

THE BULLETIN

FOR SOCIALIST SELF-MANAGEMENT

MARCH 1972

2p

Miners: battle of Britain 1972 style

The victory of the miners in their recent strike — and let us not pretend that it was not an outright one — has opened up a new phase in the class struggle in Britain. At the outset of the strike many in the labour movement thought the chances of the miners winning were at best slim. Over the previous twelve months the Heath government has made a determined effort to hold back, and then reduce, the amount paid out in wage claims.

It seemed that the stage was set for an outright confrontation between a section of the working class and the Tory government in which the position of the section in question was not very good to withstand such a confrontation.

The doubts about the ability of the miners to win were based upon a series of misconceptions. These were assumptions about two factors.

Firstly there was the question of just how important was the coal industry in modern Britain. In terms of coal output and the percentage of the working class the miners represented, there had been a continual decline since the early fifties. And at the back of the minds of most of those who remembered was the fact that in 1926 the miners had been on strike for nine months, at the end of which they had had to go back to work on the coal owners' terms.

It seemed that given the large increase in the use of oil and other sources of energy the miners had even less chance of winning than in 1926. We can now see that such an assumption was wrong.

Secondly, there was the doubt that the miners' leadership would not be able to withstand the pressures of the media — press, TV, radio — and that they would collapse like the electricians' leaders had done the previous winter.

Coupled with this was the fact that the majority for strike action had been relatively small. This gave rise to doubts about the willingness of the miners to stay the course for a long struggle.

A NEW SITUATION

Let us see how such ideas were wrong. Take the first one — whilst it is true that the importance of coal has declined relative to other sources of energy, it is now clear that it is still the basic raw material energy in this country. Also, because the economy has become more sophisticated since 1926, it is now clear that ANY disruption tends to become a major one if it is allowed to continue for very long.

What this showed was that despite the superficial appearance of coal being a declining, dying industry in which the employers held the whip hand, when it came to the crunch it became crystal clear to all that all

the highly developed and sophisticated technology still bases itself upon the willingness of men to go down into the bowls of the earth and dig out coal.

As to the second assumption — this again was based on a misreading of the miners and the reality of the coalfields. What stood out in clear outline was that the very tradition that had held back the miners in some coalfields from enforcing their sectional interests, i.e. their solidarity, became an important weapon in their own hands once the decision to strike had been taken.

A further element in this was the miners' loyalty to their own union. A point that was discounted on the left in the last few years. Important here too was the obvious willingness of the miners to let the pits close down for good in some cases rather than give in.



The National Coal Board and the media tried unsuccessfully to split the miners with scare stories about pits not being re-opened after the strike. This again ran into a stone of solidarity on the part of the miners.

But were these the only factors that led to the miners' victory? The answer is no. What gave them their victory was something new in the situation.

NEW TACTICS

In 1926 the miners had by and large been kept in their mining villages, with only forays into the outside to appeal for funds from the rest of the labour movement. Also in 1926 they had continued their struggle after there had been a major defeat for the whole class; in 1972 no such defeat had been inflicted upon the working class.

The really new element in this strike was the way in which the rank and file of the miners took hold of their own leadership's suggestion of picketing the power stations and turned it into the powerful new weapon of mass picketing. The result no doubt surprised even themselves. One would

have to go a long way back in labour history to find such tenacious mass picketing, and then only of the places directly affected by the strike.

This time the miners' rank and file deployed their flying squads of pickets throughout the whole of the country into areas where coal was being moved. In terms of industrial disputes this was a new and explosively powerful weapon. Workers in other industries affected by coal no longer had to rely upon the mass media for their information. They could get it first hand at the gates of their own plants.

Moreover, we witnessed a new aggressive picketing by the miners which added a new dimension to the strike. Since the end of the strike the press and Tories have been bleating like sheep about the 'unfair tactics' used by the miners and of course have tried to drag in the usual 'red bogey'. What the press and Tories are bleating about is that the miners won and refused to abide by rules laid down in advance by their opponents.

