

Miners' Strike

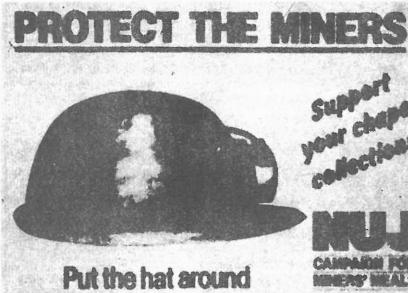
We were very pleased to receive the following article from Bill James, member of the National Union of Mineworkers, writing in his personal capacity. In printing it, we heartily echo the closing words of his manuscript: VICTORY TO THE MINERS !

To overseas observers of the political and industrial situation in Britain, particularly in regards to the epic struggle of the miners, circumstances may not appear quite as clear as they should. I think a very brief history will be of great help to readers of this article.

Shortly after the last war, the coal industry consisted of about a thousand pits and employed nearly a million men; it was taken into public ownership by the pre-war Labour administration in recognition of the fact that it was an important national asset and that under previous private ownership continual demands for subsidies were being made to compensate for bad management and lost profits. Since that time the industry has been run by an appointed board in the interests of monopoly capitalism; in fact, it has on many occasions been referred to as «state monopoly capitalism», like other so-called nationalised industries designed to serve the interests of private profit.

Since that time and particularly with the increase in world oil production, which was available to «the West» at very low prices, and the vastly increased use of oil-based fuel for the production of energy and motive transport power, the coal industry has been subject to enormous cutbacks in the number of pits and therefore also in the number of men working in them. These facts together with the vastly improved technology, which in turn has increased productivity to unprecedented levels, has reduced our industry to less than 200 pits and employing less than 200,000 men.

Much of this closure programme was carried out during the 1960s under the chairmanship of Lord Robens and against the advice of the National Union of Mineworkers, who warned of the folly of closing pits in favour of cheap oil, for they had the foresight to see that one day the oil-producing states would demand a greater cut of the cake. This as we all know has indeed happened, making oil at this time up to fifty percent more expensive than coal. During this



time miners' incomes were eroded to a totally unacceptable level which eventually resulted in the strikes of 1972 and 1974.

Since 1974, when the miners won substantial increases in wages and helped to bring about the downfall of the Tory Government under the leadership of Edward Heath, once again their wages have been and are being eroded, their basic grade rates being substituted by divisive incentive bonus schemes introduced by back-door methods and the use of the High Courts by right-wing leaders.

With the further threatened closure programmes of the Tory Government and the election of a progressive leadership in the National Union of Mineworkers, we are once again in the position of having to take industrial action, not only to save jobs but our communities and our industry. The President of our union, Mr. Arthur Scargill, warned before being elected of a massive closure programme amidst shouts of «lies», «rubbish», «it doesn't exist» from our enemies, but time and events have proved him correct.

Today the British miners and indeed the British working class are faced with a far more sinister attack on their well being, the enemy being the same, but the stakes very much higher. Today we are faced by a vindictive right-wing extremist administration who have made all possible preparations for confrontation with the working people and their elected representatives for the purpose of propping up their outdated and ailing system.

The coal miners' strike has been going on since 11th March of this year. A vicious attack has been waged by the media against the National Union of Mineworkers, its leadership and the strike itself. This has affected support from other unions, but a majority of the miners have supported the strike. Picket line violence was provoked by the police who were sent out in enormous force. As a result, 6000 miners have been arrested; five miners are still in hospital in life-supporting machines; quite a few others have suffered broken limbs. The financial loss caused by the strike to date is £20 million weekly from using gas instead of coal as fuel, and £400-500 weekly in the cost of policing.

The Political Significance

It will be common knowledge to many people, particularly those active in the labour and trade union movement, that the Tories and their backers have no regard for the organised working class and have an age long desire to render them impotent and unable to represent the people that elected them. With the deepening crisis of monopoly capitalism, the need to expedite this onslaught has become more and more urgent as far as the Tories are concerned. It is in this context that we must observe the titanic struggle being waged by the miners and their supporters, and attach the political significance that it so richly deserves.

It is worthy of note, and much to their everlasting shame, that previous Labour administrations have participated in these attacks whether it was in the form of Barbara Castle's «In Place of Strife» or attempts to hamstring free collective bargaining by so-called «Social Contracts» etc., based on the assumption that high wages are the cause of inflation and therefore responsible for unemployment.

Many people will agree that this hatred, particularly of the miners, has magnified itself as a result of the historic victories in 1972 and 1974; as a result the Tories and their backers have schemed to seek revenge on the miners and in the process to pave the way for the destruction of the whole trade union movement, the only opposition to the draconian economic measures that they wish to impose on the ordinary working people, to enable them to ride out the crisis that is inherent in their system to a lesser or greater degree at all times.

The Heath Government's attempts ▶