Just before the miners' strike, therefore, the TUC had shown (a) that it was deeply divided on left-right lines over the issue of relations with the Government and (b) that its centre-right, assumed to be in the leadership, because of a majority on the General Council, could not “deliver” on new realism.

Falling demand

The NCB had its own problems: these were very largely to do with demand for its main product. UK coal consumption peaked in the Plan for Coal period at 129.4 million tonnes in 1979: thereafter it had declined to 123.5 million tonnes in 1980, 118.4 million tonnes in 1981, 111 million tonnes in 1982, 1983 and 1984. Coal production, however, consistently outstripped demand, reaching a Plan for Coal peak in 1980 of 130.1 million tonnes, dipping to 127 million in 1981, then 124.7 million in 1982, 119.3 in 1983 and 107.7 million in 1984 (showing the effect of the overtime ban). Stocks, mainly held in either NCB or Central Electricity Generating Board yards, built up steadily, from 27.9 million tonnes in 1979 to 37.7 million tonnes in 1980, 42.2 million tonnes in 1981, 52.3 million tonnes in 1982 and 58 million tonnes in 1983.

These stocks were critical to the ultimate victory of the Government and the NCB: ministers were later to say that the

early 1980's stock-building was no accident. Yet both the Board and Government inveighed against their expense and encouraged cuts in production: and neither NCB nor Government officials believe the build-up to have been planned.

Norman – now Sir Norman – Siddall succeeded Ezra in June, 1982: a long serving and much respected deputy, Siddall was a manager's manager, who had chafed at the clamp he believed the "Derek and Joe" relationship had put on cutting back hard enough on clapped out capacity. In concert with James Cowan and John Mills as Deputy Chairman, Siddall encouraged his managers to put pits through the review procedure: though, by the end of the Ezra era, pits *were* closing at a faster pace.

Near the beginning of his brief Chairmanship, in July, 1982, he travelled to Inverness to address the NUM's annual Conference. In a typically blunt, if ponderous, way, Siddall told the Conference – Scargill's first as President, one marked by the public capitulation of at least part of the old right – that the economic tail of 12% of capacity was costing the Board over £300 million a year in losses.

He said: "Like most other industries we badly need an end to the recession and a return to growth in the economy. However we have to face the fact that customers have learned to make do with less energy for a given quantity of goods produced, and that means we will face a market somewhat smaller than we once expected.

"I have to say that in alllikelihood it could take several years to get coal stocks back to a sensible level and we must find acceptable ways to do this".

Pit closures

Siddall was able to close some 4 million tonnes of capacity, or some 20 pits in his year as Chairman – more than 20,000 mining jobs were cut. In October, 1982 a Special Delegate Conference of the NUM – the militant, activist-dominated forum which the new President was to use as his

union's vanguard – decided that a ballot vote on strike action be taken, joining together the issues of pit closures and the then current pay offer from the Board. The ballot result, on the customary high 87 per cent turn-out, was a 61 per cent vote against strike action. Immediately after the declaration of the result on November 2, Scargill said he had been sent a "secret hit list" of 75 pits marked for closure over the next five years.

In March, 1983, with the South Wales area on strike over the closure of the Ty Mawr Lewis Merthyr Colliery, the members were again balloted – on whether they would be "in favour of the National Executive Committee's recommendation that they be given authority to take industrial action to prevent the closure or partial closure of any pits, plant or unit other than on grounds of exhaustion, including those currently threatened in South Wales". The vote against was exactly similar to the previous ballot – 61 per cent.

The conventional view was that the miners were no longer an industrial threat; that, so long as their pay and redundancy terms bettered those offered elsewhere in industry, they had become too tied-in to the responsibilities of a relatively good income to offer a challenge. The mining industry *would* become a technically efficient, capital intensive, generally peaceful industry: Scargill, with his inflated rhetoric and monthly threats of strike action, was in some danger of becoming almost a joke figure. When Alastair Graham, in his closing speech in the "New Realism" debate at the 1983 TUC Congress, said that "Some of us are still waiting" on Scargill delivering industrial action, he got a good cheer and a round of applause from a gathering which was generally supportive both of miners and militants.

But the NUM leadership was convinced that the cut-backs in the industry *would* be severe, and remained determined to halt them. In the July, 1983 NUM Conference in Perth, the NUM Executive was instructed, in a resolution, to begin im-

mediately a campaign to stimulate the opposition of miners to pit closures, and to conduct a strike ballot on the issue at a time deemed best.

Plan for Coal

Throughout the period of Siddall's Chairmanship, which roughly coincided with the first year of Scargill's Presidency, Siddall and Cowan made frequent attempts at reaching a "new understanding" with the NUM – an understanding which was seen by Cowan as amounting, virtually, to a new Plan for Coal – though it was not so defined. Cowan's offer was for the best redundancy terms, the best wages, the best possible conditions – but fewer jobs. It was an offer tailored to fit the philosophy of John L. Lewis, the President of the American mineworkers until 1960. Lewis was, "an industrial tycoon ... he emphasised efficiency, pushed up wages to dramatic heights and accepted mechanisation even if it meant displacement of labour".¹⁴ But Scargill explicitly and publicly rejected the Lewis approach: in his first Presidential address (to the 1982 Conference) he said that "If we do not save our pits from closure then all our other struggles become meaningless. I do not subscribe to the philosophy of John L. Lewis, who encouraged contraction so that the wages of those who are left could be raised." Instead he invoked the spirit of A. J. Cook, the Miners' Secretary during the 1926 strike. Speaking in Aberavon on October 10, 1982, Scargill said that to be compared to Cook was "The greatest honour. Cook never sold out the miners. He didn't say one thing to the miners and another thing to others. He didn't end up in the House of Lords".

The NUM, in the early 1980s, became increasingly aware that a declining market would, sooner or later, force the Board to cut back on capacity and thus manpower. Bit by bit, the Plan for Coal, under whose aegis the Board, the Government and the unions were still supposed to be working,

came to the forefront as a "problem": in the strike itself, it was to play a central role.

The 1974 version of the Plan for Coal (almost all proposals for the industry since the war have been called 'Plan for Coal': those put forward by the coal owners in 1946 to ward off nationalisation also bore that name) is not one, but a series of documents.

All deal with expansion of production, and give little attention to contraction: they were after all written in the years after the oil shocks of 1972/73, and spiralling oil prices: coal came to be seen as a potential saviour, a state of affairs skilfully exploited by Ezra and his Board and later by Gormley.

Thus the issue which became the central one of the dispute – the closure of "un-economic" pits – is hardly touched on. In the original Plan for Coal produced in June, 1974 by the NCB, a target capacity of 150 million tonnes in 1985 is mooted, up from the then deep-mined output level of 113 million tonnes. The only closures mentioned in this slim document are "losses through exhaustion of capacity" – though it is clear in the discussion that "exhaustion" has an economic connotation, since it draws attention to the role of extra investment in extending the life of "exhausting" pits.

In the examination of the industry by Government, Board and unions, chaired by Eric Varley as Energy Secretary and whose findings were published in two reports in 1974 (interim and final), similarly little attention is paid. The interim report forecasts that "over the period up to 1985 it appears that a broad average of some 3 to 4 million tonnes of coal a year is likely to be lost, mainly through exhaustion of mines and also possibly through exceptional mining difficulties".

The final report also referred to the "inevitable losses of capacity from exhaustion" – but, in a much quoted (by the NCB) passage headed "Mobility of Labour," it stated that:

"With the transformed outlook for coal

which has been demonstrated throughout our examination, providing that costs remain competitive overall and bearing in mind the very special efforts that will require to be made to keep production going until new capacity is available to make up the deficiency, the need to close pits on economic grounds should be much reduced. But inevitably some pits will have to close as their useful economic reserves of coal are depleted”.

In the final document in the Plan for Coal series – “Coal For The Future”, a tri-partite examination of progress with Plan for Coal, chaired by Tony Benn, the then Energy Minister in 1977, the only brief reference is that “in an exhaustive industry, existing capacity is constantly eroded as the economic reserves at exhausting collieries are worked out”.

There is thus some justification for the remark by MacGregor that “I think the civil servants must have consumed enormous gallons of midnight oil coming up with the words of the 1974 Plan, which were carefully selected to make sure that whoever read it would get whatever he wanted out of it”.¹⁵ However, these gnostic guides (or hostages to fortune) were supplemented by ministerial statements throughout the period. Benn told the Commons (November 27, 1975) that the Government wanted to phase out coal subsidies to the industry: in May, 1976, he wrote in the *Colliery Guardian* that coal needed to be sold at “competitive prices”.

His 1977 Coal Industry Act authorised him to give “grants out of money provided by Parliament to assist in the redeployment of the manpower resources of the Board and the elimination of unnecessary colliery capacity”: and on December 4, 1978, in response to a question, he said:

“I am reluctant to engage in the House in discussion of individual pits, for the reason I have given, namely, that there is a proper procedure and that where necessary the NUM can come to me and I can raise the matter with the NCB.... I have never found the NUM in any way unreasonable where closures are necessary

because of exhaustion or because pits are out of line in economic terms”.

Politicians, like everyone else, speak in and of their times: the fact that Benn took a wholly opposing view during the 1984/85 strike is only in part a further example of a prodigious ability to be convinced by opposing argument; in part, it is also a reflection of, first, the comparatively uncontroversial and minor role assigned to any closures in the 1970s, when production was all; and second to the much less urgent pressure from unemployment on miners, as on other groups of workers, at that time.

It seems fair to say, however, that pits were closed throughout the Plan for Coal period on “economic” grounds (see Chapter 5 for the vexations surrounding this question), and that this was considered reasonable, though it was not at all emphasised, by the three partners in the Plan.

The appearance on the scene of Arthur Scargill and Ian MacGregor finally put paid to all of that cosy consensus: and it is to these two dramatic persona that we now turn.

Summary

The developments since the 1979 Thatcher Government took office which were of particular importance to the coal industry and to miners were:

- The new Government was determined to reduce union power.
- The unions, collectively and individually, attempted to oppose trade union legislation – but could not.
- The NCB could no longer adhere to a Plan for Coal which set what had become wildly unrealistic targets – and did not explicitly give the right to managements to close uneconomic pits.
- The NUM opposed the increased speed of closures – but appeared to be in the same boat as the other unions in its inability to translate rhetoric into action.

4. The Principal Characters

It was a familiar refrain on the left, in the course of a criticism of the miners' strike coverage on the press and broadcast media which was at times as mindless as some of that coverage was, that the media personalised the issue by making it appear a battle between two men – Scargill and MacGregor.

It was not, of course: but the two did represent, to an unusually satisfying degree, two polar opposite principles – so much so that both had constant battles with elements in their own organisations which did not wish to be associated with their policies. Further, they appeared to represent their “constituencies” well: MacGregor was the model of a Thatcherite businessman: Scargill had been elected as President with the biggest popular vote in the NUM's history.

Ian MacGregor and the NCB

MacGregor, 71 when he took over the NCB Chair on September 1, 1983, had had a business career which began (after a first class degree in Metallurgy from Glasgow University) with a relatively tough apprenticeship in metal companies on the Clyde before and during the war, took a deviation when he went to the States during the second war to assist on the technical aspects of tank procurement, stayed to become involved in allied war production plans. His career took off after the war, culminating in his leadership of AMAX Corporation (from 1967), a mining and minerals conglomerate with world-wide interests. He was then seen as a consensus, even a cosy figure: a Fortune magazine profile (March 26, 1979) wrote of him that “In truth his career has been spent in foreseeing the needs of people, in reducing the costs of meeting those human

needs and in developing a managerial style that depended on teamwork and consensus, not arbitrary power. MacGregor's international reputation as an executive is based more on his skill in human relations than on engineering”.

MacGregor came back to the UK in 1977 at the invitation of the Callaghan Government to be Chairman of British Leyland (BL): because of the objections of Sir Michael Edwardes, designated as Chief Executive, to division of responsibility at the top, he became Deputy Chairman: in May 1980, soon after the steel strike had weakened both industry and unions, he was appointed Chairman of the British Steel Corporation (BSC). In 1983, Nigel Lawson asked him to succeed Siddall at the Coal Board.

