Workers’ Playtime

on the miners’ strike

(articles from April 1983 to May 1985)
Workers’ Playtime was a more-or-less regular class struggle-oriented journal produced between Feb ’83 and May ’85. It was written and edited by a small group of revolutionaries who had got together through the London Workers Group (LWG) in the early 1980s, although it never aimed to be the journal (theoretical or otherwise) of the LWG.

It is of interest because it provides detailed analysis of some of the most important workers’ struggles which took place in the UK in this period, as they were happening. Here is everything that Playtime published which directly related to the ’84-’85 miners’ strike, including two articles about struggles in the mining industry shortly before the so-called Great Strike.

For further information see: https://libcom.org/tags/workers-playtime
Contents

Workers’ Playtime, April 1983 ........................................................................................................................... 4

Coming apart at the seams ................................................................................................................................. 4

Workers’ Playtime, March-April 1984 ............................................................................................................... 7

Miners wound up ........................................................................................................................................... 7

Workers’ Playtime, June 1984 .......................................................................................................................... 10

Pitted against the state .................................................................................................................................... 10

Miners! By the Left! Quick March! ................................................................................................................... 14

Tied up in Notts ............................................................................................................................................ 21

Workers’ Playtime, August 1984 ...................................................................................................................... 23

What we’re standing in: Coming clean on the miners’ strike ........................................................................... 23

The Miners’ Strike in Lancs .............................................................................................................................. 28

Workers’ Playtime, May 1985 ............................................................................................................................ 33

[No title] ...................................................................................................................................................... 33

[No frickin’ title for this section either!] .......................................................................................................... 40

What is Workers Playtime standing in? ......................................................................................................... 46

On our heads or on our ear? ............................................................................................................................. 49

Dock Strikes ’84 .......................................................................................................................................... 55

Any Storm in a Port - Origins of the Dock Labour Scheme, and recent dock struggles ......................... 59
Workers’ Playtime – April 1983

Workers’ Playtime, April 1983

Coming apart at the seams

The political voyeurs of the left have seen another illusion stripped bare: the miners will not be leading the working class into action against the government. As desires rose and fell, it provided yet another example of the impotence of current industrial activity. During the two weeks of speculation over the mineworkers response to another closure, the emphasis switched from the future of the pits to the future of the National Union of Mineworkers and its leader, Arthur Scargill. Unfortunately the wrong option is due to be scrapped.

After the South Wales delegate conference, which put off supporting the strike at Ty-Mawr Lewis Merthyr colliery in favour of an area ballot, the issue of pit closures and a national strike became caught up in the inevitable union manoeuvring. Emlyn Williams, area president, was the first of many to welcome the Lewis Merthyr protest and offer sympathy; he did this after refusing to implement the mandate to call a strike once the pit closure was confirmed.

Pit-Ballot Prop

South Wales has been under a long-standing threat of pit-closures due to lack of investment in “loss-making” pits. Under National Coal Board (NCB) plans proposed in November 1982, 10 of the 33 pits in the area were due for closure with another 6 possible. 10,000 out of 25,000 jobs were at risk. To counter this, the South Wales union executive arranged pit head meetings, and on December 8th, the miners voted to strike from January 14th, unless promises of investment instead of closures were made. This was not forthcoming, and the NCB announced the shut-down of Lewis Merthyr colliery for July this year. The response of the 500 miners at Lewis Merthyr was an immediate strike. Encouraged by Des Dutfield, the area NUM vice-president, 27 men staged a one-week underground sit-in. What started as an action to draw attention to a pit closure, which would have been easily ignored by the media and the vast majority of miners, led to an area strike and then became a national issue. Unlike recent strikes to save Kinneil colliery, in Scotland and Snowdown in Kent, solidarity action spread. Behind it was the precedent of February 1981, when proposed pit closures were stopped by a series of strikes.

There was an unofficial walkout by 4000 miners in seven surrounding pits, prompting an area delegate conference. It was here that Emlyn Williams refused to support the strike, preferring an area ballot, and was met with jeers and prophetic cries of “sold down the river!” The following day, as the 27 men called off their sit-in because of appalling conditions, an eighth pit came out, bringing the number of strikers to 5000. South Wales looked set for an unofficial strike, which would simply be made official by the ballot. But the vote frustrated those already on strike, because it caused a 5-day delay in organising unified action, allowing coal stocks to be moved. After the strike vote came out in favour, the union officials made their position clear. “We don’t want a strike, but we have been driven to it by the board” said Williams, when in fact he had been driven to calling it by his own members.

For a while the action grew. On the 28th February, South Wales miners had a 3-hour token occupation of the NCB’s area HQ. More importantly, the Yorkshire leadership, without a ballot and expecting full support, called its members out on strike from March 7th. Durham and
Northumberland decided to hold area ballots on the issue. The following day Scottish miners were called out for the 7th, again without balloting, and Kent held pit-head meetings in preparation for a strike. Derby Leicester, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire, traditionally moderate areas, decided upon area ballots. Significantly, the Notts area conference drew a previous executive decision not to go for a strike unless there was a full national ballot. But within two days this momentum had been halted, and reversed.

Scargill – The pits

While these decisions had been going on, Scargill had been keeping very quiet, especially in the light of his offers to go to prison over the NHS pay dispute. The martyr was prepared to excuse area delaying strike action by quoting paragraphs from the union’s rule book, but it was obvious that this was not the way to gain control, especially if the action became effective. With things getting more and more out of their control, the executive saw the South Wales strike as “unconstitutional”, as it had not been “authorised” by them. They complained that the executive “is seen to be disregarded in so many instances these days. There will be concern over the haste with which the whole exercise is launched”.

Despite Scargill’s previous aversion to negotiating with the NCB, and his obvious spoiling for a fight with the government, he needed the membership to rally behind him, not fight closures for themselves. With areas operating outside the influence of the executive, he was in no position to bargain with the NCB. This is why he needed a national ballot. It was to do with sounding out support, not so much for a strike, as for him personally. His claim that the strike was about “wider issues” was an attempt to divert attention away from Lewis Merthyr and pit closures, towards the likely appointment of Ian MacGregor as next Coal Board chief, thus making the dispute appear as a clash of personalities.

The broadening of issues to the whole future of the industry, and especially the spectre of MacGregor, was strictly within the limits of a union perspective. Scargill said that the only way to fight was with a strong union and a stronger leadership. There was little attempt to link the issues to the problems that confront working class organisation (although it was confidently asserted that MacGregor would not be allowed to do to coal what the steel workers had allowed him to do to the steel industry). The national ballot was thus presented by Scargill as a vote for a strong union, and not so much over the strike against pit closures. He needed to maintain a united union behind his leadership, which could more easily be done through a national anti-strike vote than if only certain areas came out on their own. So the ballot, the strike, Lewis Merthyr and possibly other pits had to be sacrificed for the sake of unity.

Well Shafted

From the outset, Scargill had not supported action wherever it took place, but had merely restated the union’s anti-closure policy. It was reminiscent of his attitude in February 1981, during action against the proposed closure of 50 pits (5 of them in S. Wales). Scargill, with his sights set on the union presidency, refused to call out the Yorkshire miners, not wanting to be seen to support unconstitutional strikes. The great industrial militant was roundly abused for his first attempt at selling them out.

The 1981 strike was finally halted by Joe Gormley, NUM President, and Derek Ezra, head of the Coal Board. Together, they used the fear of unofficial action leading to an unstoppable strike as a means to get £300 million from the government. This subsidised the “uneconomic” pits, removing the prospect of closure and preventing the continuation of the strike. The 1983 strike was halted by
Scargill alone, who diffused fear of a national strike by ordering a national ballot, thus blocking the momentum of the unofficial actions.

The failing of this dispute was the ease with which the executive got its way. In spite of the widespread deputations from S. Wales to other pits in the run-up to the ballot, they were not able to carry the momentum of the strike. But it is too easy to point to the lack of autonomy. The miners did reject union leadership, by rejecting Scargill’s attempt to bring about a confrontation between himself and the government – which is why he had to retreat into the issue of “unity”. With this rejection came the jettisoning of the workers’ own aims and interests: there has yet to be a unified national struggle against the impact of redundancies and if the miners will not take it on, there are few industries which would. But even the spreading of strikes within one area – S. Wales – is more than most could hope for. Almost all struggles against redundancies are within the factory concerned. The need is to link struggle across industries.

The regional factor in the NCB’s plans was reflected in the way various workforces approached the question of redundancies. An area like Yorkshire, although traditionally militant on issues like pay and conditions, is under much less of a threat than S. Wales. Investment in the area’s pits is high, and there are correspondingly high productivity bonuses.

The closures were not seen as a chance to get out of shitty and dangerous work, an attitude adopted by workers who have much better conditions than the miners. This is not just due to the lack of alternative work, even in an area like S. Wales. The strikes were not just aimed at saving jobs and the future of communities tied to bad conditions. They were strikes to save the future through investment in pits to make for better working conditions. This was the level of demand, and another reason why, in the end, the strike failed to get national backing. With the Selby field being opened, there are plenty of opportunities for miners in Yorkshire and the surrounding areas, unlike South Wales. However, future actions may be more united, in view of a report that 75% of the industry’s 200,000 jobs are at risk from new technology.

Cave In

The national ballot was presented not as an exercise in democracy, or as a vote over Lewis Merthyr. The executive was sure that the vote would go against a strike – the timing was wrong, with vast coal stocks in the country; Lewis Merthyr was not a strong cause to fight anyway. So the issue was turned into the perennial one for unions: “unity”. Only through “unity” could the membership rely on Scargill and survive the threats, not through spontaneous action in the areas. Previously, areas had taken their own decisions over strike action, but with the vote going against a strike the executive now had control over the situation, and the areas were brought into line. The national ballot – “the final chance to save the industry”, as Scargill put it – was the third rejection of national strike action in six months. It leaves Scargill still firmly in control, the workers demoralised and facing redundancies, and the left searching for another key-hole to peep through.
Miners wound up

In October 1983 the executive of the National Union of Mineworkers ordered an overtime ban as a tactic to pressure the National Coal Board into increasing a pay offer of 5.2%. There was no direct consultation with the membership. The executive argued that they were mandated by the annual national conference to call this and any other action short of a strike (which is subject to a national ballot). In response to the ineffectiveness of the overtime ban and personal loss of earnings, a group of winders took to wildcat action in defiance of the union. Whilst the media took up the usual “right to work” theme, the national officials spoke of civil war within the union.

The winders’ strike followed a series of local actions — an unofficial protest rally in Leicester, stoppages in Nottinghamshire and Staffordshire coal fields — over the loss of overtime pay and bonuses. In the eleventh week of the overtime ban, 42 winders from 5 collieries in North Staffs threatened to strike the following Monday if not allowed to carry out weekend overtime working. Winders get guaranteed overtime, since they are required to operate cages moving men and machinery when weekend maintenance work is carried out.

The winders, members of Power Group No. 2, claimed that they had each lost over £100 a week and were making a bigger sacrifice than most NUM members. They were prevented from entering the pits by pickets when they turned up for work at the weekend and responded by carrying out their threat. Unable to get down to work, 8000 miners were laid off, the majority for two days, since maintenance work then had to be carried out on the Tuesday. The Power Group temporarily suspended the winders from union membership; their branch was disbanded and individuals lost the right to hold office, attend meetings and draw benefit. But they were not prevented from returning to work.

It was this that escalated the dispute. Winders are not a well-liked section of the mining community, earning a high wage for their craft status — which originates from their operation and maintenance of steam engines in the last century. (Cages are now electrically operated but the higher wages are justified in terms of responsibility, whilst it is the underground workers who take the risks). At the North Staffs Silverdale colliery, the 300-strong afternoon shift walked out, refusing to work with the winders who had been on strike. Ironically, the winders’ strike had been ineffective at Silverdale — being a drift mine, the miners could walk to the coal face without having to rely on the cages. The following day 900 miners from the pit struck over the management’s refusal to move a winder who had crossed picket lines. It was not an all-out strike — they stated that they were prepared to work but would black the cages and the winders i.e. were prepared to walk the one mile to the coal face. The 45 minute loss of production this entailed was unacceptable to the management.

Take Your Pick

The North Staffs winders became the focus of discontent within the industry for other groups threatening to resume normal working unless the NUM executive called a national ballot to endorse the overtime ban. It was this “democratic” demand that became the centre of attention. Trevor Bell, leader of the white collar section COSA stated, “The whole overtime ban was designed to unite the
membership with regard to the proposals for the industry. Now certain important sections are calling the strategy into question and the executive has got to re-establish its control. We have got to consult the members.” A show of democracy would be of benefit to both left and right on the executive, hopefully putting an end to the wildcat actions. But the right could not be seen to advocate it after MacGregor, head of the NCB, had already supported it. For its part, the left did not dare carry through a ballot in case of rejection – which would be Scargill’s third consecutive defeat in a national ballot.

The NUM claim that only a small number benefit from overtime – those who do weekend maintenance work are mainly craftsmen and management. But increasingly the non-maintenance of equipment and workfaces have led to delays on Mondays before normal work can begin. Miners are affected through being sent home without pay whilst maintenance is done, or by a reduction in their bonus as production is lost. This has particularly hit pits with geological problems, such as flooding, where conditions are already bad, and production, and therefore bonus payments are lower. While output has dropped in some areas, it has remained unaffected in others; in some areas, e.g. Nottinghamshire, miners are working harder during the week in order to offset any losses, in overtime pay with higher bonus payments. Many workers are taking care to safeguard unhindered production – a tremendous boon for the NCB.

Loss of Face

The overtime ban has had definite benefits for the NCB and hardly any for the workers. It has gone some way to solving the problem of overproduction. In the three months to January, 3.25 million tonnes of coal were lost, the NUM claiming that this had cost £150-200m. But the NCB seem quite happy to save £33.5m in wages, plus the cost of storing coal (£7 per tonne per year). Lost production is a small fraction of the 30 million tonnes stockpiled at power stations — enough to generate 6 months electricity – and the 24 million tonnes stockpiled at pit heads. In addition the action has demoralised the workforce, and has accelerated the decline of a number of “uneconomic” pits, providing an excuse to close one colliery down completely.

The majority of miners gave their passive support to the ban, mainly out of union loyalty. The winders’ strike and subsequent unofficial actions show that that loyalty is coming under strain. It is becoming clear that the ban is hurting the miners rather than the NCB, with the NUM executive standing aloof from it all. The illusion that industrial supremacy of the miners could enable them to win their claim with a mere overtime ban (or originally, the mere threat of it) has been exposed. Not even protracted national strikes could win the steel and water workers’ disputes, and the miners, standing alone, have proved to be no different.

Already a united industry-wide response to the pay offer has broken down. One of the three unions the British Association of Colliery Management (BACM) with 16,000 members accepted the 5.2% on the table at the beginning of February. The National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shot Firers (NACODS) have also begun separate pay negotiations with the NCB. The NUM is attempting to placate the membership with talk of blacking Polish coal imports. Scargill claims that his “historic” negotiations with leaders of other unions – seamen, rail workers, dockers and lorry drivers – are a general workers’ response to the “attempt by the government to smash the spectacularly successful action of the unions”. Behind this nationalist rhetoric – intended to cover up the failure of the overtime ban – is the overproduction of coal worldwide. MacGregor claims to be “on the same side” as Scargill on the issue of “unfair” competition from subsidized foreign coal.

Widespread dissatisfaction with the NUM’s tactics and its refusal to take any action other than negotiate was soon demonstrated in Scotland where six pits have been closed in the last eighteen months. The latest casualty was Bogside, closed when flooding occurred after the NUM had refused
to carry out overtime maintenance, and the NCB decided not to carry out emergency repairs. Also announced was the closure of Polmaise colliery near Stirling, due to geological problems. The pit has been losing money hand over fist, in spite of huge investments.

The closure was confronted by strong resistance from the workers, but not from the NUM. Over 100 miners forced their way into a delegate conference which had put off for one week a call for an immediate strike. Mick McGahey, leader of the Scottish NUM, argued that this was to build up support at other collieries, but it was simply to buy time. This is a tried and tested tactic for the NUM executive to demoralise struggles they have little interest in supporting. The wave of unofficial strikes to save the Lewis Merthyr pit in South Wales last February was scuppered by a delay to make the strike official with... a national ballot! (See *Playtime*, April '83).

In both the Scottish and Welsh disputes a left leadership sacrificed the closure of pits for the sake of "maintaining unity" within the union. The reconvened delegate conference would not back an all-out strike in the Scottish area, merely agreeing to an official indefinite strike at a pit that was definitely to be closed. The NCB is taking advantage of the NUM’s repeated demonstrations of its inability to oppose pit closures.

**King Arthur’s Acid Reign**

Scargill is claiming that 70 pits are to close, putting 70,000 jobs at risk (and during the winders’ strike he emphasised that 50% of craftsmen would lose their jobs).

But what are the facts? With worldwide overproduction the market price of coal is around £40 per tonne. The cost of production in Britain varies between £25 in Notts or Yorkshire and £120 in Scotland. With pressure to reduce costs and the loss of government subsidies the NCB is planning investment in the profitable areas only. In particular, the NCB wants to introduce computer-linked technology which will mean completely automated coal faces not just in individual pits, but in whole fields. MINOS (Mine Operating System) has the technical capacity to halve employment. This system is now fully developed and ready to be put into operation just as soon as the NCB and the NUM can cook up a deal which is “acceptable” to the miners.

Scargill is in virtually the same position as Joe Wade and the NGA. Two unions with the strongest industrial muscle are on the defensive against new technology and the restructuring of their industries.

They are responding with a rear-guard action which is not so much to fight redundancies, but to quibble over payoffs and the time-scale of job losses. The reason for this is the ineffectiveness of all traditional trade union responses. The present overtime ban fits in with the NCB’s plan to grind the “uneconomic” pits to a halt and increase the intensity of labour at the pits with a future. “Radical” demands for a national strike are just naive with the current level of stocks — it is a recipe for demoralisation and division on the scale of the 1980 steel strike. If miners are to resist job losses and defend living standards, they will have to be prepared to take immediate action and spread it as widely and rapidly as possible, and not just to other miners. Their resistance to pit closures last year was broken by the NUM’s bogus calls for unity. It is becoming clear to many that even in the mining industry, with its traditions of labour organisation and struggle, trade unionism is bankrupt.
**Workers’ Playtime, June 1984**

**Pitted against the state**

The miners have committed themselves to an all or nothing fight with the NCB and the Government over their futures in the coal industry. That they cannot afford to lose is obvious. What isn’t so obvious after three months on strike is what they can win.

There are two things to be won. They can force MacGregor to drop his current plans for the industry. In reality this will mean the NUM negotiating “something better” on their behalf. Today Scargill says jobs and closures are not negotiable. What he means is that he will have to be forced to swallow them. Between the NUM and the NCB the argument is merely about different interpretations of what “the good of the industry” is. At best this means a new “Plan for Coal”. At best it means replacing the short sharp shock MacGregor wants with a slower wind-down. This is clearly what the NCB would settle for if they have to. For them the strike isn’t just about closures, it’s about trying to break the miners’ spirit. About reinforcing the divisions between miners, and confining opposition to a minority in each affected pit and region. Everyone else having been forcibly persuaded of the “inevitability of it all”, of the “pointlessness of resistance”.

The return to a slow run down within the guidelines of a new “Plan” is what the NUM will settle for too. They understand the “realities” of the capitalist marketplace. Without subsidies – out of the question from this government – British coal is uncompetitive. Closures are the “inevitable” result. The only thing to be negotiated is the speed and the price of them. They know their best hope is to set the terms of the negotiations over future closures in advance with a national agreement. That is what they will accept if they are allowed to determine the level of struggle and its goals.