There is now talk of bringing in new legislation to prevent the type of picketing used by the miners. But one thing is very clear, given the purpose and solidarity of the type displayed by the miners, no law will be successful; you cannot throw thousands of men into jail.

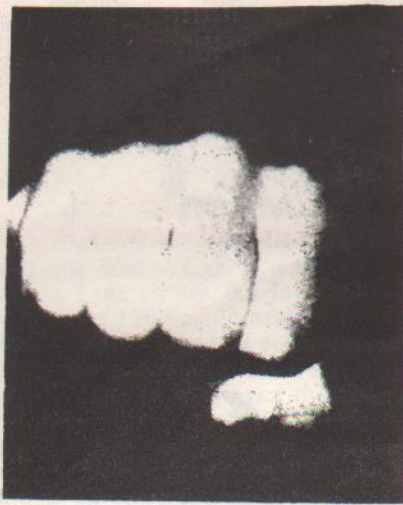
CLASS SOLIDARITY

Another factor that emerged during the miners' strike was the support and solidarity they were able to invoke in other sections of the working class. The support given by the engineers in Birmingham was the most spectacular of this, but such support was evident up and down the country. In this respect Heath and Co. were able to achieve something — working class unity — that had not happened for some years.

The mass picketing, the control over the supplies allowed out of coal dumps for urgent priority needs, eg hospitals, gave the struggle an element of workers' control over the pits, which they had not had before.

This type of control can be counterposed to the irresponsible control exercised by the Coal Board and the Tory government. THEY were prepared to let large amounts of capital equipment be rendered useless rather than give in to the miners' just claim. What we hope the miners and other workers will now be thinking about is just how long are they going to allow this gang to continue to run the mines and the rest of industry, where men's lives and souls are being continually sacrificed on the altar of 'profitability.'

Contd. p.3 Col.3



Birmingham building workers smash Tory pay norm

In the same week that the miners voted to accept the biggest increase in their union's history, Birmingham building workers employed by C. Bryant & Son smashed the Tory (bosses) pay norm of 7½%.

We voted on 24th February at a meeting in Transport House, Birmingham to accept an agreement with the following main points:

1. 25p an hour fall-back for craftsmen.
2. 22p an hour fall-back for labourers:
3. 10% on bonus target prices.
4. Increase of travelling expenses from 5p to 50p a day.
5. Review and simplification of bonus system within a month.
6. Review of apprentices pay increase within a month.
7. Employment of three redundant shop stewards whom Bryants had blacklisted.
8. 100% closed shop.
9. Check-off system for union subscription.

Despite there being a number of possible dangers in this agreement, this is nevertheless a great victory for the newly organised and militant Bryants sites. This agreement will apply to all Bryants sites except Bryant Homes Ltd., and Bryant Civil Engineering Limited. Any national increase won for the whole building trade will be added on top of this settlement.

WHY ARE BRYANTS PREPARED TO GIVE SUCH A BIG INCREASE ?

Bryants is a firm which up til a few months ago was well known as one of the most anti-trade union building firms in the country. Bryants do most of the building for the council in Birmingham.

It has been possible for them to offer low tenders for council contracts because they paid the lowest wages, had poor working conditions, used low standard materials

and made extensive use of Lump labour. The rise in militancy amongst the Bryants workers coincided with, and was assisted by the national campaign launched by the rank and file paper BUILDING WORKERS CHARTER.

Bryants have two big contracts on the huge Woodgate Valley council housing estate and it was from here that the initial leadership came. A partially successful 5 week strike in November 1971 on Bryants 'B' site sparked off a massive increase in the number of organised and militant building sites in Birmingham.

There have been a number of demonstrations and strikes over the last couple of months most of which have not been for direct economic demands but for demands which would strengthen the union and site committees' position on the sites. These strikes have been about such things as removal of Lump subcontractors from the site, removal of non-trade unionists and black legs, layoffs, pay-offs, bad site conditions, sacking of newly-elected shop stewards, and blacklisting of redundant shop stewards.