It was in itself a clearly “political” gesture: it was the implantation, into the least Thatcherite, least consumerist, wettest industry in the state's portfolio, of a man who had been an enthusiastic Reaganite in his adopted country, had been associated with very large manpower reductions at BL and BSC and had a very considerable contempt for unions.

“Successes”

He came, however, to the NCB with laurels from BL and, much more materially, from BSC. The capacity in both corporations had been reduced greatly, and their manpower even more greatly: pro-

ductivity had gone up, especially at BSC and both were seen by the Government as very considerable. MacGregor shared in this, though he was in the deputy's seat at BL, and much of the manpower loss at BSC had been effected or been set in hand before he arrived.

His role as Chairman of BSC was, as far as the unions were concerned, wholly retrograde. Before the 1980 strike (in the final period of Sir Charles Villiers' Chairmanship) the management and the unions had enjoyed a largely collaborative relationship: the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, the main union, had been an exceptionally co-operative, right-led union – though one which had insisted on and got favourable manning productivity and other agreements which helped make BSC progressively less and less competitive. MacGregor severed many of the relationships between the Chairman and the unions, effectively replaced national with plant level bargaining and did not care to consult the union leaders on his plans. It was a triumph in managerial terms: the power of the unions broke under the pressure of fear of redundancy and managerial drive: productivity shot up to reach the best European levels by 1982, and the BSC workers were to prove their pro-industry loyalties in the crucible of the miners' strike.

A mission

MacGregor stressed on taking over the NCB Chair that he saw coal as quite a different product and market, and a quite different order of problem, from steel. He spoke of very considerable markets for coal – provided, at all times, it could be competitive with other sources of energy. He saw his role in bringing down the NCB's costs as a mission for the country's future:

"The question of the closures is merely a question of moving our resources, human and financial, in the direction of production that will give us the best costs.

Now the game is worth the candle, because the only way that I can see Britain, like Japan as a nation that brings in raw materials and converts them into goods for the world, the only way that I can see the United Kingdom surviving for the long term as a major force in the world trading system is to get its energy costs down so that they're competitive, and if possible better than those of our competitors. Look at the French, now they were running highly subsidised coal industry, which even President Mitterand, despite the pressure from his Socialist and Communist friends has decided to cut in half, and I think it will ultimately be abandoned. And he's opted for an enormous amount of investment in nuclear energy. Now Britain doesn't have to go nuclear if it wants to stay with coal, provided that we get the coal at costs that keep us in contention".¹⁶

Actually, MacGregor's optimism was probably overdone. While he spoke of future export markets, especially in Europe, and of research development which could create new opportunities, he is aware that the best guess for the future of the UK market is decline. Slow economic growth, a move away from smoke stack industries, increasing interest and expertise in energy efficiency, a continuing nuclear power station programme (with five more Advanced Gas Reactor (AGR) stations in service by 1988, each representing the loss of 3 million tonnes of coal a year) all add up to a tighter, rather than an easier, coal market.

MacGregor's strategy however was capable of adaptation to a relatively high or low output: it was, in brief, to bring the industry, its managers and workers much closer to the *market* they served. He believed that only in this way could the NCB ensure its future. He called the industry a "business" – and said of his new charge that it "has, I am afraid, evolved a feeling that it can be isolated from the benefits to the community as a whole – it can operate in a vacuum, if you will, and set its own conditions for that operation. I don't think

that that is a valid, continuing, long-term principle".¹⁷

Privatisation

MacGregor side-stepped any queries on the privatisation of the industry – until near the end of the strike. Then, in a “sermon” in a City of London church, he answered a question (from a young American) on whether it might not be a good idea to hand the pits over to the mineworkers by saying it was a “wonderful idea” and that “over the long term, there is no question about it, opportunities like this will arise as they have done in other industries in this country”.¹⁸

But long before this, it had become clear that privatisation was on the agenda. The “Ridley Plan” was one straw in the wind: Ezra supplied another. Speaking on “World in Action” (October 29, 1984) he said that “I remember having a meeting with Keith Joseph when he was seeing people from both public and private sectors before the 1979 Election. And he did say that their view, the Conservative view, was that the profitable mines should be sold off and they quite accepted they could well be sold to the mineworkers. So I said, well, what would you do with the others? He said, oh well, these would be retained in public ownership under your management; I said, well, thanks very much, what sort of motivation do you think any management is going to have if every time it succeeds in anything it’s just going to be sold off?”

In a pamphlet, “Reversing Clause Four”, Conservative MP Tim Eggar – who had succeeded Ridley as Chairman of the Working Party on nationalised industries – argued that “there is no reason why the NCB’s present monopoly should continue”. Eggar’s thinking comprehended the sale – or gift – of mines to miners, and the much extended participation of private companies in new projects, such as the Selby Coalfield.

During the strike, two Ministers – Nor-

man Tebbit the Trade and Industry Secretary and John Moore, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, both referred to the possibility of privatisation – though in both cases, either they or a Government spokesman later diluted their comments as reported. In background documents on the Government’s privatisation policy, however, Moore describes coal production as an artificial monopoly – as it clearly is.

Peter Walker, the Energy Secretary throughout the strike and presently (April, 1985) had been assumed to be for retaining the monopoly: but in an interview with LBC in February 1985, he joined his colleagues – albeit cautiously – in commending private mineworkers’ co-operatives.

There is no question that, should the opportunity be judged propitious, both the Board and the Government would wish to make moves in the direction of privatisation: with an impoverished and thus weakened NUM, now would seem to be a good time.

A guiding star

In the six months of his Chairmanship before the strike burst upon him, MacGregor established continuity with his predecessor in one way, and broke with him (and all others) in another. The element of continuity was in the carrying on with the rate of closure signalled under Siddall; the discontinuity was in replacing the productionist, consensual board with a modern business corporation. To do this, he had to change, or weaken, or even destroy the oppositional role the mining unions – chiefly the NUM but also the pit deputies’ union NACODS, and even the managers’ union the British Association of Colliery Management – play inside the industry, a role which is given some “constitutional” underpinning in the Nationalisation Act.

The Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC), had been charged by the Energy Secretary with investigating the

Board's "efficiency and costs", in March, 1982 as coal stocks and NCB debt piled higher. It issued in June, 1983 a two-volume, carefully argued and detailed report. MacGregor adopted it (as he described it) as a Bible: its conclusions, which were endorsed by the Government, he used as his guiding star.

- Its main conclusions were that
- The Board should ensure "maximisation of output from low cost capacity with relatively low marginal costs and the reduction of high cost capacity"
 - should operate the areas, as far as possible, as "separate business units"
 - should reduce the numbers of departments reporting to the Board (19 when the report was made) and also the number of committees
 - measures of performance should be linked to commercial criteria
 - the numbers of craftsmen, white-collar staff and non-face workers underground should be reduced
 - the number of Board members both full and part-time with outside experience should be increased
 - investment in projects should be more stringently assessed and monitored
 - it is of "special importance" that the NCB does everything in its power to control wage costs and avoid "unreasonable increases"
 - labour market criteria on wages should play a much larger part than presently
 - more people should be recruited from other industries.

The central problem was seen to be high cost pits. The MMC report warned that "the longer the problems are left, the worse they will become. Unless there is a significant reduction in the numbers of high cost pits, the NCB's finances will deteriorate even further. The industry's ability to invest in modern capacity in the short and medium term will be jeopardised, for if the problem is not dealt with there must come a time when it will be quite impossible for any government, faced with many calls on limited resources, to justify to the public the large

and growing expenditure of public funds needed to continue support of high cost collieries. Action then, if the industry had been unable to invest in sufficient modern capacity, would be likely to be much more damaging than action taken now. In the meantime much taxpayers' money would have been committed and the price of coal might also have been kept higher than it need have been, unnecessarily increasing the cost of electricity to industry and thereby reducing the country's competitiveness in the world market".¹⁹

Board changes

The MMC's recommendation that a majority of Board members be appointed from outside the ranks of the industry chimed in well with the same thought in the six-year old "Ridley Plan" – and with practice in other nationalised industries. At the NCB, these part-timers would replace the mining engineers who had slogged their way up through the ranks, often from the pit bottom (as Siddall had done). The new Chairman cut down the full-time ranks to four: James Cowan, the Deputy Chairman and former Scottish Area Director, who with MacGregor made up the office of the Chief Executive: Brian Harrison, the Board member for finance; and Merrik Spanton, the Board member for personnel. The other six, part-time, Board members were all businessmen of MacGregor's acquaintance who had done well either in their own businesses or someone else's.

MacGregor's overall strategy was neither bizarre nor unusual: it received great attention because the glare of publicity always attracted to the coal industry in general and to the strike in particular. But in seeking to re-organise the Board into a leaner, fitter, more market-orientated corporation, in attempting to at least dilute the union's monopoly on talking to its members and in seeking to make himself and his senior managerial colleagues the "leaders of the industry" in the miners'

eyes – rather than their union leaders – he was following, rather than leading, a trend set by other companies in the trading public sector, as BL, BSC, British Shipbuilders, and by many in the private sector. A random example: when Esso Chemicals (UK) went through a re-vamp of their internal procedures and management (including industrial relations) two years ago, one in four managers left the company because they could not stand the new pace: trade union consultation was replaced by workforce communication; and large-scale redundancies were set in train. The tale was a common one: in a sense, it had simply taken the NCB longer.

The new Chairman also relied considerably, more as the strike got under way, on assistance from outsiders to the Board, working either for a fee or from their own commitment to the Chairman's cause.

Their role has been a shadowy one: but among the most prominent among them has been Tim Bell, formerly of Saatchi and Saatchi (highly regarded and reportedly consulted by the Prime Minister), now managing director of Lowe Howard-Spink Campbell Ewald – which, shortly before he joined it, won the bulk of the NCB's advertising contract: David Hart, chairman of a property company, a flamboyant and extrovert man who had also advised the Prime Minister, had numerous contacts through the "new Right", wrote novels and political pamphlets and acted both as a morale booster for the Chairman and a link to the working miners; and Tommy Thomson, a former political journalist whose organisation Opinion Research and Communications conducted extensive and in-depth polls of miners throughout the strike, providing the NCB with rather better information about miners' feelings than was available to the NUM. None of this was to please his senior managers, especially those in Hobart House, the Coal Board's headquarters; some were to express their disagreement as the strike progressed, and two of the most outspoken, Geoffrey Kirk, the Director of Information and

Ned Smith the Director of Industrial Relations – were in turn respectively dismissed and retired early.

Arthur Scargill and the NUM

The NUM President's biography is now well known: it includes a political apprenticeship in the Young Communist League, a working apprenticeship at Wooley colliery where the right-wing controlled branch kept the precocious lad down (for a while); the rise to prominence during the 1972 strike, especially in his telegenic and opportunistically brilliant manoeuvres in closing the Saltley Coke Depot; his work as compensation agent, then President, of the Yorkshire Miners and his – by that time apparently effortless and inevitable – ascendancy to the national Presidency in April, 1982.²⁰

An ultimately enigmatic man ("an enigma wrapped within a dogma" – Churchill's famous description of Stalin is easily transferrable) he is one of the most compelling platform orators of his time – passionate, arrogant, bristling with detail, hilarious on occasion – a Scargill speech is a phenomenon.

His central task

Yet the most important fact to emerge was that his rhetoric had meaning. In his lengthy address to the 1982 NUM Conference – a key political text of this decade – Scargill told the delegates that: "I have no intention of allowing the job to frustrate my intentions... I do not underestimate either the constitution of the union, nor any constraint with which I have to contend, but I do not accept that these should be reasons for not being true to one's word".

And his intentions?: "Protection of the industry is my first priority, because without jobs all our other claims lack substance and become mere shadows. Without jobs our members are nothing – they have

no power or means of subsistence, because we live in a society which penalises people who have no jobs. I hope, therefore, that this conference will endorse my call to make opposition to pit closures its *central task*".

He also made clear "exactly what I mean by democracy. The conference is, and must be, the supreme authority of the union – the ultimate decision-making body – and no matter what judges say or will say, the decisions of this conference are sacrosanct and binding on the NEC and the union as a whole. No other body can speak for the members and I give an undertaking that whilst I am National President, this conference will never be trivialised – dismissed as being out of touch with reality... it must be recognised that I am not giving a personal view, but simply repeating a union rule".