Presuming neither side decisively defeated the other the NUM and NCB’s settlement would remove the threat of compulsory redundancies. Better terms would be offered. Some closures would be put off for a year or two — this to be sold to the miners in the hope that a Labour government will be elected, or an upturn in the market will occur. None of this will be easy for either side – one facing its members, the other facing the government. That is why this strike has been a long one and could go on much longer still, inflicting in the process the maximum damages on the finances and morale of the miners themselves.

Just postponing the process of closures would be some sort of result of course. It would demonstrate if nothing else determination not to be passively subjected to market forces. But for those miners in the affected pits the months or years of extra work wouldn’t enable them to make up the money lost in the strike. Without the other thing to be won it would be a hollow victory indeed. That other thing to be won is the development of a confidence and solidarity at rank and file level which could mount an effective resistance to closures when they restart. The divisions between miners that have deepened in the course of this strike show the problem clearly. Realism says resistance to closures is doomed — that is only true if the miners don’t take this opportunity to forge better links directly with other pits and other regions.

The first step in that process must be to recognise that the strike already faces grave problems. Organised on the union’s terms, at a bad time of year, with little preparation — it would be a struggle to achieve the union’s limited objectives. If miners want more than that then they have no
alternative but to take control of the extension of the strike themselves. Successes are urgently needed after months of defeats at the hands of the police. Whether it’s closing down the steel works, or power stations, or stopping the import of coal through non-union ports only winning immediate successes will overcome the widespread passivity in the strikers own ranks and provide a basis for the miners themselves to take charge of the strike. The “militant” leadership of the NUM will not deliver the goods — the miners’ only choice is to take them themselves.

The Union

The unity that the NUM has tried to maintain during the strike isn’t a unity between workers. For them it’s not just the future of the coal industry that’s at stake (as distinct from the livelihoods of miners). Throughout the three months of the strike, during the overtime ban before that — indeed in all the attempts at industrial action since Scargill became president, it has been the unity and future of the NUM itself that has been the overriding concern. However this strike turns out, that is how they will measure “victory”.

The miners’ strike is the first national industrial action over jobs for many years. All other recent industry wide strikes — steel, firemen, health workers, lorry drivers etc. — have been over pay. (In the steel strike the unions manoeuvred anger over closures and redundancies into a strike over pay). This already moves the struggle off the ground which unions are happiest fighting on. (The NGA — a similarly “militant” union facing equally large problems, failed in its attempts to broaden its Warrington dispute with Eddie Shah beyond the question of sympathy action for the “Stockport Six”, and into the wider confrontation around technological threats to unionisation it wanted). This strike has built on the back of an overtime ban called in response primarily to a pay offer. (And when it comes to negotiating the end of the strike “winning” last year’s pay rise will figure in the list of “concessions”).

The “militant” national leadership of the NUM have wanted a national strike on the question of jobs for some time. But three ballots on the question have gone against them — though the last of these was a “calculated” defeat to stop protests at the closure of Lewis Merthyr colliery last March spreading into an unwanted strike over one closure. (See Playtime April ‘83). Scargill has been anxious not to make the mistake the NGA did over Warrington— tying a “confrontation” with the NCB/Government to one pit closure. The NUM have no answer to the NCB’s economic arguments in any particular case – sharing as they do the same capitalist logic. The NUM’s case is national — for NUM involvement in deciding the “future of the industry”.

This strike came about as spontaneously as the near strike last March. This time however the NUM leadership thought something might be made, of it. It began on the shaky foundation of the overtime ban, which groups of miners had already attempted to break. The national leadership had won agreement for the ban over the question of pay. Overtime bans are a traditional barometer for testing militancy. In this case it was clearly hoped that the hardship it caused miners — tied into the circuit of mortgage and credit debts to a much greater extent than in ‘72 or ‘74 – would generate anger that could be channelled into a “show-down” with the NCB this winter. (The overtime ban supposedly reducing the level of coal stocks before then.)

However it also came at the end of a series of pit closures, in which resistance (seldom solid in the first place) had been scuppered by the regional or national NUM executives. (Most notably at Lewis Merthyr and at Polmaise in Scotland last winter — both in traditionally militant areas). The direct catalyst to the present strike was the announcement of the closure of Cortonwood colliery in militant S. Yorkshire. Having established at a show of hands on March 4th that Cortonwood itself was “nearly unanimous” in favour of strike action the regional executive called a regional strike confident of overwhelming support in their area. Scotland followed suit. Though rumblings of
discontent were audible elsewhere the strike would probably have remained regional. However MacGregor at this point announced his plans for the industry. That production targets had been set which involved the closure of between 20 and 28 pits and at least 20,000 jobs over the next year. He also warned that this would involve “if necessary” the industry’s first compulsory redundancies. This deliberate challenge brought out other areas, some by executive strike call, some after ballots. Some ballots were against striking however.

Scargill and the “militant” NUM leaders waited for a “domino effect” to occur — one area following another out on strike, or being picketed out by miners from other areas. This avoided a national ballot which they weren’t sure of winning until some weeks into the strike, and which in some areas would clearly have been lost — risking a refusal to strike in those areas. On the other hand if the strike didn’t spread or the militancy proved not to be there the “militant” leaders wouldn’t have shot their bolt — knowing that they would be unlikely to have a second chance for the sort of union run national strike they wanted. While this strategy of inaction worked its course, Scargill spent the first two weeks of the strike in the High Court, arguing over the union’s pension fund strategy.

The “domino effect” strategy suited the executive — it sowed the seeds of future problems. Though confrontation had been signalled for long enough for the NCB and Government to make preparations, the strikes “spontaneous” development meant that few preparations were in hand on the part of the union or the miners themselves. Striking with coal stocks high meant a long financially damaging strike. The miners had little time to make financial or material preparations of any kind. In “moderate” areas not even the unions basic case for a national strike had been put to the miners as pickets from other areas were to discover. The first priority target for picketing became not coal stocks or movements but other pits. In some cases picketing was successful. In others and particularly in Nottinghamshire it failed abysmally.

Notts has always been a “moderate” area, and this was not the first time Yorkshire miners had attempted to picket them out. This time it was done without any prior appeals to the Notts miners by either the union or by fellow Miners. The national executive were letting matters take their course, and in any case wouldn’t tread on the toes of the regional executive. The Notts executive without actually saying so were clearly signalling to the membership that strike calls could be ignored, and busily isolating those militants who had come out on strike. Sadly there was no attempt by Yorkshire miners themselves to go to the Notts miners before picketing. Perhaps they assumed that talking could be left to the union. In fact attitudes had been hardening before the strike began. Notts miners had been working harder during the overtime ban to increase production bonuses. When picketing began the police operation in the county made it all but impossible to approach Notts miners directly. And as violence developed out of the frustrations of not being able to picket, divisions became set hard. To such an extent that a “right to work”/”right to a ballot” backlash emerged which eventually turned on the Notts executive when it finally called for picket lines to be observed as a matter of loyalty to the union.

When the picketing began the NCB went to court for an injunction against it. They adjourned it a week later however — partly because they realised attempts at sequestering funds might unite the miners at a time when it seemed the strike might still crash on take-off. But partly because it was clear that the police operation was succeeding in making picketing ineffective.

The executive refused to call a national ballot, preferring to defer a decision from meeting to meeting. The furore over the ballot served its purpose in building tensions between militant and moderate executives. Eventually to maintain union “unity” it was agreed to call a delegate conference instead. The conference endorsed the strike and handed control of it to the national leadership in an attempt to give it purpose and direction. The half-heartedness and lack of
preparation on the part of the regional executives was already making itself felt in terms of weakness in picketing. But handing control over to the national leadership can only be against the interests of the miners, in terms both of waging the strike and what the strike will achieve. This is already evident. The unsuccessful picketing in Notts was stepped up. It remained unsuccessful and diverted resources from more important targets. Outside the power stations and coal depots dispensations allowing coal through for essential services, negotiated between unions, has made nonsense of the picketing. Where other tactics developed such as the motorway blockades it has been on a wildcat basis and the executives have stepped in to stop it. Miners have been warned that if they picket anywhere except where they are sent by the union they won’t be legally represented by the union if they finish up in court. More crucially the executives have taken tight control of funds, refusing travel and petrol expenses for any but authorised activities. Since the unions intelligence systems are far less effective than the police’s this means that the only hope of making picketing more effective by responding quickly to events on the ground is lost. And since the strike has gone on long enough for the miners own financial reserves to have gone, it means that where they are unable to get their hands on donations direct they are restricted to what the union will permit them to do.

As a result the most innovative actions of the strike so far have been those of the women’s support groups. These groups have sprung up more or less spontaneously — admittedly helped by a social welfare worker or two. But unlike their role in previous strikes as a support group they have become active in furthering the strike in their own right. (It has to be said that as activity by “wives” this has been welcomed by the miners. Attempts at solidarity by women workers like nurses and office workers has not infrequently run into entrenched male chauvinism.)

The NUMs strategy of vainly trying to match the police in set piece picketing and appealing to other union leaderships to police the blacking of coal movements can only lead to defeat. Its move towards staging rallies like those at Mansfield and Sheffield cannot compensate for this. It can only put in doubt even the “victory” the NUM leadership is seeking, a new “plan for coal” to agree the rate at which closures are staged and jobs are sold. The union has defied one court injunction and will defy any more. But that is as far as its “militancy” will extend in practise. From the start the NUM has been dependent on rank and file initiative — the low level of active support amongst miners has lead it to try to offset this by strictly controlling activities. That’s not to say that they wouldn’t welcome miners’ initiatives to raise the level of struggle – knowing that the control of strike funds and communications they already hold make it unlikely it could “get out of hand”. But the bureaucratic stranglehold they have already developed can only act to defuse militancy and initiative. Their strategy can only lead to a “siege mentality” as greater and greater efforts are put into simply surviving the hardship imposed by the strike, in an almost certainly doomed race to outlast coal stocks.

The miners can only win anything by taking over the extension of the strike themselves. What is urgently needed are local victories — the closure of the steelworks, or the blocking off of non-union ports. Only some sort of success will encourage those strikers who are not taking an active role to get involved. The only alternative is to trust Scargill and follow his “militant” lead into a drawn out and financially crippling strike. That is why the myth of that “militancy” has to be exposed and cast aside. Scargill’s role at the end of the day is that of every other union leader — not “Mine Fuhrer”¹ but Herr Peace².

¹ This is a reference to a notorious headline that appeared in the Sun newspaper in May 1984, in which a photograph of Scargill was displayed with his right arm held in an apparent Nazi salute with the headline “Mine Fuhrer”. However, it only appeared in the first edition because the print unions prevented its subsequent publication – bizarrely they blocked the publication of the photograph but not the accompanying text.

² This is a reference to the fact that Scargill wore a wig, or at least appeared to!
Miners! By the Left! Quick March!

“The free spirit of working class solidarity is alive and well in East London if the enthusiasm and commitment generated there by the Miner’s strike is anything to go by. The dispute has galvanised Labour party activists in the area as few recent issues have succeeded in doing — because once again the men and women of the NUM are in the vanguard of the fight back against a reactionary Tory Government and its coercive laws. As Chris Morris, press officer for the Hackney trade union sub-committee puts it, “This is the one people have been waiting for. With the miners in the fight we know we can win.”

There aren’t any mines in Hackney, but you wouldn’t know it from the way the offers of support and messages of encouragement have been pouring in…”

- London Labour Briefing

“Surely the miners’ strike presents us with the perfect opportunity to explain and even clarify the deep division between state socialism and anarchism.”

- Freedom, May 1984

The working class is perhaps big enough not to give a dog’s biscuit about the deep division between the Plan for Coal and the Anarchist Plan for Coal (“Abolish the Coal Board. The mines belong to the miners.”). But Freedom has stumbled across a rich seam of truth: the strike has been the signal for every creeping variety of opportunist to mystify and even moralise upon the deep division between workers in struggle and parasites like themselves...

... Swarming over the body of the working class, contorting grotesquely in the fight for improved positions, sharpening their needle-like ideological teeth, sucking out bloody validations, digesting them and trying to poison the host with their excrescences, secreting subtle webs of myth and distortion, filling the air with their buzzing ...

We’ll Let Them Starve!

Moss Evans, left wing general secretary of the TGWU, promised that his union wouldn’t let the miners be “starved back to work”. What altruism! (Visions of grimy, emaciated faces beaming with gratitude as Moss serves up the dumplings and gravy). Of course, if they are forced to submit by anything less than famine, tough. Charity begins at home.

Evans’ sickening sanctimony is echoed throughout the left and its publications. Every week they print pictures of pickets getting shit beaten out of them by the police. What a morale-booster. Aren’t we high enough on righteous indignation? Or is there another message for the working class? The left’s journalism — showing miners getting humiliated, and writing up the strike in a “positive” way contains the same message as the mainstream propaganda it deplores. But at least on ITN we get to see some kicks going in the right direction.

Of course, nobody has to buy the left’s papers or take their leaflets. But if I was on a picket line, and some grinning Trot came up carrying a full-page blow-up of a pig atrocity in one outstretched hand, and a packet of pork sausages in the other, I’d have to think about how hungry I was before deciding on the next move.
Other things show the left’s desire to portray the miners as martyrs to the bosses and state. When the police get flexible in their interpretation of civil liberties, the left screeches about tapped telephones and the right to move freely on the queen’s highway. Well, the police aren’t neutral, and it’s important to point to the difference between official reality and what’s really happening, but the left turns issues of struggle into moral points. What can they say when workers block motorways, burn down signal boxes and sabotage vehicles? In public they ignore it, in private they apologise—“oh, well the workers are forced to do these things”. As long as they feel they can point to the other side using dirtier dirty tricks, as long as the workers take care not to outdo the bosses in skulduggery, the left will turn a blind eye, or even defend them. The left always ends up promoting a double standard. In its efforts to extract political capital from the struggle, its posture of outraged surprise barely conceals the underlying cynicism.

**Let’s Return to the 20’s!**

Digging around for sacrificial models to project onto the working class, the left turns its attentions to the past. What a rich haul it has plundered from the tomb of working class history. The long strike of 1926, which ended in starvation and defeat, is repeatedly held up as a shining example of noble struggle in the face of suffering. Thus the left tries to wrap the shroud of the past round the miners’ strike in 1984. If they consent to this kind of treatment, they’ll deserve socialism. The left is promoting the sacrificial myth of the miners as the finest warriors among the ranks of the workers—the ones who might just be able to save us all.

*Tribune* (4/5/84) carried an article under the headline “WHEN THE NOTTS MINERS STOOD BY THE UNION”, playing up the appeal of the past for all it was worth. For 11 years after 1926, Nottinghamshire miners struggled bitterly against a scab union set up by George Spencer. The final outcome was a deal between the employers, the Spencer union and the predecessor of the NUM; one which angered many Notts miners. And in 1984 Spencer is no longer around to set them up for division and defeat. Instead they have the NUM, which helped sow the seeds of disunity by agreeing to differential bonuses between pits; which repeatedly suppressed and isolated groups of miners struggling against pit closures, until it could get a dispute on its own terms; which even now is fettering the pickets by jealously controlling communications and money for transport.

In getting round this and the other obstacles they face, the miners will find themselves burying large chunks of their “heritage”. They will need to rely on direct contacts among themselves and with other workers, in order to outflank the bureaucracy (fuck the Cripple Alliance); and on their own ingenuity to outwit a well-organised, tooled-up Plod.

The miners do not carry the burden of the whole British working class on their backs, no matter how hard the left tries to nail them to the cross, no matter how hard it tries to obscure the real issues of this struggle by flinging shit in people’s eyes.

**Democracy: Now You See It…**

The left’s line on the “democracy issue” in this dispute betrays the double standard in another way. When it suits them, the left uses all the arguments to hand in democracy’s favour. They will use democratic structures, for instance, to deny a “platform” to groups they don’t like. They make a distinction between “workers” and “bourgeois” democracy, the distinction being that “workers” democracy, whether by ballot or show of hands, produces the right decisions. When necessary, the left will call for something called “Active Participatory Democracy”. This means excluding part of the electorate on the grounds that they don’t “Participate” enough, i.e. they don’t usually attend meetings.
But when, as in the early weeks of the miners’ strike, the wrong side wants a National Strike Ballot, lo and behold! The left sees the light! Democracy is just a bourgeois charade! Only the miners on strike have the right to decide whether or not to stay out! They understand that workers’ own struggles, which almost always begin with militant action by a minority, makes nonsense in practice of the “majoritarianism” (the idea that nothing should take place unless a majority agrees) and the institutional separation of decision-making and acting that democracy enshrines.

Thus, they sneeringly point out that Thatcher is all in favour of letting the miners have their say, but doesn’t want a GLC election next year because the result could be embarrassing. Precisely. The left’s opposition to a National Strike Ballot is no less opportunist. It will attach itself to “democratic” ideology wherever that ideology can provide a lever for its own bureaucratic ambitions. In private, a leftist will darkly admit that the “real” issue is not one of democracy, but one of class power. They’re merely trying to trick the workers into taking it. For themselves, of course. After the transition.

The point of course is that democracy, with its fetish for the airing of opinions and the moment of decision as a preliminary to action, offers nothing to workers. It offers everything to those who would divert, institutionalise or block their struggles, whether from the left or from the right.

Together, We Can’t Win!

The mindless triumphalism and empty sloganeering of the left has reached new heights during the miners’ strike. The more often they scream “The Miners CAN Win”, “Solidarity WILL Win”, the more abstract this Winning, this Solidarity, becomes. Rarely does the left venture to suggest what “victory” might mean, or how long it will last (except of course that it means “Maggie” being “Out”.) Every week, Socialist Worker leads with a variation on the same slogan, Six weeks ago, they told the workers that MacGregor was “rattled”. They told us he was “rattled” again last week. Time and time again over the last 2 months it seems we have been on the verge of a general strike.

But the masses cannot be allowed in on the more sophisticated insights of the left, for obvious reasons; the masses probably wouldn’t take to them very warmly. In private, the left is gearing up for a defeat — not theirs, the workers’ — no matter what they say in their papers. The theorists are already weighing up the “balance of class forces” in their oily palms, calculating the probabilities, selecting scapegoats, perfecting the “lessons” to be “applied”. For in the end, it doesn’t much matter to the left whether it makes its gains on the back of a victorious working class, or one demoralised and defeated.

The police tactics used during the miners’ strike show that the ruling class have learnt a great deal from the class struggle (both in work-places and on the streets) over recent years. Now they are responding accordingly. It’s time for a working class counter-response.

Many of the recent police actions are nothing new. Over the past three months we’ve seen:

1) The routine and fairly overt phone-tapping of union offices and similar intelligence gathering procedures (no doubt with the help of their fellow trade unionists in the civil service – the domestic counterparts of GCHQ). On one recent occasion a phone call from a journalist to a member of the Yorkshire NUM staff was interrupted by a police radio message about traffic, and in S. Wales on the 6th April a coach proprietor was asked by the police to reveal the destination of pickets 10 mins. after the union had phoned through their booking. Miners and union officials have responded to this by laying false trails – at one stage sending hundreds of police to a disused coal depot in Kent.

2) The use of infiltrators and agent provocateurs on picket lines. This has been done more or less
routinely throughout the strike. On 9th April David Owen Chief Constable of N. Wales admitted using plainclothes officers at the Point of Ayr colliery and on 10th April Leon Brittan publicly defended the use of these tactics.

When 4000 pickets succeeded in getting to Babbington colliery on 9th April a number of police infiltrators (in NCB donkey jackets and NUM stickers) began throwing stones. When one of them was challenged he claimed to be from “a Doncaster pit” but was unable to name one. This sort of activity doesn’t just give the filth good excuses to nick people (for example by shouting “Push” and arresting those who do), but combined with trade union accusations that all picket line violence is the result of police provocation it ensures that the miners are confused as to what’s really going on and so hesitant about doing whatever is necessary to make picketing effective.

3) The extensive use of snatch squads (aided by police infiltrators who’ve been known to “target” particular miners by attaching coloured stickers to them) to break up picket lines and grab “ring-leaders”.