SITE ORGANISATION

The strength of the organised sites comes mainly from the system of site committees consisting of shop stewards elected by and responsible to the members on each site. An indication of the growth of active trade unionism on Bryant sites is the fact that the Bryants Joint shop stewards committee at its first meeting three months ago consisted of the Woodgate Valley site 'B' stewards and one shop steward from the Tile Cross site but at its last meeting last week there were shop stewards representing 15 different sites in Birmingham.

Building workers employed with private firms on council contracts have raised such a storm in the local and national

press over the use of Lump labour, shoddy materials and low building standards that the Tory council has been forced to appoint a special trouble-shooter to track down the presence of Lump labour on council contracts.

Also, the council has had to tighten up on the checking of standards and since Bryants have already brought in large quantities of poor materials the work is being dismantled almost as soon as it is being put up. Shop stewards at Woodgate Valley estimate that at the present rate of completion the housing estate will take more than a hundred years to finish.

The demand for the council to stop contracting out work and directly employ all of its workers is rapidly gaining ground on the sites.

BRYANTS BACK DOWN

So Bryants, faced with pressure from their workers and the council, are attempting to buy time with a 'generous' settlement which will mean a new guaranteed weekly wage for 40 hours of about £32 for craftsmen and £27 for labourers, even in wet weather.

However, there is still a lot of discontent about the bonus system being continued at all. But this agreement is not generally seen as damping down the campaign for the full CHARTER demands. We see it as a step towards the CHARTER demands and an example of what the new-found militant trade unionism on the Birmingham sites can achieve.

Some shop stewards are pointing possible long-term dangers incorporated in this agreement. The spirit in which Bryants made this offer can be judged by their attempt to make the agreement subject to the Industrial Relations Act. This naturally enough was thrown out by the union.

By agreeing to the check-off system, the union is handing over control of its own collecting to the employers. The whole effect of the check-off system can easily

be to undermine the shop stewards' contact with the rank and file members and sow the seeds for further collaboration with the management. Having failed to defeat the workers by a show of strength and accepting the site committees as a reality, Bryants will now attempt to 'work together' with the shop stewards, trying to isolate us from our brothers and get us to implement the employers policies.

But as the class struggle comes more into the open over the next few months, it is unlikely that these subtle plans of Bryan Bryants will meet with much success.

John Mahon
Shop Steward UCATT
Bryants, Woodgate Valley

Why we publish 'THE BULLETIN'

To the legitimate question "why another paper" we have a number of answers. Firstly our paper is devoted to putting forward the idea of socialist self-management. We see this as something tied in with the growing movement for workers control which has been gathering momentum over the last few years.

Unfortunately this movement has not yet developed a paper that can be sold at a low price and with a wide distribution. We hope that in this respect we can make a modest start to fill that gap.

Secondly we feel that with the growing wave of sit-ins, take-overs, and work-ins by workers, particularly those faced with the prospect of redundancy, the time is now ripe for us to try to reach a wider audience than we have been able to up to now with

only a quarterly journal.

We hope that the paper as it develops will become a means of communication between people in different struggles and a means to try to put to the test our own particular ideas. In the process no doubt we shall modify some of these views, since we do not think we have ready made answers for all problems; rather we feel that in all struggles the people engaged in them are the ones who will be teaching us something.

Lastly, and by no means the least important, we hope to bring news and the experiences of workers from other parts of the world which have some relevance here in Britain; and similarly we hope through such exchanges to enrich our ideas on socialist self-management.

Published by BMS Publications,
16a Holmdale Road, London N.W6
Printed by voluntary labour.



The battle of Saltley coke depot — an eye witness

The struggle of the miners to stop the movement of coke by scab drivers from the Saltley coke depot began when every other movement of coke and coal had already been stopped by the determination of the miners' pickets. For this reason it was presented as a symbol of the whole struggle by both the miners and the mass media.

In the first few weeks of the strike rank and file miners organised themselves into highly mobile groups, capable of moving to any part of the country to block the movement of coal.

The success of this much more positive form of picketing and the support of other sections of the working class which it generated is bound to be noted by other groups of workers faced with similar situations. The Yorkshire miners picketing Saltley said that many of the experiences needed to operate such an effective picket had come from the unofficial miners' strikes of the last couple of years.