The rules

It is quite correct that the conference of the NUM – as in most unions, and as in some other voluntary organisations, is the ultimate authority: (the same general issue has been a continuing cause of disension within the Labour Party). The NUM Rule 8 states: "The Government of the union shall be by conference as provided for in Rule 23. In the periods between conference the National Executive Committee shall administer the business and affairs of the union and perform all duties laid down for it by resolution of conference, and it shall not at any time act contrary to, or in defiance of, any resolution of conference" (Rule 23 is a procedural rule, but it repeats the spirit of Rule 8 where it describes the conference as the body "in which the authority and government of the union shall be vested").

The Rule which places supreme authority in the conference is based on a system of delegated power: in the NUM's case delegates to national conference are elected by the Area Councils, whose members are delegates from the pit bran-

ches – the basic level of NUM democracy. The union has two other mechanisms, however, for applying countervailing pressure to the delegated democracy of conference: the national ballot vote for President and General Secretary; and the requirement, under Rule 43, to hold a national ballot on strike action. Further, the National Executive Committee, though deriving its power from conference, is formed by delegates from the areas – the numbers varying according to numerical strength – and these delegates are elected periodically by branch voting.

Thus the power of the Annual Conference is, in both constitution and in practice, less than sacrosanct. Previous leaders of the NUM had attempted to balance the various centres and mechanisms of NUM power (Conference, Executive, Areas and ballot votes); Scargill, by placing clearly on record his view of the conference as the "supreme authority" of the union, was not giving an uncontroversial re-statement of the Rules: he was making clear his intention of running the union and its policies through that forum which, because it is composed of the most active, committed and (usually) leftist members would be most likely to support his radical policies.

Gormley's theory

The contrast with Gormley was explicit, and emphasised by Scargill. In most of his early speeches as President, Scargill excoriated his predecessor – a tactic made easier by the latter's accession to the peerage, not a popular move at most union gatherings. Where Scargill explicitly rejected the John L. Lewis approach, Gormley explicitly endorsed it. He writes that "I became quite a disciple of John L. Lewis... His theory was that it wasn't his job to decide the size of the industry, but it was his job to fight like hell for the best wages and conditions for those who worked in it. I said at the time (in debates on pit closures on the NEC in the early 1960s):

“There’s a good deal of sense in what he says, because the fact is that we are not able to decide the size of our industry. It’s being decided by pressures from outside. We can’t say that it will be any bigger than other people are allowing it to be. So we should be concentrating on getting the right wages”.²¹

Gormley recounts how he put this view to Bill Paynter, then the NUM’s General Secretary. Paynter objected on the grounds that to fight for high wages for the remaining miners would be to acquiesce in closures – something the NUM was pledged to oppose in principle (though it could do nothing, or little, about them in practice). Gormley replied: “Bill... I don’t give a damn what it means accepting, but our job is to fight for a good standard of living for those people who are going to work in this industry”.²² Gormley defines himself as a democratic socialist: “I believe progress should be made gradually, rather than by revolution, because the essence of change is that it should be achieved by the majority of people; and I’m not sure that there would be many in Britain who would favour a revolution. You have to bring people with you, and, most of all, the people on whose votes you

rely to win power... my years as President were always tempered by the fact that there was an “anti” block on the NEC who would nearly always vote against anything and who certainly wouldn’t agree with my ideas about how things should be achieved. Many of them, like Mick McGahey, were avowedly Communists. And I respect that. I prefer a man who states his convictions and applies to belong to a party which meets these convictions. Others like Arthur Scargill, were members of the Labour Party, though from some of the things that Arthur said from time to time I would have thought he would be an embarrassment to the International Marxist!”²³

The International Marxists (now largely dissolved into the Labour Party) were on the contrary delighted by Scargill: he was the only union leader prepared to act according to the principles they preached. Gormley was a common-enough type – if uncommon as a man – in the Labour movement: shrewd, not averse to strikes if need be, but wholly reconciled to the win-some, lose-some bargaining in a mixed economy. Scargill was wholly unreconciled, and refused to concede loss.

5. The Strike

The two flash points of the strike were the announcements, within a few days of each other in March, 1984, of the closure of Cortonwood colliery in South Yorkshire and the cut of 4 million tonnes of capacity for 1984/85, with the assumed loss of 20 pits and 20,000 jobs. Cortonwood’s closure – there seems little doubt – was an instance where, under pressure from the office of the Chief Executive, the Area Director pre-empted the normal review procedure by saying the pit would close: the affront was exacer-

bated by the recent acceptance by the pit of men from other collieries and by the assurance given to these men that the colliery had some five years of life left in it. The capacity cut had been announced at the prompting of the unions, in the context of attempts by both Board and the unions to agree a new draft "Plan for Coal" which they could then put jointly to government.

Overtime ban

The pressures on the NUM leadership at that time from its all important activist layer were strong. Three ballots (including one when Scargill was President-Elect) in a little over 2½ years had voted down industrial action – while pits continued closing at a rapid rate. In the last of these ballots, in March, 1983, South Wales, supported by Scotland and Yorkshire, had voted to strike over the closure of Ty Mawr Lewis Merthyr pit in South Wales: the left argued for a national strike under Rule 41 (the Rule which says that area strikes may be sanctioned by the Executive without ballots) but this time, the right won and an unsuccessful national ballot was held. In November, 1983, by a decision this time of a Special Delegate Conference, an overtime ban was instituted in protest over a 5.2 per cent pay offer.

The overtime ban caused, indirectly, strikes in three pits in the South Yorkshire area in February and March, 1984. The Kent area feared the closure of Snowdown, one of only three pits in the tiny field. In the North-East, a young, radical, leadership had taken power at pit level and was pushing the previously centrist leadership to unfamiliarly militant postures. Something of the same was happening in the Staffordshire, Lancashire and even the Nottinghamshire areas.

It is important to note that the built-in, 13-12 majority to the right that Gormley had enjoyed as President was crumbling even before he retired, and could not always be relied on. In November, 1979 after four years of enduring a pay policy and with a Tory Government now in power, the NEC right joined the left in voting

against a 20 per cent wage offer and against Gormley's advice. Gormley's position was upheld, however, in the subsequent ballot, where the miners rejected the Executive call to strike and voted by 113,160 to 107,656 to accept the offer. Gormley comments: "A turnabout like that can be demoralising for the union. The Executive should try to lead, but seek to do it by reading its members' feelings correctly. It can't afford to have that sort of rebuff too often, because then it becomes a delegation of leadership to its members, and that's not what the NEC is elected to do".²⁴ Increasingly, Gormley was seen by Board and Government as unable to deliver.

As we have seen, that philosophy was to be countered by a wholly opposite one from Scargill: and when, soon after Gormley's retirement, Tommy Bartles, the Durham Mechanics' leader and the right's tactician, died in a traffic accident in London, the right had no powerful figure to articulate its case. When the strike came, it had no alternative position, only a rear-guard action that based itself on the view – which would later be vindicated – that the members would not stand for it.

The March 6 announcement of the 4 million tonne cut had been preceded, or was quickly followed, by decisions of the Area Executives in Scotland, Yorkshire, South Wales and Kent to strike: under Rule 41, these did not require ballots (unless the area rules so specified) but the action had to be endorsed by the NEC. They duly were, on March 8: by March 12, the first pickets were crossing the Yorkshire/Nottinghamshire border to enforce obedience in the country's second biggest coal field to the principle of "one

out: all out”.

This is not the place to retell the story of the strike: rather we should select the main themes thrown up by it.

The ballot

The lack of a ballot was seen, most publicly on the left by Jimmy Reid (who had been a leader of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in in the early 1970s) in various columns as the “original sin” from which other effects flowed. In a typical passage, Reid says that: “the absence of a national ballot is the rock on which the union is foundering. Scargill was not prepared to risk rebuff from the members, so he sought to impose a strike upon them. All that has happened since is an inevitable consequence of the decision not to have a ballot... picketing becomes a means of coercion, a substitute for winning minds”.²⁵

The decision not to hold a ballot was taken against a background of (a) failure to secure assent for strike action in the past three ballots – the last of which had shown majorities of 61 per cent against strike action over pit closures; (b) indication from almost all those areas where ballots were taken that miners would not strike. McGahey’s famous phrase “we will not be constitutionalised out of action” was brought out in response to press questioning after the March 6 meeting.

The demand for a ballot came to be seen by the NUM leadership, by the NUM left and by the thousands of activists as a right-wing ploy, almost a trick to prevent the NUM from taking any action at all. When, at a Special Delegate Conference of the union on April 19, the qualifying vote for strike action was dropped from 55 to 50 per cent, those who voted against the Rule change (who included the majority of those voting for a ballot) were branded by the left as hypocrites – if they really wanted a ballot, they would have voted for the change.

The left *had* a rational ground for their

opposition to a national ballot. Area ballots under Rule 41 were as much part of the union’s rule book as a national ballot under Rule 43; and areas had the right to ask for support from others – as the South Wales miners had done in the previous, unsuccessful ballot. More tellingly – and very much was made of this – the NUM leadership insisted that “no man has the right to vote another out of a job” – that is, the willingness of, for example, Scots miners to fight against closures in their area should not be undercut by votes of the Nottinghamshire miners who did not fear pit closures. The NUM leaders also turned back the demand for a ballot from outside the union on those who were most vociferously for it: who, they demanded, elected the Fleet Street editors? or the judges?

The line that no national ballot was taken because of different interests by different areas in job preservation was dismissed by the Government, the Board and much of the press as a phoney argument. It was not. Very much in Scargill’s mind, and certainly also in MacGregor’s, was the experience of the 1980 vote at BL over its survival plan – when a large majority of workers voted for a plan which was to mean redundancies for many of their colleagues. In essence, the NUM leadership’s argument was the old one of the tyranny of the majority over the minority with a special interest, one to which there is no in principle answer. In terms of self interest (usually a large component of voting) workers will always be better off, at least in the short run, to vote for a minority of their fellows to be fired if that improves their company’s competitive position: in some cases, they will be “right” to do so in the sense that no other strategy can save the company. However, to give workers “industrial democracy” only on such a question would seem to be selective to say the least: while the use of such a mechanism by managements can simply be an easy way out of rather harder strategies, such as improving market shares.

The polls taken at the time a ballot seemed most likely, soon after the April 19 Conference – showed a majority for the strike: many in the NUM believe that a ballot should have been held then, and that if it had, it would have been won.

In an interview in *Marxism Today* immediately after the strike, George Bolton, Vice President of the Scottish Area, said, “Timing is very important. In my view the NUM could have won a national ballot hands down within days of the Special Conference in Sheffield in April. And there was no doubt in my mind at that time that a national ballot would have been decisive for a strike”.²⁶

But that is in retrospect: at the two crucial meetings where the ballot was discussed – the April 12 NEC and the April 19 Special Delegate Conference – the left was scornfully against ballots. According to Roy Ottey’s testimony,²⁷ every left-winger on the NEC spoke out forcefully against a ballot: and while there was a majority convinced of the need for a ballot, or mandated by their areas to vote for one, Scargill managed to preempt the majority by ruling that the issue be left to the April 19 Conference to decide, then surviving a vote of confidence in his ruling by 13 votes to 8.

At the April 19 Conference, Jack Taylor, the Yorkshire President, revealed clearly the left’s contempt for the “soft” areas, like Nottinghamshire, when, speaking directly to those areas which were for a ballot, said:

“I will tell you what worries me about ballots, and I do not want to be offensive to anybody because we have got enough problems. I will tell you what is up. We don’t really trust you. That is the reason... You want to go back to work and you will leave the dirty work to Owen Briscoe, Ken Homer and me (all Yorkshire officials) when we go down to Cortonwood that Sunday morning and say ‘I am sorry lads I am sorry. There are 800 jobs have gone down the road’... Now if you want to be on our side I can tell you it is easy. There is no problem in getting on our side.

