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The 1972 Miners' Strike: popular agency and industrial politics in Britain

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On Monday 14 February 1972 a major industrial and social disturbance took place at Longannet in Fife, when around 2,000 coal miners and their supporters attempted to prevent South of Scotland Electricity Board (SSEB) employees from entering the power station. The miners – from Ayrshire, Lanarkshire, the Lothians, Stirlingshire and Clackmannan as well as Fife – were held back by 400 police officers as the Longannet workers arrived in cars for the morning shift. The road remained open, although numerous cars were turned back, and three officers were injured, one sustaining a broken ankle. Thirteen pickets were arrested on the serious and highly unusual charge of ‘mobbing and rioting’. The miners viewed this as vindictive; they were further antagonised when, after the thirteen had been held overnight, James Douglas, Procurator Fiscal at Dunfermline Sheriff Court, successfully resisted their bail application. Douglas ordered police to clear 150 miners from outside the court and the accused were taken, handcuffed, to Edinburgh’s Saughton prison.¹

Social and political tension consequently mounted. Mass picketing at Longannet continued, with eight further arrests, although on lesser charges of police assault or breach of the peace. The Scottish miners’ president, Michael McGahey, who sustained a chipped leg bone at Longannet on 14 February after an ‘accidental’ – his word – kick from a policeman, offered a pungent Marxist analysis of the position. The mobbing and rioting charges were ‘scurrilous’ but unsurprising: ‘there is no such thing as neutrality in

¹ *The Courier and Advertiser*, 15 February 1972.

society and the law is not neutral', he said, highlighting what he saw as the fundamental anti-working class bias in the laws used to control pickets.² Vic Feather and James Jack, general secretaries respectively of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), complained to Gordon Campbell, Secretary of State for Scotland, about the arrests and treatment of the pickets, including the handcuffing. Alex Eadie, MP for Midlothian and chairman of the miners' group of Labour MPs, described the situation as 'explosive',³ and led a deputation of Scottish mining MPs to the Lord Advocate, Norman Wylie, the UK government's chief law officer in Scotland. Wylie was asked to intervene to secure the early release of the accused, which he did, travelling to Edinburgh and holding meetings on 16 February with James Douglas, representatives of the Crown Office and Fife's Chief Constable, Robert Murison. Normal procedures were duly and considerably accelerated. Instead of a further period of weeks on remand, to allow investigations to be completed prior to committal for trial, the accused were brought back to Dunfermline Sheriff Court on 17 February and granted bail at £20 each.⁴ A celebratory crowd of 1,000 miners, gathered five or six deep in Dunfermline's narrow High Street, welcomed the thirteen outside with the triumphalist football chant, 'Easy, Easy'.⁵ These scenes were repeated on 16 June when the men were acquitted after an eight-day trial at the same court, the jury's innocent verdict reached after just 23 minutes of deliberation.⁶

Longannet's uproarious events comprise an important but perhaps little known episode in the strike by the 280,000 members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) that ran for seven weeks from 9 January 1972. This was the first national strike in

² *Glasgow Herald*, 22 and 23 February 1972.

³ *The Courier and Advertiser*, 16-17 February 1972.

⁴ Peter Wallington, 'The case of the Longannet miners and the criminal liability of pickets', *Industrial Law Journal*, 1, 1972, pp. 220-1.

⁵ *The Scotsman*, 17 and 18 February 1972.

⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 17 June 1972.

the coalfields since 1926, and secured a significant advance in wages, so inflicting defeat on Edward Heath's Conservative government, elected in June 1970, breaking the informal wage restraint that was central to its economic policy. The strike seemed to prefigure further confrontation in 1972 and 1973, with dockers, engineering workers, railwaymen and building workers all enjoying some success in disputes that cumulatively undermined one of Heath's grand designs, the 1971 Industrial Relations Act.⁷ A second major industrial dispute followed over miners' wages in the winter of 1973-4: a lengthy overtime ban and then a strike precipitated Heath's defeat in the 'Who Governs?' General Election of February 1974.⁸ The 1972 miners' strike has duly been presented as decisive in shaping both Heath's demise and the eclipse of the post-1945 'consensus' between the main political parties, Conservative and Labour, and the social class interests – including capital and labour – that these parties are usually seen as approximately encompassing.⁹ The miners' victory was achieved through mass picketing – and blockading – of power stations, like Longannet, and coal depots. This physical force encouraged the view that trade unions generally were undemocratic institutions that wielded power irresponsibly, threatening public order and economic 'stability'. Margaret Thatcher, Heath's successor as Conservative leader, and Prime Minister from 1979 until 1990, was Secretary of State for Education from 1970 to 1974. She later described the strike as 'a victory for violence' and central to the emergence of clearer thinking on economic and industrial matters within the leadership of the Conservative

⁷ Ralph Darlington and Dave Lyddon, *Glorious Summer. Class struggle in Britain in 1972* (London, 2001), *passim*; Darlington and Lyddon, p. 64, note that the Lord Advocate's involvement in the Longannet case anticipated the intervention by the government on two occasions later in 1972 in the cases of dock workers imprisoned for offences under the Industrial Relations Act of 1971; the same point is made by Wallington, 'Longannet', p. 222.

⁸ Kevin Jefferys, *Finest and Darkest Hours. The Decisive Events in British Politics from Churchill to Blair* (London, 2002), pp. 162-85.

⁹ Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace. British History, 1945-1990* (Oxford, 1990), p. 328; Jefferys, *Finest and Darkest Hours*, p. 184.

Party.¹⁰ Heath's approach – characterised as conciliating trade unions and protecting employment through public subsidy and inflationary growth – was abandoned. Unions were marginalised in the 1980s: their manufacturing and public sector strongholds were weakened through economic policies that accelerated structural economic change; their capacity to take effective industrial action was diminished by new laws on employment and industrial relations.¹¹

So this article looks at a major event in Britain's contemporary history. The Longannet blockade reveals much about the character of both the 1972 strike and industrial politics more generally in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. In existing literature on each of these questions there is a tension between 'top down' accounts that privilege high politics, with developments engineered by government ministers and officials, 'peak level' business representatives and trade union executives,¹² and work that focuses on agency 'from below', with 'shop floor' or 'rank and file' pressure the predominant historical contingency.¹³ This article examines the contextual importance of high politics, but gives greater weight popular agency. This is significant, because most 'top down' accounts of the strike emphasise the emergence in the late 1960s of 'militant' leadership on the NUM national executive, 'militant' usually used to distinguish communists and leftist Labourites from their centrist or right-wing party colleagues, normally characterised as 'moderates'. Special prominence has been given to Lawrence Daly, leftist Labourite and NUM general secretary, and McGahey, communist, NUM national executive

¹⁰ Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (London, 1995), p. 218.

¹¹ Paul Smith and Gary Morton, 'The Conservative Governments' Reform of Employment Law, 1979-97: 'Stepping Stones' and the 'New Right' Agenda', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* (hereafter *HSIR*), No. 12, Autumn, 2001, pp. 131-47.

¹² William Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry, Volume 5, 1946-1982: the nationalised industry* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 289-315; John Campbell, *Edward Heath* (London, 1993), pp. 406-22; Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life: My Autobiography* (London, 1998), pp. 325-53; Jefferys, *Finest and Darkest Hours*, pp. 162-85; Morgan, *People's Peace*, pp. 325-56; Thatcher, *Path to Power*, pp. 201-22.

