

**'VOICES OF FRICKLEY': THE
STRUGGLES OF THE MINERS AT
A YORKSHIRE COLLIERY,
1984-1993**

J. E. Nightingale

University of Sheffield

**Submitted for the degree of PhD,
1997.**

**'VOICES OF FRICKLEY': THE STRUGGLES OF THE MINERS
AT A YORKSHIRE COLLIERY, 1984-1993**

James Edwin Nightingale

Submitted for the degree of PhD, the University of Sheffield,
Department of History, October 1997.

'VOICES OF FRICKLEY': THE STRUGGLES OF THE MINERS AT A YORKSHIRE COLLIERY, 1984-1993

James Edwin Nightingale

In this study the author focuses on the activities of the National Union of Mineworkers at Frickley Colliery during ten years of industrial conflict prior to the pit's closure in November 1993. While the initial part of this period, the 1984-85 miners' strike, has been well documented by scholars, the conflict in the following years has received scant attention. Following the miners' defeat, the NUM members at Frickley played an important part in sustaining the tradition of militant trade unionism in the Yorkshire coalfield at a time of general retreat for the British labour movement. Other studies have concentrated mainly on the activities of union leaders and management figures when chronicling the confrontation in the coalfields. In contrast, a substantial part of the present author's account is based on the oral testimonies of pit level activists, thus aspects of the conflict that have been otherwise ignored or overlooked are brought to light. At the core of the study is the contention that the labour movement had become disabled by the defeatist notion of 'new realism'. Moreover, it is illustrated how the NUM leadership in Yorkshire, conventionally portrayed as being militant, was often instrumental in suffocating the resistance of the NUM rank and file as they challenged the authoritarian working practices being imposed by the management of the industry.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Frickley and the miners' union	9
Chapter Two: The early days of the Big Strike	25
Chapter Three: Steel and Orgreave	45
Chapter Four: Digging in	53
Chapter Five: The battle of 13 November	69
Chapter Six: Solid to the end	85
Chapter Seven: The return to work	99
Chapter Eight: Fighting back	116
Chapter Nine: The new gaffer	132
Chapter Ten: The Code of Conduct	146
Chapter Eleven: The overtime ban	164
Chapter Twelve: Peace	176
Chapter Thirteen: Into the 1990s	189
Chapter Fourteen: Retreat	201
Chapter Fifteen: Closure	214
Chapter Sixteen: Conclusion	237
Appendix: The Frickley activists interviewed	243
Bibliography	245

INTRODUCTION

On Friday 26 November 1993, the miners at Frickley Colliery in the Yorkshire coalfield worked their final shift at the pit. Frickley was the latest on a list of pits that had closed in the previous decade as the British coal industry was reduced to a shadow of its former self. Two days earlier, of the 357 men who took part in a pit-head ballot, just 27 had voted to oppose the plans to close the pit.¹

The very size of the vote at Frickley gives the impression that those responsible for shutting pits, the Conservative government and the management of the coal industry, had things their own way during this period - but such a view would be mistaken. Britain's coal miners had formed one of the country's most powerful trade unions, the National Union of Mineworkers, and in the ten years prior to Frickley closing, its members had been involved in an almost continual struggle. From March 1984 to March 1985, the government had to confront the miners in Europe's longest mass strike - the Big Strike, as Frickley miners often preferred to call it.² During its course, the Frickley miners, previously regarded as a 'moderate' workforce, gained a militant reputation because of their aggressive stand. Even though the miners' strike was eventually beaten, at many pits their spirit was not entirely broken and a guerrilla war of attrition against the imposition of new working practices took place. The NUM members at Frickley Colliery - the 'Frickley Fighters' as they dubbed themselves - were in the forefront of this action, a beacon of resistance as the labour movement retreated. The 'Voices of Frickley' is an account of those ten years of struggle.

Certainly the Big Strike has been extensively documented, and being the most important industrial confrontation in Britain since the General Strike of 1926, rightly so. Unfortunately, there has been little written about the strike's aftermath. And in what has been written, too often the focus has been on the changes in mining communities rather than the struggles of the miners at the point of production, the place where they had their greatest collective power. Thus Waddington et al.'s *Split at the Seams* included interviews with miners, but also 'their families, trade union officials, local politicians, police officers, social workers, health workers, school teachers and the local clergy'.³ Similarly with a sociological study of four West Yorkshire mining localities by Dennis Warwick and Gary Littlejohn from 1981 to 1989. In their 1986 survey they collected data from 123 women and just 31 men -- and few of these had been active participants in the strike.⁴

¹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 2 December 1993.

² This was by no means a unique concept amongst miners. Robert Roberts, for instance, uses the same term to refer to the 1972 national miners' strike. See R. Roberts, 'The Big Strike', in J. MacFarlane (ed.) *Essays from the Yorkshire Coalfield*, (Sheffield, 1979).

³ D. Waddington, M. Wykes, and C. Critcher, *Split at the Seams?* (Milton Keynes, 1990), p.1.

⁴ D. Warwick and G. Littlejohn, *Coal, Capital and Culture: A Sociological Analysis of Mining Communities in West Yorkshire*, (London, 1992), pp.83-87.

Even two of the later and most valuable texts which do focus on the miners' struggle, Jonathan and Ruth Winterton's *Coal Crisis and Conflict*,⁵ and Andrew J. Richards' *Miners on Strike*,⁶ each devote only one chapter to the strike's aftermath. Moreover, both have shortcomings in what they do discuss.

Considering that the Wintertons collected much of their data by interviewing a 'key activist' from each pit in Yorkshire, there is little in their account of the resistance at grass-roots level in the Big Strike: the barricade building, the stone throwing and the collecting of strike funds, the leaflet writing and the campaigning, or the intensity and range of debate amongst ordinary miners, be it at work or the social club, the branch meeting or the picket line. This is partly because there is little oral testimony presented, but perhaps also because too many of their respondents had one foot in the lower levels of the NUM bureaucracy.

Although Richards' book is packed with oral testimonies, his respondents are also from the same layer, predominantly pit-level union officials. Indeed there is little acknowledgement that a bureaucracy existed in the miners union, or that there may have been any conflict of interests between the leadership of the union and the rank-and-file membership.

In 1972, Raphael Samuel described what he saw as a common feature of much of the literature on coal mining trade unionism: 'They are for the most part bureaucratic works in which the miner is treated as synonymous with his Union, and the Union itself identified with the activities of the area officials.'⁷ It is an apt description of many later works too.

In the present writer's view, the concept of bureaucracy is an important one when discussing trade union issues. When Alex Callinicos and Mike Simons⁸ analysed the 1984-85 strike, unlike most other observers,⁹ they came to the conclusion that the miners' defeat had not been inevitable. Certainly the miners had been forced to fight in far from ideal conditions, and for sure the state repression they faced was beyond that experienced by most workers in struggle. But these were of nothing compared to the weaknesses in the working class movement. For Callinicos and Simons, the fundamental reason why the miners lost in 1984-85 was because they were betrayed by the leaders of the trade union movement; and furthermore, leading figures within the NUM itself could not be absolved of all responsibility for the defeat, having blocked action which was required for the miners to win. It is the present writer's contention that not only were Callinicos and Simons correct in their judgement in 1985, but that their analysis holds true for what happened in the years that followed.

Callinicos and Simons do not argue that it was the personal failings of trade union leaders that led them to betray the miners in 1984-85. Miners had been betrayed

⁵ J. Winterton and R. Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict: The 1984-85 Miners' Strike in Yorkshire*, (Manchester, 1989).

⁶ A. J. Richards, *Miners On Strike: Class Solidarity and Division in Britain*, (Oxford, 1996).

⁷ R. Samuel, 'Forward', in D. Douglass, *Pit Life in County Durham: Rank and File Movements and Workers' Control*, History Workshop pamphlet No.6, 1972, p.i.

⁸ A. Callinicos and M. Simons, *The Great Strike*, (London, 1985).

⁹ See, for instance, A. J. Taylor, 'Militancy is not enough', *Labour History Review*, Vol.55, No.3, Winter 1990.

before - by the Triple Alliance in April 1921, and then after the TUC had left them to fight alone after calling off the General Strike in 1926. And the same pattern was evident during the guerrilla war in the pits after the Big Strike, and yet again in the campaign to stop the final pit closure programme in 1992/93

Callinicos and Simons point out that such behaviour is actually a result of the trade union leadership constituting a particular social grouping within modern capitalist society. Though unions are the basic defence organisations of workers against the employing class, their aim is limited to lessening the extent of capitalist exploitation rather than to actually abolishing it. As a consequence, every industrial dispute ultimately ends with a compromise, albeit in favour of one of the two sides depending on their relative strengths at the time. Someone, though, has to negotiate this settlement and so full-time trade union officials have evolved, based in a union office, far removed from the everyday pressures of the workplace. Importantly, the earnings and conditions of the workers' representatives are not determined by the compromises they reach. Indeed, union officials begin to expect the same kind of salaries and expense accounts as the management representatives with whom they negotiate¹⁰. A study of trade union officials in the early 1990s found that 60 per cent of union general secretaries earned salaries of more than £60,000 a year.¹¹ All of these factors place the union officials in a privileged position in comparison with their members and help to transform them into a conservative bureaucracy for whom negotiation and compromise are seen as the very basis of trade unionism.¹² It is for this reason that union officials have been referred to as 'managers of discontent'.¹³

Callinicos and Simons were by no means the originators of this notion of a trade union bureaucracy. In their *History of Trade Unionism*, written in 1894, Sidney and Beatrice Webb had noticed that British trade unions were dominated by a bureaucracy as early as the 1850s.¹⁴ In 1911, the Italian sociologist Robert Michels wrote of the emergence of a conservative layer of full-time officials in the German labour movement.¹⁵

Because the miners were one of the first groups of workers to organise, they have long had to endure bureaucracy. David Douglass has written of the how the leaders of the Durham Miners Association in the late nineteenth century developed a particular character:

Once elected, they thought their role was to inflict upon the members their own moderation, and lead rather than serve. The members found they were being policed by men to whom they were paying wages. The officials became more and more preoccupied with arbitration and conciliation as the cure for all ills, and more and more impatient of local action which ran up against it.¹⁶

¹⁰ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., pp.239-240.

¹¹ J. Kelly and E. Heery, *Working for the Union*, (Cambridge, 1994), p.65.

¹² Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., pp.239-240.

¹³ D. Watson, *Managers of Discontent: Trade Union Officers and Industrial Relations Managers*, (London, 1988).

¹⁴ S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, (London, 1920), p.203.

¹⁵ R. Michels, *Political Parties*, (Glencoe, 1949).

¹⁶ D. Douglass, 'The Durham Pitman', in R. Samuel (ed.) *Miners, Quarrymen and*

What characterises the trade union bureaucracy in general is vacillation. It is pressured by the need to gain control of disputes on the one hand, while on the other pressed by their members to achieve better pay and conditions.

Callincos and Simons' stance is not without its critics. One writer, Peter Gibbon, is especially scathing of their position, arguing that:

This analysis's most obvious characteristic is its sheer dogmatism. For 'bureaucracy' was probably less evident in the running of the 1984-5 NUM strike than either any other major strike in recent times, or even any other recent NUM strike.¹⁷

But an intense emotional attachment to the miners' struggle has blinded many left-wing theorists to the weaknesses within the workers' movement. It is usually stressed that it is right-wing officials who 'sell out' and these can be replaced by good, fighting left wingers. But clearly what is at issue is that if the NUM was already left-dominated, how could there have been any question of any betrayal of rank-and-file interests during the period we are concerned with? What is not recognised is that bureaucratic thinking inevitably creeps upon people who for prolonged periods act as guardians of the union apparatus and mediators between capital and labour, and this can happen despite sections of the bureaucracy being *formally* to the left of most workers.¹⁸

The habits of bureaucratic thinking even crept in at pit level. Though NUM branch officials differed from the upper union leadership in that they were paid by the Coal Board and that like ordinary miners they would lose their jobs if pits closed, they did tend to spend much of their time in the union office on the pit surface, away from the job. The bureaucratisation of workplace union representatives had been in evidence in the coal industry since nationalisation and beyond, but in the late 1970s the process was deliberately fostered in all industries by the Labour government. Subsequently, by the early 1980s there were twice as many full-time workplace representatives in British industry as there were full-time trade union officials.¹⁹ One study, despite its authors being critical of the 'bureaucratic thesis', found 'the "professionalism" of workplace trade unionism is more advanced in mining than is usual'.²⁰ Certainly there was a far-reaching network of formal procedures for

Saltworkers, (London, 1977), p.255; see also D. Douglass, *Pit Life in County Durham: Rank and File Movements and Workers' Control*, History Workshop pamphlet No.6, 1972.

¹⁷ P. Gibbon, 'The miners' strike of 1984-5', *Economy and Society*, Vol.17, No.2, 1988, p.158.

¹⁸ Cf. T. Cliff and D. Gluckstein, *Marxism and the Trade Union Struggle: The General Strike of 1926*, (London, 1986), p.29.

¹⁹ D. Beecham, 'How far has shop-floor organisation been weakened?', *International Socialism Journal*, No.23, 1984, pp.99-100.

²⁰ C. Edwards and E. Heery, 'The incorporation of workplace trade unionism? Some evidence from the mining industry', *Sociology*, Vol.19, No.3, August 1985, p.349.

collective bargaining and consultation in the mining industry, and there was a highly effective conciliation machinery. After the equalisation of wages throughout the coalfields in 1966, only 6 per cent of disputes involved stoppages.²¹

But if the theory of trade union bureaucracy explains the tendency for trade union leaders to sell their members short, it is not the sole explanation for their behaviour during the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1970s, trade union leaders had been far more militant, but the defeats of the 1980s shaped their attitudes. Under the banner of 'new realism' many of them now came to the conclusion that it was impossible for the unions ever to fight and win, and that strikes should be avoided at all cost. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy - union leaders did their utmost to stop workers from fighting, consequently workers did not win.²²

Even so, in the wake of the miners' defeat there was still resistance in the pits despite the onset of new realism. Of course it could be argued that this is what should be expected from miners anyway - historically, were they not the most militant group of workers in Britain? Social theorists have long debated why miners were prone to taking strike action.²³ A common explanation has been that this was a result of them living in isolated, close-knit communities; as Bernard Newman, a researcher for the Ministry of Information, noted during the Second World War:

Their villages are occupied only by miners, save for the few local tradesmen . . . The community feels itself socially ostracised, a race apart . . . Here is to be found part of the answer to the question asked so frequently; why does the miner strike in war-time?²⁴

In 1954, Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel reached a similar conclusion after examining the strike records in eleven countries.²⁵ They argued that a 'consciousness of kind' developed in mining communities, which involved a strong awareness of shared grievances and a close attachment to worker solidarity. The Frickley miners seemed to fit with this generalisation, indeed as late as 1978 mining accounted for 75 per cent of all male employment in the neighbourhood near the pit.²⁶ But such a model does little to explain why workers who are not part of an

²¹ S. Leman and J. Winterton, 'New technology and the restructuring of pit-level industrial relations in the British coal industry', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol.6, No.1, 1991, p.58; J. Lloyd, *Understanding the Miners' Strike*, (London, 1985), p.7.

²² A. Callinicos, *Socialists in the Trade Unions*, (London, 1995), pp. 10-12.

²³ For a good introduction to the debate see Richards, *op. cit.*, chapter one; also R. A. Saundry, 'The Impact of Economic Restructuring upon Industrial Relations in the Coalmining Industry', (MA dissertation, University of Leeds, 1988).

²⁴ Cited in D. Gilbert, 'Imagined communities and mining communities', *Labour History Review*, Vol.60, No.2, Autumn 1995, p.48.

²⁵ C. Kerr and A. Siegel, 'The interindustry propensity to strike - an international comparison', in A. Kornhauser, R. Dubin and A. M. Ross (eds), *Industrial Conflict*, (New York, 1954).

²⁶ Wakefield Metropolitan District Council Planning Department, *Elmsall District Plan*, (Wakefield, 1977).

'isolated mass', such as white collar workers, have been in the forefront of industrial action in recent times.²⁷

Other accounts have noted factors such as payment systems,²⁸ wage differentials,²⁹ the working environment in the pits³⁰ and migration to coalfields³¹ as reasons for militancy, or lack of it, amongst miners. What appears to be problematic though, is that each time a factor is put forward it always seems possible to point to the same conditions existing where militancy was not always evident, such as in the Nottinghamshire coalfield.

In truth, the reasons for militancy are complex. Factors such as the strategies of the employers, mass unemployment, historical traditions, the degree of class consciousness, the quality of workers' organisation and leadership, all play a part. Furthermore, militancy is not a static entity within a workforce; and the example of Frickley Colliery shows this, with militancy ebbing and flowing throughout the period we are concerned with. While there were high votes for action on many occasions, on others there were calls for the heads of leading militants. There were times when the network of rank-and-file militants acted independently of the upper NUM officials and others when lack of confidence and demoralisation meant they had to work closely with the leaders.

One major problem in researching the events in a single locality is that it is difficult to make generalisations on what is found. Nevertheless, there have been numerous successful examples of this method. For example, Huw Beynon's book *Working for Ford*³² described what it was like working at Ford's Halewood plant on Merseyside during the late 1960s, when strikes by car workers had a high profile. Much of Beynon's study was told in the words of the workers themselves. In *Strike at Pilkingtons*³³ Tony Lane and Kenneth Roberts presented a picture of an industrial dispute at a large glass factory in St Helens in 1970, again by piecing together the viewpoints of some of the participants. Regarding mining, *Coal is Our Life*,³⁴ by Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter, an early-1950s study of coal miners in Featherstone, has been cited as 'the classic social scientific account of a coal-mining community.'³⁵ More recently, there has been Peter Gibbon and David Steyne's oral history *Thurcroft, A Village and the Miners' Strike*.³⁶

For the present writer Frickley Colliery deserves our attentions not for any generalisations that can be made about the nature of industrial relations in the coal

²⁷ Saundry, op. cit., pp.46-47.

²⁸ Gibbon, op. cit., pp.174-176.

²⁹ A. R. Griffin, *The Miners of Nottinghamshire, 1914-1944*, (London, 1962); H. Francis, 'NUM United: a team in disarray', *Marxism Today*, April 1985.

³⁰ M. Pitt, *The World on Our Backs*, (London, 1979), pp.29 and 84.

³¹ W. Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Volume 5, 1946-82: The Nationalised Industry*, (Oxford, 1986).

³² H. Beynon, *Working for Ford*, (Harmondsworth, 1973).

³³ T. Lane and K. Roberts, *Strike at Pilkingtons*, (London, 1971).

³⁴ N. Dennis, F. Henriques and C. Slaughter, *Coal is Our Life*, (London, 1956).

³⁵ Warwick and Littlejohn, op. cit., p.23.

³⁶ P. Gibbon and D. Steyne, *Thurcroft: A Village and the Miners' Strike*, (Nottingham, 1986).

Introduction

industry but as a matter of interest in its own right. Not only has the present writer not attempted to give a generalised view of the 'average pit' in the period in question, similarly when collecting oral evidence he has not attempted to capture the experiences of the 'average miner'. The informants in this study have not been selected at random from the Frickley workforce, rather they are from a particular layer: rank-and-file union activists. There is a good reason for this approach. Class consciousness does not develop evenly in an individual workplace; there are some people who come to the fore, who take more responsibility and have more influence than their workmates. The nature and quality of the leadership these activists offer can make the difference between a favourable outcome or outright defeat for the workers involved.³⁷ In the Frickley context, these men were the agitators, the leaflet writers, the pickets, the fund collectors, the stone throwers, the men who fought in hand-to-hand combat with the police and who spent time in prison for their cause.

The oral evidence in the present study was gathered by conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews.³⁸ A strategy referred to as 'snowballing'³⁹ was employed. Some of the activists were already known to the author, and these recommended former workmates who also might be willing to give their accounts of events. The earliest interviews, in the autumn of 1995, were actually held with the former branch officials and branch committee men who still manned the Frickley NUM office at the Westfield Resource Centre in South Elmsall. In all, fifteen activists were eventually interviewed. Although a small number of activists who were approached preferred not to be interviewed, it was mainly the problem of the time needed for the lone researcher to transcribe the tape recordings that limited the number of interviewees (indeed, one particular recording was almost ten hours long and took well over a month to transcribe!). In the event, this number was perhaps a respectable sample of Frickley activists considering that Edwards and Heery noted an average of only 35.4 NUM members actively involved in formal branch life at the pits they surveyed in the 1980s.⁴⁰

But the main problem with the oral history approach is that because the past is being recalled through the perspective of the present, this brings into question the accuracy and the recall of facts; thus it can be argued that oral evidence lacks validity, it is not always a true picture of what is being studied.⁴¹ Critics of oral history contrast it with what they see as the greater reliability of contemporary documentary evidence. But there are failings even in those sources; for instance, newspaper reports are notoriously casual in their standards of accuracy.⁴² Also, as Trevor Lummis has noted, 'it is worth reminding ourselves that such sources also have their biases and distortions . . . Documents are produced by institutions

³⁷ Cf. R. Hyman, *Strikes*, (Aylesbury, 1984), pp.60-61.

³⁸ Full transcripts of the interviews will be placed in the University of Sheffield library.

³⁹ M. Haralambos and M. Holborn, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, third edition, (London, 1990), p.725.

⁴⁰ C. Edwards and E. Heery, *Management Control and Union Power: A Study of Labour Relations in Coal-Mining*, (Oxford, 1989), pp.120-121.

⁴¹ P. McNeill, *Research Methods*, (London, 1990), p.89.

⁴² A. Giddens, *Sociology*, (Cambridge, 1989), pp.676-678.

(villainous or otherwise) for their own purposes and historical study is rarely one of them.⁴³ Furthermore, 'history does not happen in documents. Human activity happens as lived experience before being set down by some individual (often on behalf of an organisation) and is to that extent retrospective and second-hand.'⁴⁴

But if the present oral recollections are to realise their full potential, they need to be freed from the narrow 'interpretivist' perspective that limits research solely to the micro level. The oral evidence of Frickley NUM activists between 1984 and 1993, to be frank, would be meaningless without being located within the wider economic, social, political and historical context. Frickley Colliery did not exist within a vacuum. Energy policy, legal restrictions on trade unionism, policing methods, high unemployment, 'new realist' ideas within the labour movement, and so on and so forth, all shaped and determined the activities of these people. By using secondary data alongside oral evidence, the disadvantages of one approach can be complemented by the advantages of another.⁴⁵

And yet, despite possible drawbacks with the oral history technique, there remains one great advantage: it is a method that enables researchers to take into account those aspects of history that otherwise would not have been documented.⁴⁶ (In the present study there was a problem in that the two organisations under scrutiny were no longer capable of providing any information about activity in the pits. British Coal no longer existed; while the NUM informed the present writer that it no longer had an industrial relations department which could handle requests about its former branches.) Rarely has the authentic voice of workers in struggle been heard. For all the claims about democratic freedoms by the upholders of capitalist society, power is far from equal. Class divisions are dominant. Working people are both exploited and oppressed, and any workers who are forthright enough to tell of their struggles are vulnerable to victimisation from their employers. Earlier studies of the miners' struggles in the 1980s have acknowledged this by hiding or disguising the identities of their informants. But the great, though unfortunate, advantage that the present writer had was that his research took place after the decimation of the coal industry, therefore his respondents were no longer employed by the organisation they had challenged for so long. The activists at Frickley no longer had to be guarded in describing any illicit activities they were involved in. At last, what *really* happened could be told.

⁴³ T. Lummis, *Listening to History*, (London, 1985), pp.11-12.

⁴⁴ Lummis, *op. cit.*, p.13.

⁴⁵ Cf. Giddens, *op. cit.*, pp.682-683.

⁴⁶ S. Humphries, *The Handbook of Oral History: Recording Life Stories*, (London, 1984), pp.1-4.

CHAPTER ONE: FRICKLEY AND THE MINERS' UNION

The forgotten history

Frickley Colliery was sited on the outskirts of the adjoining small West Yorkshire towns of South Elmsall and South Kirkby. Until the 1870s these had been nothing more than two small and separate villages with around 500 inhabitants residing in each. The introduction of coal mining was to change this. By the 1880s some 22,000 people lived in the South Elmsall/South Kirkby district.

The first of these hitherto rural communities to undergo change was actually South Kirkby, with the sinking of two mine shafts in 1874.¹ The influx of men seeking work at the colliery saw South Kirkby grow to a population of 2,916 and even South Elmsall, one mile away, had doubled in size by the beginning of the twentieth century. Not long afterwards a massive house building programme was required when a new pit was opened on the Frickley Park estate. This new pit, which began development in 1903, not only had the largest pit shaft in Europe, but, by the time the Barnsley seam was reached in late May 1905, was the deepest in Britain at 661 feet. So great was the attraction to the two pits that the area gained the nickname 'El Dorado'. By 1913 the village of South Kirkby had expanded to house a population of 7,086 inhabitants and South Elmsall had grown to 5,760. Frickley Colliery was employing 2,500 workers by this time.²

Both South Kirkby and Frickley collieries experienced industrial unrest from the outset. South Kirkby was brought to a halt by a six months' long strike within only two years of starting production. This was followed by another strike in 1893 and then by a seventeen-week lockout in 1894.³

Frickley did not have to wait as long for conflict to appear; indeed, there was even a strike by the men sinking the mine in November 1903. A lot of hostility was directed towards the butty system that was then in operation. Instead of miners being paid directly by management they were paid by a 'butty', a man contracted to ensure a certain amount of work was carried out. Miners were resentful because they were never quite sure just how much the butty's contract was worth and how much pay he was keeping from them.⁴

Significantly, a number of men had joined the Yorkshire Miners' Association by the beginning of 1906 and began agitating for union recognition. But the Carlton Main Colliery Company, which owned Frickley, was determined to resist union representation. Any miner found to be a YMA member was dismissed instantly. This measure, though, failed to stamp out the resolve of the clandestine movement and in November 1906 there was an open attempt to establish a YMA branch at Frickley. Management's response, in keeping with its hard-line approach, was to sack all those involved. As a protest against the sackings, and because of general discontent,

¹ P. Rusiecki, *The Plough and the Pick: The Industrial Transformation of Two Yorkshire Villages*, (Wakefield, 1986), pp.49-53.

² *Ibid.*, pp.64-74.

³ *Ibid.*, p.58.

⁴ A. Wilkinson, *A History of South Kirkby*, (Wakefield, 1979), p.115; Westfield Local History Group, *South Elmsall in the Making*, (South Elmsall, 1991), pp.27-29.

the pit was brought to a halt in April 1907. The dispute was regarded as a test case by both the union and the pit's owners. The strike dragged on until early 1908, but by then, mainly due to the strikebreaking activities of the moderate rival to the YMA, the Amalgamated Society of Miners, it began to fizzle out. After a year there were only 40 men still on strike. A handful of men actually stayed out until 1910. Nevertheless, though the strike was beaten, the action had not proved futile. At one point in the dispute, the whole of the Yorkshire coalfield had been on the verge of coming out with Frickley and, because of this threat, Frickley's owners conceded the right to YMA membership at the pit. Thereafter, the YMA recruited openly at the colliery, and on such a scale that the rival ASM branch was forced to dissolve itself in December 1910.⁵

The Frickley miners were involved in the national miners' strikes of 1911, 1912, 1919 and 1921, and again in the lockout to reduce miners' wages in 1926. The lockout began on 30 April and, despite the TUC calling off the General Strike, lasted until December. Frickley appears to have been exceedingly solid. By November one in six of all Yorkshire's miners had accepted the wage cuts and returned to work, but of Frickley's 3,000 workforce only 20 had gone back. On 1 November a hostile crowd of between two and four thousand greeted strikebreakers as they emerged from the pit.⁶

The lockout eventually proved successful and for the following decade trade unionism in general was on the defensive. It would be January 1935 before any more industrial action occurred at Frickley, when the miners successfully prevented management showing favouritism when selecting men to be re-employed after lay-offs. This was the first purely local strike at the colliery in nearly thirty years.⁷

What is usually termed 'Frickley Colliery' was actually the site of two pits after 1917 with the opening of South Elmsall Colliery. In later years the older pit would be referred to as 'the Big Pit' by the miners, and the newer pit 'the Little Pit' or 'Cudworth' because the Cudworth seam was mined from it. South Elmsall Colliery produced coal until the 1926 lockout but did not resume production again until a year into the Second World War.⁸

The Second World War, a time supposedly of national unity, was barely a month old when a dispute broke out at Frickley over rent subsidies for enlisted miners. Dissatisfaction expressed itself in other ways too. Absenteeism, for instance, was almost a Frickley tradition and at 21.9 per cent was amongst the highest in Yorkshire in the war years. During Easter 1944 Frickley miners played their part in a wave of strikes which erupted in South Wales and Yorkshire and which succeeded in restoring pay differentials.⁹

Following the war, and then the nationalisation of the mining industry in 1947, there appears to have been no noteworthy pit-level conflict at Frickley. Although there were probably numerous issues that arose, they appear to have been dwarfed,

⁵ C. Baylies, *The History of the Yorkshire Miners*, (London, 1993), pp.288-294; Rusiecki, op. cit., pp.83-84.

⁶ Rusiecki, op. cit., p.116.

⁷ Ibid., p.128.

⁸ Westfield Local History Group, op. cit., p.35.

⁹ Rusiecki, op. cit., pp.153-156.

particularly from the late 1960s, by the more general conflict between the union and the National Coal Board.

One historian, Hywel Francis, has argued that of all the industrial workers in Britain, 'the miners appear to have the greatest sense of their own history . . .'¹⁰ And yet few of the younger activists who were to man the picket lines of the 1980s appear to have known much about the early struggles at their pit. Jeff Johnson, for instance, had just turned 28 years of age at the beginning of the 1984-85 strike; he had worked at the pit since 1975 and his response was typical. He had 'no idea whatsoever' about the early strikes at the pit or the 1926 lockout:

The older-end knew about it because they were kids when it happened. It weren't uncommon to work down the pit with a bloke who was 65, waiting for his retirement, and they knew about these things.¹¹

Robert Walker, who had started at the pit as a 16-year old in 1977, had been told 'bits and bobs' about the earlier struggles, but that was all.¹² Gary Hurst was 25 in early 1984 and had also 'heard little bits'. But he had 'never got interested or concerned about owt that went off a long time ago.'¹³

Of course not all the activists at Frickley Colliery were young men in the early 1980s. The older generation of activists such as Johnny Stones, who had worked at the pit since 1954, were obviously a direct, living link to the past. But even he was not aware of any of the very early struggles at the pit, ' . . . other than 1921, and then, obviously, 1926, because my father and my uncles were involved in that particular dispute.'¹⁴

If the details of the early years at Frickley were largely forgotten, nevertheless, developments in the lifetimes of the younger activists would generate a new tradition of militancy, a tradition that would be put through its sternest test from the mid-1980s as the very existence of a large-scale coal industry in Britain was questioned.

Decline

In 1913, the peak year of coal production in Britain, there were as many as 3,024 pits, employing 1,127,900 miners, who between them produced 287 million tons of coal. In the following years the industry began to decline, and to such an extent that by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 the number of pits had almost halved and more than one third of the workforce had been lost.¹⁵ The process did not end with the nationalisation of the coal industry in 1947. In the two decades afterwards, the number of pits in Britain fell from 980 to as little as 317 in 1968. It was the older, low producing coalfields such as Scotland, Northumberland, Durham

¹⁰ H. Francis, 'The law, oral tradition and the mining community', *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol.12, No.3, p.267.

¹¹ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author, 5 September 1995.

¹² Robert Walker, interviewed by the author, 21 November 1995.

¹³ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author, 10 and 17 October 1985.

¹⁴ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author, 12, 13 and 14 September 1995.

¹⁵ V. Allen, *The Militancy of the British Miners*, (Shipley, 1981), p.13.

and South Wales that mainly took the brunt. According to Vic Allen, there was a logic to these closures: 'production was being concentrated in the relatively new thick-seamed coalfields in which advanced mechanisation could be applied.' Moreover, fewer pits with a smaller manpower could maintain the previous level of output.¹⁶

It was also at this time that oil, which had been an alternative source of fuel since the 1920s, increasingly displaced coal. Other major factors which aided the decline of coal production included the shift to natural gas from manufactured gas, the end of steam-powered trains on the railways, nuclear power generation, and the Clean Air Act of 1956 which led to a massive reduction in domestic coal consumption.¹⁷

Closures were not limited to the peripheral coalfields. Between 1961 and 1971, in the part of the West Riding that in the 1970s became West Yorkshire, the number of miners fell from 40,000 to 27,000. One of the pits to close was Upton Colliery in 1964, barely two miles from Frickley and the second newest pit in the country at the time. Three years later nearby Hemsworth Colliery closed. Frickley itself saw its workforce reduced from 2,710 to 2,020 during the 1960s. In 1971 there were rumours, later squashed, that the pit would be exhausted by the 1980s.¹⁸

The Panels

During the 1950s the leaders of the NUM offered no resistance at all to closures. Their hope was for the election of a Labour government. But with the election of the Wilson administration in 1964, it soon became apparent that the NUM leaders' erstwhile allies had betrayed them, closing one pit almost every week between 1965 and 1969 - and yet again there was no action taken to prevent this.¹⁹

During this period, the NUM was dominated by a right-wing leadership. Of the twenty NUM Areas, only Scotland, South Wales and Kent were strongholds of the left. Nevertheless, miners did take industrial action to defend their interests. In the first ten years after nationalisation, 70.5 per cent of all industrial disputes in Britain occurred in coal mining. Scotland, South Wales and Yorkshire were particularly militant. Though these coalfields had just over half the pits, they were responsible for over 85 per cent of all stoppages.²⁰

The most confrontational and best organised miners were in Yorkshire, where there were large unofficial strikes in 1955 and 1961.²¹ Central to their organisation was the Panel system. 'Panels' were aggregates of representatives - normally the branch delegate, frequently the branch secretary and in some instances another branch committee member or official - from each of the NUM branches in a district.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.42.

¹⁷ S. McCabe, P. Wallington, J. Alderson, L. Gostin and C. Mason, *The Police, Public Order, and Civil Liberties: Legacies of the Miners' Strike*, (London, 1988), p.19.

¹⁸ Rusiecki, op. cit., p.174.

¹⁹ A. Burton, *The Miners*, (London, 1976), p.172; Callinicos and Simons, *The Great Strike*, p.20.

²⁰ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., pp.21-22.

²¹ A. J. Taylor, *The Politics of the Yorkshire Miners*, (Beckenham, 1984), pp.176-178.

From 1967 there were four Panels: North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Barnsley and Doncaster, corresponding to the NCB's divisions, or Areas, in the coalfield. They were not, in fact, part of the official structure of the union, but intended as places where NUM executive members could report back to the branches. David Douglass, an active participant in the Doncaster Panel during the 1980s, suggests that the Panels became junior miners' councils which would discuss matters of mutual concern and would formulate joint action.²²

In October 1969 there was an explosion of anger over the low pay of surface workers that resulted in a two-week unofficial strike of up to 130,000 miners. The stoppage was marked by the use of flying pickets. Another similar dispute erupted in 1970 involving 103,000 miners in Yorkshire, Scotland and South Wales.²³ 'The importance of these strikes,' Andrew Taylor notes, 'was that they were organised by the branch leadership via the Panel system.'²⁴

A new generation of left-wing activists in Yorkshire had been steeled by the unofficial action since the 1950s. Prominent among these young activists was the NUM delegate from Woolley Colliery near Barnsley, Arthur Scargill. In 1967 Scargill organised the Barnsley Miners' Forum, a monthly ginger group of branch lay officials, which played an important role in the 1969 and 1970 unofficial strikes and in opposing the right-wing leadership of the Yorkshire NUM.²⁵

Two historic victories

A unifying influence had been the signing of the National Power Loading Agreement in 1966, which ended piece-work and secured the equalisation of wages throughout the coal industry.²⁶ A consequence of this was that on 9 January 1972 the miners began their first national strike since 1926, as they sought a pay increase above the Conservative government's pay limits. It was leadership at the rank-and-file level, rather than the official leadership, which led the strike. Picketing hit British capitalism heavily. Near the close of the strike there were 12 power stations closed and 1,400,000 workers laid off. Thus the miners eventually won a historic victory. The miners' victory was a reflection of the highest level of general working class militancy for over two generations. They received invaluable assistance from other workers who refused to cross their picket lines and especially from the thousands of engineering workers who helped picket, and thus close, the Saltley coke depot in Birmingham, in what became a crucial turning point in the dispute.²⁷

²² D. Douglass, 'The Doncaster Panel, 1969-84', in R. Samuel, B. Bloomfield and G. Boanas (eds), *The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5*, (London, 1986), p.52.

²³ Allen, op. cit., pp.156-164; Taylor, op. cit., p.309.

²⁴ Taylor, op. cit., p.309.

²⁵ Allen, op. cit., pp.139-140; Taylor op. cit., p.88.

²⁶ Burton, op. cit., p.172.

²⁷ T. Cliff, 'Patterns of mass strikes', *International Socialism Journal*, No.29, 1985, pp.38-42; National Union of Mineworkers, *A Century of Struggle: Britain's Miners in Pictures 1889-1989*, (Sheffield, 1989), pp.92-96; C. Harman, *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After*, (London, 1988), ch.12.

In February 1974 the government decided to take another stand against an NUM wage demand, and so the miners struck once again. Prime minister Edward Heath's response was to call a general election. This time, however, the strike was firmly controlled by the official leadership, who were desperate not to do anything which would embarrass the Labour Party in the polls. Consequently, picket lines were limited to six pickets. The left's role was also different in this dispute. Since 1972 it had wrested control of the official union machinery in Yorkshire. Scargill, now the Yorkshire NUM president, again adopted a militant stance but, unlike previously, did little to encourage rank-and-file initiative. Nevertheless, the miners won once again. Heath lost the election and the new Labour administration conceded much of what the NUM sought.²⁸ The important point was that the miners had finally exorcised the memory of 1926 and shown they were now a force to be reckoned with.

After the 1974 strike, a tripartite committee was set up involving the new Labour government, the NCB and the NUM. The result, in October 1974, was the 'Plan for Coal', which promised greater investment and extra coal output in the future. NUM president Joe Gormley and the right-wing majority on the national executive were happy with this but were worried that miners might be restless if their earnings dwindled under Labour's wage controls. The solution was an incentive scheme.²⁹ This dovetailed with the industrial relations strategy advocated in a little-known report by Wilfred Miron, the former chairman of the NCB's East Midlands Division just before the 1974 strike. Miron contended that moderate elements in the NUM had been weakened with the introduction of the NPLA and that it would be necessary to revert to some kind of local or district incentive scheme.³⁰

But the left saw the danger and argued that the miners' union would be seriously weakened: miner would be set against miner, pit against pit, and coalfield against coalfield. The membership heeded these warnings and in November 1974 voted by 61 per cent against the proposed scheme. This did not satisfy Gormley who instituted another ballot over the scheme in October 1977. Again the miners voted against. However, the right-wing dominated NEC once more ignored the ballot result and permitted Areas to negotiate their own local incentive schemes. Once the Nottinghamshire leaders had done so, there was a stampede to sign them elsewhere. These incentive schemes, as both the left and Miron had predicted, were to have a profound impact as the NUM faced up to its most serious challenge after the election of the Conservatives in May 1979.³¹ Now under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, the Tories had learnt from their defeats at the hands of workers in the early 1970s.

²⁸ Allen, *op. cit.*, pp.240-252; Taylor, *op. cit.*, p.252.

²⁹ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, pp.31-33; M. Crick, *Scargill and the Miners*, (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp.71-72.

³⁰ Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, pp.11-12; *Yorkshire Miner*, August 1987.

³¹ B. J. McCormack, *Industrial Relations in the Coal Industry*, (London, 1979), pp.229-230; J. McIlroy, *Trade Unions in Britain Today*, (second edition, Manchester, 1995), p.151.

Thatcherism

Three elements have been identified in the Conservatives' strategy towards the unions. Firstly, there was to be no intervention to prevent rising unemployment, thus industry could be restructured and the unions weakened. Secondly, there was to be a programme of legal restrictions that were intended to make effective strike action difficult. Finally, a new climate was to be encouraged by means of an ideological offensive which stressed individualism as opposed to collectivism, a unity of interest between workers and their employers, and visible evidence that the government was determined to defeat strikes.³²

With the new government seeking to increase the profits of the nationalised industries and limit public spending, there was almost certain to be a clash with public sector unions. And it was with such a confrontation in mind that Nicholas Ridley, a leading right-wing Conservative MP, had prepared a secret report which was leaked in *The Economist* of 27 May 1978. Ridley argued that any future battles should be on ground chosen by the government. As the most likely battlefield was the coal industry, there would need to be a build up coal stocks and contingency plans for the importation of coal. Ridley suggested that a Tory government should introduce dual coal and oil-firing power stations at the earliest and encourage coal-haulage firms to hire non-union lorry drivers who would show little respect for picket lines. He advocated cutting off welfare payments to strikers' families and proposed that there should be a large, mobile squad of police to counter picketing.³³ In the following years this strategy was employed with uncanny precision.

The Thatcher government favoured the salami tactic to frontal assault, picking off and beating isolated groups of workers one at a time. The first major clash was at British Leyland in November 1979, followed by a bitter strike at British Steel at the beginning of 1980. In 1981 it was the turn of civil servants, and the following year workers in the health service and then train drivers. The TUC, obviously aware of the strategy to weaken trade unionism, did nothing in response.³⁴

There was one major exception to this pattern of defeats however. On 10 February 1981 the government announced that twenty-three pits would have to close immediately, and possibly fifty close overall, if financial targets were to be met. A strike broke out in South Wales and soon miners from that coalfield picketed out other areas. The government, realising that it had misjudged the situation, decided to retreat and temporarily withdrew the closure programme.³⁵

A turning point in British industrial relations came with Thatcher's landslide election victory in June 1983. Politically, at least, the government appeared to be exceedingly successful. This was especially evident at the 1983 TUC conference with the emergence of 'new realism', when Len Murray, the TUC general secretary, declared that unions now had to take a conciliatory rather than confrontational approach to the government. However, under pressure from economists who thought workers' wages were still far too high, the government went openly onto

³² A. J. Taylor, *Trade Unions and Politics*, (Basingstoke, 1989), p.154.

³³ P. Dorey, *The Conservative Party and the Trade Unions*, (London, 1995), p.130; McCabe et al., *op. cit.*, p.20.

³⁴ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, pp.36-37.

³⁵ Crick, *op. cit.*, pp.86-88.

the offensive against the unions. In late 1983 the government successfully used the 1980 Employment Act to defeat the National Graphical Association in the Stockport Messenger dispute, and then banned the civil service unions at the GCHQ communications network in Cheltenham.³⁶ And by then, two new appointments had signalled the Tories' intentions to finally tackle the NUM. Peter Walker, a veteran of the confrontations with the miners in the 1970s, was made Secretary of State for Energy. Then Ian MacGregor, a man with a reputation for confronting trade unionism in the United States, and more recently at British Steel and British Leyland, was named chairman of the Coal Board.³⁷

Combative tradition

Just how well suited to mount resistance were the miners at Frickley Colliery when the government finally decided to confront the NUM? As we have seen, Frickley miners certainly had a militant past but by the 1980s this legacy was largely forgotten or ignored. In the years from the Second World War until the Big Strike, it was other Doncaster Area pits such as Armthorpe and Hatfield which gained reputations for militancy. Steve Gant, one of a new generation of militant activists at the pit prior to the Big Strike, characterises Frickley in this period as being 'an ordinary run-of-the-mill pit, a moderate pit, before the strike. Not politically forward.'³⁸ Jeff Johnson agrees; Frickley NUM:

... didn't particularly have any policies. Any disputes that we had had nothing to do with national, although we supported the union in various different ballots before the strike and with good percentages. But things were basically on a local level. The only things that we were waiting for and listening about were what was happening at Kirkby pit, which again was a moderate pit.³⁹

Ian Oxley, an electrician and a self-professed moderate, recalls that Frickley miners tended to be 'left wing' in that they wanted better 'benefits for ordinary working people.' But, he says:

What you've got remember is that the NUM, like a lot of trade unions, does come with a lot of right-wing ideas that don't die out quickly. When I started work at Frickley pit there were no Irish men and blacks. Unless your dad or a relation had a job at Frickley you couldn't get a job at the pit. So miners were traditionally racist, and certainly homophobic - certainly thirty years ago wouldn't have tolerated an homosexual openly being at the pit. If a person had any connection with sexual child abuse he would have been hounded out of the pit.⁴⁰

³⁶ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., pp.38-39; D. Marsh, *The New Politics of British Trade Unionism*, (Basingstoke, 1992), pp.240-241.

³⁷ G. Goodman, *The Miners' Strike*. (London, 1985), pp.27-28; I. MacGregor, *The Enemies Within*, (London, 1986), pp.17 and 116.

³⁸ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author, 20 and 26 September 1996.

³⁹ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁰ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author, 6, 10, 11, 13 and 17 October 1995.

But if Frickley did not have a militant reputation in a formal sense immediately prior to the 1984-85 strike, what seems to have been prevalent was what Peter Gibbon,⁴¹ amongst others, has referred to as 'pit politics', a combative tradition of pit-level bargaining over wages and working arrangements that developed in the 1940s and 1950s when a substantial portion of miners' earnings were dependent on local bargaining. This was a tradition under which the withdrawal of labour was used as a precondition for negotiation and conciliation rather than as a last resort. The better organised NUM branches would have had the better wages and conditions, and a high degree of participation in branch activities. Although 'pit politics' was dealt a severe blow with the abolition of piece-work, in some places, according to Gibbon, it survived, notably in a number of Doncaster pits where a high degree of sectional solidarity was sustained over custom and practice regulation.⁴²

It is perhaps with this in mind that Johnny Stones, the Frickley NUM branch delegate at Frickley Colliery from 1964 until the pit closed, describes Frickley as 'a fairly militant pit' in comparison to most others throughout Yorkshire prior to the Big Strike:

There were definitely disputes in the late '70s and into the early '80s . . . I would say that the biggest percentage, if not the whole lot, were wildcats; no pre-strike meetings or anything. It was just the men walking out.⁴³

The NUM played little, if any, part in initiating these disputes. According to Ray Riley:

. . . there was a lot of spontaneity and class consciousness at the rank-and-file level. Virtually every strike that I can think of was initiated at rank-and-file level. A lot of the disputes that arose were over contracts and the productivity bonus scheme. Management would set targets that were virtually impossible to achieve, and if the targets were so high then obviously it hit the men in their pockets . . . the men were prepared to come out because they saw it as a powerful weapon.⁴⁴

Branch officials

The NUM organisation at Frickley, as at other pits, was based around the workplace branch. A closed shop existed throughout the industry.⁴⁵ There were around twelve representatives who were elected bi-annually and formed the branch committee. Unlike in many other industries where there are shop stewards, the branch representatives were not elected by the section they represented but by a slate system, in which the whole of the branch's membership would vote. Ray Riley was a critic of the system because its basis was a popularity poll:

⁴¹ Gibbon, 'The miners' strike of 1984-5', p.152.

⁴² Gibbon, *op. cit.*, pp.152-153.

⁴³ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁴ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author, 21 September and 3 October 1995.

⁴⁵ Edwards and Heery, 'The incorporation of workplace trade unionism?', p.347.

... it wasn't how good a socialist you were, or how good a rank-and-file member you were in some cases - although you can't dismiss that entirely because good rank-and-file people did get elected onto the branch committee - but sometimes it was a question of how many pints you could down in the local club on a weekend ... Popularity doesn't necessarily mean that someone's right for the job.⁴⁶

The oddity of the slate system was that an electrician, for instance, could be elected to be the electricians' representative without a single electrician actually voting for him. Most bizarre was that even men approaching 65-years of age could vote for whom they thought should be the youth representative!

Four of the branch representatives, the president, the secretary, the delegate and the treasurer, were full-time officials who spent their time in the 'union box' on the pit surface, dealing with members' problems, and, as such, straddled the divide between the ordinary membership and the professional bureaucracy at the union's Area headquarters in Barnsley. Steve Gant recalls who the four Frickley NUM officials were for much of the time prior to the Big Strike:

Keith Proverbs was the president. Alf Walker was the treasurer. Warren Needham was the secretary, and Johnny Stones was the delegate. They were all middle-aged. They'd been on for years. They were immovable - or so we thought.⁴⁷

Ian Oxley, a member of the branch committee for a period in the early 1980s, admired the way branch president Keith Proverbs operated:

He wasn't an intellectual bloke, but he was a brilliant bluffer - he would have made a brilliant poker player. And we'd got a very weak manager called 'No-neck', Don Clay. Again, a nice enough bloke. But in that period I would say that we ran the pit a lot because Keith Proverbs could run rings round Don Clay, in the respect that he was a humane person, and if a person had done something wrong where he deserved to be sacked, i.e. he had sabotaged something at the pit for spite over some grievance and it had got out of hand, Keith would go in and make the manager feel like he was a rotten person to even think of sacking such a nice young lad, a good lad for the pit, and so on and so forth. While there was a lot of pressure to increase the tonnage at the pit, Don Clay was very flexible in his payment arrangements - at that time the bonus scheme wasn't particularly productive - he would pay men overtime and things like that, find ways round the scheme. In that period, financially, Frickley did very well. They made a profit, the men were getting reasonable wages, and the union wasn't being jumped on - the union and Don Clay were working together. But it wasn't an equal partnership. I would have to say that at that period Keith Proverbs was probably more on top than the manager.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁷ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁸ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

This, however, was not a universal view of the situation. It was becoming obvious to some activists that the bureaucratisation of the miners' lay representatives was intended to clamp down on rank-and-file militancy. Gary Hinchliffe, another young militant in the early 1980s, argues that the Frickley branch leadership at that time would do everything within their power to keep the pit at work. He cannot recollect one dispute prior to around 1982-83 where both the pits at Frickley came out together:

Keith Proverbs, he saw his job as keeping production running. His job was to keep men in work and at work - not at any cost - but he'd had a successful week if he could get through the week by solving all the disputes and the men not losing a shift. I never heard him once advocate going on strike over anything. His first job every morning was to go in the control room and see how production was going. Then he would go and see the colliery manager, Mr Clay, and they would sit and discuss the pit's problems. This had probably gone on since 1972 and 1974. There was a new way of thinking between management and the union at each colliery. They needed as much coal as they could produce; it was a joint operation. The management in those days saw that the best means of hitting production targets at a pit was to have the union on your side.⁴⁹

In Lawrence Gertig's view, prior to the 1984-85 strike:

The NUM had a cosy relationship with management, so any compromise could be reached. But it was worded in such a way that it would be: 'Yes lads, we've done it for you. It's great stuff. You can go back down the pit now lads.' There would be some times that you would have a feeling, 'Hold on a minute, there's something not quite right with this.' We'd won half the battle but we hadn't won it all.⁵⁰

Allegiances

Despite Frickley having a militant reputation in its early years, there appears to have been little evidence of the syndicalist or revolutionary socialist influences that had formed the bedrock of the industrial militancy elsewhere in the early decades of the twentieth century. Paul Rusiecki, in his history of South Elmsall and South Kirkby, even argues that 'political extremism' was 'essentially alien to the area' and never had much of a hold, unlike in other parts of south Yorkshire. Indeed from 1926 onwards, because of the almost universal hatred of the Conservative Party in the area, it was the Labour Party which dominated the allegiances of local miners, and to such an extent that in 1951 the Labour Member of Parliament for Hemsworth, whose constituency included South Elmsall and South Kirkby, attained the highest majority of any constituency in Britain.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author, 11, 17, 26 November and 3 December 1995.

⁵⁰ Lawrence Gertig, interviewed by the author, 7 December 1995.

⁵¹ Rusiecki, *op. cit.*, pp.132-133.

The loyalty to Labour ran deep at Frickley. Paul Symonds, a young Frickley miner in the early 1980s, remembers that one of his workmates was a Labour councillor: 'Nobby Bolton. He had quite a bit of influence on me. He was a likeable fellow . . . I think that was the closest I ever came to joining the Labour Party, while I worked with him.' He also recalls the hostility shown to another of his workmates who dared to criticise Labour:

I was talking to this workman, Gary Hinchliffe, and he was explaining to me the difference between the Socialist Workers Party and the Labour Party. We got into a bit of a discussion and Gary was explaining to me all the betrayals by the Labour Party. And he was virtually set upon by the other miners. They were saying, 'Don't say that about our government and our party.' It was real loyalty towards mainstream Labour. I would say that right-wing Labour politics dominated. But that was always tinged with a real pull towards union-organisation militancy.⁵²

There was more than just a personal political loyalty to the Labour Party involved. Frickley NUM actually had a direct link to the party, as Vic France, a Frickley electrician, explains:

I used to be the chair of the local Labour Party, and the delegate to the district and the constituency . . . there were a lot of miners who were delegates to the Hemsworth constituency at that time. We were allowed one delegate to the constituency for every fifty members, to a maximum of ten. Because Frickley was affiliated to the constituency then, we were allowed to send delegates. And obviously there were a lot of other delegates on the same basis. At the time Hemsworth constituency was a mining force.⁵³

Debates

In some NUM branches the political affairs of the day were regularly discussed at branch meetings; but this was not customary at Frickley says Johnny Stones:

. . . unless it was directly arising from correspondence that we received from Area or national and/or anything that occurred at Area Council arising from my delegate's report from Area Council.⁵⁴

Even so, major issues would still be discussed down the pit. Miners, according to Gary Hurst, would discuss:

what you used to see on the television, things that affected us, and even things that didn't directly affect us, tax cuts for the rich and things like that, they all got

⁵² Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author, 31 March and 25 November 1996, and 2 February 1997.

⁵³ Vic France, interviewed by the author, 8 November 1996.

⁵⁴ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

discussed down the pit . . . in the gate when you were having your snap, on the paddy [underground train] going to the job; anywhere like that.⁵⁵

Particularly important were workers such as fitters and electricians who moved around to do their jobs and so could spread information around the pit: 'If there was owt to be talked about, we generally got to know,' says Gary Hurst.⁵⁶

Of course, with most of the Frickley workforce living within the locality, the pit wasn't the only place where important issues of the day were discussed. 'In the circles that I use to mix in at the time, we used to talk politics,' recalls Ray Riley: 'People use to take part in sorts of debates - there were like debating societies within certain drinking establishments in South Elmsall.'⁵⁷ It was in such an environment that a generation of young left-wing activists would emerge at Frickley.

The emerging left at Frickley

Whatever the strength of the NUM at Frickley Colliery, by the early 1980s it appears to have become increasingly apparent to some rank-and-file miners at the pit that sectional strength alone was no longer enough. An understanding of affairs outside the pit, and indeed outside the industry, was needed in the face of the threats to effective trade unionism from the government. One of the first of a new layer of socialist miners at Frickley was Steve Gant, a supporter of the Socialist Workers Party:

I'd been taking *Socialist Worker* since about 1980. I was selling *The Collier* - that was about '80/81 - then I moved on to sell *Socialist Worker* when *The Collier* collapsed. *The Collier* used to sell especially well, to say that it iterated the politics of the Socialist Workers Party. I used to sell bunches of twenty, something like that. They went like hot cakes - though there was a feeling around at that time for those to sell.⁵⁸

Crucially, this activity brought him into contact with other miners with socialist convictions at the pit:

George Gornell was one of the first lads who I came across, when we were going on marches against unemployment and things like that up and down the country. We were only young 'uns, but George was a bit established; he could talk at meetings. And we just took our lead off George. There was a group around George who were active at branch meetings and who were turning up to register their vote. There was about a dozen/fifteen of us, who were round about *The Collier* and taking *Socialist Worker* - rank-and-file militants. George was influenced by the Communist Party. He wasn't an active member of the CP, I just think that he got his ideas from that strain. But he was a pretty good speaker. He was always challenging Keith Proverbs. We didn't have the confidence at that

⁵⁵ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁶ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁷ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁸ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

time to challenge Proverbs, but George did. And Keith backed off a little bit with George because he couldn't shout him down. Proverbs had a habit of shouting people down, especially the young lads - but George had a bit of credibility and could stand up to him. Keith hated him. It was superb because it gave us a lot of confidence. And eventually we started challenging him and trying to swing the vote against him, and making him work for a change.⁵⁹

Frickley NUM held a general branch meeting every week. There could be anything between twenty and fifty members in attendance, depending on the issues on the agenda. If there was something that the left saw as important, they would muster all their supporters, perhaps between twenty and thirty miners, to put an alternative to the established NUM activists. 'Some things we used to win,' recalls Steve Gant:

or we used to make it harder than it had been for Keith and the branch officials to shove things through. It wasn't an easy ride for them; it wasn't done and dusted in a ten-minute meeting any longer. We started to challenge them and go deeper into questions. We wanted some answers.⁶⁰

The NUM national and Area leaderships would frequently ask branches to organise for specific labour movement causes, but these were often ignored by branch leaders who were only concerned with coal industry affairs. The militant left at Frickley, though, were soon in a position to start pushing for these initiatives, as Steve Gant explains:

We used to shove things through such as taking buses to demonstrations and so on. They couldn't really oppose these. We used to make it really hard for them to oppose things. But if we had not been there, there would probably have been no buses even mentioned. It would just have been read out in the minutes and slipped to the bottom of the pile. The People's March for Jobs, CND, a Right to Work demo in Bradford, and Liverpool. Everywhere there was a demonstration we'd try to get a bus, and 8 times out of 10 succeed in getting somebody down on a demonstration.⁶¹

King Arthur's men

In December 1981 Arthur Scargill was elected president of the NUM with an unprecedented 70.3 per cent of the membership's vote. 138,803 miners had voted for the militant from Yorkshire.⁶² Scargill gave voice to their feelings about the Coal Board and the inadequacies of the union's previous leadership, as Paul Symonds testifies:

⁵⁹ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁰ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁶¹ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁶² R. Undy and R. Martin, *Ballots and Union Democracy*, (Oxford, 1984), p.101; Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., p.19.

... amongst the men that I worked with, Gormley was universally hated. He was somebody who sold the miners short at every opportunity. So people were uneasy about this consensus that was going off, and once the incentive scheme was introduced, that really did put people into a combative mood. It put that consensus under real strain. Because it wasn't about just getting a few more tons of coal out and shaking hands with the manager. Management were now seen as people who were basically trying to rob money off you.⁶³

Scargill promised to be different from the right wing - he would not sell out. It was a quality which Scargill's enemies never fully recognised, nor understood it as the basis of the devotion of thousands of NUM members. One Frickley miner, Gary Hurst, summed up the desire for Scargill's leadership thus: 'I think at the time he was hailed as the best thing since sliced bread. It was about time that we had a leader with some guts . . . That's what I felt: "We might get something done now."⁶⁴ John Picken, no doubt like many other NUM branch committee men in the Yorkshire coalfield, felt really proud when Scargill got elected: 'I knew one thing: he would fight; he would fight - not for his gains - for his members' gains. He would fight to the last. And he proved it.'⁶⁵

The election of Scargill was a tremendous boost for those who wished to challenge the domination of Frickley NUM by moderates. As Ray Riley explains, now there was a chance to build up a strong rank-and-file organisation:

... and with Scargill as the focal point of that organisation. There was hope for the future that we could achieve quite a few results and make demands of our own that the government and the Coal Board would have to accept. So yes, it was a good time for rank-and-file militants. It gave confidence, plus, if you look at the overall view of Scargill's election - and I'm not just talking about Frickley here, I think it says a lot about the political thinking within the NUM at the time - he was overwhelmingly elected, a massive majority, and people were aware of his socialist left-wing credentials and his militant past.⁶⁶

The move to the left at Frickley was expressed in the elections to positions on the branch committee at this time. There were already a couple of left wingers on the branch committee, 'Geoff Siddons and Dave Wilson,' recalls Gary Hinchliffe:

The first *new* left winger that we got on was Steve Tulley. He got elected onto the committee before the strike. I would say that he was the first out-and-out left winger . . . In fact, I think that if the strike hadn't have been that year, Dave Wilson would've got the president's job the next time. He pushed Keith Proverbs very close. And Sider [Geoff Siddons] had already gone onto the secretary's job because the other secretary, Needham, had retired. And then Alf Walker got knocked - he was the right-wing treasurer - and we got Dicky Nailor on, a left

⁶³ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁴ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁵ John Picken, interviewed by the author, 28 and 29 September 1995.

⁶⁶ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

winger. So things were moving left just before the strike. And I think that was all to do with the incentive scheme; these people were prepared to stand up and argue over their money; not take it.⁶⁷

Frickley Colliery, then, on the eve of the 1984-85 strike, could be described as having a NUM branch leadership inclined towards co-operation with management, alongside a workforce that had enough sectional confidence to challenge management. However, through tackling the incentive scheme, through opposition to the anti-union policies of the Conservative government, and with the rise to the leadership of the miners' union a man who personified the aspirations of the rank-and-file membership, a new generation of Frickley miners were being radicalised. But the ideas these new militants were expressing would soon be put to the test as it became increasingly clear that the government finally intended to face the miners.

