

AS WE SEE IT

INDUSTRY



Myths and the miners

With each month that passes, the scale of the defeat of the miners' strike is becoming clearer. In this article Andy Brown explores the possibility that the left was responsible for its own defeat.

Photographs by John Sturrock and Laurie Sparham.

BY NOW most people on the left will be sick and tired of reading articles on 'The lessons of the miners' strike' whose main conclusion seems to be that the strike failed merely because it lacked the correct leadership. It is way past time that the left took a long hard look at itself, and asked whether its own mistrust of ordinary people and its own macho myths about the strength of industrial unions did not

contribute significantly to the defeat; asked, moreover, whether the bulk of the left has not spent the period since the strike ended trying very hard to avoid facing reality.

Much of the left has contented itself with tirades against Margaret Thatcher, the police, the press, and the TUC, which give the impression that these people have suddenly become especially evil.

But there is little point in blaming Thatcher for being a Tory, the police for being aggressive, the press for being propagandist, the TUC for trying to get workers to agree to things they don't really want, and still less the Labour Party for being more interested in the opinion polls than in the victory for the strikers. All these bodies have always acted in this way, and indeed the Labour Party in particular had a great deal to gain by the strike's defeat (no stroppy unions staging 'winters of discontent' next time they get in). Nevertheless, despite the worst efforts of those who openly oppose them and those who are supposed to be on their side, strikes are often succesful in achieving their objectives.

In my view this strike was defeated not because the

authorities were especially efficient, but rather because the whole approach of the left to the strike played into the government's hands.

Organised disaster

The first major mistake was largely one of tactics. The government wanted this strike, planned for it and provoked it - was it a good idea to give them what they wanted?

If someone wants to close down an industry, then strike action alone is most unlikely to prevent them. After all, striking is stopping work, which is what they want you to agree to do in the first place. Tactics which may work against the threatened closure of an industry are not easy to work out. However, in the appropriate circumstances they



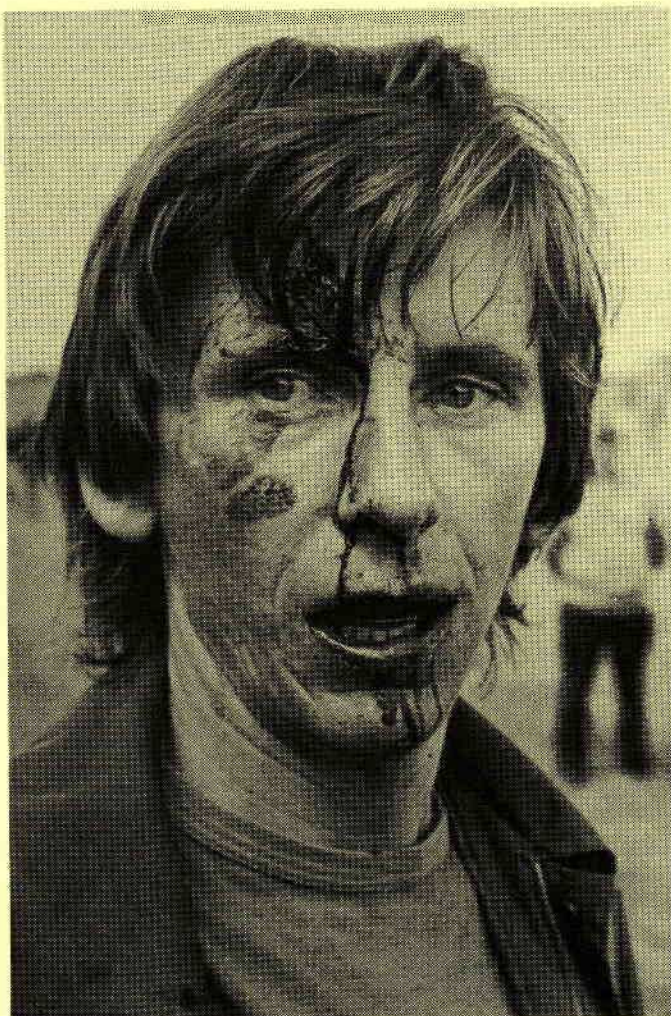
Unstoppable force meets immovable object - Eggborough pickets, April 1984. Previous page: graffiti at Easington, Durham, September 1984.

might include: firstly occupations; secondly the closure of other industries through solidarity action; and thirdly civil disruption, such as preventing cities from working by regularly blocking traffic, raising the level of violence to such a pitch that the government decides that it is safer to 'compromise', or by picketing and making life difficult for outside institutions such as newspapers and the courts, preventing the movement of trade supplies, if necessary by intimidating lorry or coach firms.

On several occasions strikers began to act along these lines (e.g. the blocking of motorways by strikers' cars which took place early on in the strike), but they were not encouraged to put their energy and initiative into such actions, and instead were mobilised for a series of set-piece battles with the police which had predictable outcomes.