¹³ Darlington and Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, pp. 31-74; Tony Hall, *King Coal: Miners, Coal and Britain's Industrial Future* (Harmondsworth, 1981), pp. 166-96; Malcolm Pitt, *The World on our Backs: The Kent Miners and the 1972 Miners' Strike* (London, 1979).

member and Scottish president, who are usually depicted as ‘hard men’ who out-flanked their moderate president, Joe Gormley, to impose militancy on the union and a punitive settlement on the government.¹⁴ This characterisation of the NUM and the 1972 strike – top-down militancy enforced on an unwitting or even unwilling rank and file – is reflective of the view of trade unionism generally that increasingly predominated in Britain from the 1950s onwards, and which shaped and was used to legitimise the Conservative governments’ employment and industrial relations legislation in the 1980s and 1990s. But it is at odds with perspectives and evidence presented in this article, which points to substantial pressure from below on the NUM leadership to behave and negotiate militantly. Although 44 per cent of NUM members voted against strike action in November 1971 on the pay offer made by the National Coal Board (NCB), support for the strike once it commenced was almost total. The subsequent ‘narrative construction’ of ‘disorder’, as one scholar has put, to legitimise legal restraints on organised labour in the 1980s and beyond,¹⁵ was predicated on the insecure premise that union leaders were largely responsible for strikes. Militant leaders, it was argued, imposed official strikes on their members; moderate leaders failed to impose discipline on militant members and so encouraged or tolerated unofficial action. But strikes in most sectors were generally shaped more by the attitudes of union members than the inclinations of union leaders. To retain influence and credibility in their organisations union leaders had to respond to these attitudes as well as try to shape them.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ashworth, *British Coal*, p. 306; Heath, *My Life*, p. 353; Morgan, *People’s Peace*, pp. 325, 328; Thatcher, *Path to Power*, pp. 215-8.

¹⁵ Tim Claydon, ‘Tales of Disorder: The Press and the Narrative Construction of Industrial Relations in the British Motor Industry, 1950-79’, *HSIR*, No. 9, Spring 2000, pp.1–37.

¹⁶ Andrew Taylor, ‘The ‘Stepping Stones’ Programme: Conservative Party Thinking on Trade Unions, 1975-9’, *HSIR*, No. 11, Spring 2001, pp. 109-25; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, ‘The Tide of Trade Unionism: Mapping Industrial Politics, 1964-79’, in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, John McIlroy (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics. Vol. Two: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 93-132; Robert Taylor, *The Trade Union Question in British Politics* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 147-51; see also Jack Jones, *Union Man. An Autobiography* (London, 1986), pp. 246-53.

This article seeks to reinforce the argument that industrial politics were essentially driven from below. The high politics of the 1972 strike are explored in the section that follows this introduction, examining the broad economic and industrial contours of the dispute; the second section draws out the importance of popular agency by studying the Longannet blockade and the conduct of the strike; the final section reiterates the general predominance of popular agency in industrial politics by relating the outcome of the 1972 strike to the broad character of trade unionism in the 1960s and 1970s. Existing accounts of the strike have been based on published records and eyewitness testimonies or oral histories.¹⁷ This article, by comparison, provides perhaps the first analysis of the strike to be based chiefly on unpublished government files. These papers perhaps confirm the interpretation in existing interpretations, that the government was determined to defeat the miners but complacent about the provision of electricity supplies during the dispute. But these papers also bring the distinctive perspective of this article very powerfully to the surface, namely the extent to which the strike was shaped not so much by miners' leaders but by the miners themselves.

High politics: the economic and industrial context of the 1972 strike

The 1972 strike was shaped by the NUM's politics, but these were conditioned less by personalities than the complex economic and social conditions and cultural traditions in the multi-faceted coalfields, which generated varying degrees of politicisation, and many species of political orientation, as Alan Campbell (sometimes with John McIlroy), John Benson, Roy Church and Quentin Outram, among many others, have impressively

¹⁷ See especially Pitt, *World on our Backs*, pp. 122-66, and Philip Whitehead, *The Writing on the Wall: Britain in the Seventies* (London, 1985), pp. 70-80.

demonstrated.¹⁸ Local and regional traditions – cultivated over many generations in the fragmented, privately owned and organised industry – were not entirely eroded by the nationalisation of coal in 1947. The bitter divisions evident in the national strike of 1984-85, particularly between large bodies of Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire miners, had strong antecedents in earlier conflicts, especially those of the inter-war period.¹⁹ But in the winter of 1971-2 these local and regional traditions were largely overcome by a variety of political, economic and industrial factors.

The high politics were certainly important. The Conservative government's relations with the trade unions generally were made difficult by Heath's ambition to 'modernise' industrial relations in a single, legislative step. The 1971 Industrial Relations Act over-turned the voluntarist traditions of British collective bargaining. Agreements between employers and unions were to be legally binding; a National Industrial Relations Court was established to impose penalties – including prison sentences – on parties or persons contravening such agreements. The legislation was hurriedly brought forward and union leaders told that its principles were 'non-negotiable'. This approach – encouraging the view that the government sought confrontation with the labour movement – reflected Heath's rush to join the European Economic Community (EEC) at the beginning of 1973. The Prime Minister was determined that Britain should maximise the opportunities of EEC membership: in industrial relations this meant curtailing unofficial strikes, inter-union disputes and other difficulties believed to lower productivity

¹⁸ Alan Campbell, *The Scottish Miners, 1874-1939. Volume One: Work, Industry and Community; Volume Two: Trade Unions and Politics* (Aldershot, 2000), John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'Beyond Betteshanger: Order 1305 in the Scottish Coalfields during the Second World War, Part 1: Politics, Prosecutions and Protest', *HSIR*, No. 15, Spring 2003, pp. 27-72, and 'Part 2: The Cardowan Story', *HSIR*, No. 16, Autumn 2003, pp. 39-80; John Benson, 'Coalowners, Coalminers and Compulsion: Pit Clubs in England, 1860-1880', *Business History*, Vol. 44, January 2002, pp. 47-60; Roy Church and Quentin Outram, *Strikes and Solidarity: coalfield conflict in Britain* (Cambridge, 1998).

¹⁹ Chris Wrigley, 'The 1984-5 miners' strike', in Andrew Charlesworth, David Gilbert, Adrian Randall, Humphrey Southall and Chris Wrigley, *An Atlas of Industrial Unrest in Britain, 1750-1990* (London, 1996), pp. 217-25; Huw Benyon (ed), *Digging Deeper. Issues in the Miners' Strike* (London, 1985), especially the editor's introductory chapter, pp. 1-26.

and generate inflationary economic pressures.²⁰ Heath antagonised the labour movement on another front, promising an end to public subsidy for 'lame duck' enterprises and sectors. This precipitated several highly publicised crises, notably the 'work-in' at the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) in 1971-2, with the workforce resisting closure and lobbying successfully with substantial public support for government assistance to keep the yards open.²¹ This campaign carried additional force due to the government's apparent toleration of rising unemployment, which exceeded one million for the first time since the Second World War in January 1972.²²

It was within this general context of economic and industrial problems, and the consequently difficult relationship with unions, that the government faced developments in the coal industry, where miners were anxious about employment security and the falling value of their wages relative to earnings in other sectors. These material concerns were related to the steady contraction of the industry since 1947, a process accelerated in the 1960s with the increased use of other energy forms, especially oil. Coal's share of energy supplied in Britain declined from 73.7 per cent in 1960 to 46.6 per cent in 1970, although this was a smaller share of an expanded aggregate. The NCB's total average manpower duly fell from 517,000 in 1963-4 to 281,500 in 1971-2.²³ Militancy was further encouraged by progress towards nationally uniform pay in the 1960s. This was designed to eliminate possible 'points of argument', but the diminution of local, regional and sectional differentials cultivated industry-wide solidarity, enhancing the likelihood of national disputes.²⁴ This potential was partly realised with two major unofficial strikes over wages, in 1969 and 1970, in the latter case after a small majority had voted for an

²⁰ Robert Taylor, 'The Heath government and industrial relations: myth and reality', in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds), *The Heath Government, 1970-1974: a Reappraisal* (London, 1996), pp. 161-4.