⁶⁷ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

CHAPTER TWO: THE EARLY DAYS OF THE BIG STRIKE

Opening shots

Many observers had been expecting a full-scale confrontation between the NUM and the Thatcher government from the moment that Scargill replaced Gormley - the new NUM president had stood on a platform of attaining good wages for miners and opposing industrial contraction, whereas Gormley had considered there was little the union could do to control the size of the industry.¹ Instead, three strike ballots, in January and October 1982, and March 1983, went against recommendations for action over pay and closures. After the last ballot failed, many militant miners began to argue that miners who were unaffected by pit closures should not be allowed to vote other miners out of jobs.²

It was the miners in Nottinghamshire and the Midlands who, because of good bonus payments, were consistently voting against taking strike action. Nevertheless, the incentive scheme not only tended to make some miners acquiescent, it also, through the tightening up on productivity and discipline, brought about an increase in small-scale, unofficial stoppages, particularly in Yorkshire - as we saw in the previous chapter with Frickley. The most explosive incident in Yorkshire occurred in September 1983 when the whole of the Barnsley Area was shut down for a week by flying pickets after a miner from Dodworth was sacked for hitting an overman. It was only after the intervention of Jack Taylor, the man who had replaced Scargill as the Yorkshire NUM president, that the strike was called off.³

In May that year, a major report by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission recommended that the coal industry should tailor output to the needs of the market.⁴ In line with this, on taking his new post Ian MacGregor began arguing that the NCB was producing too much coal at too great a cost. MacGregor's confrontational stance towards the miners was made even more plain when he quickly stated that 5.2 per cent was the Coal Board's final offer in the latest pay round. A special NUM delegate conference - with the recent ballot setbacks in mind - responded by calling for an overtime ban.⁵ The ban began on the last day of October, with the intention of cutting production, reducing the growing stockpiles of coal, and returning unity between the coalfields by reducing the disparity between incentive payments.⁶

With the ban solid, the NCB retaliated. Pit managers changed shift times and meal breaks to minimise the effect on output. In some pits, miners were sent home on Monday mornings because safety work was not being carried out over the weekend. Frickley branch delegate Johnny Stones reflects on what was happening:

¹ Richards, *Miners On Strike*, pp.75-76; C. G. Hanson, *Taming the Trade Unions*, (Basingstoke, 1991), p.71.

² Callinicos and Simons, *The Great Strike*, pp.42-43.

³ *Ibid.*, p.45.

⁴ McCabe, et. al. *The Police, Public Order, and Civil Liberties*, pp.20-21.

⁵ Crick, *Scargill and the Miners*, p.97.

⁶ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.45.

The early days of the Big Strike

You had got a situation where it was escalating off the spin-off that came from the overtime ban. For example, South Kirkby were down to three and four days production working: men were being sent home as a result of the overtime ban because the surface washer needed cleaning up and maintenance work doing before they attempted to wind coal out of the colliery. Therefore the majority of underground workers, other than safety and continuous shift workers, were sent home Mondays and sometimes Tuesdays, and definitely Fridays, when the winders operated a strict five-day working. That was one example. There was a dispute at the Manvers complex involving Kilnhurst, Wath, Manvers and Barnburgh. There was a dispute at Edlington in regards to overtime and bad face working conditions and a management crackdown at that particular colliery. There was privatisation of washeries at Prince of Wales. So, in essence, there were about four or five bush-fires in the January/February period leading up to the start of the dispute, which was triggered off obviously by the Cortonwood closure.⁷

On February 20 a strike began at Goldthorpe in the Doncaster Area following the pit's merger with Highgate Colliery. On the same day the dispute at Manvers led to flying pickets successfully calling for support at all the other pits in South Yorkshire.⁸

A fruitful visit

Miners at Frickley got in on the escalating action too. On Thursday 1 March the colliery's 1,800 men walked out on all three shifts in protest at the visit to the pit of the junior minister for energy, Giles Shaw. The *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* told how the minister was given:

a hostile reception when he arrived at the colliery to inspect progress on the £42 million improvements at the complex. The miners were in an angry mood and the Minister was jeered and had sandwiches and fruit thrown at him . . . A crowd of about 200 gathered to meet Mr Shaw when he emerged from his underground inspection . . . NUM branch secretary at the colliery, Mr Geoff Siddons, said later that the demonstration was 'spontaneous and not orchestrated by the NUM.'⁹

Robert Walker recalls something which particularly angered the miners that day over the visit:

I remember going into the canteen and all we usually got was pies and beans. We goes in and there were all these salmon sandwiches; big trays of them. We asked for a salmon sandwich, but it was only for them bastards. Everybody was

⁷ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁸ Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, p.65.

⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 8 March 1984.

The early days of the Big Strike

saying, 'We're not having fucking this!' I can remember as they were going down the pit, people were bubbling over it.¹⁰

Gary Hinchliffe recollects that the walkout actually began in the Big Pit as the night shift were heading home:

I think they'd been told that there would be a paddy coming in for them but it would be late. It would mean that they would be late riding out of the pit. So they decided to set off walking. And as it turned out, they made the right decision. Because by the time that they'd reached the pit bottom, this paddy was still sat there, waiting for this government minister. And when they looked, it had got a brand new car on, with padded seats - we sat on wooden benches, six to a box. Some men decided that it was time to empty their bladders, and that they needed to do their number two's. So they peed and shit all over it, made their way to the pit bottom and rode out of the pit. The day shift were already in the pit bottom; they realised that they'd have to walk in because nobody knew when this minister was coming down. So they ended up going home.¹¹

Later that day, Vic France arrived at the pit for the afternoon shift:

He was already down the pit when I got there. There was a great crowd gathered outside waiting to meet him. There was a barrier between where the union box was and where the gantry for going down the pit was, to stop wagons from going through. I was at the front of the barrier. When they came out, people were throwing their oranges and their snap at them. They got right up to the barrier and some guy spit at them from behind me. It was a real green 'un - it hit an undermanager, and of course the first person that he looked at was me. It wasn't me, it was another guy. It was definitely spontaneous, I don't think it was planned. I think that everybody thought it was a provocation, inviting this guy up under the circumstances.¹²

According to Ray Riley, 'the beauty of that particular strike' was the spontaneity: 'but also there were people who were involved in the welcoming party who were actually non-militant. There were faces there who I recognised didn't play a big part in NUM politics.'¹³

Cortonwood

There were two options open to the NUM as tempers escalated. They could either utilise the rank-and-file militancy that was developing in order to initiate a national strike or they could restrain it. Initially, at least, it was the latter course that was adopted in Yorkshire. At the end of February 1984 the Yorkshire Area Council

¹⁰ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

¹¹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

¹² Vic France, interviewed by the author.

¹³ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

decided not to take action beyond the overtime ban. However, the Coal Board again dictated events by announcing the closure of Cortonwood Colliery.¹⁴

Miners were more hostile towards pit closures in the early 1980s than they had been twenty or thirty years earlier because unemployment levels were now extremely high and there was little alternative employment in the coalfields. In the twelve months to March 1984, 23 pits and 21,000 mining jobs had disappeared without anything approaching a concerted fight back. But with Cortonwood being the first pit with reserves to close since the signing of the 'Plan for Coal', things were clearly different; for many NUM members this was nothing other than a calculated act of provocation on the part of the Coal Board.¹⁵ The NUM contended that Britain's coal reserves should be retained as an important source of energy for the future, that nuclear power was both a costly and dangerous alternative, and that oil reserves off the British coast were limited. Moreover, in the long term, pit closures made little sense as re-opening a coal mine is difficult and costly.¹⁶

What particularly upset the Yorkshire NUM leadership about the closure of Cortonwood was that the NCB were completely ignoring the usual procedure of talking to them about the pit's closure - in effect, a sign to the Area officials that they were no longer necessary for the functioning of the industry. Though the onset of spring meant that the best time for a coal strike had passed, and despite the huge stockpiles of coal, it was coming to the point where the NUM would have little option but to put up a fight. The union's predicament was summed up later by David Douglass, a member of Yorkshire NUM executive: 'the whole thing was premature action, because we wanted the overtime ban to continue really until the following Christmas.'¹⁷

With the changing developments, on Monday 5 March the Yorkshire Area Council voted to instruct branches to stop work from the last shift on the following Friday, in line with the decision of a ballot of Yorkshire miners in January 1981 which declared that industrial action would be taken to stop the closure of pits for any reason other than exhaustion. The next day, the NCB declared that output was to be reduced by 4 million tons to 97.4 million tons in the following financial year. Two days later the NUM executive voted by 21 to 3 to support the strikes in Yorkshire and Scotland and to endorse action by any other Area under Rule 41, which permitted Areas to call strike action without a ballot. The battle had begun.¹⁸

A quick strike

Many Frickley miners were confident of a relatively quick victory once the strike was under way, as Robert Walker reflects:

¹⁴ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., p.46.

¹⁵ Crick, op. cit., p.98.

¹⁶ B. Towers, 'Posing larger questions: the miners' strike of 1984-85', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol.16, No.2, Summer 1985, p.11; A. Glyn, *The Economic Case Against Pit Closures*, (Sheffield, 1984).

¹⁷ Douglass, 'The Doncaster Panel', p.54.

¹⁸ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., pp.12-14; Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., pp.66-70; Hanson, op. cit., p.71.

The early days of the Big Strike

It was funny because people were getting excited; saving their coal: 'It looks like it might be a long one this, about six weeks.' I remember I was on nights on the tail gate rip - you didn't have to work Fridays then if you worked all the other shifts - they were saying, 'You want to come tomorrow Bopper, it's going to be a long one this. It's going to be at least six weeks.' Everybody thought it was going to be a six- or seven-week strike; that we'd beat them.¹⁸

The older miners would tease the younger ones about their ability to last the ordeal of a strike, as Gary Hutsby, at just 17 years of age, one of the youngest workers at Frickley Colliery in March 1984, remembers:

Obviously, as the strike drew nearer, more people talked about it. The general mood was that there was going to be a strike. I can remember a few from the older-end saying, 'This is going to be a fight, it's going to be important for the industry and the union.' But I can remember them saying that it was all these young 'uns - and pointing at me - and saying that we were going to be the weak link in the chain. It was funny though, because the nearer to the strike we got, the more of the older-end started throwing onto the sick.¹⁹

Johnny Stones, the branch delegate, was a veteran of previous confrontations and because of his standing within the Yorkshire NUM wasn't as naive as the younger miners about the prospects for the battle ahead:

I knew what the stocks were on the ground - and there were over 30 million tons - and I knew that it was March and that we'd got summer in front of us. So it was going to be long in the respect that coal burning wasn't going to be affected dramatically until the winter months, which was six months ahead.²⁰

No matter how short the strike was expected to be, preparations still had to be made as the men worked their final shifts, as Gary Hinchliffe remembers:

Some men's coal hadn't come. So straight away, from day one, they'd got no coal. So they were pinching saw-blades to saw wood. Now this deputy was coming round, and we had a brand new saw. He says, 'Where's the saw?' We says, 'We don't know. We haven't seen it.' And this lad, who I know very well, he'd got the saw-blade stuck down his pants, and he'd got the arm of the bow-saw in his donkey jacket, folded up. He'd got to smuggle this out of the pit.²¹

Strikes are commonly presented in the mass media as being the work of bullying union bosses and something that most workers oppose because they lose money.

¹⁸ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

¹⁹ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author, 20 and 21 November, and 18 December 1996.

²⁰ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

²¹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

But to many participants, strikes are often a time of enthusiasm and expectation. They are a break from the tedium and aimlessness of everyday life and the regimentation of the workplace. Gary Hinchliffe remembers on the final day, 'it was jovial. Everybody was laughing and joking. And we were discussing what's going off.' Steve Gant was working on the afternoon shift that day and recalls that he and his workmates were so eager to go on strike that they joined the strike early:

I was working with Gaz Hughes down on 28s. We were due to come out of the pit at quarter-past seven, but as soon as we got to know that we were going to be on strike, we knocked off at four o'clock and came out. So we had an extra three hours on top of that year, me and Gaz and a few others who came out of the pit. So that was the feeling: 'We are out. Come on it's Friday, let's go.' It was a good feeling. I had been waiting for it. It could not come soon enough, to have another go at them.²²

A similar enthusiasm for strike action seems to have been evident the day after, Saturday 10 March 1984, when Frickley miners met at the Miners' Institute in Moorthorpe. Jeff Johnson recalls how: 'There was a feeling like a holiday atmosphere. We are going to get some time off and get some decorating done and we'll be back and we'll have a secure future.'²³ Johnny Stones remembers there was no opposition to the strike at the meeting:

When I gave my reports and we took a show of hands, I don't think that anybody was in opposition. Obviously it wasn't the full membership because you couldn't get the full membership in. But of those at the meeting - and there were several hundred there, inside and outside the Miners - it was unanimous.²⁴

The domino affect

There may have been no noticeable opposition to the strike witnessed at Frickley that Saturday, but the development of the strike in Yorkshire was no foregone conclusion as there were different levels of enthusiasm throughout the coalfield. In most of the Doncaster and Barnsley pits the situation was much the same as at Frickley. In South Yorkshire most branches were almost unanimous but at Manton a vote of no-confidence in the Area officials was passed. At another, Brookhouse, there was resentment expressed over being picketed out. In North Yorkshire five of the fifteen pits had substantial minorities against the strike, two of which passed resolutions demanding a national ballot.²⁵

There was even greater uncertainty in other coalfields. In Scotland, for instance, five branch meetings solidly backed the strike but there was doubt at the rest. There were problems in South Wales too with 18 of the 28 pits voting not to support the strike. As a result the media was full of reports suggesting that nation-wide action would be abortive. Nevertheless, on Monday 12 March, pickets managed to turn

²² Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

²³ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

²⁴ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, p.69.

things round and went on to shut down all but one Scottish pit and all but three pits in South Wales. Despite the uncertainty, a national miners' strike over pit closures was finally in progress.²⁷

A different culture?

Unlike in the strikes in the 1970s, the immediate task in 1984 was to picket other miners out rather than going to targets such as power stations. The main problem would be getting support from Nottinghamshire. But many writers have argued that such a strategy was doomed to failure because of the peculiarities of that coalfield. A common suggestion is that Notts miners had always been 'moderate', especially since the formation of the company 'Spencer union' following the 1926 lockout. And there appears to be good evidence to back this up. For instance, not a single day was lost through strike action in north Notts between 1926 and 1945. One pit, Thoresby, is reputed to have not lost a single day's production between its opening in 1928 and the national miners' strike of 1972.²⁸ In the four years to 1982 the average tonnage lost in Nottinghamshire due to stoppages was one quarter that for the industry as a whole and one tenth of that for the South Yorkshire and Doncaster Areas.²⁹

Some scholars have looked at economic and social conditions in the coalfield to explain Notts miners' moderation. Jonathan and Ruth Winterton, for instance, have argued that Notts miners were moderate because the relatively late development of the coalfield meant that 'a historical sense of mining community' was virtually absent. In addition, easy mining conditions led to a sectional approach to pay bargaining and an acceptance of the myths that good bonuses could be earned and that Notts pits would be spared from threats of closure.³⁰ Looking at the same issue, Peter Gibbon argues that Notts had been the home of the butty system and long-wall mining, whereby miners were paid on a piece-rate basis for individual set tasks, hence a highly individualistic and incentive-orientated attitude survived. Because Notts miners saw management as having a legitimate role, in providing the conditions for miners to earn money, they were not going to challenge management's 'right to manage'.³¹

Now while it is true that the vast majority of Nottinghamshire miners did continue to work throughout the dispute, nevertheless there is much in both of these viewpoints that will not suffice because they are based on a rigid deterministic view of Notts miners. Firstly, as we saw with the early days of Frickley, the lack of a 'historical sense of mining community' did not lead to permanent acquiescence or hostility to strike action; and neither did the operation of the butty system. Secondly, though most Notts miners may have earned good incentive payments and felt little threat from any closure policy, many Yorkshire pits were in quite the same predicament but nevertheless demonstrated solidarity with their fellow NUM members elsewhere. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both the Wintertons and

²⁷ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.15.

²⁸ Gibbon, 'The miners' strike of 1984-5', p.174.

²⁹ *Coal News*, February 1987.

³⁰ Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, p.75.

³¹ Gibbon, *op. cit.*, pp.174-176.

Gibbon put little emphasis on the part played by the local leadership in Notts in undermining the pickets' efforts.

Crossing the border

Crucially, there was one major problem with putting Rule 41 into practice: officially, the onus was on the individual Area leaderships to spread the strike. But what if these Area leaderships stoked up opposition to the action? On 8 March, four days before the strike began, Ray Chadburn, the Notts Area president, had announced that he would not call his members out on strike in the absence of a secret ballot. A day later, the Notts Area executive demanded a national ballot.³¹ These early declarations were the foundations of the later principled opposition to the strike by many Notts miners.

The Frickley miners were expecting to head for Nottinghamshire immediately to counter such proclamations, but they were informed that the Yorkshire NUM leadership had arranged a deal with the Notts NUM leaders. This 'caused a furore,' says Gary Hinchliffe. 'We were told that we'd to keep out of Nottingham; they were balloting their members.'³² Hence the Frickley miners, like those at most other Yorkshire pits, did not actually go picketing on the very first day of the strike, Monday 12 March.

Earlier that same day, though, a wave of 250 miners, mainly from Rossington, Armthorpe and Hatfield had tired of waiting and headed for Harworth Colliery, just over the county border. Alarmed by this, the Notts Area officials contacted the Yorkshire Area leadership. But the Yorkshire leaders failed in their bid to restrain picketing. And as the success of the first wave of pickets became common knowledge throughout the Yorkshire coalfield, miners were heading for Notts whether they received official blessing or not.³³ Steve Gant, from Frickley, remembers that 'a team of four of us went down' to Harworth:

... as soon as we knew that the lads from Armthorpe had been going down unofficially, we thought: 'Well, what's good enough for Armthorpe is good enough for us,' because we agreed with it, we thought that the union was holding back on it.³⁴

In order to regain control of the dispute, the Yorkshire NUM Council sanctioned picketing. By the second day of the strike pickets from Yorkshire were at every pit in Lancashire and Nottinghamshire, and despite the increased police efforts to stop them, successfully shut down half the Lancashire coalfield and a third of Notts.³⁵

The National Coal Board showed they had little faith in theories about Notts miners being traditionally hostile to strike action when as early as Tuesday 13 March they applied for a High Court injunction ordering the Yorkshire NUM to withdraw

³¹ Richards, *op. cit.*, p.176.

³² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

³³ M. Adeney and J. Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike 1984-5, Loss Without Limit*, (London, 1986), pp.47-48; Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, pp.47-48.

³⁴ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

³⁵ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.50; Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, p.81.

pickets. They received help from another source too. That same day the following letter was sent by Henry Richardson, the Notts Area general secretary, to Notts branch officials:

We abhor the situation that is now arising in the Area. The Yorkshire pickets are in the Area unofficially, as the Yorkshire leaders have undertaken to keep them out of the Area until the Notts Ballot has taken place . . . We have instructed our members not to cross picket lines, but the type of action taking place is not picketing, but purely blockading . . . what is taking place now . . . will be counterproductive. No union can sustain a strike under these circumstances.³⁷

With such leadership, is there any wonder there was hostility to the strike amongst rank-and-file miners in Nottinghamshire! If such instructions had been issued in Yorkshire, *even there* the strike would have failed.

That night, the Frickley miners went picketing for the first time. The main contingent were directed to Gedling, others to Blidworth or Hucknall. Steve Gant was among those at Gedling:

There were a lot crossed the picket line at Gedling that first night. One lad pulled a knife at some of the pickets, 'I'm going through.' Fair enough, he went through . . . I would say that on that first night maybe 60 per cent worked. But we turned about 40 per cent back - we did get a bit of support. But it was a poor showing as regards picket numbers. I can remember that I phoned Geoff Siddons up, the branch secretary then, and told him that we needed more men on the ground at Gedling in the morning. They sent a full bus down. We stopped half way through the day shift to picket. It was the same response. It was on the border. Some men were working, some were behind it.³⁸

Gary Hinchliffe was among four or five cars of Frickley miners directed to Hucknall:

No NUM men came from Hucknall pit, there wasn't a union man to be seen. Some of their activists came and stood with us, and told us who was who. In fact me and Jip [Paul Symonds] had a walk round the pit looking for the toilets with one of them. And then they started coming up, and this is when the animosity started, some of the men wanted to go into work. It was alien, it was something that you never thought was going to happen. They wanted to go into work. One just drove straight through without stopping, and they started kicking the car.³⁹

Just after this, the police on the scene cleared the strikers off the road and imposed a limit of six pickets who would be allowed to talk to the local miners. 'That seemed fair enough to us,' says Paul Symonds:

³⁷ Cited in Richards, *op. cit.*, p.6.

³⁸ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

³⁹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author,

I managed to get to be one of these six pickets - they were mainly older guys, branch officials, men like that - I think it was because I had been persistent enough to stay in the middle of the road. The miners started turning up for work, they obviously knew that there was going to be a picket line on, they'd put their snap up and their flasks up. They'd obviously left the house determined to go to work, and they were determined to cross a picket line. But I just remember leaning on cars and arguing: 'Don't believe owt that you read in the papers.' They'd demonised Scargill down there to enough, and basically when you said to blokes, 'Well, what do you do down the pit?' They would say, 'I work in the headings.' We'd say, 'Well I work in the headings as well.' We'd got common cause. And on that basis, we turned most of the night shift back, without any violence. I was a bit chuffed with it all. I thought: 'Fuck me, we've got them now. We've got them by the balls. If this is happening at every other pit in Notts where they've got pickets, then we've got them.'³⁹

However, the following morning, Paul Symonds went to the Miners' Institute to find out the latest news. It was not good:

I talked to someone who went to Hucknall and they said that all the day shift had worked! I couldn't believe it after the response of the night shift. But what had happened was, the police, rather than allowing us to have six pickets and stop vehicles and talk to them, by the day shift had changed tactics. They wouldn't allow us to have six pickets. They had set cordons up across the main road in front of the pit, and as the men were arriving for work in buses and in vans and things, the police were there waving them straight into the pit yard. So there was never any opportunity for us to talk to them - they were just being driven straight past us. I know about this because we went straight back down and that's what was happening . . . And of course, once that happened, that's when the cat-calling starts, 'Scabs'. There's not much else that you can do to a coach full of men that are driving past you but shout abuse at it. So I think that was a set-back. And obviously for us, it was one lesson that we'd got to learn.⁴⁰

Tragedy at Ollerton.

The contingent of Frickley miners heading for Gedling Colliery on the evening of Wednesday 14 March only got as far Clumber Park, just over the Notts border, when they were ordered to return home by the police. Two coaches of miners turned back, the men on the third decided to walk.⁴¹ 'It was seven miles to Ollerton,' says Gary Hinchliffe:

We saw a sign: 'Thoresby/Ollerton'. So we knew there were pits nearby, so we set off to walk to them - there were fifty-odd of us. Some men who'd come down in cars passed us and they were then going down to Ollerton, driving back

³⁹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁰ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴¹ M. Jones, *Killed on the Picket Line: The Story of David Gareth Jones*, (London, 1985), p.25.

up, picking another four men up, driving back - up and down, up and down. Me and Jip got in this car with this kid.⁴²

When Gary Hinchliffe's group were dropped off in Ollerton they found a big crowd of pickets outside the pit gates and a similar sized crowd congregated on the opposite side of the road:

... men were coming out of this snicket and running across the road with their snap into the pit through the picket lines. These women were clapping and cheering. One of the pickets said, 'You wouldn't believe what's been going off tonight. All the village has turned out to boo us and have a go at us for coming here picketing.' But there were a lot of Ollerton men who were coming over the road from the pub, standing with us for ten or fifteen minutes and then going back over the road for a drink.⁴³

Later in the evening, a gang of local men returning from a football match arrived at the pit gates in a coach and started chanting football songs. The pickets shouted back. Soon, the exchanges turned ugly and a big-scale fight ensued on the nearby pub's car park. Eventually though, the police herded the football fans away and a temporary lull followed. After the local pubs closed and the streets cleared, a further disturbance occurred which ended in one of the most tragic incidents in the whole strike. 'After about ten minutes,' Gary Hinchliffe recalls:

somebody said, 'Hey up, they're scratching our cars.' These football supporters had come back and they were scratching down the side of the cars. So the pickets chased after them, but as they chased after them, the lads from Ollerton ran through a housing estate and threw house-bricks and the lot. One of the pickets went down. He got hit in the chest with a house-brick. They called him David Jones - he died.⁴⁴

David Jones worked at Ackton Hall Colliery near Featherstone, but as he lived in South Kirkby he had decided to picket with his friends who worked at Frickley. One of them was Tony Short:

We were chasing scabs who were smashing cars up. There were about ten of them popped up behind these hedges and they were throwing wall bricks. I saw him go down. I didn't see one hit him, but the other lads did, Mark Bradley and them. We carried on running after these kids, then came back. They said, 'They've taken Dave to the hospital.' We didn't think owt of it because throughout our lives we had been in and out of the nick and hospital. About three hours later, I went up to this cop - which I didn't want to do - and asked, 'Where have they taken the injured?' He said, 'Why?' I said that my mate has been

⁴² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁴³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁴ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author; see also P. Wilsher, D. Macintyre and M. Jones, *Strike: Thatcher, Scargill and the Miners*, (London, 1985), pp.60-61.

injured. He said, 'What do they call him?' As soon as I said, 'Dave Jones,' he said, 'Right, come with me.' He took me through the back of Ollerton pit yard, through the police cordon. He said, 'We've got a lad called Dave who's dead.' That's just how he said it. He said, 'We want you to come and identify the body.'⁴⁵

Enquiries

David Jones died at eleven minutes past midnight on Thursday 15 March 1984. The official investigation into his death caused much consternation amongst the Frickley miners. In his book, David Jones's father, Mark Jones, has told of how the police paid little attention to the brick throwing incident, concentrating only on what happened earlier.⁴⁶ Robert Walker remembers the line of enquiry put forward when two officers from the Nottingham CID paid him a visit:

They were like this: 'He wasn't hit by a wall-brick or a truncheon.' I said, 'Well I've heard he was hit by a wall-brick.' 'Ah, well, it was the crush.' I said, 'Fucking hell, he's been to more football matches than enough, and you're saying that he was crushed.' I said, 'I know a bloke who says he was hit by a wall-brick.' 'No he wasn't.' They were like sweeping it under the carpet. Then they asked me my weight, my size - stuff like that. I asked them to fuck off out of the house, 'I've not invited you in.' So they went out and I heard nowt else. I hadn't seen anything anyway.⁴⁷

Other Frickley activists tell of similar visits. In total the police acquired 270 statements in both Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire as evidence at the inquest into the fatality. David Jones's friends who had been with him throughout the evening were never called. The end result was that the police appeared to have found little out, and the person who may have thrown a brick was never brought forward. An open verdict was given.⁴⁸

The death of David Jones had a profound influence on many of the younger Frickley pickets. 'It wasn't a game anymore,' reflects Jeff Johnson: 'You can't just kill people in the middle of a street full of bobbies, and the bobbies turn round and say "We didn't see owt." They did. They knew what happened.' David Jones's death 'totally changed my life,' says Tony Short:

He'd lived across the backs from me. Everything that I'd done in my life up until then I had done with him: boozing, shagging, fighting, the pit. I knew his wife, his two kids, everything. But after that, it totally changed . . . A lot of us knew him. We weren't exactly angels, but that made us worse. We were determined then that we would never miss a day picketing - and we didn't. I think that I missed about six days in the whole year . . . But that hardened a lot of people. And it fetched a lot of people out who I thought were wankers, who stopped

⁴⁵ Tony Short, interviewed by the author, 16 and 17 October 1996.

⁴⁶ Jones, op. cit., p.41.

⁴⁷ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁸ Jones, op. cit., pp.38-43.

with us for twelve months. We used to call them 'our little crew,' and they were brilliant.⁴⁹

Beating the blockade

In the shadow of David Jones's death, the leaders of the NUM in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire met and struck a deal under which the Notts miners would come out on strike while their Area ballot was put into operation and the Yorkshire miners would refrain from picketing. As the strike entered its second week, the results of the various Area ballots were announced. The results were a bitter blow to the fight against pit closures. In North Derbyshire the vote to strike was lost by a mere 16 votes; in Lancashire 60 per cent had voted against taking action; in the Midlands it was two-thirds. But in the most important coalfield still working, Nottinghamshire, just 26 per cent of NUM members had voted to strike.⁵⁰ Paul Symonds argues that once the ballot result had been announced:

... it sort of copper-fastened all the scabbing in Nottingham. They could claim that they had a right to work now, through democratic means. And we did talk to some Notts miners who were strikers, who were drawn into the ballot, and did argue to get the strike vote out. But they had bound themselves to the result of the ballot. So even people in Notts who were happy to be out on strike, and weren't happy with the ballot result, felt duty bound to work, to follow their union's instructions about a democratic ballot. And so overnight our task at getting Notts out became ten times harder.⁵¹

In the meantime, the government had transferred up to 8,000 extra police into Nottinghamshire and announced that there would be a new interpretation on the laws on picketing. The police would now use their powers to stop vehicles on roads and tell miners to turn round. Those who disobeyed would be deemed to be obstructing the police in the course of their duties - a criminal offence. During the first six months of the dispute as many as 164,508 'presumed pickets' would be prevented from entering Nottinghamshire. Pickets no longer had any right to stop cars and explain their case.⁵²

After Nottinghamshire police advised coach companies not to accept bookings from the NUM, the union's branches were forced to ferry their members in cars. And yet John Picken, who was involved in the Frickley strike centre, recalls that this actually worked to the NUM's advantage:

... because of the cost of a coach, it was easier to send cars. A car could get through. You could send ten cars with four people in a car, but you'd a fifty-seater coach. For one car there was a small payment for petrol and £1 a

⁴⁹ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁰ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, pp.57-58.

⁵¹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁵² Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, pp.56-57; R. East, H. Power and P. Thomas, 'The death of mass picketing', *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol.12, No.3, Winter 1985, p.308.

The early days of the Big Strike

person to picket. When we came to think about a bus, a bus was a lot more. We knew that once a bus was stopped all the pickets were got hold of. Send six buses down, six buses are stopped, nobody gets through. Send sixty cars down, and you go down little side roads. If you got a car through you could put a picket line on.⁵⁴

Despite the increased police presence, a small number of flying pickets did manage to get into Nottinghamshire on the second Monday of the strike and succeeded in picketing out a quarter of the Notts coalfield.⁵⁵

As well as the road-blocks, the police employed spotter aircraft and helicopters. In the vicinity of the pits there were dog patrols and stationed in army barracks was a reserve of 3,000 riot-trained police. There were frequent reports of police officers smashing the windscreens of pickets' cars and of pickets being dragged out of cars and searched on the roadside.⁵⁶ Ian Oxley recalls that all of this demoralised many of the flying pickets, 'they could see that you were braying your head against a brick wall.' However, he argues that if pickets were persistent, as his car load were, they could get through the blockade:

I never ever failed to get to a pit, even if it wasn't the one I was sent to . . . if you gave the police a line, they had to accept it. If we were in Nottingham, I used to know where all the garden centres were, and I used to just say I was going to that garden centre. If you refused to go back they had to give way . . . But a lot of pickets were just getting their cars filled with petrol, driving to the first checkpoint and going home. It was a waste of money, a waste of resources, and it wasn't effective.⁵⁷

According to Jeff Johnson, too many of the pickets at this stage 'were still law-abiding people. They still did as they were told by the bobbies.' But soon the blockade started to be breached more frequently:

. . . we got our own maps and we found back roads. We quickly learnt where the road-blocks were and ways round them. As the strike went on, the police obviously realised we were still getting through and brought more reinforcements in and more and more road-blocks. We used to drive through Clumber Park, down the fire-breaks, and we used to take tools in the boot. We used to take gates off hinges. And if we couldn't get the gates off - because they were all locked - we used to saw them up, smash them. We used to go through this big country house. The road was closed down. There was a big lock and chain on the big steel gates. But we used to just take the gates off the hinges, get the cars through, put the gates back on. Nobody knew we'd been.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁵ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.60.

⁵⁶ C. Lloyd, 'A national police force', in B. Fine and R. Millar (eds), *Policing the Miners' Strike*, (London, 1985), p.65.

⁵⁷ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁸ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

The pickets' initiative became the key to getting past the road-blocks. 'It all got quite exciting now,' remembers Paul Symonds, 'because what happened was you played a cat and mouse game with the police. That was your first task of the day: "How are we going to get through the road-blocks today?" And there were some ingenious methods thought up.'⁵⁹ Robert Walker remembers some of these:

One time, there was a bag of artex in the boot and the cops asked what it was for. We'd told them we were going artexing. They said, 'Righto.' I said, 'We want to leave that in all the time.' There was one bag of artex and we were going all the way to Nottingham! . . . If they saw a full car, that was it, they'd be straight over. I've been in car boots. I've been in the back of vans with sacks. We've filled vans with coal so that it looked like there was something in the van, and I've got in the back with them. We tried all sorts.⁶⁰

He remembers one occasion when his group of pickets met with a lot of difficulty getting past the road-blocks; but other miners had found a more unorthodox route:

There was like a path that went over the tips, and all these cars were coming over. We thought they were scabs; we were shouting 'Scabs' at them. There was a national park just at the other side, and all they'd done was paid about 25p a car, got in there because all the coppers were blocking the roads off. It was somebody who worked at the pit who tipped them off: 'If you go in there, the road takes you straight into the pit yard.'⁶¹

Another way to beat the blockade was for pickets to stay permanently billeted in Nottinghamshire, as Tony Short remembers:

There was me and three others staying in this caravan in a sympathetic bloke's yard. We would stop there all week and then come home on Friday, so that we didn't have the hassle of trying to get through the barriers. You could get as far as the A1 and the M18, then you started seeing them, so that's why we started going down there on Sunday tea time and stopping while the following Friday morning. It was usually those who were single and had no commitments. Mind you, you got pretty well paid - you got £8 a day, which wasn't bad . . . We stopped down there for a few months. We got arrested a couple of times. Then it wasn't so much us wanting to leave as that it was getting harder for those who we were stopping with. Don't forget that they were in a village where there were about a hundred who weren't working and 1,100 who were.⁶²

Some twelve per cent of all arrests during the strike were at road-blocks. But even the motorways could be a focus of the struggle. Miners who were frustrated at

⁵⁹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁰ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

⁶¹ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

⁶² Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

not being able to continue their journey would frequently drive slowly on the motorways to hold up the traffic flow - an idea copied from a French lorry drivers' dispute. Steve Gant was involved in one such episode:

We were going down the A1, and we were that pissed off with not getting anywhere that it was just something else to do to put our point over. What had happened was that we had about twenty cars and we decided to block the A1 off. We were going at about ten-miles-an-hour, hoping to hold the traffic up right back to Scotch Corner. Wagons were stood behind us. Eventually the front cars pulled up. We were one of the front cars. We just stopped them on the A1. The police were shooting up and down on the hard-shoulder. We blocked that off, they couldn't do owt. Then we just decided to have our snap. Somebody shouted 'Snap time'. That was it. We just left the cars for twenty minutes and sat on the grass, with tailbacks behind us.⁶³

The miners were under no illusion that there would be much progress in the dispute using this method. 'It was just something to boost the lads. It was a bit of an up-lift,' adds Steve Gant.

Organisation

In 1972 the four Yorkshire Panels had developed their own strike organisation. By contrast, during the 1984-85 strike the Panels' role was limited to putting into effect the picketing strategy worked out at the Strike Co-ordinating Committee (SCC) based at the Area headquarters in Barnsley.⁶⁴ The level of spying activity against the miners was on such a scale that every NUM branch secretary is known to have had his phone tapped by the authorities.⁶⁵ Being aware of this possibility, the SCC issued a sealed envelope to an official from each branch specifying the next day's target. Such a system, though, offered little opportunity for pickets to have any influence on the union's strategy. Indeed throughout the dispute, with the exception of three Yorkshire collieries, Royston Drift, Highgate and Maltby, there were no elected strike committees based on strike activists. Instead, the branch committees elected prior to the strike retained responsibility for affairs.⁶⁶

Jonathan and Ruth Winterton have pointed out that although local officials were generally committed to the strike, they were 'often too preoccupied with strike administration to participate in picketing.'⁶⁷ This appears to have been the case at Frickley. 'I made it my way to go picketing,' recalls Johnny Stones, 'and the branch treasurer did. The branch president and the secretary didn't . . .'⁶⁸ Nevertheless, there was still a strong commitment to picketing within the branch. John Picken, a member of the branch committee at the time, says that:

⁶³ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁴ Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, p.82.

⁶⁵ S. Milne, *The Enemy Within: MI5, Maxwell and the Scargill Affair*, (London, 1994), p.280.

⁶⁶ Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, p.95.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.95.

⁶⁸ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

For Frickley to have two hundred men who went picketing all the way through the strike was brilliant. I think the manpower may have been 1,600 men at the pit and there must have been something like 1,000 went picketing at some time.⁶⁹

For Steve Gant, the part played by the branch treasurer, Dicky Nailor, was crucial in keeping picketing numbers high:

Dicky wasn't as official as a lot of other treasurers were at other branches. Dicky's main thing was to get the pickets out, whereas a lot of branches that I know of were really tight with the purse strings, they wanted to account for this and account for that. Some said that Dicky was lax with the money. And eventually, as it turned out, there was a lot of money that was unaccounted for - I wouldn't say 'taken', but 'unaccounted for' . . . His filing system was crap to be honest . . . Dicky's idea was: 'Give the lads the money and let them get off.' We were never without petrol money or picketing money. And with the amount of pickets that were going, it must have cost a fortune. We were a rich branch at that time.⁷⁰ We'd got loads in the coffers.⁷¹

A 'bit of truncheon'

When the flying pickets did actually beat the blockade of Nottinghamshire, the treatment they received on the picket lines under the new policing policy was hardly favourable. 'Once you got into the second, third and fourth weeks of the strike, there was real hostility towards the pickets then,' recalls Gary Hinchliffe:

There was no mistaking who's side they were on. If you stepped out of the line, they'd have you. If you called anybody abusive language, called them 'Scabs' or questioned their parentage, you'd be arrested. It just depended which police force was there. Some were more tolerant than others. The London Met were by far the worst.⁷²

Soon though, the pickets' passivity and respect for the law began to break down. Jeff Johnson recalls how at the beginning of the strike:

. . . if bobbies said, 'Don't cross that line', we didn't cross it. If they said we weren't allowed in the canteens, we didn't go in the canteens. But as the lads got frustrated with watching cars going by, and buses, they wanted to get in. They had no contact. And that's when the pushing and shoving started. For me as an individual, you pushed and shoved back, it was a bit light-hearted. But it wasn't

⁶⁹ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

⁷⁰ NUM branches were entitled to retain 8 per cent of subscription income to the national union, see B. Aston, T. Morris, and P. Willman, 'Still balancing the books: the NUM and the 1984-85 strike', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol.21, No.3, Autumn 1990, p.177.

⁷¹ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁷² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

long, maybe two or three days, or perhaps a week after the start of the strike, that things got nasty. You got fed up of having fingers in your eyes, punched in the balls and having your toes stamped on, and the occasional bit of truncheon. So after a while, you knew you were going to get it, so you gave it back. And after a month, you knew you were going to get it and so you gave it out first.⁷³

The police's tactics soon became obvious - mass arrests of miners, usually on minor public order offences, on a scale never witnessed before in Britain during an industrial dispute. At the close of the strike as many as 4,314 miners had been charged with breach of the peace, while a further 2,322 were charged with obstructing the highway. Two-thirds of all offences during the dispute were for one or the other of these two offences.⁷⁴ By the sixth week, as many as 1,000 miners had already been arrested at police check-points or on the picket lines.⁷⁵ As many Frickley miners found out, the mass arrests had one main function: to reduce the numbers going picketing. Once arrested, magistrates would impose strict bail conditions on miners, such as curfews and restricted access to certain parts of the country, for 'crimes' which in normal times would only warrant small fines.

Fabricated charges and police brutality were a constant threat to the striking activists, as Jeff Johnson found out - on the first of the three occasions he was detained during the strike - after driving through a police road-block:

... they put us on a Met police bus. And the Met bobbies said that it was only a traffic offence and said, 'Slip off the bus, we're only after pickets, and go and stand in that cornfield.' But we knew what they were up to. If we'd have got off the bus and gone in the cornfield they'd have followed us and beat us up and just left us there. And so we got locked up and they charged us with attempted murder; which hung over our heads for seven or eight months. And we actually went to court over it quite a few times, but the last time was in the Crown Court in Nottingham itself and it was a woman judge and she threw it out. It was an absolute farce. But we were back at work at that time and anybody who was under threat or found guilty of an act during the strike was immediately sacked. So we kept it very quiet.⁷⁶

The call for a ballot

Right-wing writers such as Wilsher et al. have argued that the failure to win the Notts miners over to the strike was a consequence of the NUM's refusal to hold a national ballot.⁷⁷ Frickley activist Ian Oxley expresses the same opinion:

... a lot of people that did scab would have not worked if there had been a ballot. Clearly the ones who were determined to scab would have been isolated.

⁷³ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁷⁴ P. Hillyard and J. Percy-Smith, 'Miner offences that cry out for an amnesty', *The Guardian*, 18 March 1985.

⁷⁵ M. Walker and S. Millar, *A State of Siege*, (London, 1984), p.11.

⁷⁶ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁷⁷ Wilsher et al., op. cit., p.107.

The early days of the Big Strike

But it gave them something to work on. Because all they called for throughout the strike, along with the Labour Party, along with the TUC, is a ballot. So personally I think it was a tactical blunder by Arthur Scargill. I'm not saying it was Arthur's decision, but Arthur was the president, he must take overall responsibility. I think we could have won it.⁷⁸

But Ian Oxley's was a minority voice amongst the Frickley activists. Experience had taught militants that the NUM had not gained its strength through its ability to hold ballots but through solidarity in action, through miners reacting to injustice by voting with their feet. As Ray Riley explains:

The most democratic form of decision making is being stood arguing with your workmates about why you should support a particular line. They talked about the democracy of a ballot but, in effect, a national ballot, on certain issues, is not democratic. The most democratic form of organising a strike, or asking people if they want to come out on strike, was surely arguing it out amongst yourselves, listening to both sides of the argument and then agreeing on a particular sort of action. I never once considered the ballot as an option. People who were arguing for a ballot were just looking for a way out.⁷⁹

Many strikers pointed to the earlier ballot of the Yorkshire miners, in January 1981. This was a sufficient mandate in Johnny Stones' opinion:

Now that ballot was that if any colliery within the British Isles was threatened with closure by the NCB for any reason other than exhaustion, then we would come out on strike if the call was made for support from any Area in the British coalfield. That was in 1981 - it was under three years since that decision was taken . . . and as far as I was concerned that policy had not been overturned by any annual conferences, and as such that was my mandate from 1981 . . . If we'd have had a ballot, we would have had a full media propaganda campaign against it. And it would have been an unfair ballot in regards to that; because one opinion would have been voiced throughout the media.⁸⁰

In Paul Symonds' view, the reaction would have been little different even if the miners had balloted and then voted to strike:

. . . if we'd won the ballot, there was no way that the government were going to say, 'Oh well, it's all right now.' They would have still organised scabbing. In every strike where there has been a ballot, I've never heard it where the government or political commentators have said, 'Look, you've got to obey this ballot.' They still encouraged scabbing. To them it's not an issue. There was a big stress on the ballot and I don't think that it was accidental. You ended up with 160,000 miners on strike over pit closures, and what was the main debate?

⁷⁸ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

⁷⁹ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁸⁰ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

Over whether there should have been a ballot or not! While people were sat round talking about whether there should have been a ballot or not, they should have been talking about whether pits should be closing or not. And that was setting a false agenda. That's the role that the ballot played. And a lot of people succumbed to that.⁸¹

The whole ballot issue came to a head at an NUM executive meeting on 12 April, where Arthur Scargill skilfully manoeuvred the proceedings so that instead of a ballot the union would organise a special delegate conference. The right wing in the union were beaten. At the delegate conference 17 days later, the calls for a ballot were rejected and the strike - in which the great majority of Britain's miners were now participating - was declared official.⁸²

There was of course the problem of Notts still working; and especially so when Notts right wingers succeeded in mounting a counter campaign. On May Day an estimated 7,000 non-striking Notts miners, who had been given the day off by the Coal Board, demonstrated outside their Area headquarters in protest against Henry Richardson and Ray Chadburn for threatening to discipline Notts officials who blatantly encouraged scabbing.⁸³ The strength of the demonstration showed that the government had won a crucial battle: Notts miners were now accustomed to crossing picket lines and production in the coalfield would continue to undermine the strike for the remainder of its course. The initial enthusiasm that had carried the strike forward, that had given thousands of young Yorkshire miners their first ever experience on a picket line, had been blunted somewhat in failing to get any sizeable support in Notts. Gary Hinchliffe, for one, remembers being:

dejected with it all. All I could see was that the strike was going to fizzle out in three or four weeks. We weren't getting any bigger response from the Areas that were working and we would have no alternative but to call it off.⁸⁴

But this did not happen. Instead a new focal point would command the strikers' attention.

⁸¹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁸² Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, pp.62-64; Crick, *op. cit.*, pp.105- 106.

⁸³ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.70.

⁸⁴ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

CHAPTER THREE: STEEL AND ORGREAVE

A change of direction

With the miners having been forced to begin their strike in the spring, when the demand for electricity was not as great as it had been in the depths of winter, electricity cuts looked out of the question for months to come, especially with 24 million tonnes of coal stocked at power stations. Faced with this, and the lack of support from Notts miners, some NUM activists were starting to realise that if they were to win quickly they would have to hit other industries directly - as in the strikes in the 1970s. One of these was Paul Symonds, who by early May 1984, through his participation in the strike, had become involved with the Socialist Workers Party:

They held rank-and-file miners' meetings. They were small, but they did attract militants from other pits. At Frickley we always got ten or a dozen miners along to them, maybe more sometimes, and similar numbers were true from other pits. And obviously we were starting to question the strategy of the union. By now they'd thrown a ring of steel around Nottingham. So we'd accepted that we were going to have to win this without Nottingham. I think that the union was running out of ideas in terms of what to do.¹

What the small grouping of miners around the SWP heard at one meeting had an important bearing on what would happen next. Paul Symonds recalls how:

... there had been a report in the *Financial Times* [26 March 1984] saying that although the power stations were well stocked, and the pit heads were well stocked, the steelworks had little or no stockpiling, and that the effect of picketing on steelworks would bring the car industry to a halt. We knew that we needed to open a second front up. And the idea of having thousands and thousands of car workers laid off just made me feel good . . . The Socialist Workers Party convinced a few of us that rather than going into Notts we should go to Scunthorpe steelworks. Whether the steelworks were starting to come to the attention of people like Scargill at this stage, I'm not sure. But we were definitely the ones who got the ball rolling in terms of steel.²

Though the argument over steel was taken up by other activists, there was a snag. Rather than relying on mass picketing to stop the movement of coal, the NUM leadership looked to the Triple Alliance, an agreement between the leaders of the rail unions, the steelworkers and the miners. The Alliance met on 29 March and promised to stop all coal movements. But within 24 hours, Bill Sirs, the right-wing general secretary of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, had done an about-turn, arguing that the priority was to keep steel production going so as to safeguard steelworkers' jobs and that furnaces would collapse if deprived of coking coal. At the beginning of April, the presidents of the three main left-wing Areas of the NUM gave in to this blackmail, neglecting that a miners' victory inevitably

¹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

² Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

meant that other workers would have to be laid off.³ 'Effectively,' says Paul Symonds:

that meant during the strike giving as much coal to those steelworks as they wanted. So you had Mick McGahey in Scotland, Communist Party member, giving as much coal to Ravenscraig as they wanted. You had Jack Taylor in Yorkshire, a left-wing leader, supposedly, he'd done a deal with Scunthorpe, to allow them to have as much coal - and he thought it must have been some sort of propaganda thing deliberately having 'Coal from Cortonwood' there. And Emlyn Williams in Wales did the same trick with Llanwern. And so you'd got this ideal opportunity, where we could stop steel, get thousands of carworkers laid off, open up a split for the government, and we had our own Area barons making sure that wasn't going to come about. And then on top of that you had Scargill then arguing the case to stop steel.⁴

In early May miners clashed with police outside Ravenscraig, but the Scottish NUM leadership responded on 11 May by allowing three times more coal into the plant than was actually needed to keep the furnaces going.⁵

Scunthorpe

The Yorkshire leadership's policy of dispensations to the steelworks at Scunthorpe was soon under pressure from the rank and file, as Steve Gant recalls when Sammy Thompson addressed a strike meeting at the Mill Lane Club in South Kirkby:

I'd got an open letter to Scargill on me. It was issued from *Socialist Worker*. It argued that it was a mistake to make dispensations to steel. The argument was: if you stop British Steel, two weeks later you stop Leyland and Jaguar, because stockpiles were week to week. I remember that Sammy had got the meeting behind him, justifying these dispensations to the steelworks. Basically, the Area officials didn't want steelworks to shut because there would be a knock back into their Area with pits closing. I rubbished Sammy. I heckled him, and he had a go back at me. As the meeting was ending, I stood up and I said, 'I've got an open letter here to Scargill, disagreeing with the dispensations to steel. Anybody who's interested in signing it, come and see me at the back of the room.' Sammy was still talking. A lot of the lads weren't listening to him. They just got up, formed a queue and signed this paper - which Sammy didn't like one bit. He was talking to people who weren't listening, who just wanted to sign this petition. They realised that we had to do something, and fairly quickly.⁶

The next step was to head for the Scunthorpe steelworks. 'We organised it ourselves,' says Steve Gant:

³ Callinicos and Simons, *The Great Strike*, pp.86-87; Wilsher et al., *Strike*, pp.89-90.

⁴ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁵ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., pp.90-92.

⁶ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

There were about five or six car loads of lads. We said, 'Keep it quiet. We'll get our petrol in the morning. But instead of going to the destination that they say, we'll go to Scunthorpe. We'll see what the crack is there.' It wasn't a picket. It was to leaflet. It was to give steelworkers leaflets on our case, arguing the rank-and-file stand, on why we thought it would be beneficial for them to support the miners. It mentioned how the steelworks were going to shut, and that the way to stop the steelworks from closing was to join the strike, and we would win together.⁷

Although the pickets did not stop the steelworks, 'We didn't get a bad response,' recalls Paul Symonds: 'people were wondering what we were doing there, to be honest.' He says that it was only now, when trains full of coal started arriving, that they realised what the dispensations actually entailed:

. . . chalked in big letters on the side of the wagons is: 'This coal is from Cortonwood.' And there were train loads of it . . . And as far as we were concerned, that shifted the argument. People started talking about steel. Steel became a part of the pickets' vocabulary, which it hadn't been up until then.⁸

The officials' wrath

In an oral history of the miners' strike in Thurcroft, Pat Fortune, the Thurcroft branch president, explains why Yorkshire NUM branch officials accepted sending coal from Cortonwood to the steelworks: 'We thought that publicity-wise it would be a good move. "We're striking for Cortonwood and they've got to use their coal to keep the steel going."⁹ The Frickley activists who had ventured to Scunthorpe soon felt the wrath of those who adhered to such a viewpoint; as Steve Gant collects:

A mandate came straight from Barnsley the next day. We got a bollocking off our own branch officials for acting off our own backs: 'You don't know what you are on with,' and all this. We had a major argument about that. David Douglass, who was the delegate at Hatfield, knocked a little brochure up against us! He knew that we were SWP miners. He slated us off, he slated the SWP off. He had a go at every party, *Militant* as well: 'Don't take any notice of these men.' And he distributed this all the way through the coalfield. They were that scared of us pulling the lads to the steelworks against their policy. And so they came with the underhand, dirty tactics. It hit the news straight away, you see. We made it hit the news. As soon as we got back, it was on *Calendar News* that Yorkshire miners were outside the Anchor steelworks at Scunthorpe. But we were leafleting. But our next move was going to be that. But we got knocked back straight away. They weren't going to let us, the rank and file, run that show, so they slagged us off. Even though we had a small minority of lads who knew that we were right

⁷ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁸ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁹ Gibbon and Steyne, *Thurcroft: A Village and the Miners' Strike*, p.59.

about steel, they got their way in the end; which was bad, because we'd let a golden opportunity slip by there, at the steelworks. They had more power than us. Even though the rank and file were pretty strong, we didn't have the power to overrule the officials, like we did in later days.¹⁰

Orgreave begins

The campaign against the dispensations began to intensify when British Steel management, aware of how convoys of lorries had broken through miners' picket lines at Ravenscraig, mobilised a similar operation at Scunthorpe. From 23 May coal stocks were transported to the site from the Orgreave coking plant near Rotherham.¹¹ Tony Short was one of a group of four Frickley miners who traced the movements of the first convoys:

We thought we were secret undercover agents. We were out for about sixteen hours following this great big convoy of thirty-odd wagons. We'd followed them all the way from Scunthorpe, all the way to Orgreave, had a do with the bobbies outside. Gant thought I'd been stabbed - I was covered in blood. It was the closest I'd ever been to stopping them. There was about a hundred of us there, we were on the side of wagons dragging drivers out. The cops didn't have a clue.¹²

Eventually the pressure on the Yorkshire leadership paid off and they finally gave their blessing to picket Orgreave. But even then the hope was to keep the picketing low-key, as Gary Hurst testifies:

Tony Jenkinson was deploying and I was a big friend of Tony's, and on the Friday night he said to me, 'Are you going in the morning?' I said, 'In the morning? Where? Picketing is only from Monday to Friday.' He said, 'No, we've got one in the morning. We're not sending a lot. There's not going to be a mass picket, but we're going to stop some wagons going into Orgreave. But don't tell everybody because we don't want mass pickets there.' I said, 'Aye, all right then, I'll go.' Anyway, I went that morning, Saturday morning, and there were only a couple of hundred, if that, there at Orgreave.¹³

On Sunday 27 May Arthur Scargill addressed a rally of Frickley and South Kirkby miners and called for the coking plant to be mass picketed. Jack Taylor, who shared the platform, was pressured into action. On Tuesday 29 May, every Yorkshire picket was instructed to go to Orgreave. Scargill, with a megaphone, took personal charge and directed the push against the police lines. There followed a succession of charges by mounted police and foot police armed with truncheons and dogs. A total of 83 miners were arrested in the worst violence seen in an industrial dispute since the First World War. But an open rift was now noticeable between Scargill and the

¹⁰ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

¹¹ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.100.

¹² Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

¹³ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

Yorkshire officials, and the following morning the pickets received instructions to go to Nottinghamshire. Scargill, however, was amongst a small group of pickets who headed for Orgreave and was arrested.¹⁴ Paul Symonds recalls the reaction amongst the Frickley pickets when they realised where they were being directed:

People were just fuming. I had a big stand-up row in the Miners: 'What the fuck are we going to Nottingham for when Scargill's been on the telly asking us to go to Orgreave? Why aren't we going to Orgreave?' A lot of us were saying, 'We're going to Orgreave, you can bollocks.' There was a real big argument. And as a compromise the union officials said to us, 'Look, go to where you are sent to, and there is nowt to stop you calling at Orgreave on your way home. We'll not say owt.' So that's what we did, because there was all this threat about the union withdrawing support from us. But that showed me that there was something seriously going wrong. You had the national president coming on TV, making threats about how many pickets were going to go there, and then Yorkshire Area isn't sending you to Orgreave. You realised that the Area leaders are not singing off the same hymn sheet as Scargill.¹⁵

On 12 June though, the Area officials were forced to make another about-turn after talks between the union and the NCB collapsed. Two days later it was announced that dispensations to the steel industry were to end.¹⁶

The death of mass picketing?

Monday 18 June saw the final mass picket of Orgreave.¹⁷ Between 5/10,000 pickets were directed to the plant. After the lorries had gone through and the pickets had thinned out, there was a police attack that was even more vicious than that of a few weeks earlier. Police riot squads and cavalry ran amok. Many miners including Arthur Scargill were hospitalised. Many more were arrested and charged with riot. The NUM then announced that the operation to shut down Orgreave was over.

According to the Wintertons, Orgreave demonstrated the failure of mass picketing as a tactic. It played into the government's hands, they argue. Instead the NUM should have been campaigning in the wider trade union movement for support. Moreover, it is argued, the pickets were no match for the forces of the state who were now more prepared than they had been at the time of Saltley.¹⁸ The Wintertons' argument also dovetails with what opponents of the strike have had to say about Orgreave since. For instance, David Hart, one of Margaret Thatcher and Ian MacGregor's key advisers at the time, has claimed that Orgreave was a 'set-up by us . . . it was a battle ground of our choosing on grounds of our choosing.'¹⁹ Even many 'Orgreave veterans' have conceded this point and accept they were

¹⁴ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., pp.101-107.

¹⁵ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

¹⁶ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., p.110.

¹⁷ For a more detailed description from the miners' perspective, see B.Jackson and T. Wardle, *The Battle for Orgreave*, (London, 1986).

¹⁸ Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, p.165.

¹⁹ Cited in Milne, *The Enemy Within*, p.270.

directed by the police towards the plant on the final day in order to be routed by superior and unbeatable forces. "The police just opened their arms and said, "Come in, come in,"" argues Johnny Stones, 'You were directed to parking spots, and being marshalled into areas that they'd confine you to.'²⁰ John Picken's impression of what was happening at Orgreave is much the same:

In the times I'd been picketing at the beginning of the strike, there was always the police up front, always shoving and everything. I could not believe what I saw . . . I was driving my car and there were four other lads with me, and this bobby says, 'Now then sir, if you're going to park will you park down there?' I thought: 'We've won, it's over. We've won the strike.' I says, 'Hey up, this is great this.' So I went and parked my car and there must have been several hundred people walking towards the bridge . . . But when I got over the bridge and looked down - I saw thousands and thousands of uniforms. I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it!²¹

There can be little doubt that at Orgreave the government wished to inflict a serious blow on the notion of mass picketing being an effective weapon in workers' armoury, that the ghost of Saltley was finally to be laid to rest. Now it is true that many miners certainly felt overwhelmed by the forces ranged against them at Orgreave, and certainly the police aggression on the final day was perhaps the worst the organised working class had faced for two generations, and for that reason alone it needs to be remembered and told, and pointed to as example of how the state is not a neutral force in capitalist society. And yet the police assault of 18 June 1984 is only part of the story of that day. Too often the miners are portrayed as victims in this battle when in fact they were close to being victors. Indeed, Seamus Milne has pointed out that Robert Haslam, the chairman of British Steel, was so concerned about the miners' attempts to blockade Orgreave and the scenes of mayhem outside, that he actually ordered the temporary closure of the plant - just as Saltley had closed twelve years earlier. Indeed much later, in *The Guardian* of 20 June 1991, the chief constable of the South Yorkshire police acknowledged that his force would have had difficulty in keeping the plant open if picketing had continued.²²

What marked Orgreave was that the miners, in the face of police provocation and violence, were no longer adhering to the pacifist principles that had been the norm of organised labour in Britain for much of the twentieth century. Frickley miner Ray Riley reflects on how attitudes had changed:

. . . the pickets were quite prepared to have a go at the police. I think a lot of the people there identified Orgreave as a crucial point in the strike. So did the police, and so did the government. Orgreave was a awesome event - if I can call it an event . . . There were just battles - there is no other way to describe it - running battles between the police and pickets . . . Whilst the Area officials seemed to have a major say on where you went, when you were actually there it was the

²⁰ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

²¹ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

²² Milne, op. cit., pp.270-271.