THE FIRST ARRESTS

The struggle at Saltley really began on Saturday 5th February when a number of arrests were made, but by Monday morning hundreds of miners had gathered from all over the country to picket the gates. The miners were already receiving solidarity action from workers at S.U. Carburettors who had pledged to strike every Tuesday until the miners won their demands. This gesture went a long way in strengthening the feeling among the Birmingham trade unionists that solidarity action had to be taken in support of the miners.

On Monday afternoon following a demonstration outside the law courts in support of a shop steward who had been victimised for demanding the right to work, 400 building workers marched out to Saltley to join the miners' pickets. On Tuesday evening an AUEW shop steward took a delegation of miners to speak at the AUEW Birmingham East District Committee. The DC called a meeting of all AUEW shop stewards for the next day and got the support of the local AUEW full time officials. The shop steward meeting the next day voted for a strike on Thursday in solidarity with the miners, and called for all AUEW members to march on Saltley coke depot. The NUVB also decided to support the solidarity strike, as did some

T&G branches.

BOSSSES' HYSTERIA

On hearing the news, the local bosses went hysterical, with fright and anger. Early on Thursday morning, the police far outnumbered the pickets with coachloads of reserves 'concealed' up back alleys. By 10.30 the pickets had swollen to over a thousand strong, but the police lines looked solid and confident. A great roar of welcome greeted the red and gold AUEW banner when it appeared on the far side of Saltley viaduct moving steadily towards the depot gates. A few minutes later, another cheer went up as the banner reached the picket lines and the marchers could be seen stretching back over the bridge out of sight.

The police lines offered very little resistance to the marchers and in a couple of minutes, there were several hundred workers inside the police cordons and directly in front of the gates.

There seemed to be an understanding between the union officials and the police chiefs that the engineering workers would be allowed to hold a demonstration by marching past the gates and up St. Clements Road. The union officials and the police now tried to move the marchers away up St. Clements Road, but most would not be moved away from the gates. It seemed that the police were getting ready to move the marchers away from the gates by force and hundreds of reserve police assembled at the top of St. Clements Road, and began moving down towards the gates. But the police move never came off. The weight of numbers moving over the viaduct took its toll on the nerves of the police cordon and several hundred more workers slipped through and up to the gate.

At the same time marchers were seen arriving behind the ranks of police assembled at the top of St. Clements Road. The whole area was being sealed off by thousands of marching workers.

POLICE CONFUSION

The police were thrown into confusion and many of them who had been kept in reserve for just such an 'emergency' were quietly withdrawn. The build-up continued for an hour as banners from BLMC, GEC, DUNLOP, LUCAS, VALOR and many other plants gathered around the gates.

After an hour of chanting 'Close the gates gates' with no response, the workers nearest the gates began edging slowly forward to do the job themselves.

The right wing elements of the trade union leadership and the police were shitting themselves at the implications of this action. With only a few yards and a few more minutes to go before the workers 'Took the law into their own hands' and closed the gates themselves, the police chiefs suddenly dashed to the gates and locked them closed.

It felt like a lock-out for those nearest the gates but nevertheless another great cheer went up. After a few minutes, Arthur Scargill, the leader of the Yorkshire pickets told the crowd that the gates had been closed by the police without the permission of the management inside. He said the police had given their assurance that the gates would not be opened again that day.

VICTORY AND VIGILANCE

On hearing this news, some smiled and cheered, others demanded angrily "What about tomorrow? They'll open them tomorrow". A delegation went inside the depot to negotiate with the management, while police and officials appealed to the crowd to disperse. Some workers began to move away but others were not at all convinced that this was not a trick.

Arthur Harper, BLMC convenor addressed the crowd and aimed his remarks at the management inside the gates who were preparing at last to negotiate with the miners' delegation. Harper pledged the same immediate response from the engineering workers to any call for solidarity action from the miners, if the management re-opened the gates to lorries other than those authorised by the miners.