²¹ Willie Thompson and Finlay Hart, *The UCS Work-In* (London, 1972).

²² Campbell, *Heath*, pp. 407-8.

²³ Ashworth, *British Coal*, pp. 38-9, 678-9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 289-301, 304.

official strike. These stoppages lifted the volume of working days 'lost' to strikes in the industry from 118,000 in 1966, 108,000 in 1967 and 57,000 in 1968 to 1,041,000 in 1969 and 1,092,000 in 1970.²⁵ NUM rules had required that two-thirds of votes be cast in favour of a strike before it could progress officially, but the 1971 union conference in Aberdeen voted to lower this barrier to 55 per cent.²⁶

The election of militant leaders in the NUM expressed this deeper trend to militancy in the coalfields. In 1966 McGahey was elected to the NUM's national executive and in 1967 to the presidency in Scotland, the union's third largest area after Yorkshire and South Wales.²⁷ Lawrence Daly, who left the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1956, before the Soviet counter-revolution in Hungary according to Tony Hall but after and as the result of it according to Willie Thompson, and assumed a position on Labour's left after joining the party in 1965,²⁸ was elected NUM national general secretary in 1968. The rivalry between McGahey, from Lanarkshire, and Daly, a Fifer, contained a powerful regional dimension, not often understood outside Scotland, as well as the political component deriving from Daly's ex-communism, although these differences did not prevent the men from generally working closely together. McGahey contested the national presidency in 1971, using Scotland as his platform,²⁹ but he was 'trounced' – according to Paul Routledge – by Gormley, a moderate 'died-in-the-wool Labour man' from Lancashire.³⁰ This result was actually fairly close. Of 210,546 votes cast 55.9 per cent were for Gormley and 44.1 per cent for McGahey, who secured large

²⁵ *Department of Employment Gazette*, March 1972, p. 337.

²⁶ Hall, *King Coal*, pp. 149-65; Paul Routledge, *Scargill: the unauthorized biography* (London, 1994), p. 64.

²⁷ *Scottish Miner*, January 1968; some of the biographical information on McGahey in this article is taken from his obituaries in *The Times*, anonymously written by convention, and *The Guardian*, by Vic Allen, both 1 February 1999.

²⁸ Hall, *King Coal*, p. 152; Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause. British Communism 1920-1991* (London, 1992), pp. 101.

²⁹ *Scottish Miner*, May 1971; John McIlroy, 'Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, John McIlroy, *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics. Vol. Two: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (1999), p. 229.

³⁰ Routledge, *Scargill*, pp. 63-4.

majorities in Scotland (80.6 per cent) and South Wales (77.4 per cent), where pit closures in the 1960s had been concentrated disproportionately, and squeezed ahead in Yorkshire (50.9 per cent).³¹ The close nature of the result was presumably reflected in Gormley's subsequent militant presidency, which belied his political moderation.³² In a sense the personal politics of NUM leaders had a limited bearing on union policy: in office they operated at their members' calling. This was the case with Daly's two predecessors as general secretary, the Welsh communists Arthur Horner (1945-59) and Will Paynter (1959-68). Horner, John Saville notes, worked comfortably with the 'right-wing majority' on the NUM executive because he 'accepted his position as an elected general secretary, and he always carried out decisions democratically arrived at'. Saville's observation that Horner's 'history is in large measure the post-war history of the miners' – moderate conduct laced with sometimes militant rhetoric – could equally be applied to Gormley, albeit in reverse. Horner was compelled to act moderately however militantly he spoke; Gormley, the rhetorical moderate, was required to conduct a militant policy.³³

This became evident in the autumn of 1971, when wage negotiations between the NUM executive and the NCB proceeded fruitlessly. The miners' claim sought to raise the basic underground weekly wage to £28, with £35 for those paid under the 1966 National Power Loading Agreement for mechanised pits. These proposed rises amounted to between 35 and 47 per cent, and so contradicted the government's unofficial counter-inflationary pay formula of 'n-1', stipulating that each pay settlement should be smaller than its predecessor. In coal this meant an intended settlement of no

³¹ 'Election, UK President, 1971', William McLean, Secretary, NUM Scotland, to Branch Secretaries and Delegates, 14 June 1971, Acc. 9805.217, National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS).

³² Ashworth, *British Coal*, p. 306.

³³ John Saville, 'Arthur Horner', in Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. V (London, 1979), p. 116.

more than 7 per cent.³⁴ With no agreement possible, the NUM instituted an overtime ban, to minimise stockpiling, and held a strike ballot. On an 88 per cent poll in November this produced a majority vote of 58.8 per cent for strike action, above the new 55 per cent threshold. On 9 December the national executive agreed that a national strike – the first in the industry since 1926 – would commence on Monday 9 January.³⁵

Ministers and officials insisted that the miners should be defeated. The Secretary of State for Employment, Robert Carr, conveyed his department's advice to Heath on 6 January, stating that the NCB's final offer 'went to the absolute limit. Any increase in it would ruin Government policy on the wages front'. The strike might last for six weeks, but the government could secure a valuable victory: if the miners were forced to accept the NCB's terms as well as the costs of a long strike, then the wage round 'next year' could be cut to 5-6 per cent. With growth at 4-5 per cent 'on the inflationary front the Government could achieve a 100 per cent success'. There were admittedly some 'serious risks', with claims outstanding in electricity, gas and the civil service, but these were 'worth taking'.³⁶ On 7 January Carr advised Reginald Maudling, Home Secretary, that Heath agreed with the Department of Employment's advice: 'The stakes are high and we must do everything we can to achieve our objective.'³⁷

Popular agency: Longannet and the conduct of the 1972 strike

Despite worrying about the 'high stakes' and the prospect of a long strike, ministers and officials believed there would be little impact on domestic or business supplies. At a

³⁴ Campbell, *Heath*, pp. 412-3.

³⁵ Hall, *King Coal*, pp. 170-2.

³⁶ Carr to Heath, 6 January 1972, LAB 77/84, The National Archives: Public Record Office, Kew (hereafter PRO).