Steel and Orgreave

rank and file, the people there, who made up their own rules and made up their own tactics. There wasn't an official walking round giving out instruction leaflets. Actually at the scene of a picket it was the rank-and-file initiative that came through.²³

By this point, many of the pickets had become experienced at handling police aggression and were not afraid to employ guerrilla action, as Jeff Johnson explains:

If half a dozen of you were caught on your own by a van full of bobbies, they pasted you. On the other side of the coin, lads were sneaking through, down the side of the River Rother, to pumping stations, where they were pumping water out of the river for processing coke in the coking plant. They were taking manhole covers off and throwing buckets of water directly onto the motors and blowing them up to shut the plant down. I saw two security blokes have their walkie-talkies taken off them and they were thrown in the river. This was at six o'clock in the morning. You read books and they make it out as being a planned, organised battle. But there were a hell of a lot of skirmishes beforehand.²⁴

Gary Hinchliffe is one of a number of Frickley activists who argue that Orgreave failed because the NUM were trying to win the battle with little more than the regular number of pickets. The circumstances at Orgreave were not the same as at Saltley, he points out:

. . . the shop stewards and the leaders of the steelworkers' unions, and the boilermakers' unions, and the engineers' unions [in nearby Sheffield and Rotherham] were not going to get their banners out and march down. It just wasn't going to happen. You knew that it wasn't going to happen. The only thing to do was get more pickets there in such overwhelming numbers that they would decide that they couldn't get their wagons out. There was no attempt to go round knocking on everybody's door to get more pickets. Only those who were turning up went to Orgreave.²⁵

Nevertheless, he recalls that the pickets were more than holding their own in the early exchanges with the police that day:

We were pushing and pushing on the top of the hill down; and it was a hot day. We were in jeans - some were in shorts - pumps, T-shirts. The police had big plastic shields up in front of them. They'd got shoulder pads on, knee pads, all the protective clothing, they'd uniforms and big overcoats and helmets on . . . I can remember a top cop shouting, 'Does anybody want relieving?' They had some reinforcements come - and they all put their hands up. We then launched another

²³ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

²⁴ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

Steel and Orgreave

major push. We were really pushing into them. I don't think they could have stood it much longer.²⁶

Because of such pressure, the police launched a charge which is etched forever on the minds of those miners who witnessed it. 'Everybody was shoving and pushing for the wagons,' recalls Robert Walker:

and I think that's what did it that day. Everybody's just getting ready to have a big push and a shove, and all of a sudden, them fuckers came running out with truncheons and round shields, thrashing everybody. It was just like a cavalry charge. It sent everybody scattering all over the place.²⁷

The police 'really went for it that day,' remembers Paul Symonds:

they were really rough-shod. It's not just in terms of them hitting us and us throwing bricks at them. That's not what I mean. It's all the confidence. It was our day and we were getting trounced. We lost it and we had a feeling that these fuckers were wiping the floor with us. I remember on that day, there were certain union officials walking round with walkie-talkies. The coppers would see them and just march straight up to them pull them off them. It was really in your face, and they were getting away with it. That's how you know that you are fucked. The aggression from the coppers was bad. It was just like 'open season', they could do what they wanted. We gave them a good run for their money, we didn't just stand there and let them, but on the day it was a match and they won it hands down - and we got a lot of casualties.²⁸

The NUM's refusal to expand the mass picket of Orgreave meant that the government had won a crucial battle in the dispute. The experience of Orgreave 'stopped one hell of a lot people from going picketing,' says Tony Short: 'I saw one kid piss himself. We were under a bush and they were thrashing us with those big sticks, with horses on either side of us.'²⁹ After Orgreave, it became increasingly clear to activists that the struggle was now entering a new defensive phase, one in which holding the strike together and seeking support from the wider labour movement would be crucial.

²⁶ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁷ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

²⁸ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²⁹ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

CHAPTER FOUR: DIGGING IN

Sectionalism

According to one author, as a consequence of the support the miners received, 'the traditional isolation of the mining communities was shattered in 1984-5.'¹ But right from the beginning of the dispute, given the miners' success in recent times, there was the danger the strikers would think they could rely solely on their own sectional strength and ignore any possible allies within the labour movement - as we can see from the following extract from the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* of 22 March 1984:

Colliers from Frickley, picketing the Leicestershire pit Ellistown, identified a group of a dozen or so men and women not connected with the NUM. When challenged they told NUM officials they were Young Socialists. They left when asked to do so by representatives of the Frickley branch of the NUM. Frickley miner Malcolm Clawson who was present at the time said: 'There was no violence and no trouble. One hundred and fifty Yorkshire and 50 Welsh miners met in a friendly atmosphere but the dozen or so men and women were not miners. They were asked to leave and did so peaceably. It is not their place to get involved in matters between the NCB and the NUM.'²

As we shall see below, this absurd level of sectionalism would break down - it had to if there was to be any chance of victory.

No second front

In truth, the level of support from the upper levels of the labour movement was abysmal. Right-wing union leaders tended to spurn the NUM's appeals for assistance. For instance, in mid-March, Eric Hammond, general secretary elect of the electricians' union, the EEPTU, told power station workers that 'there is no obligation whatsoever for any of our members to do other than to continue to carry out their normal duties.'³ Later, on 14 April, the general secretary of the power engineers' union, John Lyons, turned down an NUM request to black the movement of coal.⁴

In formal terms at least, the left-led trade unions were far more supportive. On 29 March the three rail unions, the NUR, ASLEF and the TSSA, along with the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) and the seafarers' union (NUS), voted to stop the movement of coal. However, the lorry drivers who took scab coal and iron to the steel plants were often TGWU members. The story was far better on the railways. By the end of the strike, only 40 out of a possible 300 coal trains every day were moving.⁵ Frickley NUM activist Jeff Johnson gives us an illustration of the depth of this type of support:

¹ Richards, *Miners On Strike*, p.153.

² *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 22 March 1984.

³ Cited in Adeney and Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike 1984-5*, pp.132-133.

⁴ Callinicos and Simons, *The Great Strike*, p.128.

⁵ Adeney and Lloyd, *op. cit.*, pp.133-134; Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, pp.128

We'd had a tip off from a signal man that these trains were going through and which lines they were on. And so we spray painted 'NUM official picket line' on railway bridges at Moorthorpe and the top of Broad Lane. It didn't need anybody there, the drivers used to get out and leave the train.⁶

Crucially, whatever support was offered by the trade union leaders, none of them were prepared to take the step of linking the miners' strike to issues affecting their own members' interests and in the process open up an all important second front against the government. Nevertheless, other fronts did open up, including two national dock strikes over the transportation of iron ore into the steelworks in July and September 1984. 'That was an exciting part of the strike,' says Ray Riley, 'when a powerful group of workers like the dockers came out on strike, we thought: "Yes, this is it, this is the opening that we need." We had visions of it spreading and drawing in more workers.'⁷ These visions were to be dashed - both strikes collapsed within a short period.

The 1984 TUC conference in September seemed to offer the chance of increased support for the miners, especially as Arthur Scargill received a standing ovation and a General Council statement supporting the NUM was passed overwhelmingly. But the striking miners were to find out that the TUC's support was at a price - most of their efforts were based on trying to devise a formula for ending the dispute rather than providing the industrial action that would defeat the government.⁸ John Picken remembers being bitterly disappointed with the type of assistance on offer:

It broke my heart to see Willis with a bucket outside a tube station saying, 'Help the miners.' That was no good. We didn't want him to hold a bucket. We wanted him to tell the truth. We wanted him to come forward. We wanted him to threaten the government.⁹

A great movement of solidarity

At the grass-roots level, though, the miners' resistance was tremendously popular. However, the previous ten years of defeats and mass redundancies had taken their toll on militant trade unionism, and few trade unionists now had the confidence to take industrial action on the miners' behalf without their leaders blessing. Even so, there were other ways to help the strikers, such as donating money and food.

As early as April 1984 there had been a growth of miners' support groups, usually inspired by Labour Party activists, despite party leader Neil Kinnock's muted support. Gradually, yellow lapel stickers proclaiming 'Coal Not Dole' spread throughout the country. In the summer, trade union branches and workplaces began

and 154.

⁶ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁷ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁸ C. Harman, '1984 and the shape of things to come', *International Socialism Journal*, No.29, 1985, pp.107-108.

⁹ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

Digging in

to twin themselves with pits.¹⁰ As a consequence, delegations of trade unionists began visiting pit villages and picket lines, and the miners in return went on collecting expeditions elsewhere, especially London. At Frickley, 'The major one was the printworkers,' recalls Johnny Stones. Also:

One-to-one, we, or rather the women's groups, twinned with Hampstead and Highgate Labour Party and a lot of their collections were done in that area. We, as a branch, collected outside the GLC, on the Embankment.¹¹

Fleet Street trade unionists collected an estimated £2 million during the dispute¹² and were regular visitors to the South Elmsall district. 'We were adopted by SOGAT of the *Daily Express*,' recalls Ian Oxley, 'which was surprising to me. You tended to feel, for some reason - well I did anyway - that if it's a right-wing newspaper, then everybody working for it is right wing.'¹³ Huge operations were mounted by trade unionists to send convoys of food and other essentials to the coalfields. Tony Short remembers the significance of one particular convoy:

One of the few times that I've cried in my life was when all that snap came up the M1, with 'They shall not starve' on the lorries. That does give you hope. But it didn't me as much as my mother. Now I could say, 'Mam, we are not on our own.'¹⁴

Many of the Frickley activists were astounded by the generosity and level of support they received on collecting missions in London. Ian Oxley was one:

I collected outside the Queen's Theatre on the South Bank. It was a brilliant response. I couldn't believe the generosity of the London people. Down-and-outs who were sleeping around the South Bank area were throwing handfuls of pennies in. Workers would throw £1 in as they went to work in the GLC. The South Bank is a tourist area, and the same person - old people - would give you £1 every time they passed. And a lot of people would give a tenner or a fiver. I've never known such generosity . . . People would give you £50 and wouldn't accept a receipt. So to me the north/south divide is a load of crap. It opened my eyes, that southerners are just workers the same as me. They talk different, but they have the same values and are identical to me. I could see no difference between a southern worker and myself.¹⁵

John Picken visited London on alternate weeks between June 1984 and the end of the strike:

¹⁰ R. Huddle, A. Philips, M. Simons and J. Sturrock, *Blood Sweat and Tears: Photographs from the Great Miners' Strike 1984-1985*, (London, 1985), p.47.

¹¹ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

¹² Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.126.

¹³ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

¹⁴ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

¹⁵ Ian Oxley interviewed by the author.

Digging in

I remember one day a woman, she says, 'Are you a Yorkshire miner?' I says, 'Yes.' She says, 'What are you collecting for?' I says, 'Actually we're collecting to keep the strike going, but we've also got a caravan helping us with our food kitchen.' She gave me five £50 notes. And I said, 'Do you want a receipt?' She said, 'No, if you lose we lose.' And I shouts my mates over and I says, 'There's £250 here, from *one* woman.'¹⁶

A similar thing happened when he went to watch the local football team, Frickley Athletic, play a match in the capital:

A chap came up to me, he was from the seamen's union, and he says, 'You're a miner aren't you?' I says, 'Yes.' He says, 'Would you like some money towards your funds.' I says, 'Look, to tell you the truth, I'm not collecting.' He says, 'Well, what we usually do is give money to these kitchens.' I says, 'Oh, we've got a kitchen at Frickley. I don't mind accepting for that.' And he gave me a cheque. I says, 'Thank you very much', and shook his hand. When I looked at the cheque it was for £1,000. When I got back to the GLC, my mates who were on the buckets said, 'Look what we've collected, we've £70 in the buckets - and you've gone to a football match.' I says, 'Aye, but I've got £1,000 here.' They wouldn't believe me.¹⁷

Ian Oxley was involved in a novel way of putting cash in the strikers' coffers:

... one way of getting funds out of the trade union movement into the NUM's pockets was actually to hire Frickley Colliery Band. They would hire the band and pay £800. The £800 would go to the NUM, who would only pay expenses to the bandsmen - we'll say for instance £8, plus the hire of the bus, which would be £2-300. So clearly we could end up with £400 profit by sending the band to play for a trade union conference. We also used to go down and play for events in London. While the band was playing, we ... could always raise £200 in street collections on the day. We used to get paid £4 for our expenses, plus we got fed as part of the band, and quite often a local miners' support group would even provide cartons of wine. So your social life was part of the fund-raising as well.¹⁸

Breaking down prejudices

In such an atmosphere, sectionalism and long-held prejudices began to be challenged. 'Solidarity broke issues like racism down,' argues Paul Symonds:

Because you were in a struggle, it became apparent who your real enemy was. I remember being at the Miners [Institute] when this big van pulled up with food and there's two Sikhs with turbans in it, and they get out and they hand out this food. You just looked at the faces of some of the men who were there - most of

¹⁶ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

¹⁷ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

¹⁸ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

them had never seen a Sikh, never mind shook hands with one, never mind putting arms round them and hugging them. That's the sort of thing that solidarity really pulled into it. You'd got all sorts of people coming up to our clubs and socialising with miners, such as gay people. They didn't get beat up, called names or owt. They were made welcome, and it was because of that solidarity. It broke down one hell of a lot of barriers.¹⁹

The miners' struggle was also well supported in the colleges and universities, as Gary Hinchliffe and his mates found out when they were invited to address students:

We went up to Lancaster and up to York. At our own union meetings there would only be a handful of men turn up, but you got the impression that students' union meetings were big social events. There would be 1,500/2,000 in these students' union halls. And they were in their various groups. The Conservative's Monday Club would come in, and they would sit on their tables. And then you would have the anarchists, Socialist Workers' students, the Labour Party. Oh, it was bedlam . . . It was a big argument - it looked as if it was chaos to me - but by the time they'd finished debating amongst themselves, standing up and talking about things that had now to do with the strike, making jokes about everybody, they gave us a minibus . . . It was their activity bus . . . But to be honest, it'd done some miles, and it wasn't in very good condition.²⁰

By the end of the strike, an estimated £60 million had been raised by miners' support groups.²¹ No other strike in living memory had received aid to such an extent.

Coping with hardship

A distinguishing feature of the 1984-85 miners' strike was how from its very early stages women played an important and active role alongside their fathers, husbands and sons.²² Paul Foot has described how this activity helped to break down male chauvinism within the mining household:

In tradition and in fact, the miner had been the master in his home. The role of the miner's wife was to feed her man, bring up her children, and keep her mouth shut. Suddenly, in the most unlikely area, the ideas of women's liberation became reality. Whole communities were suddenly run by women. The strongest, most energetic and forceful of the support groups were made up, almost exclusively, of women. This led to new relationships in the community and in the home - to new uncertainties perhaps, but also to new respect.²³

¹⁹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²⁰ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²¹ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., p.127.

²² J. Stead, *Never the Same Again: Women and the Miners' Strike 1984-85*, (London, 1987), pp. 15 and 17; see also V. Seddon (ed.) *The Cutting Edge: Women and the Pit Strike*, (London, 1986).

²³ P. Foot, *Words as Weapons*, (London, 1990), p.148.

Digging in

What happened in the South Elmsall district was perhaps typical of what happened throughout the coalfields of Britain. During only the second week of the strike the Village Families Action Group was formed in Upton, and was soon followed by the Frickley Ladies Action Group (FLAG) in South Elmsall and the Community Meals Committee at South Kirkby:

The women of FLAG were soon distributing food parcels to single miners, from a base at the Miners' Institute in Moorthorpe, complemented by the meals given out at the Westfield Lane Social Centre. At Upton meals were provided on three days a week at the Welfare Hall, while at South Kirkby a marquee borrowed from the Boys' Brigade was being used as a food kitchen. The Frickley Kitchen Ladies began serving pie and peas within a few days of the start of the strike, and were soon providing 200 breakfasts and 400 dinners each day. By the end of the dispute the South Kirkby Meals committee had provided 124,000 meals for people in the village, as well as from South Elmsall, Hemsworth, Kinsley and Fitzwilliam.²⁴

A prolonged strike inevitably meant that the miners would have to endure much hardship and that life would be different from normal. Ray Riley remembers having little money coming in:

We relied on family, particularly my wife's family, who were excellent. You just got by, you didn't stop to think about where you would get your next meal from. It's a really difficult area of the strike. On a morning we used to go up to the food kitchen for breakfast sometimes, but your family wasn't allowed up - it was designed for miners, not their families. The idea behind this was that there would be one less mouth to feed at home. Then there were food parcels, but they were designed for single people, from what I can remember. Occasionally you got food vouchers for GT Smith's, a local supermarket. But largely you relied on your family. So if you didn't have a good family you were stuffed, basically.²⁵

For many miners, debt became a way of life. But there were ways round it, as Jeff Johnson explains:

You put all your bills in the hat, pulled some out and paid those that you can. Those that write to you and ask you for money, you write back and say, 'Look, this month I put you in the hat, but you didn't get pulled out. Now if you keep complaining, next month you'll not even go in the hat.' You knew that if the Electric Board, or the Gas Board even as so much as come into the village to cut people off, then word would get round and that van wouldn't get back out. There would be no way that anybody could be evicted or anything. We were all in

²⁴ Rusiecki, *The Plough and the Pick*, p.207.

²⁵ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

Digging in

the same boat and we were all standing together. We all had debts and bills to pay.²⁶

He tells of how the strikers' financial circumstances passed through a number of stages. Initially, they were used to a particular standard of living:

You're used to buying food, going out for beer, socialising, buying clothes, going on holidays - the world's your oyster. Then over about a six week period, and there's nowt coming in, you see your savings go, your holiday money, your Christmas money. You're trying not to spend owt. Then you get to a point where you've still got some brass left but everything's just eking away, and you think: 'Bloody hell, I'm not going to have anything left.' Then that day finally comes - so you've nowt to worry about. People were quite jovial about it: 'How much do you owe?' 'Five hundred, a thousand, two thousand, three thousand. There's nowt you can do about it. When we go back to work we'll pay our bills and until then they'll just have to bloody whistle.'²⁷

Particularly hard hit were single miners, such as Robert Walker, who were denied social security payments during the dispute:

They paid me fuck-all at the social, so I stopped at my mam's. My mam was doing me one meal a day. I was getting her mass coal for the fire, and I was selling mass coal to get myself a few beers. I'd go up to my girl-friend's, I'd have some dinner up there, and when I came back from picketing I'd be up at the soup kitchen, have my breakfast . . . So I wasn't too badly off. There were a lot of people worse off than me; them with kids.²⁸

Frickley NUM were well aware that the most hard-pressed miners were likely to become strikebreakers in the future and so there were efforts to counter this possibility. 'A large body of people were involved in debt counselling,' says Ian Oxley:

ringing people that were getting evicted from their houses, ringing their mortgage companies up and negotiating with them to suspend their payment. People were losing their cars . . . we had to keep people on electric. Say you owed £150, the electric company would not cut you off. They'd let you owe £150, providing you paid an average of £4 a week. The union then paid that £4 a week. It was the same with the gas.²⁹

For many striking activists, scraping enough money together to go for a drink was crucial, as Jeff Johnson recalls:

²⁶ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

²⁷ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

²⁸ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

²⁹ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

Digging in

You used to get paid £1 a day picketing money. If you went twice you got 2 quid, and three times 3 quid. You'd scrape and scrape. You'd go out with a fiver on a Sunday night - normally you'd have gone out with fifteen or twenty quid - and you'd take some change home. People used to buy out-of-date ten-gallon barrels of cider and beer and drop it off at the Empire Club, take it in the back field, knock the top off and then it was all free from then on.³⁰

Money may have been tight, but the Big Strike was a period almost of celebration in the local social clubs, as Robert Walker reflects:

It was brilliant. It was in the Empire because they kept the price of beer down to fifty pence. The Niggers, that was cheap - I think that was only about fifty pence. On a Sunday night it was brilliant in the Empire. It used to get choc-a-block. And when the band got down everybody would be singing: 'We hate Thatcher!' 'Maggie out!' People would be on their chairs singing all the picketing songs. It was just brilliant.³¹

Pilfering

One area of the strike that was downplayed by the miners' supporters at the time was the question of pilfering to relieve some of the hardship. Jeff Johnson's priority when he went picketing was:

. . . to always try to bring something back, such as a cabbage, or a bag of potatoes, carrots, apples or whatever we'd pillaged on our way about . . . If we went picketing at Notts pits we used to break into the pit yards and fill car boots full of coal or owt that would burn.³²

Poaching and stealing from farmers' fields were effective ways of putting food onto kitchen tables. After Orgreave Gary Hinchliffe became weary of travelling into Nottinghamshire and so volunteered to picket Drax power station which proved to be a good location for booty:

We used to go and set a few snares for rabbits, and plunder farmers' fields - because there's a lot of market gardening over there. They had their vegetable crops in the middle of cornfields. You couldn't see in the middle of them because of the height of the corn. But with walking around, up and down the lines looking for rabbits, we were dropping on cabbage fields, cauliflowers, carrots, lettuce, and potatoes. So it was a good base to help yourself to a few fresh vegetables. I remember one farmer going absolutely berserk. By the time that it got to August/September, he'd a field with potatoes, but you could see that they were all dug up.³³

³⁰ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

³¹ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

³² Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

³³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

There were other necessities that could be pilfered too, as Ian Oxley explains:

... one of my many tasks was going round to people's houses and frigging their electric meters. It's a mere matter of removing a link. I used to alter the electric so that say they were using a few electrical items in the house, the meter was moving slowly. I, on average, used around £60 a quarter on electric, and my bill for a full year was about £120 . . . Also, there were many ways of tampering with gas meters. If you uncoupled the unions of your gas meter, reversed it so that the meter was facing the wall, your meter actually went backwards. It's hard to believe that something as simple as that works. If people had 'blow' on their vacuum cleaners, they could wind the clock back on their gas meters.³⁴

A whole black economy developed in mining communities to bypass the problems of hardship. Men would do odd-jobs for money, some even left the striking areas seeking illicit employment for the duration of the dispute. Local household tips would be scoured by strikers and their families sieving waste for scraps of coal. But through such means, illicit or otherwise, the mining communities hung on.

Commando raids

In the wake of Orgreave, the government and the NCB, believing that the strike was only being held solid by the intimidation of the majority of miners by a militant minority, sensed that the strike could be broken if a surge back to work was instigated. Thus, there was a succession of police invasions of Yorkshire mining villages during the summer of 1984. On 9 July there were pitched battles at Rossington, south of Doncaster, when word spread through the neighbourhood that three strikebreakers were to be brought into the local pit. And that same evening there was a night of street fighting at Fitzwilliam, just six miles north of South Elmsall, after squads of police descended on the village pub to arrest a young Labour Party activist, allegedly suspected of vandalism.³⁵ These battles not only showed how the police could lay siege to striking mining communities, but were also examples of how the miners could fight back.

Given this situation, it is hardly surprising that when an opportunity arose for the active strikers to 'get their own back', they would do so in a dramatic way. On Thursday 9 August the lead article in *The Guardian* reported that:

Police have accused the National Union of Mineworkers of organising violence after 'commando-style raids' on two pits and the coal board's Doncaster offices on Tuesday night . . . about 1,000 men, according to the police, smashed canteen windows and damaged working miners' cars at Harworth. Another raid at Silverhill left 18 cars damaged, and all the NCB office windows smashed. At Doncaster about 150 men drove into the grounds of the NCB area headquarters. According to a board spokesman they began kicking windows and throwing stones and bricks at the building. About £2,000 worth of damage was done.³⁶

³⁴ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

³⁵ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., pp.159-164.

³⁶ *The Guardian*, 9 August 1984.

Digging in

Far from being organised by the NUM, the raids that day were spontaneous affairs. Ian Oxley was one of the many Frickley miners involved and argues that the roots of the action lay in how pickets were tired of being hoodwinked by the police, who would become surprisingly friendly if they were massively outnumbered by miners on a picket line, but would become hostile as soon as reinforcements arrived. At Silverhill on 7 August, there were '200 of us and six of them,' he recalls:

The lads decided: 'Why wait here to get our heads split. Let's get on with it, give them some hell, and get in our cars and go before the main vans arrive.' So the police were in the pit car park, unloading and getting themselves organised, when the lads went on a bit of a riot, for want of a better word. They ran up to the pit yard and they bricked the police, so the police had to scatter into their vans. And then they systematically pumped every car that was in the car park at the pit. Then we went down the street and we put every window through in the canteen, the general offices, the main offices. And then somebody had the sense to say, 'Right lads, quick, come on, get in your cars and get gone.' And as we were going, about 100 yards away there was one car pulled up, and he was shouting, 'On your way back lads, call in at Howarth' . . . When we gets to Howarth - the same there: four bobbies, a little gate house. Well, the lads were in a right mood by this time and they didn't mess about. Again, we kicked the cars in, did the windows, did the canteen, did the little security guard windows in, chased the bobbies all over - because there were only four. They had to run into the pit yard and hide. Again, sensibly, we jumped into our cars and left. Brilliant. And some idiot again was shouting, 'Let's call at Coal House in Doncaster,' this is the main office block. And, think on now, we'd started at twelve o'clock, it's now three o'clock. So we all turns up at Coal House in Doncaster. Think on, just at the back of Coal House is the law courts and the main police station. It's not really that good an idea. But we calls there, and we are arriving in spits and spats. And, obviously, being so close to the main police station, they did get about fifty bobbies out. And they got a line of about fifty bobbies in front of the law courts. There's an Irish centre at the opposite side, and I was stood there watching, and somebody shouted, 'Come on, let's get them bricked.' Again, we pumped all the windows through . . . we all went back to our pits and we'd be telling the tale in the clubs about how we'd knocked fuck out of them, for want of a better word - we'd given them hell, we've hammered some bobbies, we've done the scabs' cars, and we'd done the offices at two pits and the Coal House. A lovely day. The best day I've ever had as far as creating damage and mayhem.³⁷

There was, though, a final twist in the story: 'We comes to picket the next day, at the normal time in the Miners, four o'clock - where are they sending us? Howarth . . . and of course the police were waiting for us - thousands and thousands of police. They were obviously going to have some blood no matter what pit we went to.'³⁸ Fifty-nine Yorkshire miners were arrested at Harworth on the Wednesday night,

³⁷ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

³⁸ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

mostly on charges of unlawful assembly and threatening behaviour. A further six strikers were charged in connection with the incidents of the previous night.³⁹ Jeff Johnson was one of those arrested and saw the police's retaliation at close hand:

This bigwig from the Notts police force, I can't remember his name, came down and told us we were all bastards and swines and that we ought to stay in Yorkshire. And all these bobbies had got their truncheons out and I honestly believe to this day that their intention was to beat holy hell out of us in a place where nobody could see them. A lot of the other lads that were there with us were under the same impression. So it was a case of 'Get ready'. But, as it happened, a bus turned up full of construction workers who were working on these buildings and they went about their work and all the truncheons went back then. Then we were made to stand for about two or three hours while they brought some transport and took us off to another field, where we had to be photographed. I'd not been charged or anything and it was in the *Yorkshire Miner* that if you are not charged for anything you do not have to have your photograph taken or fingerprints . . . and I thought to myself: 'They're not taking my photograph,' and other miners were saying the same. Anyway they took the first lad up. He was from Askern pit. He said that he was not having his photograph taken. He was in a seat at the side of a table, so this bobby just got hold of a handful of his hair and smashed his face on the table and burst all his nose and mouth open. And after that we all got in the queue and had our photographs taken.⁴⁰

'Voice of the majority'?

In an effort to co-ordinate strikebreaking activities, opponents of the strike from all the coalfields met in London in late July and early August, and eventually founded the National Working Miners' Committee. Behind much of this activity was David Hart, a property developer and special adviser to Margaret Thatcher. Prominent business figures, such as Sir Hector Laing of United Biscuits and Lord Taylor of Taylor Woodrow also rallied round with financial support for court cases against the NUM.⁴¹

The activities of anti-strike miners and their message was given such prominence in the press that there was little surprise when anti-strike posters began to appear on walls and lampposts in South Elmsall and Hemsworth in the middle of August, put up by a shadowy organisation describing itself as 'VOM',⁴² meaning 'Voice of the Majority', suggests Jeff Johnson:

They saw themselves as the majority that wanted to go back to work, and I suppose people like me were stopping them and we were in the minority. How that works out I don't know. They blitzed Elmsall bus station and Hemsworth

³⁹ *The Guardian*, 9 August 1984.

⁴⁰ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁴¹ Adeney and Lloyd, *op. cit.*, pp.163-169; Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.166; Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, pp.174-175.

⁴² Rusiecki, *op. cit.*, pp.213-214.

Digging in

market with stickers and all sorts of daubings: 'We hate Scargill' and Christ knows what. So we knew it was going off. We knew it had been started in other areas. We knew it was going to happen here, and we knew who was doing it. But there wasn't a great deal we could do about it - apart from catch them.⁴³

In September VOM struck again, this time with graffiti on the side of a South Kirkby tip that declared in 30ft high letters 'Back to Work. VOM.'⁴⁴

When they did the lime painting on Kirkby tips, I was told the next day by a bloke that he thought it was somebody rabbiting. But he couldn't understand why there were so many pit-cap lamps - once you're a miner you can tell a pit lamp because of the way it bobbles about. And I said, 'Why, did you see it?' And he said, 'Aye, there were about a dozen up there with cap lamps on, with spades cutting it out and I saw they had stone dust bags.' Stone dust is a limestone-based dust they use down the pit to stop explosions. So the lamps were provided by the pit, the equipment was provided by the pit, and I've actually been told that there were police at the bottom of the tips to stop anybody going up to see who was up there and what was going off. Now I wasn't there, I didn't see it myself, but that's what I was told. So it was organised. Organised by specific people - none of them actually worked at the pit - local politicians, local community policemen and local businessmen. They were the people doing it.⁴⁵

There was a deep suspicion amongst many Frickley activists that strikebreaking was being organised in a South Elmsall club. 'They had secret meetings in the Pretoria to go back,' says Tony Short:

the Pretoria was always known as a right-wing club. All those who were on the top money at the pit used to go in. There were one or two lads who were stood at the side of them in the bar and heard their wives say, 'Aye, he's going back in on Monday.' He probably wasn't, but you had to make sure that he wasn't. So we discreetly put two or three people outside where he lived, sat in a car a few hundred yards away.⁴⁶

Steve Gant recalls that Geoff Siddons, the Frickley NUM branch secretary, was involved in a skirmish in the same club:

There were definitely rumours coming about those who drank in the lounge in the Pretoria, that they were on about going back and organising a bit of a crew to cross the picket lines up at Frickley. There was hell on that night. I wasn't in, but I know that Geoff had got his coat off. He was ready for battling with a couple of them.⁴⁷

⁴³ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁴ Rusiecki, *op. cit.*, p.214.

⁴⁵ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁶ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁷ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

Robert Walker remembers being stunned by what one of his workmates told him as fears grew about strikebreaking:

I was once in the soup kitchen, and there was Nobby Clark, who used to be a bit of a militant before the strike. During the strike nobody had seen owt of him. He went in the soup kitchen one day; there were a few of the lads there who we used to knock about with. I said, 'What's up with you?' 'I've been going to these back-to-work meetings,' he said, 'but the union knows about it. I'm spying on them.' Well, we were stunned, because nobody had heard about it. Nobody saw him again. We went to the union, and the union had heard nowt about it. Anyway, after the strike he becomes a copper, doesn't he?⁴⁸

Though Ray Riley was aware that 'there were forces at play' who were trying to organise miners to break the strike, he says that the strikers at Frickley:

... didn't place too much emphasis on strikebreaking in our particular area because we were quite solid, September/October time we were still relatively solid. We were aware of the movements in the Selby coalfield to get people back to work. But in relation to Frickley, we were one hundred per cent solid then and we saw no reason why that should change. But we were woken from our lethargy.⁴⁹

The breach opens

A second round of confrontation outside Yorkshire pits began in late August when a handful of scabs were forced through picket lines. On 22 August, miners occupied pit yards and built barricades at three Doncaster pits, Bentley, Yorkshire Main and Armthorpe. In mid-September there were major battles at Kiveton Park and Maltby. During October the police assault on the mining communities gathered pace. The most noted being that at Grimethorpe, about five miles north-west of South Elmsall, where men, women and children searching for coal on a nearby tip were attacked by police kitted out in riot gear. A guerrilla war ensued in the village for the following two days.⁵⁰

Evidently the Coal Board hoped that the few scabs crossing the picket lines would act as a magnet to other miners who were dissatisfied with the strike. The campaign was matched by an increasing spate of arrests and violence by the police in a bid to remove the leading activists from the forefront of the dispute and, at the same time, frighten previously passive miners who were thinking of joining picket lines as the conflict neared their own pits. In fact, although almost 6,500 miners had been detained by September, the exact opposite to what the government desired

⁴⁸ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁹ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁰ Goodman, *The Miners' Strike*, pp.79-86; Samuel et al., *The Enemy Within*, pp.119-121; *Yorkshire Miner*, November 1984.

tended to happen. The knowledge of a single scab entering a pit brought many previously inactive miners onto the picket lines.⁵¹

NACODS

The government was confident it could beat the miners so long as other unions could be prevented from coming to the miners' aid with sympathetic industrial action.⁵² This was boosted with the collapse of the second dock strike on 18 September. However, just afterwards another unexpected issue arose which promised to swing the balance towards the NUM.

On 15 August the NCB informed the deputies' union, NACODS, that their members would be expected to go into work to supervise miners who broke the strike - at the time they were getting paid even though they were refusing to cross NUM picket lines. The issue stretched on through September into October, but the stakes were raised when 82 per cent of NACODS members voted in favour of strike action to counter the Coal Board's demands. NACODS members, being responsible for safety in coal mines, were in a key position and even Nottinghamshire pits would be forced to close if they took strike action. Recognising the danger, the NCB entered into negotiations with the NACODS leadership, the TUC and ACAS, the arbitration service. As the talks faltered, NACODS called a strike for 24 October. However, with less than 24 hours to go, the strike was suddenly called off because NACODS leaders were satisfied with the NCB's assurance that deputies would continue to be paid and that the existing colliery review procedure would be amended by the creation of an independent review body.⁵³

The NACODS deal was a bitter blow for the NUM. Gary Hinchliffe was one of many striking miners who had high hopes in the deputies:

When they got that high vote I was certain that McNestry would use it. I think we'd been somewhere, me, Gant and Jip [Paul Symonds], and then suddenly it was over. It came on a news bulletin that the strike was over. We went down to the Empire. People just seemed to come flocking in. You'd been convinced that the deputies were going to come out. And then we were moaning, 'We could have had them. If the deputies had come out for a month we could have beat them.' But it was obvious that they'd gone in for a compromise.⁵⁴

A common argument among the strikers was that the miners should not have put faith in NACODS anyway, that the deputies' union had always ridden on the back of the NUM. Ray Riley, however, insists that the size of the vote for action made matters different on this occasion:

They've always been relatively isolated, to a degree, from industrial troubles. Perhaps there was only one occasion when Frickley deputies threatened to come

⁵¹ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, pp.171-175.

⁵² Goodman, *op. cit.*, p.135.

⁵³ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, pp.149-152; Goodman, *op. cit.*, p.144; Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, pp.194-195.

⁵⁴ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

on strike in all the time I was there. But you can't ignore the fact that 80-odd per cent voted to come out on strike. So you could say that argument about never trusting deputies doesn't quite wash. Local issues, local strikes at Frickley you couldn't trust deputies because you knew full well that they wouldn't support you . . . But there's no doubt that NACODS leadership sold their members down the river.⁵⁵

Gary Hurst remembers how significant the NACODS deal was for him at the time:

. . . when they didn't back us then, that was the end for me. I think then you knew that we were never going to win. I think that was the final straw. How long had we been out? Over six months then, hadn't we? Yes, at that time, I thought: 'That's it.' It didn't stop me going picketing or owt like that, or trying, but I think everybody more or less knew then.⁵⁶

The Moses Plan

Once the NACODS question had been sorted, the government saw the road clear for a sustained offensive against the NUM, confident that it could starve the miners into returning to work. On 25 October 1984, Mr Justice Nicholls ordered the sequestration of the NUM's assets for refusing to co-operate with earlier High Court rulings.⁵⁷ On 31 October talks between the NUM and the NCB collapsed. Immediately the Board initiated a fresh campaign to encourage strikebreaking by offering miners a £650 Christmas bonus and holiday pay if they returned to work by 19 November. In a bid to stress the futility of the miners' fight, Energy Secretary Peter Walker announced that coal stocks were enough to last out the coming winter.⁵⁸

By now the NCB had developed a strategy for rolling back the miners' strike: the Moses Plan, named after its architect, the NCB's North Derbyshire Area director Ken Moses. Just as the NUM had used the domino strategy to spread the strike, the NCB aimed to push it back from its peripheries. Management teams began contacting miners who lived outside the immediate vicinity of mining villages and those known to be hostile to the strike or suffering severe financial difficulties. Once a small group of miners in a locality had expressed a willingness to break the strike, arrangements were made for them to cross the picket lines by armoured bus.⁵⁹

Paul Symonds became aware of the Coal Board's strategy at a *Socialist Worker* meeting. He remembers it was recommended that:

We should make our own Moses Plan, that we put a pin in a map where everybody lives, and make sure that somebody goes out and visits those people who live on the outskirts. We needed to make sure they haven't had their electric cut off; ask them if they want to get involved in collecting or picketing; ask them

⁵⁵ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁶ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁷ Adeney and Lloyd, op. cit., pp.172-173; Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., p.184.

⁵⁸ Goodman, op. cit., pp.151-152.

⁵⁹ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., p.185; Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., p.177.

when was the last time they'd had a food parcel, and do they know when the next union meeting is? We said that we'd do that.⁶⁰

Subsequently he brought this counter-plan to the attention of a branch meeting but unexpectedly ran into opposition:

I proposed it at the meeting - and it was virulently argued against by the branch officials, Geoff Siddons and the others. They said that no way were we going to go round other people's houses, harassing them. There wasn't just me, there was a group of us who argued why we had to do this. We wanted to keep our pit solid and this is what we were going to have to do - but the people who kept the names and addresses of people who worked at the pit were the union officials. So, one, we needed access to those names and addresses, and two, we needed money for the cars to able to go round visiting people. And we won that in the meeting. We actually won it. They hated it on the top table. And that, in my recollection, is the first time that the top table had been overturned at Frickley. Frickley had always been a loyal union pit, and that meant that whatever the union officials said went as well . . . And though they'd lost it, they still wouldn't give us the names and addresses and petrol money, so we were fucked anyway. But that would have been our strategy for preventing people going back to work.⁶¹

Although by late October the Moses Plan had shown little sign of success in Yorkshire, where few miners had returned to work, in adjacent North Derbyshire a serious rupture was becoming apparent. In November though, it proved to be Yorkshire's turn. At Frickley it would lead to one of the most violent clashes of the strike, as the strikers used every means at their disposal to prevent any of their number breaking ranks.

⁶⁰ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁶¹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE BATTLE OF 13 NOVEMBER

The rumour factory

The first attempt to break the strike at Frickley was not made until the early hours of Tuesday 13 November 1984, over eight months into the dispute. According to the *Yorkshire Post*:

... pickets used roof timbers and scaffolding from partly built bungalows ... to build barricades to stop the first four miners returning to work ... Police said 40 policemen and a police horse were injured when up to 600 miners ambushed them from side streets close to the village centre. South Elmsall saw the worst of yesterday's coalfield troubles. Petrol bombs, which failed to ignite, were thrown at the police in riot gear, and several of their vehicles were damaged, but the police managed to get the four strike-breaking miners back to work.¹

By the end of October it was apparent that the strike had become a war of attrition in which both sides were evenly matched and neither showed signs of surrender. Though the TUC had done nothing of note to assist the NUM since its conference, there was still a possibility that the miners could win if power workers refused to handle coal from pit-head stocks. The strike was also proving a costly burden to the government both in direct costs and through its effect on the wider economy. Even so, this was certainly not a time for over-optimism on the strikers' part, given the financial strain after eight months without pay.

In the first week of November the NCB began a sustained campaign to break the strike, and claimed that nationally 2,100 men had crossed the picket lines for the first time.² Although these were only a small fraction of those still out, the advent of the 'November push' was obviously intended to dent the strikers' morale. According to Johnny Stones, the South Elmsall district 'was a rumour factory' around this time. 'We used to be stopping rumours day after day, 20 times a day.'³ There had been stories circulating about 'somebody working at Kirkby for a long time,' says Gary Hinchliffe, 'but there was nobody working.'⁴ Nevertheless, as Ian Oxley illustrates, evidence was mounting that the NCB would soon attempt to ferry strikebreakers into Frickley for the first time:

Things had been building up for a week that there were going to be scabs up at Frickley. We had seen an increased police presence in the village and up at the pit. We kept the pit under surveillance. We used to get people to walk their dogs on what they call 'the curtilage' of the pit on a night time, and they would let us know if anything unusual was happening inside the pit. We would go onto the pit site if we wanted to pinch anything, so we were aware of how many police are normally based at the pit. The normal amount would be three or four - and only on days. On nights there would be nobody there. We kept a picket there 24 hours

¹ *Yorkshire Post*, 14 November 1984.

² Callinicos and Simons, *The Great Strike*, p.188.

³ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁴ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

The battle of 13 November

a day, and the police would just drive up every now and then, chat to you, and go. But all of a sudden, there's three or four policemen there 24 hours a day. Then you see that they've got police up in the gaffers' offices. They actually used the personnel manager's office and that was kitted out as a rest room for the police. There was always a van parked up. Clearly an expense when there's no scabs in and no serious picketing going off - it was suspicious.⁵

Gary Hinchliffe remembers one false alarm, when the strikers amassed in the streets waiting for the scabs' arrival:

. . . there were people everywhere, every street corner, outside every newsagent's. It was just like that scene where everybody knew each other in *The Great Escape*, and they all pretended that they didn't know each other.⁶

On the morning of Monday 12 November, pits in the vicinity of South Elmsall and South Kirkby saw miners breaking the strike for the very first time. Gary Hurst remembers turning up at the Miners' Institute that morning expecting to be instructed to go to Frickley:

But when we got to the Miners it turned out not to be Frickley but Kirkby. And so we all went up Kirkby, built our barricades and things like that. I don't know whether anybody went through at Kirkby that day, but there were a lot of police there. They forced us back from the main entrance and there was quite a lot of disturbance up there. Setting these industrial dustbins on fire and shoving them down.⁷

Seven men were reported to have returned at South Kirkby that morning and six others at Grimethorpe a few miles to the west.⁸ There could be little doubt now that Frickley would be the next target.

Westfield Lane

By Monday evening preparations were already under way to combat the police invasion of South Elmsall that was expected at some point during the night. One of the first strikers on the scene was Jeff Johnson, who had a particular role to play:

As well as a picket I was also a 'spotter' - I had a 750 motor bike. Spotters used to turn up for picketing two hours early. There'd be half a dozen of us on high-powered motor bikes - the union branch knew about it - and we'd say: 'I'll go down the Common End and look around Broddy pit, you go to Askern, you go to Kirkby, you go to Nostell' - depending on how many of us there were . . . There'd be convoys of Maria vans. The idea then was to latch onto the convoy, find out where it was headed, and come back, so that our pickets could be sent

⁵ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

⁶ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁷ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

⁸ Rusiecki, *The Plough and the Pick*, p.220.

there . . . the more experienced of us knew that the next pit to go was Frickley, and that it would be Frickley the next night where it would start up.⁹

Just as in 1926, the main confrontations would take place on Westfield Lane, the main route to Frickley Colliery. The road starts as a turn off from Barnsley Road, the shopping centre of South Elmsall, and goes up a hill for about three-quarters of a mile. At the top of the hill the road forks. The left fork came to an end about 100 yards ahead at the entrance to Frickley Colliery. The right turning, Broad Lane, continues down hill and some three hundred yards later passed the landsale entrance to Frickley Colliery. Immediately after this, the road crosses the Sheffield to York/Leeds railway line, passes the last houses of South Elmsall and then goes into the countryside until about a mile and a half further on it finally reaches Common Road in South Kirkby, almost opposite the Old Mill Hotel. Being the alternative to the main route between South Kirkby and South Elmsall, the road is often referred to as 'the back lane'. Any police convoy to the pit could be expected to approach the pit from either end of the lane.

Barricades and bricks

Though most of the night's main action didn't occur until after midnight, there were some incidents late on Monday evening. Tony Short had been on the streets since ten o'clock after news spread that convoys of police were in the area. After visiting the picket line at the pit, he and a group of about fifty other miners marched down Westfield Lane where they came across 'two big rows of riot cops.' A scuffle erupted, but:

There were too many of them and so they backed us all the way down Carlton Road, down to the Asda. We ended up shoving all the Asda trolleys into the middle of the road. They got us onto the Asda car park. I could see all their helmets bobbing as they were coming round the back of the doctors' surgeries, from the ginnel off Little Lane. They split us up. There were only about ten of us left, and they chased us through Elm Estate, over the iron bridge. And as we got over the iron bridge, Black Marias came through that estate there towards where the football fields are, so we had to run down diagonally across the field and then run through the dike at the bottom. It was November, it was freezing!¹⁰

Skirmishes such as this would occur throughout the night. In the meantime, as word spread throughout the locality, the number of miners on the streets increased. Rather than going to bed, Steve Gant had slept downstairs that night: 'I heard a knock on the window at about three o'clock Tuesday morning. It was Mark Thompson. He'd been mooching about all night. He says, "It's definitely on. They are going into Frickley. There are cops all over." There had been running battles since about one o'clock.'¹¹ Once informed, the strikers were asked to congregate at

⁹ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

¹⁰ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

¹¹ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

The battle of 13 November

the Miners' Institute in Moorthorpe. 'There were about two or three hundred lads there, maybe more,' when Steve Gant arrived:

And it was announced off the stage that we'd definitely got scabs going in that morning. They didn't know how many. They'd got Ginty Carr's name. Dicky Nailor says, 'They're up at the pit, there's police throughout the village, I've told you all the information, it's up to you lot now. Try to stop them!' Dicky was sound enough.¹²

The crowd of miners charged down Barnsley Road as far as South Elmsall Library and then took the right turning up Carlton Road, which joins Westfield Lane. 'Just as we were going up the hill,' recalls Steve Gant:

there were two or three lines of police across the road, against the Niggers club, with shields and all that. We spotted them, they were about a hundred yards away, 'Fucking hell, they are here.' They weren't there long! Somebody just said, 'Get the bastards,' and that was it, everybody just ran at them and they just turned and ran off. I think one got left at the back; he took a right pasting. They left him did the rest of them. We ended up running from there up to the top of Valley Street, just before the shops.¹³

This was perfect terrain for the miners. A new school and bungalows were under construction along the upper part of Carlton Road and round the corner into Westfield Lane. Over £3,000 worth of damage was caused on the site as miners looted scaffolding, batten boards and scrap metal to build barricades and bricks to hurl at the police.¹⁴ Gary Hurst remembers the scene:

... everybody was stood on that building site, the police vans are coming down the road, screaming in second gear as usual, policemen jumping out of the vans *en masse*. It was just like a scene with Roman soldiers when they all put their shields up to stop all the mass of arrows coming over and hitting them on the head. It was just like that, but with bricks. The bobbies jumped out of the vans and it was just as if somebody had said: 'Right, fire!' It was just bricks raining down on them. They didn't even try running up the banking towards us when they saw what they were getting; it was just straight back into the van, put it into reverse and out of the road. It was the same with the horses; they tried coming down with horses. They must've thought that there would be a bit of sympathy about hitting animals, but they got bricked the same.¹⁵

Throughout the night there was wave after wave of police attempts to clear the road and shift the miners from their stronghold on the building site. Gary Hinchliffe recalls how one particular police offensive was rebuffed:

¹² Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

¹³ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

¹⁴ Rusiecki, *op. cit.*, p.220.

¹⁵ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

I can remember this police patrol vehicle. It pulled up to where we were congregated. The back doors opened as it pulled up. The van changed shape in front of your eyes. There must've been two to three hundred people there, all armed up with wall-bricks. And nobody ran. Everybody just pelted this van with wall-bricks. And it changed shape. And in about three seconds the doors pulled shut, and it drove off.¹⁶

Throughout the morning the battle would switch to different locations on Westfield Lane. For a while the epicentre was at the junction with Barnsley Road, when word spread amongst the pickets that the scabs were gathered in the car park of either the Chequers Inn or the Plough Inn. After trying to push their way through the police ranks, Ian Oxley says the pickets decided not to risk arrest and so reverted to throwing missiles:

. . . what the lads noticed was that when the police lifted their riot shields up, their legs and ankles, even though they're protected, are now vulnerable. So basically, a group of about a dozen went down armed with little wallers, half a dozen threw at the faces of the policemen, the riot shields shot up, and the other half of the group threw their bricks at their legs. It was brilliant, where I was stood, just to watch them. One by one, the police were limping out of the lines.¹⁷

With the threatening presence of the snatch squad in the vicinity, the pickets retreated back to the building site. It was then that pickets decided to put a piece of equipment off the building site, normally used to convey tiles up to roofs, to good use. Ian Oxley was among those who commandeered the contraption:

It has two wheels on it, and you can balance it on the two wheels and drive it like a battering ram. They were manoeuvring it out of the school work area onto this piece of waste ground. Anyway, they've got it moving and they're shouting, 'Come on, give us a hand with this.' So I went over and I got hold of it, and they're saying, 'Aye, we're going to send this down at the bastards.' So I'm on it, and we're walking nice and slowly with it, learning the balancing point of this piece of machinery, and I don't know who started it off, but one of the lads . . . started giving it the old: 'Zigger zagger, zigger zagger, huh, huh, huh,' which sends a shiver through your spine. You just felt like you were an African Zulu charging into battle. Your confidence was running, you were part of a tribe, we were going into battle. And my imagination is now playing wonders on me . . . I'm visualising the fear on the policemen's faces. I can see in my eye the old bobbies there as this battering ram's running over them, punching through them.

So we sets off, and as we're passing people they say, 'Oh, it's a good idea,' and they're jumping on, and I'd say we got about fifty around us. Not everybody could hold it, but just touching you to be part of the battering ram. At about five or ten metres from the police lines I bailed out. I always liked to give myself a bit

¹⁶ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

¹⁷ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

of a start on the younger lads when it comes to a run, because clearly, when this goes whizzing through the bobbies I expect some reaction from them. Other lads stayed with it for another five metres, but even they didn't steer it to the last second. But it did go straight for the police line, as I had envisaged, and everybody else had envisaged, and the police, at the very last minute, opened their line and pulled back, and it went straight through them.¹⁸

Street-fighting

A major shift in the battle took place when the police deliberately enticed the pickets towards the pit, away from their stronghold on the building site. Gary Hinchliffe recalls what happened next:

... as soon as we got up near the Westfield Hotel we got into a confrontation. There were riot police coming back down the road again then. I can remember running down to where the allotments are - it was either Victor Street or Oxford Street. I remember running down there, and getting into an argument. They'd closed the end of the road off; they had us all pinned down the side streets then. I remember Tony Cork shouting at this police officer, 'If you are so good, take your helmet off, and your visor and everything, and come on, we'll have it out.' This copper started stripping off and they set off to have a fight, and I said, 'Tony don't, because he'll just hold you.' Anyway, Tony set off walking towards them, and they all came chasing after us. And we kind of sucked them down to the bottom where it's dark and split up into the alleys. They got split up and we came round the back of them. We realised then what was happening. They were trying to pin us down the side streets so that they could fetch the scabs up Westfield Lane.¹⁹

But it soon became evident that the police were no match for the pickets in the back streets of South Elmsall, as Ray Riley recollects:

... there were just running battles - skirmishes. Stones, catapults, barricades, fireworks - I think a quantity of fireworks were actually stolen from the local fireworks factory - people setting off rockets because there were police horses there. It was like Northern Ireland and the pictures that you see on the television - running battles. One thing that was amusing, I suppose not at the time but later: the police didn't have a clue where they were. They didn't know South Elmsall, they didn't know the back streets, they didn't know the escape routes. They took quite a hiding did the police.²⁰

Eventually, the pickets forced the police to retreat out of Oxford Street and Victor Street and back onto Westfield Lane. Gary Hinchliffe remembers that the police re-grouped and formed a large circle near the recreation ground:

¹⁸ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

¹⁹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁰ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

The battle of 13 November

But they were just getting bricked from everywhere. And they were getting frustrated. They kept wanting to break and charge. Then somebody would shout for them to hold their positions. And for some stupid reason they went charging off, through the rec', into the field. Their ranks broke, so they must've been getting bricked from that side as well as from out of Victor Street and Oxford Street. They got routed. They got a real battering.²¹

The reason the police were being routed was that even away from their base on building site, the pickets were still managing to get a supply of missiles:

Really heavy bricks were getting thrown at them. People were just coming up the side streets with dustbin lids full of bricks, putting them on the road, and going back down and getting some more. They'd got like a conveyer belt of them.²²

Ian Oxley explains where the supply of bricks came from: 'people had got hold of seven-pound hammers and they were actually knocking people's walls down - and the people didn't mind.'²³ The people in the locality rallied round the pickets in other ways too, as Paul Symonds recalls:

You had old women in night gowns coming out telling us where the police were. They'd be shouting out of their windows and leaving their doors open. Everybody had a common enemy that morning - and it was the coppers.²⁴

Robert Walker recalls an odd incident where one local resident asked the pickets to do him a favour during the disturbances:

I don't know who he was, he just popped out and shouted to the lads, 'Hey up. Do us an insurance job on my car, will you?' So we just torched it for him. We'd get the blame for doing it, but the bloke was happy and we were happy. We got it in the middle of the road and set fire to it.²⁵

The pickets continued to push the police further up Westfield Lane, towards the pit. Gary Hurst remembers how 'there was hell on' near Broad Lane School:

I can remember some lads sneaking round Gordon Place, climbing over the wall into the cricket ground, going more or less up the side of the bobbies, but behind the concrete wall, and then, just like a Trojan Horse-type thing, standing up and just pelting the bobbies with bricks and then running straight across the cricket field. The bobbies were finding it difficult to climb over the high concrete fencing

²¹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²³ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

²⁴ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

The battle of 13 November

and get after them. So the lads never even got caught. They used to have these big searchlights. They could see them but they couldn't do owt.²⁶

On the opposite side of the road, in the recreation ground, mounted police officers also ran into difficulties when they pursued miners across the bowling green. 'Nobody had told them that it dipped,' explains Robert Walker:

they were going down like flies. We knew that it dipped. They just came charging at us across the bowling green, and as it dips down onto that putting green, they were just dropping. And then we were just coming back with bricks. Because they didn't know the crack. They were all cockneys, most of them. We knew where we were going. So we were egging them on to go places where we knew that we could hammer them. They just got hammered.²⁷

He recalls that as the action got nearer to the pit:

. . . we were knocking lampposts down and making little barricades. The coppers had their lights on us, but every time there was a light everybody aimed at it. It would go down on the floor, and then some other slack bastard would pick it up. They were picking all the ringleaders out, but everybody was a ringleader. All the Frickley men were there. All them who went picketing turned out, it was just unbelievable . . . There were people there who you'd never seen picketing before. People who had never worked at the pit were there. 'We're not having these bastards in our village,' that was the main thing.²⁸

BACM

Perhaps the most violent episode that morning occurred when a convoy of police vans forced its way up Westfield Lane followed by vehicles the pickets thought contained scabs. 'They weren't scabs as it turned out,' recalls Paul Symonds, 'they were BACM [British Association of Colliery Managers] members.' BACM were usually let into work unchallenged. 'They shouldn't have been stupid enough to do it when they knew what was happening,' argues Paul Symonds:

This is at about six or seven in the morning by now. The fighting was well under way . . . there were two police vans in front with about five or six cars behind - the cars weren't full. The barricades across the road weren't very good because we hadn't put them on the pavement. The vans came screaming up. They must've been told: 'Just put your foot down and go for it.' Of course, these two big police vans went up the pavement and just bounced straight over the barricades, and kept going. These poor fuckers in the cars were trying to do the same - and they just got bricked to fuck. I do not know how anyone didn't get killed: it's a wonder to me because the cars got it. We thought they were scabs. I think they were screaming out of the cars: 'BACM!' but there was that much noise. That

²⁶ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

²⁷ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

²⁸ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

morning, somebody had made a tray full of petrol bombs - I don't know if they were miners. I'd heard about them, but I hadn't seen any explode so I didn't know whether we had any or not - until that car convoy came up. I just saw this huge flash on the last car. Initially I thought it was somebody inside taking photos. I'm running towards this car with a brick in my hand and I see this blinding flash - and that was the first instinct: somebody has got me on camera here. And then I realised that it didn't come from the back of the car; the flash came from under the car. And word has it that it was a petrol bomb that got thrown, and it ignited on the exhaust of the car. But the car didn't catch fire. But the police definitely knew what was going to happen that morning when they took them people up. They just fucked off and left them. I think the police were half hoping that somebody would get killed so that they could label us.²⁹

The back lane

Though Westfield Lane was the scene of the main clashes between pickets and police that night, there was also concern among the strikers that the scabs could be brought in from the South Kirkby side of Broad Lane. Jeff Johnson was part of the group defending this route:

... there were fifty or sixty pickets on the back lane, dropping lampposts and telegraph posts and trying to dig that culvert up. But all the time the police were coming up and down and knew what we were about. Whether they'd got heat-seekers or what I don't know, but they knew where we were and what we were doing, and there was many a battle, up there. But we were camouflaged and they were running around with big lights and clinking and clanking with big coats on and shields rattling, and we could see them . . . We were in and out of allotments, that fireworks factory, the farm that's down there, in and out of the woods - fetching trees from Christ knows where. Yes, there was merry hell up there for hours and hours and hours.³⁰

Truncheoned

Encamped at the main entrance to Frickley Colliery throughout the night was a group of branch committee men and older Frickley miners. Among them was John Picken, who says they knew little of what was happening further down the hill. Around daybreak though, they could see how much damage the pickets had inflicted on the police officers who were returning to the pit yard: 'They'd got cuts and bruises, in fact there were police laid out in the main yard.' He and other union men among this group decided to try to bring an end to the hostilities:

Because of the violence we asked the [police] inspector if we could see the manager, to stop this stupidity, as we saw it. We couldn't control our lads when they could see scabs going by their own front door. We went to see the manager . . . There was me off the branch committee, and I think there were three branch officials there. We got as far as the door and the manager turned round and told

²⁹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

³⁰ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

The battle of 13 November

the inspector that he wouldn't have anything to do with us, he wouldn't see us. And the inspector says, 'I think your best bet is to go. You can see what has happened. Look at them [injured policemen]!' And there were some mad 'uns as well. So we went.³¹

As daylight came the miners who remained on the streets were starting to wonder what the latest developments were regarding the scabs entering the pit. 'It was getting to seven or eight in the morning and it was getting light,' remembers Gary Hinchliffe:

we decided to go into the pit yard to see what was going off: had the scabs gone into the pit, or what? So we walked up and the 'Home Guard' as we called them, were there, the older-end who always picketed outside the pit, Johnny Stones and Chick Picken and them. I says to one of them, 'Have they gone in?' He says, 'Aye, they've come down the back lane and gone in through the landsale. They haven't gone in through the front door, they've gone in through the back.' Then some of the other lads came up. And the police were sat. He says, 'What's been going off down there? They're bolloxed, these.' And I looked in the pit yard and the coppers were flaked out all over. They'd got their helmets off, they were off their police horses.³²

The battle of 13 November was not quite over yet however, because though the police had retreated to the pit, they were suddenly given the perfect opportunity to regroup and counter-attack the pickets:

Then a group of lads must've got some bricks and gone running into the pit yard and thrown bricks at these police officers. Of course, they jumped back up on their feet and the mounted police officers jumped onto their horses. I thought: 'Oh, you fucking, stupid idiots.' So it was a matter then of turning and running. We set off running and the horses came charging at us. They chased us all the way down Beech Street. I thought: 'Well, on a morning when we've won, to get beaten in the last battle.' We could've just held them in the pit yard, there was nowt else to do now, it was too late the scabs were in. Just for the sake of throwing a couple of more bricks at them, we got routed. And some lads got arrested.³³

One of the arrested miners was Ray Riley, and he describes how the police took revenge for their earlier ordeal:

Unfortunately they caught me - not so much caught me, I took a wrong turning and ran into them. There were about four of them, all in riot gear, they didn't have numbers on their shoulder straps, and they began punching me and kicking me. Obviously, against four or five riot officers, you haven't much chance of a

³¹ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

³² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

³³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

The battle of 13 November

fight-back, so I took a sort of cowering position up the side of this bungalow wall. I was thinking: 'I'll have a few punches and pretend I'm hurt.' The next thing I know I felt them yanking my hair back and I thought they'd banged me head-first into a wall. I was - stunned is not the word - just out. I can remember being laid on the floor. There was no pain, I was just dazed. I can remember feeling something running down my head and I realised that it was blood. And apparently - this came out later by someone who witnessed the event - they left me lying there and for some reason they came back. I can remember being dragged - and I mean dragged, my feet were dragging along the floor - up Beech Street, up Poxton Grove. And they took me through the ranks of the riot police, and they were spitting on me and saying 'We hope you die, you bastard. Bastards, bastards, bastards', swearing and spitting on me. I can remember having spit on my face, and that mixed with blood, it wasn't a nice feeling.³⁴

He was taken to the colliery management's offices, where there were already a couple of other Frickley pickets under arrest:

We sat in the deputy manager's room with a couple of policemen and one in particular, who had a sling on his left arm, he had blond hair, he was a sergeant . . . and I can remember seeing a pair of legs from behind a table. Later I found out it was Brian Curtis, again a Frickley picket. Harold Jones was laid face down and I remember him saying, 'Can I move my arms boss?' He had his hands in handcuffs and because he was laid down they were cutting into him. Then I heard this voice say, 'Lie fucking down!' I didn't have a clue who he was talking to. Anyway, this police sergeant got up, whacked me round the chest and whacked me round the shoulder with a truncheon. And obviously I went to my knees, and he says, 'Get your fucking arms out in front of you.' So I was laid face down, blood oozing from my head, and then he whacked me across the arms with a truncheon. I must have lost consciousness, because I don't know how long went by, and I can remember being loaded onto a stretcher by this ambulance man. I can remember him kneeling down and saying, 'What have they done to you, cock?' I said something like: 'Truncheoned me.'³⁵

Ray Riley was eventually charged with breach of the peace and 13 November proved to be the end of his active involvement in the strike. Harold Jones was still in prison at Christmas time, charged with carrying a petrol bomb. When he was released just afterwards, his bail conditions stipulated that he had to live 50 miles away from his home. He spent much of the remainder of the strike living in exile in Manchester at a magistrate's house. Over the coming months the original charges against him were dropped. Eventually, his case came to court in December 1985, 13 months after his arrest. He was acquitted when it was stated that the prosecution had no case to answer.³⁶ Similarly, Ray Riley endured six months of torment after his arrest, with the fear of the sack constantly haunting him. On 2 May 1985

³⁴ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

³⁵ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

³⁶ Rusiecki, op. cit., p.226.

however, his case came before Pontefract magistrates' court and the charges against him were dismissed, because, as the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* reported, 'there were "grave doubts" over police evidence.'³⁷ The NUM activist then decided to take legal action against the police to compensate for his injuries. Much later, on 19 December 1990, the following appeared on page 5 of *The Times* under the heading 'Strike damages':

A striking miner who was falsely arrested, beaten up by police and maliciously prosecuted during the 1984 miners' strike was awarded £60,000 damages in the High Court at Leeds yesterday. Raymond Riley, now aged 32, was a face worker at Frickley Colliery, South Yorkshire.³⁸

At the time, Ray Riley's payment was the biggest award for damages made against the West Yorkshire Police force and ranked as one of the highest against any police force in Britain.³⁹

Casualties

The arrests and the serious charges against the Frickley miners were obviously a serious blow, but, on balance, the events of the morning of 13 November were seen as a massive victory by the activists. It was obvious that it was the police who had the majority of casualties, as Ian Oxley and others on the Frickley picket line found out as they taunted the injured police officers who trundled past:

If we saw an injured policeman being helped into the control centre, which they had set up in the administration office, we'd cheer and shout something like: 'Three - nil.' 'Seven - nil.' I think we got up to about 'Thirty-eight - nil.'⁴⁰

According to a police spokesman reported in the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 'about 40 police had been injured during the incident.'⁴¹ Because police injury figures in the media were seen as part of the propaganda war against the strike, the tallies announced were not usually taken seriously by pickets. 'Even if they broke their finger-nail they would say that they had been injured on a picket line,' argues Paul Symonds. However, his wife worked at Pontefract General Infirmary where the police casualties were taken; this time the figures given were genuine:

... this was a common story amongst the staff at Ponty hospital, that coppers were just wasting the hospital's time coming into casualty when there was nowt up with them. Pam rang this bloke she knew in casualty when she got to work to see if anybody she knew had been injured. She said, 'Has anybody been injured from Frickley?' He said, 'There's bodies laid about everywhere.' She's saying,

³⁷ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 9 May 1985.