You don’t have to have any ballots for that. You don’t have to go round campaigning for it either. You have to put your feet on the floor and walk across that line that MacGregor has drawn, his side and our side. He is talking like John Wayne now, you know, shoot-outs, gauntlets thrown down. I will tell you what we have done. We have picked that gauntlet up and if he wants a shoot-out with us he can have one. He can have one, not of our making but of his making”.

Solidarity

Support from other unions was promised: by the grouping of transport unions, all left-led, which acted as an NUM support group throughout the strike, and, from September 1984 Congress, by most of the unions in the TUC.

In the first six months of the strike, however, the NUM leadership did not seek support from the wider trade union movement, outside of the bounds of the left group. The rail unions, the National Union of Railwaymen and the drivers’ union, ASLEF, and the Seamens’ Union were able to provide some assistance: for much of the strike, little coal moved by train in most coalfield areas, and little by UK ships: however, this had limited value since road transport and foreign shipping were ready substitutes.

The TUC did wish to become involved, but the NUM leadership, especially Scargill, was suspicious and jealous of “its” strike. Scargill said in June: “There is a view being expressed that the strike should be taken out of the hands of the people who know what it is all about. And there is another view – I didn’t say it was mine – that if it was, then remember what happened to ASLEF and the National Graphical Association. The TUC can give us support, providing they want to give that support as individual unions”.²⁸

Len Murray believed that much of that went back to the old charge of “sell-out” when the TUC led unions back after only

eight days of General Strike in 1926, to leave the miners to fight, and starve, alone.

Largely, it appeared, under the instigation of McGahey, the NUM came to the TUC just before its 1984 Congress to assist it in preparing a composite motion for support which would keep the left and the right in the same movement – the familiar TUC duty. The result was a motion which promised “total support” for the miners, and called all affiliates “to make the dispute more effective by (a) not moving coal or coke, or oil substituted for coal or coke, across NUM official picket lines, or using such materials taken across NUM official picket lines; (b) not using oil which is substituted for coal”.

The debate was marked by fierce expressions of solidarity from the left unions: statesmanlike pledges of measured support from the centre and some of the right-led unions; and complete rejection of the support strategy by a few unions on the right – including three centrally involved: the electricians, the power engineers and the steel workers.

We know that the net result of this debate was very little in the way of physical support – though a considerable amount of money, well over £1 million was contributed to the TUC fund for the miners, while much more was given directly in cash or in the shape of food by individual unions. It became slowly obvious that the workers who mattered most would do little – these were the power workers in the Trent Valley belt of stations which drew their coal from the working Midlands fields; their colleagues in the oil-fired stations around the country; the drivers, some unionised, some not, to whose lorries coal and other supplies had been switched from rail; and the steel workers, who had been the first non-mining group in line, and the first to reject solidarity.

The NUM leadership made belated and rather perfunctory efforts to woo leaders, like John Lyons, of the Engineering Managers whose members' support was needed. But even had they given full-

hearted support, little more would have materialised than did. The Transport and General Workers Union leaders were part of the left grouping around the NUM: they were able to get their members in the docks out once on an issue related to the miners' strike (but presented very much as an internal TGWU issue) but not twice. Some of their drivers did obey union instructions not to cross picket lines – many others did not.

Support groups

The new political forces and alliances which emerged within the network of miners' support groups at an early stage has been very much emphasised by the left. Peter Carter, Industrial Organiser of the Communist Party, writes that “The role of women has been unprecedented, and has taken completely new forms... this change is partly because pit closures are an obvious threat to whole communities, whereas wage disputes do not have this character, but also it is linked to the work of feminists and women's liberation over the past two decades... ‘Dig Deep for the Miners’ badges have become a personal statement and expression of identity. The collections of food and money have been more widespread than in any strike since the war. It is no exaggeration to say that without this support from outside the coal-fields – from local authorities, trade unions, feminists, black people, local Labour parties, Communist party branches, gays and lesbians and many more – the strike could not have been sustained”.²⁹

Doreen Massey and Hilary Wainwright make an almost obligatory criticism from the left when they say: “With trade union leadership at sixes and sevens, their creaking structures, and their lack of credibility, unable to lead any response, and with Party political leadership embarrassed by the whole affair – in spite of, maybe because of, all this heavy-footed inertia – there has sprung up a completely different way of

organising support, indeed an expansion of what the concept of support means. 'The grass roots', people of all sorts, previously politically active and not, have just got on with it. Often in the most unexpected ways and places, support networks have been organised, fundraising events launched, and distribution systems established".³⁰

The claim of those involved in these support groups, in particular feminists involved in, or observers of, the Women Against Pit Closure groups, is that (a) women have, by joining in such activities as picketing, gone far beyond their traditional role as helpers in the struggle – though they also performed that role; (b) that their participation in the strike, and the nature of that participation, liberated their consciousness from the bonds imposed on it by what feminists often see as the male-dominated society of the pit community. Further, on the same basis, the links forged between the kinds of groups enumerated by Carter on the one hand and the mineworkers on the other have created new alliances which will last, and have an important effect on socialist consciousness as well as on methods of organising.

More broadly still, commentators on the left have drawn attention to the wide spread of support, from old-age pensioners to ethnic minority groups, from the Scottish Highlands to St Albans and Milton Keynes.

Caution over these developments is not to dismiss their possible importance to the Labour movement. First, many people in the UK had some kind of contact with miners, often through family: there were, after all, one million miners, which means perhaps four to five million people in miners' families in the UK only four decades ago. This attachment, coupled with admiration for their fortitude, must have padded out straightforward political sympathy – which was anyway considerable.

The importance of the women's and other support groups, and of the new alliances, is less easy to assess. From im-

pressionistic evidence, much of the activity of women's support groups did appear to be "women's work": cooking and serving food, organising food collection, caring for their own and others' children. Women did go on picket lines, but probably never in very large numbers. They did speak at meetings and organised the collection of money – but that, too, was a role more often taken on by men. There was no question that men were in the leadership at national, regional and local level.

The women's role was clearly larger than in previous strikes: there was a considerable injection of feminism into the ideology of the support groups, but the role was explicitly and inevitably *supportive*. In a union like the NUM, in an industry where female participation is limited to either canteen work at the pit, clerical work in offices or (a few) junior and middle managerial functions at area and national Board level, the objective scope for continuing participation is limited.

The new alliances forged during the strike were novel, exciting and often moving: the amount of hard, voluntary and committed work put in the miners' cause by activists was exceptional, surpassing any other industrial campaign – though none, of course, has lasted for so long, demanded so much in the way of aid and given activists so much time to get their act together. What new politics these alliances are likely to encourage is less certain. Miners will not now visit Labour parties and other organisations in non-mining areas to ask for support: whether informal links are maintained remains to be seen. Gay, feminist and ethnic minority groups will return to pursuing their own campaigns, in or out of the Labour movement. At the time of writing, there is little evidence of a radicalising change in Labour Party politics because of the work of the support groups: the strike's effect on the Labour movement as a whole is a different matter.

Uneconomic pits

The issue of uneconomic pits was at the centre of the lengthy negotiations between the NCB and the NUM which punctuated the course of the dispute. It was never resolved: nor could it be, since both sides took opposing, principled stands. To the NCB, the central element it had to secure from a negotiation was a formula which allowed it to close uneconomic pits. To the NUM, the central element was an agreement which contained no formulation which could possibly be read in that way.

The question is endlessly vexed: we have to note only that an economic calculation lies, in practice, at the heart of *all* pit closures, except in those very rare cases where a pit becomes absolutely unworkable, no matter how much is spent on it, for safety reasons. "Exhausted" pits are closed with large amounts of coal in them, but which would cost too much money to mine in relation to its price: how far one takes this calculation before a pit becomes "uneconomic" rather than "exhausted" is a matter of judgement, custom and practice, market demand and social and industrial relations realities.

The MMC Report highlighted the problem of high cost pits by devoting a separate chapter to it. It noted that ageing pits generally show a tendency to decline in productivity because seams become more distant from the pit face; the coal becomes poorer in saleable value and becomes more difficult to cut. All of these factors lower output per man shift – the NCB's productivity measure. The MMC Report comments that they also "may affect a colliery long before it approaches physical exhaustion of its reserves. Indeed the fact that they may cause a colliery to become irretrievably unprofitable introduces an element of difficulty into the concept of exhaustion. The NCB put it to us that in its view the economic viability of reserves remaining in a colliery depends not only on the physical quantity of mineral in the ground, but also on the costs of extraction,

the value of the product, and how both the costs and the prices are expected to move in the future. By contrast, so we understand, commercial mining companies, when judging whether a mine should be regarded as exhausted, would concentrate on whether it offers any potentially profitable mining opportunities rather than the quantity of mineral known to remain physically in the ground".³¹

The Plan for Coal 1974 envisaged the closure of 3 to 4 million tonnes of capacity – much of it "uneconomic" rather than exhausted – each year. However, by mid 1982 – eight years later – old capacity had been cut by only 8.84 million tonnes (58 pits) or at a rate of 1.1 million tonnes per year. The MMC Report notes that "when we questioned the NCB as to why it had failed to achieve the level of closures envisaged in the tri-partite report of 1974 we were told... that the necessity of maintaining good industrial relations precluded faster progress".³²

The NUM had had a formal policy of opposing "uneconomic" closure for many years, which is clearly more easily enforced by the union when the market for coal is tight.

After the first substantial talks on the strike, in Edinburgh and Rotherham, Scargill made it clear that the NUM was not talking about complete exhaustion – even though it would not allow the Board to define in writing an "uneconomic" closure.³³

"(James Cowan) said: would it be possible to reach an agreement if, for instance, there was a small parcel of coal which might take 18 months to develop and might not last nine months? Will it be possible to agree a situation where the NUM could themselves agree it was no longer a working proposition? We reiterated our position that we could not agree to closures on economic grounds, but we said that in the instance he had outlined, that had already been catered for within the first two categories (of exhaustion or geological difficulty) – it would not be a feasible proposition".

This means that the NUM leadership had within its definition of "exhaustion" an economic connotation – but not one it was willing to make explicit in a written agreement.

In the course of the negotiations, the NCB was, in fact, to drop explicit mention of "uneconomic pits" in the many drafts which passed between the two sides – but insisted on the retention of a phrase which expressed, or was held to express, the "philosophy" of uneconomic closures.

Throughout the negotiations, and in briefings to the press, the Board continually stressed that it had never been and would not be its intention to close pits *only* because it made a loss: pits would move in and out of profit, profitability was nearly always a direct function of the investment cycle as well as the market, and certain coals – as, for example, anthracite – were required even if mining them was often unprofitable.

The October draft

The furthest the Board was prepared to go (though opinions vary on which of the various draft agreements were most favourable to the NUM) was the draft put to the union during talks at the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service in October, 1984. Once these talks broke up on October 31, there were no further substantive discussions: and as the miners began melting off the picket lines and back into the pits, the NCB's line hardened.

The October draft reads in full:

"The NCB and the NUM have examined the current situation, in an effort to resolve the present dispute and provide a basis for the future of a sound industry.

"1. On March 6th the NCB put forward proposals designed to influence the prospects of the industry and to equate production with market requirements. There have been losses of output resulting from the

dispute and changes in the needs of the market. In the light of the changed circumstances the Board will re-examine the proposals for the industry and revise the objectives for the individual areas.

"2. The following collieries referred to specifically by the NUM – Polmaise, Herrington, Cortonwood, Bulcliffe Wood and Snowdown – will continue in operation. Any further decisions relating to these (and other collieries) will be dealt with in accordance with the guidelines under s.3 below.

"3. In order to establish more clearly the parameters in respect of exhaustion of reserves – in line with the principles of the Plan for Coal – it is agreed that in the future the following categories and procedures will apply:

(a) collieries which are exhausted in line with principles set out in the Plan for Coal will be closed by joint agreement

(b) collieries facing severe geological difficulties – ie safety – again in line with the principles of the Plan for Coal will be closed by joint agreement

(c) any other colliery not covered by 3(a) and 3(b) may be brought forward by either party for discussion and investigation in line with the principles of the Plan for Coal under the Colliery Review Procedure.

The Colliery Review Procedure will be amended to include as a final stage an independent review body whose function will be to consider a reference from any one of the parties to the procedure on any closure matter arising under clauses (a), (b) and (c) above, about which there is disagreement.