³⁷ Carr to Maudling, 7 January 1972, LAB 77/84, PRO.

meeting at the Department Trade and Industry (DTI) on 13 January, attended by Derek Ezra, NCB chairman, it was noted that picketing of power stations would be ineffective, as coal stocks were 'mainly' within these stations already.³⁸ This view was shared in the business and daily press,³⁹ but by the first week of February – partly because of a cold weather snap – power cuts were being anticipated, with industrial capacity already curtailed. In Scotland DTI officials noted the dates by which coal stocks held by large industrial users would be exhausted. These included British Leyland, at Bathgate, by 14 February; Scottish & Newcastle at Fountainbridge, Edinburgh and Chrysler/Rootes at Linwood by 21 February; and ICI at Grangemouth by 28 February.⁴⁰ On 8 February the government declared a State of Emergency, to ration electricity and maintain some order in industrial and domestic life. The following day Carr met NCB and NUM representatives separately, having seen them also on 21 January.⁴¹ The government now clearly saw that the miners' determination and organisational capacities had been greatly under-estimated. Carr told Davies, Secretary of State for Industry, and Anthony Barber, Chancellor of the Exchequer, that there was 'no doubt that the miners were feeling their strength and had got power in their hands'. Time was short: within days 'there would be real interference with supplies and the life of the community, particularly industry'.⁴²

The government had been confounded mainly by the miners' successful picketing. With blanket support among NUM members for the strike and an almost complete absence of working miners, the picketing of collieries was designed chiefly to prevent pit deputies from entering the mines. This unofficial action contravened the NUM

³⁸ Sir Dennis Barnes, Minute of Meeting at DTI, 13 January 1972, LAB 77/84, PRO.

³⁹ *The Economist*, 11 December 1971, p. 85 and 8 January 1972, p. 53.

⁴⁰ J. W. Anderson, DTI Scotland, 4 February 1972, HH 56/95, National Archives of Scotland (hereafter NAS).

⁴¹ Ashworth, *British Coal*, p. 309.

⁴² G. Holland, 'Note for the Record', 9 February 1972, LAB 77/84, PRO.

executive's pre-strike undertaking to cooperate over maintenance and safety, and was a plain sign that local NUM officials rather than national leaders were directing events. By the first week of February full safety cover was in place at just 31 of 289 mines.⁴³ Heath and Carr told Vic Feather, TUC leader, on 15 February that they found this exasperating; Feather observed that many miners would rather see the endangered pits close than continue being under-paid for a 'job which they and the public alike regarded as unpleasant and dangerous'.⁴⁴

Against ministers' expectations, the NUM received crucial support from unionised transport workers on the roads and railways.⁴⁵ This meant that miners needed only token pickets to prevent coal from coming out of the collieries and by the second week of the strike were concentrating efforts on power stations. These proved to be central to the outcome of the dispute. 'It was on the gates of Longannet, Barking, Battersea and West Thurrock', wrote Malcolm Pitt, Kent miner, union activist and communist, 'that the battle of the miners was won.'⁴⁶ Here some elements of the Scottish experience are instructive. At Longannet coal supplies were on site, so the pickets' first aim was to prevent coal getting out rather than in. Supplies were mainly earmarked for Cockenzie, the SSEB's second largest power station, east of Edinburgh, but members of the train drivers' union, ASLEF, cut these off, telling union officials that once the strike began that they would carry no coal from Longannet or anywhere else. This, it should be emphasised, reinforces the importance of rank-and-file agency in the dispute. Road movement of coal

⁴³ Ashworth, *British Coal*, p. 308.

⁴⁴ Note of meeting between Prime Minister, Secretary of State for Employment and General Secretary, TUC, 15 February 1972, PREM 15/985, PRO.

⁴⁵ Hall, *King Coal*, pp. 180-1.

⁴⁶ Pitt, *World on our Backs*, p. 17.

from Longannet was maintained until halted by the NUM picket on 11 January and no further transfers were attempted.⁴⁷

The Longannet pickets' second aim was to prevent diesel for coal-handling equipment and flashing oil for starting up boilers from getting in, although this was not pursued initially with great intensity. On the night of 20-21 January, for example, a road tanker with diesel fuel entered Longannet unhindered, the two pickets 'sheltering in [a] car from the snow'.⁴⁸ A group led by Tam Coulter of Manor Powis in Clackmannan demonstrated more enterprise several days later. A Danish tanker was approaching with flashing oil so Coulter, according to the *Scottish Miner*, persuaded a trawler skipper by 'rustling a few notes' to 'take him and the lads out to the tanker'. Three pressmen came on board too, having agreed to cover half of Coulter's costs. The *Scottish Miner* duly carried a picture of the huge tanker looming over the bows of the trawler, which, Scottish Office officials noted, failed in the unlikely and dangerous objective of halting the landing of the fuel.⁴⁹ Physical confrontation periodically characterised more conventional forms of picketing, notably at NCB offices in several parts of the UK when NUM members attempted to stop clerical staff from working. This was another illustration of the NUM executive's limited influence. There were two clerical workers' organisations in the industry: the NUM's white collar affiliate, the Colliery Officials' Staff Association (COSA), and the Clerical and Administrative Workers' Union (CAWU). Despite an instruction from the NUM executive to stay at work, on 17 January COSA members compelled their officials to join the strike, but CAWU members stayed at work. NUM pickets attempted

⁴⁷ A. J. Murray 'Coal Strike. Effects on the Electricity Industry', 13 January 1972; Electricity Branch, Scottish Development Department (SDD), 'Coal Strike: Electricity Sitrep', 21 January 1972, HH 56/75, NAS.

⁴⁸ Kelly, SDD, to C. T. Hole, Scottish Office, 13 January 1972; Electricity Branch, SDD, 'Coal Strike. Electricity Sitrep (situation report)', 21 January 1972; A. J. Murray, 'Confidential', to H. Robertson, 24 January 1972; HH 56/75, NAS.

⁴⁹ 'TAM AND HIS MERRY MEN TAKE TO THE SEA', *Scottish Miner*, March 1972; Electricity Branch, SDD, Sitreps, 24 and 27 January 1972, HH 56/95, and W. K. Fraser, 'Miners' Strike: Longannet Power Station', 14 February 1972, HH 56/96, NAS.

that week to prevent CAWU members from entering NCB offices in Yorkshire and South Wales, against NUM official instructions to picket power stations instead.⁵⁰ Robust exchanges followed at the NCB's Northern Scottish Area office at Alloa, where 70 police officers helped clerical staff past 400 picketing miners. Some scuffling ensued: a young woman was treated for bruised ribs, several others treated for shock, and cars were damaged.⁵¹

Picketing intensified in the week beginning 7 February, most dramatically with the blockade by 7,000 miners and local engineering workers of the West Midlands Gas Board's coke depot at Saltley in Birmingham. Led by Yorkshire miners and their full-time official, Arthur Scargill, operating independently of the NUM executive, this coincided with the declaration of a State of Emergency and climaxed on 10 February, when Maudling interrupted a Cabinet discussion about the law on picketing – this 'appeared to permit activities extending well beyond what could be regarded as tolerable' – to convey the news that Birmingham's Chief Constable had been obliged to 'request the closure' of the depot. Cabinet concluded that this outcome, with the depot closed and no further stocks leaving, 'represented a victory for violence against the lawful activities of the Gas Board and the coal merchants'.⁵² To Scargill and his followers Saltley would become a demonstration of working class solidarity, while Thatcher, in the Cabinet that digested Maudling's humiliating news, viewed it as evidence of the fundamentally bullying character of trade union power that had to be first restrained and then dismantled.⁵³ Yet the blockade's empirical impact on the 1972 strike was probably minor. Saltley contained only a small fraction of the coal needed to supply the power stations that had already been forced to slow or cease the generation of electricity, and Dennis Skinner, NUM-

⁵⁰ Darlington and Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, pp. 40-2.