³⁸ *The Times*, 19 December 1990.

³⁹ *Northern Star*, 21 February 1991.

⁴⁰ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

⁴¹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 15 November 1984.

'Oh no.' She says, 'Who?' He says, 'There's no pickets. They are *all* coppers.' He said to her, 'At this stage, there are 43 coppers injured.' She's going, 'Oh, well but -' He says, 'No Pam, these *are* injured.' We are talking about broken jaws, broken collar bones, broken legs, ankles, shins, arms, hands. One bloke had a ball-bearing through his cheek and it had come out of the other side - they'd been firing high-powered catapults at them.⁴²

The question of violence

The general picture presented in the media of the disturbances at Frickley and other pits during the Coal Board's 'November push' was one of courageous strikebreakers and policemen encountering mindless NUM thugs.⁴³ But as well as this leading figures in the labour movement were only too willing to condemn the miners' actions despite their mass support amongst ordinary trade unionists. Indeed, on the evening of 13 November Norman Willis delivered a major speech at a rally of miners in Aberavon in which he slammed the miners' methods. Although he criticised police aggression, he also stated that any miner who resorts to violence 'wounds the miners' case more than they damage their opponents' resolve.' Such acts, he said, 'are alien to our common trade union tradition, however, not just because they are counter-productive but because they are wrong.'⁴⁴

Only rarely have the views of the strikers themselves about violence on the picket lines been heard. Even supporters of the miners could sometimes be put on the defensive over the question of violence. Robert Walker remembers what happened when a photographer from the left-wing newspaper *Socialist Worker* came to South Elmsall in November to do a sympathetic profile of the miners: 'He had to burn half his pictures, didn't he? . . . he was trying to portray the coppers as being hooligans, and we just knocked fuck out them.'⁴⁵

For all the Frickley NUM activists, their use of force was fully justified considering the powerful foe they faced: the British state, with its body of armed men and gaols, which was determined to crush the miners by any means at its disposal. Ray Riley, who as we have seen suffered personally at the hands of the police, explains that:

. . . we were all involved in throwing and shoving and throwing punches - doing whatever it takes - because it was their side against our side . . . because in a war, which it was in reality - it was a class war - their side, the police and what have you, were hell-bent on destroying our union, destroying our livelihood. And whatever it takes for your side to secure a victory, you take it. I've got no regrets. I've got no guilty conscience about anything that happened to

⁴² Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴³ For a critique of the press coverage during the dispute see E. Wade, 'The miners and the media: themes of newspaper reporting', *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol. 12, No.3, pp.273-283.

⁴⁴ Cited in P. Routledge, *Scargill: The Unauthorized Biography*, (London, 1994), p.179.

⁴⁵ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

The battle of 13 November

strikebreakers or the police during the strike. I've no guilty conscience whatsoever. It was a simple choice: them or us.⁴⁶

John Picken, like all of the other Frickley activists, saw the situation on the picket lines quite differently from the press. The newspapers' picture of violent miners and saintly policemen was, he says, 'totally rubbish', and gives examples of police harassment usually neglected by the newspapers:

They were talking about violence, but when you think about the police getting hold of one of our members, and because there was no room in this police car, they said, 'We don't take prisoners.' He'd got his arms tied behind his back. The policeman hit him smack across his nose - broke his nose - with his truncheon. We asked him to go to court but he wouldn't go. Another one had got some stickers and they held him, they pulled the stickers off his coat, screwed them up and rammed them up his nose until it bled. And he had to be hospitalised to get that out. Another one was beaten up by the police, taken to Pontefract, and was told that when he'd been stitched up he was going to get some more. He ran away. And he phoned me. He was frightened to go home in case he got beat up. I told him to get in touch with a solicitor.⁴⁷

Frickley activists point to how the police deliberately initiated the violence on the picket lines. The NCB, the government and the police lost the battle with peaceful picketing, argues Johnny Stones. The confrontations 'had as much to do with police tactics as ours,' he says, 'therefore I had no qualms about the means used throughout.'⁴⁸

Gary Hinchliffe says that he was not alone in thinking that 13 November was the day the Frickley pickets got 'their own back':

You got your own back for Nottingham; for Orgreave; for Scunthorpe; for Immingham; for Agecroft; for everywhere that you'd been to and got pushed, where you'd got hit over the head and just left, assaulted, arrested for nowt. This was my day to get my own back *on them*.⁴⁹

More than that:

... it was the only victory that we had in the strike, to be honest. It was the only day that you'd achieved something. It was the only day that you'd won - and then we didn't stop them going in. But we stopped them going in by the main road. They didn't do what they'd done in 1926: go in up Westfield Lane. They went in the back way every day. So it was the only victory that we had. And I think that the events of that morning, and the amount of men that went up picketing every

⁴⁶ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁷ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁸ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

day that van went in, and the anger that they voiced towards them, kept the numbers who went back to work to a minimum.⁵⁰

The compromise

Nevertheless, there was a price to pay for such dogged resistance to the forces of the state. The police were in a position to retaliate over their defeat on a scale the local miners couldn't hope to match without the physical assistance of the wider labour movement. The pickets needed to retreat. Johnny Stones was involved in negotiating a compromise to ensure this:

... we had a meeting with the deputy chief constable of West Yorkshire ... He met the four branch officials in the manager's office at Frickley - the first time we'd been on the premises since the strike. In a nutshell, what he said was that he would fight us. They were his words: 'I will fight you, I will close this village down and nothing will come in or go out', and he intended bringing people in to work who wanted to work. So we came to a compromise. Obviously we had fallen out with the manager, and the manager at that time, Clay, was having his two-penn'orth, and we were arguing with him rather than with the police. What we said was that if he thought we would stand by and allow him to drive scabs through South Elmsall - down through South Kirkby, through Moorthorpe, down Barnsley Road and turn round at the bottom of Westfield Lane - and drive them up in the full view of all the community, then he was just asking for trouble, day in and day out, while ever he did it. The compromise was that he would bring them by the Old Mill at South Kirkby, down the back lane - fetch them in over the fields in essence - and get them in at Shann's shop, by the landsale. Therefore virtually bypassing the built-up areas of the communities. That was the compromise that we reached. They did that every day and never took them through South Elmsall centre. That was because we had told them that we would not be able to hold the lads back, they wouldn't have stood it, they'd have been bricking them all the way down.⁵¹

With the likelihood of retaliation from the police, Frickley NUM also decided to suspend picketing for the following day:

We just had the token six on the gate and they brought them in. That was the consensus among the branch officials and we got criticised for it. But I think if we hadn't done there could have been forty or fifty lads arrested and sacked. If we would have fought them again on Westfield Lane, I've no doubts whatsoever that they would have sealed South Elmsall off. They'd done it at Hatfield, they'd done it at Armthorpe. And reports that we received after the event were that there were police stood by in schools, in parking-lots at Barnsdale Bar, ready to move in and seal South Elmsall off. There's only about four or five entry points: Westfield Lane, Minsthorpe, Doncaster Road, up South Kirkby, and they could have sealed it off on the back lane. They only needed five roads blocked and

⁵⁰ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁵¹ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

they'd got South Elmsall sealed off. Buses, transport, business; they'd have all been stopped and only certain ones allowed through.⁵²

Given the possible repercussions, Steve Gant agreed with the decision to suspend picketing. And this was confirmed when he and another miner ventured near the Frickley picket line in the early hours of Wednesday morning:

There were two or three men round the fire. We had a look round the back; no coppers. It was like the calm before the storm. We decided to walk back down past Broadway, past the factories. As we were just crossing the railway bridge, we could see them coming down the back lane - vans. It was like a snake. There must have been fifty or sixty vans - at that time in a morning! The first one was just going past as we were going to turn round into Broadway. They all slowed down; the widows are down, they were watching us. Me and Johnny nipped round the corner and legged it. We knew they weren't going to take any prisoners. That confirmed it, that the branch officials were right in calling it off. It was a wise decision because I think that they could have got their own back. Anyway, we denied them that chance.⁵³

In his chapter on the 1984-85 strike, Paul Rusiecki suggests that the incidents of 13 November were 'on a scale and of a sort which far exceeded the "riot" on Westfield Lane almost 60 years earlier' in the 1926 lockout.⁵⁴ But Rusiecki totally neglects the views of those miners who were involved in the confrontation, giving more detail to the harassment of a local strikebreaker. And yet while Rusiecki was disturbed that such a 'woeful picture was occurring in the village of my birth',⁵⁵ as we have seen, for many Frickley miners the early hours of Tuesday 13 November were actually amongst the highlights of the whole strike and would remain a part of local folklore. At that stage in the dispute the strikers had two options open to them. They could either permit large numbers of well-equipped police officers to invade their communities in order to escort a handful of strikebreakers to work and perhaps witness the start of a trickle back to work, or they could mount an effective challenge. At Frickley they chose the latter. This was the day when the Frickley pickets 'got their own back' for their battering at Orgreave and elsewhere. But the question now was, with the first strikebreakers at work, had the show of strength by the Frickley pickets been enough to prevent the trickle back to work becoming more serious, as the depths of winter drew nearer? Already the strike was longer in duration than the historic struggle the strikers' forebears had endured in 1926.

⁵² Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁵³ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁴ Rusiecki, *op. cit.*, p.216.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.203.

CHAPTER SIX: SOLID TO THE END

Tailing the scabs

Because strikebreaking was now clearly a local issue at Frickley, from the middle of November onwards, the NUM activists had to be vigilant against the Coal Board's back-to-work drive and mount a counter campaign of their own. One of the first duties was to discover who the strikebreakers actually were so that an attempt could be made to convince them to rejoin the strike. Ian Oxley recalls how there were members of the Coal Board staff at Frickley who were sympathetic to the miners' struggle. One was an upper management figure:

... and he used to tip Dicky Nailor off about what was happening at the pit. He's a local born and bred bloke; a smashing bloke as a pit manager. He knew that it was in the pit's interest not to split the workforce into half of you scabbing and half of you not. He never used to give us names. 'Is so and so working?' he wouldn't comment on it. And that meant 'Check him out.' If you gave him another name, he would say, 'He definitely isn't working.' So he would tell you without telling you. Also, the head timekeeper would say, 'That man's definitely not working,' so that he didn't get any hassle.¹

If there were uncertainties about someone, 'We used to just send lads round to their house, round about twelve o'clock at night,' says Ian Oxley:

They used to have to camp outside their house every morning for a week. And if the scab van comes and they've not left their house, we assumed that they were not in that van - clearly they could have flitted out, but we'd check that out as well. We just sent a union man up for a friendly call ...²

He says that some scabs actually rejoined the strike because of such visits:

One was a local onsetter, that's a man in the pit bottom who loads the men and the material off the cage. His father was a union man for NUPE, he was a caretaker at a local school. So we actually went and saw his dad, and got his dad to see him. His dad had not given him any money, he'd got five kids. So his dad said, 'Look, I'll see that he's not short of money.' He never went in again. Another lad, he was an assistant engineer, a funny person. His wife was very high up in the social services, so he'd no money problems at all. But we went to see him, and he said that he'd been duped into working. He was told that all the other assistants were going in to work, so that's why he worked. He regretted it and said, 'I'm not going anymore.' These were two that I personally know of, and there were one or two more. So we were pretty successful in identifying them pretty quickly.³

¹ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

² Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

³ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

The precise number of miners who broke the strike at Frickley has never been discovered by the strikers. Nevertheless, estimates were made. According to Jeff Johnson:

We calculated, by using certain methods - secret hiding holes, binoculars - on any given day the largest amount that went in was fourteen. And in total I think there was something like 43 scabs. Some would work one day. Some a week, then another one. There were only two or three - one of them was Ginty Carr - who worked all the time. All the rest were one-dayers. They thought there was a pit full of men, but when they got there, there would only be a handful. I've actually had the tale told to me by scabs - a long time afterwards and who wanted to come back round the village - of what happened: about lads getting in the van, changing their mind and crying, but they wouldn't let them get out of the van.⁴

Ginty Carr attained a reputation for being extremely hard-faced. 'We only ever saw one minibus coming in,' says Gary Hinchliffe, and 'one person used to sit at the front every time - Ginty Carr. He never bothered about hiding himself, but nobody else seemed to be keen to show their face.'⁵

If information was not always forthcoming about who the strikebreakers were, there were always other methods, as Tony Short explains:

After you had done your morning picketing, you would go home, have a bit of breakfast, try to get an hour's kip, then wait for them coming out and follow them all over . . . they would go onto the Doncaster/Wakefield road towards Brodsworth; and just as it turns off for the Red House, there is a lay-by. Here they used to swap them out of the iron bus into a minibus. So we used to be across the road with binoculars, laid in the grass trying to see who the scabs were. In the end, my mam used to take us, because it was better if a woman was driving because they never used to stop you.⁶

Gary Hurst remembers the time when he was part of a team that tailed a van and finally came face to face with a scab: 'He was a transferee from Hickleton. There was me, Shorty and Brad.' The group followed the van into Doncaster:

It trundles off towards the centre of Doncaster, down to the roundabout, where the railway station is. It gets towards the roundabout, the police vans peeled off and left the van that was carrying the scabs on its own. Just before the roundabout, there's a little slip road that turns off towards the station, it went in there. So by this time we are about a hundred yards behind the van with the scabs in. It turned round the corner; we were round within a couple of seconds of it. And all we saw was this kid who Shorty knew off the haulage down Frickley pit saying, 'Thanks a lot,' and shutting the van door. And Shorty jumped out of the car and he shouted: 'Hey up, you scabbing bastard,' he called him by name. And

⁴ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁵ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁶ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

at that moment, it was just a slight look on the kid's behalf, the van pulled away, and from round the other way, a police car came. He ran in front of the police car, banging on it, shouting, 'Hey up, I'm a scab, I'm a scab, they're going to get me.' So we all jumped in the car and went home.⁷

Ambushes

Although a compromise had been reached with the police after 13 November, there were still serious attempts by the Frickley strikers to stop the convoys traversing the alternate route to the pit. Consequently, mass pickets of the Broad Lane entrance became a regular feature of the remainder of the strike. Indeed the following Monday morning saw what was later described in the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* as 'one of the worst nights of violence on local picket lines.' Two miners were later jailed for their part after 200 pickets clashed with police near Broadway Terrace at about 4.30 am.⁸

Because of such dangers on the Frickley picket line, other, less legitimate, ways were employed to stop the strikebreakers' van, as Ian Oxley illustrates:

... we went into the pit yard and we pinched some old five-gallon oil containers. We filled them with water and we stacked them on a Z-bend. We also got some stuff called 'soluble oil', which is an oil which mixes with water. We also got some bolt cutters. And we got some of that heavy reinforcing mesh they use for putting into concrete floors and roads. We cut these into star shapes, bent the stars in different directions. If you threw these on the floor, then one point of the star always stuck upwards, puncturing the tyre of the scab van. We were relying on it being frosty, so we decided to lace the road with water and put the soluble oil on top of the water - that would make the road very slippery.⁹

The hope was that the van would lose control due to puncture, skid off the road, 'At that point we would brick it and disappear into the night'. However, the scheme did not go quite to plan:

The CB [citizen band radio posted at the start of the lane] sends the signal up: 'Yeah, they are on their way.' We knew the plan, we'd watched it previously. The first thing to come through is a heavy-armoured Land Rover . . . That flies up - they've got these searchlights looking around for people. If it sees anything, then they'll send a police van full of riot police to try and chase you off. It didn't spot us, we'd all got the old black balaclavas on, and we nipped out. I was on the metal spikes, while the other lads were giving it the water and the soluble oil. That was all done. Then we all went back into our hiding positions, with our suitable pile of bricks ready for what, we thought, would be an ambush of the scab van. The scab van came up, rode over the metal spikes at 40 miles an hour, straight round corners as though it was on rails. We didn't puncture it! We've since learnt that apparently they have these steel-reinforced tyres. You can't

⁷ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

⁸ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 21 February 1985.

⁹ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

puncture them with bullets, they are that good. And clearly the traction of the van was good enough to avoid our second trap, which was water and oil, which at the pit, anybody who works where there's water and oil knows that it's treacherous, and unfortunately it didn't work. And the place was white with ice.¹⁰

Guerrilla actions such as the one described above were not planned by the Frickley branch of the NUM. 'You, generally, after six months, form into little groups of people that you can trust when it comes to it,' says Ian Oxley:

Somebody comes up to you with an idea and says: 'I want to go do this,' and you'd think: 'Aye, sounds all right, that.' And they'd say, 'Get up at two o'clock,' and, sure enough, all the regulars that you know you can trust will turn up at two o'clock in a morning just to try something different to keep the police on their toes.¹¹

Although it was hypocritical of the press to condemn the miners for fighting back in such a way, considering their neglect of the police's tactics and the armoury at the disposal of the police such as truncheons, shields, horses, high-powered vehicles and the like, nevertheless, it needs to be mentioned that there was a negative aspect to the acts of violence which miners' hit squads often carried out as a substitute for mass action. Steve Gant remembers that a number of Frickley miners were arrested after one particular ambush, 'and the lads they arrested weren't involved that morning. They'd got it wrong. They'd just gone for certain people.' Fortunately, 'there were no charges.'¹² But this was not always the case, as was shown at the end of November when the bungalow of a Wheldale Colliery miner who lived in Upton was gutted by an arson attack following the discovery of his return to work. Immediately the police seized their chance and began a round-up of strike activists. Eleven Frickley miners were subsequently put on an 8pm to 8am curfew which prevented them from active participation in the dispute.¹³

Christmas

The Coal Board's efforts to break the strike in November resulted in a greater number of miners returning to work in Yorkshire than in any of the previous eight months of the dispute. The Board persisted with their drive throughout December, when the question now being asked was whether the mass of the strikers would be willing to endure financial hardship with the Christmas period in sight. Nevertheless, by Christmas, despite all but three Yorkshire pits having miners back to work, there were less than five per cent of the miners working in the coalfield. In Doncaster pits a mere one per cent of miners had broken ranks.¹⁴ Surviving Christmas was now going to be vital if a further push was to be thwarted in the New Year. Miners' supporters everywhere were aware of this and as the festive season neared they

¹⁰ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

¹¹ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

¹² Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

¹³ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 29 November 1984.

¹⁴ Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, p.179.

flooded into the coalfields bringing with them hundreds of thousands of pounds and enough food parcels to give the miners and their families a decent Christmas. Because of this, for many miners the comradeship and common struggle made the Christmas of 1984 probably the most memorable of their lives. 'I have a vision of the Miners' Institute being full of sacks of potatoes,' recalls Johnny Stones:

There were parties for kids at the Miners' Institute and throughout other places, such as clubs, as well. Obviously collections went on and appeals went out to all our supporters to get toys and money in for it. We had some visits from some Germans who brought toys and clothing. Generally it was done on a personal basis but also on a collective basis. We had toys, clothing and potatoes; and I think we also had turkeys donated as well.¹⁵

Ray Riley recalls how 'there was a good atmosphere' in the community during that Christmas:

People were skint, but at the end of the day the community seemed to be at peace with itself in some ways. A lot of money that was raised was channelled into providing something for the kids, which was brilliant . . . you went out when you could but obviously you'd got to get your priorities right: which was the most important, a pint of beer or buying a loaf of bread. So you had to weigh it up at times. But yeah, I can remember having a really good Christmas. The community pulled together, that was the great thing. You saw how society could be different, how people were taking control of their lives and planning and arranging things. And that will be what stays in my memory.¹⁶

What sticks in Gary Hinchliffe's memory is how his mother-in-law, despite the hard times, managed to put on a lavish Christmas dinner after his brother-in-law invited home a couple of students he had met on a collecting mission to Lancaster University:

These students thought that they were going to have grass pie for dinner. They came through the door: there was salmon, roast beef. I looked, I thought: 'Where the fuck has she got all this from?' But because she'd got guests, she was putting a proper tea on. They'd been living on stew and dumplings for about six or seven months. Of course, these two students couldn't believe it. They were going to go back and tell the tale that we'd been living on grass pie, instead they had a banquet.¹⁷

The New Year

Although the NCB's expectations of a post-Christmas surge back to work never materialised in early January 1985, their tactic of rolling back the strike at its peripheries was becoming clearly visible. Scabbing in South Yorkshire was spreading

¹⁵ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

¹⁶ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

¹⁷ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

from neighbouring Notts and North Derbyshire by way of Manton and Shireoaks collieries. The strike in the Barnsley Area was proving weakest at its western edge in the Calderdale collieries of Emley Moor, Park Mill, Denby Grange, and Bullcliffe Wood. Similarly in North Yorkshire where the scabbing campaign centred around the Selby complex.¹⁸ In mid-January, though, the strike began to crumble. On Monday 21 January the NCB could claim that 593 miners had broken the strike for the first time in the strike's Yorkshire heartland. The force of the NCB's strategy of concentrating on vulnerable areas was demonstrated with astonishing results at Kiveton Park in South Yorkshire where 150 miners went back in an organised group. By Friday management at the pit could claim that out of a total of 735 miners 432 had returned to work. Large numbers also scabbed at Kellingley that week. During January as a whole about 10,000 men were reported to have returned to work throughout Britain's coalfields.¹⁹

The NCB was gaining from an increased feeling of demoralisation among miners, even in the most solid pits such as Frickley. 'You knew in your heart it was over; but at the time you weren't having it,' explains Tony Short.²⁰ Frickley craftsman Lawrence Gertig had expected a long strike:

... but by that time, because of the tactics employed, there was an air of despondence and despair about it. People were short of money, and the kids were asking for things. And as you can appreciate, it starts to wear a person down after a bit. If you can magnify this to the whole of the Yorkshire Area, that's what was happening. Plus what was happening with the TUC and everything else. There was a feeling that it could not last, that it would have to end soon, it was going down hill.²¹

Until this period Robert Walker had retained some optimism about the strike's conclusion:

It's still there in the back of your head that you've got a chance of winning; but just after Christmas they showed you those pits that had been solid, just north of Notts, Kiveton, where they were marching in. It was propaganda really. But it was working; people were believing it. It was mainly the people who hadn't been involved. But people were talking about it; after Christmas there were mutterings. Before Christmas there had been mutterings, but we'd tried to keep it as solid as we could. But after Christmas, when everybody was like super-broke - they targeted people who were out of the area, and all these who weren't interested in picketing. The mutterings were from them. But the lads were solid. Most of the lads who lived in the area were backing the union one hundred per cent.²²

¹⁸ Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, pp.179-180.

¹⁹ Callinicos and Simons, *The Great Strike*, p.197; Goodman, *The Miners' Strike*, p.172.

²⁰ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

²¹ Lawrence Gertig, interviewed by the author.

²² Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

Gary Hinchliffe thought that the satirical television programme *Spitting Image* summed up the situation regarding the strike collapsing:

There'd be MacGregor going, 'There's one, there's two, it's a flood, it's a flood!' And Scargill would be saying, 'There's no men going back to work!' Now you didn't believe owt that they told you in the press. You'd learnt by now not to believe what they told you. So we were getting told: 'There's only a handful of men going in. And even where the men are going in there's no production,' which, as it turned out, was so - there was virtually no production going off. But with the numbers that were going in - it was crumbling. You could see that it was going.²³

But some Frickley activists doubted the Coal Board's figures. 'It definitely wasn't collapsing,' argues Jeff Johnson:

Now, at this time a lot of the lads were destitute, you couldn't get dole, and if you got any benefits you had the first fifteen quid taken off you, because that was deemed the amount of strike pay you were getting. At this point, for most of the lads, the only way they could get some brass - because it was winter and you couldn't pinch out of the fields, get taties and cabbages and various stuff - was to go on the sick. And if you were on the sick you were claiming partial benefits from the Coal Board. So they were deemed 'Prepared to work, but not fit.' So they went down as working. So that's what artificially massaged the figures. We understood this because we had trade unionists who were working in the DSS, at all levels, and so we knew what was going off.²⁴

Paul Symonds though argues that because the strike dominated the activists' lives, and because they wanted to win so badly, they were often reluctant to believe the truth about the situation:

I remember going to a Socialist Workers Party meeting in Kinsley where Tony Cliff was speaking. It was a packed meeting, and Cliff argued about how Scargill was able to lead a strike, that Scargill was a brilliant general, but his problem was that he didn't know how to retreat. This was before Christmas, and Cliff was saying that the strike was going down. This was something that you didn't want to hear. I remember being angry about this, at somebody telling us that the strike was going down. But this was one of the things which attracted me to the Socialist Workers Party: they were always honest in their assessments; they didn't get it right all the time but they were honest. Whereas *Militant*, and people like that, were saying: 'Here we go, just one more push' - which wasn't the reality of the situation. It was far from that. Even though you didn't want to hear that things were going badly, it was true. I can appreciate that meeting now, but I couldn't at the time.²⁵

²³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁴ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

An important factor in the strikers' demoralisation was that winter time was not bringing forth the power cuts that had been expected by NUM members. The February 1984 issue of *The Miner* had forecast that the coal stocked at power stations would eventually deplete and that power cuts could be expected in July.²⁶ John Picken thinks that the NUM's forecasts were essentially correct:

A lot of people thought Scargill was wrong about the coal stocks. Arthur always said there was a big hole in the middle. But the big hole in the middle was being filled by Nottingham coal alone. And it was proven after the strike that they'd get coal from anywhere to keep it going. The strike could have been over for November.²⁷

But the stark reality was that not a single worker was laid off for lack of electricity during the whole of the Big Strike. Further, there were no meetings between the miners' representatives and the shop stewards in the power stations until 16 January 1985, when the strike was beginning to crumble.²⁸

The Wintertons, like many other commentators both then and since, argue that 'the conflict was futile' from the moment it was certain that Nottinghamshire miners could not be won over to the strike.²⁹ But such a stance neglects that the government's position was not entirely secure either. For example, imported oil to the power stations meant a bill for the Central Electricity Generating Board of some £106.5 million per week.³⁰ In 1992 one of Margaret Thatcher's closest political associates, Norman Tebbit, confessed that the strike had been a 'close run thing', especially so during the NACODS' affair. In 1994 the CEGB's operations director, Frank Ledger, revealed that the energy situation had verged on the 'catastrophic' during the autumn, and secret bulletins at the CEGB actually forecast that the miners would win by Christmas if extra coal supplies were not transported through the miners' blockade.³¹

Down but not out

Much of the media began to pronounce the strike as good as over by the end of January 1985. However, there was still much for the miners still on strike to fight for, even if they were heading for defeat. Ray Riley recalls how there was 'an almost forlorn attempt to sustain the strike' amongst militant activists:

A couple of rank-and-file initiatives then came through about militants going round knocking on people's doors, trying to get them interested in the strike again, get on the picket line. Because obviously the more class-conscious people

²⁶ Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., p.186.

²⁷ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

²⁸ Cliff, 'Patterns of mass strikes', p.49.

²⁹ Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., p.190.

³⁰ Callinicos and Simons, op. cit., p.157.

³¹ Milne, *The Enemy Within*, p.16.

involved in the strike could see that it was crumbling. They tried a few initiatives but they weren't particularly well received by the local leadership.³²

There were still substantial pockets of miners on strike even in early February, demonstrating that though the resistance had weakened, the struggle had not collapsed entirely. According to the *Financial Times* of 6 February 1985, although there were 6,272 miners back at work in Yorkshire:

In the Barnsley pits of Dearne Valley, Kinsley Drift, Darfield Main, Grimethorpe and Royston Drift at most eight miners are back at each pit, going down to as few as two. In the whole of the Doncaster area, only 404 men have returned to 10 pits, with Frickley, Goldthorpe and Hickleton being among the most solid.³³

Why was Frickley so solid? The Frickley activists have given a number of reasons. For John Picken it was because 'everybody was behind it. Everybody knew.'³⁴ Johnny Stones puts emphasis on Frickley NUM's operation to counter the NCB's attempts to pick off miners outside the locality:

There were a lot of Frickley employees who lived within a four or five mile radius. We had some transferees from Hickleton. What we tried to do was any cash to be shared out we would get it across to Thurnscoe because of the Hickleton/Highgate transferees that had come across in 1982-83. We tried to get money out to the kitchens at Fitzwilliam, Hemsworth, Ackworth, Upton, South Kirkby, and generally tried to help anybody that we could. It was a combination of those two factors; plus the fact that we were tightly picketing the pit and . . . the stigma that held people back if they'd to live within the community.³⁵

Gary Hurst thought that this threat of being an outcast was a particularly important factor in discouraging anybody from breaking ranks:

You'd got a few lads who were involved in politics and things like that who really made their mouths about it. I don't know whether it was fear that stopped a lot from going back, but you knew what you were expected to get if you went back, I'm sure you did. And I don't mean good hidings or owt like that. I think the lads had got more sense than that, to actually bray somebody in the pit yard or in the club or somewhere like that. But I think that threat of intimidation, of 'Scab' and nobody talking to you, nobody wanting to know your family or anything like that, that's got a great deal to do with it, I'm sure.³⁶

Jeff Johnson does not share the view that intimidation was the crucial factor in keeping Frickley solid - instead he stresses the efficiency of the local strike

³² Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

³³ *Financial Times*, 6 February 1985.

³⁴ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

³⁵ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

³⁶ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

organisation. Nevertheless he remembers one specific threat, made by a branch official as the miners met to discuss the first scabs entering the pit:

I've never seen a meeting as full, even the meeting to go on strike - and the words were: 'If any of you are thinking of going back to work, think again, because we've got the lads here who can find out who you are and stop you.'³⁷

Ray Riley says that people in the area were 'aware of how they would be ostracised and vilified for the rest of their lives should they ever break the strike at Frickley.'³⁸ Just what could be expected if anyone broke ranks had been set back in 1926. The members of the Pretoria Working Men's Club, for instance, had barred all strikebreakers from its premises, and the ban had lasted right up until the latest dispute! Similarly, 'old timers' from Frickley would tell a macabre tale about a scab from 1926 who had been killed by a runaway tub down the pit, of how all of his workmates walked past him and refused to pick him up.³⁹

For Gary Hinchliffe, picketing had been crucial in limiting scabbing:

I think that if every other pit would have had as many pickets picketing throughout the strike as Frickley had, and had as many on duty at the gates when the men were going back to work, then the numbers wouldn't have got out of hand. Definitely not.⁴⁰

Picketing banned

Though there was the odd sortie to other pits when the Yorkshire leadership decided to hold a token mass picket, for the most part after Christmas picketing was restricted to the strikers' own pits. What marked this period for Gary Hinchliffe was how an agreement had been reached with the police concerning conduct on the Frickley picket line. Henceforth:

We used to go and stand at the pit gate when they took them in. We used to shout abuse at them - you really vent your anger, gave them a noisy reception. But as long as there was no violence, and no bricks were thrown, we could push as much as we wanted; the police weren't bothered . . . Once the vans had gone in: you went home; they went. That was it. It dropped into a routine. By the time it came to March, the police who were there knew all the pickets by their first names.⁴¹

³⁷ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

³⁸ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

³⁹ Frickley NUM pamphlet, *Commemorative Concert to Honour Our Women for the Role They Played in our Historic Struggle*, (South Elmsall, March 1986), p.7; See also L. Griffiths, B. Lewis and R. Schuhle (eds) *Privy to Privatisation*, (Castleford, 1988), p.67.

⁴⁰ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁴¹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

Throughout the dispute all the striking NUM Areas had consistently disobeyed court rulings. However, when a High Court ruling declared mass picketing illegal at eleven Yorkshire pits on 12 February, the Yorkshire Area agreed to comply. And just to prove its intent, disbanded the Area Strike Co-ordinating Committee.⁴² Frickley was one of the pits on the list. 'They left all of this until the back end of the strike, leaving it to a few individual scabs to bring out injunctions,' recalls Paul Symonds:

I think Ginty Carr was named on one of the injunctions . . . a scab - who wasn't even living in the village - and he and a judge had decided that we were no longer going to be able to picket our pit. A lot of us just went mad over this; being told by a scab and a judge, that we couldn't even picket our own pit. Of course the union said that we weren't able to do anything because they would seize the union's funds.⁴³

With the exception of the Frickley branch officials, the general mood among the Frickley miners was to disobey the ruling. 'I think that we fully expected Barnsley to say, "Stick it," after all this time,' remembers Steve Gant:

But they didn't. Directives came through to each pit that you had to limit picketing. We said that you might as well not send anybody at all and just give them a green light. All you were going to do by that was increase scabbing. This was all argued at the meeting. The officials lost on that one. They were saying, 'There's nowt we can do about it. Barnsley are telling us that we've got to limit it.' It wasn't just the militants who argued against that. It upset more or less everybody. It was doing no good at all. You were more or less just giving the scabs a green light. With no picket on, instead of sixteen scabs, it would increase to thirty or forty.⁴⁴

Because the Frickley miners intended to maintain the right to picket their own pit, a demonstration and mass picket was hastily organised for 19 February, when 500 miners and their families marched through the streets of Moorthorpe and South Elmsall to their picket line. 'That was organised unofficially by me and Jip, and the lads on the ground, such as Gaz Hinchliffe,' says Steve Gant:

We got some leaflets knocked up. We argued for the banner. The union said that we couldn't have the banner because it would make it official if it was seen near a picket line. They said it would put them in the shit. The law would say that it had been organised by the officials, and so they would serve this injunction. We got hold of the banner, it was supposed to be handed back in at Weston Hall. The union officials were waiting there to take it off us. But I think that the banner

⁴² Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.215.

⁴³ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁴ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

went up all the way . . . It was a good little demo. Everybody was there, women, kids, the lot. It paid off.⁴⁵

It was enthusiasm and determination such as this that the NUM needed to tap into if it was to retain something from the strike. Instead, the superior influence of the Yorkshire NUM leadership led to the branch reversing its earlier decision and accepting the court's ruling 'under protest'.⁴⁶

No settlement

February 1985 was marked by the government and the NUM manoeuvring so as to determine the strike's outcome. The government hoped to see the dispute resolved without the union being able to claim anything resembling a victory. But, faced with the government's intransigence, a campaign began to emerge among a 'soft left' current of NUM officials, the most prominent being Kim Howells, the South Wales NUM research officer, with the aim of returning to work without a settlement. Arthur Scargill dismissed the whole idea as a 'complete fantasy'.⁴⁷ Superficially at least, the soft left's proposition seemed attractive because it promised to stem the flood of strikebreaking and avoided the need to sign a humiliating deal with the government.⁴⁸ But many strike activists felt that such a return would mean abandoning the hundreds of miners who had been sacked during the course of the dispute. 'We'd said this at the beginning of the strike, that we were all coming out on strike together, and that we were all going back together,' argues Paul Symonds, who thought that the issue of the sacked miners should have been used as a 'fall-back position' in the last weeks:

If we'd have said that we now concede the argument over pit closures, we want to go back to work, but we are not going back unless we all go back, that would have done enough to stop the scabbing. I think that a lot of people were going back because they thought it was over, there was no end in sight - I'm not making excuses for them, but I'm sure that a lot of people thought that we were fighting a losing battle, and then by going back to work were hoping to bring about the end of the dispute.⁴⁹

When talks between the TUC and the government collapsed, the return to work accelerated and many prominent NUM officials were now ready to surrender. According to the NCB, a record number of miners went back to work on Monday 25 February. By Friday, the Board were claiming that 5 per cent of the NUM's membership had returned that week alone.⁵⁰ Over the following days the pressure for a return to work snowballed as the Area councils of South Wales, Durham, Lancashire, and Northumberland voted to end the strike. In Yorkshire the decision

⁴⁵ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁶ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.216.

⁴⁷ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, pp.206-207.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.213; Milne, *op. cit.*, p.270.

⁴⁹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁰ Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, p.200.

to stay out was close. The Yorkshire Area Council voted by 42 to 22 to stay out but after consulting branches voted by 38 to 31 to go back. This decision, however, was then reversed by a card vote of 571 to 561 resolving to stay out until an amnesty was reached.⁵¹ Johnny Stones, being the Frickley delegate, was mandated to put the Frickley miners' view forward at these meetings:

We at Frickley, and I use it collectively, were willing to keep going. I didn't want to go back when we did go back. I was in a strong position. There were others where they were leaking in fast, your Mantons in Yorkshire, who were 90 per cent back. That rump of pits through Doncaster and into Barnsley Area were strong. But the numbers that were going back at collieries in Yorkshire narrowly swayed the balance at the end of the day.⁵²

By now the forces ranged against staying out had become too great, and the decision to end the historic strike - at twelve months the longest mass strike in British trade union history - was finally passed at a special national delegate conference of the NUM held at Congress House, the headquarters of the TUC, on Sunday 3 March. By 98 votes to 91, the South Wales resolution, for a return to work on the following Tuesday and for negotiations for an amnesty for sacked miners, was carried.⁵³

But for having sprained his ankle, Tony Short would have been lobbying the special conference with his friends at this historic moment. Instead:

I was on Minsthorpe fields watching the Pretoria football team playing, and somebody came over and said, 'It's just been on the wireless that the strike's over.' I said, 'No!' This kid had a transistor radio, so the game stopped and everybody came over to listen to it. It was strange. You knew that it was over by then; it was as good as dead. I can remember going out that night, there were a lot of people crying, which you didn't expect. A lot of people were devastated. I don't know if I was relieved or what. Don't forget that every day was like a Saturday. But you were living on tenterhooks. I bet I didn't weigh ten stone. You were running here, there and everywhere. I was glad that it was all over in that I didn't want it to get any more embarrassing with more going back to work, but I didn't agree with that 'marching back to work with dignity'. I thought that was utter garbage.⁵⁴

Though Ray Riley was disappointed at having to return to work without an amnesty for the sacked miners, ultimately he did not see the strike's conclusion as a sell-out by the NUM leadership:

The Trades Union Congress had washed their hands of us and we'd become a massive embarrassment to Kinnock. Our own members were going back to work,

⁵¹ Goodman, *op. cit.*, p.191; Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, pp.205-206.

⁵² Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁵³ Callinicos and Simons, *op. cit.*, p.219.

⁵⁴ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

there's no doubt about that. I don't think it was a sell out. It was very unpalatable, and it was definitely a hard pill to swallow, but our options were very limited. We were sort of boxed into a corner. I think a lot of people were prepared to stay out on strike until the year 2000 if need be, but I don't think there was a sell out at the end . . . I don't think it was in the mind of Scargill to sell the strike out. It's not going to go down in trade union history as a massive sell out.⁵⁵

Steve Gant remembers how, 'There were a lot of lads who had the attitude that we could stick it out for ever, "Fuck 'em, we'll not go back."' But many activists knew they had lost:

It took some admitting; and you had to be careful who you said it to. But the lads who had been politicised knew this. So we started to argue that if we go back, and it's going down to defeat, let's try to get something out of it, like the reinstatement of all the sacked miners. We called meetings at places like Kinsley and Hemsworth, and they were well attended. It got a good response: 'OK, the strike is over, we'll go back, but don't go back routed, with our heads down.'⁵⁶

Significantly, right to the end the strike held solid in the heart of the Yorkshire coalfield. Just eighteen per cent of Yorkshire miners had crossed picket lines on the eve of the formal return to work on Tuesday 5 March 1985. And most of these had done so only in the final week. A mere seven per cent had gone back in the Doncaster Area.⁵⁷

Although the outcome of the strike was far from what the strikers had anticipated twelve months earlier, everywhere their struggle had been an outstanding display of resistance; especially with the failure of the upper reaches of the labour movement to provide any meaningful solidarity action. If there was one thing that the miners' strike had shown, it was that people change in struggle. As one writer has noted: 'The minds of thousands of young miners were "blown" by the experience of struggle in much the way that the minds of thousands of students had been in 1968.'⁵⁸ Long-held prejudices and sectionalism had been broken down, and workers who had previously played little part in NUM politics had become active in a way they had never imagined before. At Frickley, self-activity had become the norm. The battles to prevent the first scabs into the pit, and the defiance of the judges in February 1985, had been organised at rank-and-file level, with the moderate branch leaders shoved into the background. Now it would be the duty of the politicised minority to ensure that the radicalisation of their workmates did not turn to despair. The miners had been defeated; but what kind of defeat had yet to be decided. One thing was sure: life in the pits promised to be much different from what it had been twelve months earlier.

⁵⁵ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁶ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁷ Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, p.201.

⁵⁸ Harman, *The Fire Last Time*, p.368.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE RETURN TO WORK

The march back

The miners at Frickley Colliery actually marched back on Wednesday 6 March, the day after most of the others. Starting at the Miners' Institute in Moorthorpe, and led by Frickley Colliery Band, the procession marched into South Elmsall and then headed up Westfield Lane towards the pit.¹ Frickley NUM branch president Keith Proverbs describes the scene in a letter published later:

About 2,000 people marched through the village to the colliery. I felt very proud to lead the march but it was very emotional. Women and children stood clapping us with tears running down their faces.²

There was, however, still a final twist to this part of the story. Still very much at issue was the question of the sacked miners. Scottish NUM delegates narrowly voted to stay on strike until an amnesty had been agreed, and there was a near unanimous vote among the 2,000 Kent miners to continue the strike. In Yorkshire, Armthorpe and Hatfield NUM branches also voted to stay out.³ As a consequence, many processions back to work were greeted by representatives from Kent, Armthorpe or Hatfield as well as local sacked miners, as Ray Riley found out on the march back to Frickley Colliery:

... we were virtually in the pit yard and we were met by Malc Tulley waving a letter and shouting, 'Look what they've fucking done, look what they've done!' And they'd sacked him on the day we were due to march back to work.⁴

Gary Hinchliffe, being one of the 11,312⁵ people who had been arrested during the strike, now feared that he too faced the sack: 'A couple of lads had got sacking letters on the morning that we were going back. I thought: "Fucking hell, I bet I've got one!" And then somebody said, "Aye, and the Kent miners are here."' He recalls that Frickley branch delegate Johnny Stones went over to talk to the miners who had congregated outside the pit entrance:

And I remember Johnny saying: 'Well, I don't cross picket lines.' All of a sudden there was nobody left to push this banner back down the hill. So we had to turn the banner round and push it back. Some of the men were arguing with them. They were silly arguments such as: 'We might as well have somebody from Elmsall market come and put a picket line on.' We were saying: 'These lads are from Kent. We went down there twelve months ago and asked them to come out of work and support us.' There were about forty men sacked down there for

¹ Rusiecki, *The Plough and the Pick*, p.222.

² Cited in Samuel et al., *The Enemy Within*, p.148.

³ Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, p.206.

⁴ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁵ J. Percy-Smith and P. Hillyard, 'Miners in the arms of the law: a statistical analysis', *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol.12, No.3, Winter 1985, p.345.

The return to work

having a sit-in at a pit. All their Area leaders were sacked, and all their branch officials at the three pits that they'd got open. And they didn't want us to go back to work until it was resolved. They didn't want men left sacked while other men were returning to work. So anyway, we pushed the banner down. Nobody crossed. Nobody went into work.⁶

It was a scene repeated in many parts of the Yorkshire coalfield. The sackings were evidence of how the NCB intended to operate in the future. At Ledston Luck, Cadeby and Kilmhurst collieries, and at NCB workshops at Carcroft and Birdwell, NUM members were locked out merely because the union's march back to work at 9.00am did not coincide with regular shift time. Miners at Hickleton voted to remain on strike for the remainder of the week over a new shift system that was being imposed, while at Manton, where over half the workforce had actually gone back before the end, as many as ninety per cent came out for a further week in protest at suspensions and sackings. At the end of the first day of the official return to work there were still 25,000 miners on strike in Yorkshire and some 36,000 nationally.⁷

At the end of the second day back, only a handful Yorkshire pits remained out. But after the Yorkshire NUM leadership issued instructions that the Kent picket lines were unofficial, the Frickley branch officials asked the Kent miners to withdraw their picket line. And so the decision to return to work was finally made at a mass meeting at Frickley Athletic's football ground held on Thursday at noon.⁸ Gary Hinchliffe describes what happened:

Something had happened and these Kent miners had been pulled off. But we still weren't going back to work; not until they'd lifted these sacking notices that they've given out. It was a big meeting on the football field. Keith Proverbs ram-rodged it through. If it had gone to a vote not to go to work, we wouldn't have gone to work. But they were crafty. There were pleas from Arthur Scargill, and Jack Taylor and the Yorkshire Area: 'We've organised a return to work; it is going to look silly if the men don't go back. You can't stop out on your own.' So we had it passed, by a show of hands, fifty pence per man for these sacked lads, to make sure that they didn't lose out . . . So, as we saw it, all that Proverbs had managed to do was pre-empt the ballot - which we thought was going to get passed anyway - to get the men back to work. This seemed to pacify everybody - barring those who were sacked.⁹

By the following Monday the strike was also over in Kent and Scotland, where miners decided to return to work without an amnesty after considering the scale of the return elsewhere.¹⁰

⁶ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁷ Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., pp.206-207.

⁸ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 14 March 1985.

⁹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

¹⁰ Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., p.207.

The first shifts back

Though many miners, considering the hardship, were glad to be returning to work, for the strike activists it was a depressing time. Below, Ian Oxley describes his first shift back at Frickley:

There were no boilers lit, the boilers were out - the management deliberately kept them out. My first shift was on afters. It was a very cold day. I was with the lads who I'd been picketing with, Martin Leaf, Kevin Leaf, various other lads. I was in good company. And I physically, and mentally, was sick. I did not like being at work, because the workplace was cold, quiet, and I felt like a scab - because they didn't allow all the men to return to work. I'm an electrician, they allowed what they classed as 'safety men' to work, to get the pit ready for the rest. Even though the strike was over, not everybody went to work on that first shift. The Coal Board put the boot in. They said: 'No, it's not ready for work for everybody, you'll have to go home. You'll not get paid until we say it's ready for you.' So the fitters had to check and strip and rebuild the boilers and things like that. We had to check and strip the winders etc. But what I remember most about it is - I can only put it down to depression and the problems of how sick I felt on that first day - I actually physically shit my trousers in that shift. I felt that much like a rat, being back at work. That is the worst day of my working life, that first day back to work. Nothing physically was said or done to me by the management. But I felt defeated, crushed, and I felt like a scab. I didn't want to be at that pit.¹¹

He recalls that some of the machinery at the pit was not in working order because of the sabotage carried out during the strike:

I know a group of lads that went into Frickley Colliery and put sand in all the gear boxes and in as many places that they could find. Certainly they put it in the spare fan, and in all the gear boxes in the washer. That was done so that if the scabs got to such a number, the moment that they tried to run the washer, the washer and the gear box would seize. And hopefully they'd have no fitters scabbing, so the job would stop anyway. But when the pit got back to work, one by one, the gear boxes failed. I counted up to 28 gear boxes, including the spare fan bearings.¹²

Robert Walker also remembers the depression he felt on his first days back at work. 'It was terrible,' he says, 'everybody was just down in the dumps moaning.' Rather than producing coal, most men were involved in a clean-up operation. He volunteered to work in the Little Pit, the Cudworth seam:

One of the gaffers came on the face. Everybody was still down in the dumps, so they were just slow-timing a bit. The gaffer says: 'I thought you would have been wanting to earn money now that you are here, having been on strike for a year.' And one of the lads turns round and says: 'We're on a hundred pounds a week

¹¹ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

¹² Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

pay rise now because we were getting fuck all. We're getting £100 a week basic pay and we're happy with that.' The manager fucked off out of the way.¹³

The sacked miners' ballot

In total, there were as many as 1,014 miners sacked by the NCB for their activities during or immediately after the 1984-85 dispute. 318 Yorkshire miners had been dismissed. On 4 March 1985 the Board made it known that they were ready to take just 67 miners back; ones who were guilty of only minor offences.¹⁴ MacGregor's position was clear. In mid-March 1985 he told a House of Commons employment committee that though reinstatement was left to each Area and that each case would be considered on an individual basis, any miner convicted of serious acts of violence, intimidation, or vandalism could not expect to get his job back. Although many miners were subsequently to be acquitted in court, even this proved to be no guarantee of being reinstated.¹⁵

Sacked miners faced the possibility of extreme hardship; therefore between 20 and 22 March the NUM conducted a ballot of its membership about whether a weekly 50p levy should be held to support those who had been sacked. The result was a stunning blow to the militants. Only forty-six per cent of those balloted decided in favour of implementing the levy, moreover, the Notts, South Derbyshire and Leicestershire Areas boycotted the proceedings. NUM general secretary Peter Heathfield suggested that there was a feeling in the coalfields that establishing a compulsory levy 'could be misinterpreted by the government and the NCB as a sign that the union was prepared to back down on the crucial issue of reinstatement for those who had been dismissed.'¹⁶ But Heathfield's comments could not hide the fact that the union stood accused of not mounting a serious campaign in order to get its message over to the rank and file.¹⁷ Gary Hinchliffe was one of the critics:

It was a disgusting time to be a union activist; I was ashamed of the NUM. We went to one meeting; it had been passed at a conference to spend £360,000 on new cars for the full-time officials. It was sickening. And you'd got to justify why you couldn't organise a proper campaign to get fifty pence per man stopped out of their wages . . . I couldn't believe that they could vote and do this stupid trick. How the national press didn't get hold of it, I don't know. You didn't want to go against your union and condemn it, but how could you justify it. They showed you how to organise a ballot six or so months later over the political levy. There were thousands spent on maintaining the political levy to the Labour Party. That's how to organise a ballot.¹⁸

¹³ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

¹⁴ P. Gibbon and R. Bromley, "From an institution to a business"? Changes in the British coal industry 1985-9', *Economy and Society*, Vol.19, No.1, 1990, p.76; Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., p.210.

¹⁵ Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., p.211.

¹⁶ *The Guardian*, 27 March 1985.

¹⁷ *The Guardian*, 27 March 1985.

¹⁸ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

If most miners accepted the arguments put in the press about the sacked miners not deserving support, at least things were better in the Yorkshire heartland of the union and showed what could have been achieved if a good campaign had been mounted on the sacking issue. Overall in Yorkshire the vote was 54 per cent in favour of a levy. At some pits the support was particularly high - at Goldthorpe it was 90.1 per cent in favour, and at both Fryston and Hickleton it was 85 per cent. At Frickley 903 out of 1,077 miners, 83.8 per cent, voted for the levy.¹⁹ 'There was demoralisation on a large scale,' says Paul Symonds, 'but we went back defiant. And I think that mood of defiance fed into the ballot. That's why I would argue that there was such a discrepancy between Frickley's result and the other pits' results.'²⁰

The loss of the vote did not necessarily mean that nothing could be done about the sacked miners in the better organised pits. By this time a branch levy had already been initiated at Frickley, but the branch had to hoodwink the Coal Board to get this in place, as Johnny Stones explains:

... we couldn't present it as a levy for sacked miners because they wouldn't have stopped it. So what we had to do was increase our pit inspection levy - which was 4 or 5p - and we were going to up it and split it between the sacked lads and the pit inspection. This was another source where pit officials could get about the pit, by making safety inspections. They [the members at a general meeting] overturned our recommendation for - I think it was for a 20p increase - and came in with £1 to be split 50/50, so that we had a 50p levy of approximately 1,100 men. And we paid our sacked lads in the region of £100 a week.²¹

There were other means of helping sacked miners while the branch fought to get their jobs back, as Ray Riley recalls:

... the pit shop was a shop where the lads could go in and buy things and have it stopped out of their wages over a ten-week period. And two or three of the sacked miners used to go in there and help out. So they were keeping in daily contact with the branch and rank-and-file members.²²

In the coming months the NUM leadership campaigned for an amnesty for the sacked miners. Later in the year, at the TUC and Labour conferences, despite the opposition of both the TUC General Council and Neil Kinnock, NUM resolutions demanding that a future Labour government should pardon sacked miners received majorities. In the final analysis, though, these resolutions proved worthless, and it was at pit level that any real progress towards getting jobs back for sacked miners would occur.²³ Below, Jeff Johnson reflects on what this entailed at Frickley:

¹⁹ *Yorkshire Miner*, May 1985.

²⁰ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²¹ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

²² Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

²³ Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, pp.213-214.

... there were about fourteen to start with. But we kept our lads right, And we were able to get people back to work by having to do back-door deals. If we'd agree to this, they would let us have a sacked miner back. It was us that suffered but we got one of our mates back, so we actually thought we'd won something - for me we had, anyway ... Slowly, slowly, we got most back.²⁴

Face to face with the scabs

One of the first issues that concerned the strikers at Frickley on their return to work was the matter of those miners who had broken ranks. There was no mercy shown towards them. Prominent scabs such as Ginty Carr never came back to the pit again. The rest had to be winkled out. Gary Hurst remembers two of the scabs who were uncovered:

... there was a bloke called Ken Shepherd, he was a well-known person down Cudworth seam where I worked. He used to play in the band. I can remember it coming out that he'd scabbed. And he was actually working with us after the strike - but we hadn't a clue. It must only have been a matter of a couple of weeks when we found out he'd scabbed. I remember being told that they gave him a right time on the ramp, queuing up to get out of the pit, spitting at him and calling him scab and all things like that. He never came any more. I can remember another one, Dennis Seats from Doncaster. I don't know if he scabbed to this day, because I've never seen him since two days after we started back after the strike on afters. Now, I used to work with Dennis, in the 69s heading they used to call it. He was a heading man and I was the fitter. And we are all talking around the shaft side waiting to go down the pit on afters one day, and somebody, off the top of their head, said, 'Where have you been all the strike Dennis. We haven't seen you picketing or owt like that?' He just went right sheepish, never said anything, except, 'I was making my own way.' And you never saw him again after that day. But I don't know to this day if he's a scab, nobody ever said: 'Aye, he was a scab,' or 'We've found out that he was a scab.' But he never came to the pit again after that day.²⁵

Although the penalty for shouting abuse at a scab, or even just mentioning the word 'scab' was instant dismissal, this never deterred those who had endured the strike to the end from chastising their detested workmates. Some of the first scabs to be discovered would have a deputy assigned to look after them. Later, such individuals were gathered in teams and made to perform tasks in isolation from the rest of the workforce. Gary Hinchliffe remembers one incident after a management trainee was given the job of supervising a group of strikebreakers:

He'd done his university degree and everything, and he was assigned to look after four or five other men who'd come in during the strike, who we knew about. And he was stood on the pit top with them, underneath where we used to ride the shaft at Number 3s. They were spotted hiding down there. They must've been

²⁴ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

told to get out of the way when the men were there, and to do a bit of cleaning up when they weren't. Anyway, they were spotted. And there was a big tub of chock wood, and the men got these really big pieces of wood and started chucking them down onto them. This man in charge of them screamed up, and so everybody stopped. Everybody thought that there was going to be a big inquiry over this, that he'd go and report it to the management. They'd want to know who was at the shaft side, who saw what. But there was nothing done about it. They didn't come in anymore, these men; they took their redundancy money.²⁶

We have seen already how during the strike the branch was able to get information about strikebreakers from sympathetic members of management and office staff. But this information was no longer forthcoming, as Gary Hinchliffe explains:

Throughout the next few months the union was supposed to be getting information from the people who worked in the time office. Once they got into everybody's wages, seen how much they'd earned in the past year, they'd know who had come to work . . . we left it a month, and then kept pressing the branch to press these people in the wages office. But I think that they'd been warned that they weren't going to refer anything, that it was going to cause trouble. They didn't want it on their consciences if anything went off.²⁷

But the lack of exact information about possible strikebreakers only increased the uncertainty and the suspicion amongst the miners. 'We never found out about a lot of them,' says Robert Walker:

There was nobody gave you a list of names; which really was wrong, because there were people who were getting accused of it. It was a bit upsetting for them, I suppose, if you hadn't seen them for a bit. I think the gaffers put the word around to cause a bit of animosity.²⁸

'There were loads of men who were getting accused,' recalls Tony Short, 'loads and loads.' But:

they always covered themselves. You had got to be 150 per cent sure when you accused somebody of that. You had only got to mention somebody just after the strike and their windows would be put through. Mick Proverb had a scab living next door. His house was done that many times that Mick knocked a post in his own garden with a post saying, 'Scab lives there,' so that he didn't get *his* windows done.²⁹

Every so often the identities of strikebreakers would come to light. 'Whenever it was rumoured that there was a name coming out,' says Gary Hinchliffe, 'these same

²⁶ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁷ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁸ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

²⁹ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

people would stop coming to work. There was one bloke used to work in the headings, "Tony Tunneller", he ducked out and went to live down Nottingham.' One unexpected source of information about who had scabbed was Kenneth Shepherd, one of the first scabs to have been unmasked:

... when he left he took a stall on Barnsley market. Some of the lads saw him; and then the union officials went and spoke to him. He was supposed to be giving the names of people who went in. They used to go through and ask him: 'Look, we've got so-and-so given to us, was he on that bus when you were going in?' He'd say 'yea' or 'nay'. The one who had moved to Nottingham, they went and asked over him. He said 'Yes, he was.' But there were one or two who we have found out about since who he said hadn't.³⁰

Though the most notorious strikebreaker at Frickley Colliery, Ginty Carr, was never seen at the pit again after the strike, Robert Walker recalls that one group of Frickley miners did come across him quite unexpectedly:

Ronnie Cutts was saying that after the strike they all went to Scarborough with the Harlequin Club. Two or three bus loads went. They'd just got off the buses, he says: 'I was just walking down the front at Scarborough, and I heard Melv Wall shout: "You scabbing bastard."' He said, 'And when we all turned round, there's Ginty Carr running up the front.' So everybody dropped their kids and wives and went after him. All the Frickley miners are chasing him up the promenade, throwing things at him; he's got fishing tackle on his back. He jumped in this boat and this bloke's rowing like fuck to get out to sea with him.³¹

Though the desire to root out the miners who had broken ranks probably lasted until the pit closed, the early level of resentment faded as new problems arose. 'There'd been a lot of sitting about and talking, and doing jobs that weren't owt to do with production,' says Gary Hinchliffe:

It was a case of 'idle minds cause idle gossip'. But as soon as the pit got back under way, and they were seriously involved in production, and doing driveages, and fetching faces back, supplying headings and what have you, men didn't have the time to sit about and discuss this thing. It was put on the back boiler. It was still a topic, but the names weren't coming out and being disproved and un-disproved as regular as what they had been.³²

Prospects

The main issue facing miners as they returned to work was about what kind of industry and what kind of working environment they would have to endure following their union's defeat. Some indication was given not long after the return when the Coal Industry Act was rushed through parliament, with the insistence that the NCB

³⁰ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

³¹ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

³² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

must operate without a subsidy by 1987-88. There were other early signs of what lay ahead. By mid-July 1985 twenty pit closures had been announced since the strike was called off. A few of these were in the older parts of the Yorkshire coalfield, but most were located in the North East, Scotland and South Wales. By this time there were some 14,000 fewer workers in the industry than there had been at the start of the strike. Moreover, the figure was changing daily as older or disgruntled miners rushed to claim their redundancy cheques.³³

In the months following the strike, the NCB revealed little of their plans for the future. But most forecasters envisaged a future dominated by job losses and closures. During the dispute the economists Gavyn Davies and David Metcalf had offered what they saw as a compromise between the positions of the NUM and the NCB: the industry should shed between 50 to 60 pits in the following decade. The Davies-Metcalf report - which was hardly comforting for the miners - was thought to be appealing to the Labour Party leadership. A report by Bill Robinson of the London School of Economics had forecast in December 1984 that the Coal Board would have to function with as few as 138,000 miners by the end of 1985 if the industry was to break even by 1987-88. Jonathan Winterton, a lecturer at the University of Bradford and an adviser to the NUM, in a report published just after the strike, calculated that allowing for pit closures and the introduction of new technology into the mines that remained, there could be just 76,000 miners by 1990. Other reports noted factors such as how four new nuclear power stations were due to start producing electricity and that each would destroy between 6,000 to 7,000 mining jobs, and in addition, cheap electricity from French nuclear power stations was soon to be added to the national grid by means of a new underwater link. Also, the further decline of manufacturing, energy conservation policies, and the predicted saturation of the world coal markets by coal mines opened in South Africa, South America and Australia, were all perceived as playing a part in the decline of British coal mining.³⁴ Moreover, somewhere in the future lay the prospect of the privatisation of whatever remained of the coal industry.