All of these things were made use of during the miners strikes of ‘72 and ‘74 and much of the blatant brutality that’s been seen – miners being roped to railings, car windscreen being smashed with crowbars, pickets being beaten up and interrogated about their political views, “saturation policing” in pit towns – is all pretty standard stuff wherever proletarians confront “their” law and order.

What is new is:

1) The level of national coordination of the police. The idea that there is no national police force in Britain has always been a myth. And ever since the First World War (and probably before then) the State has maintained some sort of permanent organisation to coordinate the police and other state agencies during periods of social unrest. Presently it’s the Civil Contingencies Committee. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this coordination has been tightened up in recent years.

In addition to this coordination at governmental level there have also been weekly meetings of the Chief Constables and regular briefings from the Home Office (known about by Fleet St. hacks but almost entirely kept out of the papers).

2) The restriction of movement of flying pickets which began in the second week of the strike when Yorkshire miners were turned back from Lancashire along the M62 and Kent miners were stopped at the Dartford tunnel on the way to Nottingham.

3) Although the use of snatch squads is nothing new, the sophistication of “disturbance control” techniques available to the police has been considerably extended since the ‘81 riots. Police in full riot gear (flame-proof clothing, helmets etc.) were quick to appear on the scene during the disturbances at the mass picket in Warrington last November and the 23 man Police Support Units used in the present strike carry riot equipment as standard issue. It also must be remembered that the police now have large stocks of CS gas and rubber bullets as well as water cannons to make use of if they think it appropriate.

The point is that the agencies of the State have noted the problems associated with large-scale struggles like the ‘72 & ‘74 miners’ strikes, ‘78 lorry drivers strike, 1980 steel strike, 1981 riots and so on, and have made suitable contingency plans. On the one hand there have been strategic economic preparations like ensuring large stock-piles of coal at power stations, and on the other the increasing organisational sophistication and “tooling up” of the police and other State bodies.
The Civil Contingencies Committee is one of the standing Cabinet committees set up to deal with the major areas of Government activity. It was set up as the National Security Committee by the Heath government in 1972 to replace the Home Office “Emergencies Committee” which had proved ineffective during the ‘72 miners’ strike. Its brief was to redraw the national War Plan on the assumption that the main enemy would be internal, to cover full-scale “state of emergency” situations (prolonged strikes by key workers, insurrections etc.). This was accomplished by 1975, at which time the Committee was renamed and continued with its other task of making plans for “contingencies” — covering everything short of a full scale Emergency — terrorism, hi-jacking, flood disasters, maintaining essential services during strikes etc.

It is serviced by the Civil Contingencies Unit within the Cabinet Office which sets up interdepartmental teams to plan coordination between ministries, police and military with regard to specific threats of strike action. (This includes coordinating intelligence as to strike plans). Assessments of the seriousness of the strike and suggestions for countermeasures are presented to the Emergencies Committee, a sub-committee of the Civil Contingencies Committee, which takes charge if the threat materialises. Then during the strike the Unit co-ordinates the activities of the different ministries, and if necessary the regional and county emergency committees.

The police equivalent of this last function is the National Reporting Centre based at New Scotland Yard. Not as some have thought a new body established specifically to “get” the miners this time — it was the main control centre during the riots in ‘81. However the miners’ strike in ‘72 was instrumental in focussing ruling class attention on the need for reform along these lines. “In November ‘73 Home Secretary Robert Carr announced that next time the police intended to ‘stop the masses forming’. The police planned to set up regional ‘intelligence units’ co-ordinated by Scotland Yard.” (Daily Telegraph 14/11/73, quoted in State Research 14). In fact this was only achieved as part of the wide-ranging institutional reforms begun by Robert Mark in the mid-seventies, under a Labour Government.

Similarly, the Police Support Units which have been in the front line of the control of picketing were commissioned in 1974 – ostensibly under the need to “meet situations before and after (nuclear) attack” (Police Manual of Home Defence 1974). In other words, as part of drawing up the ruling class War Plan against insurrection. As distinct from the SPGs which are permanent operational groups, the officers forming PSUs remain part of their division as regular officers, but available for call up when the need arises. Each of the 325 police divisions in Britain is required to have at least one PSU – an inspector, two or three sergeants and thirty officers. That’s 11,000 specially trained filth to act as the “foot soldiers” (to the SPG shock troops) in public order situations.
The vast amount of money spent on the police operations (already the cost to local authorities runs to tens of millions of pounds which the Government has now agreed to pay 75% of) may be seen by many liberals and leftists as "a waste of public money" (irresponsible spending by a nationalized industry perhaps?), but for capitalism the pacification of the working class is always a sound investment. The Hampshire constabulary chartered a Boeing 737 to fly 126 officers to the East Midlands. Who else would have such lavish company transport laid on to take them to their place of work?

The flying pickets succeeded in 1972 because the government had no effective response to them short of bringing in troops to assist the police. The miners succeeded in forcing the government and NCB to withdraw closure plans in 1981 because they caught them unprepared for a strike. The government has been making plans ever since for what’s been seen on both sides as an inevitable clash. Government and union plans were both geared to a strike this winter when the overtime ban had reduced coal stocks. The current strike wasn’t planned by either side. But the NCB and the

POLICE RIOT

The police ended Monday’s march with a rampage. It followed a pattern set after the rallies in Sheffield last month, when the police waited until most miners had left before setting about the remainder.

One eye witness told Socialist Worker, “Groups of miners were standing around, with the police trying to provoke them. Scuffles broke out and the police baton charged the miners, forcing them off the car park where they were waiting for their coaches.

“Mounted police drove some demonstrators half a mile down a road, lashing out at anyone who got in the way”.

Another eye-witness said, “I saw coppers smash a guy against a coach. He fell to the ground and was jumped on by three policemen, crushing him. More police came round to prevent the crowd rescuing him, but eventually they went because he was lying unconscious with the crowd shouting, “You’ve killed him”.
-- Socialist Worker, 19 May 1984

This piece of defeatist drivel refers to the miners march in Mansfield on May 14th. What it neglects to mention is that many miners had been spoiling for a show-down with the Old Bill all day. Groups of miners had marched through the streets shouting “Seig Heil!” at every copper they passed and giving stirring renditions of “Harry Roberts is our friend” (for our younger readers, Roberts achieved folk-hero status after murdering a policeman), and “Where’s yer fucking snatch squad now?” In response to this the filth kept a low profile, rarely being seen in groups of more than half a dozen.

Towards the end of the afternoon when the march was over and the miners were spread about more, the force showed itself in greater numbers, but even then there were several occasions when they obviously wanted to nick miners but thought better of it.

The tragedy is that when the show-down did finally come it was on the filth’s own terms with the miners too scattered, tired and, in many cases, pissed, for a united response.
government have had few problems adapting their plans to the situation. The NUM leadership was clearly afraid that if it didn’t take this opportunity for a near national strike under national direction as it presented itself, they risked not having a second chance.

The problem is that the miners seem to be using the same tactics as have served them in the past and expecting them to still work. The fact that MacGregor hasn’t used the Industrial Relations legislation to force the union to remove pickets or be savagely fined owes as much to his belief that the miners can be defeated without it as it does to his fear of a united class response.

The miners’ hesitation about taking the struggle on to the offensive can be seen in the dependency on their “radical” national leadership. For example in the militancy at the mass picket of NUM headquarters on April 12th to pressure the executive meeting not to call a strike ballot. The police injuries that occurred happened when the pickets surged forward to shake hands with Mick McGahey. If that dependency is scarcely surprising given the way the strike developed from a series of local disputes – in several cases in opposition to regional NUM leaderships, it still illustrates the lack of confidence in their own strength felt by many of the strikers. Illustrated more crucially by the low percentages of strikers actively picketing in many areas.

On the other hand, there are hopeful signs – the hundreds of miners demonstrating outside Lincoln Jail on May 5th demanding the release of 4 of their comrades from Kiverton Park colliery arrested on their way to a picket. The attempts to block motorways also showed a welcome break from traditional tactics which, aside from causing disruption in itself, could be extended to tie police resources down or even prevent the movement of police reinforcements.

So far there have been no attempts to break through police road blocks on the approaches to pits. As one Kent miner said to a playmate, “We shouldn’t be in coaches, we should be driving those bloody great articulated lorries”. All that’s happened so far is that miners have taken up “cross-country running” by parking coaches several miles from the pits. Nor have there been attempts to disable police control vans (or any other aspect of police communications), or develop tactics for dealing with snatch squads.

As with all other aspects of the struggle, tactics must turn from defence to offence. Failing to stop coal moving can’t be compensated by trying to generate public sympathy about the attack on the right to legally picket. Nor by relying on inter-union deals to limit scabbing, particularly in the face of the NCB’s advance planning to route imports through non-union ports. The battle against capitalist law ‘n’ order – at the immediate level the police – is one that should unite the whole working class. We should all be looking for ways to stretch the blue line as thinly as possible.
Tied up in Notts

The divisions between areas and pits in the current dispute are of course not as hard and fast as is being portrayed. From the first days of the strike, many miners in the Nottinghamshire area – supposedly solidly anti-strike – came out in support of actions in other coalfields. At the same time some pits in “union loyalist” areas have drifted back to work, often because their loyalty has been strained by closures which the NUM was not ready to fight in the past. But the fact remains that the government/NCB strategy has succeeded in softening up some areas and causing – on an immediate level – a division of interest between coalfields.

Up until now, closures of unprofitable pits have affected just about every coalfield in the country except North and South Notts. Nottinghamshire miners earn the highest bonuses in the industry, thanks to the incentive scheme introduced under Tony Benn in 1977, even though they’ve also seen these bonuses reduced in the last couple of years. Sensing that the majority opinion amongst their members would be against strike action, the officials in Notts, and other “soft” areas such as Leicestershire, naturally thought that in terms of their career interests a local ballot was the safest option. It could justify their inaction before those miners solidly out on strike. Once the decision to ballot was made, the NCB and government concentrated on bribing some areas to ensure a big anti-strike majority. The board sent out a special edition of its monthly newspaper, Coal News, setting out the lump sums miners could expect for being made redundant. This “offer” ranges from £5,217 for a 21-year old to £36,480 for a man aged 49, assuming average weekly earnings of £165. The government obviously realises that it will cost more to break unionism in the mines than the cut rate price of £1,000 per head at GCHQ!

After the area ballots, the NCB kept piling on the incentives to carry on working. During the overtime ban, maintenance work was undertaken on the Monday morning, so miners would be sent home on Mondays and lose a day’s pay. Now, as an incentive to cross picket lines, miners in Notts and other areas are being invited to spend Monday morning drinking tea in the canteen, and receive their productivity bonus as well as their basic pay.

Also, whereas before the strike, miners would receive an official warning if they left work 15 minutes early, now the management is inviting them to quit the coalface half an hour before their shift ends.

Production is well down in the areas where pits continue working. For example, at Cotgrave in South Notts, output is down by about 20,000 tons a week. But the object of the exercise is to break the unity of the miners, and so production bonuses are not only being paid, but have been restored to the levels in operation before the overtime ban.

The media has of course done all it can to inflame local chauvinisms, by reporting the great picket line spectacles in terms of militant Yorkshire pickets versus moderate Notts miners. Unfortunately, this does correspond in some measure to the traditional reality in the NUM. Notts has always been a problem for the NUM ever since the days of the Spencer union after the General Strike. The Yorkshire miners descended on Nottinghamshire early on in the 1969 and 1972 disputes. On this occasion, it would have been wiser for threatened miners to argue their case in Nottinghamshire at a rank and file level, and develop solidarity before contemplating strike action. Instead, “Scargill’s Army”, organised and co-ordinated by the Yorks NUM, turned up hoping to shame Notts miners into supporting them out of a “traditional loyalty to the union”. When this failed, the strikers had no choice but to try to picket out the scabs — although it was still by no means inevitable that attitudes should harden to the extent they have. Some of the acts of revenge (vandalism, threats to families, etc.) have been tactless to say the least. But with resources under the control of the union, and a massive police presence, real contact became increasingly difficult.
The conduct of the strike in these areas has therefore been left to small and isolated strike committees. While we admire the stand made by these isolated groups, it must be said that in many respects their ingrained trade union outlook is only making things more difficult. Specifically, it is a mistake for them to think the main effort needs to be winning over dribs and drabs of waverers, those miners who are only working because everyone else is. Most of the miners’ resources have been tied up in the concentrated effort to get Nottinghamshire out on strike. The secretary of the Notts strike committee is reported as saying that once they can get out those miners still going in to work, “the broader trade union movement can really throw its weight behind us”. But this “trench warfare” view of the struggle is unrealistic, for the simple reason that the miners must make rapid headway or starve — only the bosses can afford a drawn-out strike. With the resources they have at their disposal, the government and coal board are proving that they can tempt many miners across the picket lines. In these circumstances, which may mean compelling other groups of workers to stop work, the miners need big successes. These would show that the strikers have the ability as well as the will to win, and perhaps bring a greater unity — not vice versa. But this, of course, is not the way the NUM wants to conduct the strike.
Workers’ Playtime, August 1984

What we’re standing in: Coming clean on the miners’ strike

As this issue of Playtime is published the miner’s strike enters its 24th week. A national delegate conference has rejected the NCB’s “final” offer, and voted to continue the strike indefinitely. The NCB’s campaign for a return to work linked to the annual holidays has been a failure, as even their “independent” house journal, the *Times*, has been forced to admit. The continued efforts of the women’s support groups organising and distributing food has alleviated some of the desperate hardship caused by the strike, and provided a remarkable demonstration of practical solidarity. And in recent weeks there have been clear signs that many strikers have become more than ever determined to continue the fight to the finish. Not just evident in miners’ insistence that they would sooner see pits close than be starved back, but in the escalation of organised sabotage. A series of arson attacks on transport belonging to the NCB and private contractors has dramatically raised the level of attacks, which had already caused £1 million pounds worth of damage to NCB property to the end of July. Appeals by NUM officials to stop have been ignored and activities reached a peak on August 7th when several hundred strikers toured two Nottingham pits and the local NCB headquarters during the early evening (when police presence was minimal) attacking windows and cars and dispersing as the first police reinforcements arrived. Though evidently only involving a minority of strikers these are the first welcome signs of organised attempts to by-pass both the union’s useless set piece mass picketing and the hitherto successful police operation preventing it from succeeding. Similarly the police assaults on mining communities are more regularly meeting violent resistance.

Against this it’s also clear that the overall direction and control of the strike remains firmly in the hands of the NUM executives, and the majority of strikers are not actively involved. In this context the prospects for what can be won remain what they were 3-4 months ago. The gap between NUM and NCB at the last set of negotiations in July had narrowed considerably — the demand for the NCB to verbally withdraw its current plans was dropped and short term guarantees given over five pits. The difference was simply over how to set the criteria for closeability in future NUM/NCB bargaining. Scargill’s “militant” demands that a settlement will have to include items like a four day week, an improved wage offer and early retirement, are simply signals to the NCB that a settlement will have to include such items as sweeteners if an “agreement” on the, basis for future closures is to be sold to the miners.

For anything better than a face-saving sell-out to be achieved the strike would need to become more solid and be successfully extended in conjunction with other groups of workers. Though the prospect of another dock strike is there over the blacking of coal destined for Ravenscraig steel works, and the rail work-to-rule planned for September 10th will undoubtedly affect some coal movements, by themselves these are far from enough. As it becomes clear that coal stocks at power stations and existing pit head stocks will last until the new year, the only hope of extending the strike significantly is to stop coal movements on a large scale. The miners could not achieve this themselves without blacking by transport workers. It’s already clear that they cannot expect any widespread automatic solidarity — it is also doubtful whether official instructions to workers not to cross miners picket lines will be forthcoming, for all the bluster from “left” union leaders. It must be faced that as things stand the prospects for the sort of victory many of the miners are determined on are not rosy.
In this situation the tasks facing the strikers are not hard to see. The physical maintenance of the strike through food collection and distribution must continue. The emerging attempts by the NUM bureaucracy to take control of this (assisted by the Communist Party) must be resisted. The lessons of national control of picketing and of national and regional control of strike funds are there for all to see – consistent inertia and active sabotage of local initiative.

And the growing anger of strikers must be turned in a practical direction. Direct links must be forged between militant pits and regions, and within mining communities, so that when one-off closures restart after the strike ends, miners in the affected pits have a solidly based confidence in their ability to resist closure, or simply sell the jobs as dearly as possible. Miners must know already that when an agreement is reached over the basis for closures, they will be able to count on nothing from the NUM when closures restart — as miners in those pits closed over the last couple of years have found the hard way.

Lastly miners must directly approach transport workers to ask for blacking of coal movements. The results of relying on deals between union executives have already been seen – for example in the deals over exemptions from blacking.

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In this issue of Playtime we’re not going to go into a detailed account of events in the strike of the sort we have given in the past. We believe it’s important for all militants and revolutionaries to be able to make for themselves as accurate an estimate as possible of the prospects and significance of any given strike (or any other instance of class struggle) in its own terms. One of the motivations for producing Workers Playtime was our dissatisfaction with the constant attempts to look at events through the rose-tinted spectacles of preconceived ideas – and with the ludicrous ideas allowed to flourish by this refusal to look at what’s actually happening. At this level our ambition was to demonstrate the sort of basic account of struggles which is possible even where direct sources of information don’t exist. In other words to do what anyone convinced of the importance of class struggle should be capable of doing for themselves.

But this certainly wasn’t our only reason for producing Playtime. We also wished to contribute positively to the debate about the importance and direction of class struggle. We believe that no struggle however militant can win more than short term, sectional gains and that that will remain the case while capitalism dominates every aspect of society. That no change of government or system of government, no programme of reforms however “radical” can significantly better our situation. Only the overthrow of capitalism, — the system of state and exchange economy which exists in every country in the world – will end the social division and alienation, the exploitation and oppression that make up our lives. Only then will it be possible to achieve a genuine community, without racial, sexual or class division or exploitation. The workplace clearly isn’t the only place in which the revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalism will take place. That involves overthrowing all capitalist social relations, for capitalism doesn’t just dominate the workplace but all of society. However as the heart of the capitalist system – the place where capital itself is produced through our exploitation — it is where a crippling blow can be dealt by taking control of the means of production. Of course we don’t simply want to run them ourselves but to create from the potential within them a society fit to live in — but that can only be done on the basis of workers seizing control away from capital. The debate about how to get from here to there was what we wished to contribute to through Playtime.

The reaction to the miners’ strike in those circles of people who believe like us that revolution is necessary and desirable has illustrated the scale of the problem. From the start we have seen divisions paralleling those in the miners own ranks. Some were convinced from the start that the
strike was “doomed” and that nothing could come from it relevant to revolution except an awful warning of what happens when workers don’t overthrow capitalism, but stick to struggles for reforms. Others from the first were frothing at the mouth at the Significance of the strike as if it meant social revolution was just around the corner. It’s necessary to avoid both extremes the first leading to a cynical passivity, the other to frenzied activity and then disillusionment.

It seems we need to go back to basic principles.

The miners’ strike is important to us as fellow workers or proletarians, because it has happened at all. The last four years have seen the effects of economic crisis on class struggle – a series of defeats of groups of workers, the steady growth of mass unemployment and heavy attacks on us as capitalism attempts to rationalise itself in unsuccessful attempts to restore profitability. With all its problems the miners’ strike is the first serious fight by a group of workers, not over pay but over jobs. And it’s the first industry-wide strike to remain solid in the face of fierce resistance from not merely the employers but also the state via the police, and equally in the face of considerable difficulties. From the start it was seen on both sides as not merely an attack on the NCB’s plans but as a challenge to the government. As such it has already had an effect in boosting the morale of other sectors of workers in pursuing their own claims — the relative timidity with which the opportunities have been taken up testifying as much to the degree to which workers had been convinced of the need for the “new realism”, as it does to the cunning of the government or the manipulations of the unions.