Full weight will be given to the parties to the advice of this independent review body.

"4. On the basis of the above

arrangements the Board and the unions will jointly discuss the Plan for Coal and any proposed revision. It is agreed that these discussions will seek to identify the basis for jointly establishing a developing and expanding coal industry equipped to meet future energy requirements”.

The key phrase is “in line with the principles of the Plan for Coal”: the NUM had demanded that “the principles of” be dropped, since it made commitment to the Plan vague and therefore meaningless.

The union took its stance on the Plan, and nothing but the Plan: for at its heart was a commitment to expand production to 135 million tonnes by 1985, as much as 200 million tonnes by 2000: a commitment which would have meant every available pit kept open and producing flat out well into the future.

The main elements here are:

- a demand by the NCB that uneconomic pits be closed, and this be written down in some form
- a refusal on the part of the NUM to allow it
- assurances by the Board that “uneconomic” meant chronically, rather than occasionally, unprofitable
- indications by the union that “exhausted” comprehended at least a limited notion of “uneconomic”.

In days gone by, the NUM and the NCB would have been able to take these last two points and make a fudge of them. Its inability to do so in 1984/85 indicated that *for both sides* the conditions had changed. In the 1960s period to which Gormley refers above, the consensual relationship had remained (though he adds: “I often wonder how Alf Robens got away with it: perhaps he was helped by the fact that we as a union were not as united as we should have been, since some areas were getting off much more lightly than others”.³⁴) In the early 1980s, there was no basis of trust: no-one was getting away with anything.

The issue attracted a measure of attention, from a number of sources. The MMC

Report’s examination of “high cost pits” had produced the “official” position: there was official consensus that, whether an industry was expanding or contracting, a major imperative was to rid itself of uneconomic capacity. Thus the European Commission’s Report to the Council of Ministers in February, 1982 pointed out that “The Community has to face the uncomfortable fact that a large number of its mines will never reach a level of productivity sufficient to make them even marginally profitable or competitive with operations abroad, no matter how modern the technology invested in them or how efficiently that technology is used. The rate at which new productive mines can be opened, and the health of the community mining industry improves, will be linked to the rate at which uneconomic capacity is phased out”.³⁵

Left responses

The strike produced a number of responses from the left which challenged, or more accurately frontally assaulted, that orthodoxy. Best known was the work of Andrew Glyn, an economics fellow at Oxford University. In two reports, Glyn made the central claims that the NCB was only making large losses because of interest payments, subsidence and pension payments which were related to past mining activities and nothing to do with the present costs of coal production: and that the costs of *not* employing miners were higher than the costs of employing them, even in “uneconomic pits”. His argument is very neatly summarised in the table³⁶ overleaf.

George Kerevan and Richard Saville, lecturers from Napier College, Edinburgh and St Andrews University respectively, followed Glyn’s line in arguing the case on Scotland’s coal industry: and showed that the closure of many of Scotland’s pits – now very much on the cards – would increase the tendency to reduce the former heartland of British manufacturing to “virtually a Third World economy run on

Effect on Government Finances – (£ per mining job lost)

Year	Redundancy pay etc. for older miner and lost tax revenue	Dole for "new" miner & lost tax	Dole & tax lost for NCB staff & other workers	Total costs	Subsidy saved
Year	1	2	3	4=1+2+3	5
1	15764	would be on dole anyway	4812	20576	6875
2	7644	<i>ditto</i>	4812	12456	6875
3	7644	<i>ditto</i>	4812	12456	6875
4	7644	<i>ditto</i>	4812	12456	6875
5	7644	<i>ditto</i>	4812	12456	6875
6	Would have retired anyway	5500	4812	10312	6875
7	<i>ditto</i>	5500	4812	10312	6875

public sector jobs and oil exploitation".³⁷

The "Aberystwyth Report on Coal" by four academics confronts the MMC's assumptions on high cost pits, arguing that averaging investment charges at £2.60 per tonne of coal produced across all production grossly overstates the cost of coal from old pits in which little or no investment is made, and even more grossly understates it in new capacity where high investment is going on. They further argue that the 70 pits with the highest losses in 1981/82 (£332 million in aggregate) are "peripheral to the NCB's investment strategy (which) probably causes part of the poor performances in the group of 70... the key point here is that a major programme of investment in new pits was started under the 1974 Plan for Coal when the industry was planning for expansion. Now that the market is contracting, the peripheral pits must close so that the NCB can defend its showcases".³⁸

The crucial element in much of the left thinking is *unemployment*: the central assumption in Glyn's work was that those miners made redundant would remain so. In a report for London Weekend Television, Gavyn Davies and David Metcalf

took a view between that of Glyn and that of the NCB/MMC, arguing that "50 to 60 pits should perhaps be closed on average, after 5 years" – on the assumption that some of the miners displaced found jobs. However, they also admit that "where there is a binding long-term constraint on employment because of permanent demand deficiency... the pit should probably be left open to exhaustion".³⁹

The central "analytical conclusion" of the Davies/Metcalf paper was that both the NCB's core argument that pits should be looked at wholly as financial considerations, and the NUM's argument that pits should be left open to exhaustion (though as we have seen both sides were more pragmatic than that) were insupportable. Instead, it proposed that "to maximise UK real output, pits should be closed only when the resource gains from alternative employment outweigh the resource losses from lost coal output. This may involve quite long time spans... but not infinite ones. There will be financial losses to be incurred by the Government in order to reap the economic gains involved in leaving high cost pits open until (this) criterion is met. The time span in which these finan-

cial losses need to be incurred can be shortened by the active promotion of alternative employment by the NCB in areas threatened by pit closures. But the alternative employment should probably, on resource grounds, come before the pit closures”.

The closure programme suggested by Davies/Metcalf would result in an average of 5-6 pits a year being closed over ten years, not dissimilar from the original target in Plan for Coal. “However, this would be much less than required for financial break even by the NCB, and much more than required on an exhaustion principle”.

It is tempting to endorse Davies/Metcalf just because it seems to split the difference between two intransigent positions: there are better grounds for doing so, however. First, it replaces the principle of simple uneconomic closure with criteria which explicitly include wider costs – the costs of unemployment, most obviously, but also the resource cost of not producing even uneconomic coal. The base of their calculation is the “real cost to the whole economy”: a criterion which takes the decision out of the hands of the NCB alone, in which the Government had attempted to leave it. Second – though the authors do not examine this case in detail – it proposes a responsibility for the Board to provide alternative employment in communities suffering a loss of their main source of jobs.

Some of this did appear in draft agreements: in the final draft, for example, the Board did acknowledge a community responsibility, and had by then created a medium for channelling money into mining areas where pits had closed to create new jobs. However, the impression was – and it is one which stands – that these measures were bolted on to a basic approach which was to close pits on a profit and loss basis *as a principle*, if not always a practice.

The Davies/Metcalf line stands as one which could commend itself to future Labour Governments – since it admits an

economic criteria which cannot be absent, yet commits Government and Board to provision of alternative employment.

Legal action

The issues of the use of police and the law, and the phenomenon of the working miners are indivisible. Most policing was directed at the protection of working miners: the most effective court cases were those taken by working miners against their own union.

The new “Tory Law” was not extensively used. In the second week of the strike, the NCB secured an injunction against the Yorkshire area to stop it sending pickets to other areas (principally Nottinghamshire): picketing did not stop but the court action did. Two Gloucestershire transport companies run by the brothers Read secured an injunction to stop picketing of Llanwern – an action which ultimately deprived the South Wales area of control of its funds. Both of these actions were taken under the secondary picketing provisions of the 1980 Employment Act. However, there appears to have been a real reluctance on the part of the Government to allow these industries it controlled to use the laws it had passed: there is evidence that when BSC considered using the Employment Act to restrain picketing at its Ravenscraig Plant – partly prompted to do so by the request of its own trade unions – it was restrained by the Government: the NCB injunction against Yorkshire was not proceeded with because Government did not want to give the NUM leadership a potentially unifying cause at a time when the working miners were still a fragile phenomenon.

The working miners’ groups, whose cases and favourable judgments became increasingly irksome, then damaging, then crippling to the NUM, largely fought under contract law, alleging that the NUM, at area and national level, had broken the contract existing between union and member in a number of ways. In

the case which ultimately deprived the NUM of its funds, taken in the first instance by Ken Taylor and Andy Foulstone, working Yorkshire miners, against the area and national union, the charge was that the strike was unconstitutional: at the end of September, Mr Justice Nicholls had found the strike to be “unofficial” and “unlawful” – findings which were immediately rejected by Scargill. “The High Court decision, as far as we are concerned, will not be accepted.”⁴⁰

Once again, the issue is complex. The Government pointed continually to the fact that the NUM was under legal attack by its own members and that they, not the employer or the state, had brought justice to bear on the union. From the testimony of those working miners who brought cases, and their lawyers, there was no encouragement, or suggestion, or assistance, from Government or any other party in the taking of these cases.

There is little doubt that the working miners as a whole felt aggrieved by their union’s attitude, and felt in need of representation which protected them from the demand by the NUM leadership that they strike: the votes in Nottinghamshire which replaced the largely pro-strike area and branch leadership with officials who were for working are conclusive proof. In turn, these men who became leaders of the working miners’ groups, or who – like Foulstone and Taylor – felt frustrated by what they saw as the imposition of a strike on an unwilling workforce, saw in the law a remedy for the pressures they were experiencing.

There is similarly little doubt that the Board at least did much to encourage the working miners. They were given time off to take their actions, meet and brief the press and issue statements. NCB press officers put journalists in touch with them. Allegations were made – denied by the working miners’ groups – that the Board financed them. They were, of course, given heroic status – which many of them disliked – by the press. Many of them received 24-hour police protection, at

least for a time: they needed it too.

It is not impossible that the Board, or the Government, or both, were closely involved with the working miners, and that this involvement stimulated, or sustained, the legal actions – but there is very little evidence for it. The working miners arose as a phenomenon in reaction to the NUM leadership’s decision not to have a ballot.

Later, especially in the Midland and Western coalfields, Area Directors, such as John Northard (Western) and Ken Moses (North Derbyshire) systematically planned the breaking of the strike by persuading miners to come to work, and guaranteeing them safe passage: this inevitably set up a somewhat conspiratorial relationship between the Board and some of these men (which the Board found to be a nuisance once they had served their function).

The police

The role of the police has been fully and judiciously reviewed by the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL)⁴¹: little needs to be added. That review was given widest publicity for its judgment that “any person has the right to choose whether or not to go to his workplace so long as it is not for an unlawful purpose. The police have a responsibility to protect the rights of individuals to go to work free from harm or threat to themselves or their families, even if their action is repugnant to their fellows. Police activity to prevent and deal with violence or threatened violence is correct and indeed essential”.

Less attention was given to the next sentence: “So too must the police be seen to understand and to enforce the essential right to picket peacefully” – to which, and similar issues, most of the report was addressed.

The main findings were that police on many occasions had been heavy-handed, provocative and at times out of control during the policing of picket lines and in

protecting working miners generally. The report noted, for example, that "we are disturbed by wide-spread complaints, often corroborated by news reports, of such behaviour as rhythmic drumming of batons on riot shields, personal remarks and insults directed at striking miners and their wives, the waving of pay packets and lines of police applauding as injured pickets are carried away. It appears to us that the new philosophy of training, and particularly the organisation and training of the police support units may not only have been inadequate to prevent these actions but, by emphasising the group ethic, may have encouraged them".⁴²

The report also criticised the Attorney General for an indication to police to stop those travelling to picket lines; the use of "standard" bail conditions on those charged with presumed guilt; the deployment of thousands of police to escort one working miner; and the new tactics used by the police which had, the inquiry team believed, at times exacerbated tense situations.

This tenor of criticism was reflected in frequent comments made by Labour Parliamentary spokesmen, especially by Gerald Kaufman, the Shadow Home Secretary: and it was a constant cause of complaint by miners, many of whom had been shocked by the treatment they received – especially where, as in the vast majority of cases, their previous contact with police had been either neutral or friendly.