Despite the obvious direction of the NCB's industrial relations strategy under MacGregor, some NUM officials still clung to the hope that they played an indispensable role in the industry. For instance, during the strike Jack Taylor had boasted to *Marxism Today* that the Coal Board needed the NUM: 'The one thing they can't do is run a successful coal industry on their own.'³⁵

But with the miners' defeat, one thing now seemed plain: the coal industry would be run with as little interference from the NUM as was possible. The whole argument of the Thatcherite wing of the Conservative Party had been that management ought to control production without any concessions to the trade union bureaucracy. In their view the whole array of consultation and review procedures that had become established on the industrial relations front were an obstacle to revitalising British capitalism. This philosophy, it was hoped, could now be

³³ D. Thomas, 'Paying the price of coal', *New Society*, 12 July 1985, pp.49-50;

³⁴ G. Davies and D. Metcalf, *Pit Closures*, (London, 1984); Lloyd, *Understanding the Miners' Strike*; B. Robinson, 'How large a coal industry?' *Economic Outlook*, December 1984; Thomas, op. cit., pp.50-51

³⁵ *Marxism Today*, October 1984.

consolidated in the coal industry with the defeat of the NUM. David Hart, who, as we have already noted, had the ear of both Thatcher and MacGregor, had no doubts about what was required. On 12 April 1985 he told the readers of *The Times* that the employers had won a great victory and should not let it slip away. For Hart, the main issue of the strike had been whether the NCB had the ultimate right to manage the coal industry. He warned MacGregor not to surrender this fundamental principle now that the strike was over.³⁶

MacGregor had already made it quite plain just what kind of working environment miners could now expect. In an interview in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 10 March, he said: 'People are now discovering the price of insubordination and insurrection. And, boy, are we going to make it stick.'³⁷ Of course this was not the end of any contact with the NUM and especially as a substantial section of the union's leadership were willing to talk with the Board at any price. The NCB made it known that a precondition for any talks with the NUM would be the ending of the overtime ban which had preceded the strike. Consequently, on 2 April a special delegate conference of the union, with the recommendation of the NEC, voted to lift the ban. Talks took place soon after, but it was all too clear that the NCB had one intention: to humiliate the union. On 19 April agreement was reached on pay claims that were outstanding from 1983 and 1984. Miners were awarded two rises of 5.2 per cent on grade rates. But to say that this was a result of negotiations is to overstate matters. The Coal Board simply imposed on the NUM the wage rates it had already agreed with the deputies' union.³⁸

The attack on custom and practice

In line with the attack on the union at national level, activists had been expecting local management to go onto the offensive at pit level. But this appears not to have happened at Frickley immediately, as John Picken remembers:

... there was like a cooling off period. I expected the big stick in the first shift but it didn't come. But they must've been to their head-shrinking school to analyse how to work us, and how not to. Gradually, as things moved on, things got harder.³⁹

Steve Gant recalls much the same.

The deputies didn't dare say a word. They didn't want to upset anybody. They lived in the same village, they knew they had shit on you, they couldn't hold their heads up. They had been paid throughout the strike, the last thing they were going to do was start finding you work and threatening you. That was left to certain overmen, higher-level management who you expected it off. It was like a holiday camp, but it was depressing, you'd lost, and it took a week or two to get it out of your system, to get back to normality... We were hearing from other

³⁶ *The Times*, 12 April 1985.

³⁷ Cited in Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., pp.216-217.

³⁸ Gibbon and Bromley, op. cit., p.76; Winterton and Winterton, op. cit., p.217.

³⁹ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

The return to work

pits that they were stamping their authority straight away. But at Frickley, we were regarded as a militant pit, and they seemed to be a bit steady with us did the management. It took time . . . There was a feeling that it might blow again.⁴⁰

But before long, the assault on the NUM at national level became more obvious. The Coal Board's Doncaster Area director Albert Tuke in particular soon earned a reputation as an enthusiast for the post-strike hard line. Under his authority pit managers in Doncaster tried to claw back on custom and practice that had been won by generations of miners. Johnny Stones tells of a story he came across which sums up management's intentions:

. . . the Area director had all the colliery managers in and asked: 'If you had two wishes what would you wish?' Some said, 'All branch officials back down the pit.' Some said various things: shift changes, shift time changes; things that had been stumbling blocks prior to the strike or they hated at their pit. And these were implemented upon the branches and the members when they went back to work. Ours was a shift change time, I believe, over which we had a mass meeting; and by a sleight-of-hand chairmanship, averted a strike. There was also the reinstatement of sacked lads. That became a problem for other branches as well.⁴¹

The Wintertons have noted that immediately after the 1984-85 miners' strike, senior NCB officials who still sought a more conciliatory approach to industrial relations within the coal industry were either forced into early retirement or replaced in a management reshuffle.⁴² Ray Riley was one of a number of Frickley activists who observed there was a similar process taking place at pit level:

One of the most notable things that happened was - and I heard the same from miners at other pits while I was on the trade union course at Leeds University - a new, younger, aggressive breed of management were brought in to replace those who shared an empathy with the miners, these who came through the ranks to achieve their positions. And that was very noticeable. There was a menacing atmosphere after the strike. You had to watch your P's and Q's, to be quite honest. You had to be careful not to step out of line because management were so confident that they would have sacked you because union organisation then was sort of splintered and very weak as a result of losing the strike.⁴³

In this kind of environment, the miners were to find that management could be intransigent about almost everything now. Robert Walker remembers how management started to lay down the law on matters that had previously been left to the discretion of the colliers:

⁴⁰ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁴¹ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁴² Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, pp.216-217.

⁴³ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

Before the strike it would've been: 'Oh, I think that we should put timber up.' Even stupid things like that needed doing. If they said it didn't, you had to rag up. I've known it where they've said, 'Oh, it doesn't need timber.' We'd say: 'Fuck that,' and put the timber up. Then they would put you in the book and stop your time - and you were in the right. That's how it was getting. They were screwing down on you. Their word was law, instead of talking about it and sorting it out that way.⁴⁴

Established working practices were an obvious target for management,⁴⁵ as Ian Oxley points out:

Bit by bit, we soon realised that management knew how great a victory they'd got: they just took every concession. 'Custom and practice' is the term that trade unions use. As a moderate type of person I found it inconceivable that management could take customs and practices away. It was custom and practice at our pit that if you went down the pit even for five seconds you got paid your shift. There were things like tea breaks - we'd always had a twelve-o'clock tea break. Every concession that we had was removed, and nearly all concessions involved perks, whether it was getting water-money, getting height-money if you work on the surface, whether it's paying your pit checks . . . after that, there were no perks. You were paid and you take it or leave it.⁴⁶

The removal of the concessions for working in water were particularly detested by the miners, as John Picken explains:

Before the strike, if you were working in water you could get a water-note, especially if you worked down Cudworth because it was a colder seam as well as damp. If you got wet, you could go out half an hour early, or you could go out an hour early and lose a certain amount of money. There was the Yorkshire Water rate. But what the manager was doing was not letting us go out of the pit but giving us roof- or floor-money for us to stop down the pit. We didn't want that. Some of lads were wet through. They didn't like it. They'd do anything. They'd spend money on clothing but you couldn't always work in these clothes because the conditions didn't allow you to - in some places it was too hot to wear this type of clothing.⁴⁷

In chapter one we touched on how there was a long-standing tradition of absenteeism at Frickley. According to Robert Walker, 'laking' was tolerated by the pit's management before the strike: 'If you worked five on days and five on afters, you could have a Friday night shift off, because the gaffers knew that was part of the

⁴⁴ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁵ See R. Richardson and S. Wood, 'Productivity change in the coal industry and the new industrial relations', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol.27, No.1, March 1989, pp.43-44.

⁴⁶ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁷ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

tradition; they used to get enough to cover the night shift.'⁴⁸ This certainly was not the case after the strike, as he found out when management tightened up on all aspects of timekeeping:

We used to get our job done a bit early on a Friday - I'd got a job on afters regular. We used to make sure the job was done, get to the pit bottom, and then sneak out. We didn't think that we'd been caught, but we had. The personnel manager had me in. He had a chart up with different colours marked on it. I'd got a yellow mark for laking; something else for being on the sick. Well, I hadn't laked for ages, and I hadn't been on the sick, I thought: 'What's up with him? What are these?' To me they were just different coloured pens. He says, 'It's for coming out early.' I said, 'Well, we knew our job was done.' He said, 'Yes, but you're supposed to stop down that pit.' That's how it got. Before, they would have turned a blind eye to that.⁴⁹

The drift to the right and new realism

That many rank-and-file miners were dispirited in the aftermath of the 1984-85 strike was clearly evident in the large numbers who volunteered for redundancy - it was believed that up to 4,000 of the 12,000 men at Doncaster pits had applied for redundancy by late May 1985.⁵⁰ John Picken remembers that at Frickley some men never returned after the strike:

One miner told me: 'If we lose this strike I'm never going back to the pit. They won't get me back in.' And he didn't go back in. A good lad, a good worker, a good picketer, and I respect what he did. But everybody couldn't do that.⁵¹

The demoralisation was also expressed in the miners' worsening attendance records - despite the clamp down on timekeeping. In mid-August 1985 the NCB claimed that as many as 19 per cent of the Doncaster Area's miners were failing to turn up for work - an increase of five per cent on the pre-strike level.⁵² Adding to the despondency were the constant rumours sweeping through the industry about the future of pits. For example, on 22 May 1985 the *Doncaster Star* told of a rumour claiming uncertain futures at Frickley and two other Doncaster Area pits, Hatfield and Brodsworth.⁵³ And even when announcements about closure were true, there seemed to be little desire to fight to keep pits open. This was illustrated in September 1985 when all but three workers at the Yorkshire Main Colliery, situated at Edlington just outside Doncaster, voted to accept the pit's closure.⁵⁴

Even so, the more far-sighted members of the government could recognise that the miners would not always be in a weak position. A shortage of oil, for instance,

⁴⁸ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁹ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁰ *Doncaster Star*, 22 May 1985.

⁵¹ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

⁵² *Doncaster Star*, 12 August 1985.

⁵³ *Doncaster Star*, 22 May 1985.

⁵⁴ *Doncaster Star*, 23 September 1985.

could improve the miners' bargaining position as it had a decade earlier. And even in the short term, if the pound fell against the dollar imported coal would become more expensive.

Faced with these possibilities, an important part of the NCB's post-strike strategy was to build on the strike-breaking stance of the Notts NUM and encourage a split from the NUM on the lines of the Spencer union after 1926. The division in the union came to a head at the NUM conference in July, when the Notts contingent walked out soon after a vote to dismiss leading Notts officials Roy Lynk and David Prendergast from the NUM payroll for pursuing policies against the union. Finally, in October 1985, the Notts NUM, along with breakaway groups from other Areas, formed the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM).⁵⁵

But even within the ranks of those in the union's leadership who remained loyal to the NUM, it was becoming increasingly evident that Arthur Scargill was in a minority. More and more the message was conveyed that the militant tactics advocated by the union's president were counter-productive. And those who advocated this line were helped because defeatism was now widespread in the rest of the labour movement as well.

Though the miners constituted a far smaller percentage of all trade unionists in 1985 than they had in 1926, their defeat was still a massive blow to the wider labour movement because of the importance of the victories in the 1970s. A common utterance amongst workers now was: 'if the miners cannot beat Thatcher and the employers, what chance have we got?' Indeed strikes fell to their lowest level for fifty years in 1985.⁵⁶ This shift was enthusiastically endorsed by the trade union and Labour Party leaders who had done precisely nothing to further the miners' struggle, and who revelled in this serious set-back to left-wing ideas and militant trade unionism by denouncing the class struggle and pointing to the election of a Labour government as the only hope for working people. In contrast to the enthusiasm felt during the strike, many left wingers began to proclaim that the miners had lost because there had not been a ballot, because of the failure to involve organisations such as the churches, and above all, because of mass picketing.⁵⁷

The main theoretical inspiration for this shift to the right was provided by *Marxism Today*, the journal of the 'Eurocommunist' wing of the Communist Party of Great Britain, which in 1985 was well into the process of splitting into rival factions, a process from which it never subsequently recovered. Crucially, two key left-led Areas of the NUM, Scotland and South Wales, were under Eurocommunist influence. In short, the Eurocommunists' contention was that the labour movement was in serious decline. This was because large numbers of the population no longer identified with collectivism but rather with the ideological appeal of 'authoritarian populism', capital's new form of class rule, and typified by Margaret Thatcher's electoral success. The labour movement, it was argued, needed to adopt drastic

⁵⁵ Winterton and Winterton, op. cit. pp.228-230.

⁵⁶ P. Bassett, *Strike Free: New Industrial Relations in Britain*, (Basingstoke, 1986), p.3.

⁵⁷ Harman, '1984 and the shape of things to come', pp.112-115; McIlroy, *Trade Unions in Britain Today*, first edition (1988), pp.54-56.

changes if the situation was to be reversed. Traditional methods of struggle needed to be abandoned in favour of winning the battle for public opinion.

These 'new realist' ideas had been the basis of the soft left's opposition to the blockade of steel in 1984 and then in forcing through the return without a settlement. In the aftermath of the strike the Eurocommunist attack on 'Scargillism' intensified. In a roundtable discussion between leading NUM Communists in the April 1985 issue of *Marxism Today*, Alan Baker, the NUM branch secretary for Oakdale in South Wales, claimed that: 'Mass picketing was totally counter-productive - in relation to just about everything - but certainly in relation to Nottingham,'⁵⁸ George Bolton, the Scottish NUM vice-president argued that there should have been a national ballot instead of picketing in Notts,⁵⁹ while Hywel Francis questioned 'the very traditional, almost archaic, solely industrial strategy of mass and flying picketing.'⁶⁰

The Area leaders of Scotland and South Wales, and increasingly Arthur Scargill's former allies in Yorkshire, took every chance they had to denounce the NUM president. Only the continuing popularity of Scargill amongst rank-and-file miners restrained them. The common strategy of the Area leaderships was to take advantage of the union's federalist structure by re-asserting their authority in their own coalfields and repeatedly keeping the national officials out of their affairs.⁶¹

Increased productivity

The most important development in the post-strike coal industry was the intention to increase productivity. Just after the return to work, Doncaster Area director Albert Tuke warned Doncaster miners that they had to 'increase production dramatically to protect long-term jobs and make sure the NCB nationally had confidence to invest in future development.'⁶² This objective was expressed in a number of plans issued by Coal Board officials in the following years. First, in September 1985, Ken Moses presented a scheme which committed the industry to a cost ceiling of around £38 for every ton of coal. This target was then endorsed by the 'Wheeler Plan', the brain-child of Albert Wheeler, the former Scottish Area director who had since taken charge of the Notts coalfield. The Wheeler Plan was comparable to the private coal owners' strategy following the miners' defeat in 1926. The hope was produce coal six days per week, introduce four continental shifts of up to nine hours per day, and have coal wound to the surface for twenty-three hours per day.⁶³

Allied to the efforts to humiliate the union at national level was an attempt to circumvent the union at pit level through appealing directly to the workforce and by attempting to recruit mine workers to resolve production problems. One way of doing this was to conduct a propaganda barrage by issuing Area editions of *Coal News* and monthly full-colour newsletters prepared for each colliery. These were

⁵⁸ *Marxism Today*, April 1985, p. 23.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁶¹ M. Simons, 'The enemy within?', *Socialist Review*, October 1986, p.12.

⁶² *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 28 March 1985.

⁶³ Winterton and Winterton, *op. cit.*, p.220; Leman and Winterton, 'New technology and the restructuring of pit-level industrial relations', p.59.

mailed to miners' homes and contained detailed production information and pleas for increased output. In addition, pit managers were given training in 'direct communication' techniques, and team meetings became fashionable after a management tour of American mines.⁶⁴

The NCB's overall aim was to have fewer miners producing more coal per shift, consequently the pit closure programme was relentless after the strike. At those pits that remained open, the NCB sought to squeeze greater output from fewer miners. There was a reduction in the number of faces worked at each pit, and where faces had been re-equipped with new machinery, an increase in the average yardage of faces occurred.⁶⁵

It would be wrong to argue that new realism was only rampant in the upper reaches of the NUM. With the ever-present threat of closure, NUM branches were frequently putting forward the same argument as management: that the best way to keep a pit open was to make it economically viable. Hence within a year of the strike ending Yorkshire pits were breaking world coal production records. David Douglass, the NUM delegate at Hatfield Main, and a miner who prided himself on being a militant, explained in March 1986 how he now saw the way forward:

I've been strongly urging a strategy that the pit must become profitable enough to get out of the danger margin to stop it shutting. This necessarily has made it look like I've changed my point of view. The fact is that the clock had moved on; yesterday's slogan, like yesterday's top coat, does not necessarily suit today's climate. The fact is once the disastrous policy of a return to work without a settlement had gone through we were left with only the overtime ban and guerrilla resistance down the pit as our only strategy.⁶⁶

The Hatfield delegate went on to argue that the guerrilla strategy had meant that branches were forced to fight their own local issues as best they could. Some branches, being war-weary, had offered little resistance:

Cortonwood just surrendered; others like Edlington, a modern pit with years of coal, ran themselves on to the rocks and let the pit flounder because they couldn't see any hope or direction in the Union and the industry. Well, I was determined to not let that happen at our branch. It was clear that unprofitable pits were closing, the Board weren't bluffing.⁶⁷

There can be little doubt that the ideas peddled by branch officials such as David Douglass were widespread and that many of the NUM activists who had manned the picket lines for twelve months were convinced that there was no alternative other

⁶⁴ J. Winterton, 'The demise of collective bargaining in the British coal mining industry', in O. Kourchid and R. Temple (eds), *Cent Ans de Conventions Collectives: Arras 1891/1991*, (Revue du Nord, Lille, 1994), p.189.

⁶⁵ Gibbon and Bromley, op. cit., pp.62-69.

⁶⁶ D. Douglass, 'Letter from Yorkshire, March 1986', in Samuel, et al., *The Enemy Within*, p.236.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.237.

than to increase output. Jeff Johnson, for instance, argues that the Coal Board would intentionally sabotage production at Frickley so that they had the perfect excuse to close the pit. He recalls how he and his workmates responded on one occasion when the management decided to abandon the face they were working:

It might have been the wrong way of thinking about it, but we said, 'Right, we're going to get this coal out. They're not going to shut this face down. That way they're not going to make us redundant.' We'd fought for jobs; why give it up now? So we went on that face and we worked like bloody crazy. For about two months we really made it crack. And we ended up in the top ten of the Yorkshire coalfield for that type of coal. We broke all the production records. So what management then did was - there should have been something like sixteen of us working - they started taking a couple of men away every time, sometimes three, sometimes four. So I would do three jobs: I'd do my own job, then somebody else's and then somebody else's. We were flogging our guts out, but we were earning decent money. They couldn't shut this coal-face down and so next they starved us. They wouldn't supply us with any materials to do our jobs with, and so we stole them from other faces, and pillaged and raided other areas and got our equipment and kept going. And we actually got to the boundary and kept it going an extra five or six months. And they tried every shift to break us.⁶⁸

If such reactions were widespread among miners, it would suggest that management had tamed the miners in the aftermath of the strike. Certainly announcements from the NCB were giving credence to this. In the year after the miners returned to work, the rate of production increased dramatically at Frickley. The workforce, which had been around 1,600 before the strike, had been reduced by a third due to transfers and redundancies, but was still producing the same amount of coal.⁶⁹ In the South Yorkshire Area as a whole, three collieries had closed and there had been a reduction in manpower from 25,947 to 18,102. A Coal Board spokesperson told the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* of 6 March 1986 that in the last three months of 1985 'this Area has made a profit of £9 million after capital charges. If we can maintain this upward trend, we will be in the position to make a clear profit in the year 1986 to 1987. This success can be attributed to a number of factors, such as investment, good seams and the positive attitude by the workforce.'⁷⁰ Writing in the NCB's *Coal News* five months later, Ian MacGregor claimed that '1985/6 has been a year of great achievement for the coal industry. Following the end of the strike, output rapidly recovered and major improvements in efficiency were achieved . . . In large measure this was due not only to the efforts of management but also to the new spirit of realism and co-operation showed by our workforce . . .'⁷¹ And yet though these 'achievements' had been made at the miners' expense, as we shall see, this picture is not entirely accurate.

⁶⁸ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 27 February 1986.

⁷⁰ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 6 March 1986.

⁷¹ I. MacGregor, '1985-6 a year of progress', *Coal News*, August 1986.

CHAPTER EIGHT: FIGHTING BACK

Fighting spirit

Although working life had become intolerable for many miners, and despite the new realists seeming all too eager to surrender to the bosses' demands, in many pits the miners retained their combativity. Indeed, parts of the Yorkshire coalfield were the setting for almost continual class conflict for the remainder of the 1980s and into the 1990s. This resilience was expressed at the official level in late October 1985 when Arthur Scargill supporter Sammy Thompson beat the moderate candidate, John Walsh, convincingly in a ballot for a position on the union executive.¹

Despite new realism having gained a toe-hold in the pits, there was still the possibility that the Board's conduct would provoke retaliations from the miners. In such circumstances the task for NUM activists was to build up the confidence and morale of the rank and file and wait for an issue upon which the miners could fight and win. Indeed, no sooner had the strikers returned to work when disputes began to break out throughout the Yorkshire coalfield. The earliest reported dispute of any note in the Doncaster Area occurred at Askern Colliery on 16 April 1985, when faceworkers walked out and brought the pit to a standstill for five days over bonus payments.² On the last day of the same month there was a potentially more serious flare-up at South Kirkby where management summarily dismissed four men who were alleged to have intimidated strikebreakers. By the end of the week the miners at the pit and at the adjacent Ferrymoor Riddings drift mine were out on unofficial strike. Though other pits in the Barnsley Area were picketed out, the stoppage finally ended when both the Barnsley Panel and the Yorkshire Area executive refused to make the strike official.³

On Wednesday 15 May craftsmen at the Yorkshire Main Colliery in Edlington staged a lightning walkout over wages,⁴ and a week later production at Barnburgh pit was brought to a halt over redundancy offers to miners.⁵ From Thursday 1 August to Monday 5 August the 1,400 miners at Armthorpe took strike action in support of workmates who had been disciplined for walking out over management's refusal to implement the Yorkshire agreement over wet working conditions.⁶ On Friday 23 August Armthorpe was brought to a standstill again, and this time miners at the pit threatened to spread the action.⁷ Five days later, Thurcroft Colliery was shut down over the visit of coal minister David Hunt.⁸ Then production at Rossington Colliery was brought to a standstill for the first two weeks of September

¹ Adeney and Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike 1984-5*, p.302; P. Foot, 'Battle for the NUM', *Socialist Review*, January 1988, p.10; Gibbon, 'The miners' strike of 1984-5', p.186.

² *Doncaster Star*, 17 and 22 April 1985.

³ Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, p.218.

⁴ *Doncaster Star*, 15 May 1985.

⁵ *Doncaster Star*, 25 May 1985.

⁶ *Doncaster Star*, 1 and 6 August 1985.

⁷ *Doncaster Star*, 23 August 1985.

⁸ *Doncaster Star*, 28 August 1985; see also Gibbon and Steyne, *Thurcroft*, pp.256-257.

and work only resumed when management decided to reconsider their decision to scrap a long-standing agreement over the selection of coal-face workers.⁹ No sooner had production begun at Rossington when there was a 24-hour stoppage at Brodsworth on 20 September because of the possibility of management closing underground workings.

Now all of this clearly points to the miners having a degree of confidence after the strike and which the beleaguered NUM needed to tap into if it was to become a powerful force once again. However, defeatism was also evident as well, as the failure to contest the closure of Edlington showed all too well. What could be witnessed was a contradictory consciousness. Because of the NUM's weaker circumstances, and because of the threat of closure and the pressure for increased output, many of the pits just mentioned above were breaking their own production records in the latter half of 1985. But at the same time there was resistance to management's claw back on bonus payments, custom and practice and so on. At Bentley Colliery, for instance, former pickets smashed the pit's individual production record during the week ending 7 September 1985, and yet on Thursday 17 October the pit was brought to a standstill in support of a workmate who had been sacked for allegedly attacking a scab.¹⁰ In the early autumn of 1985 the Doncaster and South Yorkshire coalfields were merged into a new South Yorkshire Area by the Coal Board. By December it was being claimed that output in this Area had shot it to the top of the national production league.¹¹ One of the output success stories of the new Area was Silverwood near Rotherham. But no sooner had it been announced that Silverwood had set a new European coal production record when on 19 December 35 faceworkers walked out in support of nine colleagues at the pit who remained sacked.¹²

Simmering below

The defeat had hit the new layer of militants at Frickley hard and few incidents of outward resistance were reported in this period. 'People were gutted,' says Paul Symonds:

They were beat, it was as simple as that. We just had to watch our step. That's why management could get away with it. They could ask you to do something that you wouldn't normally do, knowing that somebody would do it. And they were pretty confident that there would be no rag-ups. To be honest, the climate was such that if we had ragged-up we would have got ourselves sacked. There was fear after the strike.¹³

The only strike at Frickley to be noted in the press during the remainder of 1985 took place on Tuesday 27 August, and lasted until the following day. Production on the afternoon shift was brought to a halt after two men working in the Cudworth

⁹ *Doncaster Star*, 7, 16 and 17 September 1985.

¹⁰ *Doncaster Star*, September 13 and October 17 1985.

¹¹ *Doncaster Star*, 18 December 1985.

¹² *Doncaster Star*, 19 December 1985.

¹³ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

Fighting back

seam were sent home because of a row with an overman about the length of their meal break. By the night shift both pits were involved. It was reported that work resumed as normal on the afternoon shift the following day after discussions between NUM representatives and the management.¹⁴ This incident may have been the only one to have come to the attention of the local press but other issues simmered below the surface. Ian Oxley describes how a long-standing disagreement over craftsmen's report money came to the fore immediately after the return to work:

. . . they paid the underground craftsmen for writing reports but they wouldn't pay the surface men. We'd had this dispute for three or four years, that we wouldn't write reports. We gave verbal reports but not written ones. Anyway, we'd been back at work at least a week when the instruction came: 'You must write reports, or you will be sent home!' . . . So we had a meeting with the day shift. And the day shift says, 'Look, we'll take 'em on, we'll go home. We've been on strike for a year, we'll give it a run for two or three weeks.' Anyway, we didn't write reports. Our union man, George Parkin actually wrote one. It was crazy, we'd had a democratic discussion . . . But the majority - the shop consisted of about sixteen - were not willing to write reports . . . we were sent home for three days. Eventually, the union had us all up and said, 'Look, you'll get sacked. You've got to realise that we can't support you because we are in such a weak position.'¹⁵

But it soon became apparent to the craftsmen that they could sometimes turn the tables on management if they stuck rigidly to new instructions. Allied to the disagreement over writing reports was the issue over the times that electricians were supposed to report to their workshop. Prior to the strike it had been customary to spend the first half an hour of their shift in the workshop discussing any problems with the men they were relieving and to receive their orders for the rest of the day. Similarly at meal breaks and at the end of the shift they would report back early and talk to their supervisors about any problems. Under the post-strike regime, Ian Oxley recalls that electricians were now:

. . . sent out of the shop at quarter-past six in a morning - we started at six - and we were told that we mustn't return to the shop until twenty-past nine, our snap time. And then we must be out of the shop by nine-forty - that's a twenty minutes snap time, that's including making your tea. And you mustn't come back into the shop until ten minutes to two, when you've got ten minutes to wash off, write your report, and leave the shop at two o'clock.¹⁶

But, 'We just laughed at this,' says Ian Oxley. For electricians to work effectively they needed the freedom to use their own initiative about which jobs took priority: 'Although we had assistant engineers, who were foremen basically, each electrician was his own gaffer.' Some tasks only took half an hour, and when they were

¹⁴ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 29 August 1985.

¹⁵ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

¹⁶ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

Fighting back

completed the electrician would head back to the workshop for further instructions. But now, in retaliation, the electricians decided to stay out as ordered:

... we would go out of the shop at quarter-past six, use the vending machine or other people's snap cabins - there would be two-dozen snap cabins at various places on the pit top, it's huge, it's like a village on the pit top, massive - we'd not return back to the shop while ten-to-two, and make the gaffer find us ... So all those little jobs weren't getting done. And that lasted about three weeks before he put the white flag up and said, 'Oh, just keep the doors locked when you're in so that the manager can't catch you in here.' He backed our team rather than the manager, and we got back then to a good working relationship. And bit by bit we did get back our customs and practices.¹⁷

Back in the union box

Another of the management's measures also backfired. One of the most stark examples of the Coal Board disregarding the NUM at local level was in how most of the branch officials at each pit were now to work down the pit rather than sit in the union office on a full-time basis. 'That,' says Johnny Stones:

was one of the wishes from all the Area directors, from MacGregor downwards, and they implemented that. It left virtually branch secretaries on their own and paid by the union or with one or two shifts paid by the Board on a conciliation basis.¹⁸

Some activists were not entirely displeased with this situation but, because this was a clear attack on the union, backed the demand for the branch officials to be given their former status. As Ray Riley explains:

... this was always a thorny question among rank-and-file militants because they should have done shifts down the pit like anyone else. Before, they'd led a sort of insulated life, they were in the union box five days a week. They were in a position after the strike where the colliery manager insisted that they did shifts underground. And because the colliery manager was insisting, then obviously you took the side of the local officials. And that's what happened after the strike. But it was only a short period of time before the branch officials managed to weed themselves back onto the pit top again. But at the time, because it was seen as an attack on union organisation at the pit, then we were bound to defend the branch officials.¹⁹

In Jeff Johnson's view, the effect of making branch officials work down the pit ran counter to what the management actually wanted. Making the branch officials 'do a shift' gave the men more contact with their union men than they had previously. Also, it:

¹⁷ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

¹⁸ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

¹⁹ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

... worked against the Coal Board because the actual branch officials, to some degree, managed the workforce by keeping the lid on certain disputes: a miner had fallen out with a deputy, they'd resolve that problem; if there were problems with money on the bonus schemes, they'd find out information, work it out properly, go and argue with management, then there would be some sort of payment and things would be right. But the union officials weren't there, and so the men were phoning management directly. So management had a hell of a lot more work to do and we had more contact with our union men. So for me it backfired on British Coal who, after a short period, probably three to six months, started paying our union officials to go back in the union box because they were that fed up of being harassed by the men when the branch officials used to do things for them.²⁰

The post-strike Frickley left

The experience of the strike had ensured that left-wing ideas now had deep roots at Frickley Colliery. It had also brought the militants from the Big Pit and the Little Pit closer together. 'In the twelve months on strike you discussed politics at one level or another - it dominated your lives,' remembers Paul Symonds:

You also built up friendships. And the main militants during the strike did tend to hang around together after the strike - which hadn't been the case before - and obviously things like running for the union, going to union meetings, and what to do in disputes were informally discussed. Sometimes they were formally discussed. There was certainly a focus for the left inside Frickley.²¹

Two main left-wing political strands were now evident at the pit. The first was what could loosely be described as the 'Broad Left' and mainly consisted of members of the Labour Party. The second grouping was the members and sympathisers of the far-left Socialist Workers Party. For much of the time the two groups overlapped and would work closely together.

The Broad Left at Frickley had actually been given a stimulus during the Big Strike when Dave Feickert, the NUM's head of research, and Mick Clapham, the head of the union's industrial relations department and one of Arthur Scargill's long-time Yorkshire NUM allies, invited activists from around Yorkshire to attend a strike activists' meeting at Northern College near Barnsley. 'It would be November time,' remembers Ian Oxley, 'pressure was really piling on':

And looking at the people who were there, they were generally the lads that had been on the trade union industrial relations course at Leeds University ... And basically, it was just a question and answer session from these two research officers from the NUM.²²

²⁰ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

²¹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²² Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

Fighting back

With Scargill rapidly losing the trust of his lieutenants in the Area leaderships, the hope seemed to be to re-establish links with the new generation of rank-and-file activists so as to form a fresh left caucus able to challenge for positions in the union. Indeed, in the wake of the strike, such meetings would form the basis of an attempt to establish an organisation on the lines of the old Barnsley Miners' Forum - the Barnsley Miners' Campaign Group - with meetings at the Junction pub in Barnsley. Jeff Johnson was one of those involved:

... we set off and called it the Barnsley Forum, but these individuals at Yorkshire Area level weren't very happy about it. They could see that we were aping their way to power ... and they actually took out some legal stuff to stop us using the Barnsley Forum as our name. So we changed our name. They'd actually had interviews and made statements in papers like *The Sun*. That really threw us out, that did. So we decided to go to town then. Initially we'd wanted to influence policy, both in the Yorkshire Area and nationally, but we didn't want their jobs. They could keep their jobs. We wanted to stay at pit level and influence things ... But once the Yorkshire Area officials set about us like that, that's when we decided - and there were quite a lot of us - that we'd put up for branch officials' positions and get rid of the old men who had seen it all before and didn't want to try anything new.²³

The Voice of Frickley

The Broad Left were the instigators of one of the most audacious challenges to the Coal Board's post-strike regime at Frickley: the rank-and-file newsletter *Voice of Frickley*. This first circulated amongst the colliery's miners in the final weeks of the 1984-85 strike, re-appeared in late 1985, and was then issued on an irregular basis until early 1987. 'It was published,' says Lawrence Gertig, one of the editorial team, 'whenever we could get enough funds to publish it and the correct sort of information - not just trivia, but issues where it would involve people.'²⁴ Ray Riley was an occasional contributor to the newsletter and remembers that its founders were Vic France and Ian Oxley:

They were Labour Party members, but they were good members during the strike, supportive of the NUM, got off their arses - unlike some others in the Labour Party - and played their part.²⁵

Vic France recalls that the origins of *Voice of Frickley* lay in the activists' meetings at Northern College:

One or two other pits had done it before and we got our lead from them. There was a core group of about five of us got together and said, 'Let's do it, let's put one together and see what it looks like.' We got some people in Doncaster to print it for us really cheaply - about £20 for a thousand. We put the first issue out,

²³ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

²⁴ Lawrence Gertig, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

Fighting back

it was well received and so we thought that we would carry on with it. The other people dropped out. It just finished up with two of us who were the core writers and editors. It was supposed to be a secret who was writing this thing - but it was an open secret: people were coming up to us giving us stories. Even management would give us stories; so it wasn't a very well kept secret who was doing it.²⁶

The editors of *Voice of Frickley* maintained a tight control over the newsletter in line with their own political agenda. 'We were determined that we were going to keep control of it, and not let it get too political,' explains Ian Oxley:

We were going to treat the newsletter in a light-hearted, *Sun* style of reporting. In other words, a grain of truth - if it was a good story - would have been sufficient, if it was regarding the management. But we wanted to inform the workers of the union's side . . . we wanted to get our message across, but not in a heavy political sense of the *Socialist Worker* or *News Line* . . . It had to be brief, nothing more than sixty words, very short, punchy paragraphs, and light-hearted stories attacking 'No-neck', which was Don Clay, the manager . . . We called certain overmen 'Sweet-feet', because they were renowned for having smelly feet. There was 'Bluenose'. Another one was an alcoholic. So we had all these names, and that's the type of humorous tone we ran it in.²⁷

The following extract from the February 1986 issue of *Voice of Frickley*, under the heading 'Here's the best', give us an insight as to the kind of articles which would appear:

When Mr Deaks visited the pit a few weeks ago Manager Clay accompanied him on his tour of the Haigh Moor headings. Manager Clay was on his best behaviour actually talking to men whom he met on his rounds. Presumably this was to show Mr Deaks that he was operating a friendly pit and that everything was back to normal. Manager Clay then got a message that Mr Taylor from Area would be joining them for lunch. He then phoned Mr Webster the Mechanical Engineer and the following was the conversation which was overheard:

MANAGER CLAY: 'Mr. Webster'.

WEBSTER: 'Yes'.

CLAY: 'This is Mr Clay, Mr Taylor will be joining us for lunch. He only likes John West Red Salmon so I want you to go to the Asda immediately and buy a tin. Is that clear?'

WEBSTER: 'Yes Mr Clay but we are broke down mechanically in the Cudworth seam'.

CLAY: 'Don't "but" me. Just get down there and do the shopping'.

WEBSTER: 'Yes Mr Clay'.

CLAY: 'Oh, one other thing, make sure a table is set for four and a white table cloth is used'.

WEBSTER: 'Yes Mr Clay'.

²⁶ Vic France, interviewed by the author.

²⁷ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

Fighting back

We have not managed to find out if Mr Webster got his money back from Clay, but we do know what a mechanical engineer's tool kit consists of - a tin opener.²⁸

In the management's eyes, this was all clearly subversive stuff and so the editors and contributors to the newsletter had to operate in a clandestine manner. Thus issue No 2 of *Voice of Frickley* informed readers that: 'Any contributors names will be kept secret . . . to protect them. At future branch meetings a bucket will be provided at the entrance in which contributions in the form of letters can be placed.'²⁹

Distribution was also a risky business. Ian Oxley describes what was involved in the operation:

. . . it could only be done with the co-operation of NUM members. But I used to actually distribute them. I used to put them in every workman's locker, which involved getting up at two in a morning, coming up to the pit, and putting them in the lockers. But, unfortunately, at the very end, the Coal Board actually to stop this put a security camera in the baths. But, being an electrician, I knew how to switch it off. I used to just go to the fuse box, knock the camera off, shove the newsletters in - which took about an hour - and then as I left I put the camera back on. The camera went to the control room, so the control room man is tied there, all he can do is ring our shop that the camera's off. Our lads knew to ignore it, and sure enough it would come back on and he would think that somebody had been up and mended it. So we got round things.³⁰

There were near misses though. 'One of the managers actually went into the union and said, "I know who it is,"' recalls Vic France:

Geoff Siddons said, 'What do you mean?' 'I know who is doing *Voice of Frickley*.' Geoff Siddons said, 'Tell me, and I will stop it.' But they didn't actually approach us directly about it. The union was actually paying us this £20 to have it printed; but they were denying any knowledge of it.³¹

Even activists who did not necessarily agree with the political stance of the editors saw the value of the newsletter and were willing to contribute articles. Ray Riley was one:

. . . there was a need for some kind of leaflet or information, a short booklet, about what was happening in the pit and putting a correct slant on things; because obviously we were receiving propaganda from British Coal, filling our heads about productivity and how we've got to compete and things of that nature. I was approached and asked if I would like to contribute to this newsletter; which was really good, because there were a lot of arguments taking place underground. Don't think for one minute that all these arguments were won or that people

²⁸ *Voice of Frickley*, No.4, February 1986.

²⁹ *Voice of Frickley*, No.2, December 1985.

³⁰ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

³¹ Vic France, interviewed by the author.

agreed with everything that we were saying. A lot of people claimed that we were talking out of our earholes. But one of the great things about it all was that we had the confidence to do it. And I saw the opportunity, in contributing to this newsletter, of putting socialist ideas over . . . The first article that I wrote for this newsletter involved racism, and I related it to the struggles in South Africa and the struggles we'd gone through in 1984-85 - because at the time South Africa was very much a topical issue, and also, I felt it was necessary to put a good argument over that was anti-racist . . . Quite often you would find copies underground, just lying around, obviously where people had read them and then discarded them. It was really popular, and I thought at the time that it was a really innovative idea and was excellent because it actually came from below, and was published from below, rather than being something that was done from above and handed down.³²

The SWP's argument

It was the realisation of the need to organise from below that was leading some Frickley activists to break from the Broad Left, which was always likely to accommodate to the union bureaucracy and accept some variant of new realism. 'There was now a sizeable handful of us who were in the SWP, and there was also another layer who bought *Socialist Worker* and were swayed by the SWP's arguments,' says Paul Symonds:

And the argument that the SWP put to us was simply this: 'Putting up for union jobs is all right, but only as long as it doesn't entail you giving up your job underground, spending your time in a union office, and spending your time talking to the manager.' We went through these arguments time and time again. Immediately after the strike, it was never really on the agenda. But as we started to get better organised, arguments over standing for officials' posts came up. And that was the party's line on it, that it would be a disaster. We weren't against standing for full-time positions in general, it was about tactics. We'd just had the hiding of our lives, and it was a bad time to put left wingers onto the union because they would be pulled. There would either be nothing that they could do, or we would have been pulled by the management. That argument won the day and so most of the militants never put up for full-time positions, although we did occasionally run the odd person.³³

Sometimes the gap between the two left-wing tendencies could become a chasm; as Paul Symonds discovered when he attended a meeting of the Barnsley Miners' Campaign Group:

Jeff Johnson used to be involved, and Neil Parry and Steve Parry, maybe Vic France and Ian Oxley - the soft left. It wasn't the Militant Tendency or anybody like that who organised it. It was just good trade unionists, Labour Party types. I went to a few of these meetings, but I remember them arguing that the trade

³² Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

³³ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

union laws had got to be obeyed. I remember having a big argument with either Neil or Steve Parry in the meeting, saying that we've got to break the trade union laws. They were arguing that those days have gone, that we've got to accept that these laws are here to stay. They were basically arguing new realism, that we've got to accept the new situation, that we've got to get a Labour government elected. That sort of stand was more widespread than ours, of strengthening your section, strengthening your pit, sticking together, one out all out . . . One of the things that came out of the defeat of the '84/85 strike was that a lot of the left were looking round for another way of fighting. But you can't fight on your knees.³⁴

On the branch committee

Although an influential section of the left at Frickley were wary of standing for full-time posts within the union, they did stand for lay positions on the branch committee - and were increasingly successful in the years following the strike. According to Gary Hinchliffe, the first left militants to get on the Frickley branch committee after the strike were:

Tony Short in the Big Pit. Steve Gant got on the first time that the Cudworth rep came up. Dave Wilson was the Cudworth rep, and Ganty stood against him and got the Cudworth rep's job. Paul Symonds got on the committee. In the next elections that came up, my brother Paul got on the committee.³⁵

Also that first year, and as Steve Gant recalls, 'the president, Keith Proverbs, finished. Steve Tulley took his job. He came off the committee.' And so:

Within the first year after the strike, we had a left-wing president - compared to Proverbs he was, without a doubt. It was a move for the better, and everybody knew it. It showed you that there was still some resistance there because they were electing known left wingers onto the branch. Now whether the men thought that they could do it for them, I don't know, but I just thought that these were the best people for job. They had been active through the strike, they'd been seen as being capable of organising things, speaking at meetings, things like that. That reflected itself in the ballot . . . We put the foundations down for others later. We were starting to run meetings. We were questioning things. We were the ones who were doing all the leafleting. We were the ones who were challenging things at general meetings. Also at that time, a lot more people were showing an interest in coming to general meetings than they had done before the strike.³⁶

Significantly, the increased influence of the left at Frickley Colliery meant there was now a qualitative difference in the whole manner in which trade unionism operated at the pit. For example, in contrast to the narrow sectional view that had predominated prior to the Big Strike, regular pit-head collections were now held for

³⁴ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

³⁵ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

³⁶ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

Fighting back

other workers who were in struggle, even ones from different countries. Also, left-wing activists ensured that wider issues were raised down the pit and at branch meetings. 'Politics was kept very much alive,' says Ray Riley:

People started putting forward motions on abortion, campaigning against David Alton's Bill; what was happening in South Africa; also, the riots in Broadwater Farm in Tottenham. People were making connections with what had happened in our strike, so they could identify with the struggles of blacks in London.³⁷

After the Broadwater Farm riots in the autumn of 1985, 'We actually fetched Winston Silcott's brother, George, up to the pit,' remembers Paul Symonds:

It was a bit weird. We didn't have any black people working at Frickley, and so when George Silcott walked into our canteen that Friday, people's heads turned at this big black bloke. But the thing was, he did a speech and everybody signed the petition about Winston Silcott [falsely accused of murdering a policeman], the branch affiliated to the campaign and gave money.³⁸

Another difference was in how the new generation of left activists intended to behave when they confronted management once they were elected to the branch committee. Ordinary miners had long been cynical about how their representatives sold out once they met management. This was something that Paul Symonds had to consider when he informed an older workmate how he was standing for a post on the branch:

He asked me why. I said, 'I'm going to end all this shit that's been going off,' etc. I suppose I was talking like a typical young militant. But this bloke was a bit older, he says, 'Aye lad, but the trouble is, when you get on you will end up like the rest of them, just sat round talking to the gaffer.' I remember saying to him, 'Well I won't. I am going to stick to my principles.' It was true, there was a level of cynicism about putting up for the union. A lot of them did used to abuse it. They were good blokes most of them, but they did get shifts out of the pit, they got out early, they got put on whatever shifts they wanted, things like that. And once you started accepting favours off management, management expected favours in return when the time came.³⁹

As far as those activists who shared his views were concerned, there would be no more crawling or collaboration with the class enemy. 'I wouldn't dream of having a pint or a sandwich with managers,' argues Tony Short:

I can remember the first year I was on the union, going to a meeting with management at Christmas; there were cases of beer, pork pies and chicken legs laid on. The manager opened the meeting and then shut it - and I'd got loads to

³⁷ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

³⁸ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

³⁹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

bring up that the lads had told me to say. I looked at Gant and said, 'We are not having any of this.' I said, 'Is the meeting over?' 'Yes.' Three of us walked out. But as we were walking up the corridor we heard them say something about us and then all laugh, it wasn't just the management but the union as well . . . they really surprised me.⁴⁰

Mad scramble

In one study of industrial relations in the coal industry in the aftermath of the Big Strike, the authors, Gibbon and Bromley, argue that a great many ordinary miners no longer cared about fighting for their jobs. This, they say, forced NUM branch officials into seeking alliances with pit managers 'who really believe pits can be saved by hard work and greater flexibility.'⁴¹ But were the rank and file now so apathetic that they would willingly accept the requests for increased output? It appears not; as David Douglass found out when he called for greater efforts at Hatfield:

I had to fight to get the branch, and the membership at large, to accept a strategy of trying to make the pit profitable, trying to turn coal, not for the Board's sake, but so that the great cause of the miners' union itself and our contribution to the rest of the working class wouldn't be lost.⁴²

Elsewhere, Douglass has written that he termed his strategy 'Production Plus Disruption', arguing that pits which broke production records were now in a better position to take action, and that this became evident in the strike statistics in the old Doncaster Area.⁴³ But the reality was that Douglass's strategy was nothing other than capitulation disguised in fighting rhetoric. It was also a naive strategy for NUM branch officials to adopt. The belief that giving the Coal Board the output they required would save individual pits from closure ensured nothing other than to enforce the idea that miners at other pits were competitors and thus further splitting the union. In fact, such a strategy promised to undermine any sustained resistance mounted against the Coal Board, because to put up a fight threatened the attainment of production targets that were supposed to ensure a pit's future. And this could be more so when miners wanted other pits to strike on their behalf. All that the strategy promised was a mad scramble to survive at individual pits with no co-ordinated resistance and, importantly, to disguise the fact that there was no real logic as to why many pits headed the Coal Board's closure programme anyway. Striving to make pits profitable in the Yorkshire coalfield also ensured the isolation of pits in South Wales and Scotland which had little hope of meeting the Coal Board's targets. This only played into the hands of the new realists in these Areas who felt obliged to retaliate by accepting management's demands in the belief of improving their own coalfield's ability to compete.

⁴⁰ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

⁴¹ Gibbon and Bromley, "From an institution to a business?", p.81.

⁴² Douglass, 'Letter from Yorkshire', p.237.

⁴³ Douglass, *Pit Sense Versus the State*, p.80.

Furthermore, and as the Oxford economist Andrew Glyn had pointed out in the *Pitwatch* magazine in December 1985, it was all too evident that the NCB's ambitions did not stop at breaking even anyway: 'MacGregor has boasted of increasing output to 4 tonnes per man shift at every pit (an increase of about one third). On this basis the number of miners required to produce 90 million tonnes would be 100,000 or less.'⁴⁴ Besides, British mines could not hope to match their competitors in the energy market. An article in *The Times* in mid-March 1986 noted that oil was far cheaper. Moreover:

The Americans, for instance, can boast productivity of 15 tons per man shift; that is five times the record levels now being reached in British mines and three times better than MacGregor's ambitious target of five tons for achievement by our best pits.⁴⁵

From a world perspective, miners who agreed to their bosses' demands over productivity were in the same situation as a dog chasing its own tail: always chasing but never quite catching up. The employers would always point to the miners in front as the ones to aim for, while those in front would be urged to work ever harder before competitors caught them up. The only answer for the miners was not the David Douglass strategy but to stop the mad dash through effective trade unionism and solidarity, even if the employers had the upper hand and were getting increased output. This is what the most far-sighted activists at Frickley aimed for.

Opposing the Doncaster Option

Much of the reason for the increased output in pits was not due to some faith in keeping pits open through greater effort, but because of the need to pay off debts incurred after twelve months on strike. Bonus payments had formed a large part of miners earnings since the introduction of the Area incentive schemes. Incentive payments were determined by the number of yards of coal cut at the coal-face and based on agreements negotiated by faceworkers. While face and development workers received one hundred per cent bonus, other mineworkers were paid a percentage of that. Because of the manner in which the incentive scheme had been introduced, there were a number of schemes in operation throughout the industry. In Kent and North Derbyshire there was an Area-wide incentive scheme based on the output of the whole Area and which resulted in an equal distribution of bonus payments between pits. In some Areas there were schemes based on individual faces within each pit. In Yorkshire incentive payments were based on the Yorkshire Area Agreement and determined on a pit-wide basis.⁴⁶

Though the Coal Board had been enthusiastic about introducing the incentive schemes to split the coalfields, there was the problem that militant miners could make the scheme work in their favour, as was the case at Frickley and the other Doncaster Area pits. 'They looked into it and found that the Doncaster Area got the

⁴⁴ A. Glyn, 'Planning for chaos', *Pitwatch*, No.3, December 1985, p.6.

⁴⁵ I. Carson, 'Coal: the new trouble in store for Thatcher', *The Times*, 15 March 1986.

⁴⁶ Gibbon and Bromley, op. cit., p.69.

most bonus in the country for the least production,' says Gary Hinchliffe. The NCB's solution was the 'Doncaster Option', which they attempted to introduce at individual collieries from November 1985. 'So then it came to us,' recalls Gary Hinchliffe, 'that if we don't accept this tonnage bonus, the Doncaster Option, they were going to close the pit. They were scaremongering.'⁴⁷ The militants at Frickley could see that the intent was to divide miners by increasing faceworkers' bonuses at the expense of the majority of the other workers in a mine. The Doncaster Option 'Would have been beneficial for me,' argues Tony Short:

I would have been on the top money. They used to put it on this special phone message. Say I was on 08s, it would say, 'Your bonus on 08s is £16 a day. Under the Doncaster Option you would have earned £66 a day. He did that for months and months . . . But it would have meant about 100 men getting all the money, and the rest of the men getting nothing.'⁴⁸

And so the Doncaster Option had to be opposed. Gary Hinchliffe remembers attending a number of branch meetings where the issue was on the agenda:

Geoff Siddons had a big thing over it. Keith Proverbs had left by now, and Steve Tulley was the new branch president. I can remember them being stood on the platform, practically pleading with the men to accept this Doncaster Option. We weren't getting any bonus at all at the time and they were saying that it was the only way we were going to get any bonus, the only way we were going to get any production, the only way that we were going to stop open. And it's the first time, so they tell me, in the history of Frickley NUM, that the men on the floor have not voted with a recommendation from the platform. We'd built up a good network among the pickets. We had a good rank and file at that time. We just weren't going to sacrifice people who were outbye workers . . . They were on the lowest money as it was. We won the argument that we weren't going to take from their share of the bonus to make ours bigger. The platform were in despair. They couldn't believe that they'd been beaten: 'Aye, they'll shut the pit now.' Two months later, it was back on the agenda again. I think Johnny Stones must have tipped Ganty off that there was a three-meeting rule: once something had been debated at three meetings, it couldn't come on the agenda again for twelve months. And that was the only way that we got it stopped. We got it stopped for twelve months. But it reappeared when we got a new manager.'⁴⁹

A turning point

In the early period after the return to work, it was imperative that management were not given the opportunity to dismiss miners with militant reputations. 'Me and Jip [Paul Symonds] decided that we were going to keep our heads down,' remembers Gary Hinchliffe. But because of the countless grievances that arose, this was not always easy:

⁴⁷ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁸ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

They were riding twelve men out at a time, there were around 200 men on a shift. It was taking half an hour to ride the men out. But we were keeping our heads down! We were in the pit bottom, we were due out of the pit at quarter-past one, but it was quarter to two. The undermanager is stood there. Jip was getting madder and madder. And he just flipped: 'Can you just tell me something gaffer. Why does it take you ten minutes to ride us into the pit in a morning, and half an hour to ride us out at night?' I thought: 'Jip, shut up.' We dragged him onto the chair and out. I said, 'You soft bastard.' The next day, we came in and we were convinced that Jip would have to go out and answer to this.⁵⁰

There was a point, though, when it was decided that enough was enough. Gary Hinchliffe was involved in an incident that probably proved to be a watershed in the miners' struggle at Frickley:

For the first twelve months, I don't think that we were in a heading. Then, when we got back into the headings, when we got back on contract, some of the things that we used to get paid for before the strike had been terminated. The men who were the first back on contract would do anything bar go on strike. They would do anything bar argue over their money. We lost 'emergency', which is where you got paid the bonus that you'd earned if you were stood for any reason where it wasn't your fault. It wasn't part of your contract to put water pipes in and lay rails. But when we came to get our first contract, these men had accepted it. If you were stood, they had to pay you waiting time. But they were scrubbing it out, they weren't honouring it. Legally they had to pay this, they couldn't get out of it. So we said, 'Look, we've started this heading as we mean to go on. The first time that he fucks about with our money, we're going.' We weren't going to spend weeks arguing over it like everybody else, going into meaningless negotiations, and end up getting paid a bit.⁵¹

Such a situation finally arose. 'They turned us over for about four or five quid a shift,' Gary Hinchliffe recollects. Immediately the discrepancy was noticed, the men on the unit contacted the union office. The following day they were informed that Clay, the colliery manager, had refused to pay what they were due and so they decided to confront him instead of going down the pit:

He walks in: 'Right, I am not having a £60,000 machine stood idle because you have got a bit of an argument over a couple of pence. That's who I talk with over the incentive scheme, and if you're not happy with him [a branch official], get somebody else to do it for you.' He says, 'You're fucking sacked!' And he walked out of the room. So me and Jip looked at one another, and the union officials went charging after him. So I says to Jip, 'Well that's it then. Fetch the pit out.' We were at the point of no return now. We'd made our decision about what we were going to do: we were having the pit out, we were having the

⁵⁰ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁵¹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

pickets out - we were like three jumps in front of everybody else, me and Jip. We hadn't just got our pit out, we'd got the country out. Anyway, he came back through the door, he says, 'If you go back down the pit, I'll make it a final warning. You'll have your final warning, kick that machine up.' 'We ain't going down the pit, we want our money sorting out.' This took the wind out of his sails . . . So then he went again.

. . . Clay comes back in the room: 'Look, I'm going to tell you lot something, the things that I've done to keep this pit open. Do you know that I've had men come to me who couldn't feed their families during the strike?' Jip says, 'Oh, is that why you were chasing them off the coal stacks when there was all that coal all the way through the strike. Having the security on them, when they were just going to get a few cobbles to light a fire? That's how concerned you were!' 'I didn't do that!' 'You fucking did!' It got into this kind of argument. Jip says, 'You, you're taking the bread out of my kid's mouth, you bastard! That's my money, I've earned it, and if you don't pay it the pit's shutting down.' It was a humdinger of a row. It got to where Jip was throwing chairs about; Clay was banging the table. Clay then storms out of the room. We are left in. We looks out of the window, there's a crowd of men, the afters shift, outside.

Clay came in again: 'Tell those men to go down the pit!' 'I'm not telling them to go down the pit.' So the union went to tell them. They wouldn't go down unless they'd seen one of us out of the room to ask if we wanted backing up. So anyway, they went home. Word had got round that Jip had flattened Clay. Clay said he'd lift the last warning, and he'd pay our waiting time. He'd sit through it again with the branch officials and he'd seriously consider taking up some of these things if we went down the pit. So I think we ended up going down the pit - but most of the afters shift had gone home!

. . . I think that was the first attempt at really digging the heels in over the incentive scheme. Up until then it had been accepted that the manager could do what he wanted. After that it gave everybody the confidence to go in and argue over their money . . . People had just accepted that they couldn't win anything. But we showed them, there and then, that you could; you could resist being threatened and bullied. If you just stood your ground, you were OK.⁵²

In the testimony above, we are presented with one of the advantages of the oral history approach to data collection. Official statistics on industrial disputes merely tell us that here was a stoppage - that is, if the dispute was actually acknowledged - but there is no emphasis on whether its outcome was favourable to the workers or the employers. Statistically, this was just a short stoppage, no different to countless others that took place in the coal industry. But we have seen that for those involved it held greater significance. And it was by standing firm in such a way that the ideas of solidarity and resistance that had gained widespread favour during the course of the Big Strike were retained at the Frickley despite the harsh industrial climate. Thus the foundations were laid for further and more sustained challenges to management.

⁵² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

CHAPTER NINE: THE NEW GAFFER

One year on

A year after the miners had returned to work the Tories' prime strategy for the coal industry, crippling the NUM and streamlining the workforce, seemed well on course. As many as 31,000 miners had left the industry and 21 pits had closed since the strike. Although productivity had been raised massively, uncertainty within the industry remained due to the government's insistence that coal would have to break even; and figures released in late February 1986 showed that as many as two-thirds of Britain's pits did not match the government's criteria for remaining open. Making matters worse, oil prices were falling.¹

The first anniversary of the end of the miners' strike also marked the fifth week of the most important industrial dispute of 1986: the lockout of printworkers working on *The News of the World*, *The Sun*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* as media tycoon Rupert Murdoch transferred his News International operations from Fleet Street to a new printing plant at Wapping in east London.² As many miners now had personal contact with Murdoch's employees from during the Big Strike, and because they felt forever indebted to the Fleet Street workforce for their support, this was a dispute they could not ignore. As early as February 1986 the front page of *Voice of Frickley*, reminding Frickley NUM members of their obligation to the printworkers, asked its readers not to buy any of Murdoch's publications, to pass a resolution at the branch for a £1 a week levy, and demanded that they 'get involved in any demonstration or picket lines in support of SOGAT 82.'³ Tony Short remembers visiting Wapping on numerous occasions:

It was like being in the strike again. I never got involved in the organisation side of it, but I knew that it had to be done - it was the next stage from us. Once they'd thrashed us they were going for them, and they knew it . . . The only thing we could do was go down and do what we knew. We'd get a bus up in the Empire on a Saturday afternoon, and at that time you would get forty or fifty lads in the club. We used to say, 'There's a bus going to Wapping, anybody want to go?' and it used to get filled.⁴

But trade unionism was not supposed to operate in this manner anymore. In fact the News International dispute was the first great test of the new realist approach to combating employers. Brenda Dean, the SOGAT leader, and Tony Dubbins of the NGA, claimed to have learnt the lessons of the miners' strike. They argued that mass picketing and defiance of the law had been Arthur Scargill's folly, insisting that the key to victory in 1986 lay in winning 'public opinion' and stressing that unions were now harmless institutions which needed a few more legal rights. It mattered little that no amount of public sympathy and no amount of 'peaceful picketing' had ever

¹ *The Guardian*, 26 February 1986.