But the importance of the strike goes beyond the fact that it raises the general temper of class struggle by setting an example. For us as revolutionaries it is important because the experience of being involved in such a mass struggle is a radicalising one. It creates the conditions within which talking of overthrowing society becomes more than daydreaming.

Participation in intense collective struggles has the effect of changing people’s sense of the inevitability of the everyday misery of capitalism, and of their ability to act to change it.

People acquire a heightened sense of how they are exploited, and as the system reacts to their struggle, of the meaning of class divisions and the violence with which capitalism will defend them. The experience of acting collectively can expose the hollowness of “normal” relations at work. The experience of being abused in the media sets in perspective the same sort of attack on other strikers. Together with the contact with other workers the struggle brings it can deepen the sense of having a common class identity.

The experience of struggle can lead people to admit, and express class anger. At the same time it can provide an experience of autonomy, arising from the sense of individual and collective power in activity, and from the sense of freedom from the normal constraints and institutions of capitalist society. Both experiences are transient — but they are vital in the development of class consciousness.

People can come to see through the political institutions of capitalist society as a result of their experiences. Not just the class divisions separating them from their employers, but the class role of the state and it’s servants in aiding them. Not just the openly anti-worker groupings but the false friends – the socialist and leftist parties, and the trade unions. People can come to an understanding that these institutions are not eternal and unchangeable. They can acquire a sense of the possibility of things being different, being better. The experience of acting collectively, of organising their own struggle can lead to a sense of class power. It can lead to an understanding of the need for organised collective struggle to resist and challenge capitalism, and that such struggle cannot be organised through or by the institutions of capitalist society, whether unions or parties.
In a struggle on the scale of the miner’s strike these effects aren’t confined to the workplace. As we’ve seen, they have embraced the communities within which miners live, even their families. The experience of the struggle breaking out of the original limits of the factory or pit can lead to a sense of how the struggle is linked to other struggles. How one’s own oppression and exploitation are linked to the different oppressions and exploitation of others.

Some of these elements are present in all situations of class conflict, even the most isolated and individual. The significance of mass struggles such as the miners is that the degree and intensity to which they are experienced is magnified. And on the other hand they are no longer confined to the participants – a struggle such as the miners takes place in the public sphere in a way most strikes are not. It spreads the experiences arising from the strike to all other workers even if it is only as passive spectators.

The fact that people come to a greater sense of class consciousness as the result of class conflict, says nothing about how that consciousness will be applied, or about what conclusions will be drawn from it. Much of the experience remains just that, something which people don’t have the language to articulate or discuss. And the sense of the experiences importance which leads people to radical ideas to find ways of describing and understanding their experiences, mostly leads them to ways of thinking and systems of ideas which far from challenging capitalism reinforce it, and far from leading to revolution lead to the conviction that it’s impossible.

Class activity and consciousness, which arise from the experience of class conflict are the necessary precondition for coming to understand the need for and possibility of revolution — but they do not automatically create that understanding. The purpose of revolutionary organisation is organised activity to develop a better understanding of class conflict, class society and what is needed to replace them. And to develop ways of making those ideas clear and accessible to other proletarians.

The real significance of the miners’ strike is to impress on us the need to develop the organisational links which can make talk of an autonomous, collective class response a reality. For us as revolutionaries, this means coming to terms with the urgency and scale of what has to be done.

**Material Solidarity**

As the weeks pass the question of material aid for the strikers becomes more important. Inevitably after an initial enthusiasm, the amount of contributions reaches a plateau, or even falls. Since for many this is the only form of support that is possible, it’s important that efforts are kept up.

It is also important that wherever possible people make sure that funds go direct to help the strike rather than into the NUM national funds to pay the £115,000 a week spent on administration costs.

As the precedent for sequestration of funds has been set in South Wales it will become increasingly important to see that money doesn’t get caught up in wrangling between regional executives and sequestrators, but gets to branch or pit level direct.

Those not sure of where money will go (this is particularly the case in London where official collections have been sewn up between the NUM executive and the South East Region TUC) should try channelling resources towards the women’s support groups directly. Many local initiatives exist collecting food and also urgently needed household goods for distribution direct. Less obvious than food but just as much needed are baby food and toiletries soap, sanitary towels etc.
Communist Party Community Policing

In a recent issue of the *New Statesman* Beatrix Campbell, one of the CP feminists who have been intervening strongly in the women’s support groups, wrote that “The very act of collecting has been made political by a police force which appears to be desperately improvising devices to nail any public mobilisation of support for the miners”. It’s an accurate description of the activities of her fellow CP members on Glasgow Trades Council. Here the efforts of the CP nationwide to build their own dwindling ranks through support activities can be seen in their true colours. Local collections of various kinds – some by leftist groups – but also regular street collections by Glasgow anarchists, unemployed groups and others, were being handed over direct to local pits. The trades council circulated rumours that money was being misappropriated and threatened to call in the police if collections were not stopped. In the meantime they used their influence with the Regional Executive of the NUM to try to have the collections refused. The Exec wouldn’t go that far but did insist that pits return money — which they would accept however for their own regional funds.
The Miners’ Strike in Lancs

[We were pleased to receive the following article from a member of Wildcat, a revolutionary group based in Manchester. It covers their experiences of the first few weeks of the miners’ strike in Lancashire.]

Since the strike began, Wildcat has intervened on picket lines, talking to strikers and giving out leaflets (two of which were jointly signed by the Communist Bulletin Group). We have been arguing the effects of trade unionism – both in the actions of the officials and in the heads of NUM members.

Background

In the Lancashire area, there are eight pits owned by the NCB, employing 6,500 miners. It is a shrinking area of coal production. The closure of Cronton pit was announced on March 2nd 1984, and it is now only operating salvage work. At Agecroft pit in Salford, there is only one coal face working. All the other pits are remnants of the old mining community around Wigan and St. Helens, and they are threatened with redundancies.

The 1977 productivity deal, initiated by Tony Benn and forced through by the NUM executive despite a National Ballot rejecting it, led to differences in pay between areas. A faceworkers basic wage is £130 a week before stoppages (surface workers get less). Productivity bonuses can be up to £100 at the most productive pits in the country — none of which are in Lancashire.

Wildcat regarded the overtime ban — begun in November 1983 as a diversion from a strike. Whether this was deliberate or not, its effect was to make the less militant miners reluctant to strike because they were short of money. However, it is defended by militant pickets, who claim the ban was effective in lowering coal stocks.

The result of the ballot in Lancs on whether or not to strike against the NCB’s redundancy and pay plans for 1984-5, was announced on March 16th. Only Bold pit had a majority in favour of striking. At the other pits (apart from Agecroft, which voted decisively against), the result was close. Overall, 59% of those who voted were against strike action. 3 days later, pickets from Yorkshire arrived throughout the Lancs coalfield. The strike spread, thousands of miners went on strike, and coal production — for the time being — was stopped.

Limitations on the strike: the police

The police responded to the mass picketing by setting up roadblocks on all roads out of Yorkshire, and on the motorway exits in Manchester. We were told of pickets turned away three times and escorted back to Yorkshire, before getting through. The police have mainly been concentrating on Agecroft, as the “show pit” to be kept working. Only with the arrival of hundreds of pickets from Northumberland and Durham on May 1st, did the police become more aggressive and make more arrests. But they have been resisted. We were told of three Northumberland miners who were arrested and locked in a police van with a superintendent — they threatened to break his neck unless he let them out. He did!

Limitations on the strike: the media

One of the main concerns of the pickets has been the media, particularly the TV news portrayal of strikers, lies about the numbers of miners working in the local papers, and the journalists and camera crews touring the picket lines looking for violence. The Sun is singled out by the miners we
talked to as the worst offender. We had the pleasure of taking part in the removal of *Daily Express* reporters from a mass picket at Golborne pit. The media is not just an enemy of the strikers in its bias and lies, but is equally effective in its suppression of information. Miners from Northumberland say that there are no power stations working in Northumberland and all the power workers are laid off. There is no news of these examples of the picketing’s effectiveness, or of workers’ struggles taking place in other countries.

**Limitations on the strike: the NUM**

The Lancashire NUM officials made explicit that they had no wish to see the class violence of mass picketing remain on “their” territory. Frank King, NUM Branch President of Parkside pit, said that pickets calling out “scab” and “blackleg”, “make it hard to cross the picket line”. What did he expect the pickets to say?! Gaskell, NUM Branch Secretary at Golborne pit, commented that the “pickets were jeering and shouting”, and “had a bad effect on the afternoon shift”. These officials wanted control of the Lancashire area. They called a one-week official strike, for March 26th-30th, it was said to “press for a national ballot”. Gaskell, however, revealed the real reasons: “Things were getting too hot with the pickets … we decided to quieten the situation”. The effect was to remove the pickets from Yorkshire, and send the Lancashire miners home.

Only the most militant miners came out to picket. At Bold pit a strike committee was elected to organise picketing. Miners were told to picket only their own pits. Consequently, they had no information, and we had to tell them what was happening at other pits we had visited. There was some “unofficial” picketing of power stations, but the pickets were told not to do that until union leaders had met. The pickets we spoke to said they didn’t want a national ballot – it was unnecessary as the strike was growing. At Sutton Manor and Bold pits, there were disputes about safety cover. Pickets at these pits told us “we’re staying out next week whatever the Lancs NUM decide”.

**Confusion**

What the Lancs NUM did decide, at a delegate meeting on March 31st, was to call off the strike action. This set the scene of confusion which has plagued the Lancashire miners ever since. Agecroft returned to work, Bold and Sutton Manor stayed out, Cronton kept working salvage, and miners at other pits were divided. The pickets didn’t know what the local NUM was doing, or what the officials’ attitude to the strike was.

Following the National NUM conferences in Sheffield on April 12th and 19th, when the ballot rules were changed, and the area strikes re-affirmed, Lancashire leaders were concerned not to return to mass picketing where they were not in control. At an area NUM delegate meeting in Bolton on April 27th, a decision was taken to “ask” miners to join the strike. It was later reported that “many branch secretaries had no mandate to vote either way.” There had been no consultation at all with the miners. The union removed workers completely from decision-making, while obviously they wanted to participate. There was mass-lobbying of all union meetings. We were told at Sutton Manor pit that half the miners there wanted to attend the first area delegate meeting, but only one coach was going.

The pickets told us that the last Lancs NUM meeting was arranged to find a way of sending them back to work, which is why thirty of the lobbying miners organised a sit-in and occupied the NUM headquarters at Bolton. They wanted to prevent further meetings, saying “you don’t need a meeting to run the strike — only to call it off!” Sid Vincent, Lancs NUM General Secretary, is hated by the strikers for saying different things to different people. During the sit-in he said NUM meetings were cancelled because he wouldn’t cross the picket line at Bolton.
While this sit-in was going on, the message from the union on the picket lines at the pits is “Work normally and don’t cross the official picket lines.” No-one knows what this means! On May 5th a striking miner from Golborne pit showed a letter saying “from this afternoon, the strike is official at Golborne.” He had been on strike for eight weeks.

On May 8th, Vincent declared the strike in Lancashire official. The sit-in ended, but there was some feeling that they should have stayed and used the NUM facilities to print leaflets themselves. Everyone on the picket lines knew that many fewer miners had been working, due to the presence of 300 Northumberland and Durham pickets not due to Sid Vincent.

**Demands of the Strike**

Miners told us that the strike was to make sure that no pits were shut until they were worked out. It is obvious that when a pit is “worked out”, it is not that there is literally no coal left, nor is it anything to do with peoples’ need for coal or jobs; it is what is considered economically viable by the bosses. We argued the need to go beyond this, at least to include the pay claim and grievances over working conditions. This would be one way to involve miners who were reluctant to strike. Some miners thought that once pit closures were settled, then the pay claim and all other matters would be settled. No-one thought they could alter the demands of the strike. It was up to Scargill.

**Yorkshire Pickets**

Lancashire miners were suspicious of “their” local union, and consequently were more interested in ideas of self-organisation, such as organising picketing themselves, and tape-recording union meetings. On the whole, older miners had less faith in Scargill than the younger ones — who mainly made up the mass pickets. The pickets from Yorkshire were more keen to defend all NUM actions, although we heard an interesting story from a picket from Selby in Yorkshire. We asked why Yorkshire miners did not support the South Wales fight over redundancies in January 1983. He told us that pickets from South Wales arrived at Selby, a meeting was called, and the miners there agreed to strike. But the Branch NUM officials were divided, and as a result of their equivocations, the action ended in a one-day token strike. He said he thought it would have been better to strike then, last year, when there was more support.

**Coal Movements**

Coal is only supposedly being moved from pitheads to hospitals, old and handicapped peoples’ homes, schools and miners’ families. In fact, union officials are issuing vast numbers of dispensations for factories using coal. Pickets at Sutton Manor told us that union convenors at local factories had made agreements with the NUM to take coal if it was used for heating the factories, and not for manufacturing. If workers had had collections for the miners, coal was being taken to those workplaces. At Plesseys in Liverpool, workers were being made redundant. The unions there were campaigning for higher redundancy payments — and arranging with the NUM for coal to go in and keep the factory operating!

**On the Picket Lines**

The numbers of active Lancashire pickets is tiny. Since the strike began, at any time there has been a maximum of about 100. Thousands of miners are at home, for the whole idea of being on strike is based on not turning up to work, and waiting for victory to be negotiated. The active pickets realise the need to combat this. They said they need more pickets to stop all the mines, the power stations,
and all coal moving. They have had some successes: the NCB machinery works has been closed, 90% of train drivers are refusing to move coal from Warrington and Wigan, and, despite what the papers say, very little coal has actually been mined here since the start of the strike.

We argued the crucial importance of active participation in actually controlling the strike, and the strength of collective action. The pickets agreed, saying how you “saw things from the other side” when you were actively picketing. But the shortage of pickets led to demoralisation, as day after day, they watched local miners going in to work. They were unable to picket power stations as there were too few of them to resist police aggression, and they were unable to stop coal moving from a massive local coal dump. This led to desperation, the lowest point being before the arrival of the Northumberland pickets on May 1st. The Lancashire miners turned to sabotage: NCB lorry tyres were slashed, nails spread, and conveyor belts cut through. We were told “If we can’t stop them one way, we have to do it another.”

Spread the Strike!

The crucial point about the limitations of the strike so far, is that all the miners we have talked to, are aware of how vital the strike is for the whole working class — in the fight for our interests, to show workers can get the upper hand over the bosses. But there is a reluctance to argue that the strike should therefore be spread beyond the miners. Time and again they say “we must get all the miners out first.” We say it’s the same fight for all workers, that no jobs or working conditions are safe in this crisis, but the miners have been approaching other workers as trade union members. For example, there are two opencast pits in the area, not owned by the NCB, and with workers in the TGWU not the NUM, so they are still mining coal even though they are in their own dispute over pay and conditions. Lorry drivers in the TGWU who have been threatened with the sack if they refuse to cross picket lines, are left isolated in a personal dilemma, and so pickets have let them cross. The response must be collective, from the workers themselves, not directives of general support from union leaders to individual members.

Active miners had visited local factories to collect money, and told of their embarrassment and humiliation when doing this. We said that the arguments of the strike, not buckets for money, should be taken to other workers, especially those with their own struggles. Rather than diverting all energy into picketing Nottinghamshire and Agecroft pit in Lancashire, if miners joined their strike with other workers, the scab miners would see the potential in a strong movement and join in.

Even within the mines, on the picket lines the first question is “what union are you in?” On a picket line at Parkside pit, we saw all non-NUM members drive in to work, not stopped at all by the pickets. When we visited Bold pit in May, the pickets we spoke to thought that the canteen workers ought to be on strike too. But they said that they couldn’t tell them that “I’m just a worker - I’ve no authority” was what they said, and asked us to go to the strike committee, as they couldn’t leave the picket line! This is what being in a strong union means – workers unable to have confidence in themselves as workers, without the backing of the NUM.

Through making these criticisms, Wildcat is now greeted on the picket lines as “You’re the ones who support the miners but not the union”.

Signs of Radicalisation

It was the desperation of the most militant pickets in Lancashire, and the ineffectiveness of the struggle as it was being run by the union, that created an awareness of the need for more radical action. *Wildcat* produced a leaflet with the agreement of these pickets, urging all members of the working class to join the picket lines, and to transform the struggles of other workers into
immediate joint strike action with the miners. It was to be given out as widely as possible, by the
pickets as well as *Wildcat* members. If large numbers of non-miners turned up to the picket lines
which was not inconceivable, given local community support — then not only the present
organisation, but the trade unionist preconceptions of the strike would have been challenged, and,
we thought, significantly altered.

As it was, although the leaflet was well-received, it was inappropriate. We had overestimated how
far the radicalisation of the Lancashire pickets went. And after talk of solidarity by Scargill, NUR
and ASLEF bosses put a stop to any strike movement on the railways, and went to negotiate. The
leaflet also coincided with a change in the NUM’s tactics for controlling the strike, which pushed
the pickets further back into the union’s grasp. About 300 miners from Northumberland and
Durham arrived to form daily mass pickets throughout the Lancashire coalfield. In contrast to self-
organised mass picketing being an expression of the collective strength of the working class, what is
happening at the moment is a totally controlled, military style operation. Scargill is himself
directing mass picketing nationally. The individuals involved are simply so much cannon-fodder, in
set-piece confrontations with the police, such as at Agecroft pit, or, on a larger scale, at the
Orgreave coke works in Yorkshire. The local NUM officials have little fear of such rituals. Militant
workers are given their role to play in the strike in these mass pickets, giving the illusion of positive
activity while preventing them from radicalising their own tactics and demands.

Miners in Lancashire feel there is less need to become involved, as the strike has been taken out of
their hands. The strike committee organises pickets from a locked room at Bold Miners Welfare
Club, which is being used to accommodate people. The initiative for action and the ability to move
the strike forward beyond its original aims, has been removed. The NUM seems to have captured
this potential and diverted it onto strictly limited terrain. The recent attempt of Lancashire NUM to
expel the miners who are still working, is another way of re-capturing the loyalty of militants.

**Postscript**

As this is being written, the miners’ strike continues. Wildcat will continue to analyse events and
respond with propaganda. We have learnt a lot from our interventions in this strike so far. This will
not be our last word on the matter.

H., *Wildcat* – 4th June 1984
Workers’ Playtime, May 1985

[No title]

The miners’ strike has dominated political discussion for over a year. Put another way, more crap has been written about it from every hue of the visible political spectrum than about any other event.

Now Playtime shuffles into the marketplace after it’s all over, only to find itself alongside the jackals picking over every scrap of fallen “truth”. There’s a lot about the strike in this issue, so we should say now: it’s not our intention to sell ourselves using the strike as a loss-leader, just as we haven’t used it as a “cause” that we could abandon ourselves to.

Class struggle in the mining communities is about our class – and thus in a sense about us, our own struggles, our own hopes. But in a more real sense it’s not about us in London, ninety miles from the nearest pit.

Finding ourselves in the position of interested but largely helpless spectators, and in the presence of so many narcissists and politicians, it’s hard not to feel a bit self-conscious writing about it. Why risk looking like one of them? Others are asking the same question. The silence now about the strike in some quarters is deafening, while the absence of sound from those now talking the loudest is even more marked.

So why? Because it is “images” of the miners’ strike which are painted on the backcloth behind every class struggle in Britain today.

The miners’ strike began as an initiative by the strikers themselves, was maintained through the initiatives of the mining communities, and only ended when a majority of the strikers saw it wasn’t going to achieve its object The strikers’ aim was to force the National Coal Board (NCB)/Government to cancel their plans for the industry – a programme of rapid closures involving 20,000 “voluntary” redundancies. In this they have been unsuccessful.

Talk now is of 20 closures over the next year (4 out of 5 in South Wales, 2 out of 3 in Scotland and the North East, 6 each in Yorkshire and the Midlands) and 50,000 redundancies. NCB Area Directors have been told to do an “exercise” in seeing how many redundancies could be made without affecting production targets. As this is written, the struggle over the first two closures – Frances and Bedwas – is underway.