Violence

Yet this violence, which quickly became the most obvious (because the most televisual) feature of the dispute was, to a very large extent, a result of the decision not to hold the ballot – coupled with the further necessary element, the determination of the Government to ensure that all miners who wished to work were able to do so. It flared first as Yorkshire pickets, with an already low opinion of their Nottingham-

shire comrades, were held back by police lines to watch in impotence as the Nottinghamshire miners went in, in ever greater numbers, to destroy the "unity" of the strike.

Most impressions of the nature of the violent confrontations which took place during the strike agree that they were localised and even intimate: they were typically confined to pushing and shoving, blows and beatings, stone throwing and truncheon charging, between police and pickets: and to violence visited by striking on working miners – less often, on striking by working miners. The violence often was, or appeared to be, directed against men (and sometimes women) known to the assailants. The depth of feeling expressed against a "scab" in a mining community is not easily understood by an outsider, and is shocking in its intensity and its ability to release inhibitions over behaviour which the perpetrator might at other times see as indefensible.

There is no question that many policemen exceeded their duty and guidelines, and that, caught up in a kind of battle fever, some resorted to brutality and arbitrary arrest. Those who witnessed the beating of their shields by truncheons as a ritual of taunting their opponents were usually reminded of Zulu warriors (inaccurately, since according to the film 'Zulu', on which most people including this writer base their expertise on matters Zulu, the warriors beat their shields as a tribute to bold opponents).

The left of the Labour Party, and left-wingers beyond it, placed most of the "blame" fullsquare on the police. John McIlroy says that "because trade unionists perceived approaching fellow workers to be both right and necessary, strikers would picket and if frustrated would do so in every greater numbers. As a consequence they would be breaking the criminal law and could legitimately be answered by the growing presence and restraint of the police. The workers' reaction, defence of what they saw as their rights, would then become, in the eyes of the law and of

law-abiding citizens, gratuitous and offensive violence".⁴³ McIlroy condemns "Labour movement leaders' pieties about 'the need to condemn all violence'. Such statements are not only intellectually and politically bankrupt but legitimised the role of the state and squandered the opportunity to deepen an understanding of its oppressive nature".

The most obvious problem with this approach is that it blots out the issue of the working miners' rights by transmuting them, simply, into scabs. The decision not to hold a ballot nationally meant that, for many men, the pickets were attempting to deprive them of their rights both as the Prime Minister defined them *and* as the Union rule book defined them: the definition of a scab, in such circumstances, takes on a highly subjective colouration. Some criticism from the left reflected a view of policing which has become more pronounced within the Labour Party in the past decade, and had little in common with the Labour Front Bench approach. A lengthy essay on policing of the strike saw the police as the oppressors of those struggling against the state, and concluded that "There can be little doubt that the British police force is primarily a public order force; its role in crime prevention and criminal apprehension is secondary".⁴⁴ This conclusion would not have been out of tune with the 1984 Labour Party Conference debate on the police: four motions were passed, all of them highly critical of current police practice.

In a lucid comment on Labour's still burgeoning anti-law and order lobby, Martin Kettle writes that the "Revisionists tendency on the left – which had called for realistic strategies against crime and for policing which could find support both among socialist and the general public – is now in danger of being swamped within the Labour Party by the anti-police feeling engendered by the miners' strike. As a result Labour policy is hopelessly one-legged. Many have warned that the long-term legacy for the police in the coalfields will be bitter and unpleasant – and un-

doubtedly it will be so. But there is another casualty too – the emergence of a credible and principled crime and policing policy based, among other things, on the legitimacy of the police function. The policing of the miners' strike has made it all but impossible for such a policy to flower on the left for some time to come".⁴⁵

The controversy over the NCCL Conference's and executive's condemnation of the report for damaging the miners' cause by equating the right to go to work with the right to strike, and the subsequent decision by the members of the inquiry – including Ian Martin, the former Fabian General Secretary – to bring out a truly independent final report – is, as the NCCL executive would say, outside of my terms of reference. It is worth noting, however, that the debate within NCCL posed what was, in the circumstances, a false dichotomy between individual and collective rights. The point at issue was rather one of *competing collective rights*: the collective right of the NEC, and of the NUM Special Delegate Conference, to call a strike; and the collective right of Notts and other areas to abide by the results of their ballots taken under rule 41 and to go to work. The law upheld Notts' reading of the union rulebook: yet it was in Notts that many of the worst incidents of violence took place in the critical first half of the strike.

However, once it is admitted – even if, as in the NCCL report, it was given only a few lines – that working miners had the right to police protection, then the NUM leadership's main strategy is very largely undercut – since it depended on blockading pits, steel plants and power stations. This strategy was increasingly the subject of criticism within the NUM leadership as left-wingers saw its limitations – but by then, no other would work.

The issues raised by the strike and the NCCL report include the well-known bias of the English courts against collective rights. In the specific instance of the miners' strike, the report was correct to argue

that the miners' right to work, in the absence of a national ballot, was absolute. But, suppose a properly conducted national ballot had resulted in a majority for a strike and still large squads of police were mobilised to escort in working miners? A mere appeal to the equivalence of the right to strike and the right to work

does not cover this tactic, which in theory could always break a strike. There is scope for work by Labour on a collective right which safeguards individual liberties in industrial action – one which would depend upon strike ballots being open and available to all.

6. Summary and Conclusions

It is not surprising that a 12 month miners' strike should be a complex business: what *would* be surprising would be any continuing attempt by groups or organisations in the Labour movement to propagate a simple response to it. The response of the Labour movement to the strike, which must be the most important of its themes as far as a group such as the Fabian Society is concerned, has been left to form the conclusion of this pamphlet. One of the factors in that conclusion is the belief that only if we can admit the complex and contradictory range of issues raised by the strike will we be able to properly frame policy in the future.

To review some of those issues raised in the preceding chapters:

- The coal industry was, by most conventional measures, hugely and increasingly unprofitable early in the 1980s because (a) it had kept open very high cost pits and (b) its market was declining rapidly, but its production was not. It was taking remedial action, but slowly: and the kind of managerial restructuring set in train in most companies to deal with recession was not undertaken until the arrival of Ian MacGregor. An extensive MMC report on the NCB, which received Government endorsement, recommended sweeping changes in marketing, production and

managerial techniques: the Plan for Coal, setting ambitious production targets in 1974 for the next decade, was no longer realisable. The price of coal, and the subsidies paid to the NCB, were a burden on British industry and on Government finances. Unlike other industries, the NCB enjoyed a largely protected market, one in which imports of cheaper coal were kept to a relatively low level. However, sales to the CEGB, its dominant customer, had declined because of recession and would tend to decline further as more nuclear capacity came on stream.

- The NUM never accepted "economic" closures in principle, but in practice large-

ly acquiesced throughout the 1950s and especially the 1960s. By the late 1960s, this acquiescence was changing to a more militant posture: two national strikes, and the 1973 oil shocks, put miners at the top of the manual workers' wages league and made coal the subject of planned expansion. By the time closures again came to be seen as essential, in the early 1980s, the NUM's militancy was such that no formal or informal agreement to close pits was possible.

- The accession to power of the left in the NUM signalled by the election of Scargill in 1982 and Heathfield in 1984 changed the rules of the game on the union side. The new leadership ran the union from the left: it attempted to centralise power: and made every effort to stimulate industrial confrontation. The NCB was seen simply as the agent of a reactionary Government: the union severed most of the informal and formal links which had bound the two sides of the industry together, in favour of a hostile rejectionist posture.

- The arrival of MacGregor at the NCB in September, 1983 changed the rules on the Board's side. He reorganised the Board and management structure and, both before and during the strike, made clear his intention to strengthen the hand of management against the power of the union, and to downgrade the role of consultation. Both he and the Government made clear that privatisation of at least part of the industry was in prospect.

- The NUM, the other mining unions and beyond them the Labour movement as a whole – unions and party – were all faced with a series of challenges. The mining unions had the prospect of deep and continuing cuts in jobs, often in areas where unemployment was already high and where jobs for their members and their members' children were simply not available once a given community's pit had closed. The further element added by the Government and MacGregor was the dismantling of the ethos and managerial/

industrial relations practice which was part of the NCB both by statute and custom: and the clearly serious intention to take the pits out of public ownership.

- The strike was stimulated by two incidents both related to the Board's accelerated programme of closures. The NCB and the Government both clearly prepared for a long haul: stocks had been built up, the CEGB had well-developed plans to substitute oil for coal in power stations and the police had in place a national network and local riot control techniques greatly superior to those practiced in 1972 and 1974. There is no evidence however that the strike was "fixed" by either the Government or Board: the commonsense view leans towards the belief that neither of these had any interest in promoting a strike to gain expensively and doubtfully what they hoped to gain by quiet attrition.

- The NUM promoted a national strike without holding a national ballot: from that decision flowed the necessity of widespread and increasingly violent picketing of working miners, a lukewarm response from the trade union movement and increasing success for the NCB's strategy of coaxing miners back to work.

- The negotiations between the two sides were never open to agreement as long as one or the other was unwilling to fudge the issue. The NCB did try fudging for much of the negotiations – the NUM at the end. But both reserved "principled" positions.

- The issue at the heart of negotiations was that of uneconomic pits. While the extreme positions which both sides caricatured the other as taking were not, in practice, held, the central question of management's "right" to close pits it deemed uneconomic could not be resolved.

- The appeals for solidarity and support, only channelled through the TUC in the latter half of the strike, produced large sums of money but very limited solidarity action. There is evidence that many union

officials tried reasonably hard to bring their members out in at least short term support of the miners: but also much evidence that they met great resistance from their members. The steelworkers, the first in line, refused all but token action: so did most power workers, the most crucial to the miners' cause. Much of this was already obvious by the time the TUC met in Congress in September, 1984: yet the Congress resolution pledged "total support" albeit with a few caveats.

Lessons

From these, it is easy to read off "lessons" for the Labour movement. Many trade unionists have been harshly critical of the NUM leadership during and after the strike, on the grounds that it had chosen the wrong time for battle, had created divisions by refusing to ballot, had sought to resolve the tensions thrown up by this by encouraging mass picketing, which became inevitably violent and had then not condemned the violence: had asked for support too late and in the wrong way.

This is of course quite right. In particular, the criticism over the lack of a national ballot, most ably delivered by Jimmy Reid (for which he received much blame, understandably from the miners' leaders and, less understandably, from others in the Labour Party) is to the point. The NUM decision ran square against the grain of developments within unions: even without the 1984 Trade Union Act (though of course aided by it) union members had been more and more attracted to ballots on large-scale decisions; the proponents of ballot democracy, as the leaderships of the electricians and the engineers, were heaped with scorn but were winning points. Even had the main rationale used by the NUM leadership – no man has the right to vote another out of a job – been correct within the context of the NUM rule book (which it was not), the point which was driven remorselessly home was that to deprive miners of the

right to vote on the issue was to be a *guarantee* of job losses, probably bigger and faster than originally intended.

It is worth considering how a *Labour* Government would have coped with a strike organised in the way the miners' strike was.⁴⁶ Would it have upheld the Nottinghamshire miners' "right to work"? Or would it have taken a contrary position to that proposed by the NCCL inquiry, and allowed the Yorkshire pickets to dissuade other miners from working unhindered – even where the Notts and other miners' interpretation of the NUM rule book was upheld in the courts? The issue is fundamental, and cannot be waved away. In the same category is this consideration: Governments must ultimately determine an energy policy, which by its nature cannot simply be a balancing act between pressure groups. The price is a major determinant: often *the* major determinant.

Labour's policy

Labour's present policy on energy favours coal: the full Labour programme of 1982 called for the creation of 4 million tonnes of new capacity a year to "be pursued with the utmost vigour". Coal liquefaction and gassification research would be "stepped up as a matter of urgency", while the fluidised bed combustion system would also be boosted. European levels of support would be provided to the NCB (the subsidies per tonne are much higher), thus enabling costs to industry to fall. The shorter programme produced for the 1983 Election pledged Labour to "give priority to the coal industry and the use of coal as a fuel. We will seek to re-establish the tripartite machinery set up under Labour and establish a new Plan for Coal. We will also replace old plant with coal fired stations".