² H. F. Gospel and G. Palmer, *British Industrial Relations*, (London, 1993), p.215.

³ *Voice of Frickley*, No.4, February 1986.

⁴ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

won an industrial stoppage.⁵ In the event, the dispute dragged on for a year and the finally collapsed.⁶ However, as Paul Symonds stresses, the respect for the printworkers continued long afterwards at Frickley: 'Up until shutting, Frickley Colliery was a *Sun*-free zone, after Murdoch sacked them. It was a detested paper.'⁷

More 'rag ups'

At the end of April 1986, the National Coal Board (soon to be renamed British Coal) disclosed that its financial position had been transformed - a deficit of £875 million in the year before the strike had been reduced to just £50 million. But those miners who saw a let up in the onslaught in all of this would have been bitterly disappointed. The industry's competitive position was said to have deteriorated because of the fall in oil prices, thus a further four pits were to close and three more were in the appeals procedure.⁸

But the anger and frustration at such announcements, and the continuing determination to hold the line against the pit management, meant that local stoppages were still prevalent in Yorkshire. In mid March there was a protracted strike at Woolley over bonuses, which the miners won. And just afterwards, at Thurcroft, a pit that had been split down the middle at the end of the Big Strike, the miners walked out after they found out there were two UDM members at the pit, eventually forcing one of the men to re-join the NUM and the other to transfer to Creswell in Derbyshire.⁹ There was a strike at Redbrook Colliery on 2 April to prevent management picking who should be transferred to other pits in the Area, and one at Wistow in the Selby coalfield after Easter when miners claimed they were being forced into working harder for less money. Again the pit management were forced to back down.¹⁰ On 9 April the day shift and the afternoon shifts at Hatfield stopped work because some men had been forced to work with scabs.¹¹ Perhaps the most significant dispute in this period was a week-long strike at Armthorpe, which began on 19 May after a solitary miner - a well-known militant who had received three warning letters for 'ragging up' - picketed the pit to a halt over his own and another miner's dismissal. Armthorpe militants then picketed nearby Bentley Colliery. However, the strike came to a conclusion when the South Yorkshire Panel announced that support would only be forthcoming after three weeks. And so while there was evidence that basic trade-union principles were still being honoured, there was also evidence that many NUM branch officials had moved to the right.¹²

Scargill isolated

This drift to the right within sections of the NUM was at its most stark when the Yorkshire Area leadership neglected to invite Arthur Scargill as a speaker to the

⁵ *Socialist Worker*, 1 February and 8 March 1986.

⁶ Gospel and Palmer, op. cit., p.216.

⁷ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁸ *The Times*, 30 April 1986.

⁹ *Socialist Worker*, 5 April 1986.

¹⁰ *Socialist Worker*, 12 April 1986.

¹¹ *Socialist Worker*, 19 April 1986.

¹² *Socialist Worker*, 24 and 31 May 1986.

Yorkshire miners' gala in June. Nevertheless, the union's president did receive a hero's welcome by the rank and file when he made an appearance.¹³ It was a similar story too when Scargill addressed the NUM conference in Tenby just afterwards, listing the demands the miners should expect if Labour returned to office. Among these were the reinstatement of all victimised miners and the restitution of all the union's assets seized by the courts. He criticised those who claimed there were alternatives to industrial action. 'With this government,' he said, 'no amount of new realism, persuasion or silent protest will shift it. Only direct action which carries economic impact can do that.'¹⁴ However, according to *The Guardian's* labour editor, Keith Harper, Scargill's remarks were greeted with 'little enthusiasm. Some delegates, notably from Scotland and Yorkshire, either clapped politely or remained silent.'¹⁵ Even *Socialist Worker*, which backed Scargill's attack on new realism, was forced to admit that the new realists were 'more in tune with majority opinion in the pits than the NUM president.'¹⁶ The problem was that Scargill spoke in the abstract, and did not stress what action was possible. Neither did he put any emphasis on the increasingly large number of local stoppages that were breaking out as the way forward and declare that the union should support all of these in the future. In private Scargill probably welcomed the mounting resistance in the Yorkshire coalfield, but this was never made public. He remained trapped because of his adherence to working within the official machinery of the union which he thought he had captured for the left. To have backed the wildcat strikes would have meant defying the Area leaders who were doing their utmost to dampen down the resistance.

In August, there were a further three days of disruption at Armthorpe involving around 200 men; there were two 24-hour strikes at Hatfield - the latter one for the reinstatement of the pit's three remaining sacked miners; there was an overtime ban in operation in South Wales; and resolutions demanding an overtime ban were being passed at branch meetings throughout Yorkshire and Durham as frustration mounted over NUM members going almost two years without a pay rise.¹⁷

Frickley's first notable stoppage for almost six months also occurred in August, on the 22nd, when the presence of Ken Moses, now British Coal's technical director, sparked off a 24-hour lightning strike at the pit because of his role in the Big Strike: 'As the official party toured the coal face at 9.10am, disgruntled miners started to walk out, refusing to work on. Their unofficial strike brought the pit to a standstill for three consecutive shifts with an estimated loss of 3,000 tonnes of coal production.'¹⁸

Uncle Bob

In September 1986 the aged Ian MacGregor retired from the chairmanship of British Coal to be replaced by Sir Robert Haslam, formerly the deputy chairman of ICI,

¹³ Simons, 'The enemy within?', p.12.

¹⁴ *The Guardian*, 1 July 1986; *Socialist Worker*, 5 July 1986.

¹⁵ *The Guardian*, 1 July 1986.

¹⁶ *Socialist Worker*, 5 July 1986.

¹⁷ *Socialist Worker*, 2, 23 and 30 August 1986.

¹⁸ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 28 August 1986.

chairman of Tate & Lyle, and latterly chairman of British Steel. According to *The Times*, 63-year-old 'Uncle Bob' had a 'manner and style' that were 'a world apart from that of Sir Ian.'¹⁹ Nevertheless he still promised to be a formidable foe for the miners; indeed he had actually been Margaret Thatcher's first choice to take over from Sir Derek Ezra as chairman of the NCB back in 1982, but only a serious illness had ruled him out of contention.²⁰

Haslam's 'manner and style' were evident almost from his first day in his new post. On 8 September, without consulting the NUM, Haslam imposed the previous year's disputed pay deal on the union. As a result, all members of the NUM were to be paid an extra £8 a week, back-dated to 1 September.²¹ Although this seemed as if the new coal chief had ridden roughshod over the NUM, the reality was that in giving a rise of such proportions, Haslam showed he was wary of the miners' potential power and was hoping to buy peace in the pits by attracting the support of the NUM's Area leaders. But this promised to be a dangerous trap: at British Steel Haslam had slashed jobs and wages just as effectively as MacGregor had.²²

The end of Clay

There was also a change of personnel at the head of Frickley's management team in this period. Throughout 1986, Frickley, like other South Yorkshire Area collieries, was constantly breaking production records. But British Coal was intent on squeezing even more output from its workforce. Rank-and-file activists at Frickley may have beaten off the initial efforts to introduce the Doncaster Option incentive scheme at the pit but the issue never went away. Gary Hinchliffe remembers that:

As far as Clay could see, and the Area manager, the root of all the problems at Frickley was this infernal, out of date, useless incentive scheme. 'Let's replace it and have a simpler one that hasn't got all these man-minutes and stipulations. We are going to make it simpler,' this was their argument . . . There was nothing wrong with the incentive scheme that we had. It was their plan. They invented it. They sold it to us. This was the package. We all contribute by putting something into the pie, we all get a cut of the pie. 100 per cent for them on the face; 60 per cent for those inbye; 50 per cent for them at the bottom of the gate; 40 per cent for those on the pit top. We all put in, we all got a share out; for everything.²³

But once they had been given the example of how to stand their ground against the pit manager, 'People then started to kick up against Clay,' recalls Gary Hinchliffe.²⁴ Steve Gant remembers how there were numerous small-scale disputes over bonus payments in the final period under Clay:

¹⁹ *The Times*, 14 August 1986.

²⁰ *The Times*, 14 August 1986.

²¹ *The Guardian*, 9 September 1986.

²² *The Guardian*, 9 September 1986; *Socialist Worker*, 13 September 1986.

²³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁴ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

... each face and each heading had their own task, and their own disputes and their own arguments. These were all more or less taken up individually. If the manager increased the production norms *carte blanche*, then it would be a pit issue. Other than that, they were to do with individual units and individual faces arguing over their own conditions they were working in. Most of these got sorted. Occasionally they would get no joy, Clay would give them no more - and that would be it: phones would ring, people would be out of the pit. It would then roll round 24 hours. We made that more or less the unofficial union policy: that once one shift had gone back, it would roll the whole 24 hours, so that we had all been the same, we had all lost a shift. We stuck together for that 24 hour. They knew then that if a shift was sent back on afters, the night shift wouldn't work and the day shift wouldn't work the following morning. They were going to lose 24-hour's production if it got that far.²⁵

With mounting unrest under his regime, at the end of September 1986 Donald Clay was finally despatched to Silverwood and replaced by new manager Tony Lawson,²⁶ or TL as he became known.

TL

Tony Lawson was to become a legendary figure to every Frickley activist. There was only one reason why he had arrived: to put a stop to their influence. And it was soon evident to the activists that the new manager had done his homework as to whom were the likely ringleaders in the pit. Tony Short recalls the first time he met TL:

The first time I saw him was down the pit. He used to wear blue overalls. He always had knee pads on and a stick. He came on the unit and asked for me, 'Who's Short, who's this with the big mouth?' That's exactly what he came out with! Of course, I'm laid in the chocks spitting baccy, not taking a bit of notice of him. He came with that attitude: 'I'm the manager, you'll do whatever I say.' I think we were on 05s and I was supposed to be cleaning up in front of a chock and I wouldn't do it because it was snap time. When Lawson came down with his cronies, Terry Bradley was shovelling up. He pulled the chock in the wrong way and knocked all the clogs off at the back. We couldn't have done owt worse when he first came to meet us!²⁷

Vic France, the co-editor of *Voice of Frickley*, was similarly surprised at the new manager knowing who he was:

I remember that he'd picked up on my name, and he'd only been there a few days. I was working in the surface compound and he was walking across the gantry, and some guy who worked in the compound didn't have a helmet on. Suddenly I heard this voice shouting: 'Vic!' I looked up and there's this Lawson guy. I'd never even seen him before, but he was telling me to tell this guy to put his helmet

²⁵ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

²⁶ *Frickley Newsletter*, October 1986.

²⁷ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

on! So he'd obviously gone out of his way to find out who he might have problems with . . . He must have seen the issue after Clay left: 'Good riddance to bad rubbish.' And the word that we got straight away was that he thought this was slanderous, and that he wanted something doing about it. So that may have been how my name had filtered through to him. But I was surprised that he had shouted my name when he hadn't even seen me before.²⁸

At the top of Lawson's blacklist were the prominent Socialist Workers Party members Paul Symonds and Steve Gant. 'He knew about me before we actually met!' recalls Steve Gant.

I was on the consultative committee, and when they were introducing people round the table to the new manager, he said, 'Oh yes, Steve.' So obviously he'd been in my records, and had been told where the problems were coming from. There wouldn't have just been me. He would have known about Paul Symonds, and what he called 'The Niggers' Clock'. He was going to stop that, because he said that they were the ones who were running the pit: 'Them under the clock in the Niggers'. That was one of his quotes. Plus, at that time, they fetched in that Mr Deans. He was a bastard as well; another one who came with the hard-headed approach. He was the undermanager. He was going to stamp it all out, all this militancy. He was going to have no shit off anybody.²⁹

It was not long before Steve Gant clashed with his new adversary:

We were in a consultative committee meeting - it was about two years after the strike - that consisted of the deputies, management and the unions. We were sat in the office, Lawson came in. I had a sheepskin coat on. It was one that I used to go picketing in, and I still had Coal Not Dole badges on it. Lawson sits down, opens the meeting. The first thing that he says is, 'Steve, can you take that coat off?' I said, 'Why? What's the problem?' 'You're offending me with your badges. Take your coat off!' I said to him, 'The coat's stopping on. The badges were on before you came, and the badges will be on when you go. My coat is stopping on.' He said, 'Well leave the meeting.' I refused. I said, 'If it offends you that much, you leave the meeting.' He did! He jumped up and walked out like a ten-tonner, and banged the door behind him. We heard an all-mighty crash down the passage. He'd actually kicked a door off the hinges further down the corridor. Everybody in the meeting was looking at each other: 'His fucking head's gone!' It had. He'd lost his head.

About ten minutes passed, we are sat there, no meeting, wondering what's going off. Steve Tulley said, 'I best go and see what's going off.' He went out to try and find him. He couldn't, so he came back. He said, 'Fucking hell. He's kicked the door of the hinges, and there's a right hole through it. He's gone upstairs back to his office.' About twenty minutes passed, and we are still sat there in this non-meeting, before Lawson decides to come back down - he must

²⁸ Vic France, interviewed by the author.

²⁹ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

have dipped his head under some cold water. He came back into the meeting, the first thing that he does is apologise, 'I'm sorry about that, I shouldn't act that way. I apologise to everybody concerned. My mistake. I will now declare the meeting open. Will you take your coat off Steve, just for this meeting?' I said, 'No, I won't take it off.' Then he just carried on with the meeting regardless. That was one of my first clashes with Tony Lawson. But when you've got a man's blood boiling that much, you know that there's going to be some kind of revenge coming somewhere.³⁰

The 'will to win'

Writing in the management's *Frickley Newsletter* of October 1986, Tony Lawson explained what he expected from his subordinates:

I was appointed Manager on 29 September 1986, which I proudly accepted, to become part of what I feel, at this stage, is a team of Management, Officials and Workmen with a WILL TO WIN in an ever more competitive atmosphere . . . We are currently losing just over £1 million and if we can continue with our current good performances, we can eradicate the deficit by the end of October/Week 1 of November. Over the next few months, I shall be looking to bring our operating costs down to an acceptable level.³¹

Gary Hutsby would become active in the NUM during Lawson's reign at Frickley. On his very first contact with the new manager he was given an exhibition of what exactly the 'will to win' entailed:

The first time that I ever laid eyes on this bloke was when I was on a button . . . he says, 'What's your name?' I told him. He never introduced himself. All I knew was that he was this right big bloke who had got a stropy attitude about him. I thought that this had to be the new gaffer. He started ranting and raving about the rollers being made up with dust and muck and that it was a hazard. I had cleaned the outer edges of the rollers, but right in the centre of the belt, where the central rollers were, it was made up solid. I said that I had cleaned the outer edges but - and I shouldn't have been doing this anyway - the shovel that I had was too big to get into the centre of the rollers in the middle of the belt. I remember him saying, 'Well this isn't good enough.' I said, 'What do you want me to do? Do you want me to stop the job?' He snapped at me something like: 'There's no need to stop the job!' And then he got on his hands and knees, and he got this wooden wedge that they used to stick under tram wheels to stop them rolling, and he shoved the length of his arm into the rollers and started hacking at this muck with this wooden wedge. I just thought, 'You are fucking mad. You deserve to get your arm torn off.' And then he turned round and said, 'See, it's that easy.' I just said, 'Aye, all right.' Then he went off to the face.³²

³⁰ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

³¹ *Frickley Newsletter*, October 1986.

³² Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

Other men were also given exhibitions of the standards Lawson expected, as Robert Walker recalls:

Some of the lads were in the yard. It was pissing it down and they asked for some waterproofs and some warmer clothes. This day it was freezing, and he went down the yard with no top on, bare-chested, walking round the pit yard saying, 'It's not that cold, what's up with you?' But then he was going back to his office. That's the sort of bloke he was.³³

Intimidation and bullying were central to Lawson's whole approach. 'He set off by attacking the deputies,' remembers Paul Symonds:

Pits are hard places to police. People are working in the ends of dark tunnels, and so it's not as if they can stand over you and watch your every move. The main management instrument for policing you was the deputies. There was one deputy for every unit. By and large, a lot of deputies were either sympathetic towards us or they were intimidated by us, and they just wanted something to write in their report book at the end of the shift. I think that Lawson cottoned onto this and so he started making their lives a misery. And obviously, in turn, they started to make our lives a misery. So Lawson, very quickly, became very unpopular. Just in terms of his size, he was big; and he was loud. The deputies used to quake in their boots near him. One deputy told us about an occasion when Lawson was coming onto a unit, and written on the bars and the rings was: 'Lawson is a bastard,' 'Lawson, we hope you die of cancer,' general abuse about the manager, which was a common thing. Lawson saw all this graffiti and he shouted this deputy over, he shone his light at it all and he said, 'Look at these for references kid. That's when you know that you are doing a good job!' That's the sort of bloke he was. He took great pleasure out of people hating his guts.³⁴

Tony Short recalls a bizarre incident when a member of the management team was ridiculed during a special meeting one Saturday morning: 'He was sat there, and his personnel manager came in wearing a track suit and T-shirt. And he made him go out of the room and put a tie on over his T-shirt! He was one of those types.'³⁵ Tony Lawson seems to have favoured British Coal's strategy of circumventing the union, as Gary Hincliffe testifies:

He'd come down, open the snuff tin. He'd stand and have a talk with you. His way of running the pit was to have his officials frightened to death of him, but the men thinking that they could talk to him. He'd come down to me regularly and say: 'Now then Gary, how are we?' . . . There was no difference between him and the right wing on the union. He didn't agree with what was going off; he didn't vote Tory: 'But we've got to keep Frickley open until the next Labour government. The best way that we can do that is to sell all our principles down

³³ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

³⁴ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

³⁵ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

the river, cut in overtime, go against everything that Yorkshire Area says. Let's have the tonnage bonus in.' He never stopped trying. He worked at it all the time. Behind everything that he did, that was the ulterior motive. He used to try - and he was very successful at it as well - to divide the union officials away from each other. He'd certain people on the branch who he could pull away and use. It was like listening to one or two on the branch, listening to Lawson. He browbeat and bullied Steve Tulley. It ended up where he pulled him away from the rest of the branch. You didn't dare trust Steve Tulley in a room with TL.³⁶

Lawson's approach seemed to be paying dividends almost immediately he took charge at Frickley. On 20 November 1986 the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* proclaimed that 'Frickley tops the production table' in South Yorkshire. Output at the pit had reached 6.6 tonnes per manshift compared to the national average of 3.5 tonnes. The pit's new chief told the paper that:

... for the first time Frickley output has topped 30,000 tonnes, putting it in the big league. We want to be able to do it consistently because I believe we have the potential to stay amongst the big hitters. The aim is to turn Frickley into a 1.5 million tonnes a year mine, bring down production costs and produce regular good bonus money for the miners.³⁷

Over the following months the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* would consistently carry reports of the South Yorkshire Area's, and in particularly Frickley's, productivity achievements. On 31 December it was reported that Frickley's driveage record had been 'smashed' by development workers who had completed 100 metres of roadway in five days. This was 10 metres further than the previous record set a year earlier. The report added that 'each of the 15 men has been presented with one of the pit's yellow jerseys by Mr Lawson in recognition of their outstanding achievement at the pit.'³⁸ At the end of March 1987 the paper announced that a new pit record of 31,179 tonnes had been set the previous week by the 1,090 men at Frickley and that the colliery was on track to break the million tonne barrier for the first time for over a decade.³⁹ Then the May issue of *Coal News* proclaimed that the pit had indeed re-joined 'the coal millionaires club'. It was a 'super-human effort' stated Tony Lawson.⁴⁰

But these reports in the press about new production records did not always impress Frickley militants. As Gary Hinchliffe explains:

One of the things with Mr Lawson was that he was very good with the accountancy figures. If he wanted records to be broken, they could be broken . . . There was production borrowed from the year before. We were still paying some of that million tonnes back three months into the following year. If he wanted a

³⁶ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

³⁷ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 20 November 1986.

³⁸ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 31 December 1986.

³⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 26 March 1987.

⁴⁰ *Coal News*, May 1987.

heading to do 100 metres; that heading did 100 metres. But the point that every other heading didn't do any yardage didn't seem to matter . . . He put units onto three shifts, so that it meant that faces were back before we'd got headings to replace them. It was a propaganda exercise. He was good at them, was TL.⁴¹

Part of the propaganda exercise was that miners would be presented with special awards, such as ties and yellow jerseys, for outstanding performances. But not everyone was thankful. 'I never used to go and collect owt from the office,' says Robert Walker:

I got a tankard and a bottle of beer. My tankard and bottle of beer must've got knocked down when they knocked the pit down, because I never went to collect it . . . They were trying to slap a carrot in front of you. But a bottle of beer! It's just taking the piss, isn't it?⁴²

Tony Short held the same sentiments:

I never collected one in my life. They had tankards, they had bottles of beer, if you attended all year you got a pen. I never used to have time off, but I would miss a shift on purpose because they would put your name in newsletters or on the phone. I told the management, 'I don't want my name going in anything like that.' There would be 'King Arthur' - that would be Arthur Thorpe - or 'King Cuffy' set so many rings. Some of the men used to love it. They would give you a yellow T-shirt with a daft slogan on it if you did four or five bars or five strips in a shift. Paul Sharpe did the best thing, he got his tankard, took it in to the blacksmith, put it under the jack-hammer, flattened it, and nailed it to the door.⁴³

Not surprisingly, discontent soon started to surface over Lawson's manner and style, as Gary Hinchliffe remembers:

as TL came in, Geoff Siddons went out. They might have overlapped for a couple of weeks. And Johnny Stones returned to the pit [after a heart attack]. And within a month, I would say, Johnny Stones and TL were at loggerheads. Lawson came up with 'The Frickley Money Spinner'! Johnny Stones was staunch Yorkshire Area policy and the Yorkshire Area Incentive Scheme. He couldn't budge Johnny off it. In the end, he refused to sit down and negotiate with Johnny over the incentive scheme. He wouldn't sit down and go through the sheets like Clay had done . . . Lawson had disputes on his hands within the first month over this; back and forward, he wanted to deal directly with the men.⁴⁴

Well within a year of the new manager being appointed, his aggressive manner would rebound on British Coal in spectacular fashion. But before we come to that

⁴¹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁴² Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

⁴³ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁴ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

we need to examine other, wider issues in the industry which were also preparing the ground for this showdown.

Margam

One issue dominated NUM politics for much of the spring of 1987: the decision by a South Wales Area conference in Porthcawl on 7 March to agree to six-day working at the proposed £90 million Margam superpit.⁴⁵ South Wales president Des Dutfield justified the decision to abandon conditions that had been in practice since 1908 by arguing that, 'if we don't accept six-day working we give the UDM and other unions a beeline to get into South Wales.' Labour leader Neil Kinnock praised the move for its 'courage and foresight'.⁴⁶ But NUM militants at Frickley did not quite see it in this way and so travelled down to Wales to lobby the South Wales delegates. 'We just saw it as the thin end of the wedge,' argues Paul Symonds:

that it was going to lead to six-day working, that you would have to work on a Saturday afternoon or a Saturday night - and it would be compulsory. It was part of the general offensive by the Coal Board. If they'd have got this in South Wales it would have ended up coming in everywhere. We found out the night before that the Welsh NUM were going to vote on it. We got a call - it must have come from Scargill - to get as many miners as we could down there to lobby their meeting. And we did. They were arguing for it. Big rows were starting to emerge inside the NUM. People had talked about new realism and stuff, but this was the first place where the NUM was accepting six-day working in the pits.⁴⁷

The renewed sacked miners' campaign

The Welsh decision may have been a blow to the militants, but not everything was going the new realists' way in the industry. Given the significance of the miners' defeat in 1984-85, the mounting resistance over day-to-day issues in the pits was phenomenal. There had been as many as 237 stoppages involving 65,700 workers in the coal industry in 1986. Eight times as many working days had been lost to strike action in coal mining than the average for the rest of British industry. Speaking in February 1987, a worried Sir Robert Haslam complained that there were only 15 of the country's 125 pits which had not witnessed strike action during the previous twelve months. Nearly two-thirds of lost production had been in Yorkshire pits.⁴⁸ 1987 promised to see a similar high level of struggle.

One of the first major stoppages that year began on 16 February when 3,000 miners in the £1.4 billion showcase complex at Selby stopped work for a week over lost bonus payments, a dispute described in *The Guardian* as 'the tip of the iceberg of grumbling discontent in the coalfields'.⁴⁹ In the first few days of April there was

⁴⁵ A. J. Taylor, 'Consultation, conciliation and politics in the British coal industry', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol.19, No.3, Autumn 1988, pp.228-229.

⁴⁶ *The Guardian*, 9 March 1987; *Socialist Worker*, 14 March and 4 April 1987.

⁴⁷ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁸ *Coal News*, February 1987; *Socialist Worker*, 7 March 1987; *The Guardian*, 17 February 1987; *The Times*, 19 February 1987.

⁴⁹ *The Guardian*, 17 February 1987.

disruption at Armthorpe after deputies were found to be carrying out electricians' duties.⁵⁰ During the following week there was a one-day strike at Brodsworth and a two-day strike at Frickley, on 9 and 10 of April, over high levels of coal dust. Workers on one particular face at the pit had suffered high levels of dust for a number of weeks. The men had been finishing early to clean the dust out of their eyes, but management stopped this. These miners then called the rest of the pit out in support. A union meeting decided to go back to work but agreed to refuse to work in areas with high dust levels. The Frickley miners also passed a motion demanding that the Yorkshire Area instigate an overtime ban as part of the campaign against the Wheeler Plan.⁵¹

The resistance to British Coal's attacks was not limited to Yorkshire pits. In mid-April both UDM and NUM members walked out in a 24-hour strike at Ollerton after an injured miner had his wages stopped. And on 21 April, seven of the eight pits in Staffordshire and Warwickshire struck for 24-hours for the reinstatement of miners sacked in the Big Strike. Around 8,000 miners were out, more than actually came out in 1984-85.⁵²

On Friday 1 May miners at the old Doncaster Area pits of Askern, Hatfield, Armthorpe, Rossington, Goldthorpe and Frickley collieries also took part in a 24-hour stoppage in support of sacked colleagues after they were greeted at the pits by picket lines manned by sacked Kent miners.⁵³ Paul Symonds was mid-way through his shift on days when he received a phone call explaining that there were some Kent miners picketing the pit:

There wasn't just me who was a committee man knocking about, there were people such as Paul Hinchliffe. We decided that we shouldn't be underground when we'd got pickets at the pit, so we came out on strike. There were some men working in a heading - they were road men - somebody said that we had better tell them. We couldn't get in touch with them by phone so we put a conveyer belt into reverse and I went down to them. I was wondering if I would end up having a big argument with them, I didn't know how they would take it, they weren't known as militant men. I got there, they said, 'What's up?' I said, 'Come on lads, get your coats on, some Kent miners have put a picket on the pit.' I'd been wondering how I would convince them but they just said, 'Right, that's it let's get our coats on.' They just downed tools straight away. I was over the moon about this.⁵⁴

The sacked miners had arranged a follow-up meeting at Armthorpe Miners' Welfare Club that day. But the contingent of Frickley miners who went there soon found themselves at odds with the tactics envisaged by the Kent miners. The most prominent personality among the sacked miners was Terry French who had just served a prison sentence for his part in the Big Strike. 'He seemed to have got this

⁵⁰ *Socialist Worker*, 11 April 1987.

⁵¹ *Socialist Worker*, 18 April 1987.

⁵² *Socialist Worker*, 2 May 1987.

⁵³ *Yorkshire Post*, 2 May 1987.

⁵⁴ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

plan, and there was no way on earth they were going to deviate from it,' recalls Steve Gant:

Their strategy was going to be wildcat strikes. Nobody knew where they were going to hit and nobody knew when, so that management couldn't campaign against them. But you might not see them for a week or two, and then they could go into the Barnsley Area, hoping to shut that down for a day, move to another Area a month later and shut that down for a day. Though we argued that any action is better than none, and they had shown the support was there by shutting the Doncaster Area down, we said that if they were really serious about defending the sacked miners . . . once the ball was rolling, shut it down properly. We were arguing this in the meetings. But they would never deviate from their line. We found out afterwards that the instructions for this had come via the national executive. That was how they saw that you should run these disputes. It had actually been planned at a higher level than Terry French. It had been planned by the bureaucracy, by the top men in the union. But it was a poor way of going about things. Obviously it collapsed. It collapsed not long after.⁵⁵

The next major plan for the campaign was to picket out the Barnsley Area pits on Monday 18 May. On 17 May a further meeting was held at Wakefield Labour Club in preparation for this. However, Frank Clarke, the right-wing branch president from South Kirkby Colliery, and other Yorkshire branch officials put in an appearance and argued against the action, claiming it did not help threatened pits which needed to carry on working so as to increase output.⁵⁶ Because of this, 'Come Monday,' says Paul Symonds:

we decided that we should go and give them some moral support at Kirkby, because we knew Frank Clarke, we lived in the same village as him, and we knew if we were there it would be much harder for him to tell the men to go past the Kent pickets. We went as bystanders, but to help carry the argument. But, of course, we weren't on strike that day because they'd decided not to picket us, so a number of us put rest days in because we didn't want to miss out on the action. I can't remember exactly who was there - there was certainly me, Gant, Tommo, maybe Gary Hinchliffe and Shorty - but a handful of us went down to Kirkby pit at four o'clock in the morning. When we got there, there were no Kent miners there. The day shift started to roll up for work. We were stood there and they were saying, 'What are you lads doing here?' We said, 'The Kent miners are putting a picket line on.' Most of them were saying, 'Oh, all right then,' and then turning round and going home. We were hoping that these Kent miners would hurry up and arrive. Soon, the bulk of the men started to arrive. And then Frank Clarke and all the union officials arrived. So by now there were about two hundred men stood at the end of Kirkby pit lane; and there was just us, a handful of miners from Frickley pit - and we'd got rest days in! We are thinking: 'Fucking hell!' Frank Clarke said to us, 'Well they are not here yet.' But we said, 'We were

⁵⁵ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁶ *Socialist Worker*, 23 May 1987.

out last week, you've got to show solidarity.' We were in an impossible situation. And the next thing that happened was that a car pulled up with Joe Henry in it and a couple of Kent miners. They shouted, 'Come on, they've called it off.' They'd called it off and half the day shift had gone home! So we just disappeared. We'd put a holiday in and gone and picketed another pit out!⁵⁷

This saw the end of the campaign. Rather than building on the bitterness in the pits and develop the sacked miners' fight, the Yorkshire Area leadership, with an eye on not harming Labour's chances in the coming general election - now called for 11 June - contacted all the branch officials in the coalfield demanding that no further action be taken if sacked miners turned up at pits again.⁵⁸

Vibrations

The Frickley miners were actually on strike as the electorate went to the polls. The stoppage, which spread over four days, began on Wednesday 10 June when management asked miners working on the afternoon shift to travel to an alternative shaft because of a breakdown. There had been a long-standing worry amongst the miners over vibrations when riding down this shaft, and the issue had gone through all the 'proper' channels, as Lawrence Gertig, the craftsmen's representative on the colliery's consultative committee remembers:

It went on for a period of time. The management kept saying, 'It's all right, we've done this test, we've done that test.' And then one day the men just turned round and said, 'That's it, we've had enough, we are not going down the pit.'⁵⁹

Because of the men's refusal, management stated that pay would be docked for the delay. This prompted a walkout of the whole afternoon shift and then spread to the entire workforce. What sticks in Gary Hinchliffe's memory of the dispute was manager Lawson's remarks to the men: 'Thank Steve Gant for me.'

In other words, he'd got Steve's card marked then. I think that Steve was one of the main ones refusing to travel. I remember this one because the shaft men even came up - the shaft men were notoriously right wing. They were seven-days-a-week men, twelve and fourteen-hour shifts. But even they said that this shaft wasn't safe.⁶⁰

On the Friday, a meeting was held and the men decided to go back to work. However, when the Monday day shift returned, they told management they were not prepared to wait two hours to be transported underground and so went home once more. Production eventually resumed on the afternoon shift.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁸ *Socialist Worker*, 16 and 23 May 1987.

⁵⁹ Lawrence Gertig, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁰ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁶¹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 17 June 1987.

CHAPTER TEN: THE CODE OF CONDUCT

New disciplinary procedures

The general election result was a terrible blow to the millions of trade unionists who had put their faith in the election of a Labour administration, with the Tories getting back in office with their majority hardly dented. What the miners could expect in the following period was summed up in the *Financial Times* editorial on the day the election results were announced: 'the slow, painstaking business of raising efficiency closer to international levels has to go on . . .'¹

Alongside the Coal Board's efforts to raise productivity was an attempt to tighten up on working practices and disciplinary measures. Frickley NUM branch delegate Johnny Stones remembers that:

We had already, within the Nationalisation Act, got a disciplinary procedure which had operated and was agreed and signed within the industry. But the Coal Board and the government decided to issue one based upon the guidelines of ACAS. That was mooted and debated in March, April, May time.²

What was being 'mooted and debated' was the Code of Conduct. Under these regulations, colliery management were to be given licence to dismiss miners for any criminal offences they had been charged with outside their pit, whether they were found guilty or not. Those miners who were issued with written warnings could now be sacked if they stepped out of line at any time within the following three years, indeed management could now sack any miner without notice for a single instance of misconduct even where he had no current warnings under the procedure. In addition, and as Frickley miners were to find out, the Code gave management the power to listen to charges against a group of miners on an individual basis, and furthermore managers could now choose which union official they wanted to represent men at disciplinary hearings. A new set of offences were also introduced, such as 'behaviour not conducive to good employee relations', absence from work without prior authority, and late arrival at work. Lastly, the Code also abolished the final stage of the old appeal system which consulted an independent umpire.³ The intent of all this was made explicit later when the director of industrial relations at British Coal, Kevan Hunt, described the new disciplinary procedure to the press as a means of 'ridding the industry of a culture of industrial conflict' by removing 'militants whose actions cannot be tolerated.'⁴

Rothsay

The main issue on the minds of most Frickley activists during the early summer of 1987, however, was still the Welsh NUM's decision on six-day working; and it was because of this that two 18-seater minibuses full of Frickley miners travelled to Rothsay in Scotland to lobby the NUM conference in the first week in July. 'One

1 *Financial Times*, 12 June 1987.

2 Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

3 Gibbon and Bromley, 'From an institution to a business?', p.79.

4 Cited in *ibid.*, p.79.

went up at night and the other followed us up in the morning,' recalls Steve Gant. He particularly remembers visiting Rothesay because, on arrival, he went to the conference building to arrange for some visitors' passes for the Frickley contingent, but ended up in a quarrel with one of the architects of six-day working:

... as I was turning to go out and get my head down for an hour, there was Des Dutfield and George Rees and all the Welsh delegates walking up. So as I was walking past I ended up arguing with Des Dutfield about six-day working: 'You want fucking, fetching this up. We shouldn't even be here lobbying this conference.' He started shouting back, and the argument got more and more heated. He was saying, 'You'll not listen to the arguments.' I said, 'I was at Porthcawl, I heard your arguments down there. They were wrong then, and they are wrong now. And you know they are wrong.' He got really angry then, he was saying, 'You shouldn't have been down Porthcawl.' I said, 'This is a national union.' It got like that. A few more words and we would have been wrestling on the floor. But when I looked round, all the foyer was chock-a-block, and you could hear a pin drop; everybody was just watching me and Des Dutfield having a go.⁵

Despite the debacle over Margam, the Frickley contingent were encouraged by the response of the delegates in the debate on the Code of Conduct. 'They were saying that we'd got to fight it, that it would be the death of the union,' remembers Paul Symonds:

You could see the top table clapping away at every speech that condemned the Code of Conduct. And so it wasn't a surprise that we started to think that the Code of Conduct was a bad thing, that everybody in the union was against it, from the union president down to the rank-and-file delegates.⁶

The conference delegates had been disturbed enough by the new disciplinary procedure to call for a ballot on industrial action - most likely to be an overtime ban. 3,000 miners in South Wales were already on written warnings, and the possibility of dismissal within the next three years, after taking industrial action over coal concessions. In Durham, an NUM branch official had been disciplined under the Code for handing out leaflets, while a Notts miner had been fined £150 by management following a scuffle outside a pub. There was even the case of a miner who had been fined £500 by management because his wife, following a tiff, had told them he had pilfered small amounts of British Coal property.⁷ What the new Code held in store for union activists was made plain at Stillingfleet on 13 July when the pit's NUM branch secretary, Ted Scott, was suspended and then sacked for 'industrial misconduct' after having instructed his members about Yorkshire NUM's policy on not cutting coal at weekends.⁸

⁵ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁶ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁷ *The Guardian*, 17 July 1987; *Socialist Worker*, 25 July 1987.

⁸ *Yorkshire Miner*, October 1987.

With British Coal going full out to introduce six-day working and increased output alongside the new disciplinary measures, the miners were going to have to fight hard at some stage if they were to resist this offensive. But unbeknown to the Frickley contingent at Rothesay, an earlier incident at their own pit was in the process of developing into a decisive test over the Code of Conduct.

The origins of the Code of Conduct dispute

The NUM conference had actually taken place while Frickley Colliery was closed for its annual two-weeks' holiday from Friday 26 June until Monday 13 July. During this period the latest issue of the pit management's *Frickley Newsletter* had been despatched, with the foreboding message from the pit's manager that the thirteen weeks period to the end of June had been disastrous. The pit had lost £1.25 million and this would lead to a £10 million deficit by the following March. One of the factors which had cost output, argued Tony Lawson, 'has been "rag outs" etc.' He continued:

Without dwelling on the individual causes, I wish to make my position clear: a) I will pay men for the time they are in the pit and working. I will not pay them for time spent on the surface. b) I will retain the right to deploy people and I expect men to go to the work they are sent to do.

I have always been a fair and reasonable manager, and I will lead Frickley in the right direction to maintain its capacity. If you prefer to follow a certain element of the workforce (whom you all know), then I can see big problems at Frickley.⁹

As we shall see, faced with such belligerence, it was this 'certain element' whom the workforce would follow.

The initial wrangle that led to the Code of Conduct dispute had actually taken place at Frickley on the last working day before the holiday. It began in the Big Pit when a deputy confronted five men who were taking a late snap break. The men claimed they had worked through their break, but British Coal argued they intended finishing early for the holiday.¹⁰ Jeff Johnson had just been elected to the Frickley NUM branch committee and it was this which led him to be among the first miners at the pit to fall foul of the new disciplinary measures:

... in the end he [the deputy] ordered these blokes out of the pit. I was there. If you stay down the pit when a deputy's given you an instruction, its a sackable offence. I'd just got on the union at this time and I thought: 'Well I'm here, I've heard it all, I'll go out and represent these lads.' So I went out of the pit.

The first accusation against us was: 'You've left your place of work early without permission.' So our argument was: 'We've been sent out by the deputy'. The deputy denied it. So we said, 'Right, it's a dispute between the deputy and the lads who have been sent out.' In normal circumstances we'd go into a meeting with the deputies' union, management, the NUM and the people involved

⁹ *Frickley Newsletter*, July 1987.

¹⁰ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 22 July 1987.

dispute; find out who is telling the truth, face to face. We were refused permission for that to happen.¹¹

During the holidays, the five men involved received letters from Lawson stating that they would have to face individual disciplinary hearings on their return to work. When they did go back on 13 July, they refused to attend the hearings,¹² because as Jeff Johnson recalls:

You weren't allowed to hear what was said against you so that you could counteract it and say, 'No, that's not true, this is the way it happened.' You weren't allowed to hear what your mates said to see if you were all singing from the same hymn book. He said he would judge what had happened and we couldn't even have a sort of jury trial by a group. Unless I could hear the allegations made against me, I didn't know how to put my defence forward. It was against all the forms of democracy that I knew of or the legal system. We weren't even allowed anything similar to going into a magistrates' court. So we said, 'You can stick it, we're not going in.' He then brought it round that by refusing to go into the meeting we'd broke the Code of Conduct.¹³

After this, the five men were refused their underground checks, and thus denied permission to go down the pit. Their workmates stopped work in support and eventually all of the 900 NUM members at Frickley were on strike. The following day a mass meeting at the Pretoria Working Men's Club voted by a massive majority to stay out indefinitely. Robert Walker remembers that feelings were running high over the issue. The victimised miners were, 'really good workers, they never caused rag ups or anything like that. It was surprising that it was them . . . Everybody was mad about it.'¹⁴ 'If it had been somebody like me, Gant, Jip or Tommo,' says Tony Short, ' . . . the lads would probably have said "sack them." But with it being them, older blokes, it was a bonus for us.'¹⁵

Although there was strong support for the victimised miners, the course that the latest strike would take was in the balance almost from the start. A section within the branch leadership openly argued for the dispute to go through the 'normal' channels, to consult the Doncaster Panel. Militants such as Steve Gant saw things differently:

. . . we'd been through Panel meetings, and we'd no faith at all in the Panel. We knew exactly what they'd do: the strike would just disappear and these lads would end up being disciplined. We knew that if we didn't fight it now, we would end up with the Code of Conduct being implemented. It would give the gaffers more confidence. These are the things that we were arguing from the floor of the general meeting. After a heated debate, the officials wouldn't move. They wanted to go through the Panel. We argued against it, and won the vote! We'd been

¹¹ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

¹² *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 22 July 1987.

¹³ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

¹⁴ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

¹⁵ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

saying that we should be sending pickets out and going for it. That resulted in the branch officials walking off the stage. Somebody shouted, 'Well what are we doing?' The officials shouted back, 'See Ganty and Jip. They are in charge of it,' and they walked straight out of the meeting.

So me and Jip got back on the stage and just carried the meeting on from there. We announced that we were going picketing. We announced how important it was going to be that everybody turns up. We asked them all if they could get down to the Miners for four o'clock, and how many cars would be going - we knew how to organise picketing because we'd had a year of it. The response was brilliant. We were nervous, as you'd expect - it takes a lot of guts to take charge of something like that . . . But the numbers that stopped back was brilliant. They all came forward to the stage asking where we were going. There must have been a hundred people there, maybe more. We said, 'We want as many cars as possible. Let all your mates know who have not been to the meeting. We want you at the Miners at tea-time.'¹⁶

The return of the flying pickets

As many as two hundred miners turned up for picketing that evening, almost a quarter of the whole branch.¹⁷ Crucially, for Paul Symonds (Jip), the sacked miners' strike in May had been important because it had proved that picketing still worked, 'So we had a good idea that picketing would deliver the goods for us.' Unexpectedly thrust into leadership, he and Steve Gant 'were like commanders,' he recalls:

We were saying, 'Right, you lot go to this pit, you lot go to that pit.' We were shitting ourselves. But everybody was doing as they were told. We went picketing as well, we weren't just sat behind a desk. As soon as the last car went, we jumped in ours and went away. The first pickets went out on the night shift. We had a feeling that it would be all right. We had a strategy where we would get the Doncaster Area out first, then South Yorkshire and Barnsley. We would build a head of steam up. The first night we pulled all the Doncaster pits out - every one of them came out to a man. And so for the first night on strike there were something like 12,000 miners out. I can't remember which pit I went to first, but we'd arranged for everybody to meet back at Bentley. We got back to Bentley and there were just hundreds and hundreds of miners there. It wasn't just Bentley miners and us who were there, they'd come from other pits as well. Everybody was solid. I've never known anything like it.¹⁸

On Wednesday they picketed out another six pits in the South Yorkshire Area. By the end of Thursday the South Yorkshire Panel had been pressured into giving its blessing and the dispute had spread throughout the South Yorkshire coalfield, bringing 13,000 men out and all 16 pits to a standstill.¹⁹ The flare up was now so

¹⁶ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

¹⁷ *Socialist Worker*, 25 July 1987.

¹⁸ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

¹⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 22 July 1987; *Socialist Worker*, 25 July 1987.

serious that it had become the main story in the national press. In Friday's issue of *The Guardian* the paper's labour editor noted how the Frickley miners, following a swift two-day operation, 'have managed to produce an impact, the like of which has not been seen in the British coalfield for three years. In some cases, the Frickley pickets have numbered up to 30. In others it has required no physical presence, only word of mouth.'²⁰

For this to happen, the strike clearly had popular support at many pits. 'We were getting standing ovations at meetings,' recalls Robert Walker:

They'd have a general meeting and they would invite one of the lads in to speak. People were cheering them. I went to Bentley. We weren't allowed into the meeting, but they might invite one of us in to speak on behalf of the Frickley miners. We'd stand outside: 'Vote for the lads!' 'Of course we will!' But the feeling got bad when we were no longer in the Donny Area. That was the main bit of solidarity. It was brilliant there. Everybody was in the same boat; they were all pissed off with what was happening. This was like a flicker of light. It was: 'Righto lads, we'll vote for you.' They were clapping you and shaking your hand: 'No problem.'²¹

Ray Riley reflects on how this was a novel situation:

You've got to understand that the Big Strike was bureaucratically controlled. This particular dispute wasn't - at this stage it wasn't anyway. So there was a different sort of enthusiasm. I don't know if people made this connection, but my understanding of it was that this was something *new*: branch officials not organising a strike?

Steve Gant remembers that where there were problems, the NUM Area headquarters in Barnsley was the source. Moreover:

I think that our branch officials were called straight through to an emergency meeting at Barnsley once they'd lost control of the dispute: 'What the fucking hell is going off here? Get them back to work.' But they couldn't get us back to work because they'd lost control of the dispute. I dare say that they got a severe bollocking for walking out of the meeting. They would have argued that there was nothing else they could do. They had pleaded and pleaded for us to use the machinery. So pressure would have come on that way, because as we are pulling pits out, each pit's officials were then ringing in to Barnsley, and ringing Johnny Stones. I lost a lot of respect for Johnny in that strike, because he didn't help us one iota during it. This made it harder when we started going to Manton and places like that, which are on the border line. They were asking questions about who was running the strike, and why had our officials walked out. We told them that we had no faith in the Panel. But all the time we were getting total respect

²⁰ *The Guardian*, 17 July 1987.

²¹ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

for the picket lines. Even people who didn't agree with you weren't going to cross your picket line. We'd still got that, which was great.²²

He recalls that, 'after one or two days of picketing,' John Picken, recently elected as the branch president, Steve Tulley, who had recently vacated the branch president's post to become the branch secretary, and Johnny Stones the delegate, turned up at the strike headquarters and finally got involved in picketing so as to take control of the dispute:

Chick [John Picken] turns up with a list of which pits we are going to go to. 'Right, pickets,' he shouts, 'Let's get you off.' But nobody goes to him. The lads are saying, 'What's going off? These are running it.' We were stood there taking names as well. So they were coming to us because we had deployed them the first night. In the lads' eyes, we have done a good job, we've been running the picketing so they are coming to us.²³

Eventually though, the branch committee did start acting in harmony and the strikers' next step was to explain their case at other pits' general meetings as the perimeter of the dispute widened. Steve Gant recalls his intervention at Maltby:

By this time we'd got a leaflet out on the Code of Conduct, a good one as well, but it was getting a bad response outside this meeting. It was a really big meeting; probably a thousand men there. Men were coming past saying, 'Who are these fuckers?' It was a bit scary. Anyway, I went into the foyer and asked if I could speak to a union man. Somebody came out and I told him I was the Cudworth representative at Frickley Colliery. He said, 'You can't come in here cock, this is a private meeting.' I said, 'I'm not asking to come in throughout your meeting, I just want ten or fifteen minutes to let you know what's going off.' 'I'll ask them,' he says. So I'm stood outside this meeting, and the doors were shut on me and locked.

By now I was really nervous, and I was wishing that I'd never asked for speakers' rights for this meeting, I could hear what was going off. They were giving an official rundown on the dispute: that we'd been asked to go through the Panel and all this. Then they were saying that it was their bull week. It wasn't going our way. Their officials didn't want anything to do with this dispute; that was the feeling I was getting. Then this official says, 'Now there's a lad here from Frickley - he says that he's on the branch committee.' He said 'says he is' as though I was some kind of liar. He carries on, 'He says he wants to address the meeting. I told him to wait outside in the passage.' I thought, 'That's nice of you, give me a good build up, you bastard.' He says, 'We'll put it to the vote.' They were even questioning whether to have a vote. But then this lad stood up, and said, 'Well if he's come down here, and he's on the branch committee, we might as well listen to what the lad has to say.' So they voted to let me in. I went in, but all the chairs were blocking the walkway, it was that packed. I had to walk right

²² Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

²³ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

through the middle of them. It was really unnerving. I then got on the stage and put them in the picture about the dispute: why we'd no faith in the Panel - I gave Ted Scott as an example - I careered then into what had happened in Wales with Des Dufield. And all the time I was being barracked by one of their officials at the side of me: 'Stick to the issues.' He was trying to make it as hard as he could. I just turned round to him and said, 'Look, will you give me a break here, I'm trying my hardest to get a message over.' One or two lads clapped at this. In the end I got the message over. I asked them for their support. I said that we had got to fight it together. I said that I realised the position they were in because it was their bull week, but I said that we can't pick our time and our issues - otherwise we would have done. I said, 'But it's here now, and there's nowt we can do about that.' I finished, got off the stage and started walking through. You could hear a pin drop. But then all of a sudden I got a round of applause. It was lovely. And so at that meeting they decided to give it another week for something to be sorted out, and for Barnsley to get a grip so that we could do it together - which wasn't bad. Another week would keep the strike going.²⁴

Going to plan

Though the strike was going to plan, the Frickley activists at the centre of the dispute were aware that the Area officials would try to sabotage the action at some stage. 'We had a strategy for dealing with that,' explains Paul Symonds:

Because we didn't trust any of the Yorkshire officials, our plan was to break it out of Yorkshire within a week. If we could break it out of Yorkshire it would be a national dispute. We understood how the union worked. Once the strike had gone beyond Yorkshire, people such as Scargill would have to get hold of the helm. We were picketing places out, and if they were going to scab, we were going to continue pushing out, we weren't going to go back. That's what we had worked out, and we were doing it. At first we had no problems. There were one or two pits came out and then had narrow votes to go back, but we thought, 'Fuck them, if we turn it into a national dispute by next week we will be laughing.'²⁵

On Thursday the Frickley strikers lobbied the North Yorkshire Panel which was meeting at Kellingley and which faced a stark choice about what to do over the Ted Scott affair. But the Panel decided to continue working on the Friday while the case was heard, and pleaded with the Frickley pickets to keep away because they did not want BC to consider the case while it had 'a gun to its head'. The Frickley pickets were furious, but held off on the Friday morning.²⁶ Later on Friday the North Yorkshire Panel recommended that the 16 pits in the Area come out at the start of the following week. But as the success of the strike so far had been down to the strikers hitting other pits fast and hard, the Frickley pickets could not wait that long

²⁴ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²⁶ *Socialist Worker*, 25 July 1987.

and so hit the coalfield immediately. Paul Symonds remembers worrying over whether Kellingley and the Selby pits would be supportive:

half of Kellingley ended up scabbing in '84/85. About twenty of us formed a picket line and they all just drove in past us. We were so demoralised about this. There was nothing we could do, they just went in. But what they had done was gone inside and had a meeting in the canteen to decide what they were going to do about these pickets on the gate - and they decided to come out. So about ten minutes after they had gone in, all these cars started to come back. It was an unbelievable feeling. Then we got all the Selby pits out.²⁷

With the strike going from strength to strength, now was the time to venture beyond the boundaries of Yorkshire. 'On Friday afternoon we were really itching to take it out of Yorkshire,' says Paul Symonds:

We were already getting messages from the North East and Kent asking, 'When are you sending pickets up here?' I can remember after we had picketed some pits out on the afternoon shift, there were some of us in the Empire Club and we were discussing tactics. There were about twenty of us trying to decide what to do. Though there was a core of people that were organising the strike, there was no formal structure and nobody had any specific jobs. Anybody could just come and join in and argue what to do next. We decided that we shouldn't wait while Monday to go to Kent. We thought it would be a big job sending pickets up to the North East where they had a lot of pits. But because of the sacked miners, we'd got contacts down Kent and they told us that they were itching to go. They said, 'Get some pickets down here and you've got Kent.' To be honest, they talk about the Kent coalfield, but we knew that there were only three pits in Kent. But it would sound pretty impressive when it was announced that Kent and Yorkshire were on strike. So we despatched a couple of car loads there and then. People just ran home and made some sandwiches and jumped into these two cars and went to Kent. Unfortunately, they didn't get there in time, because their night shift started at six and not at ten. By the time they got there, they were already in work. They rang us up to tell us about this, so we said, 'Stay there until Monday morning.'²⁸

Sabotage

By late Friday, events were swinging so much in the strikers' favour that *The Times* could report on how 'even British Coal spokesmen yesterday said they expected the coalfield to be at a virtual standstill at the beginning of next week . . .'²⁹ Anxious senior management had been forced to spend the whole of Friday trying to counter the spread of the strike. As NUM branches prepared to meet over the weekend, North Yorkshire Area director Albert Tuke sent out letters to the Area's 16,000 miners telling them to 'come to their senses'. In South Yorkshire, a letter from

²⁷ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²⁸ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²⁹ *The Times*, 18 July 1987.

Frickley manager Tony Lawson, originally to be sent just to Frickley miners, was despatched throughout the Area on the personal instructions of Sir Robert Haslam.³⁰ Lawson made his position quite plain:

Frickley cannot afford action of this kind. I would be failing in my duty if I allowed the stoppage to continue without making it clear that the strike action is a serious breach of your contract of employment that will lead to disciplinary action and this may lead to dismissal . . . I do not see this as part of any move towards 'jackboot' management, but because in today's world none of us can expect to continue to be employed on the basis that we may walk out when something happens that does not please us.³¹

Significantly, threats such as this began to have an effect on those NUM branch officials who were already hesitant in their support for the dispute; as Gary Hinchliffe found out to his astonishment when he picketed pits in the old Barnsley Area, now part of North Yorkshire, on Friday evening:

Now in the first couple of days, they [the branch officials at the pits that were picketed] were telling the men what was going off. But on the Friday it started: they were telling the men to work. They were saying, 'We are asking you to lift your picket line.' This was at Grimethorpe. 'No we're not.' You sensed that there was something wrong here, with some of these branch officials. 'Well Johnny Stones hasn't sent you,' this was Ken Hancock: 'I know for a fact that Johnny Stones hasn't sent you because I've had him on the phone. None of your branch officials have sent you here.' I said, 'Branch officials?' He said, 'Well who was there today when you came picketing? Who told you to come here? If Johnny Stones hasn't told you to come here, you are illegal pickets; you are not official pickets from the NUM.' I said, 'We are official pickets from the Frickley branch.' He said, 'Who's decided this then?' I said, 'We had a meeting on Monday. We voted to go picketing. The branch officials turned up, and Tony Jenkinson has turned up tonight to give petrol money out. He's the branch treasurer.' 'He's not Johnny Stones. I know for a fact that Johnny Stones hasn't told you to come here. And I know that he recommended that you didn't picket this week.' So anyway, we had a big argument with him. These men went home; there's only a handful of men on the maintenance shift at five o'clock.³²

From Grimethorpe, Gary Hinchliffe and his band of pickets moved on to nearby Darfield Colliery where they met with the same kind of reception. However, they were amazed to discover that some men at Darfield had already been disciplined under the Code of Conduct without any resistance:

Of course then we set off laying into this branch official from Darfield - and his own men did, when they found out what we were on strike for and what we'd put

³⁰ *The Times*, 18 July 1987.

³¹ *The Times*, 18 July 1987.

³² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

our foot down over. They started slagging him. I said, 'Tell your men to go to work then. Because the half-past five shift hasn't gone in, the afters shift hasn't gone. You tell these to go to work when all the others have gone home.' We got in the cars and went. We could see them arguing at the pit gates, and everybody was going home.³³

Robert Walker recalls having similar problems that same night elsewhere in North Yorkshire:

There were three of us at Gascoigne Wood, we turned all the night shift back. Johnny Stones phoned up - this was on a Friday night - 'Call your pickets off.' We said, 'We can't call the pickets off now, we've turned half the pit back. We're all right letting half of them work, we might as well turn them all back.' Anyway, their union men came and said, 'Look, we understand what you're saying, we'll turn the others back.'³⁴

Gary Hinchliffe, clearly confused about these developments, decided to visit the Mill Lane Working Men's Club in South Kirkby to see Frank Clarke, the South Kirkby NUM official and a member of the Yorkshire Area executive:

'I want a word with you Frank. What's going off? All the radio bulletins that we are picking up in the car have Jack Taylor on saying that all Yorkshire's going to be out on Monday over this Code of Conduct. But every pit that we've been to since tea time has been giving us trouble. The branch officials are there telling their men to work and mouthing us off. What's going off?' He said, 'Barnsley are calling the strike off tomorrow.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Because it's come to their attention that your union aren't running this strike. The SWP are running it.' I said, 'What are you on about? The men have voted on it. It's not the SWP who have been out picketing, it's the men.' He said, 'Aye, but Johnny Stones recommended that you follow the union guidelines on convening the Panel. You haven't taken any notice. You've followed the SWP's opinions and policy on it; so they'll call it off tomorrow.'

After this I goes down for Jip. Jip and Ganty have just got back from the Selby pits. They've had a flaming row with somebody at one of the pits there. They've managed to get the men to go home, but they've had a big row with the branch officials. Some of the men had been to Prince of Wales and got cracked; one of them got a smack in the mouth. I told Jip what Frank Clarke had told me. He said, 'Frank Clarke knows nothing. We've just had Jack Taylor on the radio as we've been coming back from Stillingfleet. All Yorkshire's out on Monday.' I said, 'I know, I've heard it. But I'm telling you what Frank Clarke's just told me.' He wouldn't have it. Of course, the next day Yorkshire Area has called it off. They were asking Frickley to withdraw their pickets.³⁵

³³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

³⁴ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

³⁵ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

Betrayal

British Coal may have feared the strike would escalate, but when the Yorkshire NUM executive met on Saturday 18 July, they did their utmost to make sure this did not happen and instead recommended a return to work. The North Yorkshire Panel, which had been expected to support Frickley, then voted to obey the executive.³⁶ All the fine words that the Frickley contingent had heard at the NUM conference about tackling the Code of Conduct had been an illusion. Nevertheless, this was not quite the end of the dispute.

A mass meeting was arranged for the following day at the Pretoria Club in South Elmsall so that the Yorkshire NUM leaders could order the Frickley miners to end their strike. But the resolve of the strikers was far greater than the Area officials ever anticipated. And if the Yorkshire leadership were under the impression that the strike was merely the actions of a handful of socialist militants at Frickley, they were to be proven wrong.

Of course socialists at the pit were playing a leading part in the dispute and by the weekend were preparing for the Area official's visit. 'We knew why they were coming,' says Ray Riley:

and so we had a meeting in another working men's club in South Elmsall the night before. And there were activists there from other pits - Askern in particular. It wasn't just the SWP, it was a militants' meeting - people who wanted to fight. Anyone was welcome. It was through word of mouth and it was well attended. We discussed tactics and talked about things. We even considered ambushing Jack Taylor's car, preventing him from speaking at the meeting - and that wasn't an idle threat! It was something that was realistically proposed! We agreed that we had to be cohesive in our arguments when someone got up to speak. Our left hand had to know what our right hand was doing, so to speak.³⁷

All the Yorkshire Area NUM full-time officials came to South Elmsall for the showdown: Jack Taylor, the Area president, Ken Homer, the Area vice-president, Sammy Thompson the Area general secretary and recently elected national vice-president, along with Frank Cave, the South Yorkshire agent. *The Guardian* described the reception for the Area officials as 'hostile'.³⁸ As we shall see from the testimonies below, this was certainly an understatement.

Prior to the general meeting, the Area officials addressed the Frickley branch committee. However, as Paul Symonds recalls, when he and Steve Gant, the two most prominent committee members in the action against the Code, arrived for this important meeting, they found it had already been in session for a lengthy period without them:

In the committee room were the four Area officials and all our officials and committee men. They'd decided that they were going to recommend a return to work for Monday. Me and Steve Gant were completely furious. And while we

³⁶ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 22 July 1987.