It’s been said that the most remarkable thing about the strike was that it happened at all, after years of induced recession and the “new realism” it has bred amongst workers. (In fact we said this in the last issue.) This truism is used by many in a patronising sense. “Jolly good show, chaps! Pretty good effort, given the sticky wicket you were playing on!” As if defeat was inevitable. Absolute rubbish. In fact, the strike provides a basic lesson in the nature of mass class struggle. That it arises from the anger generated by specific and usually local grievances, but once the ball has been set rolling it achieves a momentum of its own.
The hardline National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) leadership had been trying to get a national strike for some years, and had been rebuffed in a series of votes. They were as surprised at the development of this strike as anyone else but knew, for all the problems (bad timing, no planning, high coal stocks, etc.), that this was the only chance they were going to get. They worked hard to make the best of a bad job.

The union didn’t plan the strike, and neither was it some sort of logical “miners next step” in response to the effects of the build-up to restructuring. (Not just the job losses through closures but those through mechanisation and reorganisation. And the speed-ups and increased work discipline for those left. All against the background of the grievances over pay. But bad as the effects were, workers as militant as the miners have stoically put up with worse. Equally the walkout at Cortonwood colliery wasn’t the first local strike against a closure since the present round of restructuring began. This time, as the strikers’ anger led a minority to step outside “new realism”. It gave both them and the majority of their fellow miners a new perspective on what acting realistically could mean. The way in which this struggle erupted – and was pursued – against the odds shows how insubstantial the “realistic limits” can be.

It’s no insult to the determination and courage shown by the majority of miners to point out that they still made relatively little effort to overcome the difficulties of extending the strike, as opposed to standing firm. In fairness to them, most strikers had a sensible view of what they might achieve. The aim was not proletarian revolution, but to stop the MacGregor Plan. Nevertheless once mass picketing had been defeated, it became a (very large) sit-at-home strike. It is still a tribute to them that it remained as determined as it had ever been, well after the point that power cuts and large-scale outside solidarity became unlikely, and the lack of resolve of the non-“militant” NUM leaders became obvious.

For some “revolutionary” observers the NUM became the focus for their private ambitions, much as Solidarność was a couple of years ago. On the other side some tried to cast it as the unique agent of the strikes defeat (up to 11½ months before the strike’s end). Both views are total shit. The function of unions is to mediate in class struggle. At least-worst they “represent” the anger of workers to management, and “represent” the response of management back again. The price of keeping their stake in the middle management of capitalist society has been their readiness to actively focus and channel workers’ anger, and actively police the accords they arrive at with the bosses. Unions can never be a form of organisation suitable for revolution – unless revolution simply means kicking out the old bosses to replace them with new ones. (The closely-related dream of sharing out the authority over capitalist society between everyone is just that, an impossible dream).

On the other hand, those “revolutionaries” who saw the union as the principal Bogeyman simply developed workerist versions of “Green” politics. The militant faction in the NUM leadership wanted a strike (on their terms). Far from going out of their way to sabotage direct action, the executive was wholly pragmatic. It was quite happy to see violence, disruption, anything you like. Its objection wasn’t to these, it was to bad publicity. They didn’t just tolerate rank and file initiative, they counted on it.

Not being responsible for disruption, but still being the body best able to sort it out is an old union stance. After the revisions to union law by the Tories it has become the norm. But this isn’t the same as saying that all unions are interested in stamping on militancy. On the contrary, for the NUM (like some others, e.g. the NGA), rank and file militancy and initiative is what gives the strength to their negotiating positions. Just as long as they remain in charge of negotiations, and the militant-dominated delegate conference continue to accept the role of miners’ parliament, and continue to give them democratic “legitimation”. In other words, provide them with the “orders” “they were only obeying”.

34
The problem for the union in many areas was keeping this threat of an uncontrollable membership credible in the absence of any effective activity which it could be “seen” to organise during the months of “waiting for the power cuts”.

Anyhow, so much for theory. In reality, the union’s failure to match the state’s advance planning; its lack of skill in responding to the NCB’s publicity and opinion-forming machinery; the inertia and active sabotage of faint-hearts and traitors, even given the limited scope for betrayal within the union’s normal functioning: all were exposed during the course of the strike. What else would you expect, even from a militant union? But most of the bureaucrats genuinely wanted to “win”, and would quite happily have put up with the cost of this in terms of losing control over the direction of the strike to the strikers themselves. They would even face things getting out of hand. Dealing with that is what unionism is all about, in the last resort. And after all, the leadership — and most of the strikers come to that — saw the NUM as the best union of the lot.

Of course it’s true that the control the union was allowed to retain established limits to the strike which eventually helped break it. But after mass picketing had been defeated, most of the strikers were clearly not prepared for the degree of radicalisation and violence that extending the strike would have involved. To be more exact, they had an eminently realistic sense of how far they could count on their fellow-strikers, and on other workers and proletarians. That was the crucial element in the failure of the strike to burst its limits. Had they believed otherwise, the union couldn’t have kept control even if it had wanted too, and would have had real difficulty regaining it.

As for those “revolutionary observers” who used accounts of the union’s role as pornography in order to masturbate over what could be achieved in a real “union”, with real “members” like themselves, well ... few words are necessary. The abject display of arse-licking from every point of the compass is testimony enough to the “new fantasy” in “revolutionary” circles that has paralleled the “new realism” in the working class.

But this is a marginal problem. The most depressing fact about peoples’ perception of the NUM’s role and function, has been the difficulty they’ve had in distinguishing the goals of the union from those of the strikers. After all the union’s actions have been visible to all. The way they have preserved their funds overseas — not in order to use them to promote the strike, but to secure the union’s future. The way the upheaval of the strike was used to restructure the union’s own organisation (the attempts by both “militants” and “moderates” to build their respective power-bases), exactly like the NCB. The way that after the return to work, the perspectives put forward by the leadership were for campaigns against Thatcherism, rather than about the class struggle which was supposed to continue in the pits. The degree to which the membership and their families were left to wage the struggle (in every sense), on their own.

Throughout there were two struggles going on. The failure to see or understand this — even among those committed to class struggle against this society — was the most sobering indicator of how far the strikers themselves were constrained. What could you say about the militants outside Congress House shouting that the NUM executive had betrayed them... and Arthur Scargill.

The exposure of the NUM’s powerlessness, the way its planning was undercut by new forms of struggle by the state, the loss of credibility it suffered — all mirror the defeat of Ted Heath and Co. in 1972. The union’s struggle suffered the deepest defeat — because the union itself is the institutionalisation of that defeat, in as permanent a form as is possible under capitalism.

To a degree unionism itself has suffered a real setback. Many miners won’t ever trust the union to lead them into another battle. And while the strike has demonstrated that Arthur Scargill really does
walk, not on water\textsuperscript{3}, but on the very thinnest of ice, miners will never again believe he can single-handedly offset the inertia of the union structure.

Of course, the disillusionment with unionism as a result of the strike, felt by some miners and by many other workers, is mostly passive. All too much of it is sublimated into blaming the lack of solidarity, blaming the bosses and state, or in feeling guilty. On the other hand as we go to press we hear that a national miners’ rank and file movement has been launched out of disillusionment with the reactionary activity of the NUM. We will be looking with interest to see what it stands for and does.

If the union’s defeat was severe, the NCB’s victory by contrast remains incomplete. It’s won an opportunity to restructure fast — one that it is seizing with both hands. It is offering voluntary redundancy terms over the heads of the union bureaucrats, in an attempt to undermine threatened pits beyond the point of feasible resistance. This is an enormously expensive strategy in terms of redundancy payments. The brass face of the NCB in claiming poverty as the justification for its “post-strike strategy” of closing pits without referring to the colliery review procedure agreed with NACODS, the pit deputies union, is quite astonishing. But the money always seems to be there for what suits the boss.

The strike has been both expensive — costs to the NCB about £1bn — and risky in a commercial sense. In recent years the coal industry’s markets have been dangerously unbalanced, dominated by one monopoly customer, the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB), which takes 92% of all coal sold. Coal’s 80% share of electricity fuel supply would have dropped whatever happened. In the aftermath of the strike the NCB faces a tough ride commercially. Some of its smaller markets were lost to imported coal and will have to be won back.

Hopes have been raised of making British coal more internationally competitive. But the lack of sufficient deep-water ports which kept coal imports relatively low makes exports equally difficult, and many countries will not accept British coal which has a high chlorine and sulphur content.

It will not be seen how far the NCB has “won” until the extent to which the strike has gone “underground” in the pits is known. That will be fairly soon, because the most important orders the NCB has are to restock CEGB power stations, which means the NCB being able to deliver large quantities of coal rapidly.

The effect of any large-scale restructuring exercise isn’t simply to break workers’ resistance, it is also to break the entrenched power of senior and middle management. The disputes within the NCB executive and with NACODS were not by-products of the “real fight” but essential elements of the NCB hard-liners’ strategy for the coal industry. It’s clear that NACODS members are as little pacified as the other workers.

So far the evidence is that the NCB will by no means have things all its own way. That can be seen in the spate of small local disputes since the return to work. Restructuring may not be stopped, but the price extracted for it in obstructionism and non-co-operation could eat deeply into the bosses’ profits.

The fact that significant numbers of the miners seem still prepared to “have a go” is a failure for the NCB. And in the terms the NCB themselves measure victory and defeat, all they have done is create an opportunity which they still have to successfully exploit.

\textsuperscript{3} “Arthur Scargill walks on water!” was a real (non-ironic) slogan of striking miners.
Another disturbing indicator of how the strike was not biting deep enough to expose the real issues at stake is the general lack of understanding of how the strike fitted into a wider social context — the place of coal in British energy policy. While some people frothed at the mouth about the “Tory” plot to destroy coal, the Labour Party produced alternative capitalist plans for the exploitation of coal and the communities that depend on it. The NUM circulated bizarre ideas, for example a commitment to put chimneys in new council houses. They might have added air conditioning and tumble driers to overcome the effects of the pollution this would cause. They also made great claims for the alternative technologies for exploiting coal, which the NCB has been half-heartedly experimenting with. This stream of propaganda about the role and future of the industry found no counter at all from “revolutionary” circles (except tortured debate among the ecologically-minded).

The MacGregor Plan is about ensuring that coal will play an admittedly reduced, but still absolutely crucial role in energy policy, at least until the next century. That is what the strike was about. How to reorganise the industry to ensure this. The government, far from wishing to abandon coal, is inextricably dependent on it. They stopped the Gas Board buying bargain-price gas from Norway during the strike precisely because it would have undermined coal’s market competitiveness.

Oil has proved to be black dynamite rather than black gold. Gas faces a medium-term future at best unless alternative sources of supply are developed for when North Sea gas runs out. Now, fair enough, experiments in liquefaction — coal into oil — and gasification — coal into gas — are being conducted. But while extraction efficiency has been improved, no substantial progress has been made about economically filtering pollution. Acid rain being another Bogey over which the government is out of step with its more “green-conscious” EEC competitors. More basically, the state doesn’t have the money to develop such schemes on more than a token basis. For the Labour Party of course, this is just a problem of investment — the problem of where this investment is to come from remains deliberately unanswered. Because it is to come from a more efficient exploitation of us.

Nuclear power — the favoured choice in the CEGB for a primary energy source — is politically extremely sensitive and immensely, perhaps prohibitively, expensive. It is not even certain to what extent new capacity in energy production is required, since the CEGB, and following them the coal industry in the 70s via Plan for Coal, have proved to have based development plans on grotesque overestimates of future energy demands.

Energy policy is so politically loaded that governments of whatever party actively discourage debate about it. Combined with the NUM and NCB’s self-interest in pushing coal regardless, it’s not surprising that people take up the disinformation on offer. What’s disturbing is how little this disinformation and the built-in presuppositions of what sort of society we want aren’t effectively challenged.

The miners’ strike reveals clearly that traditional strike strategy is ineffective against the state, particularly when it has prepared itself to meet the specific strike strategy employed. The miners took up the same tactics as in ‘72 and ‘74 because the strike started relatively spontaneously and there was little opportunity for them to plan anything different. Particularly given that many of the strikers would probably have voted against a strike if a ballot had been held a few weeks before. The tactics worked in ‘72 not because they were especially innovative or subversive, but because they took the state by surprise.

Revolutionaries have been pointing out the failure of the tactics used in the strike right from the start. Indeed, we’ve added our own five pennyworth. There’s no point in going through the failings of this armchair generalship at length — but one or two points should be made. The agreement now by so many that the NUM should have held a ballot is particularly stupid. The NUM didn’t hold one
because until several weeks into the strike they thought there was a good chance they would lose it. The results of the unpublished polls conducted by the union which have been learnt since, confirms this reading of the situation. To take up something else that has irritated us, simply calling for unity, general assemblies and generalisation is pure formalism. It says nothing about the actual content or context of struggle. And in any case, if there is a time to “intervene” with this “class wisdom” it is in the years before a mass strike breaks out, not once it is underway.

The “national” and “mass” dimension of the strike gave it a special significance for some militants, who seem to be suggesting that that’s what real class struggle is, as opposed to what happens constantly throughout class society. In fact, mass strikes are just “hot” war, as distinct from the perpetual “cold” war under capitalism. Saying that mass struggles have a potential to spread and have effects well beyond their initial objectives is one thing. But it’s hard not to conclude that these militants attach such importance to large-scale “public” and hence visible struggle because it is public and visible. Intervention doesn’t then mean an expression of solidarity, so much as making “contact” with the class struggle as if it wasn’t going on around us every day of our lives. Unless discussion of mass struggle is related to some attempt to understand the general level of class struggle going on all the time, it risks becoming seen as a political event, somewhere “out there”, to be responded to politically.

Those wailing the loudest about what a crushing defeat the miners suffered are precisely those who saw the strike as a political gesture. For example, the “Eurocommunist” tossers in the Communist Party who called for a coalition of the miners with the radical forces in society — the Greenham women and CND. A theme which no less than Arthur Scargill took up in speeches immediately after the return to work, reflecting the lack of a militant role for the NUM in the local struggles going on. This revealed clearly how distant its aims were from those miners struggling for specific, concrete objectives.

Rather than dwelling on defeat, shouldn’t we be saying something about the positive aspects of the strike? Here we come up against an immediate difficulty. We are as well-placed as proletarians anywhere else in Britain to comment on the overall struggle and its background. When it comes to specific initiatives by the strikers and within mining communities, especially by women, our views are second-hand at best. In addition to our geographical distance from it (one not broken down by “day trips to see the miners”), most of our sources of information about these initiatives are wholly unreliable. Right from the word go, the dealers in political “avant-gardes” leapt in to transform the activities of hit squads and support groups into political commodities, to be sold to the rest of the working class. It’s been sickening to watch the speed with which individuals were interviewed or photographed and turned into symbols. Or the ease with which “quotes” were picked out of what they had to say and invested with a General Significance. All to provide a background of imagery for the political commentators who presented themselves as the real actors in this theatre of struggle. Given the level of distortion, the illusions many built up about the hit squads and the “miners’ wives” (as the women were invariably described) are understandable. But wholly counter-productive.

The level of the initiatives within the mining communities at all these levels is one of the things that distinguishes this fight from others in recent years. It is to be hoped that now the strike is over, more accurate accounts may emerge alongside the torrent of mythology.

The emergence of significant instances of class violence is one of the most positive aspects of this strike. For once workers could be seen acknowledging the violence that characterises our exploitation in this society, and responding appropriately. That said, the myths have to be attacked. The vast majority of miners were never prepared for the level of violent escalation that might have turned the struggle in their favour in its last months. Indeed there were a number of ironies.
involved. Many strikers explained their defence of their communities as a determination to avoid the divisions, demoralisation and violence they saw in the decaying urban centres. Only to suffer varying degrees of lasting division, demoralisation and violence as a result of their struggle. While the lack of sympathy with class violence felt by most workers elsewhere related precisely to the fears about violence generated by the conditions the miners were struggling to avoid.

The involvement of women from the mining communities in the strike was also notable. That said, the fact that people take an active part in struggles doesn’t mean that activity is automatically going to take a radical direction — though it certainly did for many of them. Similarly, the sort of “community spirit” and solidarity developed in many areas is always ambiguous, and not necessarily positive. As anyone familiar with the community spirit in what remains of London’s docklands will understand well. Still once again we undoubtedly suffer from hearing so much of what we have about these aspects of the strike through the use of them by entirely reactionary political groupings.

*Events don’t keep pace with deadlines, especially ones as meaningless as Playtime’s. This was only the latest of a whole series of articles about the miners’ strike produced by different Playmates over recent months. For an alternative look by another of us, see the last three pages of this issue.*
According to the strategy of the militant strikers, the cold weather was the miners’ last chance to intensify the strike and turn it to their own account — certainly as far as stopping the MacGregor plan was concerned.

The “drift back” didn’t help coal production figures much, but it was tying down most of the active strikers to picketing pit gates, and usually their own pit. The level of picketing declined after Christmas, and the active minority found themselves spread more thinly, as they had to turn their attention to stopping the return to work, at the expense of the effort to stop coal movements. Bail restrictions and conditions of sentencing prevented many miners from picketing local pits. In addition, they came up against the conservatism of some branch and area officials, who were reluctant to sanction initiatives which were not closely controlled by the union, such as door-knocking campaigns. The South Wales and Yorkshire NUM areas were obeying injunctions to restrict picketing at some pits to six people.

But even if some of the tens of thousands of strikers who sat out most of the strike at home had begun to take a more active part, the miners would have needed a lot more than food or money. They would have needed physical solidarity.

The strategy of the strikers was all along to disrupt the electricity supply industry. But the Central Electricity Generating Board’s crisis policy, designed to take the pressure off power stations in strikebound coalfields where stocks were being conserved or power workers were known to be sympathetic to the strike, succeeded in preventing blackouts. It did this by working some plants beyond their declared capacity (Isle of Grain, Littlebrook), and adapting others to burn fuel oil (Blyth, Aberthaw). Local power cuts for short periods were one consequence of this, as the pressure resulted in a higher number of “technical failures” than usual. But these could no longer be taken as “signs” that the coal strike was putting unbearable pressure on power stations. An overtime ban and work-to-rule by NALGO staff at power stations in January (in pursuit of a 35-hour week) helped to undermine the myth of an imminent collapse by failing to push the electricity supply industry over the edge.

The CEGB’s strategy relied on its ability to bring stocks of fuel to the places where it was needed — coal from pitheads by road, rail and sea, and oil. Their task was made easier by small numbers of miners going back to work before Christmas at pits which had, until then, been totally strikebound. Up to that point, they had been content to move small amounts of coal from pits in areas where the strike was less than solid. Later, they began moving coal in larger and larger quantities, with less and less opposition. When the Coal Board decided to put on a show of strength by moving a large quantity of coking coal by road from Silverwood colliery, the NUM took up their clear challenge and called for a mass picket — to which only 200 people turned up.

The CEGB was also relying on the willingness of power workers to handle “blacked” coal and substitute fuels. In the south, for instance, sympathy action was confined to three coal-fired stations in the Thames Valley: Didcot, Tilbury and West Thurrock. But even here, negotiations on fuel quotas resulted in a return to something like normal production soon after the New Year.

Both these trends would have had to be reversed for the strike to take more effect. It would have meant widespread, mobile and determined action at power stations and pit gates, railway yards, docks and on the roads. Workers who were already supporting the strike directly, by refusing to move coal by rail and sea, would have had to resist mounting pressure and attempts at victimisation from their bosses. British Rail, for instance, was routinely suspending workers who they knew would hold up coal trains.
Others who were supporting the strike half-heartedly or not at all, even though they were in a good position to do so, would have had to be persuaded to take a different attitude.