⁵¹ DTI Coal Strike Report, 24 January 1972, HH 56/75, NAS.

⁵² Cabinet Conclusions, 10 February 1972, CAB 128, PRO.

⁵³ Darlington and Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, pp. 56-62; Thatcher, *Path to Power*, p. 218.

sponsored Labour MP for Bolsover in Derbyshire, later recalled that the event was actually 'symbolic, it was psychological, and it helped to impress the establishment'.⁵⁴

The picketing – even where it was physical or violent – had little bearing on public opinion, which was broadly supportive of the miners, despite the power cuts, short-time working and redundancies. This is worth noting, given the emphasis placed by Conservative politicians – at the time, in the case of Heath, and retrospectively, in the case of Thatcher – on public disorder and 'extreme' left-wing political involvement. The Conservative Party commissioned the Opinion Research Centre to monitor public opinion; James Douglas of the party's Research Department told Carr that the findings did not 'make pleasant reading'. On 14 February, for instance, 66 per cent of 642 'representative members of the electorate' agreed that the miners were justified in striking for higher wages – an increase from 54 per cent who took this view on 1 February! The same sampling indicated that 49 per cent of the public on 14 February believed the government was handling the strike 'very badly' and 19 per cent 'fairly badly'.⁵⁵ So, besieged by public opinion as well as the miners' picketing, on 11 February the government appointed Lord Wilberforce, a High Court judge, to chair an inquiry into the miners' pay claim, with the assistance of John Garrett, Director of the Industrial Society, and Professor Lawrence Hunter of the University of Glasgow's Economics Department.⁵⁶ This negated the Department of Employment's earlier insistence that the dispute should be settled without reference to 'an outside agency which would be beyond our control', and was interpreted in the press as a significant defeat – a 'climbdown' – for the government.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Routledge, *Scargill*, p. 75; Whitehead, *Writing on the Wall*, pp. 75-6.

⁵⁵ James Douglas to Robert Carr, 16 February 1972, with enclosures, 'Snap Surveys on the Coal Strike', LAB 77/84, PRO.

⁵⁶ Department of Employment Press Notice, 11 February 1972, LAB 77/84, PRO.

⁵⁷ Carr to Heath, 6 January 1972, LAB 77/84, PRO; *The Economist*, 12 February 1972, p. 59.

Ministers expected Wilberforce's appointment to improve the supply position, and on 14 February the NUM executive decided to 'reduce pickets generally'.⁵⁸ Carr appeared on BBC's *Panorama* that evening, asking miners to resume work immediately on the understanding that the government would authorise any settlement recommended by Wilberforce.⁵⁹ But Carr had little influence with the miners, not helped, according to Thatcher, by his leftist Tory reputation. Trade unionists, she wrote saw 'left-wing Conservatives not as more compassionate but merely as less candid'.⁶⁰ Feather duly warned Heath that the mass pickets would ignore the NUM executive and continue to muster, particularly at power stations.⁶¹ On 16 February the Home Office learnt that while the NUM executive believed 'they had won the battle', Gormley realised 'there would be no chance of getting the men off the picket lines'.⁶² This was vividly so at Longannet, where for several days miners had been seeking to close the power station by stopping SSEB employees from entering. There were 500 pickets at the main entrance on Tuesday 8 February; on Friday 11 February there were 1000; police officers kept the access road open.⁶³ Over the weekend of 12-13 February Murison, Fife's Chief Constable, learned that there would be over 2,000 pickets on Monday morning, with miners travelling from coalfields throughout Scotland. Murison summoned 300 reinforcements from other police forces and interviewed the power station's manager, who doubted that many of his staff would 'run the gauntlet' of a mass picket for long.

⁵⁸ DTI Report, 'Day 37', 15 February 1972, PREM 15/985, PRO.

⁵⁹ *The Times*, 15 February 1972.

⁶⁰ Thatcher, *Path to Power*, p. 201.

⁶¹ Note of meeting between Prime Minister, Secretary of State for Employment and General Secretary, TUC, 15 February 1972, PREM 15/985, PRO.

⁶² Home Office note on picketing, 16 February 1972, PREM 15/985, PRO.

⁶³ Robert F. Murison, Chief Constable, Fife Constabulary, to James M. Dunlop, Clerk, Fife Police Joint Committee, 17 March 1972, HH 55/1392, and Murison to the Secretary, Scottish Home and Health Department (SHHD), 14 February 1972, HH 56/95, NAS.

Murison advised the Scottish Office that 'within a few days' the Longannet management expected to be 'completely beleaguered'.⁶⁴

At 6 a.m. on 14 February there were, as Murison expected, just 'over 2,000' pickets at Longannet, despite the NUM executive's directive that picketing be scaled down. One of those arrested that day, William Sneddon, an NUM official from Larbert, confirmed at his trial that the union in Scotland believed closing Longannet would secure more rapid and pronounced victory in the strike, as a settlement – through Wilberforce – seemed to be imminent.⁶⁵ Murison's forces kept Longannet open that day, just, although that evening McGahey indicated that the picketing would continue. 'We shall do a Birmingham on them', he allegedly said, alluding to the previous week's events at Saltley,⁶⁶ and a large presence was maintained until the national strike was provisionally settled early on 19 February, as Table 1 indicates.

Table 1: Picketing at Longannet Power Station, 14-18 February 1972

<i>Date</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Monday 14 February	'over' 2000	13 arrests on charge of mobbing and rioting
Tuesday 15 February	2000	2 arrests on charge of breach of peace
Wednesday 16 February	500	'peaceful'; no arrests
Thursday 17 February	2,500	6 arrests on charge of breach of peace; 2 of these charged also with assaulting the police
Friday 18 February	450	'no incidents'

Sources: Flaherty to Hole, 16 and 18 February 1972 and Chief Constable, Fife Constabulary, to Secretary of State for Scotland, 17 February 1972, HH 56/96, NAS.

⁶⁴ Murison to Dunlop, 17 March 1972, HH 55/1392,; W. K. Fraser, 'Miners' Strike: Longannet Power Station', 14 February 1972, HH 56/96, NAS.

⁶⁵ *Glasgow Herald*, 15 June 1972.

⁶⁶ Duncan Dee, SHHD, 'Miners' Strike: Longannet Power Station, Further Minute', 14 February 1972, HH 56/96, NAS.

The comparison with Saltley was instructive, although Longannet arguably represented a more important practical target. In February 1972 it was the acme of industrial modernism. Construction had begun in January 1964 and when fully completed, in January 1973, it was the biggest power station in Britain,⁶⁷ responsible in normal conditions for producing roughly a third of electricity generated in the South of Scotland and 27 per cent of total electricity generated in Scotland.⁶⁸ During the strike only two of Longannet's three units were operating,⁶⁹ but even then its importance was increasing because it had ample coal on site, while other stations were running down non-replenishable stocks. By mid-February Longannet was probably supplying about 50 per cent of electricity generated in the South of Scotland. Of additional, significance, however, is that 'normal' generation in Scotland exceeded local demand, so lost production there affected supply to other parts of the UK. This was what troubled the Cabinet's Official Committee on Emergencies when it learnt of the mass picket at Longannet; Cabinet ministers were immediately advised,⁷⁰ and gratefully contrasted Murison's success in keeping Longannet open with the 'inadequate' measures adopted elsewhere.⁷¹

The outcome of the strike and industrial politics in the 1960s and 1970s

⁶⁷ South of Scotland Electricity Board, *Longannet Power Station* (NCB publications, undated, presumed 1974); copy in COAL 74/2205, PRO.