³⁷ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

³⁸ *The Guardian*, 20 July 1987.

were in the committee room, men were coming up and booting the committee room door, shouting: 'Taylor, we are going to fucking kill you when you come out of there!' It was brilliant. You'd got all these men who were gathering for this mass meeting and they were really angry that it was being called off, that we'd been stabbed in the back by the officials. The arguments continued in the committee room - they were trying to calm me and Steve Gant down. In the end we said that there wasn't much point in continuing to shout at people if the decision had already been made. By now a really large crowd had gathered outside the committee room - the four Area officials were shitting themselves. People were coming up to the window outside, saying: 'You bastards! You're dead!' They were shitting themselves, they were wondering where they had come to. Just when the big meeting was about to start, Gant says to Steve Tulley, 'Steve, I think you had better go out there to calm them down, because we don't want any bloodshed.' You could see the colour draining out of the Area officials' faces. It sounds quite unbelievable, but Steve Tulley had to go out and appeal for the safety of the Area officials, that we'd not got to beat them up. He managed to do it by saying that there was the media outside and that it wouldn't look good if they reported it. It wasn't about any sense of loyalty to these four blokes. It was just that it would look bad in the papers!³⁹

Eventually the Area officials made their way to the club's concert room to address the gathering. Gary Hinchliffe describes the scene:

They fetched them out of the committee room, marched them through the Pretoria. They thought that they were going into a boxing match: they'd got the branch officials in front of them and the committee lining their sides; these four heavyweight champions walking through the crowd. It was hostile; you'd have thought they were scabs: 'You fucking Judases!' They were screaming and baying. The officials were shaking when they got on that stage, they couldn't talk for fear. Every one of them tried to give some sort of an argument as to why they'd called it off. They couldn't. Jack Taylor said, 'We've got to have unity. We are no good without unity.' So Jip says, 'Aye, you want us to have unity with scabs and pits that won't fight. You want us to have unity with people who would let their branch secretary get sacked without raising a finger!' Then Sammy Thompson gets up: 'The first person that gets sacked under this Code of Conduct, we're all out.' 'Sacked? Sacked? They've just fucking sacked Ted Scott, you stupid bastard!' Frankie Cave gets up. He was the Area agent at this time. He said, 'Look lads, I know how you feel. We've disputes all over. I know what this macho/jackboot management is like. On Friday I was down at Silverwood and had a meeting with men over their money. Then I had to go to Bentley.' Then you just heard this voice say, 'And I bet you're bollocksed, aren't you?' They got really hammered.⁴⁰

'That meeting was just unbelievable,' remembers Paul Symonds:

³⁹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁰ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

You think to yourself: Here we are, just rank-and-file miners, all we do is work down the pit. And here are the four Area officials, and the NUM has got a lot of clout, the members are very loyal to it, and most of the members respect Jack Taylor and Sammy Thompson, they have good track records - unless you know the ins and outs of it - and not only do you have the Area leaders, you have the four branch officials, and you have all bar three or four of the committee men, all recommending a return back to work. The odds are against you. And they have already ordered the rest of the coalfield back to work, which there was nothing you could do to stop. But we set off, and we argued that we shouldn't listen to them, that they were betraying us. I've never been in a meeting as heated. The arguments that were put were good ones. We argued that we should stay out on strike - it was a pretty hard position for us to argue from - and that we should picket out the other pits on Monday morning. It should have been unthinkable for us to argue this, but we did. And when it came to the vote, they voted for it by a massive majority. It was like being on another planet. The officials could not believe what they were seeing in front of them: loyal NUM members voting with the SWP - that was the crux of it, everybody knew what me and Steve Gant were. And they'd made every effort to tell people that was the choice. They had been hoping to play on that to divide us. But we won it, it was just amazing. They had to leave the room by a side exit. They didn't want to be in that room when the meeting ended, and so they left after they had said their piece and every one of them had been shouted down - but shouted down with good arguments.⁴¹

The eventual result of the two-hour meeting was that the Frickley miners took an unprecedented decision, voting by 616 to 84, to oppose the Area executive and to continue the strike. Branch secretary Steve Tulley told the assembled press that his mandate was for an indefinite strike until the withdrawal of the suspensions against the five Frickley miners: 'The feeling is that we've been let down as a branch. It's a vote against the Yorkshire Area officials. They are voting against the Yorkshire executive decision - they feel they've been sold down the river.'⁴²

Defiance

The battle against the Code of Conduct was not merely a local wildcat strike that had somehow lost control. For those involved it was a deadly serious issue to be fought to the end. As Gary Hinchliffe explains:

The men who lived in Hemsworth had been round and collected off the traders there with a view to setting up kitchens up in the St Pat's club. We thought that there was going to be a four or five week dispute over it. We had men up in Northumberland and down in Kent and South Wales. They were just waiting to go picketing on Monday morning.⁴³

⁴¹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴² *The Guardian*, 20 July 1987.

⁴³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

But now the actions of the Yorkshire Area officials had wrecked these plans. After Sunday's mass meeting, the activists involved in the picketing met to discuss their next step in light of the vote to stay out. 'But we weren't just mindless militants,' argues Paul Symonds:

We understood the score and we knew that we wouldn't be able to hold out against the Area officials. If we'd had a base at the other pits like we had at Frickley we could have held the line. But we hadn't. We knew that it was just us at Frickley, that we had mates at Armthorpe and a few others here and there, but who weren't as strong as us. That Sunday afternoon, me and Steve Gant discussed what we were going to do. We decided that we would pull Doncaster Area out on Monday morning, and then on Tuesday we would call the strike off at the next meeting . . . We knew that we couldn't hold out against the Area officials. They'd got clout. And the branch officials would order men through our picket lines. We didn't want to split the branch wide open; have some men crossing the picket line and some not. Me and Gant realised that the furthest we could take it was to picket the Doncaster pits out on Monday. That would show them! And then we would call it off.⁴⁴

That Sunday evening it looked as if even these intentions might be over-optimistic, as just one other Yorkshire pit declared support for Frickley.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, despite the worsening odds, the fight did continue. The next day, Monday 20 July, Frickley miners defied the instructions of the Yorkshire executive and managed to picket out nine South Yorkshire pits and nearby South Kirkby/Ferrymoor Riddings and Nostell in North Yorkshire.⁴⁶ But because of fears of splitting the union, the pickets were given particular instructions, as Paul Symonds recalls:

We said to everybody, 'If anybody crosses the picket lines at these pits, we don't want anybody being called scab, because people are only doing what the union has told them to do. If people start going in, pull the picket lines off; we should remove the picket line before we give anybody the excuse to cross one. There were about nine pits to picket in the Doncaster Area. The only one where we had any trouble was Hatfield Main, where David Douglass was the delegate. He was supposed to be a left winger, with a national profile. That was the only pit where we had to remove the picket line. I went there. The manager fetched him to the pit in a car. Hatfield was on holiday that week and so there were only a few who were working. Basically, he told his men to cross the picket line. We moved it. I said to him, 'Davie, this is going to be the only pit in the Doncaster coalfield today that has gone to work.' He was saying, 'No, you're mad. You're living in a dream world, they've all gone back.' This was at about half-past five in the

⁴⁴ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁵ *The Guardian*, 20 July 1987.

⁴⁶ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 22 July 1987; *The Times*, 21 July 1987.

morning. When we got back, we found out that they had all respected our picket lines.⁴⁷

On Monday evening the pickets were met with the same degree of success. Six South Yorkshire collieries were stood along with South Kirkby. However, by now an important meeting of the Yorkshire Area Council had taken place, which only demonstrated Frickley's increasing isolation and how the sabotage of the Yorkshire Area officials had taken its toll. The Area Council voted by a massive 53 votes to 3 to recommend an end to the strike.⁴⁸ Johnny Stones, being the Frickley NUM delegate, was at the meeting:

A request was made that we return to work and stop picketing other pits because of the national ballot. The trade union legislation at that time made it so that we couldn't hold a ballot until there had been a resumption of work, something like that. But yes, weight was put on us, plus the fact that support was waning within the pits. I went to the Yorkshire Council and the tenor of the debate was that we weren't going to keep getting pits coming out in support of us. That's as I saw it, that's how I reported it back.⁴⁹

The men at the centre of the strike realised now that they had taken the strike as far as they could. 'A lot of the men were surprised to hear us argue this,' recalls Paul Symonds, 'because here were two blokes who had argued all the way through that we had got to keep it going. But we explained why.'⁵⁰ As a final gesture it was decided that rather than just go back to work they would send out pickets once again, for the Tuesday day shift, but this time only to thank the men at other pits for standing by them, rather than asking them to stop work, 'We stood on the gates and clapped them as they came in,' explains Steve Gant. 'We handed out leaflets saying "thanks for your support, it's been a noble effort but we've been sold out." That was the end of that dispute, more or less.'⁵¹

Paul Symonds argues that in contrast to Arthur Scargill, who only knew how to lead men forward, the Frickley activists at the centre of this strike knew how to retreat when the odds were not in the favour:

... we wanted to retreat intact. And we did. And I think that it left a number of things. Firstly, the respect of the picket lines remained intact - nobody ever crossed picket lines. Secondly, we didn't split any workforce - which was a big thing at that time because people were just getting back together after being split in the '84/85 strike. It was a defeat in a sense; but it wasn't the Coal Board that had defeated us: it was the union that had defeated us - and everybody knew that. It was important that everybody knew why we were going back. They knew that it wasn't because they were crap, or that the Coal Board was too powerful. They

⁴⁷ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁸ *Yorkshire Post*, 21 July 1987.

⁴⁹ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁰ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁵¹ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

knew that it was because of the Area leaders bowing to the trade union laws or whatever.⁵²

The dispute finally ended at a reconvened mass meeting that Tuesday morning, 21 July, when all but 19 of the Frickley miners voted to go back to work. The dispute had cost British Coal as much as £8 million in lost production. And just in case management had any ideas about seeking retribution for this loss, Frickley branch secretary Steve Tulley gave British Coal the following warning: 'If there is any victimisation or reprisals on anybody by management we'll take immediate strike action.'⁵³

Shock waves

The reason given by Jack Taylor for calling off the strike was so there could now be a pit-head ballot over the Code. He claimed that moderate pits outside the Area might vote against taking action if Yorkshire jumped the gun.⁵⁴ But the Frickley action, far from being divisive, actually showed that militancy still worked. 'When we went back the management weren't cocky,' says Paul Symonds:

We were the cocky ones. We could say to them, 'We'll do it again if you are not careful.' They knew the score and we knew the score. For me, that particular strike was a couple of the best weeks in my life. It proved that it could work if you did it properly.⁵⁵

Further proof came later when the five suspended Frickley miners were finally brought before management. True they had to undergo the dishonour of being interviewed individually and had to endure what Steve Tulley described to the press as 'kangaroo courts'. However, their only punishment was to be given verbal warnings for 'failing to accept reasonable instructions and leaving the pit without permission.'⁵⁶ Compare these disciplinary measures with what eventually happened to Ted Scott, whose case was championed by the Yorkshire leaders and thus went through the 'proper' channels. Though the Stillingfleet official was later reinstated, he was forced to work at Kellingley and not long afterwards left the industry.⁵⁷ The deciding factor was that there had been no industrial action on Scott's behalf, whereas it had cost British Coal millions of pounds in lost production before they could even force the Frickley miners into attending a hearing.

The reality was that the action of the rank-and-file miners at Frickley had sent shock waves through British Coal and the government. Two years after the end of a serious defeat, this latest strike had shown that the miners were still a force to contend with. However, what the strike also showed was that the left-wing leadership of the Yorkshire NUM were very much in control of matters and hardly

⁵² Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁵³ *The Guardian*, 22 July 1987; *The Times*, 22 July 1987.

⁵⁴ *The Guardian*, 21 July 1987.

⁵⁵ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁶ *Yorkshire Post*, 23 July 1987.

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 28 March 1988.

The Code of Conduct

differed from the new realists in South Wales and Scotland when it came to challenging British Coal's offensive. While the rank and file were well organised at Frickley, it was evident that what was missing was a wider network of militants that could have co-ordinated the action despite the Area officials' opposition. Significantly, Arthur Scargill may have been the trade union movement's most vociferous opponent of new realism in this period, but what marked the Code dispute was his absence from the conflict. 'Where was he?' asks Steve Gant:

He never came on the radio or television during the Code of Conduct. He had been speaking at all these meetings about the best way to fight it, but when we do all the groundwork and we pull all the pits out, where is he? He goes missing. He doesn't make an appearance. He still carried a lot of weight at the time, but he just went walk-about. He was just letting the machine do the work for him - the machine that wanted him out at the end of the day. He would have been better off sticking with the rank and file, as he did in '72.⁵⁸

Here had been an ideal opportunity for Scargill to appeal over the heads of the Area leadership to the rank and file, in order to contest the Code of Conduct and thus challenge the increasing domination of the new realists. The Frickley action had shown that miners were willing to support a fight back. But Scargill failed in this because his allies were not the rank-and-file NUM members but the Area officials, the very men who had called the strike off. And yet the outcome promised a massive blow to militancy in the union and the further ascendancy of new realism.

⁵⁸ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE OVERTIME BAN

The Code of Conduct ballot

With the Ted Scott issue still smouldering, on 21 August, three days before the result of the Code of Conduct ballot was due, British Coal again went on the offensive when it announced that seven Yorkshire collieries - Armthorpe, Hatfield, Nostell, Prince of Wales, Redbrook, South Kirkby, and Woolley - were on the danger list. BC also announced that it hoped to introduce six-day working into the militant South Yorkshire coalfield. As the ballot papers were being counted, it appeared that British Coal had calculated the prevailing mood amongst the miners correctly after the Frickley action. At branch meetings throughout Yorkshire to discuss what action to take over Scott, only Frickley amongst the Doncaster pits demanded an all-out strike.¹ But the outcome of the ballot was at odds with this, with 77.5 per cent of NUM members voting for 'industrial action short of a strike', the first national vote in favour of industrial action by the union for over a decade, and the first under Arthur Scargill's leadership.² In the words of Frickley activist Gary Hinchliffe, 'it was a tremendous result.'³

British Coal had refused to negotiate with the NUM since the end of the Big Strike, but now hastily changed tack and called for talks at ACAS. Talks began on 27 August but broke down on 14 September. The NUM had actually made a serious climb-down and offered to accept the principle of independent binding arbitration on disciplinary matters. British Coal, however, insisted that disputes should be settled by industrial tribunals. This was an important sticking point for the NUM because under industrial tribunals victimised miners such as Ted Scott could not be guaranteed reinstatement in their old jobs. *The Guardian* outlined what was explicit in British Coal's latest intransigence:

Sir Robert [Haslam] made it clear that one of the main objects of the current exercise was to rid the pits of union 'activists', who had been responsible for a rash of unofficial stoppages, mainly in Yorkshire. Sir Robert and his colleagues do not want them back in the industry.⁴

Little clout

It was becoming noticeable that the only way the NUM could force the corporation into making meaningful concessions was to make sure the overtime ban hit swiftly and hard. However, from the way many NUM executive members were interpreting the vote for action, this option seemed unlikely - indeed the leaders of the South Wales and Scottish miners had hoped to call off the action at the first sign that BC were going to make concessions.⁵

Nevertheless action did eventually take place. In Yorkshire, an overtime ban began on 14 September and national action began a week later. However, rather

¹ *Socialist Worker*, 22 and 29 August 1987; *Yorkshire Post*, 22 August 1987.

² *The Guardian*, 25 August 1987; *The Miner*, October 1987.

³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁴ *The Guardian*, 15 September 1987.

⁵ *Socialist Worker*, 19 September 1987.

than implementing a total overtime ban as initially intended, the NUM executive merely ordered its 94,000 members to cease overtime working on production faces and development work. Such a move promised to offer little clout because only one per cent of coal production was ever carried out in overtime.⁶ Ray Riley recounts how ineffective the overtime ban was at Frickley:

There was an overtime ban - but there were some strange dealings and some strange manoeuvrings going on to ensure that people would get their five shifts in. The mandate to hold an overtime ban was not so much adhered to as accommodated to, which allowed flexibility. A proper overtime ban would hit production, it really would, and obviously result in people losing shifts, there's no doubt about that. But it was so flexible in its approach, and in the way that it was done, that hardly any production was lost. A couple of shifts were lost, but there should have been a lot more people sent back home if it had been done properly. And so it just became a farce.⁷

The limited nature of the action also gave management the opportunity to divide the miners, as Ian Oxley illustrates:

We were always told that some Selby pits were working seven days a week. Johnny Walsh was the Area official in that Area. And he was anti-Scargill, anti-union, anti-everything by then. So, unfortunately, because we'd no direct contact with those pits, one tended to believe rumours. Now I think that the rumours were probably exaggerated, but certainly the manager keeps hitting you with: 'They're coaling seven days; aren't you bothered about keeping Frickley open? They're working hard at Silverwood trying to keep their pit open. They're working hard at Goldthorpe trying to keep their pit open. Why is there only Frickley?'⁸

Walking slow

The ineffectual overtime ban only helped to increase British Coal's confidence to intimidate miners at pit level - as Frickley miners were soon to find out when they were again forced to take strike action on Thursday 22 October. The *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* described how this particular dispute began:

Frickley Colliery was hit by a lightning strike last week, as miners walked out in a dispute over docked wages. According to NUM branch officials, the dispute started on Thursday when 40 men working on the Cudworth seam received their pay. Wage slips showed that three-quarters of an hour's money had been docked from the previous Friday when the Cudworth 'Paddy' was out of action. Inquiries to management revealed that the money had been docked 'because the men had

⁶ *The Times*, 18 September 1987.

⁷ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁸ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

not walked quickly enough to the seam', and the Thursday afternoon shift on both Cudworth and Hague Moor seams consequently walked out.⁹

Robert Walker was one of the Frickley miners who had their pay docked:

I remember that because the paddy had broken down, so we had to walk - it would be a couple of miles in. The roads are rickety, you have to bend under where there's a bit of weight on. We'd be walking so far and then we'd have a minute. We weren't going to walk in at first, but they said the paddy couldn't be fixed in the shift, so we had to walk in. We were walking steady, having a minute, a slice of bread and a cup of tea, but they'd got the deputies to time us walking in. So they docked us so much time off. I think it was everybody. There were a few who rushed in, they didn't get owt docked. But you can't be rushing in down there, the road's awkward, it's not meant for walking anyway . . . It cost us to get our money back, but I think that we won that one.¹⁰

The walkout ended after a mass meeting on the Friday voted to return to work on the following Monday morning. At the meeting activists spoke of their concern over management's continuing efforts to intimidate the miners into passivity, and of the need to prepare for action in order to preserve the 'market system', in which the union had a say on how jobs were allocated in the pits.¹¹

Scargill's bombshell

In early November 1987 British Coal intensified its pressure on the NUM by announcing that the union's members would only receive a 4.3 per cent pay increase - the second stage of a two-year deal - when they called off their overtime ban.¹²

When the union's executive met on 12 November to discuss the latest developments, Jack Jones, the Leicestershire miners' leader, demanded that the union accept six-day working at the new Ashfordby superpit, and there were attempts by the new realists to end the overtime ban. But it was what followed that was the real surprise. Arthur Scargill, under fire from his critics, stunned his opponents and supporters alike by unexpectedly putting his leadership of the miners' union on the line and declaring his intention to seek re-election as NUM president.¹³ At a press conference afterwards, Scargill stated his intention to stand on a militant platform in opposition to the new realists.¹⁴

An NUM militant at Frickley Colliery told *Socialist Worker* what he thought of Scargill's decision to stand for re-election:

There's real relief that Scargill has done something . . . the right wing on the exec' were saying they wanted all the action called off. Now Scargill's resignation

⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 28 October 1987.

¹⁰ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

¹¹ *Socialist Worker*, 31 October 1987.

¹² *Socialist Worker*, 7 November 1987.

¹³ *Socialist Worker*, 21 November 1987.

¹⁴ *The Guardian*, 13 November 1987.

puts it all back on the agenda. We can start arguing again about what we are going to do about the Code of Conduct, about six-day working . . . Fighting new realism has got to be the theme of the campaign. But I wish Scargill had done this round the Frickley dispute. Instead, he and Heathfield helped engineer its end so they could ballot on the overtime ban.¹⁵

Considering that the new realists wanted rid of Scargill, his decision to stand for re-election actually threw his critics into disarray. Surprisingly, the only challenger for the presidency came not from the new realists of the Scottish and South Wales Areas but from a traditional right winger, John Walsh, the NUM's North Yorkshire Area agent. Immediately the 'Re-elect Scargill' campaign was on its way, and between late November and 22 January over forty meetings and rallies were organised throughout the British coalfield.¹⁶ 'We had posters up, "elect Scargill" and things like that,' recalls Steve Gant, 'and a lot of lads were going up Scotland and putting them up, because their Area leader, Eric Clarke, was a Walsh man . . . We had meetings and I spoke at a few of them.'¹⁷

Scargill addressed the Frickley miners at the Pretoria Club on Thursday 10 December, telling them that his campaign would rest on his honesty, integrity and devotion to the miners, and stated that his predictions of massive job losses had proved correct. The *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* reported that Scargill was given a standing ovation at the meeting.¹⁸ To the detriment of the NUM, though, the same edition of the newspaper could also proclaim that in the previous week the South Yorkshire coalfield had set a new productivity record of 4.09 tonnes per manshift.¹⁹ This, we need to remind ourselves, was in the midst of an overtime ban that had then been in operation for almost three months.

As the NUM presidential election campaign got under way, the class struggle continued - and once again Frickley miners showed the way to take on British Coal when, during the final week of November, they forced the colliery management into a humiliating climb-down after the pit's bosses suddenly withdrew concessions for working in deep water underground. At first management declared that they would not discuss the issue even if the miners stopped out until Christmas. However, the walkout had barely begun when management were telling branch officials they would back down. 'This miscalculation gave everyone heart and will make management think twice before trying it on again,' a Frickley militant told *Socialist Worker*.²⁰

Bentley

In the period since the Big Strike, industrial action in Britain remained at its lowest level for over 40 years. Because of this, when Margaret Thatcher gave her New Year's message for 1988, she said that strikes were a thing of the past, she had cured

¹⁵ *Socialist Worker*, 21 November 1987.

¹⁶ F. Watters, *Being Frank*, (Doncaster, 1992), p.178.

¹⁷ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

¹⁸ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 16 December 1987.

¹⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 16 December 1987.

²⁰ *Socialist Worker*, 5 December 1987.

the 'British Disease'. Days later, however, a dispute at Bentley Colliery over the victimisation of three men, who were alleged to have been slacking, would lead to a substantial walkout in the Yorkshire coalfield once again. Just as with the Frickley dispute over the Code of Conduct five months earlier, this latest display of mass defiance would stun British Coal. Significantly though, as with Frickley, the dispute also bore the mark of new realism.²¹

The Bentley strike began on Monday 4 January. By Tuesday night Bentley miners had picketed out all of the old Doncaster Area pits.²² When they arrived at Frickley, 'I thought that they were bank robbers,' recalls Gary Hinchliffe:

They'd got face masks on with eye slits in, so that none of the management at Frickley would recognise them if they took photos. Because apparently, when we'd been on strike, they'd been taking photos of us and they were on about disciplining us under the Code of Conduct.²³

Paul Symonds argues that the Bentley strike was the culmination of a chain reaction:

We'd got the confidence to go for the Code of Conduct strike because the Kent miners had proven that there was still life left in picket lines. And then Bentley had a dispute. And they thought exactly the same: 'Why don't we do what Frickley did?' They did, and it worked.²⁴

On the Wednesday, with 6,000 miners failing to go to work, and 8 of the Area's 19 pits at a standstill, Ted Horton, British Coal's South Yorkshire director, warned that legal action might be taken against the flying pickets. The scale of the dispute on his hands, over what appeared at first sight to be such a small issue, clearly horrified Horton, who declared that he did not understand the miners' 'lemming-like attitude of walking out . . .'²⁵ The reality was that the Bentley strikers were tapping into resentment that remained in the coalfield over the consistent and vicious attacks from management, and, crucially, that miners still respected the principle of not crossing picket lines. By the end of Friday 14,000 miners were out at 19 Yorkshire pits.²⁶

Nevertheless, serious problems were already becoming evident. Steve Gant, like many other Frickley activists, was involved in the Bentley dispute almost from the start and could see the weaknesses:

Their lads were asking us how we'd got on in our strike. We told them that they would not be able to do it on their own, they would need to get as much

²¹ *Socialist Worker*, 16 January 1988.

²² Gibbon and Bromley, 'From an institution to a business?', p.80; *The Guardian*, 7 January 1988; *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 13 January 1988.

²³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁴ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ *The Guardian*, 7 January 1988.

²⁶ *The Times*, 9 January 1988.

involvement as they could. But you could see when you got involved in that dispute that it was nowhere as well organised as ours. There were no meetings anywhere after they'd been picketing. It was more in the hands of the officials, Johnny Church and them. They were OK, but they were always going to be under the rule from Barnsley. It never got loose, the rank and file never got a grip of the strike. That's what we used to argue for at meetings. Although John Church and them weren't hostile towards us, they tried to keep it under their guide-lines. That's how the Bentley dispute petered out. There was no good base for it.²⁷

Matters were so bad that Frickley miners seemed to be more involved in the dispute than Bentley miners. 'We got into the ridiculous situation where we were sending pickets from Frickley to help them when there would be no Bentley pickets,' says Paul Symonds: 'You could have six or seven people there and it didn't matter as long as one of them could say that he was from Bentley. But if you were all from Frickley it looked bad.'²⁸

The shortage of Bentley pickets was not an accident. The Bentley branch leadership 'were appalling,' remarks Gary Hinchliffe:

they frightened everybody off from going picketing by telling them that they were liable to get the sack. We went through to Bentley. We said, 'What are you playing at?' What they said was that they couldn't have people going picketing without informing them of the dangers, that there was a very real prospect that further action could be taken, that they could've been sacked.²⁹

Of course there can be little doubt that the application of the Code of Conduct was making picketing harder during the Bentley issue, as Robert Walker recalls:

We were fucked because we were classed as secondary pickets. If anybody asked us, we were from Bentley; because we were going on their dispute. They were only supposed to picket their pit. So we were going with balaclavas or scarves round our faces, things like that.³⁰

However, as Steve Gant argues, the need to wear disguises was actually a sign of the weakness of the dispute:

... that wouldn't have been the case with the Frickley strike. Nobody would have bothered with balaclavas - there were that many of us, we were more confident. Whereas Bentley didn't have the same input.³¹

But the lack of initiative on behalf of the Bentley branch officials was of nothing compared to the undermining tactics elsewhere in this important confrontation.

²⁷ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

²⁸ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²⁹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

³⁰ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

³¹ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

Wherever branch officials supported the pickets, it was easy for them to carry their members. But some officials were not so supportive, as Jeff Johnson found out when he went picketing in South Yorkshire:

I went to Dinnington. Bloody hell fire, it was hard work was that. The union tried to throw me off the property. I ended up on the canteen table and there was a union man on another table speaking at the same time. But I persuaded the shift to down tools and go . . . We had to keep a constant picket, that was the problem there. We couldn't leave a pit and go to roll the next pit over, because as soon as we left that pit word got round and they went back to work.³²

Some branch officials were reported to have been so vehemently opposed to the action that they described the pickets in terms which echoed those coming from Nottinghamshire in 1984 - calling them scum and rabble.³³

Under such circumstances, at the weekend, following a recommendation by the South Yorkshire Panel, and under pressure from the Yorkshire Area leadership, the strike was called off by the Bentley branch in the hope that negotiations would take place with British Coal.³⁴ It was later revealed that if the Panel had not ordered an end to the strike, then Jack Taylor was ready to do so at a meeting of the Yorkshire Area Council.³⁵

The vote

After the events at Bentley the NUM presidential campaign heated up. If Scargill were to lose the presidency, the new realists in the NUM bureaucracy, who wanted peace at any price, would then be in a position to surrender on everything that British Coal wanted. John Walsh never put any blame on British Coal or the government for the continued attacks on the miners, but stressed what he saw as Scargill's 'obsession' with confrontation. He went as far as to attack Scargill for refusing to discuss the possibility of flexible working in the pits and gave his blessing to the South Wales miners' leaders for wanting six-day production at Margam.³⁶ It was because of such policies that Jeff Johnson argues there no support for Walsh at Frickley:

Anything Scargill said, Johnny Walsh disagreed with. He was all for talking with the UDM; he was all for productivity bonus; he was for various things that we didn't want at Frickley. So he didn't have a camp at Frickley, nobody followed him. I never actually met many folk that were for Johnny Walsh. If there had been somebody of Scargill's standing put up, maybe they would have gone for him. But Walshy never had a chance and that was reflected in the vote.³⁷

³² Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

³³ *Socialist Worker*, 16 January 1988.

³⁴ *The Times*, 11 January 1988.

³⁵ *Socialist Worker*, 16 January 1988.

³⁶ *The Times*, 16 January 1988.

³⁷ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

In contrast, Scargill's great appeal was that he was not in with the bosses. Speaking at one election rally, he told miners:

You should vote for me because Margaret Thatcher and the Tories hate me and want to see me defeated. You should vote for me because Sir Robert Haslam and the Coal Board desperately want to see me defeated. And if the bosses want to see me defeated, I must be the best candidate.³⁸

When the votes were counted and announced on the weekend of 23/24 January, 'King Arthur' had been re-elected as the president of the union, but with a greatly reduced majority, receiving 54 per cent of the total. The right had clearly lost out with the formation of the UDM. Nevertheless, in the Yorkshire coalfield, the power base of both contenders, Scargill managed 64 per cent of the vote. Moreover, in the heartlands of new realism, 61 per cent of Welsh miners and 69 per cent of Scottish miners backed Scargill.³⁹

And yet even though Scargill retained the presidency, the militants' dilemma would not be resolved because management's offensive promised to continue and the new realists and the right would remain influential within the NUM. Indeed, the after-effects of the climb-down in the Bentley dispute were still being felt as Scargill returned to office, when ten Bentley miners were issued with final warnings for being involved in the flying picketing. Around the same time all the miners in the South Yorkshire Area were sent a threatening letter from British Coal, warning that 'Management are determined that the small militant faction in the area will be prevented somehow from disrupting continuous production.'⁴⁰

But British Coal could not have gone this far with its threats if it had not been given the opportunity to do so by the pit-level officials in the coalfield. On the weekend after calling off the Bentley strike, the South Yorkshire Panel had gone as far as to declare that in future no pit should send pickets out until the action had been sanctioned by a Panel meeting. And at branch meetings held that same weekend, many branch officials in the South Yorkshire Area also asserted that the overtime ban should be called off to pave the way for negotiations over pay.⁴¹

In such a situation there were two options open to Scargill. He could let himself be tied by the rightward moving officials, or he could vehemently support every struggle of the rank and file which erupted in the pits. To do the latter, though, would mean a complete change from the strategy he had long endorsed, and meant risking the wrath of those NUM officials who had recently supported his re-election campaign but were hostile to unofficial action.

The first test of Scargill's new standing came at a special NUM delegate conference in London on 3 February when Scargill attempted to get the overtime

³⁸ Transcript of *Panorama*, 11 January 1988.

³⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 27 January 1988; *Socialist Worker*, 30 January 1988; *The Miner*, January 1988.

⁴⁰ *Socialist Worker*, 30 January 1988.

⁴¹ *Socialist Worker*, 23 and 30 January 1988.

ban extended. But it was the new realists who won the day, with delegates deciding to hold a membership ballot to review the action.⁴²

The nurses' heroes

The Bentley dispute was not the only example in early 1988 of how the trade unions had not been tamed to the extent Margaret Thatcher was claiming. On 9 February, an editorial in *The Times* conceded that 'Britain is still suffering from industrial disease.' It went on to say that the government's trade union legislation had done much to reform the unions, 'but little, it seems, to remove the feelings of trade unionists in favour of the strike weapon to settle their grievances.'⁴³ The reason for such alarmism from such a pro-Tory newspaper was that car workers at Fords were taking industrial action, there was trouble brewing in the health service, and seafarers were taking their first strike action since 1966. And though tougher action now looked unlikely over the Code of Conduct, Britain's pits came to a standstill on a number of occasions during February, as members of NACODS took national strike action for the first time in their history, in a series of one-day stoppages over bonus payments and British Coal's threat to remove the union's closed shop.

It was the NHS dispute which most attracted the public's attention though. On 3 February thousands of health workers throughout Britain took part in a 'day of action' over pay and funding in the health service. *The Times* gave a rundown of the demonstrations and industrial action that had taken place. Though strike action had been patchy among health workers, significantly, one non-health-related workplace had actually struck in support of them:

At Frickley Colliery near Pontefract, West Yorkshire, 1,000 miners stopped work for 24 hours in sympathy after a delegation of four nurses from Leeds arrived to enlist support. More than £100,000 of production time was lost.⁴⁴

Here, surely, was real proof that solidarity with other workers was now taken very seriously by the miners at Frickley. However, the issue was much more complex than this brief report indicated and subsequently proved to be a testing time for some left-wing activists at the pit.

Tony Short was coming off work on the night shift when the day of action began:

I can remember coming out of the pit at about five or six o'clock. I think that I was the only union man there. But when I came out of the baths there were three or four nurses outside. Everybody was milling about, humming and ahing about coming out.⁴⁵

The NHS dispute was something the miners at Frickley could hardly fail to notice with there being a small hospital, Warde-Aldam, sited only two hundred yards from

⁴² A. J. Taylor, 'Consultation, conciliation and politics', p.232.

⁴³ *The Times*, 9 February 1988.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 4 February 1988.

⁴⁵ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

the colliery entrance. However, Johnny Stones remembers that these particular nurses:

... came by about a dozen pits from Leeds to get to Frickley. I think there were other forces afoot in regards to that one. I couldn't tell you whether it was the RCP [Revolutionary Communist Party] or the SWP. But there were other forces because it was too coincidental. I agreed, personally, in principle, to supporting them because they supported us - I wouldn't say the membership did.⁴⁶

According to Gary Hinchliffe, it was the RCP, a tiny organisation with no influence at the pit, that had instigated the stoppage: 'this group had told these nurses to go through to Frickley knowing full-well that Frickley wouldn't work. The men were very sceptical.'⁴⁷ Paul Symonds and Steve Gant were later branded by their political opponents as two of the instigators of the stoppage. Both remember being on the afternoon shift that day. Paul Symonds first heard about the stoppage on the radio:

At first I just thought: 'Who's organised this?' I couldn't really believe that something like this could happen without us knowing. I went straight up to the pit, and there they were: four or five nurses in uniform stood there, and they'd turned all the pit back. I wasn't sure if the union hadn't had a bit of a hand in it. Without a doubt, it was nice to see miners being prepared to go on strike for nurses. It would bring a smile to any trade unionist's face, and it certainly did mine at the time. It was a good feeling.⁴⁸

Steve Gant first heard of the action when he met Steve Tulley, the branch secretary, while taking his children to school that morning:

Steve Tulley had been on a brewery trip with The Mallard on Tuesday night. The first thing that I said to Steve this morning was, 'Did you have a good night?' 'Aye, a great night; barring having to get up at five this morning.' I said, 'Why, what's up?' 'Fucking nurses are up at Frickley. They've turned the pit back, we are on strike.' I genuinely didn't know anything about this: 'Brilliant.' 'Aye, but it's only Frickley though.' I said, 'Well owt is better than nowt.' I dropped the kids off at school and went straight up to the pit to find out what's going off.⁴⁹

When he arrived there, he found a lot of discontent amongst the Frickley workforce:

There were some people hanging about waiting for the afters shift coming up. But by this time it had been on the news and by now they know that there's only Frickley out. They are saying: 'Why only Frickley, why only us?' Don't forget, these are lads who have had dispute, dispute, dispute, strike, strike, strike.

⁴⁶ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁷ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁸ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁹ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

They've had ten times more than any other miners in Yorkshire. So some are thinking, 'We've had our fair share. What's this going to prove; Frickley being out on its own?' I agreed with this, in a way. I couldn't understand why they hadn't hit the Doncaster Area; because at the time the feeling was behind the nurses. If they had done that it would have been a lot better, and there wouldn't have been as much shit hit the fan as did.⁵⁰

Despite this undercurrent against the stoppage, the nurses informed Frickley NUM of a health workers' rally in Leeds that afternoon and invited a Frickley branch official to speak. Subsequently an emergency branch meeting was held and a coach booked to go to the rally. However, as Gary Hinchliffe recalls, neither:

Steve Tulley nor Johnny Stones would go through to speak. They ducked out of the issue, saying that it was nothing to do with them, once it turned out that we were going to be the only pit that was going to be on strike.⁵¹

Though the militants in the branch were puzzled as to why only Frickley had been hit, they nevertheless went through to Leeds. When the contingent arrived at the rally, they were treated as heroes. 'We'd got the banner with us,' says Steve Gant:

and we put it up at the rally, near the platform. We were Frickley miners and they were all clapping us. *Calendar* and *Look North* wanted to do interviews with a union man. I turned them down at first. But then I was getting pressure from some of the lads to do it; so I agreed. I stated in the interview that we were behind the nurses one hundred per cent, but I thought the mistake they had made was in only coming to Frickley. I said that they should have gone to the Doncaster Area, and they would have got support because everybody relates to nurses, we all understand their predicament.⁵²

In Tony Short's view, it was this appearance on television, 'with the Frickley banner and the dirty dozen stood there,' which made matters worse for the militants:

There was Gant speaking and there were us, like his bodyguards, behind him. And of course everybody has a fit about this, don't they? Even my mam said that it looked bad, every pit in Britain working barring ours.⁵³

Witch hunt

Over the following days, investigations within the branch soon revealed that the nurses who had arrived outside Frickley were not an official delegation from the health service unions. Thus a special general meeting was arranged for the following Saturday so that those who were thought to have instigated the walkout could face

⁵⁰ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁵¹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁵² Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁵³ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

the wrath of their workmates. Gary Hinchliffe says that about seven hundred miners were there and 'they were baying for blood.' Moreover:

that's probably the first time that the moderates and the right wing in the union were organised. It was a witch hunt. They wanted all the branch committee on the stage so that they could see who they were. It was like McCarthy being there: 'Did you know that this wasn't official?' Steve Tulley was saying that he knew nowt about it. They were being called 'liars'. They really got attacked. And that's when I would say that the right wing and the moderates got organised, when they started putting candidates up for elections. But that was gutlessness. All it needed was for Steve Tulley and Chick Picken to stand there and say that they'd been taken in. They let Jip, Ganty and our Paul take the full brunt of it: 'The SWP had organised it. The SWP had sent them.' The official thing was that they didn't know, but they knew that it was a left-wing organisation. Everybody assumed it to be the SWP. Jip tried to tell them that he'd been contacted the night before to warn him that it was coming, but he wasn't in. He said that if they had done, he would have told them. But they wouldn't believe it, they wouldn't have it. From then on in, Lawson had a stick to bait people with then: the SWP. It was as if all the good work that we'd done went with that, and everything became hard work then.⁵⁴

Steve Gant recalls that although there were not many calls for him to resign from the branch committee, the fact that some were made hurt him. 'I felt really let down at the moment,' he says:

Because all that I seemed to have done since I started at the pit was put myself in the firing line. I'd not been on the union for myself, and I thought that I was a damned good union man. I don't want to blow my own trumpet, but I was the best for the lads, and that's what I still believe. So all this hurt. It took some time to get over it. And I lost a few friends. After that, one or two came up to me while I was out socialising: 'I'm sorry about that.' And once they had heard the story, some of them started to believe that it wasn't us. I would be telling groups of men what the SWP's theories were on this: that it wasn't our aim to organise secret strikes, that we were against this as much as anybody.⁵⁵

The paradox about this was that the miners at Frickley and elsewhere were starting to retreat at the very time that other workers were starting to stir, albeit on a very limited scale, for the first time since the Big Strike. The miners' retreat became all too clear one month later, on 6 March, when the result of the overtime ballot showed that NUM members had voted by 58 per cent to end the ban. Out of the union's 17 Areas, only three had voted to continue the action.⁵⁶ The Code of Conduct was now a fact, and if this situation were to continue, the prospect of flexible working practices being forced onto the miners seemed a very real one.

⁵⁴ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁵ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁶ *The Times*, 7 March 1988.

CHAPTER TWELVE: PEACE

War weary

The end of the overtime ban signalled a period in which hostilities all but ceased in the Yorkshire coalfield. An article in the *Yorkshire Post* on Monday 13 June 1988, under the banner 'Peace in our mines', assessed the situation. It was argued that in the Yorkshire coalfield, 'the bane of industrial relations', the previous couple of months:

have been among the most peaceful in the history of the nationalised industry. In April and May last year 21,208 shifts were lost through strikes at Yorkshire pits; this April and May only 1,115 shifts have been lost - a 95 per cent decrease. The mood in the mines has changed. Prosperity has a real chance of emerging in an industry which has appeared cursed by a death wish.¹

And there was plenty more evidence to suggest that the mood in the mines had indeed changed. Between mid-April and mid-June 1988 Britain's miners were said to have broken the all-time production record on five occasions; and since the overtime ban had been called off some miners were said to be earning as much as £500 a week, with overtime and bonuses.²

The reality, as the militant activists at Frickley had found to their cost, was that many miners were war weary. Added to this, Yorkshire NUM branch officials were now more reluctant than ever to back strikes and so disputes were kept to a minimum. Many officials placed their hopes in the series of private talks that were held between the NUM and British Coal. It was noted in the press that conciliatory noises were evident in these negotiations. Indeed, Sir Robert Haslam was even reported to have backed down on one issue, indicating that six-day working would be confined to new-pits.³ So peaceful had affairs in the industry become that some new realists on the union's national executive were predicting that the forthcoming NUM conference, due to open at Great Yarmouth on 27 June, would be the quietest on record.⁴

The price of peace

Peace there may have been, but it was the miners who were paying the price. In the year to April 1988 a massive 20,000 workers had left the industry, 16 mines had closed, leaving just 96 still operating. Five pits had closed in March alone and there were now little more than half the number of pits there had been at the beginning of the Big Strike.⁵ The Wakefield Metropolitan District, which included South Elmsall and South Kirkby, had been badly affected by closures. In the nine years since the Tories had come to power, Wakefield District had lost 14 of its 20 pits. Five pits had closed in the previous six months alone. Astonishingly, there were now no pits

1 *Yorkshire Post*, 13 June 1988.

2 *Yorkshire Post*, 13 June 1988.

3 *The Guardian*, 11 June 1988.

4 *Yorkshire Post*, 13 June 1988.

5 *The Times*, 28 March 1988.

at all in the traditional mining communities of Castleford and Featherstone. Similarly, there had been six pits in the adjacent Hemsworth parliamentary constituency in 1984: Acton Hall, Kinsley Drift, Nostell, South Kirkby, Ferrymoor Riddings and Frickley. By the end of 1987 the first three pits on the above list had closed.⁶ Then came another bombshell. On 9 March 1988 British Coal announced that the combined pits of South Kirkby/Ferrymoor Riddings, which employed 1,300 workers, were to close too. The following day, the dispirited miners who worked at these pits voted by four to one in favour of accepting the closures without offering any opposition.⁷

The social and economic costs of pit closures to this particular region were immense. Estimates of the local unemployment rate were now set at an alarming 24 per cent, and were predicted to rise with the snowball effect on other industries.⁸

Was Frickley safe?

Though British Coal's axe was swinging ever closer, initially at least, the future still seemed rosy at Frickley - that is if output figures had any importance. In the first week of April the pit had produced 37,637 tonnes of coal, beating the previous best tonnage record by over 600 tonnes. The output per manshift record was also extended from 7.10 tonnes per manshift to 8.06 tonnes per manshift.⁹ Ken Davies, the pit's deputy manager, told one of the local newspapers that:

This is an excellent start to the year for us. £30 million has been invested in a new winders shaft, deepening and developing the Top Haigh Moor seam and currently improving development work in Meltonfield and Newhill seams. An achievement like this repays some of the investment and while we continue this sort of performance the pit will go from strength to strength.¹⁰

The message, then, was that if the Frickley miners worked hard enough their future was secure. But was this really so? Not long after, in mid-May 1988, a report prepared by the Coalfields Communities Campaign gave an astonishing forecast, predicting that within four years at least 16 more Yorkshire pits were likely to close, with the loss of 15,000 jobs, as a direct consequence of the privatisation of the electricity supply industry. Throughout Britain as a whole, a total of 51,500 mining jobs were said to be in jeopardy if privately-owned power stations were allowed to import coal without restrictions.¹¹ When the report was later discussed at a conference attended by such interested parties as Wakefield District councillors, mining unions and British Coal, one of the pits said to be in danger was Frickley Colliery.¹²

⁶ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 23 March 1988; *Yorkshire Post*, 15 March 1988.

⁷ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 16 March 1988.

⁸ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 23 March 1988.

⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 13 April 1988.

¹⁰ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 13 April 1988.

¹¹ *Yorkshire Post*, 19 May 1988.

¹² *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 22 June 1988.

Of course one of the main concerns of NUM members was the possible privatisation of the coal industry itself under the Tories. On 12 October 1988 the government's intentions were laid bare at the Conservative Party conference in Brighton when energy secretary Cecil Parkinson made what he called 'an historic pledge', stating that coal would be privatised if the Conservatives won the next general election and that the government would retain its firm commitment to nuclear power.¹³

Victimised

The after-effects of the NHS day of action were felt for quite some time at Frickley. 'We lost a fair bit of credibility there. That's probably why there wasn't a dispute for six months,' suggests Tony Short.¹⁴ With a clear division evident in the workforce for the first time since the Big Strike, management now felt confident enough to attack the militants in the pit. 'They were always trying to victimise us, so you had to do what you could to avoid it,' explains Paul Symonds:

One of the things that I always tried to do was work in a team of men when I worked in the headings, so that it was very hard for them to pick on me as an individual. If they victimised me, they had to victimise all my team. I never gave them the excuse to; in terms of work, I used to be a good worker. So I kept victimisation down to a minimum.¹⁵

Another one of Frickley management's main targets, Steve Gant, was not so fortunate:

Not long afterwards, I was going down the pit on the afternoon shift. Now I've always been good at smelling a rat straight away. We used to go down the pit and we used to get deployed off the board - a blackboard where they used to chalk up your numbers telling you which part of the pit you would be working in. This day, my number is there, 493, 'On a dint. Take pick and shovel.' I thought that there was something wrong about this, but I didn't say anything because it was the first time that this has been done. I couldn't jump the gun; not after what has gone off. I goes on this dint. It was a job that had been created out of nothing. It was away from everybody else, there was nobody else there. I knew there was something wrong because this doesn't happen; this is planned. The deputy on the unit was Andrew Symonds, one of my old schoolmates, although we are not friendly at this time. As he came past I asked him what the crack was with this job. 'Nothing, why what's up?' He was very evasive. I said, 'Andrew, I know that there's something up. You know there's something up. I want you to tell me what's up. I will not quote your name, I will not say a word about where it's come from.' You could see that Andrew didn't want to say anything - could he trust me? But I gave him my word and he accepted that. So he tells me: 'Yeah, you have to be deployed onto this job, on your own, every day. Nobody has to be

¹³ *The Guardian*, 13 October 1988.

¹⁴ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

¹⁵ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

deployed with you. And I have to mark down every day the exact amount of work that you do.' 'Thank you, I know where I am now.' That just confirmed what was going through my mind.¹⁶

The following day he complained to the branch officials about how he was being victimised, but they were not sympathetic. He faced a dilemma:

I was trapped because the men were against me and the union had enough of me. It was like Catch 22: I can't pull men out, I've lost that bit of credibility. Is it going to fall on deaf ears? If it does I'm sacked. I thought: 'Has Lawson set me up on this for that reason? Yes he has. He wants me to jump the gun. He wants me to fetch the men out, for it to fall dead, for me to be sacked.' By this time he had already established a way to go about disputes; the Code of Conduct was coming in steadily. So I've got to dint; I've got to eat shit, basically.

Now Lawson knew this. He would have his visits. He would always make a beeline to go to that job; and would fetch his two or three overmen with him, and maybe the safety officer. I'd be on my job, he'd say, 'Now then Steve, how's your dint going?' trying to goad me. He fetched a right crew down one day. There were about ten of them: deputies, overmen, safety officers and visitors from somewhere. 'This is Steve's dint,' he told them in front of me.' Then he gets his snuff tin out, 'Do you want a bit of snuff Steve?' I said, 'Not if your fingers have been in it. No.' 'What do you mean by that?' 'Well what does it mean? It's obvious enough what it means.' Now I don't think he knew how close he was that day for me to smash him with this pick that I had in my hand. I've never been as close. It was unbelievable. I was shaking after he'd gone. How I didn't do it I don't know. He'd got me if I'd have done that; that was it. And I would have had a problem with having to do time as well. But I got through.¹⁷

Short-manning

Despite the best efforts of the new realists, the peace in the Yorkshire coalfield was short-lived. And even if militants were no longer in a position to offer a lead, the reality was that they were not the ones who had been the initiators of the stoppages in the pits anyway. 'Apart from once, I've never fetched people out on strike,' argues Tony Short, 'none of the militants have. If you ask all those who were supposed to be the ringleaders, I'll bet that there's not been one dispute over us. It's always been over other people.'¹⁸

And so it proved. On Tuesday 20 September, for instance, production came to a halt once more, for 24 hours, after men on the night shift refused to go underground because of a disagreement over manning levels.¹⁹ That same week miners also struck briefly at nearby Brodsworth and Barnburgh collieries. There was a further encouraging sign for militants in late September when a conference of South Wales

¹⁶ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

¹⁷ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

¹⁸ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

¹⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 28 September 1988.

miners did a remarkable U-turn and rejected British Coal's demands for six-day working at Margam.²⁰

There were further walkouts at Frickley the following month. On Friday 14 October there was a strike on the afternoon shift on 83s unit in the Little Pit, and four days later there were strikes involving L27s in the Big Pit and C90s in the Little Pit. Like most of the disputes in this period, most of which were unrecorded, these were over 'short-manning'. 'They'd let about 175 men go with redundancy,' recalls Gary Hinchliffe:

the pit was getting so run down and de-manned - instead of there being a fitter for every unit, and men for every unit, plus a market list, it was getting to where if somebody didn't turn up for a face, they wouldn't replace him. They'd argue that we haven't got the manpower, had no men working. They'd deliberately caused a situation where we were understaffed, and then they expected the men to work undermanned on a face . . . Management would blame your colleagues who were not coming into work, the absentee levels. The union would cite the fact, 'Well you knew this before you let these 175 men go' . . . A contract for a job might be for eleven men. But then Lawson came in with a ten-man contract, a nine-man contract, an eight-man contract . . . And then he would say to the men, 'Look, if you think that you can run this face with just four men - just because the union says it's an eleven-man face - we'll pay you the money that eleven men would earn; you can share it between you.' We had big battles over this.²¹

GCHQ again

In late October 1988, the issue of trade union organisation at GCHQ, the government's electronic spying centre at Cheltenham, grabbed the attention of trade union activists once again - as it had prior to the Big Strike - when the Tories dismissed four of the 18 remaining trade unionists at the establishment for refusing to relinquish their trade union affiliations.²² Even the TUC, now more prone to promoting credit cards, mortgages and glossy advertisements as the stuff of modern trade unionism, felt forced to respond over this and called a day of action for Monday 7 November, but urged unions to take action short of strikes, generally lunch-time rallies and marches.²³ When it took place, the day of action demonstrated just how resilient British trade unionism remained, with solid action across the civil service and isolated action elsewhere. But the action also showed that the trade union movement was still trapped by its compliance with the legal restrictions; and so no strikes were called, even by the NUM.²⁴ Nevertheless, one Yorkshire pit did strike that day, and once again it was Frickley Colliery.²⁵ After the debacle over the

²⁰ *Socialist Worker*, 1 October 1988.

²¹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²² *Socialist Worker*, 22 October 1988.

²³ *Socialist Worker*, 29 October 1988.

²⁴ *Socialist Worker*, 12 November 1988.

²⁵ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 9 November 1988; *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 7 November 1988.

health workers earlier in the year, 'This was so ironic it was unbelievable,' says Paul Symonds:

The consensus at the pit was this: 'We've had our day of action for the nurses and we are not having another one.' But it still went onto the agenda for a union meeting to discuss whether there should be a 24-hour strike in support of GCHQ. There was a big notice about this went up in the union box; and there was a steady stream of men going into the union and saying, 'We are not coming out on strike. What's this notice doing up?' The union officials, mainly led by Chick Picken, reassured all these blokes that they fully understood their circumstances, that it was just a formality, that we wouldn't be coming out on strike and that they shouldn't worry about it. This was going on for weeks. And to be honest, I'd got my head down a bit and wasn't really arguing for it - I thought that it would be better to mark this one down as a loss.²⁶

Although Paul Symonds had no wish to see any strike action taken over the GCHQ in the current climate, he still wanted the branch to debate the issue and so invited an SWP civil service union activist from Sheffield to address the meeting:

I met Kieran and I said, 'Look, we don't want to be coming out on strike. Just get up and say your piece.' Kieran gets up and what does he do? He makes this brilliant speech about why people should support GCHQ! There were only about twenty-five people in this room - and they were all cheering him! I was stood at the back of the room with my head in my hands, thinking, 'Oh, no.' It was the first time in my life that I'd stayed silent in a union meeting. And as soon as he finished speaking everyone said, 'There's no problem, let's support them.' I really didn't know what to do. I couldn't force myself to speak against it, although I knew that it was a big mistake, because I knew that the men at the pit were dead against it. Barring two or three abstentions, it had been voted for unanimously - and I was one of the abstentions!

There was hell-on on Monday. It was mainly the union officials who got it - men were going to rip their heads off: 'You told us there wasn't going to be a strike!' 'But, but, but.' What a situation that was. You want to go on strike when you have the backing of the majority of the men. But the pit was in a no-strike mode, and the union meeting had voted to take strike action. It was still solid, nobody scabbed; but it was one of those things that shouldn't have happened.²⁷

Almost

1988, the year of relative industrial peace in Britain's coalfields, almost ended as it began - with an NUM overtime ban in place, this time to force British Coal's hand over pay and because the corporation was denying the NUM negotiating rights in UDM dominated pits. In the event, however, the miners narrowly rejected any action by 29,386 (50.6 per cent) to 28,650 (49.3 per cent) and thus allowing British Coal to impose a 7.5 per cent wage increase. Within the result, Yorkshire miners showed

²⁶ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²⁷ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

signs of their combativity by voting 58 per cent in favour of action. But once more the worst damage had been done by the Scottish and South Wales Area leaders who openly campaigned against challenging British Coal.²⁸

The failure to get a vote for action vividly showed the NUM bureaucracy's dilemma. Sections of the leadership continued to dampen down the fights over local issues in favour of larger-scale actions. But they failed to see that victories at pit level remained the key to rebuilding confidence in the pits in order to tackle wider questions such as national pay claims. To make matters worse, the rebuff for national action came just as British Coal declared a renewed pit closure programme, and just after the corporation and the Health and Safety executive had announced plans to slacken underground safety regulations - this when the existing regulations were hardly enough: already the accident rate was increasing, with as many as 11 deaths in the first 32 weeks of 1988, double the rate for the previous year.²⁹ Ken Moses, still British Coal's technical director, vocalised management's absolute indifference to miners' working conditions on 29 November as he pressed the government to change the restrictions on working hours enshrined in the 1908 Coal Mines Regulations Act, stating that, 'It doesn't seem to me there is anything very onerous about working under ground for ten hours or more.'³⁰ Moses' remarks were made two days after the first ever six-day working agreement had been signed by the UDM for the new Ashfordby pit in Leicestershire.³¹

On 24 January 1989 British Coal told mining unions that five South Yorkshire pits, Barnburgh, Brodsworth, Dinnington, Shireoaks, and Thurcroft were 'causing concern', even though the Area had made a profit of £13 million, after capital charges, in the three months up to December. Three other pits were also said to be operating at costs less than British Coal's minimum level of £1.50 a gigajoule.³²

And yet despite the miners once again having voted against action, the resistance at pit level that had disintegrated after Bentley was still in the process of mounting. Amongst the most prominent disputes in this period was a two-day strike in Selby over safety in mid-December. In late January 1989 there was a 24-hour strike at Kellingley and a three-day strike at Barnsley Main, both over bonus payments. Also in late January, the Yorkshire Area NUM banned all production in overtime.³³

Significantly, British Coal had faced little opposition on the question of closures since the end of the Big Strike. Suddenly though, on 5 February 1989, things changed briefly when miners at Barnburgh Colliery, some six miles south of Frickley, voted unanimously to fight to save their threatened pit and 750 jobs. Management were so stunned by the decision that they had to abandon their plan to immediately run the pit down for fear of provoking a strike.³⁴ 'This was like a breath of fresh air for us,' recalls Paul Symonds:

²⁸ *The Guardian*, 19 December 1988; *Socialist Worker*, 7 January 1989.

²⁹ *Socialist Worker*, 10 December 1988.

³⁰ *Yorkshire Miner*, Christmas 1988.

³¹ *Yorkshire Miner*, Christmas 1988.

³² *Yorkshire Post*, 25 January 1989.

³³ *Socialist Worker*, 7 January and 4 February 1989.

³⁴ *Socialist Worker*, 11 February 1989; *Yorkshire Post*, 6 February 1989.

at last a pit had said 'No'. There was a campaign around it, and initially I think there were some walkouts over it. We were over the moon. A car load of us from Frickley went over to a public meeting over the closure. The best speaker on the night was a local vicar called Rodney Marshall. He was dead militant.³⁵

However, there were signs that new realism would scupper the Barnburgh fight. At one meeting the rift between Arthur Scargill and the Yorkshire Area leaders was evident once again. Scargill called for industrial action to save pits, but Jack Taylor saw the battle to save Barnburgh only in terms of presenting a good case to the review procedure.³⁶ 'But once you put it in the procedure, it just dragged on and on,' argues Paul Symonds:

Your bonus would be down because they would stop you earning it, and they would make it so that you just wanted to get out. There hasn't been any pit that has gone into the review procedure and survived it. So the union's strategy was: yes, they wanted people to vote against closure - but that is all they wanted them to do.³⁷

And so it proved, with the campaign to save Barnburgh eventually collapsing and the pit closing.

Transferees

A consequence of pit closures since the mid-1980s was an influx of transferees at Frickley, replacing the older and disillusioned miners who had taken redundancy. Thus it was noticeable that the pit was gradually changing from being one in which the vast majority of the workforce lived in the immediate vicinity. But as we saw in the introduction to this present study, theorists have long associated close-knit mining communities with militant workforces, and in line with this thinking, some Frickley miners were wary of the influx of transferees; as Gary Hutsby recollects:

Some people at the pit would theorise that along with a lot of good, solid militants leaving Frickley, the pit had been diluted by the men who had been shipped in from pits that had closed. They would argue that the militancy wasn't there any more. Some people referred to these who had been transferred to Frickley as 'Gypsies', which to my mind was a load of bollocks. You can go through all the disputes that took place from '85 onwards, when half the pit was made up of people from outside the locality, with people who didn't grow up in the same streets as us; but if they were so weak and spineless and weren't prepared to fight, how come every strike we ever had was solid? Some people had a pop at them openly: 'Aye, it's your faults, we wouldn't have stood for this years ago.' But when people were asked, 'Are you going to go on strike over this matter?' it was always one hundred per cent, everybody always marched down

³⁵ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

³⁶ *Socialist Worker*, 25 February 1989.

³⁷ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

the lane. People were trying to find excuses for why things had turned from the way that it had been.³⁸

Robert King had transferred to Frickley, via a short spell at Askern, after South Kirkby closed, and recalls hearing the same argument:

... a lot were saying that these from other pits were watering it down. But it wasn't. I think it was the Frickley miners themselves who were getting their heads battered against the wall. Because I noticed that at meetings it was those who were fresh from other places who were sticking their hands up to strike, and they were doing picketing and that. Whereas some of the Frickley lads who had been doing it for years had had enough.³⁹

John Picken, Frickley's branch president in its final years, pays the following tribute to the transferees at the pit:

We'd got a lot of lads from what we call 'over the common', from Goldthorpe, from all over. Credit to them lads. They backed us all the way. If there was a strike coming up, they were with us. They were at the forefront with us, they paid into our levies. They were as good as any man you could work with.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, there was a genuine fear amongst militants that the pit management would try to reinforce any divisions and attempt to get newcomers to deviate from what was regarded as normal practice at the pit. Paul Symonds recalls that one of the main concerns was that the transferees were moving into the better-paid jobs on the coal face that were usually taken by younger miners once they had gained experience:

Although these weren't circumstances that we particularly wanted, we on the left thought that we had to welcome the transferees to the pit for the simple reason that these men had not sold their jobs and wanted to stay inside the industry. Because of this, there was a discussion in a union meeting and it was agreed that we would accept transferees, but that there would be negotiations between the branch and management about how many there would be and what jobs they would do. If there were button men sent, we would use these to try to free the button men who had been waiting for years. So, by and large, they were pretty much welcomed.⁴¹

He explains that Frickley NUM was fortunate in that many of the newcomers were militants who had especially requested a transfer to Frickley because of its reputation. However, he remembers that the efforts to integrate the transferees were not as good as they should have been:

³⁸ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

³⁹ Robert King, interviewed by the author, 13 December 1996.

⁴⁰ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

⁴¹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

Looking back, there were things that the union didn't do but could have done - and I suppose I should have raised it. I remember thinking about when new men came to the pit, they would have a meeting with the management and the manager would welcome them to the pit. But they were marched straight past the union office, and the union never made any attempt to say, 'Welcome to Frickley NUM, this is how we do things here.' So that was missing.⁴²

Robert King remembers the reception he encountered with Frickley management just after he arrived at the pit:

I was up in the offices and somebody said, 'You'll have to see TL.' I thought: 'Who's TL?' That was Lawson's nickname; I didn't know. He got me in the office with the personnel manager and they made me a cup of tea and what have you. Then it was: 'Are you a member of the Socialist Workers Party? Do you go drinking in the Niggers?' He knew that all the militants drank in there. And I just lied to him. And he knew I was lying.⁴³

But wherever the miners who constituted the Frickley workforce resided, in early 1989 the workers at the pit would once again demonstrate the most effective way to tackle British Coal's attacks.