It is no good arranging to turn up at a specified time and place for a mass confrontation against well-equipped police backed by the courts. Such rituals usually lead to arrests, beatings and imprisonment. For an action to be effective it usually needs to come as a surprise to the authorities, and to be difficult to forestall. The best way to achieve this is for the actions to be organised locally by word of mouth and the targets constantly changed.

The traditional left still believes in strong centralised leadership and in organising in a disciplined way. This strike should have taught a lot of people that such methods aren't practical. For example, all the clever financial manouevres of the NUM leadership did nothing to make its funds available to help its members - instead the money was seized by the courts. Miners were forced to organise financially themselves, and raised far more money as well as winning support



A foot soldier in the battle - one victim of a police truncheon attack at the Orgreave works, June 1984.

from many more ordinary members of the public; facts which came as no surprise to libertarians, who have always argued that the self-activity of people is more central and effective than central direction. So far there is precious little evidence that this particular 'lesson' has been absorbed by those people who most need to learn it.

Systematic mistrust

The second mistake is that throughout the strike the left has shown a mistrust of ordinary people, and this has been one of the key causes of the strike's defeat.

There was no justification in union tradition, tactical gain or

common sense, in refusing to ballot the NUM. The only reason for the refusal to do so was president Arthur Scargill's fear that he would lose. He was almost certainly wrong. A ballot two or three weeks into the strike would very probably have been successful, and would thus have brought out enough Notts miners to tip the balance significantly. It would also have helped campaigns

Miners' hardship fund

Please send a donations to the Miners' Families Appeal, c/o 90 Fawe Park Road, London SW15. Cheques should be made payable to the appeal. The fund is being organised and distributed by Women Against Pit Closures.

for solidarity action among other workers (e.g. dockers) which failed by so narrow a margin. To some extent the reason these solidarity actions failed to get off the ground was because union leaders tried to manipulate workers into coming out rather than trying honest persuasion and a clear fair decision one way or the other.

If, on the other hand, the ballot had been unsuccessful, then it would have been clear from an early stage that the strike would not succeed and a lot of brave people would not have had to suffer as much and as long as they did. I have no desire to fetishise the formalities of constitutions, but for any strike to have a chance of success it must have the freely given support of the overwhelming majority of workers involved.

Most of the left seems frightened and suspicious of democracy, and this leaves it wide open to attack. The way to respond to the so-called 'moderate' campaigns for democracy in the unions is not to resist them, but instead to embrace them and take them further than their proposers intend. Truly

democratic organisations are far more of a threat to governments.

It may serve left-wingers' careers to get themselves appointed to positions of union power via manipulation, but it does no good at all if this means that the 'leadership' cannot carry its members with it. It is better to lose honestly than to win by devious means, and it prevents the government passing itself off as the defender of democracy. Workers do not like being conned or taken for mugs. The left has grown so used to the smug idea that it has a superior consciousness to the masses and therefore has a right to manipulate them in their own interests that it cannot see how damaging this has been in a real struggle.

Systematic mythology

Another serious illusion present on the left is that 'real' workers such as the miners are particularly powerful and should therefore be used as the shock troops in our battles.

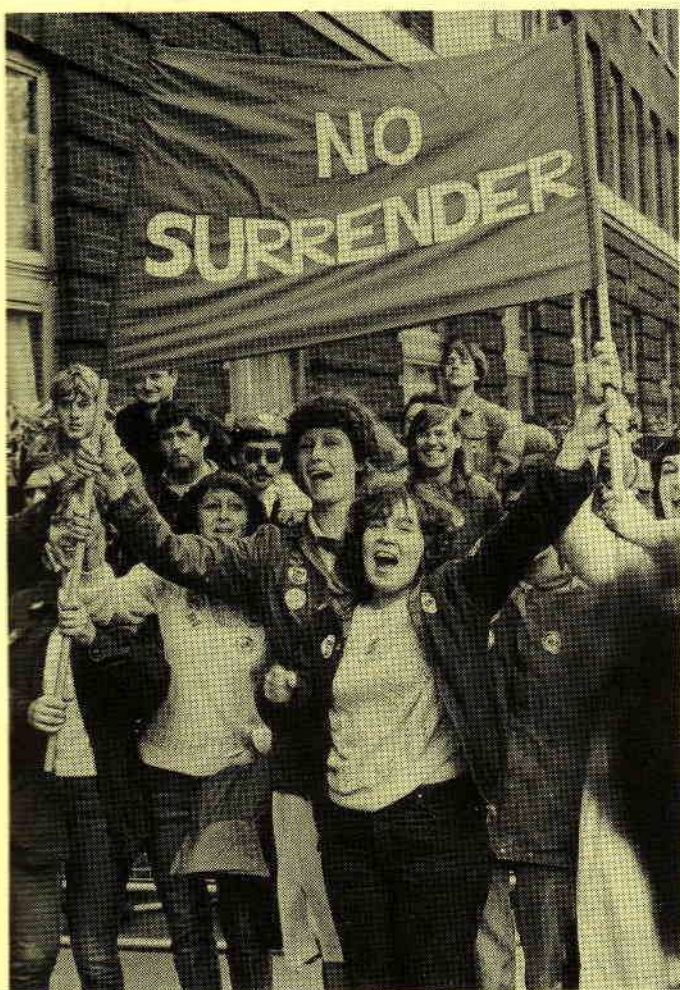
This idea is repulsive on a number of levels. First, there is the idea that other workers should do our fighting for us, while we cheer from the sidelines feeling comfortable because the bulk of us are not 'typical proletarians' (i.e. male unskilled manual workers) and therefore can't be expected to do much more than talk.