⁶⁸ George T. Murray, *Scotland: the new future* (Bishopbriggs, 1973), p. 38.

⁶⁹ Kelly to Hole, 13 January 1972 and A. H. M. Mitchell, Note on Energy position, 11 January 1972; both in HH 56/75, NAS.

⁷⁰ Cabinet Official Emergencies Committee, 14 February 1972, HH 56/97, NAS; DTI, 'Day 36', noting 'Heavy picketing of Longannet Power Station', 14 February 1972, circulated to various Cabinet ministers, PREM 15/985, PRO.

⁷¹ Cabinet Conclusions, 17 February 1972, CAB 128, PRO.

The Longannet picketing, while failing to close the plant, surely increased the pressure on the government to reach a quick settlement. Murison advised Ministers that ten per cent of total Scottish policing resources were concentrated on Longannet, and asked whether this could be justified in political terms, given its impact on policing elsewhere, with officers drawn from Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Alick Buchanan-Smith, Under Secretary of State at the Scottish Office, replied that Wilberforce's recommendations would be presented within days, so the large force required to keep Longannet open was justifiable on the assumption that the strike would shortly be concluded.⁷² This eventuality materialised early on 19 February, with the conclusion of lengthy negotiations on the basis of Wilberforce's findings.

Wilberforce had gathered oral testimony on 15 and 16 February and written evidence from the NCB and the NUM, which was assisted by Hugh Clegg, Professor of Industrial Relations at Oxford University, Michael Meacher, Labour MP for Oldham North, and the Trade Union Research Unit of Ruskin College. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) also submitted evidence, reiterating comments made by Campbell Adamson, director general, on *Panorama* on 14 February about the inflationary dangers of the miners' claim.⁷³ On 18 February Wilberforce recommended a two-component rise: a 'normal periodic increase', adjacent to the government's maximum allowance of 8 per cent, and an 'adjustment factor', of 11-13 per cent, to increase the relative value of miners' wages.⁷⁴ Negotiations on the basis of these recommendations took place from 10am on 18 February to 1am on 19 February at the Department of Employment and then at 10 Downing Street. Heath, pressing hard to secure Britain's entry to the EEC,

⁷² Duncan Dee, SHHD, 'Miners' Strike: Longannet Power Station', 14 February 1972, HH 56/96, and 'Further Minute', 14 February 1972, HH 56/96, NAS.

⁷³ *The Times*, 15 February 1972.

⁷⁴ Ashworth, *British Coal*, pp. 310-11.

had to postpone a visit from President Pompidou of France.⁷⁵ Having first talked to Vic Feather and Campbell Adamson, Heath – with Carr and Barber – unsuccessfully urged the NUM delegation to accept Wilberforce's recommendations,⁷⁶ before an improved offer was agreed to early in the morning of 19 February. In the 'top down' or 'high politics' accounts of the strike this outcome is usually presented as the 'left-wing' or 'militant' members of the NUM executive wringing multiple 'concessions' from the NCB and so maximising Heath's humiliation. Kenneth Morgan, for example, contrasted Wilberforce's terms, constituting an additional £85 m 'to the bill for coal', with the final settlement that raised this to £116-117 m. The most significant addition was that the 'bonus' payment for the Saturday shift, paid since 1947 after the normal five-day working week, would now encompassed in the regular Monday to Friday shift rate.⁷⁷ Morgan's account was based on calculations published in *The Economist*, which linked the settlement to the observation that the 'moderate Mr Gormley now gives the impression of no longer being the man in charge'.⁷⁸

The NUM executive was, however, operating within considerable practical constraints, obliged to search for terms that their members would accept. Daly told Heath that accepting Wilberforce would result in 50 per cent of the miners remaining on unofficial strike, and even the final settlement would not avert 'havoc in their ranks for a week or two', meaning a continuation of picketing and strikes 'in certain areas'.⁷⁹ While Longannet was clear of pickets immediately, some miners remained at Cockenzie on Saturday 19 February, one waving a placard referring to the Prime Minister's nautical

⁷⁵ Robert Armstrong, note, 21 February 1972, PREM 15/986, PRO.

⁷⁶ Minute for Record, Prime Minister's 10.20 pm meeting with the NUM, 18 February 1972, LAB 77/84, PRO.

⁷⁷ Campbell, *Heath*, pp. 418-9; Heath, *My Life*, p. 383; Morgan, *People's Peace*, pp. 327-8; Routledge, *Scargill*, pp. 80-1.

⁷⁸ *The Economist*, 12 February 1972, p. 59.

⁷⁹ Minute for the Record, Prime Minister's 10.20 pm meeting with the NUM, 18 February 1972, LAB 77/84; Note for the Record: Discussion, 10 Downing Street, Saturday 19 February 1972, PREM 15/986, PRO.

leisure pursuits: 'We don't WANT a Yacht. We Don't Ask a Lot. Just a Living Wage.' And the sporadic 'havoc' forecast by Daly duly materialised with a two-day unofficial strike at pits in West Lothian over the re-employment by the NCB of two men whose NUM membership had been withdrawn when they took other jobs during the strike.⁸⁰ These strikes followed the general relaxation of picketing on Monday 21 February, which allowed coal and oil to pass freely to power stations by road and rail. As Scotland's power generation approached pre-strike capacity, the Cabinet's Official Emergencies Committee reported with satisfaction that Scotland was again exporting electricity to England.⁸¹ The miners resumed work on Monday 28 February, following a national ballot that ratified the Downing Street agreement by an overwhelming 210,039 votes to 7,581.⁸²

The evidence of the popular agency that under-pinned the strike baffled Heath, as he admits in his memoirs,⁸³ and in seeking to understand the miners' militancy he asked the Secret Service to explore the role of 'subversive organisations'.⁸⁴ This investigation revealed little in the way of grand conspiracy. 'For many years', Heath was told, 'the Scottish area [of the NUM] has been under Communist control.' This was not a revelation: McGahey had become a member of the CPGB's national executive in 1971, and Bill McLean, Scottish general secretary, was also openly a communist. The intelligence officers emphasised that the CPGB supported the strike to advance its chief political aim, the defeat of the Conservative government. This was a matter of public record. The officers noted that McGahey maintained contact during the strike with Bert Ramelson, the CPGB's Industrial Organiser, and that union officials and members who

⁸⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 22 February 1972; *The Times*, 1 and 2 March 1972.

⁸¹ Cabinet Official Emergencies Committee, 21 February 1972, HH 56/97, NAS.

⁸² Telegram from Gormley, Schofield and Daly to McLean, 25 February 1972, Acc. 9805.235, NLS.