Most of the pickets and marchers dispersed and learned later that the Gas Board management had agreed to the miners' demands.

The solidarity shown by the building, engineering and other workers with the miners has forged new links between sectors of workers who have been isolated from each other for years, and an important Tory myth that "greedy, highly-paid car workers" are responsible for miners low wages, has been badly shaken, if not shattered by the united action against the common enemy, the Tory government.

Dave Miller

INTERNATIONAL MARXIST REVIEW NO. 2 Contains: The End of American Dominance — the devaluation of the dollar. The Specific Oppression of Women. Towards a Feminist Revolutionary Movement. Chile — the Bloodless Revolution? Marx and the Paris Commune. Rosa Luxembourg — a biographical sketch. The Greening of America from IMR Publications. 16a Holmdale Road, London NW6. Price 22½p post free.

MINERS

Contd. from p.1

NATIONAL CLASS MILITANCY

There is one final aspect that is worth commenting on in regard to the miners' strike. This is that the strike has once again put on the agenda the use of the national strike by the trade unions as against the localised or one-firm strike.

Many of the miners on strike were striking as much for the lower paid sections in the industry as for themselves. This points once more to the fact that trade unions as national institutions and their leaderships are far from being redundant, as some on the left would have us believe. The manner in which further concessions were squeezed out of the government even after the Wilberforce report demonstrated that their role is far from exhausted.

Given enough rank and file militancy such strikes can be won again, even if the national leaderships are unwilling.

IWC CONFERENCE ON UNEMPLOYMENT

The first of a series of conferences on unemployment and how to fight it was held in Newcastle on Tyne on 8th/9th January 1972. There were about 170 people attending, most of them from trade unions and socialist organisations. It was the intention to make this a delegate conference since the last national conference in Birmingham had been too big to allow much detailed discussion.

The conference was divided into four sessions with two on each day.

Opening Session at which a number of papers on the theme 'Workers Control and the fight against Unemployment' were delivered by leading members of the IWC.

Saturday Afternoon session with reports of representatives of the workers of UCS (Glasgow), the Fisher-Bendix factory in Kirkby near Liverpool, Plessey Argyle Works (Alexandria), River Don Steelworks Sheffield and GKN Cwmbran, detailing their efforts to prevent massive redundancies. These reports were followed by discussion.

Sunday Morning Session at which the delegates broke up into five separate discussion groups. Each of these groups discussed one of the following topics:

1. Manpower Bargaining — In this group the question "How low a wage can you accept in order to keep a job?" was asked and discussed.

2. Politics and strategy of New Forms of Local Action — The need for the strong to help the weak was emphasised in this group and the idea of denying capitalists their 'right' to private property emerged.

3. Problems of Occupations of Factories. Here it was stressed that a general policy could not be laid down. The action should be different for different factories. The type of product made and its turnover plays an important part in determining the form of action. At UCS it was possible to have a work-in while at Fisher-Bendix the sit-in was more appropriate. The work-in at

UCS has taken the form of keeping working in the firm as many as possible of the workers who have been made redundant by the management. The wages of these workers come from outside donations.

The sit-in has the effect of preventing the management disposing of the factory which they might want to close down. In either case of action connections with local groups, sympathetic to the workers' militancy, became very important.

4. The Economics of Unemployment. In this discussion the group pointed to a falling rate of profit as being typical of the British economic situation over the last ten years. It was felt that Britain's joining the Common Market was aimed at arresting this fall in the rate of profit.

5. Organising the unemployed — The main points developed were:

a) the fight against unemployment could only succeed by a united fight of the employed and unemployed workers.

b) Claimants Unions had developed despite and because of the lack of trade union interest in the real problems of the unemployed.

c) Claimants Unions could only fight the effects of unemployment — there should be cooperation between trade unions and Claimants Unions.

d) Trades Councils should play a major part in organising and co-ordination on unemployed movements, and also be a link between employed and unemployed.

e) Different areas would develop different types of unemployed workers' organisations. This should be recognised and not hindered; the stress should be laid on developing links between different groups and areas.