The Party programme is cool on, but not wholly against, nuclear stations. The 1983 programme says that Labour would "stop Sizewell and scrap the Tory PWR

programme. The need for a continued nuclear programme based on the British AGR will be reassessed when we come to office." Labour, then, *did* give coal pride of place: but then, so did the Tory Government.

The two members of the Labour Party Parliamentary leadership who bore the brunt of the political effects of the miners' strike were Neil Kinnock, the Party Leader and Stan Orme, the Party's Energy spokesman. The latter, unusually, won praise from almost every quarter for his patience and determination in attempting to negotiate what ultimately proved to be un-negotiable. But it was on Kinnock that the greatest pressure fell, as the polls displayed a continuing and – for a long time – worsening effect of the strike on Labour's standing.

Kinnock, a miner's son who must have felt the agonies of the strike in his gut, made some 70 speeches putting the case for coal: Orme made at least as many. One of Kinnock's best reported (most were not reported) was that given to a Labour Party rally in Stoke on November 30, 1984, which summed up much of his case.

The rally was held in part in response to an invitation to him to appear at one of the NUM rallies which had been conducted earlier in that month: he had refused, objecting to being "bounced" into it by Scargill. On the day of the November 30 Rally, a taxi driver taking a South Wales miner to work had been killed: and Kinnock began his speech by acknowledging that "we meet here under the shadow of an atrocity".

The core of his case was for an expanding coal industry in an expanding economy: for a reliance on a fuel which would last 20 times longer than oil and was under British control; for more investment, especially in the peripheral areas which had been starved relative to the Midlands fields; for the maintenance of mining jobs at a time when high unemployment meant the only alternative was the dole. He continued:

"This shambles is not the price for

democracy or anything so worthwhile. It is the price of the Prime Minister's incompetence and bigotry. It is the bill that Britain has to meet for having a Government that sustains a slump which pushes down coal demand, denies alternative jobs to miners and many others and spends massive amounts on the unemployment of labour and capital instead of putting that money and the people and machines to work.

"The dispute is rooted in that reality. It does not originate in any political motives. It is not fuelled by any ambition to harm democracy in this country. British democracy is strong. Its value and institutions have never been threatened from below by any social mood, industrial dispute or political movement, for it has always been the subject of democracy that has advanced liberty and tried to sustain that achievement.

"That democracy has however from time to time been threatened from above just as its progress was impeded from above."

Dilemmas

It is a powerful case, compellingly argued. It leaves two major problems.

Firstly, the commitment to coal made in the Party programme and in Kinnock's speech, would be subject to enormous strain in Government. No plan for production could be sustained independent of price: indeed the goal of securing an "efficient" industry would be unrealisable if it were.

In one important sense, the Party proposes *shrinking* the market for coal, through the allocation of £1 billion to a four year programme of energy conservation to achieve "real saving" (1982 programme). The 1983 election programme pledges that the Party "will begin a massive conservation programme, led by insulation for council housing, and giving incentives to industry on agreed plans to save energy. The programme will be managed by a new energy conservation agency".

Coal demand, as we have seen, was under pressure not just from a recession, but from growing nuclear capacity – including nuclear capacity ordered by the last Labour Government. As John Cheshire argued in a Fabian briefing:

“Given the recent changes in the energy outlook summarised earlier, it is difficult to maintain without revision the coal demand projections of the 1974 Plan for Coal. A new Plan for Coal is thus an urgent priority. The principles of the earlier Plan should be upheld and investment must be maintained at a high level, even though output projections need to be revised.

“In this context, it is difficult to see how any further pit closures can be avoided in an extractive industry such as coal. Closures need to be considered in the light of both physical exhaustion and economic criteria. This does not imply that all pits currently recording losses should close because:

(i) in an uncertain world, security of supply considerations will in the future (as the events of 1973/4 and 1975 made clear) justify a large British coal industry;

(ii) whilst world coal prices are currently depressed, they may not remain so in future – making coal imports expensive in sterling terms should the Pound depreciate further;

(iii) even relatively small amounts of investment in existing pits can lead to dramatic productivity gains and cost reduction; and

(iv) in areas of high unemployment, the national resource costs of additional job losses (such as foregone income tax revenue, increased social security payments, rent and rate rebates, etc) resulting from closures may exceed the NCB’s accounting losses”.⁴⁷

It is beyond question that a future Labour Government could not and would not be indifferent to the fate of miners made redundant – even allowing for the relatively high rates of severance paid to

them, and the level of pension they receive. The lame efforts made belatedly by the Government and the Board towards the end of the strike to establish industries in mining areas to offer replacement jobs would need considerable strengthening and far greater resources than the £5 million committed to it. But the logic of the industry’s technology, geology and its economics appear to dictate a concentration, in the main, on the Midlands and Yorkshire fields, and a rundown (how rapid or gradual is a matter of political choice) in the peripheral areas. While unemployment remains at present levels, the case against a rapid closure programme on economic as well as human grounds is strong and would be compelling for a Labour Government. But it is not a case that can be made in perpetuity and in principle. The loss to working class – indeed to national – politics and culture from the shrinking of the numerical base of such groups as the South Wales, Scottish, Northumberland and Durham and other miners would be – already has been – great: but miners’ communities cannot be preserved in state-funded aspic because of their culture.

Secondly, Kinnock was, in that section of his speech quoted above, seeking to “rehabilitate” the strike into the arena of a simple – if massive – industrial dispute. But it was rather the kind of strike he wished to be, or would himself have organised (had he taken a different route, to become NUM President) than a description of the real strike. The real strike had a politically revolutionary dimension intertwined and indissoluble from its quite real industrial objectives.

The proof of that is not in the “violence”: US mineworkers were accustomed to shoot it out with local marshalls during their strikes, and the occupant of the White House suffered no political worries. Nor is it because very many of the NUM’s supporters on the far left, in and out of the Labour Party, saw it as being revolutionary: they commonly see industrial action as at least an antechamber to

general strike and revolution.

The political challenge

It is because the NUM leadership had the intention, articulated in advance by, above all others, the President, of posing a challenge to the Government of the kind it *could* only interpret as a political one; and because the union was militant enough, politically aware enough and potentially powerful enough to back up the rhetoric and strategy with action. The leadership had a vision – again, most powerfully expressed by Scargill – of a society in which market criteria no longer applied, production was greatly expanded, and large-scale benefits were available to the working class in general and the miners in particular. It was the old Communist ideal: the difference they had with other trade union leaders who were Marxists or Communists was that they were not prepared to tolerate a state of affairs in their industry which was different from the ideal – and if society had to be revolutionised to accommodate that change, so be it. It was magnificently uncompromising, and it was the philosophical envelope which enfolded the strike.

Scargill gave many interviews before the strike in which he made his position plain: it was a position which exposed him to close attention by Government as well as the NCB, and brought him little popularity from the elder statesmen of the trade union movement. But it was and remains refreshing for its directness. The most famous exposition of his views – treated as a source of demonology by his right-wing critics during the strike – was an interview in *New Left Review* in 1975. In response to a question “Shouldn’t the left unions fight for a fuller, rounded-out political programme to meet the crisis as it affects the working class in every aspect of life?” the then Yorkshire President responded: “I would argue, as I’ve argued with many people inside the left movement, that the biggest mistake we could

make is that of suggesting that a wage battle is not a political battle. Of course it is. The problem is that once we start to divorce wages from politics, then we lose our perspectives, we begin to suggest that the miners, that the trade unions have lost their sense of direction, that they are no longer projecting the real issues of the day which are nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange. And not just nationalisation, but common ownership, real common ownership. But you see you will not get real common ownership of the means of production, you will not get real control of the society in which we live, unless you commit and convince the working class of *the need to struggle*. You will not convince the working class of the need to struggle unless you show them by example, as at Saltley, that struggle is the result of our legitimate claims, and that the system will continue to affect them. Even if you get a wages increase the problem will still be there tomorrow. But struggles convince workers of the need for real control over society”.⁴⁸

A miners’ strike could have worked: it had a moral basis and – in concert with other unions – the miners had industrial strength. But where the NUM constituted itself as a revolutionary vanguard it was bound to fail: and fail first and most obviously within its own ranks. It could have allowed the Labour Party to articulate a case for all workers based on the particular position of the miners faced with redundancies as a general symbol for the waste of unemployment and the inexorability of industrial decline. The case could have been made not just for coal but for employment, social justice and a revolution in political perspectives which had narrowed, on the side of the Government, to a steely-eyed faith in tight money and a loose labour market. But where the NUM was making only a case based on its particular perspective – both industrial and political – and when even that was obscured by picketing aimed at disciplining its own dissidents, no further argu-

ment was possible or indeed was heard.

The movement's response

The Labour movement as a whole, with a few exceptions only, did not adequately differentiate itself from the miners' strategy – at least in part because it owed the Thatcher Government less than nothing, and did not wish to be seen to be doing it any favours. But in taking this position, it badly let down the miners and betrayed itself. The prominent exceptions to this were Kinnock in his speeches deploring violence, especially those at the TUC Congress and at Stoke: though, as we have seen, his programme for coal and analysis of the strike blurred over much; Norman Willis, the TUC General Secretary, especially in his famous speech at Aberavon; and much more overtly, even brutally – because they were less constrained – Eric Hammond the Electricians' General Secretary and John Lyons the Engineering Managers' General Secretary.

Willis' speech at Aberavon in November, 1984 was similar to Kinnock's: it was a rehabilitation of the strike into the conventional industrial relations arena: "anyone who genuinely cares about the future of the mining industry – and the Government and the NCB have repeatedly said that they do – knows that there must be a genuine negotiation and a genuine agreement, and the sooner the better". The passages in the speech for which he was booed – the booing drowned his delivery, and was accompanied by a hangman's noose dangled from the catwalk above the speaker's platform – were those against violence: "such acts if they are done by miners are alien to our common trade union tradition not just because they are counter-productive but because they are wrong"; and on the great difficulty he was having in mustering support: "the TUC is not an army and I'm not a field marshall. When I see the hardship, when I see the sacrifice, I wish I could guarantee you all

the support you need. But I don't kid trade unionists and I'll never mislead the miners".

Hammond and Lyons were more forthright: together with Bill Sirs of the Steelworkers – who had tried desperately not to be put in a position where he had to deliver, or say he could not deliver – they made clear to the 1984 TUC Congress that support from the power industry would not be forthcoming: the members would not support. In a speech to the Labour Party Conference a month later, Hammond slammed the Party Executive statement of unqualified support for the miners for making "no attempt to understand why the refusal to ballot the membership has split the NUM: no call for the TUC's guide for the conduct of disputes to be observed; and most shamefully, no demand for the violence and the hooliganism on the picket lines to be stopped".

All of these speeches drew storms of abuse from many in the Labour movement while they were being given and after. Yet they were no more than the expression of a belief in united, democratically-approved industrial action for industrial ends – a belief which the Labour Party could hardly jettison without transforming itself into a revolutionary social group. To have argued the case for that transformation – as some did – was at least honest: but the Labour Party, while it remains in the arena of democratic politics can have no truck with that and must distinguish itself sharply from it.

That is why it was incumbent on Labour Party leaders to take issue with the NUM leadership's rhetoric from an early stage. It is not the NUM leaders' "fault" that they are serious about the class struggle, and about their tactics for waging it: they have made their position clear, honest and unambiguous. It is the responsibility of those who do not believe in that strategy, who do not believe, as Murray put it, that "the Trade Union movement is some sort of alternative government, Brother Bonny Prince Charlie waiting to be summoned back from exile", to articulate the differ-

ence, even where the Government is hostile and the temptation is to blur these differences in the name of unity. The revolutionary road to power is as sharply to be distinguished from the democratic socialist route as the latter is from the right: if it is not, most people in a democracy at most times will prefer the right on constitutional grounds alone.

The NUM strike of 1984/85 was the apotheosis of political unionism, or "vanguardism"; Scargill was the man who had to push it to these limits. It showed that, in the Labour as in any other movement, only *parties* can articulate a politics which may be seen by the citizens of a democracy as worthy of support: a union or group of unions cannot. It demonstrated graphically how little the Labour Party can afford to be merely the sum of its pressure groups – even a group as honoured and powerful as the NUM. As Kinnock's speech showed – albeit by a rhetorical sleight of hand – the Labour Party leadership never shared their NUM comrades' political perspective – nor could they, if they were to come to power in an advanced democracy.