⁸³ Heath, *My Life*, p. 350

⁸⁴ Note by Robert Armstrong, 25 February 1972, PREM 15/986, PRO.

were communists in Yorkshire, South Wales and Kent as well as Scotland had co-ordinated picketing and strike activities with local CP district officials. These, again, were matters of public record: Dai Francis, general secretary in Wales, Jack Dunn, secretary in Kent, and Jock Kane, full-time officer in Yorkshire, were all open communists,⁸⁵ and the intelligence officers had the sense to conclude that the NUM executive, which contained a sizeable anti-communist group guided by Gormley, but was generally unanimous in its conduct of the strike, had not taken its lead from the CPGB.⁸⁶

Heath scribbled 'I don't find this very convincing' on the report and asked Dennis Barnes, Permanent Secretary at the Department of Employment, for his comments. Barnes concluded that the miners' militancy rested on broad industrial, social and political foundations. While the eight communists on the NUM executive were 'wreckers' in the sense of being opposed to the 'existing political system generally', it was a 'reasonable assumption' that the 20 other executive members opposed the government and so were 'wreckers' too. The NUM was, moreover, supported in its aims and tactics by the political and industrial wings of the labour movement: 'what developed was a near wrecking consensus rather than any planned conspiracy'. Of importance here was the public support for the NUM of the Labour Party in the country and at Westminster, and a statement by Feather that members of other TUC-affiliated unions should not cross the NUM picket lines. Barnes believed, probably correctly, that Feather had been influenced by 'left wing' members of the TUC general council, especially Jack Jones, general secretary of the Transport & General Workers' Union (TGWU), who themselves were guided by their increasingly militant members, in the context of increasing unemployment and debates about the Industrial Relations Act.⁸⁷ Barnes reached what

⁸⁵ McIlroy, 'Communist Party', pp. 228-9; Pitt, *World on our Backs*, pp. 90-1.

⁸⁶ Secret Service, 'Influence of Subversive Organisations in the NUM and the Miners' Strike', 24 February 1972, PREM 15/986, PRO.

⁸⁷ Jones, *Union Man*, pp. 238-44.

seemed to him a gloomy conclusion: 'Generally I regard the course of the strike as one further example of the greatly increased militancy of the minority of workers which has developed over the last years and the much greater effectiveness of the weapons they are using.'⁸⁸

Barnes's emphasis on the broader social and political context of the strike draws attention to the limited importance of individuals. Yet an emphasis on personalities nevertheless characterises the 'high politics' literature on the 1972 strike, and not just the memoirs of Conservative leaders.⁸⁹ Kenneth Morgan and William Ashworth, distinguished historians both, see a correlation between the change in personnel at the heads of the NUM and NCB – where Derek Ezra succeeded Alf Robens as chairman in 1971 – and the trajectory of events in the winter of 1971-2.⁹⁰ Yet many miners disliked Robens, chiefly because of his association with the closures of the 1960s,⁹¹ and so it seems odd to position deteriorating industrial relations in coal as a consequence of his retirement. So far as the changes at the NUM are concerned, it would seem more sensible to see these as the product rather than instigator of militancy, which had been growing in various, unambiguous ways for several years – witness the 1969 and 1970 unofficial strikes – by the winter of 1971-2. To paraphrase the industrial sociologist, Alan Fox, McGahey and Daly did not 'introduce' conflict to the industry, but were themselves 'introduced' by the miners as the institutional expression of their legitimate and growing grievances.⁹²

Fox was partly responsible for developing interpretations of the character and behaviour of trade unionism in the 1960s that challenge the emphasis on top-down,

⁸⁸ Sir Dennis Barnes to Robert Armstrong, 8 March 1972, PREM 15/986, PRO.

⁸⁹ Heath, *My Life*, pp. 350, 353; Thatcher, *Path to Power*, pp. 215-18.

⁹⁰ Morgan, *People's Peace*, p. 325; Ashworth, *British Coal*, p. 306.

⁹¹ Hall, *King Coal*, pp. 165, 168.

⁹² Alan Fox, *Industrial Sociology and Industrial Relations; Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, Research Papers*, 3 (HMSO, 1966), pp. 10, 12.

hierarchical bureaucracies that is evident in some of the literature examined in this article and was present in Conservative thinking and policy from the 1960s to the 1990s. Fox's colleague and mentor at Oxford University, Allan Flanders, in 1968 lamented the contradictions in Tory thinking on trade unions. On the one hand unions were seen as being too strong, which necessitated legislative 'curbs' on their activities. Yet on the other hand they were criticised for being too weak, for 'failing to control' their members by stopping unofficial strikes and other undesirable forms of industrial behaviour.⁹³ Fox and Flanders, together with their colleague Hugh Clegg, in emphasising the degree of pluralism within unions, which they saw as comprising a potential multiplicity of interests, duly influenced the work of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Organisations, chaired by Lord Donovan, appointed by the Labour government in 1965 and reporting in 1968. This famously identified what Clegg later described as the 'centrifugal tendencies' in British industrial relations,⁹⁴ with 'full' employment since 1945 encouraging the development of informal bargaining – between shop stewards and managers – alongside formal bargaining between union officials and employers' representatives.⁹⁵ These economic processes were bolstered by less tangible social and cultural changes, which occupy much space in literature on the 1960s.⁹⁶ Geoffrey Goodman briefly articulated the implications of these changes for industrial relations in his assessment of the career of Frank Cousins, general secretary of the TGWU from 1955 to 1969, during which time the grip of the 'Establishment', in all branches of economic, social and political life, including the trade unions, was weakened: authority of

⁹³ Allan Flanders, 'What are Trade Unions for?', in Flanders, *Management and Unions: the theory and reform of industrial relations* (London, 1970), pp. 39-40.

⁹⁴ Hugh Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889. Vol. III, 1934-1951* (Oxford, 1994), p. 300.

⁹⁵ *Royal Commission on Trades Unions and Employers' Associations 1965-1968*, Cmnd 3623, (HMSO, 1968), pp. 12, 261.

⁹⁶ Recent lengthy treatments include Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties* (Oxford, 1998), and Mark Kurlansky, *1968: the year that rocked the world* (London, 2004).

all forms was crumbling as popular deference diminished and 'ordinary men and women' grew in confidence. This encouraged the taking of initiative on the shop floor, and loosened the ability of union executives to control or even to shape significantly the trajectory of industrial developments.⁹⁷

In the 1970s Conservative thinking and policy remained largely oblivious to these perspectives. Fred Lindop, for instance, has noted that the architects of the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, who included the Solicitor General, Geoffrey Howe, later Thatcher's first Chancellor of the Exchequer, 'presumed that unions were (or should be) business organisations in which executives gave orders to subordinates'.⁹⁸ The legislation was subsequently discredited precisely because union members – particularly in the docks, on building sites and in engineering works – did not follow policies set down by union executives. Lindop, along with Darlington and Lyddon, has shown that the Act was challenged first by ordinary trade unionists, with union leaders compelled to assume positions of militant opposition to the legislation to retain influence within their organisations.⁹⁹ The realities of trade unionism – with shop floor pressure from below shaping union policy – continued to escape even thoughtful Conservatives. On the eve of the 'winter of discontent' of 1978-79, Peregrine Worsthorne, the *Sunday Telegraph* columnist 'who spoke for an important segment of Thatcherite High Tories',¹⁰⁰ speculated on why so many people in Britain – more, he claimed, than in other countries – owed their major or principal loyalty to a trade union. Worsthorne believed that the main explanation was Britain's 'spectacular loss of national prestige' over the course of the twentieth century. This was an inversion of the usual conservative assumption about

⁹⁷ Geoffrey Goodman, *The Awkward Warrior. Frank Cousins: His Life and Times* (London, 1979), p. 595.