No-one except the more stupid leftists could have expected anything from the TUC’s “solidarity” stunts, which were nothing but a diversion. Ridiculous parliamentary lobbies, Coal-not-Dole carnivals complete with clowns and foam rubber Maggie Thatchers, souvenir mugs and so forth only served to enhance the South East Region TUC’s reputation for abject tokenism (in most people’s eyes, anyway: groups like the Labour Party Young Socialists were still demanding that the TUC call a general strike a week after the miners went back.) Already well-practised in the staging of symbolic Moments of Action, SERTUC decided in the autumn to “mobilise” weekly shows-of-weakness outside West Thurrock power station — which had already been shut down as the result of the actions of its own workers (the only power station in the region to do so.) While it busied itself trying to find a “middle ground” between the government and the miners’ union, the TUC could be counted on to do everything in its power to dissipate and waste any real sympathetic impulse among trade unionists.

As for the prospects of an early settlement together with a unified return to work, such a possibility was growing smaller all the time. But minutely-chronicled shifts in the attitudes of the negotiating parties, and the constant rumours of talks-about-talks and new “forms of words”, largely succeeded in shifting attention away from the fight in the coalfields, transport and at power stations, where the original objectives of the strikers would be won or lost.

Over the years, we have become used to seeing strikes openly isolated and sold out by unions, or at least the facts could be compressed into such an interpretation. The fact that there was a militant union leadership in the coal strike, makes the standard categories of “militant workers” vs. “reactionary bureaucrats” harder to insert into political accounts of the strike. This has led to some bizarre contortions among far- and ultra-left groups. Some have got round the problem by basing their analyses on a selection of anecdotes which yield the correct insights (for instance, union officials asking pickets to dismantle a barricade). Some “revolutionaries” said maybe the NUM should have held a national strike ballot after all. Others queued to do disappearing acts up the NUM’s backside, notably the Socialist Workers Party, which publically stuck to its line of championing rank-and-file militancy as the way to win the strike, at the same time as it was privately conceding defeat and preparing to “retreat within the traditional organs of the working class”. Both attitudes betray a contempt for “ordinary” workers by the way they manage to avoid talking about the real relationship between unions and strikers.

Since the early weeks of the strike, which was not started on the union’s terms but began as an initiative by miners threatened with immediate redundancy, the NUM had succeeded in establishing its control over the direction of the strike and in limiting it to strictly defensive and reformist aims, even though these aims have been pursued very militantly and sometimes violently. But it should be clear that the strikers and their leaders meant different things by the slogan “No Pit Closures on Economic Grounds”, and that they were making a different set of calculations about the strike. The MacGregor plan was bad news for both the miners and the NUM. But factors outside the direct control of the strikers, such as national energy policy or the attitude of governments to import controls, the value of the national currency and subsidies for nationalised industries, are factors upon which the union aspires to have a direct influence. As middlemen in the labour market, the union is threatened on two fronts; firstly, the loss of members, and possibly the end of its negotiating monopoly if profitable pits are returned to private ownership. Secondly, the undermining of its role as a partner in the managing triumvirate of government, employer and union, to which the NUM became accustomed during the 1970s. This has been the real argument between the NUM and the government, behind the rhetoric of “Honouring the Plan for Coal” from
one side, and “Management’s Right to Manage” from the other. As far as the union is concerned, Plan for Coal was a sacred document, not so much because it sanctified particular production targets or levels of employment in the industry, as because it enshrined the principle of NCB/NUM joint planning.

Now the NUM feels itself being elbowed out, as management opts to deal more directly with its workforce, which means pressing the union into a more subservient role. The high eminence to which the NUM rose during the 70s was the result of a conjunction of circumstances — the full development of the national power grid, rising oil prices, the infancy of nuclear technology — which gave the miners a powerful (but temporary) strategic weapon in their fight for higher pay, better conditions and secure employment. The idea that the miners possessed “traditional” industrial might (as distinct from an exceptional degree of rank-and-file solidarity) is nothing but a leftist myth; during the sixties, many miners were forced by pit closures to move in search of work. While this strike was from the union’s point of view a struggle to regain lost strategic ground by forcing the government to change its priorities, it was by no means the NUM’s only line of defence. While the contraction of the industry and mass redundancies would undoubtedly put the union in difficulties, it could still survive as a union with a negotiating monopoly over a smaller workforce in a technology-intensive industry, and survive quite well if it could obtain a closed shop to move in search of work. While the contraction of the industry and mass redundancies would undoubtedly put the union in difficulties, it could still survive as a union with a negotiating monopoly over a smaller workforce in a technology-intensive industry, and survive quite well if it could obtain a closed shop among the new layer of technical staff which would be created as coal production came under computerised, integrated, automated mine operating systems. But to make this transition, it would need the consent and assistance of management, and, ultimately, governments. The point is that whether the union wears its militant face or its bureaucratic face according to the moment, it is an organisation which has to adapt to changing capitalist priorities. While it may choose to use workers’ struggles to try and change those priorities, the workers themselves are engaged in an endless and fundamental struggle against the implications of capitalist reality itself.

Striking miners must have known, as the union does, that it isn’t a question in the end of whether the industry is restructured, rather of how and when. The MacGregor plan meant mass sackings, pit villages being Corbyised, communities broken up, miners forced to be more “flexible”, more “responsive to the needs of the industry”. Their calculation was that this could be held off for at least a few years, and many strikers must have had an eye on the possibility of the government rethinking its energy policy in favour of coal. It was always a long shot. To reinstate domestically-produced coal as the country’s primary energy source, the government would have to be persuaded by an overwhelming combination of political and economic pressures. As it is, British coal’s sudden attractiveness on price is the result of a sterling crisis which probably won’t last long. Even if it does, other considerations make a major change of emphasis unlikely. The CEGB’s plans to expand its nuclear generating capacity have run into a number of problems, but during the strike nuclear power has met up to 20% of the total demand for electricity (as compared with 3% at the time of the 1974 strike.) For the future, nuclear power looks set to further undermine coal’s pre-eminence. The aim of the government and CEGB is to create a more broadly-based generating industry using a number of different technologies, which would be less vulnerable to political pressures and fluctuations in the price and availability of fuels from different sources.

Arguments from some quarters on the left — that the strike and its effects have set the coal industry so far back as to make the MacGregor plan redundant anyway — represented feeble attempts to construct capitalist-sounding reasons for letting the strikers off the hook. They were also, indirectly, an admission that any victory on the issue of pit closures would have been temporary.

Barring a sudden global deterioration of uranium stocks, all oil evaporating overnight, world revolution or some such natural disaster, long-term restructuring will almost certainly mean a permanent reduction of the workforce in the mining industry, whether this strike had been won or lost. It has already happened in steel, shipbuilding, the docks, the railways (and in coal mining
itself, though in a steadier way, over the last thirty-five years).

Clearly, the NUM will need to be consulted rather than excluded from this process, and this will mean proving its ability to police distasteful agreements. As long as the strike continued, and maybe for a while to come, the union could play hard-to-get. But if it wants to survive at all as a national organisation, the NUM will have to negotiate and help implement Coal Board policy — this year, next year or in ten years’ time. It can have no other role. It is precisely the question of their own political survival, of what part they can play in the future management of the coal industry and its workforce, which now exercises the minds of the NUM high-ups. This is where the different interests and priorities of striking miners and union functionaries really becomes apparent.

That is, if it wasn’t already apparent from the NUM’s conduct before last March. The left had already got its fingers burnt twice when it had tried to initiate strikes by holding national strike ballots. Both times, it had failed to get the required majority. It was not a matter of the leadership proving itself to be more militant than the rank-and-file; neither was it a matter of the rank-and-file proving themselves to be clever strategists, biding their time. The difference between March 1984 and the NUM’s two previous embarrassments was that this strike was started and consolidated by the miners themselves.

Like most mass strikes that start in this way, the action was un- and even anti-democratic, in the sense that the strike was begun by a minority and was spread, at least in the early weeks, less by formal decision-making, voting and head counting than by force of direct persuasion and example. During the early days of the strike, miners at some pits which had democratically voted against striking changed their minds after meeting strikers from other pits and areas on the picket lines, and stayed out (for instance, in the South Wales area and at Ashington in Northumberland.) Later, this strike movement was closed down both physically (by the police) and politically (by the NUM, with its strategy of area-by-area balloting).

Both the NUM executive and the strikers resisted pressure for a national ballot during the early weeks of the strike, though for different reasons. For active strikers, it was an obvious waste of time and energy, since as far as they were concerned the strike was already on. For the union, it was a question of turning a rash of walkouts into a *de facto* official national strike, run by NUM officials on the ground and firmly harnessed to the ambitions of the national union. This meant that some democratic procedure would have to be gone through, as a means of bringing the strike under the formal control of the national and local NUM and swinging it behind a set of negotiable demands on the union’s terms. As the union correctly said, government pressure for a national strike ballot was aimed at formally dividing the strike in the hope of exhausting the energies of the strikers at an early stage. We would say that the NUM’s attempts to justify the strike in a slightly different set of democratic terms was no less opportunistic, since it was aimed at recuperating that same energy.

Apart from shifting the initiative into the hands of the union, the strategy of holding area-by-area ballots succeeded in formally isolating the minority of strikers in areas like Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, and gave a ready-made alibi to the scabs in those areas. In general, we would say that any and all democratic practises are a hindrance to workers in struggle, although they are a powerful weapon in the hands of those who would suppress, divert or neutralise them.

The NUM was taking a calculated risk when it decided to go for a national strike last March. On previous occasions it had, in fact, deliberately suppressed strike movements against pit closures because it thought it would be unable to turn them into the kind of strike it wanted, on the terms it wanted. In 1983, it ignored an 80% strike vote in South Wales, while Yorkshire officials dissuaded miners at the new Selby “super-pits” from striking in sympathy. In Scotland, a strike and sit-in at Kinneil was pacified by Mick McGahey in person.
Again, this was not because the union had decided to reveal itself as the deadly enemy of the workers, but in line with the different priorities of the national NUM. When the NCB’s March closure plan was announced, and was met with immediate walkouts, the NUM judged that both the severity of the closure programme and the strength of the response would be sufficient to sustain a unified official strike which could be directed at forcing the government and NCB to negotiate on their future plans for the industry, in terms favourable to the NUM. They hadn’t done their groundwork very well: the pit closure programme would affect different areas very differently, and while there is no perfect correlation between the militancy of miners at individual pits and the immediate prospects for those pits under the NCB’s plan, the unanimity of the strikers in (for instance) Kent and South Wales clearly related to the seriousness of the threat posed to jobs and to the quality of life in general. The failure of the strike in Nottinghamshire has nothing to with any “scab tradition”, and everything to do with the fact that Nottinghamshire is a profitable coalfield which will attract heavy investment in the future, with the (relatively) good chance of alternative local employment even if one or two pits were to close, and with the relatively dispersed nature of the mining “communities” in those areas.

Further emphasising this division is the fact that in 1979 the NUM agreed to the introduction of differential bonus schemes, under which miners at highly profitable pits earn much more money than miners at older pits which have not attracted as much investment and where productivity is therefore lower.

The question of why the miners’ strike failed to spark off a wave of sympathetic actions, and why it did not apparently give encouragement to other groups of workers to pursue their own demands, must also be seen in terms of the aims and context of the strike.

From the beginning, the NUM and the left couched their arguments in terms of “honouring agreements signed by Mrs. Thatcher herself”, “protecting the British coal industry from heavily-subsidised foreign competition”, in terms of “fighting for the right to work” and “keeping jobs down the pits for future generations”. These arguments may have had some appeal for Labour traditionalists and liberal bleeding hearts, but they were hardly calculated to raise the temperature of the class struggle. Of course, we would not expect the union to pitch its propaganda at any other level than social patriotism and attachment to the job. Many of the strikers would put their case differently in private, where it’s alright to say they couldn’t care less whether there’s a pit to go back to any more, and the last thing they want is to see their children working as coalminers. But in public, even the most militant strikers have allowed the union to speak for them, on its own terms. So it’s little wonder if other workers have used this as an excuse for treating the miners’ strike as if it were a purely sectional dispute which had nothing to do with them. Why should other workers support the demand for unconditional guarantees of employment in the coal industry, especially if such a demand conflicts with their own interests at a similar level? (the future of the steel industry, for instance?) As one power station worker said, the CEGB has been shutting down old power stations for years — he’d worked at a string of others before ending up at Fawley. What was so different about coal mines?

No amount of abstract appeals to “stand by your class” and “fight for basic human dignities” are enough to change such attitudes. That is why, in spite of miners support groups appearing all over the country arranging workplace meetings, visits to pit villages, collections of food and money, and generally trying to whip up support, the miners’ strike did not “pose the question of class power”; why limited sympathy actions among workers on the railways, in the docks and at power stations were so easily isolated; why the identification of other workers with the miners’ struggle stayed at an emotional level, where it existed at all; why solidarity has been expressed indirectly, rather than directly.
The end of this miners’ strike is not the end of the struggle, for the miners or anyone else. The strike will not have brought revolution any nearer, but then can any limited, defensive struggle do that? On the other hand, it’s no use complaining about the “limitations” of defensive or reformist struggles — by definition, any action which is not aimed at destroying capitalism is going to be limited, because it cannot result in any lasting gain, and can only end with a resumption of business as usual. We are all compelled to take up “limited” struggles every day of our lives, usually on our own, sometimes collectively.

Nevertheless, such struggles begin from a refusal to accept capitalist misery, or to live our lives in a way which is congenial to capitalism. It is this refusal, at the heart of the miners’ strike and every other proletarian struggle, which we can identify as the basis of class unity. The fact that it has been expressed collectively by large numbers of strikers and others in the mining communities, for so long and with such intensity, is why the miners’ fight has been and continues to be so important for anyone who wants revolution.
What is Workers Playtime standing in?

- A response to the editorial on the miners’ strike in Playtime, August 1984

We received this response to the editorial in our last issue (Aug ‘84) shortly after it appeared, and this reply was written to it in December when we expected this issue to come out. Obviously both the criticism’s by Scorcher Publications and our reply are a bit out of date. We decided to publish them anyway. Scorcher Publications can be contacted at Box 56, 1-0-8 Bookshop, 108 Salisbury Road, Cardiff.

Poor old Workers Playtime! The miners’ strike has certainly made you come clean. The latter-day Bolsheviks can carry on selling papers, holding meetings, trying to recruit miners to The Party, no matter whether the miners lose because the NUM gets what it wants, or lose because the NCB and strictly non-interfering friends get what they want. Does it matter to Militant that their call for a 24-hour general strike was passed by? Or to the WRP that the TUC still hasn’t got round to organising the indefinite General Strike? Building the Party, fighting for Marxism in the Labour Movement goes on regardless. The ICC can develop the “political avant-garde of the class”; the CWO can try to set up their first “communist kernel” in the workplace. The RCP, which got the “wrong” answer to the ballot question in trying so hard to be different, has given up on the miners who “remain unconvinced by our approach”: now the RCP can concentrate on Preparing for Power. It seems that Workers Playtime have given up on the miners as well, but with no consolation in party-building: or perhaps the competition to invent a new name for a “Leftist Communist Party” isn’t just a dig at Wildcat after all!

The arguments of the first part of Playtime’s editorial are:
1. The NUM controls the strike; only a minority of strikers are involved actively.
2. A face-saving (Scargill’s face?) sell-out will be achieved (at best?) if nothing changes. Pits will close in exchange for better wages, early retirement, shorter hours, or some such package.
3. To get something “better” (unspecified), there needs to be
   a) a more “solid” strike,
   b) an extension of the strike to other workers and
   c) blacking of coal movements by transport drivers.
4. In the meantime, the miners and their families must be kept going through food and money collections which go to them directly.
5. “And the growing anger of strikers must be turned in a practical direction. Direct links must be forged between militant pits and regions, and within mining communities, so that when one-off closures restart after the strike ends, miners in the affected pits have a solidly based confidence in their ability to resist closure, or simply sell jobs as dearly as possible.”

Let’s look at all this. Does the NUM control the Hit Squads? Does it control all the support groups and relief funds? Does it organise the sabotage? Patently not. The NUM controls the negotiations, controls the picketing money, is trying to control food and money collections. It threatened to discipline and fine (! — after 24 weeks on strike) miners who threw bricks at the police at Gascoigne Wood. The miners ignored that threat: does the NUM control them? If the strike is merely not going to work, does the NUM even control it in the sense that it can get a return to work? Playtime mentions that some miners have no intention of being starved back, but of fighting “to the finish”: what is the “finish” — the face-saving sell-out? communism? or are the miners in Playtime’s view only capable of the former?

How can the miners be defeated? Would it be a defeat for the miners to sit it out endlessly and never go back? That is the question that arises if you assume “nothing changes”. For Scargill to sell a face-saver, a lot has to change. The NCB is already offering large sums to pack it in. The state
Workers’ Playtime – May 1985

shows no inclination to back down at all. The “drift back to work” is the only way this strike looks like ending — which is precisely why striking miners have directed such violence at those men going in in the North East, Scotland and Yorkshire (and at NCB property) to put a stop to this “drift”. That is precisely why the state has devoted such resources, physical and financial, to get miners to work, even to get one man into a pit as a symbol.

Calling for a “more solid strike” implies that in some way working miners have to be persuaded (or forced) out. Picketing has failed. On May 2nd, 10,000 Yorkshire miners failed to stop 200 men working at Harworth in North Nottinghamshire. What ratio of striking miners to working miners would have succeeded? There is simply no way those scab miners will come out. There is no persuasion possible now. If they’d had a national ballot and lost they’d probably have demanded a raffle, and if they’d lost that ... All the rationality of capitalism is with them — and an argument from Playtime (see below). The strike is as solid as it can be.

Until it’s clear what they’re being asked to support, calls to other workers to “extend” the strike are empty. The call for class solidarity regardless of the issues only goes so far (a lot of dockers, some railway workers, not a lot of steelworkers.) If the strike’s about a sectional interest, then for the steelworker it’s fair game to be against steelworks closing. All six remaining Gwent pits depend on Llanwern steelworks – it’s their sole customer. The South Wales NUM has deliberately avoided any serious picketing of Llanwern or the coke convoys from Port Talbot beyond a few minor push and shoves with the police so that some miners can let off steam. As long as the miners’ strike is just an “industrial action”, it is no use expecting other workers to strike for months on end — and most workers know that one-day sympathy strikes are token, ineffective and a stupid way to lose money.

The two sentences quoted above as point 5 really are quite remarkable. From discussing the strike as it is, Playtime now says “the strike is over”. But, says Playtime, while this strike is still on, strikers must turn their “growing anger”, not to winning this strike (in whatever terms they might see winning), but to preparing themselves for a struggle after this strike. The “practical” forging of links is not for any immediate ends, but to be kept in reserve for the next struggle. And for what specific struggle “must” the miners do this? Why, to fight the next one-off pit closure! Voices off-stage: “But this strike started with the one-off closure of Cortonwood.” Absolutely. This strike here and now, this concrete struggle which is proving so unsatisfactory to so many political groups, is to resist closures. If this battle is lost (i.e. pit closures continue), where will the “solidly based confidence” come from? From having turned “growing anger” into forging direct links? Either this “practical direction” will have failed in this strike, or won’t even have been tried!

But that’s not all. If this “practical direction” fails to stop a pit closure next year or whenever, it will apparently help miners to “sell the jobs as dearly as possible”. Well, a lot of cracked heads and empty stomachs had to be gone through to get to this. The jobs can be sold now. The NCB has the money on the table for that, and many miners have got their eyes on it. There’s no need to struggle to sell the jobs: why go through a long, costly strike just for that? It’s an argument for the scabs. Their calculation is to carry on working and get their wages: if their pit stays open, all well and good, they’ve kept their jobs; if their pit closes, they’ll take the money. Who’ll sell the jobs “as dearly as possible”? The same people who’ve been selling them for years — the unions, in this case the NUM. In all honesty you ought to come right out and say “Miners, you can’t win: sell your jobs, accept pit closures!” That is the real message of your editorial.

