

Scargill addresses Belfast meeting

Arthur Scargill, who will be 72 in January 2010, certainly hasn't lost any of his fire as a public speaker. In a, regrettably, poorly publicised meeting at the Unite office on the Antrim Road on Friday 30th of October, Scargill recounted the miners strike of 84-85 with humour and emotion.

"We were right to stand and fight!"

he declared as he told the story of a dispute that brought down the full weight of a state determined to crush the miners and the NUM.

This was indeed a strike that was confronted with the full force of the state, the police, and soldiers dressed as police, were used to crush the miners. Surveillance, dirty tricks, media misrepresentation and betrayal marked the increasingly bitter struggle of the miners against Thatcher's government.

"I am a fighter against capitalism. I am a socialist. If that makes me an enemy of the state, I take that as a compliment" proclaimed Scargill.

Throughout the tale Scargill added humour, impersonating (sometimes well, sometimes not so well) many of the people he had dealings with during the strike. He told how, years after the Battle of Orgreave, he had returned to the town as the coking plant was being closed down. He got on the phone to the local police to ask them to get down there. Relating how the constable on the other end of the phone asked what it had to do with

the police Scargill recounted "Well it was a lot to do with you in 1984 when we tried to shut it down temporarily". Another example of how it is one law for them and another for us Arthur told us.

He urged those present, mostly trade union bureaucrats, to learn the lessons of the miners strike and apply them to their struggles today. Unfortunately Scargill still mistakes nationalisation of industry for socialism.

Scargill also dealt with some more controversial issues and attacked modern day environmentalists for picking the wrong target, criticising what he regards as de facto support for nuclear power. He asserted that coal can be produced in an environmentally friendly manner and pointed out that Britain has a 1,000 year supply of coal beneath its soil.

Asked if he would make any changes to what he did during the strike he said no, but warned that others should learn lessons of solidarity and support. He pointed out the betrayal of some in a struggle that was also a tale of treachery. However the cost of collaboration was the closure, in the wake of the strike, of 31 of the 32 pits 'represented' by the scab union the UDM.

If we are to apply the lessons of the miners strike we must acknowledge that workers taking industrial action today are going into their disputes from a weaker position than the miners.

Jason

A Year of our Lives



Arthur Scargill facing up to police with riot shields, backed up by dogs and horses

Dave Douglass, anarcho-syndicalist, NUM member and participant in the great miners strike looks back twenty years on. Written in 2005, originally for Black Flag, despite his uncritical and, we believe, misguided, comments in relation to the IRA the article is an illuminating account of the strike, the reasons behind it, the Tories' and Labour's attacks on the working class and finally how the strike was lost:

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the 1984/85 miners strike, arguably the most important working class struggle of the twentieth century. Some have seen the miners strike of 1926 and the subsequent general strike as a greater potential revolutionary movement. I wouldn't argue with that, for a brief period the state and the misleaders of the trade union movement held their breath, while the tanks were mobilised on the streets and the military took up position while workers followed the call for class solidarity. But the moment was short lived, in its revolutionary potential anyway, for the miners it was to last 9 bitter, betrayal and starvation filled months.

The 84/85 movement, however, posed a far greater physical challenge to the guardians of law and order, in terms of confrontation and mass movement of workers taking to the streets to challenge control by the state. In terms of rank and file control (at least initially) and involvement of the whole community, the offensive by the women of the coalfields and sometimes the children, establishment of miners support groups across industry and the labour movement, the world wide mobilisation of solidarity support and sometimes action, 84 was far more an actual *movement*, politicising vast numbers of people, both within and without the pit communities. (Of course 26 had its moments, derailing the Flying Scotsman, was unmatched by anything we pulled off in 84 for example).

The pit communities were 'closed' communities in the sense that, mining isn't a trade you just come to out of the blue. It is a profession passed on father to

son, in many cases for generations (women and little girls had worked in some coalfields, but by the 1840s were prevented by legislation from underground labour, pit brow women continued into the 1960s). It carries with it, its own culture, its own view of history and how that has impacted upon the mining communities. When miners spoke on public platforms during the strike, of 'the struggle of our fathers and grandfathers' most academics assumed they were talking figuratively, but they weren't, they were talking actually, about the impact and perceptions of struggles which had gone before. The effect of this was to ensure mining communities were already highly politicised, with deep class perspectives and socialist traditions. It had been scarcely ten years earlier the Edward Heath government broke its back on the miners strike, and twelve years since they had wrecked his incomes policy. So the miners and their families entered this struggle well aware of the scale of the challenge being mounted. Although some had taken some convincing at first, by March 1984 few were unaware that Thatcher was moving in to smash the social power of the miners by breaking their union in an all or nothing confrontation.

Almost universally the 'left' has cited the decentralised nature of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) as a weakness. This is a strange view indeed, without the semi-autonomy of the miners areas, the strike in the form it was launched could never have happened. Behind the view is a notion that some how the miners could simply be ordered out on strike by a national leadership running a national union. They would never have worn that, which is in part why the old Area structure and strong branch autonomies remained.

Ever since Margaret Thatcher was elected it was clear her whole strategy at home would depend on being able to heavily defeat the unions. Most had responded to this perspective by staying out of sight and hoping she wouldn't notice them, with the miners she and her