Short Sunday afternoon Session at which spokesmen from the different discussion groups gave brief reports. There were fraternal greetings from a member of the P.S.V.

of France who pointed to the growing problem of unemployment in the European Economic Community.

Another fraternal delegate represented the Dutch Metal Workers' Union and Building Union. This delegate mentioned that self-management ideas were emerging from groups in the unions.

The delegates at the conference, many of whom were the militants active in fighting redundancies, had much to offer in the way of new experiences. What was new in the industrial situation in Great Britain was well put by one Labour Party speaker, during the discussion groups held on the Sunday:

"Workers are now saying this place (referring to the factories or industrial complexes involved in the various sit-ins or work-ins such as at UCS and Plessey that are becoming commonplace) belongs to us NOT TO HIM." This speaker stressed the importance of this change in attitude by the workers. It was unfortunate that this idea so ably put by this speaker was not developed further in the discussions which followed.

Many of the delegates present including leaders of the UCS struggle still saw their actions purely in terms of the defence of the right to work and did not seem to appreciate to what extent their own actions were raising new political questions for the working class movement.

Members of the IWC council have already moved for improvements in the form of the conferences so as to allow delegates to participate much more freely in discussion and policy making. Perhaps at these coming conferences we shall see a greater opportunity to formulate more clearly the new political questions being posed by the workers in their new forms of struggle.

J.M.

Ovambo workers' strike

The strike of Ovambo workers in Namibia (South West Africa) has brought to a head the mounting discontent of the oppressed and exploited people of Namibia under South Africa's apartheid regime.

Administered as a trust territory in terms of the mandate conferred by the defunct League of Nations, South Africa has virtually incorporated the territory and extended its oppressive system to South West Africa for the exploitation of the natural wealth of this area with its vast supply of indigenous labour in defiance of the United Nations' weak-kneed resolutions on Namibia's independence under UN supervision.

MASS MOVEMENTS

When the Namibians ceased to pin their faith on the UN for independence in the early sixties they formed mass organisations as a preparation for armed struggle to overthrow the South African administration. South Africa established a military base in the Caprivi strip adjoining Ovamboland, and suppression of political organisations in-

reased within the territory.

The concessions and promises of limited self-rule in South African-type Bantustans made by the South African government have failed to halt the growth of political consciousness among the Namibians. The political movement has grown in strength, drawing in religious organisations as well and cutting across racial boundaries by establishing a political alliance between African and Coloured organisations.

OVAMBOS' KEY ROLE

The Ovambos provide the main source of migrant labour for Namibia's profitable mining industry and commerce, and the widespread and well-organised strike has nearly paralysed industry in the territory. The fact that the South African government has not so far used its brutal methods to end the strike underlies the vulnerability of South West Africa's industrial economy which depends almost completely on a single source of labour. It also belies the empty boast of SA that it has contained all opposition to its repressive policies and that the territory can become 'economically independent' within the apartheid system. Here is another major failure of apartheid.

UNCOMPROMISING STRUGGLE

A few months ago four SA policemen were killed in the Caprivi strip by SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation) guerrillas; and across the Angolan border, North-East of Ovamboland, UNITA guerrillas have captured sizeable territory in their war of liberation against Portuguese armies.

In this climate the Namibian struggle now follows the same pattern of uncomprom-

ising struggle. The significant point about the strike is that the broad masses of the oppressed people in town and country have become conscious of the existing political and social antagonisms and the urgent need for determined action to bring down state power.

S. Ntshona
Unity Movement of South Africa

Ireland

The recent spate of police searches makes it imperative for all socialists to stand up and be counted. We do this in no uncertain manner. Whilst we may not agree with this or that aspect of the struggle of the IRA, we have no option but to say that we are in complete support for the removal of British troops from Ulster. We say, let the Irish working class — North and South — determine their own destiny. For far too long has Britain ruled — with the gun — in Ireland and this must stop. Since the British Government has condoned repression and armed violence in Ulster for over fifty years it cannot legitimately decry such methods when they are used by those that they were used against. We do not equate the violence of the oppressed and the oppressors.