P.S. One last point. “And the growing anger of strikers must be turned in a practical direction.” How is this “growing anger” showing itself at the moment? Attacks on NCB property, attacks on scab transport firms, throwing bricks and stones at the police, attacks on police stations, organising hit squads and a lot more besides. But for Workers Playtime all this is an impractical direction:
miners must turn away from all this and instead forge links with each other. This is very reminiscent of the objections raised by the left to the rioters in 1981: rioting, looting, attacking the police etc., are all impractical, mere “anger”; demanding jobs, joining The Party, voting Labour (reading *Workers Playtime*) etc., were practical.
On our heads or on our ear?

Our editorial in the last issue was the object of a good deal of debate and rancour between Playmates. Since it appeared it has been the subject of a lot more. Your open letter to us about it was doubly welcome. It’s helped us to reach conclusions about what we see as the deficiencies of the editorial. But it also indicated to us that there was somebody who took what we wrote seriously enough to take it apart.

Your criticisms relate to our arguments about the miners’ strike on the one hand, and to our reasons for producing Playtime at all on the other. I’ll deal with these two things separately – first with your criticisms of the editorials arguments.

You summarise us as saying that “The NUM controls the strike; only a minority of the strikers are involved actively”, and ask whether we are suggesting the NUM controls the initiatives that have come from the strikers and their families and communities. As you say, patently not. In the editorial we only rather briefly listed the militant initiatives which have marked the strike. Not simply the most militant actions but the determination and spirit shown by over 100,000 miners striking for nine months with the hardship and resistance to State violence that has entailed, and the resourcefulness and courage it has demanded. Of course the NUM doesn’t control the initiatives of the strikers – it can only attempt to channel them for its own ends.

That has been the story of the strike from day one. Scargill and the “militant” faction in the NUM leadership wanted a national strike for their own ends. They were unable to get a “democratic” mandate for one in a series of votes over the last couple of years. The present strike came about through the initiative of the strikers themselves. They responded to the threat to their jobs and communities posed not just by the announcement of specific closures (Cortonwood etc.) but by the announcement of MacGregor’s future plans. For the strikers the issue is clear — that threat must be stopped.

If the language used by both the strikers and the NUM is the same, what is meant by it is rather different. The strikers are not primarily interested in the “Plan for Coal” but in what MacGregor’s plan means for the “future of the industry” in concrete terms for them. The “militant” NUM leadership by contrast are interested in “defending our members’ jobs and communities” by ensuring the place of the NUM in determining “the future of the mining industry in Britain”. The strikers see the need for a national strike because no one pit or even region can stop the national plan for closures. Scargill and Co. see the need for a national strike because the argument about the future role of the NUM can’t be settled at the level of any individual struggle — (at the level of “isolated” closures, specific economic arguments, actual hardship and community devastation etc.). It can only be won by making the political price of the NCB plans too high for the NCB & the Government. In those circumstances a new “accommodation” with the union over the conduct of future industry-wide negotiations would be necessary. Is this what the strikers are after? We think not.

We don’t think there would be any disagreement between us about the aims of the strikers and the NUM being different. But if that is the case an obvious question raises itself. Whose aims are currently put forward? More exactly, since as long as unions and workers co-exist it will never be a completely black and white distinction, whose aims are predominantly at stake. We don’t believe that there could be much doubt about the answer when we produced the last issue or now. It is the NUM’s. The strikers have certainly forced the NUM to move in directions it wouldn’t have chosen. But they are not determining the direction of the strike — and not therefore its goal. At the moment.

You ask “...does the NUM even control (the strike) in the sense that it can get a return to work.” As
things stand it would be very difficult to “sell” a sell-out in the militant regions (S.Wales, Yorkshire, Kent etc.). However, it was our gloomy conviction then – and events have reinforced it – that if a new round of talks agreed a formula which both the NUM national leadership and the delegate conference could accept, they would be able to get a majority return to work nationally. It would be bitterly resisted by a minority in all areas — perhaps a majority in some — but once the strike was no longer national that resistance could be isolated and either defused or crushed. It’s not as if the precedents don’t exist. The NCB are not currently refusing to negotiate because of any conviction that the NUM would be unable to police an agreement.

In the last week we have seen the delegate conference throw out a National Executive motion on strategy towards the receivership as too moderate. If that indicates the difficulties the “militant” national leadership face it doesn’t alter our belief that any deal Scargill puts his name to will probably be accepted by the delegate conference.

However, as yet neither victory nor defeat (or if you prefer “victory” or “defeat”), are on the horizon. What we actually wrote was that “the overall direction and control of the strike remains firmly in the hands of the NUM executive, and the majority of the strikers are not actively involved”. It would perhaps have been clearer as to what we meant if these statements had been put in the correct order. It is because the majority of the strikers are not actively involved that the strike remains in the hands of the NUM. You don’t challenge our assertion that the majority of strikers are not actively involved — in other words active in picketing beyond their own pits (many not even that), in seeking practical support from relevant groups of workers, even in collecting money; let alone in the encouraging instances of a more militant resistance to NCB manoeuvres, state violence and treachery in their own ranks. There are of course considerable differences between regions in this respect — that is part of the problem. For us that lack of active involvement by a large number of the strikers is the most important element in determining “victory” or “defeat”.

A little further on you read our argument that “for anything better than a face-saving sell out to be achieved the strike would need to become more solid…” as meaning that working miners should be picketed out. As you rightly say, this (as opposed to prevent a drift back) is wasted effort. It’s what we said ourselves in the issue before last. By “more solid” we simply meant the need for more active participation, to give the strike more bite. It should of course have been put more clearly.

You paraphrase us as saying “some miners have no intention of being starved back, but of fighting ‘to the finish’…” and ask “what is the ‘finish’ — the face-saving sell-out? Communism? or are the miners in Playtime’s view only capable of the former?” As you imply, communism isn’t (unfortunately) on the agenda. Except of course in the somewhat abstract sense that every struggle since 1848/1871/1914 (delete as appropriate) has posed the question of “socialism or barbarism” blah blah blah ….. We are certainly not suggesting that a face-saving sell-out is the only possible alternative. There are at least two clear alternatives — clear defeat of the strikers and clear defeat of the Government. And the term sell-out covers a broad range of options with greater or lesser degrees of defeat for either the NCB or NUM. What we are saying is that unless the strikers take the direction of the strike in their own hands a deal along the lines sought by the NUM is the best prospect they could hope for.

By direction we don’t just mean running the strike — in material terms the strikers are running the strike and have done so from the start — we mean determining by their actions the future course of the strike.

You say “The ‘drift back to work’ is the only way this strike looks like ending” and “The state shows no inclination to back down at all”. But the reason there hasn’t been a sell-out so far isn’t because of the pressure of the strikers on the NUM, or because of Government intransigence.
Obviously those are important factors, but the determining element remains the fact that the hardline factions in charge of the NUM and the NCB haven’t caved in or lost control of their respective executives. Despite rumblings in both camps, and attempts in both cases to foment divisions from outside. And despite discontent with their performance expressed (as yet privately) by a minority within both Government and strikers.

At this level what there is to be “won” remains what is on the negotiating table. On neither side have the legs been kicked over or sawn through. Both leading factions are genuinely hardline and both have staked too much to back down unless forced by events or undermined. It’s uncommon after many years of dominant “consensus” unionism to see a genuinely “militant” hardline national union leadership. (Hence the difficulty some “revolutionaries” have in criticising it for what it is and does, and the ease with which others have actually supported it.) This definition (“hardline”, “genuine militancy” etc.) obviously begs a full discussion of what’s involved — but the reality so defined isn’t one of the points at issue between us as far as we can see. More familiar is the hardline management style displayed by the leading faction in the NCB — not just MacGregor’s own past in British Steel, but Michael Edwardes and his successors at British Leyland, or in a different way the “business-like” management introduced at British Telecom to prepare for privatisation. All were put in by Government as a response to the effects of economic crisis and the needs of state economic policy. The severity of the regime at BL reflects the terminal state of the company when Edwardes took over and the crisis in world car production. The hardline approach by MacGregor & Co. in the NCB reflects the crucial importance of restructuring the coal industry for state directed energy supply policy. But “soft” or “hard” all are just a choice by the Government of the day as to the appropriate tool for carrying out the same job — “motivating” and streamlining the parallel bureaucracies of middle management and union, and breaking entrenched workers power, so that the state controlled monopolies can cut costs and respond to changed demand.

Amongst other things the miners’ strike is significant as the first industry-wide struggle with hardline factions in charge of the respective union and management. So far neither has lost control to the forces pressuring them from behind. At the moment the principle to be settled isn’t the “Government’s right to govern” or the expression of working class power. (Perhaps in light of your criticisms we should emphasise that we don’t see class power as something which is only expressed through revolution but one side of the class opposition that is fundamental to capitalism). The strike certainly raises these questions to a degree no strike has since the “winter of discontent”. But so far they have only been raised negatively, as unfulfilled potential, and they are not — as yet — the issue at stake. That is still the question of how the coal industry is to be managed. In other words, how “capitalist realities” are going to be applied – and how much say the NUM has in that process. After nine months of striking the questions are still how many pits? Which pits? On what basis? On what terms?

The process of democratic negotiation between the NUM & NCB is currently deadlocked. The TUC “initiative” seems to be leading nowhere in a transparently desperate attempt to rebuild TUC credibility amongst its “moderate” constituency. The Government has gambled everything on the strike crumbling sufficiently (in numbers or spirit) before February, when coal stocks start to run below the level needed to maintain the CEGB’s so far entirely successful crisis containment strategy. At that point large scale coal movements and extra generating capacity from power stations currently running at low levels will be necessary. The Government clearly hope the strike will be sufficiently weakened by then to police these movements without using politically unacceptable levels of state violence, especially if that is combined with disruption to electricity supply in practice. For the moment they are not sitting still — wherever possible the screws are slowly being put on the NUM leadership which is clearly seen as more of a problem in ending the strike than the activities of the strikers. However it is not necessary for the Government to escalate things at the moment — merely to attempt to contain them. (Indeed they have a positive interest in
not creating the sort of incidents that might fuel resistance or sympathy in support of the strike, which has to be balanced against the need to police existing resistance and break the will to struggle).

The NUM’s current interest is in holding the strike “solid” in every sense. Given the relative passivity in the ranks of “their” strikers it’s necessary to organise (largely symbolic and useless) picketing initiatives to maintain a basic momentum of activity, alongside the propaganda aimed at keeping morale high and ensuring it’s channelled towards the “correct” goals. In addition, efforts to prevent “drift back” have to be made. The aim is to keep resistance ticking over until the crucially important time when coal stocks run down. Similarly the propaganda efforts put into calling for “Industrial Action” in support by other “trade unionists” are clearly less calculated at producing results now than in creating a climate in which direct appeals will bear fruit in practise, when the “real battle” starts on the picket lines in a month or two. This is the most the NUM leadership can do in support of their strategy since for them to appeal directly to other groups of workers beyond making public speeches would breach the democratic etiquette amongst trade unions — one set of “laws” the NUM has no intention of flouting. For the strikers however this clearly cannot be enough unless they are prepared to accept what the NUM wants as “victory”.

The NUM is committed to a “last battle” when coal stocks run down to the point where targets for activity (large coal movements — power stations coming back on to the grid) are created. This is certainly the only chance for a “union led victory” along the lines of 1972 which might force the NCB to settle. If the strikers want more than that they will have to act on their own initiative. Indeed it’s arguable that they would have to do so to make the NUM’s risky “all or nothing” strategy work.

Take first the question of “forging links” with other workers. The NUM leadership making speeches clearly isn’t enough. We have argued from the start that — as in any strike — the only effective way of calling on solidarity is for the strikers to identify the relevant groups of workers (those whose action would make the strike bite) and approach them directly. The importance of this is only underlined by the shyness and reluctance strikers generally display about doing this. (It’s always “what the union should be doing” when in most circumstances it’s the last thing the union wants – and where it does coincide with their ambitions is generally beyond their power to achieve.) That reluctance by strikers and the difficulties it reflects says more about the changed composition and consciousness of the working class than any intellectual sounding generalisations from us about the “destruction of working class community” etc.

We agree entirely with your paragraph about calls to extend the strike being empty unless it is clear to other workers what they’re being asked to support. But it was never our intention to suggest that this could be done usefully through public “calls” or “appeals”. Such calls (particularly from strikers as opposed to unions) have a limited role in pointing out to people that class solidarity is at issue. But in practical terms they must be regarded as secondary to direct approaches. And at that level it is not a matter of “class-unifying demands” but of whatever arguments are necessary to achieve results. That is a different matter to “calling on” other workers to make a “stand”. In this strike one of the problems is the degree to which the miners see themselves as making a stand rather than waging a fight, and see solidarity in terms of other workers doing the same. “Making a stand” in in the literal sense “voting with your feet” – treating the strike as a political event, in a society where politics are the domain of the ruling class and working class power by contrast means putting the boot in.

Your final paragraph criticizes our extremely stupidly worded sentence about anger being turned in a “practical” direction as meaning that we see class violence as impractical, or somehow secondary to “forging links”. It’s a reasonable interpretation of what we said – it’s the opposite of what we
meant. The only way we can see the current deadlock being broken in a way favouring the strikers is if the anger demonstrated by the militant minority becomes more widespread. Traditional mass picketing was defeated by nationally directed riot policing in the first battle of the strike. Over the last month or so we have seen resistance to state violence turn into violent resistance, and the first instances of successful hit and run picketing. Only if the readiness to do whatever is necessary to make the strike bite is generalized – for a start beyond the battleground of S. Yorkshire – will the question of class power replace the issues on the negotiating agenda. It has been obvious from the start that to prevent a deal over closures the strikers would have to do more than break the NCB’s determination. It would also mean making the political price of maintaining “The Resolute Approach” too high for the government. For all its rhetoric of confrontation the government has no intention of taking on any single group of power workers directly – as opposed to doing so through its industry board hatchet men. They insist on the need to defeat “Scargillism” but they are still relying on the NCB to do it. For the strikers it must become a conflict directly between them and the state if the sort of victory they want is to become possible. That is still possible – as things stand it is one possibility among others.

It would be easy to become over-optimistic on the basis of the instances of violent escalation of the struggle. It would also be easy to become over-pessimistic as many now are on the basis of the return to work during November. But the facts of the situation must be even more obvious to the miners than the rest of us. As things stand neither success nor defeat are clearly in view for either side. Nor is there any sign of it being possible to agree the deal which has become all too visible in outline during the last two rounds of negotiations. Something has to give – be it patience or nerve – on one side or the other.

The criticisms in your last two paragraphs are clearly those you feel strongest about. We don’t suggest this strike is over. No strike is ever over until a return to work has taken place – and sometimes not even then. We believe it’s possible for the strikers to win the sort of victory they want. We would like to see signs in what’s taking place that this is the most likely outcome. But we can see no point in deceiving ourselves or anyone else that that’s the case when it isn’t.

Having read us as “writing the strike off”, you see our arguments about the need to develop solidarity between pits for the struggles after this strike is over as being nonsense. Of course, links need to be developed to win this struggle – how else will they be developed. But what are you suggesting is at stake in this struggle? This is an all or nothing attempt to prevent the NCB’s current plan being implemented. It’s not about whether closures take place or not – it’s about the timescale of them. Over a short period of time, or over many years (with the possibility of a change of State priorities). Are you suggesting that victory will mean the NUM won’t sabotage future struggles? Are you suggesting that the divisions amongst the miners are going to be forgotten? Are you suggesting that once the strike is over that’s class struggle settled in the mining industry for the next fifty years?

The crucial point as far as we’re concerned is the one you put on one side when you say “while this strike is still on, strikers must turn their ‘growing anger’ not to winning this strike (in whatever terms you might see winning) but to preparing themselves for a struggle after this strike.” We are talking precisely about “what winning means”. That’s what we said back in June: “There are two things to be won. They can force MacGregor to drop his current plans for the industry… Just postponing the process of closures would be some sort of result of course… Without the other thing to be won it would be a hollow victory indeed. That other thing to be won is the development of a confidence and solidarity at rank and file level which could mount an effective resistance to closures when they restart”.

However, it’s all very well being able to “defend” ourselves from “misunderstandings” about “what
we really meant”. The fact is that the editorial was written in a way which didn’t convey what we wanted to say. Worse still it was written in such a manner – tired and detached – that makes your assumptions about our attitude to the strike entirely understandable.

The inadequacies of the editorial are largely the result of the circumstances under which it was produced to meet a deadline. Much of what you object to or misunderstand is where we have hastily thrown ideas together without explaining them properly. This is even worse in the second part of the editorial which you don’t go on to criticize. There are several passages in that which could be wildly misunderstood. I hope we’ve said enough to make clear we are aware of that.

The second aspect – the “attitude” we convey – is perhaps more of a problem than the first. We don’t believe that getting our ideas across is just a matter of accurately stating facts or political points. It’s also a matter of getting over the attitude underlying why we are writing them. That we produce Playtime because we hate this society, because we are angry at what it does to our class. In practice this obviously isn’t clear enough – we have more than once been accused of taking a “calm”, “detached”, “academic” point of view. We could put it down to our undoubted deficiencies as writers and theorists. But that would still not be the whole story, because our deficiencies reflect the weaknesses of the revolutionary circles in this country. Our sense of that weakness was why we started to produce Playtime.

That’s the principle difference between us and the groups you line us up with in your first paragraph. We don’t produce Playtime because we imagine we have the perfect revolutionary programme, or the right answers for every situation we write about.
Dock Strikes ‘84

When a national dock strike was announced by the TGWU leadership from midnight on 9th July, it might have seemed that, for the first time in the current miners’ strike, there was the real possibility of a “second front” being opened up in the class struggle.

The same basic issue was at stake in both industries: job security. Many dockers had already shown a degree of solidarity with the miners by blacking coal and iron ore movements. Even the bourgeois press and TV was carrying statements like “soon, no doubt, miners and dockers will be joining each other on the picket lines”, and putting out dire warnings about the consequences of the strike continuing.

By the time the first strike had collapsed, it was beginning to look as though they needn’t have worried.

The strike was called by the T&G’s national docks committee, after British Steel used workers who were not registered dockers to unload iron ore at Immingham dock on the Humber. The ore in question was bound for Scunthorpe steelworks, and had been blacked by Immingham dockers in support of the miners. The steel corporation was directly contravening the terms of the National Dock Labour Scheme which reserves dock work for registered dockers while providing them with job security and large redundancy payments to encourage them to leave the industry.

The union’s case was partly that British Steel had been asked not to bring in private contractors to move ore until the outcome of the July 9th coal negotiations was known. In other words, the union leaders had been hoping that by then some kind of deal would have been cobbled together over the miners’ strike, so the dockers could be kept out of it.

The effect of the national strike call was to push the issue of how to organise effective blacking of coal and iron ore neatly to one side, turning it into a national disagreement within the dock industry between the T&G and the National Association of Port Employers (NAPE) over the precise terms of the DLS. At the same time, it played upon the dockers’ real fears about the future of the scheme, which has come under greater and greater pressure from the government and employers, as the volume of port trade has declined and dockers have become less and less willing to take voluntary redundancy, as unemployment has risen.

This pushing-aside of the blacking issue was made apparent as soon as the strike was called, when a train-load (equivalent to perhaps two road convoys) of iron ore was taken from Immingham to Scunthorpe unhindered. Furthermore, on the fourth day of the strike (July 13th) there were talks between NAPE and the T&G. British Steel — which is represented in NAPE as a port employer — said they had employed a specialist operator to load trucks with a mechanical shovel, it was just that they couldn’t find dockers who were prepared to be paid to observe the work (as was standard practice). BS were, however, perfectly prepared to square everything with the DLS by training dockers to use the equipment. The union negotiators’ reply to this was not to affirm that the ore was blacked in any case, but to call for a guarantee that the employers would do everything possible to avoid a breach of the scheme rather than leaving it for the Dock Labour Board to sort out.

