

party strategists had long planned to take them on as a prelude to her whole social and economic programme; the miners had to be fought and defeated (most will perhaps be aware of the Myron Plan and Ridley Commission, strategies drawn up following the defeat of Heath to take on and defeat the miners in the future, using scab drivers, mass policing, an anti-strike movement and support for a nuclear alternative). A steady game of chess had been stalking the board for three years prior to the outbreak of the strike. The union leadership had been trying to forge a strategy which would take the miners as a united national body into conflict with this government, on our terms, but it had failed. Failed because although the miners were a militant bunch, and would fight on wages and conditions when they felt particularly aggrieved, they had never really been too arsed about fighting pit closures. Hundreds had closed over the preceding twenty years, the failure to fight this was only partially due to the collaboration of NUM leaders, the other was down to the ambivalent attitude of the miners to pit work.

We didn't actually like the pit, we didn't actually like working on god awful shifts, in crippling dust and heat in cramped and wet conditions. True we were all proud to be miners, but that didn't mean we liked working down the mine! So fighting for jobs, especially *these jobs* was never going to be a catchy slogan. NUM leader Arthur Scargill had disastrously tried to link the question of pit closures to pay rises together on a single ballot paper, in the hope that the desire for the latter would deliver up a mandate on the former. The members were furious and felt they were being conned, and the strategy backfired. The National Coal Board (NCB) for its part was also wrong footed, for a start they were not sure what the aim of a showdown was about. Most senior managers would agree the union was too strong and needed its wings clipping in a showdown, many would agree there was *surplus capacity* in the industry and it required fine tuning, perhaps a little surgery. Few on the NCB side would agree to any perspective of decimating the industry or stomping the union out of existence, the bulk of them had come up through the ranks, and themselves were generational pit folk, albeit 'on the other side'.

What the bosses of the Coal Board hadn't realised was that this whole strategy was aimed at destroying the NCB as an

organisation, and with it, most of them. For a time it looked as though, the NCB would concentrate on taking out 'capacity' (shutting pits) in areas where they figured they could get away with it, Durham, Northumberland, Scotland, Wales. Rank and file efforts to generate a major fight back on closures in these areas failed to move, with great residual bitterness. Polmaise in Scotland, Bear Park in Durham, Lewis Merthyr in South Wales all had tried to demonstrate the need for solidarity action and a national stand. At Lewis Merthyr pickets had started to be deployed around the country. At Hatfield Main in

Doncaster the Women's Support Group was founded to lobby for support for strike action for Lewis Merthyr and the branch voted to strike. The Doncaster panel was calling for strikes in the entire Doncaster coalfield in support, but other parts of Yorkshire were hostile. The South Wales Area came out en masse and the strike was endorsed under rule 41 by the National Executive Committee, the way was open for South Wales to then picket out and call for support from the other areas. However the demand for a national ballot was acceded to and following the usual press propaganda war, warning of hell fire, and murder, the vote was lost by 61%. The NCB could continue its selective surgery without confrontation.

That was not the strategy however, and under Thatcher's orders, industrialist Ian MacGregor was called in because Thatcher didn't trust the NCB chiefs to do the scale of closure and conduct the fight to the finish with the NUM. The US imported undertaker [originally brought to the UK by the Labour Party on the board of British Leyland] threw down the gauntlet in Yorkshire - Cortonwood would close in days, what are you going to do about it? The Yorkshire miners as a whole had been very reluctant to fight for miners elsewhere, it must be said, but now the challenge was at home, and it was clear this was a fight, initially yes for 50,000 jobs and 50 pits, but also whether



Pickets and police at what became known the Battle of Orgreave

or not the remaining miners would have any backbone, what sort of regime would remain for the survivors and would we have a union at all. Those things *were* worth fighting for. Again an area strike was called by pit delegates and at mass meetings throughout the coalfields endorsed at the pit head in a show of tens of thousands of hands, although there had also been a successful ballot in the Yorkshire Area three years earlier. Again the NEC approved the action under rule 41 and the Yorkshire pickets set off to call out their fellow miners in all the other areas. This time we would not respond to calls for a national ballot. Other areas joined the action, some very reluctantly and picketing and mass meetings seen strong arguments, especially in Wales where the miners had felt particularly let down by Yorkshire, but within a week 80% of the miners and 134 pits were on strike nation-wide. At the others despite calls to support the strike, and with the active assistance of Thatcher's strike breaking teams and undercover agents, an anti-strike movement later an anti-union movement was developed.

What must be remembered is that this uneven response by key areas was not an accident, it had been designed to happen, and designed by the former Labour government.

The miners strike of 1974 had brought down the Tories and imposed a Labour government, but the miners had refused to call off their strike during and after the general election. The implication was clear to any government, strike action could shift governments, and it needn't be once every five years. Power resided elsewhere other than in parliament. The working class as a class had power if it wished to exercise it for political and class ends. Labour didn't like this any more than the Tories and had set up a think tank to design strategies to ensure this didn't happen again, just as the Tories had done in fact. Chief target of the strategists had been the centralising, unifying, feature of national pay bargaining. It meant that miners wages and conditions for the first time were debated on a single national table by a single national union body representing all the areas. It had ended area disparities and area inequalities. National pay

bargaining had meant for the first time that a miner in Scotland could be paid the same rates for the same class of work as a miner in Kent, or in any one of the far flung coalfield areas.

The eyes of the miners in all areas, and the strength of their resolve would be unified in one union around conference decisions. It had been this feature, brought about by the National Power Loading Agreement of 1963 which had cleared the way for successful strikes in '69, '72 and '74. It was this feature which Labour now moved to break. This it did by introduction of the Area Incentive Schemes, over the top of national conference decisions and against the decisions of national ballots. The Midlands and Nottingham in particular ignored ballot decisions and with the green light from NUM leader Joe Gormley, effectively a fifth columnist, the area incentive scheme was adopted, entirely unconstitutionally. Wages and conditions, as well as perspectives for the future, would now be locally coloured to a large extent. Area strategies would be seen as more important than national ones. Old fault lines, first established in the anti 1926 strike movement, the anti miners union of Sponsorism which had been established in Nottingham, now opened up wider with the generous payments of incentives in selective areas. Nottingham and Leicester convinced themselves they had a long term future of their own, the other coalfields areas were not of concern. This "I'm all right Jack" attitude was crucial in dividing miner from miner and area from area, but it had been created as a political and social ploy, it wasn't some natural development.

Some have made the ballot the central issue of the strike. Of course it wasn't, but it is important to understand the degree to which the rank and file dictated tactics during this strike. Many in the leadership had seen the picketing operations and the semi-official nature of the strike movement as a temporary measure, a kick-start to get the thing rolling on a more official basis. Once the strike started, and the full design of the other side revealed, once we were able to let the activists hammer home the message of the gravity of this situation, once the bulk of the rank



Striker George Brealey carries out his 'inspection' routine on the picket line whilst wearing a toy police hat