The way forward

For the NUM, the future is bad: some of that is its leadership's making, more of it is a combination of Government action and of recession. It will get nowhere by pursuing variations on the policies and positions which have guided it over the past three years. Yet it had achieved, under the Plan for Coal, a high point in consultative procedures and in (at least negative) power. It still has (or had, perhaps) an industry to some extent insulated against the managerial reform which elsewhere has reduced unions to occasional bargainers.

The only way to build on that position would have been – and may still be – to re-enter the consultative forums and to grapple with the real problems of the industry which will not be conjured away by industrial action. Clearly, before MacGregor came – and even perhaps after – a

deal was offered which, while inviting redundancies, would have been open to much creative bargaining by a union which held its strength in reserve. Industrial democracy – the participation of the union in more and more of the Board's decisions, that thread of radicalism which has never really been built on – would have required responsible and tough decisions, but would have brought some stability, perhaps expanding markets, certainly a slower rate of loss than is now taking place.

The perspective is there, within the NUM's present leadership. Peter Heathfield said, at the debate on workers' control in Harrogate in December, 1977:

"What steps can we take? An extension of collective bargaining is one answer or part of the answer: both at pit and area level, the management could be moved on safety, or manning.

"But that still doesn't let us in on the decisions coming from high up which determine for instance pit management's approach to hiring and firing, planning, purchasing and stores.

"How can it weaken us to learn how those decisions are taken?

"How can we lose our strength by increasing our knowledge?

"It seems to be that our NEC, with respect, has itself caught in a bit of a muddle.

"Suppose that, at pit and panel level, certain management decisions were subject to agreement with NUM. Suppose we had the right of veto over managerial appointments, over orders for equipment, over sub-contracts, over safety tests of new underground machinery. After all, it's our lives that are at stake.

"What's the point in fighting for proper wages, the so-called fruits of our labour, if we're in no condition to benefit from them?

"Ours is an industry which is ready for nationalisation in our terms. It's nationalised; we're employed by a single firm, producing a single product: and a single trade

union – the NUM – covers those most responsible for getting the product out.

“Many of us are well aware of the potential here. Our National President, Joe Gormley, has expressed the opinion that workers’ control is highly desirable – with at least 51% control – as an ideal.

“... Many of us feel that miners have the ability and the capacity to play a major role in the running of our industry. It is not our intention to prop up capitalism but rather to formulate and fashion new systems of management that will enable the socialist cause to advance.

“Democracy at all levels is a permanent struggle, an expanding awareness. Our failure to advance the cause of such awareness will inevitably lead to the decline of democracy”.⁴⁹

That last sentence was particularly prescient. The evacuation of the NUM from positions of joint control of the industry meant that management had to fill the vacuum: the failure of the industrial putsch has legitimised the position. Heathfield’s case, put during the Labour Government’s tenure of office when coal demand was high, would find few takers in the present-day Board. But it offers a future Labour Government an idea to explore, and offers miners a way out of a cycle of boom and bust in which their futures are planned without their participation. That participation would not cause reality to soften, but it would make it more manageable by those who often feel themselves its victims.

We should not end, however, on any note of false optimism. The ending of the strike has opened up to the Board and the Government new and large possibilities. First, of course, the closure, with little anticipated resistance, of many of those

pits identified as loss-makers. Second, the management at every level has been able to reassert controls and practices which had been subject to effective joint control for – in some cases – decades. Third, the coal industry has seen its market position worsen during the strike, and consumers of NCB coal, having established alternative sources of supply during the strike, will be concerned to keep them open in many cases – especially where they offer a price or quality edge on the home-produced variety.

Finally, privatisation is now being discussed as an active possibility. The large energy companies, many of which have headquarters in the UK, have never seriously considered private investment in UK coal on any large scale – till now. It is no longer fanciful to assume that, over the short and medium term future, these companies will probe the profitable opportunities – in open cast, already operated by private companies under NCB control, in the small private mines sector – and seek to delicately insert themselves into the industry. Bit by bit, private could replace state capital.

That would represent an enormous achievement for the present Government (though it is still attended by great risks). It would mean that the centrepiece of Labour’s post-war nationalisation programme, the “jewel in the crown” thought to be untouchable, would be broken up and sold to a multitude of different interests. A powerful NUM, which had bent with the hostile wind, could have kept such a perspective in the realm of fantasy indefinitely: a union which has allowed itself to be broken may not have that ability.

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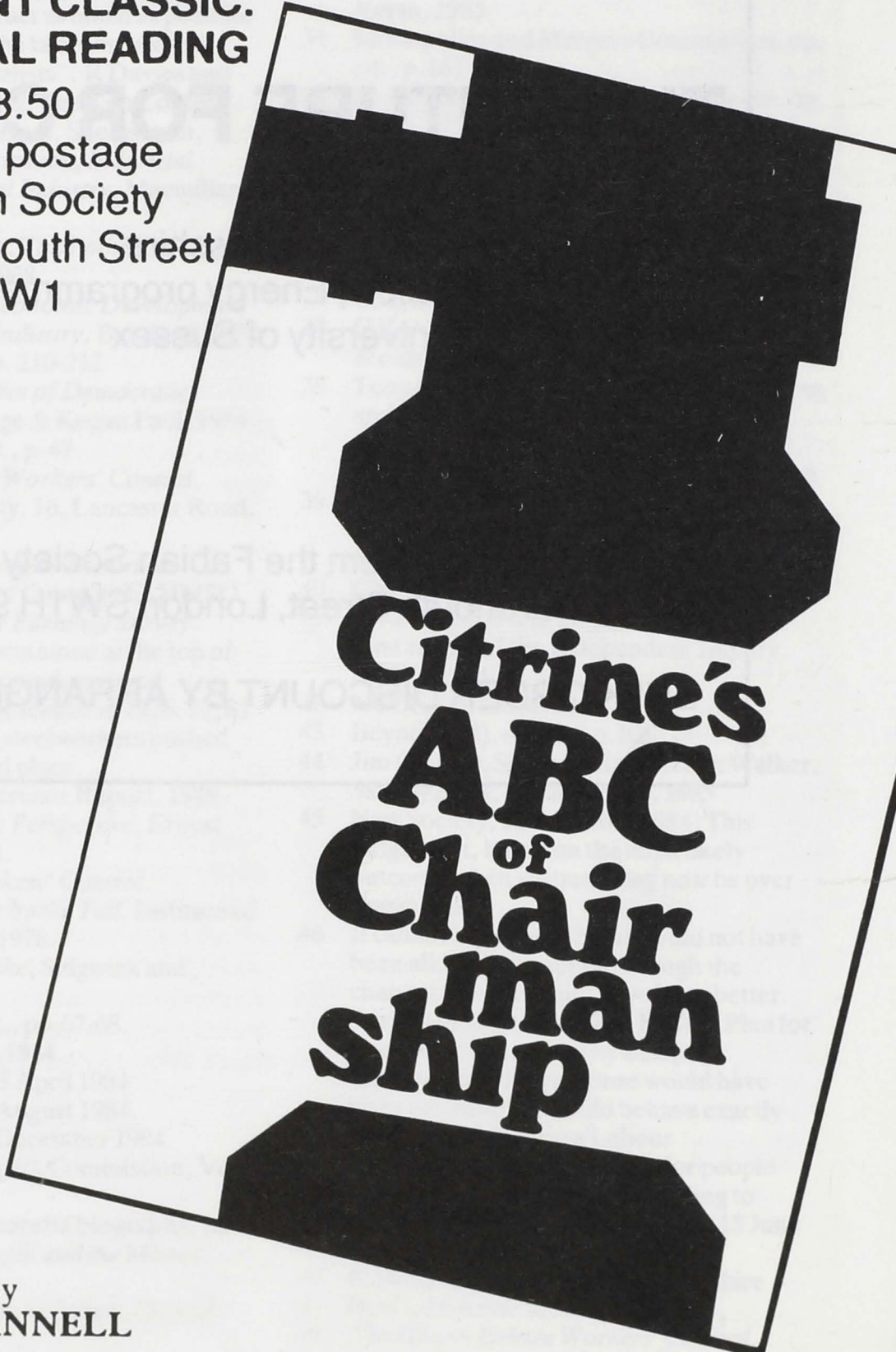
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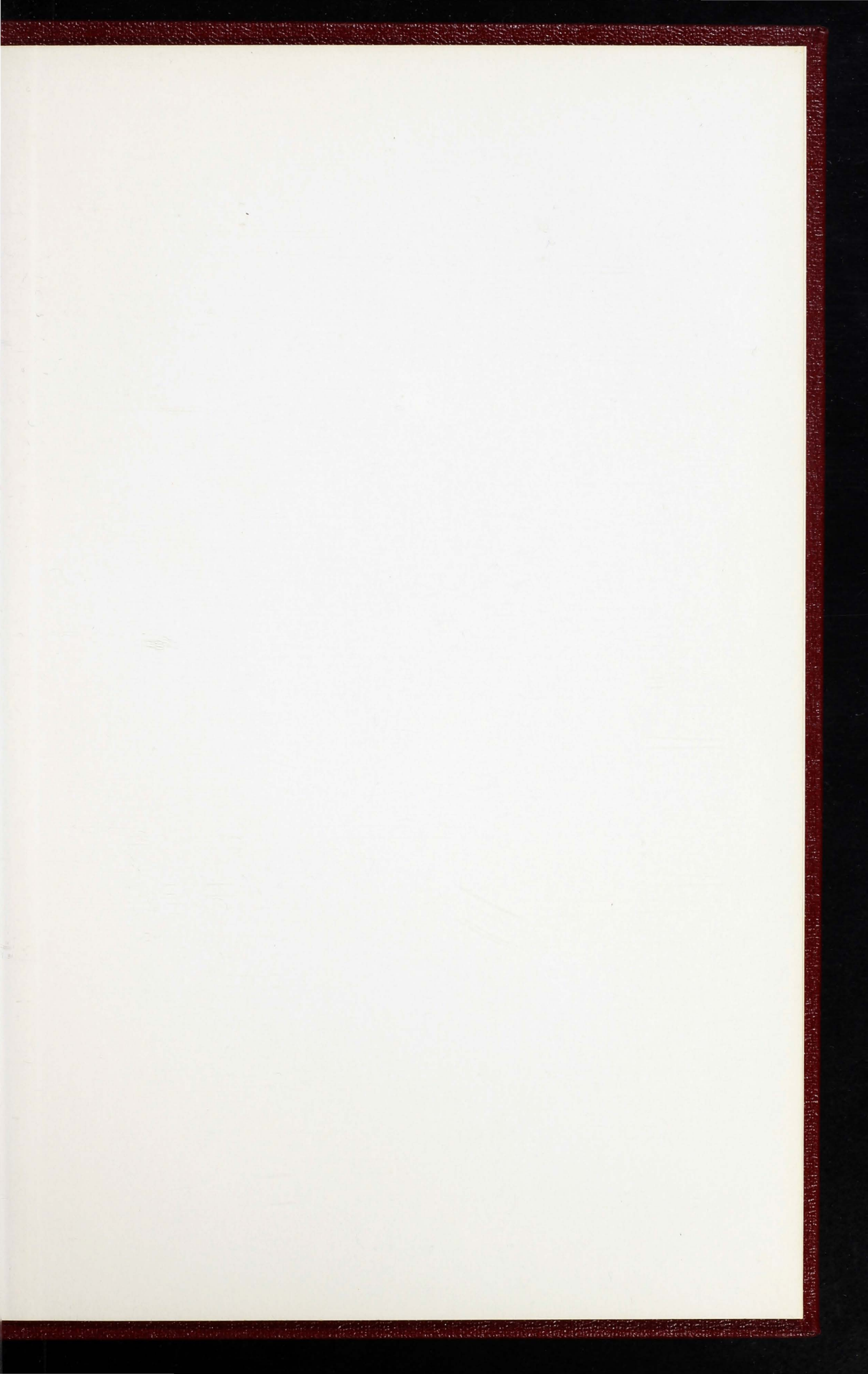
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