The 13,000 registered dockers in the DLS ports stopped work as soon as the strike was called, but the major non-scheme ports (around 22,000 dockers are outside the scheme), such as Felixstowe, Dover, Harwich and Newcastle, carried on working. The effect of the stoppage at this stage was to strand 75% of cargo along with over 100 tankers and cargo ships, although there was every possibility that cargo could be rerouted through non-scheme ports.
Throughout the strike, there were almost no picketing initiatives. This is not something which can be put down to any reluctance to participate in the strike by the dockers, or even to bureaucratic union control of the strike. The simple fact is that there has been traditionally very little reason for dockers to picket out other dockers. Until recent years, they had tended to “strike first and ask questions later” when their mates in other ports were in trouble, and strikes were usually completely solid. For various reasons: the relative security that the dockers have gained, the destruction of dockland communities, and so on — striking dockers can no longer rely on this sort of “automatic solidarity”, any more than the miners can.

On July 14th, Felixstowe finally voted to join the strike, but they were not prepared to disrupt passenger services. The previous evening, a ban called by the National Union of Seamen (NUS) on Sealink freight transport began. This was in protest at the privatisation of Sealink, and opened up the possibility of Dover dockers becoming involved, because many of them are in the NUS rather than the T&G (although subsequent events were to show that union divisions remained as firm as ever).

On Monday July 16th, Dover voted to stop all freight, but on the same day tug-men in Swansea went back to work as did 200 dockers at two oil industry supply depots. In neither case did other dockers do anything to counter this.

**Turning the Quay**

Over the next couple of days, the reluctant strikers of Dover were given just the excuse they’d been waiting for when lorry drivers began to blockade channel ports in protest at not being able to take their lorries onto the ferries. It began with a small number of owner-drivers using their lorries to block the entrance to a Townsend-Thoresen ferry at Calais, and quickly spread to Dunkirk, Ostend and Zeebrugge. Around 300 lorries which had been parked on the M20 for the duration of the strike began to move off in convoy for Dover, to negotiate with the Harbour Board. By the next day, the dockers’ shop stewards had called off the freight ban “because of fears of violence in the port”.

Much was made by the press and TV of the fact that many of the lorry drivers were in the T&G. While it is true that there was an almost complete absence of solidarity from lorry workers (as there has been during the miners’ strike), this obscures the fact that a large number of the drivers, including the initiators of the blockades, were self-employed owner-drivers. These petty-bourgeois scum never have any sympathy towards striking workers, which is not entirely surprising, since their class interest in a narrow sense lies in pursuing their businesses above all else. The only reasonable proletarian response is to burn their lorries.

With the precedent set by Dover, the strike quickly collapsed. The next day there were votes all over the country to return to work.

At the same time the NUS called off its ban on Sealink freight and decided to talk to Sealink’s new bosses, Sea Containers, instead. Jim Slater, General Secretary of the NUS, said the union did not want to appear to be “dragging them to the negotiating table”. Meanwhile, the dock employers made no promises whatsoever about future breaches of the DLS. They just reaffirmed their commitment to the existing procedure. Adding insult to injury, the T&G’s national docks officer John Connolly described this as a “great victory”!
Bollards to the Union

When a national strike was called again just over a month later, it’s hardly surprising that it was less enthusiastically supported, with most dockers presumably adopting the fatalistic attitude that “if the T&G are running the show it must be a waste of time” and very few attempting to take the struggle into their own hands in any significant way. That the reluctance to strike cannot just be put down to the dockers’ “apathy”, or unwillingness to join a “political” strike in support of the miners, can be seen from the fact that in Northumbria, dockers respected miners’ picket lines at docks bringing in coal even while they themselves were ignoring the strike call.

This time, the strike was called in response to the BSC allowing a coal ship called the Ostia to dock at Hunterston in Ayrshire, without T&G boatmen to moor the ship. They used a local contract firm instead. The T&G had blacked the ship after talks had broken down between the T&G and BSC over the level of coal and iron ore supplies to Ravenscraig steel works.

In Scotland, dockers responded immediately with solid strikes in all 12 scheme ports. None of the large non-scheme ports in England joined at any stage, and the situation in the English scheme ports was a complete mess, with dockers either unable to decide whether they were in or out, or serious splits within ports. For example, on the second day of the strike, dockers at Grimsby and Immingham voted to work, only to reverse their decision two days later, resulting in 400 striking and 260 working.

In the first week, there was a series of confused mass-meetings. In Bristol, the meeting on Tuesday broke up in confusion after shop stewards refused to allow a vote. In a vote at Tilbury on Thursday, shop stewards tried to blatantly rig the vote by means of a confusing resolution which led many dockers to believe they were voting for a return to work, when in fact they were voting to strike. Two days before, 600 dockers had held an unofficial meeting and voted to return – but only 40 of Medlock Bibby’s (a sort of dockland “Silver Birch” figure) merry band of scabs dared to cross the picket line. This scenario was repeated in many other ports.

By the second week, the strike had more or less settled into the following pattern: over half the scheme dockers were out (7500-8000 out of 13,000) and almost none of the non-scheme dockers were. On the Wednesday, John Connolly had said that although the strike was over “scab labour”, it could be resolved through lower coal quotas for Ravenscraig. In other words, having sabotaged possible solidarity action during the first strike by shifting attention onto the workings of the Dock Labour Scheme, this time around they could safely make a gesture to the miners and at the same time sabotage the second strike by quietly shelving the issue of the DLS.

In the second week, there were quite a few attempts picket out the working ports, with Southampton dockers unsuccessfully picketing Felixstowe, Portsmouth and Poole, and by the third week some miners were joining in the picketing of Grimsby and Immingham (several hundred of them being turned back by the filth, as were 50 Hull dockers).

In middle of all this, the T&G leadership declared that picketing must be stepped up providing, of course, it was within TUC guidelines. These had been drawn up between the TUC and the Callaghan government after the “Winter of Discontent” of 1978-79. Essentially what they say is that pickets should act in a “disciplined and peaceful manner”, even when provoked, and should obey the instructions of union officials at all times.

By the end of the third week, a shabby deal was being patched together, involving seedy union hacks and slippery Labour politicians at the highest levels. Even Neil Pillock himself was involved,
but the talks (between the ISTC and T&G over coal quotas) were initiated by the MP for Motherwell, whose constituency includes Ravenscraig (Labour Needs those scab votes!).

At the end of it all, the British Steel Corporation gave away nothing over the employment of non-dock labour, and the T&G agreed to meet the BSC/ISTC quota within two months.

Another “great victory”.
Any Storm in a Port - Origins of the Dock Labour Scheme, and recent dock struggles

From the earliest origins of dock employment until WW2 (in Britain at any rate), employers hired labour on an almost entirely unregulated basis. That is, men would present themselves at some recognised hiring point, usually the dock-gate, and foremen would call on as many as were needed for the day’s business. 

Men would be kept to the end of each loading or unloading operation and then paid off according to hours worked or tons moved. Not surprisingly, this system often led to chronic poverty. Figures given to the 1908 Royal Commission on the Poor Law showed that “pauperism” was three times higher among dock labourers than the national average. After WW1, when dockers were covered by national employment benefit, the industry drew three and a half times as much out of the fund as it put in, although this is partly a result of the fact that the dockers were one of the first sections of the working class to systematically exploit loop-holes in the social security system. Many labourers worked “three days on the hook, three days on the book”.

With the onset of WW2, the need arose for a stable and permanent dock labour force to ensure war production.

The first step was to introduce compulsory registration for dockers and to require them to accept transfers between ports (from the ports on the East coast to the now crucially important ports on the West coast of Britain). This register was started at a time when the only other groups covered by registration were professionals such as scientists and engineers. This was not the first time registers, which had the effect of increasing work discipline and reinforcing the division between dockers and other semi-employed proletarians, had been introduced. But it was the first time they had been successfully introduced on a large scale — previously dockers had resisted them. In 1912 at Birkenhead, Merseyside, the register drawn up by the main union and port employers was only imposed after a long and bitter strike was broken by scabs brought in by the union.

This time, the registration package was unusual in that employers had to register as well. Later, a national corporation was established and ports administration was overseen by local boards, on which sat equal numbers of union and employer representatives.

Despite around 30 strikes in each war year, and rising absenteeism as the war progressed, union representatives proved very valuable to the government and the bosses, by enabling them to abolish a large number of “restrictive practices”. It was generally felt in government circles that there could be no return to the laissez-faire chaos of the pre-war years. Despite resistance from the employers, the scheme was properly institutionalised in 1947. Casual labour was to stay, but it was sufficiently well-regulated to provide dock labour when and where British capital required it.

Berth of a Nation

The National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS) was, not surprisingly, hailed by many leftists and trade unionists as extremely progressive because it was a form of “workers’ control”. The General Secretary of the Transport & General Workers Union described it as a “brave experiment”. The implication of this point of view being that through belonging to a strong union, the dockers had been given a “say” in “their” industry.

This is totally misleading. The “dual control” aspect of the scheme was more an attempt to shore-up
a rather weak trade union set-up, so that the industry could be reorganised without too much bother from the workers. Ultimately, the scheme paved the way for containerisation in the 1960s.

The historical weakness of the unions in the docks was the result of two causes: the inherent difficulty of maintaining any sort of representative body composed of casual labourers, and the informal rank-and-file strength exercised by the dockers.

Two important consequences of this were the always-high level of unofficial strikes (after WW2 the T&G didn’t make any strike official until 1961, despite over a dozen major stoppages taking place), and the inability of the unions to police productivity deals. This second aspect is something which has existed throughout the history of unionism in the docks. In 1892, Tom Mann, the president of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers Union, had suggested to a Royal Commission that minimum time rates be abolished, after his membership had persistently ignored his appeals to work harder. More recently, in 1967, when casual work was abolished, it was decided that an agreement based on the one reached with Dockers on the West Coast of the USA must be ruled out because British unions did not have sufficient control over their rank-and-file to deliver the goods promised at the negotiating table.

Another important result was the phenomenon of break-away trade unionism. The most important example of this was the 1920 decision by stevedores to stay out of the T&G-initiated federation. This led to the formation of the National Association of Stevedores and Dockers, which remained in existence as a minority union until the mid-70s. To a certain extent, it competed with the unofficial movement as a focus for workers’ discontent with the T&G.

In 1960, the chairman of the London Ship-owners Dock Labour Committee, summed-up the situation as it then was for dock employers:

“In the docks, there is a sense of frustration ... in short we have lost the initiative; it rests not with us, not with the union, but with the men and the agitator.”

Indeed, in the mid-60s one third of Liverpool dockers were not in unions at all despite the high level of union control over hiring.

Decasualisation in 1967 was not brought in out of some humanitarian concern for the dockers’ well-being, although middle-class liberals had always expressed concern about casual labourers. Victorian philanthropists had been dismayed by the “demoralization”, “criminality” and “vice” associated with this form of employment in the docks. This can be seen as a moral precedent for present-day “Right to Work” campaigns which always carry the implication that today’s casual labourers, those who are working on the black while signing on, should be found “proper jobs”.

Its function was to break the dockers’ control over the production process by ending the host of informal restrictive practices associated with casual hiring, and pave the way for the introduction of containerisation, which would lead to tens of thousands of redundancies. It wasn’t just a question of softening up the workers so they would accept job losses. The introduction of containers, which implied a dramatic shift from a work process mostly composed of living labour to one mostly composed of capital, involved a completely new style of management of dock labour. For a start, payment by tonnage had clearly become obsolete, but there was more to it than that. To a large extent, the organisation of labour in the docks, like in 19th Century factories before the introduction of Taylorism (the exact science of time-and-motion study), remained in the hands of the workers. It was the dockers themselves, organised into work gangs, who passed on their collective expertise from generation to generation, who determined work speeds and methods. It was this “community of work” which produced much of the intense solidarity found among dockers. However, it must
not be romanticised. Amongst dockers there was a rigidly determined hierarchy of job-access and within each gang there was also a definitive hierarchy with a recognised gang-leader. The important point is that all this was largely outside the bosses’ control.

Containers are the extension of the production line into transportation. From the factory to the point of sale, the rigidity of the production line — the dream of every capitalist – is maintained, making the worker a mere appendage of the machine, unable to control the process of loading and unloading.

It is no coincidence that the chairman of the National Modernisation Committee (composed of 7 representatives each from bosses and unions), which negotiated decasualisation in the docks, was Lord Brown, the Chairman of Glacier Metal. He was known for his opposition to piece-rates and had switched his own factories to hourly rates in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s. This had been an important move by the bosses to establish direct managerial power rather than relying on unpredictable dealings with workers who controlled their own pace of work.

Another benefit for the bosses was that containerisation effectively prevented pilfering, which had always been an important means by which dockers supplemented their wages, usually as a self-regulated “fringe benefit”, occasionally as something more offensive to the employers.

In return for accepting decasualisation, dockers were given “jobs for life”, improvements in pay, pensions and sickness benefits and large redundancy payments to encourage them to leave the industry (at the present time, a registered docker can receive up to £25,000). At the same time, discipline was tightened up — bosses could suspend workers without going through the Dock Labour Board.

What’s up, Dock?

It was generally recognised, particularly after 1964 when the Devlin Committee put forward sweeping recommendations about decasualisation, that if it was to be possible at all the leadership of the T&G would have to get its act together pretty quickly.

In London union officials were encouraged to hold dock-gate meetings like the unofficial “liaison committees” did (many of these committees showed outright hostility to decasualisation). They were even promised loud-speaker equipment to compete with that of the committees.

Throughout the country there were attempts to integrate the shop stewards more closely into the union hierarchy. For example, by giving them administrative tasks at branch level. At the same time, the T&G lifted the ban on CP-ers and Trots holding union office. No doubt the T&G leadership knew very well that even though some of these ideologues of trade unionism were involved in the unofficial movement, they would be only too pleased to smash it in the interests of “rebuilding the T&G at rank-and-file level”.

With the hurdle of decasualisation got over, the serious business of shedding jobs could begin. Within the first 5 years (‘67-’72) the number of dockers declined from around 60,000 to around 40,000.

In April 1972 Liverpool dockers stopped work, refusing to handle containers packed by non-dock labour, and London dockers came out in sympathy. A few weeks later, in July, there was a wildcat strike in Liverpool over the same question.

In response, the bosses and union leaders set up a joint management/union commission to “look
“into” the redeployment of surplus dockers. This was known as the Jones-Allington Commission after Jack Jones (General Secretary of the T&G) and Lord Allington (Managing Director of the Port of London). Before the commission had even sat, the dockers were out again, this time they occupied the container depots.

When Liverpool dockers picketed a container-handling firm Industrial Relations Legislation was used to force the union to call off the picketing and its assets were threatened with sequestration if a £5000 fine for contempt was not paid. Even though the union ordered the dockers to stop picketing and agreed to pay the fine (as Jack Jones said afterwards: “No one in our union ever advocated an illegal operation”), the picketing continued unofficially.

Later, on July 21st, the government used the IR Legislation to arrest 5 shop stewards (the “Pentonville 5”). A wildcat general strike rapidly developed, beginning with the lorry drivers and containermen (many of whom had previously tried to cross dockers’ picket lines) and later spread to print, building, engineering, coalmining, the airports, buses and many other industries. At the same time a growing crowd threatened to storm Pentonville prison. There was even some international solidarity with British ships being blacked in Belgium, France and the USA.

The dockers were freed and the dock strike continued. The T&G was forced to back delegates from all over the country who called for a total stoppage because all dockers were facing the same problems. The strike ended with a compromise reluctantly accepted by the dockers, which was only marginally better than that proposed by the Jones-Allington “recommendation”.

This “recommendation” — in no way legally binding upon the employers — was mostly concerned with the Temporary Unattached Register, which was supposed to be a register dockers could sign on to if they wanted to be reallocated to a new job. While on the register, they received less than half pay. With the extension of containerisation, the TUR became more and more a dumping-ground for “surplus” dockers. Before the 1972 agreement there had been almost 6700 on the register. By the end of 1972 this figure had fallen to no more than 1700, and following an agreement in 1974 it was decided not to use the TUR at all except as a disciplinary measure.

Since the early ‘70s, the dockers have become increasingly reluctant to accept voluntary redundancy as unemployment has risen (particularly in Liverpool). At the same time, the volume of trade has fallen dramatically, giving rise to a situation where employers have to go on shelling-out for dockers wages even where there is very little work for them to do. In August 1980 there were around 650 dockers being paid to do nothing at all in Liverpool alone. Not surprisingly, the pressure has been on to get rid of, or at least drastically modify, the Dock Labour Scheme.

In September 1980 the Liverpool Port Authorities proposed that 178 dockers belonging to two companies in financial difficulties be signed onto the TUR. As a result dockers in Liverpool, Southampton, Hull and Glasgow threatened to strike. This forced the T&G to convene a delegate conference and call a national strike. Before the strike was due to begin, a deal was stitched-up whereby redundancy payments would be increased, “idle” dockers kept on and retirement at 60 introduced, the money coming from the government which was desperate to avoid a strike. Despite all their monetarist huff and puff, the Tories clearly did not feel that the balance of class forces was in their favour at the time. In return for these concessions the union promised to do everything in its power to encourage its members to take up voluntary redundancy.

Since then the attacks on the dockers’ “right to idleness” have been stepped-up and national dock strikes have been threatened in ‘81,’82 and ‘83.

A major weapon in the hands of the government and employers over recent years has been the
development of ports not included in the Dock Labour Scheme because of their unimportance in 1947, which has enabled them to foster the division between Scheme and Non-Scheme dockers.

The situation in the non-Scheme ports is that the dockers can earn more money than in the Scheme ports but have to work much harder, for example being expected to “turn round” ships in about half the time. Naturally this has made these ports more attractive to shipping companies resulting in a large diversion of work away from the Scheme ports. For example, as a result of the latest strike an important contract with the American shipping company, US Lines, was taken away from Southampton and given to Felixstowe.

Felixstowe is at present the largest container port in the country [in terms of value of trade it ranks second only to Dover, the largest passenger port, also non-Scheme] and is something of a show port for the bosses – it’s probably no coincidence that there’s a police station right opposite the main gate. Recently a deal was fixed up with the local T&G giving Felixstowe dockers similar sick pay and redundancy payments to those on offer in the DLS, thus removing much of the incentive for dockers to join the Scheme. It was finalised between the two recent dock strikes.

Of course, none of this makes it inevitable that non-Scheme dockers become hardened scabs. If the Scheme ports are “pacified” there’s every possibility that work will be moved back to the scheme ports putting the jobs of non-Scheme dockers at risk. Whether this minimal basis for unity amounts to much, as the government moves in for the kill following the disastrous defeat of the dockers in August, remains to be seen.

*This account simply deals with the situation in the British Docks. For a fuller account of dockers struggles internationally we recommend reading “International Dockers Struggles in the Eighties” produced by BM BLOB, LONDON WC1N 3XX, currently selling for £1, which we found very helpful in researching our article.*
“Society does not develop in a continuous way, free from setbacks, but through conflicts and antagonisms. While the working class battle is widening in scope, the enemy’s strength is increasing. Uncertainty about the way to be followed constantly and repeatedly troubles the minds of the combatants; and doubt is a factor in division, of internal quarrels and conflicts within the workers’ movement.

“It is useless to deplore these conflicts as creating a pernicious situation that should not exist and which is making the working class powerless. As has often been pointed out, the working class is not weak because it is divided; on the contrary, it is divided because it is weak. And the reason why the proletariat ought to seek new ways is that the enemy has strength of such a kind that the old methods are ineffectual. The working class will not secure these ways by magic, but through a great effort, deep reflection, through the clash of divergent opinions and the conflict of impassioned ideas. It is incumbent upon it to find its own way, and precisely therein is the raison d’être of the internal differences and conflicts. It is forced to renounce outmoded ideas and old chimeras, and it is indeed the difficulty of this task that engenders such big divisions.”

The back cover of the last issue of *Workers’ Playtime*, May 1985 (quote is from Anton Pannekoek)