⁹⁸ Fred Lindop, 'The Dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, Part 2: The Arrest and Release of the Pentonville Five', *HSIR*, No. 6, Autumn 1998, p. 66.

⁹⁹ Darlington and Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, especially pp. 141-77.

¹⁰⁰ Hugo Young, *One of Us* (London, 1989), p. 493.

the causal relationship between national decline and trade union power, with the former, he suggested, giving rise to the latter.¹⁰¹ For the poor and the weak, Worsthorne argued, a union filled the vacuum once filled by an impressive imperial nation state. The same hierarchies and loyalties were allegedly evident:

Asked by a trade union leader to lay siege to a hospital, even decent members will suspend the inhibitions of conscience in exactly the same way as they would have done in the old days for some comparably ruthless act in the service of the nation. The same thoughtless, amoral jingoism which used to inspire a nation at war can now be found on the militant picket lines of an embattled union.¹⁰²

In the 1972 strike, however, picketing and other strike activities were generally not directed from above in this manner. Rank and file agency was such, indeed, that the influence on events of miners' leaders, whether 'sensible moderates' or militant 'destroyers',¹⁰³ was highly constrained, as this account of the conduct and outcome of the strike has indicated.

Conclusion

On 26 February 1972 Heath was congratulated on the outcome of the strike by President Nixon, in Beijing engaged in the historic task of establishing relations between the US and Chinese governments, which suggests some measure of international recognition of the apparent crisis in Britain. Despite their cool personal relations, Nixon

¹⁰¹ The usual conservative model of this relationship is discussed in Jim Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-war Britain* (Harlow, 2000), pp. 55-8.

¹⁰² Peregrine Worsthorne, 'Their Union Right or Wrong', *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 December 1978, reproduced in Peregrine Worsthorne, *Peregrinations. Selected Pieces* (London, 1980), pp. 115-118.

¹⁰³ These are Heath's characterisations: Heath, *My Life*, pp. 350, 353.

congratulated Heath on his 'resolution' of the dispute.¹⁰⁴ But for Heath's government the strike was an unambiguous defeat. The 'n-1' pay policy was breached; the settlement was based on the findings of an outside agency, the Wilberforce committee; and the miners, 'feeling their power', to quote Carr, grew strength that was realised further in the next major dispute, in the winter of 1973-4. Evidence examined in this article has shown, however, that the character of the government's defeat has been distorted, particularly in the memories and memoirs of Conservative leaders, but also in mainstream historical literature, where emphasis has been placed on 'violence' and disorder, and the decisive role of the 'politically-motivated' miners' leaders. Perhaps too many historians have read too much significance into the famous – but curious – observation by Douglas Hurd, Heath's private political secretary, in his diary on 11 February, that the government was 'wandering vainly over the battlefield looking for someone to surrender to'.¹⁰⁵ Hurd, of course, had the sensibilities of a novelist as well as a politician, and this entry echoes – or is clouded by – the same preoccupations with quasi-militarist insurrection that characterise *Scotch on the Rocks*, a 1971 novel co-authored with Andrew Osmond, joint founder of *Private Eye*.¹⁰⁶

Hurd – and the historians who have followed him – have blown an undoubtedly important industrial and social problem into a major political and even near-revolutionary crisis. In this article the focus has been on the strike as a fairly straightforward industrial dispute that was pursued determinedly by the miners themselves, to arrest the decline in their real wages and to provide some compensation for employment insecurity in an industry experiencing structural decline and contraction. This seems to have been the

¹⁰⁴ President Nixon to the Prime Minister, 26 February 1972, PREM 15/986, PRO; Campbell, *Heath*, p. 347.

¹⁰⁵ Douglas Hurd, *An End to Promises. Sketch of a Government, 1970-74* (London, 1979).

¹⁰⁶ Douglas Hurd and Andrew Osmond, *Scotch on the Rocks* (London, 1971); the climax involves the fugitive head of the Scottish Liberation Army taking a dirk to his stomach at the Holyrood ceremony marking the establishment of an Independent Scotland.

understanding on most of the picket lines for much of the dispute, where relations between police and miners were generally cordial. Even at Longannet, where order was threatened and tension was greatest, relations were strained rather than ruptured following the ‘mobbing and rioting’ of 14 February. Robert Murison, Fife’s Chief Constable, kept the power station open, and spoke to NUM officials about arrangements for the following day’s picketing;¹⁰⁷ Norman Wylie, Lord Advocate, quietly organised the arrested men’s release on bail; Mick McGahey complained about the anti-working class biases of the law in capitalist society, but joked with journalists about his ‘accidental’ injury by a police boot. Authority was certainly questioned and even, to an extent, challenged at Longannet. But it was not seriously jeopardised.

The miners’ strike duly suggests that the balance of power between capital and labour that had existed in Britain since the Second World War was still, just, present in the early 1970s. The term ‘consensus’ is usually used to describe this power balance, generally by mainstream historians who conclude that the alleged abuse of union power in 1972 strike was an affront to this consensus. But another term, introduced as early as 1959 by Peregrine Worsthorne, might be more apposite. He wrote about the ‘stalemate’ – rather than consensus – between the working and middle classes, emphasising on both sides the unwilling and grudging nature of the post-war economic, social and political ‘settlement’.¹⁰⁸ The industrial basis of this stalemate – high levels of employment in strongly unionised sectors of the economy – was gradually crumbling in the early 1970s as deindustrialisation gathered pace. The political realities of structural economic change were disguised in the short-term by the outcome of the 1972 strike, which was an expression of militancy that was shaped by industrial contraction in the 1960s. But as

¹⁰⁷ Duncan Dee, SHHD, ‘Miners’ Strike: Longannet Power Station, Further Minute’, 14 February 1972, HH 56/96, NAS.

¹⁰⁸ Peregrine Worsthorne, ‘Class and Conflict in British Foreign Policy’, *Foreign Affairs*, April 1959, Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 421, 428.

the process of structural economic change accelerated, particularly after the election of Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979, the implications for trade unions of the decline of their manufacturing and public sector strongholds became clear. This was predicted by *The Economist* in 1972, which argued that the miners had forfeited their right to argue in the future for protection against industrial decline because they had used their power to disrupt the economy and inflict 'crushing defeat' on the government.¹⁰⁹ So it came to pass. Thatcher took her 'revenge' on the miners by masterminding their defeat in the national strike of 1984-5, enjoying especially the victory over Scargill, who she and her acolytes regarded as the chief villain of 1972. Yet it is worth reiterating, as this article has shown, that Heath was not defeated by 'destroyers' at the apex of the NUM but by tens of thousands of spirited adventurers like Longannet's Tam Coulter, who gamely hired a trawler to head off the Danish tanker as it steamed up the Firth of Forth. From this perspective Thatcher's subsequent 'revenge' assumes an unambiguously anti-working class character: its thrust was at the manual working class and not just the excoriated union leaders.

¹⁰⁹ *The Economist*, 19 February 1972, p. 16.