Next, there is the idea that struggles of manual labourers are somehow more important than struggles of women, or claimants, or white-collar workers, or blacks.

Finally, such thinking leaves us in a very defeatist mood now that the strike is over. If our best troops have been defeated what hope is there for the rest of us?

The truth is that the defeat of the NUM is a very serious blow to all groups on the left, but not a

terminal one. There are other groups of workers whose power is virtually untouched, and many of these groups have barely begun to tap their potential power. For instance, despite a very conservative ideology the Civil Service Union caused the government to lose millions of pounds during its last strike without actually causing its members that much hardship, and individual actions by civil servants have regularly exposed the government in the last year. Equally, the strength of the women's movement has probably increased as a result of this strike, and the possibility is beginning to emerge that work might cease to be the focus for the most visible manifestations of political struggle.



New forces in an old struggle – miners' wives demonstrating in London during talks between the NUM and NCB, May 1984.

Such theorising does not, unfortunately, help the miners any, and there is no getting away from the seriousness of the position for many of them in the aftermath of the strike.

Repairing the damage

Two images from recent demonstrations brought this home to me particularly clearly. On one, three children who might have been ten or eleven were walking around with collecting tins. Each had a notice around her neck. One such notice read "Dad jailed for 2½ years - please give generously".

On a different demonstration, the day after the return to work, I heard a miner telling someone why he wasn't back at work. He'd been sacked that morning and had been forced to sell his TV set in order to survive. "Still," he said, "I can always go home and watch the radio - they haven't taken that yet."

People like this need all the help we can muster. All too often the left cheers on a group of workers and then forgets them the second the strike is over, moving on to support the next cause of the week. We ought not to let this happen this time. Please send any money you can spare to the address published on the facing page and so help to alleviate at least the worst of their problems.

The way the ordinary strikers have behaved in this strike has been astonishing, as has been the enthusiasm of the women who fought alongside them. After a year of poverty none of us can dispute their courage and almost no-one is seriously blaming them for going back, not even those who cracked that two or three weeks before the general return.

Nevertheless, despite all this courage the government has gained from the dispute a sizable victory. If this victory is not to be repeated then it is way past

time we took careful note of the one true lesson of this dispute.

Most of the things which were organised by ordinary people and by miners and their families worked very well. Almost all the

clever manipulations of the leadership worked very badly. You can draw your own conclusions about who has the higher level of consciousness!

ANDY BROWN

EDITORIAL

About Solidarity

'Solidarity Journal' has come of age. John Cobbett comments on its current strengths and weaknesses.

IT IS NOW ROUGHLY two years since we re-launched Solidarity's magazine. In those two years we have achieved some successes. Our most important step forward has been the creation of a (relatively) stable editorial group which should, in future, guarantee the production of the magazine at fairly regular three-month intervals. But even after this two-year, seven-issue revival we still lack other people's contributions and participation.

At present Solidarity is produced by a small group of people, all living in London, all working, and all with other political commitments. Nearly all the material in the last six issues has been written by this group, and therefore has been largely based upon our experiences in London. Inevitably the scope of our articles has been at once too general and too narrow: too general, because most have taken the form of an abstract generalised commentary on events rather than a fully researched analysis; too narrow, because our material has too often been drawn solely from our personal experiences. We have also failed to publish enough material on feminist, industrial, ecological and cultural issues.

We feel that these weaknesses can be overcome through more participation in Solidarity from our readers. Possibly we should arrange a readers' conference to discuss the future of Solidarity both as a magazine and as an active political force. If any reader would be interested in such a conference, please let us know. Certainly we appeal to readers to send in articles, detailed critical responses, and letters, which will open new areas of discussion or develop debates which past articles have initiated. We especially need more material dealing with current struggles and events.

We are not afraid to acknowledge differences and disagreements within our ranks, mistakes we may have made or points we have overlooked. We are no more perfect than anyone else, and we do not have a monopoly of the truth. We would appreciate 'feedback' - letters (not necessarily intended for publication), commenting upon our material and presentation. And of course, as always, subscriptions and contributions to funds are welcome. Back copies of recent issues of Solidarity are still available. Finally a new Solidarity pamphlet on radicals and revolutionaries in the English Civil War is due out by mid-summer.