Water tight

In an earlier chapter we touched on how Frickley Colliery management were eager to end the practice of granting concessions to miners who worked in wet conditions. The issue would remain a potential powder-keg for a long time. 'This,' says Johnny Stones:

was one of the issues that when we resumed work after the strike and managers had got a wishing well and could wish what they wanted; they collectively agreed that the Yorkshire Water Agreement, as we'd understood it in the past, was no longer operating in that way.⁴⁴

There was no way of avoiding water underground - and water was not just wet, sometimes it was acidic or icy cold, and sometimes consisted of slurry - and so the issuing of 'water-notes' permitting miners to leave the pit early or receive a special payment was always likely to remain contentious. In theory, water-notes were issued at the deputy's discretion and had little to do with senior management. But 'there was always some kind of argument over water-money or water-notes,' recalls Gary Hurst:

We went through a phase where there were no such things as water-notes. We were getting told: 'You can have water-money,' and then when it was really bad,

⁴² Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴³ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁴ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

'Oh, you can have an half-hour note but you can't have water-money. You can have one or the other but you can't have both.' . . . They seemed to be ruled by the wind over it. It was never a clear directive about water-money, or water-notes, because I can remember that we used to get an hour's note in 10s heading on Fridays, and 69s heading, prior to the strike. It was just below the knees in water, raining in from above, You were wet from head to toe. But as far as hour notes were concerned after the strike, there was no such thing. You used to get at the most half an hour, and that was going in the water - you really had to be drenched to get that . . . Sometimes the men used to take it on themselves: 'Are you giving us a note?' 'No!' So it would be like a mini-dispute.⁴⁵

In mid-February 1989 there had been water present on one particular face at Frickley, C83s in the Little Pit, for about a week; but not enough to warrant a water-note. By the morning of Monday 20 February though, water levels had risen to between 12 and 18 inches in depth. Deputies on both the day shift and the afternoon shift agreed that water-notes were in order but were afraid to sign them because senior management had declared there was no water and that any deputy who issued a note would face disciplinary action.⁴⁶ 'We were asked to work in these shocking conditions without receiving any payments,' remembers Ray Riley:

We were not prepared to work in that area unless we got paid accordingly. And the deputy gave us an ultimatum: that we make our minds up within half an hour about what we were going to do, or else we could get our coats on and go. So obviously we took his advice and went.⁴⁷

When the Frickley NUM branch officials and a team of senior colliery managers got involved after this, management assured the union representatives that they were prepared to leave the issuing of water-notes to the deputies' discretion. However, workers on the night shift found this not to be the case as deputies again refused to give out notes because of pressure from senior management. The men on the day shift on Tuesday were back to square one and quickly getting soaked. The NUM branch officials tried to solve the problem by asking for the colliery manager to visit C83s. A water pumping system was being installed and production was stood by the time Tony Lawson arrived at the site. Lawson now declared there was no water and refused to sign a water-note. However, he said he would allow men with wet clothes to change into fresh clothing at the face.⁴⁸ Angered at this, the men involved then walked out of the pit. Robert King was among them:

. . . we were all on the paddy waiting to go out on strike, and the manager was there. He'd been on the face and he sat down and he said to this bloke something like: 'It's madness.' This bloke said, 'It might be, but we're still going home.' And that was it, we all got on the paddy and went home . . . And he was on the

⁴⁵ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁶ *Labour Briefing*, 21 March 1989.

⁴⁷ Ray Riley, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁸ *Labour Briefing*, 21 March 1989.

same paddy, shaking his head. It was great, because he was powerless. They're all right getting you in the office when you are on your own; but he couldn't do owt, he couldn't threaten anybody with the sack. He couldn't intimidate anybody because we were all going. He was a nasty piece of work, an intimidating bastard, and he couldn't do owt, he was just impotent.⁴⁹

A mass meeting was held the following day and the men voted to stay out until Saturday. Later that week British Coal sought the advice of an industrial solicitor to see if the Yorkshire Water Agreement could be overcome in court. To their consternation, the corporation found that the agreement was legally binding, and so backed down. Frickley management apologised to the NUM and promised not to interfere in the handing out of water-notes again. The miners subsequently returned to work the following Monday.⁵⁰

Writing in the left-wing newspaper *Labour Briefing* under the pseudonym 'A proud miner from Frickley NUM', Jeff Johnson asked for other miners to follow the Frickley example:

The problem to me as a rank and file member of Frickley NUM is how many other pits have already experienced the same style of aggressive management, had long-standing agreements torn up, and done nothing? Once again it has been Frickley fighting to maintain the status quo, as we have done dozens of times since 84/85. I know at some pits faced with closure morale is low, but where is the miners' tenacity? Others won for us what we have. Are we going to give it up without even raising our voices? Now more than any other time is the time to stand up and be counted.⁵¹

This victory was especially important considering that the management at Frickley were once more pressing miners to break the one million tonne mark by the end of that financial year. The miners needed to remain vigilant because such pressure was causing the accident rate in the pit to increase. Indeed in one 36-hour period just prior to the walkout there had been as many as five serious accidents at Frickley, including one miner suffering a broken back.⁵²

The battery dispute

Hardly had the dust settled from the strike over water payments when another walkout occurred at Frickley. This is how the *Yorkshire Evening Post* of 12 April 1989 described the latest stoppage:

Frickley Colliery, at South Elmsall, was strike bound today after a walkout sparked by an instruction to carry a battery. British Coal say a man waiting to go underground for yesterday's night shift refused to take with him a lamp battery for use on a man-riding car. He was then sent from the pit and was followed by

⁴⁹ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁰ *Labour Briefing*, 21 March 1989.

⁵¹ *Labour Briefing*, 21 March 1989.

⁵² *Socialist Worker*, 4 March 1989.

the rest of the men on his shift. Today's 6 am shift also refused to work leaving more than 600 of the pit's 970 workforce idle.⁵³

The row which sparked the dispute had been running for over two years and stemmed from management's refusal to continue paying custom and practice payments. 'It was because we had a new man-riding haulage system in, which took the men into the pit bottom,' recalls Johnny Stones:

There was an engine that drove it that was in the pit bottom and there was a Cyclone Converter paddy-engineman. What he'd got to do was carry a battery that was charged up in the lamp room on the surface. He'd to carry it from the lamp room, down to the shaft side, and from the shaft side to the Cyclone Converter haulage engine house underground. But there was no payment for it. He got paid for carrying an oil lamp, only a minimum payment . . . which was about 10p per shift.⁵⁴

Although the issue was relatively trivial in comparison to others that led to walkouts, Gary Hurst thought that the question of payments for carrying objects underground always had the potential to flare up:

A lot of men were under the same feeling as me, because, being a fitter, we used to be loaded up to the nines with tackle to carry in to our job every day. We started work at six o'clock and we were going into an office to report at quarter to six. And then they were giving us tackle to carry to the job and we didn't start until six. And we were always falling out over that. So it was no surprise when the battery thing came up, because the men have to present themselves down the pit for work. That's their contract for employment. And they were asking them to pick batteries up at quarter to six, carry them in their own time to their job. It sounds small and petty, but if it's in your own time have they got any rule over you? I know you are on their premises, but you are not getting paid by them, why should you do as you are told before six.⁵⁵

The walkout ended the following day, 13 April, when a mass meeting voted to accept a recommendation from the South Yorkshire Panel to go back to work and allow talks between the NUM's Area agent and British Coal.⁵⁶

To outside observers, and even many Frickley miners, the dispute may have seemed petty. This may have been so. But, crucially, what this stoppage did demonstrate once again was that it was going to cost British Coal dear if it picked on even a single worker at the pit, even though a large section of the workforce were weary of continually having to take action.

⁵³ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 12 April 1989.

⁵⁴ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁵ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁶ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 13 April 1989.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: INTO THE 1990s

'Just like old times'

Without doubt there was still great pride in being a member of the NUM. However, by the time of the union's 1989 conference in July, moves were already under way to bring about a merger with the giant Transport and General Workers' Union, with the miners constituting a part of the TGWU's energy group.¹ Union mergers were very much in vogue in this period. By 1992 over 40 per cent of all trade unionists would belong to conglomerate trade unions.²

The fact that such a merger was even being contemplated by the NUM bureaucracy was a sign of how they were losing faith in the miners' industrial strength. And yet, though the merger itself eventually fell through, the great irony is that such a move was being sought at precisely the time that the Conservative government started to face severe difficulties. According to the new realists, 'Thatcherism' was supposed to be invincible, and yet Labour was now 14 per cent ahead in the opinion polls, and inflation, which the Tories had claimed was under control, had now reached 8.3 per cent and showed no immediate sign of falling.³ It was a similar story on the industrial front, where the unions were supposed to have been tamed. As the Tories celebrated ten years in office, *The Economist* commented on how it was 'Just like old times, really, suddenly strikes are back in fashion.'⁴ In the following weeks there was a strike ballot amongst engineering workers in a pay dispute; 37,000 power workers voted by 10 to 1 to take action over pay; there were unofficial walkouts on the London Underground and one-day strikes by London bus workers; at the BBC there was a series of one-day stoppages by 20,000 television workers; postal workers were threatening strike action; 750,000 local government workers were in the process of being balloted over pay; and the firefighters' union was threatening action on pay and in defence of national bargaining.⁵ In June there were also one-day stoppages on the railways, strikes on North Sea oil rigs and strikes by dockers.⁶

With the miners desperately needing to gain confidence to fight the next round of pit closures, all of this should have been welcome. But the industrial action that took place also showed clear signs of new realist influence. The strikes were limited, they tended to be of one-day duration, they were sectional, and they were within the law. But what was most worrying for the Tories about these developments on the industrial front was something that *The Economist* also noted: 'Tight laws regulating official strikes may be making wildcat action more common.'⁶

The 'wildcat action' that *The Economist* bemoaned had, of course, long been a common feature at Frickley Colliery and would remain so during the rest of 1989. On 20 and 21 of June, for instance, there was a strike in the Little Pit over

1 *The Guardian*, 4 July 1989.

2 *Labour Research*, June 1990, pp.9-11; McIlroy, *Trade Unions in Britain Today*, second edition, (Manchester, 1995), p.17.

3 *Socialist Worker*, 15 July 1989.

4 *The Economist*, 29 April 1989.

5 *Socialist Worker*, 13 May 1989.

6 *The Economist*, 29 April 1989.

'redeployment'. As with the short-manning disputes, deployment disputes were a consequence of the large numbers of redundancies at the pit. 'We were always having do's over things like that,' recalls Gary Hurst:

Everybody used to get the monk on over redeployment. You got sent to a job, during the job it might've broken down. There might've been an hour when the men couldn't do that job, so they used to redeploy them onto other jobs. Basically, they were trying to keep you doing something, but not on your own job. You had your regular job, the men on the face especially. They saw it as part and parcel of their job to do that job. That's what they were employed for. They were picked out for that job, they were put on that job, they didn't see why they should walk another mile somewhere else to do another job, which they haven't got enough men to do. But the gaffers expect you to do it because you are not doing owt. You always used to have disputes - but not disputes as far as going out on strike over it. But you used to have bits of these pretty regularly: 'I'm not being redeployed, you can knackers. I'll go home first!' And they used to go home.⁷

Another indication that militancy at Frickley was beginning to recover somewhat from the low point after the NHS dispute was the continuing success of left-wing candidates seeking positions on the branch committee. Gary Hinchliffe had stood for branch secretary in 1987:

I got beaten on that . . . But I was elected to run the pit shop for a couple of years. Then I got on the branch and came off the pit shop . . . I was voted on with the highest number of votes as well, and I was re-elected with the highest number of votes. I got re-elected twice.

Perhaps more significant was the re-election of Steve Gant:

I increased my vote. Which was funny. One year I was being asked to resign, but when it came round to voting again I was back on. Which was smashing. All this attitude about Frickley having had enough, 'Let's hide our banner and get some coal off and set more bars,' didn't stop management attacking them all the time. So after a period of time - when we've been getting all this shit - it's never going to stop, so they start realising that when it comes to the elections, and who do you want on your side, at the end of the day the best lads for the job were us. And I think that's why we got re-elected. They knew that although we had our fall-outs, and that things had gone wrong, at the end of the day we were the most capable people at the pit for arguing on their behalf.⁸

There were further walkouts on a number of different headings at Frickley from Tuesday 19 September and Friday 22 September 1989. Later in the autumn, on Thursday 16 November, the entire day shift struck in the Little Pit.

⁷ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

⁸ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

Pessimism

Job losses still dominated thinking in the coal industry as the new decade approached. In late July 1989 it was announced that a further 80 jobs at Frickley had to go and that a face in the Cudworth seam would have to close. The Frickley branch officials were so disturbed by these latest losses that they requested the matter be put through the colliery review procedure. 'At the moment,' Steve Tulley told the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 'feelings at Frickley are terrible and talk is always of it being closed down, more job losses and the like.'⁹

The pessimism at Frickley was probably indicative of the climate elsewhere in British pits in the coming months as further speculation about the prospects for the industry were disclosed. On Monday 7 August 1989, for example, *The Guardian* newspaper revealed that British Coal had drawn up plans to close a further 20 pits, cut almost 30,000 jobs, and reduce output by 25 million tonnes, to just under 60 million tonnes, if the industry was privatised over the next four years.¹⁰ More immediately worrying was the forthcoming electricity privatisation. On 30 October, a leaked cabinet memorandum revealed that up to 18,000 miners could lose their jobs as a direct result of the sell-off and there would be a further 12,000 redundancies in a clear-out.¹¹

August 1989 also witnessed British Coal attempting to put the NUM under threat in a more direct manner, when it retaliated to the NUM's pay demand of a £30-a-week pay rise by threatening to terminate the check-off agreement, which had existed since 1949, under which NUM members had their union subscriptions stopped directly out of their wage packets. If this measure was implemented, it promised severe financial difficulties for the NUM.¹² In addition, the end of the check-off could provide the perfect excuse for those miners who were discontented with the union to drop out of membership altogether. In the event, the threat was not put into operation on an industry-wide level at this time. Nevertheless, British Coal knew they were aiming at the NUM's jugular, and so later made the same threat at pit level to miners involved in local disputes - as Maltby miners found out in January 1990 when they held a series of one-day strikes over their demand for a pit ambulance.¹³ A few weeks later, in early February, British Coal stopped the check-off of all Notts NUM members, arguing that it was 'inconvenient'.¹⁴ It was with this threat to union organisation hovering in the background that the next major stoppages at Frickley would occur.

Weld mesh

The next stoppage of any significance at Frickley Colliery took place in late February 1990 and had its roots in the worsening safety record in the coal industry, and in how British Coal were taking advantage of the weakened NUM and bullying workers into ignoring safety rules. In the year up to September 1989 there had been

⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 2 August 1989.

¹⁰ *The Guardian*, 7 August 1989.

¹¹ *The Times*, 31 October 1989.

¹² *The Times*, 15 August 1989.

¹³ *Socialist Worker*, 27 January 1990.

¹⁴ *Socialist Worker*, 10 February 1990.

18 fatal accidents in the industry. To make matters worse, the government's mines inspectorate, which was supposed to maintain safety levels in the pits, was in the process of negotiating a series of new health and safety laws which threatened to reduce the existing safety standards.¹⁵

Gary Hutsby operated an underground conveyor belt at Frickley and tells of an incident which typified management's attitude to safety in this period. He says that, 'Everywhere that you went there were safety posters: "Have you remembered to check this today."' But this was only superficial:

the first time that you say that you are going to have to stop the job because it isn't safe, they used to go absolutely ballistic with you. They would drag you into the office for stopping the job. One day this gaffer collars me. He says, 'Look at all this paper on the blind side. It's a fire hazard. I want you to get it cleaned up.' I said, 'Yes I'll do it, no problem. The belts will stop for snap time in about twenty minutes, I'll jump over the belt when it's stopped and clean it up.' He said, 'No, no, no. There's no need for that. Just jump across the belt now, it won't take you five minutes. You can get all that paper up, the job is still running, everything is fine.' I said, 'Look, I'll do it, but I am not going to go over there while the belts are running.' Safety-wise you are looking for an accident, you could get caught on a roller. And legally, you shouldn't be on the blind side when the belt is running. If something had happened to me, I wouldn't have had a leg to stand on because I shouldn't have been there. But he was saying, 'No, no. You don't see what I mean. Just jump across the belt. You will be all right.' I said, 'No, I'm not prepared to do that.' I'd now become a militant, and little things like this seemed important to me . . . This undermanager hadn't been at the pit long, he took his helmet off and threw it onto the ground. He says, 'I don't know what's wrong with you lot here. Every time I ask somebody to do something it's fucking "No, no, no." Forget it, I'll do it myself.' And he did. He jumped across the belt and cleaned all this rubbish up. I was just wishing that something would have happened to him.¹⁶

The dispute which erupted followed hard on the heels of two safety incidents at Frickley. In the first, two miners had been buried by a roof fall - one of them was so badly injured it was feared he would never work again. A Frickley management bulletin issued at the time stoked up the unrest when it blamed the accident on 'sloppy working practices.'¹⁷ The second incident took place in another part of the mine, after management refused to allow miners to use corrugated sheeting, which the miners needed to protect themselves from falling dirt while contract workers were boring to insert steel rods for strengthening the roof. Instead they had to use weld-mesh.¹⁸ Ian Oxley, an NUM safety inspector at Frickley at that time, explains the union's case:

¹⁵ *Socialist Worker*, 2 September 1989.

¹⁶ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

¹⁷ *Socialist Worker*, 2 March 1990.

¹⁸ *South Yorkshire Times* (South Elmsall and Hemsworth edition), 23 February 1990.

The case was that the men had previously been using tin sheeting, which gives total safety over the men's heads. Under the tin sheeting is pieces of wood. The men are used to this, they are quite happy with it, and they can earn good bonus. Production-wise it's good. Safety-wise it's good. But the colliery manager - in my opinion and that of the men - to save money, changed to mesh, which has holes in, I would say two inches wide, if not wider, by four inches long. You had to drill this roof and it was friable, in other words, the rock was breaking into small pieces, and as you were drilling the roof, it shakes the small pieces off. So you can imagine a piece of dirt, that could be up to four inch, two inch wide, falling from a height of eight to ten feet and catching you on your shoulder or your arms. It's very painful. But the men said: 'No. We don't want mesh, we want tin sheeting.'¹⁹

At first the dispute looked to have been settled in the miners' favour without any need for a walkout. On Tuesday 20 February the deputy manager visited the men with the grievance, accepted their demands and even arranged for two or three bundles of corrugated sheeting to be sent underground.²⁰ But then pit manager Tony Lawson got involved. 'Unfortunately', reflects Ian Oxley:

the manager, instead of going down to the men and saying, 'Look lads, I understand that you are used to this method of work, what's your problem?' 'Big bits are bouncing through'. 'Well, I'll tell you what lads, we'll put you a finer mesh in, but get back to your tin sheets while I get you the new mesh.' But it isn't that. It's, 'You will put that mesh up because I say so. I am the manager. I say that's safer.' And so the men's safety was disregarded. The union's advice to the men was: 'Go and get every piece of timber you can find in that gate, and put it over the top of the mesh until no bits can fall through it. But clearly, there's a limit to how much wood you can find in a gate. The manager refused to order extra wood. We're at an impasse now, because there's no tin sheets in the gate - he'd had it all removed - there's only mesh, which has got these large gaps in it . . . Now at that stage we should have had the safety engineer in, and the men should either have been taken off the job and redeployed or allowed to continue with the previous method of mining. But that wouldn't happen, because we're at a macho management situation - it's: 'Get off home.' And unfortunately, again, we went home.'²¹

Some of the more recent walkouts at Frickley had been over local matters and remained within the confines of the pit. This dispute was different. As Gary Hinchliffe points out, 'This becomes a national issue and an Area issue, because it's over safety.' But, as he notes, the Frickley militants could foresee problems if they sent pickets out:

¹⁹ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

²⁰ *South Yorkshire Times* (South Elmsall and Hemsworth edition), 23 February 1990.

²¹ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

... we've seen what's happened in the past with our strike and the Bentley strike, that we would probably have one day's success at it, and then they would have meetings and vote to work. We weren't even convinced that they would convene a Panel meeting until we'd withdrawn the pickets. This is how much they'd clamped down on it. A lot of pits weren't ever going to go on strike over anything at their own pit, never mind back somebody else up.²²

But the dilemma was that the importance of the dispute required that British Coal needed to be confronted, and so 'We decided to take them to task over safety,' says Gary Hinchliffe:

We got in touch with as many papers as we could, and TV stations, and told them that we were on strike over safety. What we did was go out to all the pits in the Doncaster Panel and addressed them at canteen meetings - where we could. A lot of managers wouldn't let you into the canteen to speak to the men, and union branches were getting very frightened about you getting onto the pit premises. We had about ten thousand leaflets printed and we dished these out to the men as they were going into work ... We took the initiative.²³

As with the Code of Conduct strike, the Frickley strikers' message was well received at other pits. 'Everywhere that we went to the other miners were saying that it was unbelievable,' recalls Robert King: 'They were saying, "What do you mean, you can't use sheets?" They couldn't understand it. You were allowed to use whatever you wanted.'²⁴

But it was colliery manager Tony Lawson's behaviour that particularly marked this dispute for Gary Hutsby:

The contempt that he had for us was shown in how he caused this dispute and then he went on holiday. One of the Area directors had to come in to manage the dispute. This Area director actually fetched Lawson back from his holidays ...²⁵

According to Gary Hinchliffe, Area management got involved because they were worried about all the activity in the coalfield over the issue:

The next thing we knew, they are fetching the top HMI [mines inspector] in, our top safety engineer from the union, and theirs from the Coal Board; they're going down the pit with our union, the manager, and the Area director, to look at it. I think it was Steve Tulley who said, 'We got down, we looked at it, not a thing had come down! The last piece of weld-mesh they'd left up was still up there.' He said, 'I thought we were going to get hammered.' But the Area director took one

²² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁴ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

look at it and said, 'Yes, I think you are right. If your men want to use sheets and they are not happy with weld-mesh, by all means they can use sheets.'²⁶

The men returned to work on Wednesday 27 February after six days on strike. Once again the Frickley miners, despite increasing war weariness, had shown that it was possible to stand up to management aggression. But there was a further reason for the miners to celebrate their action. Not only were they successful over an important safety issue, they had also paved the way for the exit of a manager who had been appointed specifically to further impose 'management's right to manage'. 'I reckon that within a month or two months Lawson was out,' recalls Gary Hinchliffe:

His departing statement was that he felt that he no longer had the support of the men at the colliery and that everything that he suggested as a means of improving production, or improving Frickley's chances of competing, would not be seen in the light he portrayed it, but seen in a derogatory way by the men. Those were his official reasons for going. But he'd failed in his job that he'd been sent to Frickley for. In all his attempts and everything that he tried to do, he never managed to take one concession off us that we had before he got here: from water-notes, payments for carrying batteries and lamps, to what we put over our heads, to how we ran the pit, to who picked the men for faces, even down to the incentive scheme that we were on - we were still on the Yorkshire Area incentive scheme three-and-a-half years after he'd arrived, and he'd spent three-and-a-half years trying to get us off it.²⁷

Hatfield

No sooner had the Frickley men returned to work when, on Monday 5 March 1990, they were called on to take solidarity action with Hatfield miners, who had walked out after management redeployed three teams of development workers for not working fast enough. The Hatfield strikers had gone straight onto the offensive and picketed out the seven remaining Doncaster pits in what was the first large-scale stoppage in the Yorkshire coalfield for over two years.²⁸ However, as Jeff Johnson recollects: 'it didn't last long. They packed it in. We were ready to run with them, but they'd gone. They weren't there. Dave Douglass stopped that one, nipped it in the bud.'²⁹

The Hatfield strike was an indication to militants of how British Coal now intended to take full advantage of the legal restrictions on trade union action. With the flying pickets out, the corporation was granted a High Court injunction against Hatfield NUM because no ballot had been held prior to the action. But this dispute was also an indication of how NUM branch officials were afraid of the law. Faced with the legal threats, the Hatfield officials backed down - though they did call on

²⁶ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁷ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁸ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 7 March 1990; *Socialist Worker*, 10 March 1990.

²⁹ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

the other South Yorkshire pits to stay out a further two days.³⁰ 'We went mad that Hatfield had taken notice of it,' says Gary Hinchliffe:

Up until then British Coal had always threatened that it was secondary action; but they were prepared to sit it out for three or four days while the NUM put the boot into it. With the Hatfield dispute, they decided that they weren't waiting. I think they'd convinced themselves that there was so little support about that they could wipe this out.³¹

The 'Scargill affair'

On the very day that the Hatfield miners picketed Frickley Colliery, a new bombshell rocked the entire NUM to its foundations. Accusations appeared in that day's *Daily Mirror* - then controlled by media tycoon Robert Maxwell - that Arthur Scargill, along with Peter Heathfield, was guilty of embezzlement and corruption. The *Mirror* alleged that 'while miners were losing their homes at the height of the bitter 1984-5 strike', Scargill and other NUM officials had used money collected for the miners to pay off personal debts. Not surprisingly, considering that here was a chance to lay into the man who epitomised militant trade unionism more than anyone, the scandal immediately attracted intense press coverage and condemnation of the miners' leader. The *Today* newspaper (6 March 1990), for instance, proclaimed that 'everything Mr Scargill stands for is fit for history's dustbin.' For a while, speculation was rife that Scargill would soon be forced out of his job, or even finish up in prison.³²

At pit level, miners with right-wing views were only too willing to believe the allegations, as Gary Hinchliffe recalls:

They were coming up and saying, 'What about that bastard then? That Arthur Scargill.' We had a meeting over it to point out where the anomalies were . . . I bet this was one of the best attended meetings that we ever had because they'd all come to knock him . . . Some people weren't bothered what you told them. They wouldn't have it. You see, what was throwing weight behind it was that it was a Labour paper.³³

But such miners were in a minority at Frickley. Jeff Johnson argues that most miners did not believe the stories because they had been on the receiving end of bad reporting so often themselves: 'We knew what lies the media told anyway. So it wasn't believed. Nobody took a great deal of notice about it. Maxwell was never a friend of the miners anyway.'³⁴ What is certain is that union activists at Frickley were solidly behind Scargill, indicated by the appearance of a letter, signed by Steve Tulley, the secretary, John Picken, the president, and Tony Jenkinson, the treasurer,

³⁰ *Socialist Worker*, 10 March 1990.

³¹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

³² Milne, *The Enemy Within*, pp.38-39.

³³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

³⁴ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

in *Socialist Worker* on 17 March 1990. They argued that the campaign being waged against Scargill and Heathfield was:

... a cynical attempt to try and change the leadership of the NUM when the coal board is stepping up its attacks. The allegations that Scargill had his hand in the till by taking money for his own personal gain is ridiculous to say the least. Ever since the 1984-5 miners' strike began, the Tories and the right wing of the labour movement have queued up to attack Scargill at every opportunity. In the year long strike literally hundreds of thousands of pounds were collected and donated to the strike up and down the country. With so many miners collecting bucketful's of money - was Scargill supposed to account for all this? As well as this the Tories were busy sequestrating the union's funds, with Scargill doing all he could to make sure the strike didn't run out of money. This shows his determination and loyalty to those of us who were fighting. It is no thanks to the TUC and Labour leadership who left us to fight alone without funds. Luckily the feeling in the pits seems to support Scargill so we need to call branch meeting passing resolutions to stand by him. The real reason why everybody from Thatcher to the right wing leaders want to see the back of Scargill is because he stands for a fighting union - something that terrifies them all.³⁵

The intricate details of the 'Scargill affair' have been dealt with elsewhere.³⁶ Nevertheless it is germane to note that the controversy ended with not a single one of the original claims proven against the NUM leaders, thus the Frickley miners' faith had been fully justified. But Frickley activists played no small part in bringing about this conclusion, as Paul Symonds explains:

... again, the activists at Frickley played a vital role in terms of orchestrating meetings. Our little network swung into action. It's a funny carry on, trying to get meetings arranged. Speakers have to be invited by the branch to come and speak. So we got our network going and we got Scargill and Paul Foot [columnist on the *Daily Mirror*] invited to different pits, and they ended up doing a tour round the coalfields and the big cities. I remember a big rally in Sheffield. And there was such as myself and Mike Simons. If you couldn't get Foot and Scargill, you got me and Mike Simons. So we did a sort of mini tour as well, to fill a few gaps. I don't think that all of this can be underestimated. Because we went straight onto the offensive, this meant that there was no chance for people inside the pits who would have loved to have had Scargill's head to sow the seeds of doubt. We were able to lift all the heads of those who were Scargillites and motivate them to go onto the offensive. So we at Frickley did have an effect on things far greater than just in our own pit ... And it ended up being a successful campaign. Again, this is one of those unsung battles that nobody really acknowledges - but the outcome could have been devastating. If they had got Scargill and Heathfield, it would have taken years for the trade union movement to have recovered from it.³⁷

³⁵ *Socialist Worker*, 17 March 1990.

³⁶ See Milne, op. cit.

³⁷ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

Organising against the poll tax

Ironically, at the very time as the Scargill scandal broke, the government were so unpopular in the opinion polls that there was open speculation about the Conservative Party actually replacing Margaret Thatcher as leader.³⁸ The primary reason for this was the explosion of anger against Thatcher's flagship policy, the Community Charge, or poll tax, which had been devised to replace the old rating system for funding local authorities, and which was viewed by many as a continuation of the government's attacks on working people. But actually implementing the tax was rapidly becoming Margaret Thatcher's biggest challenge since the miners' strike. Despite no lead whatsoever from the official labour movement on how to force the government into a climb-down, the dissent over the tax was widespread and thousands demonstrated outside town halls and council chambers the length and breadth of Britain. Millions were to play their part in a campaign of non-payment which would eventually see the Tories back down.³⁹ In the mining communities of Yorkshire the mood of defiance was almost on a par with six years earlier. As elsewhere, meetings organised by anti-poll tax campaigners were full to overflowing. "Can't pay, won't pay" seems to be the general consensus of opinion in Hemsworth when it comes to the poll tax,' admitted the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*.⁴⁰

Activists from Frickley were in the forefront of the local campaign. Though the poll tax was not directly a trade union issue, the question of non-payment was, because local authorities could seek to have the tax stopped from workers' wage packets. 'We tried to get a campaign going within the NUM to put pressure on the Coal Board to stop them deducting money from our wages,' remembers Gary Hutsby:

Another thing - and this was without the help of the TUC or the Labour Party - was the demonstration that was called in London. We, the militants at Frickley, proposed that the union should put on a bus to the demonstration, or, if not, partly pay for the bus that was going down locally. We pushed this at a general meeting and it got passed. I can't remember how many seats were sponsored, but that was something that we got through, and we actually got the branch to put up posters in the union box advertising this demonstration. At the same time there was also the David Jones march, which was an annual event, and we raised the issue of the poll tax on the march and pulled people from that onto the national demonstration in London.⁴¹

³⁸ *The Guardian*, 10 March 1990.

³⁹ B. Croxall and L. Roberts, *Contemporary British Politics*, (Basingstoke, 1994), pp.188-189; R. Bentley, A. Dobson, M. Grant and D. Roberts, *British Politics in Focus*, (Ormskirk, 1995), p.485.

⁴⁰ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 14 March 1990.

⁴¹ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

Still a force

The humiliation of the NUM as a national organisation had continued since the Big Strike. British Coal had repeatedly bypassed the national bargaining procedures, instead conducting separate negotiations with the minority UDM. Any resumption of negotiations with the NUM were always conditional upon the union accepting some principle or other, such as the role of incentive payments or the Code of Conduct. The NUM rejected such conditions. The regular pay settlements made with the UDM were then repeatedly extended unilaterally to the NUM, which the NUM then accepted as an 'interim settlement' with little hope of any subsequent negotiations.⁴² And yet, more than anything else, the smears against Scargill and Heathfield were testimony to how the NUM was not quite finished as a force. Though British Coal's workforce had been much reduced, and though output at British pits had sunk from 90 to 76 million tonnes in the seven years to 1990, nearly 80 per cent of Britain's energy was still being generated by the domestic coal industry. Most worrying of all for the government was that 80 per cent of this coal was mined by Scargill's members.⁴³

But with the NUM severely weakened by the allegations, British Coal took the opportunity to announce that a further 7,000 miners' jobs were to go. The situation was exacerbated when the government back-tracked on an earlier commitment to install £2 billion of 'chimney scrubbers' in power stations - the most effective means of reducing the sulphur emissions which cause acid rain. Instead, power stations were expected to use gas and import low sulphur coal from countries such as South Africa. This threatened up to 30,000 jobs.⁴⁴ Arthur Scargill, on 22 May, dubbed the government's plans 'the economics of the madhouse', considering how they had closed down 50 pits which produced the lowest sulphur coal in the world and were now planning to import coal with a higher sulphur content. He added that the miners still had tremendous industrial strength and should be prepared to use it.⁴⁵ The government certainly took such threats seriously, hence a week later energy secretary John Wakeham instructed National Power and PowerGen, the two private electricity supply companies which were due to replace the CEGB, that at the beginning of winter they must hold jointly no less than 27 million tonnes of coal stocks and have at least 22 million tonnes at winter's close as a safeguard against NUM action.⁴⁶

'We will survive'

Of course not all pits and power stations were threatened by the government's failure to invest. In April 1990 Wakeham had announced that PowerGen had been given the go-ahead to fit a sulphur cleaning plant at Ferrybridge B and C power stations. This meant that coal mined in the Yorkshire coalfield could still be burned and that the power station would still comply with the EC's strict acid rain

⁴² Leman and Winterton, 'New technology and the restructuring of pit-level industrial relations', pp.56-57.

⁴³ Milne, *op. cit.*, pp.9-10.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 21 May 1990; *Socialist Worker*, 26 May 1990.

⁴⁵ *The Guardian*, 23 May 1990.

⁴⁶ *The Times*, 30 May 1990.

prevention standards. This, according to Peter Box, the chairman of the Wakefield District Council's Employment and Economic Development Committee, promised 'a longer life for pits such as Sharlston, Prince of Wales, Kellingley and Frickley, which send most of their coal to Ferrybridge.'⁴⁷

The danger in this situation was that workers at Frickley would concentrate solely on the survival of their own pit. John Owen, the Frickley branch secretary of NACODS, certainly seems to have seen it in this way. 'Frickley has as good a future as any pit in the country and better than most,' he wrote to the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* in mid-June 1990, when taking issue with a correspondent from the Green Party who had dared to suggest that the pit might close:

It is one of only three pits authorised to supply National Power and PowerGen because the sulphur content in our coal is lower than the 1.8 per cent they will accept. The chlorine content is 0.19 per cent and both companies will accept 0.3 per cent, the ash content is 16.9 per cent and the moisture content 10.5 per cent. With an average of £1.50 per gigajoule this current year and only £1.28 for the month of May, Frickley can compete with foreign coal and has the right quality skilled workforce to do just that . . . One does not need a degree in economics to know that low sulphur coal on the world market is very limited and, in a market economy, as demand rises so does the price . . . Relative to the future, we have nothing to be complacent about at Frickley, and though we may make things difficult for ourselves at times, we will survive.⁴⁸

But the NACODS branch secretary was neglecting one of the key lessons that were evident from the most recent batch of job losses in the industry: that the 'viability' of individual pits had little to do with the efforts of the workers involved. Massive cut backs in the industry had been justified since the early 1980s on the grounds that low productivity in British mines had given foreign rivals a competitive edge. But this was no longer so in mid-1990. Since the end of the 1984-85 strike, half the industry's workforce had been shed, colliery costs had declined by a third and an estimated £900 million a year was being saved by British Coal. Nevertheless, the relentless pursuit of greater efficiency was continuing unabated, especially as BC was struggling to get back into profit. The truth was that the coal industry was vulnerable to far more than just low output. There were fluctuations in the international price of fossil fuels to take into consideration, variations in the exchange rate, and interference by governments; all of which affected coal's standing. In addition, the electricity supply industry, on which coal was now totally dependent for its sales, could search for cheaper alternatives such as oil or gas.⁴⁹ Viewed in this light, the efforts of even the hardest working miners who attempted to make their own pit a viable concern hardly mattered. All such a notion did was enhance the uncertainty within the workforce and spread the belief that workers should accept longer shifts and more flexible working if they wanted to remain in a job - factors which the NUM had long fought against.

⁴⁷ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 25 April 1990.

⁴⁸ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 13 June 1990.

⁴⁹ *Socialist Worker*, 2 June 1990.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: RETREAT

Another boss, another strike

In mid-May 1990, Tony Lawson was replaced by Malcolm High, until recently the deputy manager at Houghton Main.¹ 'He actually took the benefits from Lawson's reign,' argues Paul Symonds: 'I don't think that Lawson had reaped them himself, but he certainly had us war weary by the time Malcolm High got here. Malcolm High got here when the men had enough, basically.'² The new manager 'came with exactly the same portfolio as Lawson,' says Gary Hinchliffe:

His task was to get us off the Yorkshire Area Incentive Scheme, onto a tonnage bonus, remove the market system and everything - break the stranglehold of the NUM at this pit. The next manager came, and I think he wasted no time at all in getting us out on strike.³

The stoppage Gary Hinchliffe refers to began on 13 July, a Friday, when management sacked a miner, Glyn Fryer, for allegedly working on a building site in Manchester while off sick.⁴ Johnny Stones recalls what happened:

The personnel officer at that time alleged that he'd had a phone call to the effect that Glyn Fryer was on the sick, getting both sick-pay make-up along with his statutory sick-pay, and was working. So our personnel officer, a true spy that he was, followed him in a car, and saw from a distance who he alleged was Glyn Fryer. Had him in, sacked him.⁵

That could easily have been the end of the matter, but, as Gary Hurst explains, Fryer had been caught working while the pit was closed for the summer break:

He maintained that he was on holiday during the time that he was working and that he shouldn't have been sacked. And we maintained that aspect with him, to a certain extent. We all realised that he'd done wrong, but it was a bit severe during a holiday week.⁶

According to Ian Oxley, what had happened to Glyn Fryer was not an isolated incident; spying had become a common management practice:

So if a man was on the sick, they'd send the pit nurse up to visit him, on the pretext that she was 'interested', she was 'concerned'. The nurse would then

¹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 16 May 1990.

² Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁴ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 19 July 1990.

⁵ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁶ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

write a report: 'This man's a malingerer. There's no reason why he can't start work.'⁷

Injunctions

The 750 NUM members then employed at Frickley stopped work as soon as the sacking was announced. But the reverberations of the recent dispute at Hatfield were still being felt. Gary Hutsby recalls the first mass meeting of the dispute:

I can remember one of the branch officials getting up on the stage and saying, 'It's all illegal this, we are breaking the law, and I've got to tell you now that you've got to return to work.' At the same time he was giving us the nod and a wink, as if to say, 'It's a load of bollocks, but I've got to tell you this if we go on strike.' Anyway, the meeting took a vote that we would stop on strike.⁸

On Monday, however, British Coal took out an injunction to stop the strike, claiming £200,000 worth of damages because the miners were striking without holding a ballot. The High Court in London duly deemed the strike illegal and ordered the men back to work. After copies of the injunction were delivered to the homes of the Frickley branch officials, a mass meeting was immediately called for the following morning in the Pretoria club.⁹ Again Gary Hutsby was there:

A part of this injunction was that all the officials should tell us to return to work. I can remember Steve Tulley, Chick Picken and Johnny Stones saying that we'd to call the dispute off and go back to work. But if my memory serves me right, when it got to Tony Jenkinson, he said, 'Fuck it, I'm not telling you to go back to work. Bollocks to them.' At that, a massive cheer went up in the hall. And then a vote was taken that we were still stopping on strike.¹⁰

The men voted by 2 to 1 to defy the judges. They called for the unconditional reinstatement of the sacked miner, with no loss of pay, and demanded that disciplinary proceedings be initiated against the pit's personnel manager and Area security. Also, they called for an end to any spying on the workforce, and insisted that Area and national officials stand behind the branch's defiance of the law rather than forcing them to back down.¹¹ Things did not quite work out this way.

On Thursday, the Frickley NUM officials were issued with yet another High Court injunction, this time ordering them to completely disassociate themselves from the action.¹² John Picken, one of the four officials, recounts what happened next:

⁷ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

⁸ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 19 July 1990; *South Yorkshire Times* (South Elmsall and Hemsworth edition), 20 July 1990.

¹⁰ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

¹¹ *Socialist Worker*, 21 July 1990.

¹² *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 26 July 1990.

On the Thursday it became that serious that we were called in at ten o'clock to the Yorkshire Area headquarters. I was there until half-past six at night . . . We were told that we'd got to give in. Our legal department said that we must be seen to break the strike, go back to work, have a meeting, and - this was from British Coal - there'd got to be cameras in our committee room at the time. And I said 'No way. I'm not going to chair any meeting where the media is coming into our committee room. I'd sooner go to prison.' . . . I told our legal department, faxed it out, and there was a long wait. Then it came back: 'Right then, you must face the cameras outside the Pretoria club when you go back to work.'¹³

Strike called off

A meeting originally scheduled for Saturday was hastily re-arranged for Friday morning. By now management had also gone further onto the attack and announced that they intended to stop the check-off system at the pit. 'We told our committee that we were going back to work,' says John Picken, 'they couldn't understand it. We explained that we were going to be arrested at two o'clock if not.'¹⁴ Tony Short was among those committee men with a different perspective on what was needed:

My point of view was that if you are in the job [as a branch official], you are in it. It wouldn't have bothered me. They wouldn't have jailed you for long. But the older-end on the committee were shitting themselves. We had a vote and it was six-six. Six voted for them not to just walk off, that it should be discussed with the men; and the six others said that they should read a statement out and we should go straight back to work . . . For me, if you are going to be a trade unionist, the laws are there to be broken. You are never going to win a dispute by going by their trade-union laws . . . That totally disillusioned me with the union did that. I thought that if the job was too hot for them, they shouldn't have been in it. They should have stood down for someone who was willing to take all the risks. In fact, if I'm not incorrect, I'm sure that they were on about changing all their mortgages into their wives' names, and crap like that. I think that there was about sixty-odd grand they wanted to put on all of our heads. It might as well have been sixty-quid for me; sixty grand is a ridiculous amount of money. My house wasn't worth much, and I owed £18,000 on it, but it wouldn't have bothered me if they had taken it.¹⁵

There were only around 180 miners attended the mass meeting due to it having been re-arranged at such short notice. But what happened there was bizarre. On the advice of the Yorkshire Area NUM leadership, the Frickley officials read out a statement prepared by solicitors in London, and declared that they had no alternative other than to recommend a return to work. No discussion was held and no vote was taken. The officials then simply left the meeting and headed for the pit.¹⁶ 'We went mad over it,' says Gary Hinchliffe:

¹³ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

¹⁴ John Picken, interviewed by the author.

¹⁵ Tony Short, interviewed by the author.

¹⁶ *Socialist Worker*, 28 July 1990; *South Yorkshire Times* (South Elmsall and

the men were milling about outside the Pretoria; they wondered what was going off. I said: 'I'm not returning to work.' We were all adamant that we weren't returning to work, apart from Jeff Johnson who ran up the hill and was the first one down the pit - a committee man. People were coming up and asking our advice. I said: 'Well I'm not going back to work; not today anyway. As far as I'm concerned I'm on strike.' And then, people seemed to take it that the officials had done this because they had to do, that they really didn't want us to go back to work. So there were very few men went back to work. So that made the situation worse.¹⁷

Defiance

A group of about twenty miners, angry at what had happened, met just afterwards in the nearby Frickley Colliery Club. There, it was decided to meet again the following day in the same venue to organise further defiance. Gary Hutsby was one of them:

We decided that we would knock our own leaflet up saying that the Frickley membership should have the right to decide what Frickley NUM policy is, and nobody else, whether it is a High Court judge in London, the Coal Board, the Area officials or whoever. At the end of the day, it was us who were the members and it should be our opinions which count. The leaflet called for a proper branch meeting to be held where the issue can be discussed, that if we were going to return to work, it had to be through a decision made by the membership at Frickley. Because after that final meeting where Steve read out that document and left without any vote or discussion, there was still a lot of confusion as to whether the dispute was still on, with the officials having given a nod and a wink at the other meetings.¹⁸

Over the next day the leaflets were distributed in all the pubs and clubs where the Frickley miners socialised. Gary Hutsby recalls little opposition to their proposal:

The vast majority of the people we spoke to actually said, 'Thank God somebody is doing something, because nobody knows what's going off. We don't know whether to turn up for work on Monday or not.' Obviously we went through all the arguments about the Coal Board dictating the branch's policy and all that. Out of all the pubs that we did, we only came across two or three men who disagreed . . . and all the people who had been to other places came back with the same tale.¹⁹

Another of those organising the defiance, Paul Symonds, argues that there was no feeling of euphoria in what they were doing, 'We were in a fix. For the first time, they had managed to drive a big wedge between the activists at the pit and the

Hemsworth edition), 27 July 1990.

¹⁷ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

¹⁸ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

¹⁹ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

branch officials. We'd always managed to keep them on board or in check.' That split became all too apparent outside Frickley Colliery early on Monday morning:

We should have had every militant at the pit there. There should have been at least 30 of us. Five of us turned up! Four of these were SWP members and the other was a miner who was on the sick. We were in trouble - and we knew it. We got to the pit at about a quarter past four, armed with the leaflets that we had written, arguing the case that there should be a union meeting, that we should not be ordered back to work by some judge sat in London, that we run this union. When we got there, the pit managers and the branch officials were there, waiting. And as the men started turning up for work, we asked them not to go to work. There was a bit of confusion about whether this was a picket line or not. We said that it wasn't, that we were just giving leaflets out. But this hour and a half was one of the worst times of my life. We had stand-up arguments with the officials. They were ordering the men into work, and we were trying to stop them. You could see blokes there who you worked with every day. But they were in a position where union officials - and the most credible and well-respected union officials as well - were telling them to go to work, but they are also faced with their workmates who are saying, 'Don't.' Me and Johnny Stones almost came to blows. We ended up trading personal insults, we were nose to nose at one time. And while all this was going off, the managers were stood behind us. Some men would hear one argument and then decide they were going to stick with the union and start arguing against us. But even then, they still didn't go into work. I think that we were stood there until about half-past six - everybody was supposed to have been down the pit by six. It got to the stage where we simply refused to back off from our position - which was probably a mistake seeing that there were only five of us turned up. But we were in it too deeply. And the union wasn't going to back off. So we were in a head to head. And if you looked at the history of Frickley since the strike, it was bound to have happened sooner or later. It got to where you heard people saying, 'Come on, I'm going to work,' and leading men past you. It was bad. Then there was a rush and they all went in.²⁰

There was but one bright moment for Paul Symonds that morning. The pit's upper management 'had smiles like Cheshire cats,' once they realised the militants were isolated from the majority of the workforce:

One of the managers said something to Johnny Stones like, 'We've got them now.' After me and Johnny had been nearly to blows, you would have thought this would have been music to his ears. But he turned round and screamed to this manager, 'You are sacking nobody else from this pit, mister. You've sacked one man too many!' It was so comforting to hear that. And I'll always respect Johnny for that. We were in trouble.²¹

²⁰ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²¹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

Just how much trouble the five men were in became apparent that afternoon. 'We were at Mark Thompson's, talking about what had gone off, and there was a knock at the door,' Gary Hutsby recollects:

There was this guy there with a registered letter from the Coal Board, accusing Tommo of gross misconduct for stopping the pit working, telling him that he had been suspended, pending an inquiry. It said, 'If it is found that you have committed gross misconduct then you will be sacked.' We thought that they wouldn't have just come to Mark. Jip rang home and found that the same letter had come for him. It was the same with Paul Sharpe and Wayne Donell. I didn't receive one at first - apparently the gaffer who had taken the photos had his line of view blocked by a pillar and couldn't identify me.²²

Originally fighting the sacking of a workmate, the five were now fighting for their own jobs. But their response could not have been more at odds with the timidity that was now customary amongst the official trade union movement. 'Immediately we started organising, seeing people such as Ian Oxley and Jeff Johnson and winning them over to our position,' says Paul Symonds:

But one of the nicest things was when we had a meeting with the SWP's industrial organiser, Sheila McGregor. She came up here, and basically she said to us, 'Look, the decision to sack you is not going to be taken by the pit manager. That decision has probably already been taken by senior management at Area level.' The thing was that management knew that we would act independently of the union. It's one thing to sack a militant and then the union refusing to call any action. But they knew that if they sacked us we would go for it. And we had made that absolutely plain from the start. Sheila said that these disciplinary meetings they were calling us to were designed to do nothing else but humiliate us. She said that they wanted to make us regret everything that we had ever done. They wanted to make us feel so guilty that we had put ourselves and our families in this position. She said, 'Don't give them the satisfaction of letting them see you on your knees.' At the time, the Eastern European revolutions had just taken place, and the newspapers had been full of how brilliant it had been that these people had been demonstrating and going on strike, that they wanted a free society where you could say what you think. She said, 'These people sat in that room will have been cheering when they've seen those workers. Tell them this.' She said, 'Don't deny anything. They saw you lot giving leaflets out at the pit, they know you were trying to stop people going into work, so don't say that you didn't mean to do it.' She said that there was no point in trying to say that it was all a misunderstanding. From that minute I felt better. We decided that they weren't going to grind us down.²³

When Paul Symonds finally faced the pit management, 'it was exactly as Sheila said,' he recalls:

²² Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

²³ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

There were the branch officials there taking notes, the personnel manager and his secretary, and the manager sat at the end. The first thing he said was, 'I understand that you have a son.' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'How old is he?' I told him. He said, 'What would you like him to do?' I said to him, 'You haven't got me in here to talk to me about my son. What happens between me and my son is my business. Can we get on with why I've been brought here?' He just went, 'Er, er.' It was true. He was trying to make me feel guilty for messing up my son's life. I said, 'I'm not bothered what he does as long as he doesn't turn out to be a pit manager.' Everybody in the room was gobsmacked . . . Then he said, 'Right, at 4.15 on Monday morning, we've been told that somebody meeting your description was trying to stop the pit working.' I said, 'Yes, it was me. I arrived at quarter-past four.' 'Were you giving leaflets out?' 'Yes, I was leafleting.' 'Why were you leafleting?' 'I was trying to stop the men going into work.' 'Oh, so you admit trying to stop the men.' I said, 'Yes, that's precisely what I was there for!' It just went on in this vein, and I felt so good and cocky about it all that I didn't care whether they sacked me, to be honest. I remember walking out of that room with a big smile on my face. The manager was fuming. The union officials were wondering what was happening - I was supposed to have been a broken man. And as I walked out, I met Tommo, coming in. And Tommo had a big smile on his face. He just said, 'I hope you gave it to them in there, Jip?' I said, 'I hope you do as well.' He said, 'Don't worry.'²⁴

Gary Hutsby's experience in his disciplinary meeting was much the same. However:

Because I hadn't been around like Tommo, Jip and Sharpy, who were all known by the management for being militant, they must have thought: 'Here's a lad who has always turned up for work, he's never been one for ranting and raving, we've got a soft touch with this one, we'll have an easy ride with him.' But because we had met earlier and discussed how we were going to tackle it, as soon as they started barking questions at me, straight away I was barking and snarling back. It was such a shock for them. They were saying, 'Were you at the pit giving leaflets out?' I was saying, 'Yes, of course I was. Do you think I am going to let you lot decide what Frickley NUM does? It's us who decide.' I was banging the table. I said, 'What about democracy? Do you believe in democracy? Don't I have the right to my opinion?' They wouldn't answer this.²⁵

The tactic of standing firm and resolute against the class enemy worked. Though they were all put on final warnings, none of the five dissident miners were sacked. But contrast this with what happened to the unfortunate Glyn Fryer, whose case went through the industrial tribunal procedures, as recommended by his union, without the threat of any further disruption. Though he actually won his case for unfair dismissal when it came up in January and February 1991, there was no

²⁴ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

obligation for British Coal to reinstate him, nor was it deemed that he should receive any compensation.²⁶ In other words, he remained sacked.

Significantly, the Glyn Fryer dispute proved to be the last major stoppage at Frickley Colliery to be initiated by the traditional means of a spontaneous walkout and a show of hands at a mass meeting. Despite dogged resistance, Frickley NUM, under pressure from their own Area leadership, had finally succumbed to the government's legal restraints. As Gary Hinchliffe notes: 'As far as we were concerned, it was the first step backwards that we'd taken since the end of the strike - and we were to pay for it later as well.'²⁷

Thatcher's fall

If morale was extremely low in the pits in this period, paradoxically, the miners' hand was being strengthened by wider matters. In July *The Economist* had noted that, while coal mined in Britain was expensive at \$86 a tonne, 'the longer-term supply of overseas coal is neither secure nor necessarily cheap.'²⁸ There had recently been bitter strikes in Russian and American mines, and other coal supplying countries, such as Colombia and South Africa, were far from stable.²⁸ In addition, the nuclear power industry was facing problems. And when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, energy economics was significantly altered as oil prices soared.

It was against such a background that a special NUM delegate conference in October 1990 decided to push for a £50 a week pay rise. And as the miners prepared for their ballot in mid-November another major development added weight to their cause: the government's political crisis, intensified by the failure to impose the poll tax, had reached rupture point and the Conservative Party was hopelessly split. Indeed, many Tory MPs now saw that their only hope was to dump Margaret Thatcher.²⁹ Rarely had there been a better time for trade unionists to make up lost ground. This was especially so in the pits, where pit-head coal stocks had fallen from 7.3 million tonnes in August 1989 to just 4.8 million tonnes twelve months later. In fact, power stations in Yorkshire were even being supplied with coal from Scotland because of the shortfall.³⁰

In the event, though, activists in the pits were unable to convince the rest of the membership of the NUM's strong bargaining position; consequently a vote of 23,181 (57 per cent) to 17,654 against taking action was delivered. As before, the press and the new realists in the union immediately proclaimed this as yet another disaster for Arthur Scargill,³¹ this being his fifth ballot defeat in a row.³² And yet the greatest irony was that it would not be the miners' president who would be flung into the political wilderness that month, but rather the miners' most prominent foe, Margaret Thatcher herself.

²⁶ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 17 January and 21 February 1991.

²⁷ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

²⁸ *The Economist*, 14 July 1990.

²⁹ B. Jones, (ed.) *Politics UK*, (London, 1994), pp.396-397; Croxall and Roberts, *Contemporary British Politics*, p.239.

³⁰ *Socialist Worker*, 24 November 1990.

³¹ *Socialist Worker*, 24 November 1990.

³² Routledge, *Scargill*, p.229.

By early December 1990, with Thatcher unceremoniously dumped by her party, John Major had taken over as prime minister. By the beginning of the following year, there were changes at the top of the coal industry, with Neil Clarke replacing Robert Haslam. But these changes did not signal any changes in policy regarding coal and soon a further wave of pit closures and job losses were under way. February 1991 saw the very first closure in the new Selby group, with the decision to axe Allerton Bywater Colliery. In South Yorkshire, Treeton and Brodsworth collieries were already in the process of shutting following decisions taken in late 1990. Then in mid-February, miners at Dinnington voted to accept their pit's closure. Later, on 28 February, the closures of Dearne Valley and Barnsley Main were announced at a special review meeting. This meant that with Denby Grange due to close in the summer, only Grimethorpe and Houghton Main now remained in the old Barnsley Area. There were also threats from BC that Askern Colliery would close if productivity did not improve. And yet this was happening just as productivity in British mines reached a new peak of 5.10 tonnes per manshift.³³

All of this certainly had an effect on the miners' willingness to mount any sort of challenge to British Coal. They may have been bitter about the direction the industry was heading but most saw little point in taking industrial action if they were to lose. What is more, British Coal's use of the legal restrictions was clearly working. In fact by this time, legally, miners wishing to take action were in a worse position than Frickley NUM had been at the time of the Glyn Fryer dispute with the government's latest anti-union laws taking effect. Indeed, for a period in 1991 industrial unrest was almost non-existent in the coal industry. According to the *Employment Gazette* - and these rounded-up figures included the coke, mineral oil and natural gas industries as well! - in January there had been 5,000 working days lost to industrial action, in February 4,000 days lost. In March, however there were just 1,000 days lost; in April: 0; May: 2,000; June: 0; and July: 1,000.³⁴

Because of their anxiety about the increasing legal restraints on effective trade union action, the delegates to the NUM conference in the summer of 1991 passed a series of resolutions condemning the new laws and demanded that a future Labour government repeal them.³⁵ But passing resolutions was simple. Soon the union would be faced with a major local strike which would again test the organisation's resolve to challenge the restrictions head on. And once more Frickley Colliery would be at the centre of the storm.

Asleep

In the last week of July/first week of August 1991, industrial unrest started to bubble over again in parts of the Yorkshire coalfield. At Manton, former British Coal employees who were now contracted to BC by outside firms walked out. At Maltby at around the same time, 200 subcontractors were sacked after they stopped work in protest at their bonus being cut. All but 12 were subsequently reinstated. Then, on July 31, a potentially explosive situation erupted at Armthorpe, where miners stopped work after management withdrew water-money payments for twelve miners.

³³ *Yorkshire Miner*, March 1991.

³⁴ *Employment Gazette*, March 1992.

³⁵ *Yorkshire Miner*, August 1991.

However, Yorkshire Area officials and solicitors turned up at the strikers' meeting on Friday 2 August and argued that the 1990 Employment Act made the Armthorpe miners liable to injunctions, writs and selective dismissal. In a repeat of the Glyn Fryer dispute at Frickley twelve months earlier, the men were ordered back to work without a vote.³⁶

No sooner had the Armthorpe dispute ended when another strike erupted at Frickley on the following Monday, 5 August, in support of a fitter who had been sacked after being caught sleeping underground a few weeks earlier. Gary Hurst, being the NUM craftsmen's representative at the pit at this time, was involved:

This undermanager, Northcliffe I think it was, had caught Tony Proverbs asleep. Northcliffe had said that he'd tried to wake him up, couldn't, so he took his spanners off his belt to prove that he'd actually been there, walked up to another gate or to the entrance to another heading, and found a deputy or an overman, took him back with him, and then woke Tony up, while having this deputy or overman as a witness and proof with having these spanners in his hands, and consequently marched him out of the pit to be interviewed by the manager . . . it finished up that he got the sack for the offence; which seemed very harsh.³⁷

Johnny Stones argues that everybody who works down the pit has fallen asleep at some stage:

There's not been anyone who's worked in a pit on days, afters or nights who's not slept underground. And a manager will have had to have had five years' experience underground to have become a manager, and have worked on a face or a heading for two years to get experience - *he* will have done days, afters and nights; and *he*'s fell asleep!³⁸

One of the things that angered the men about the dismissal was that the sacked miner had a seven-month old baby at home who was ill and keeping him awake during the night. He had even requested a rest day over this matter but management had refused it.³⁹ 'As far as the men were concerned,' says Gary Hinchliffe:

it wasn't even a fining offence, but they were prepared to accept a fine. For the last bloke who had been fined for this, it had been something like £50, or the cost of his shift. And by all accounts, this undermanager thought that he would get fined. When he went out of the pit, he went for the fine book. The personnel manager wanted to know why he wanted the fine book. He told him. The personnel manager then got Area management on the phone to see whether men were still fined for falling asleep. He was under the impression that now that they got sacked. Area told him, 'Yes, you do sack them.'⁴⁰

³⁶ *Socialist Worker*, 17 August 1991.

³⁷ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

³⁸ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

³⁹ *Socialist Worker*, 10 August 1991; *Yorkshire Post*, 12 August 1991.

⁴⁰ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

On 22 July Frickley NUM appealed against the sacking but British Coal rejected this because the sacked miner had admitted falling asleep, and by so doing had breached the Code of Conduct.⁴¹ But, as Robert Walker recollects, 'They'd ground us down that much that we'd started to go through the procedure.'⁴² Consequently, instead of the traditional show of hands at a mass meeting, a pit-head ballot was organised by the branch for Thursday 1 August.⁴³ Moderate activist Ian Oxley was in favour of holding ballots for strikes, but not under these circumstances

It really stuck in my throat that it was because of the Tories that we were having ballots rather than because it was in our union rules . . . Because what happens is, now you've got to have what you put on the ballot paper approved by the gaffers - and yet it's our ballot paper - which is crazy. So all he's got to do is say: 'I don't agree to this.' He'll slow it for ages.⁴⁴

Even so, the result of the ballot, with 72 per cent voting for strike action,⁴⁵ showed conclusively that the combativity of the Frickley miners in the preceding years was not based upon bullying by a handful of militants at mass meetings. On the following Monday an 'official' strike duly commenced. But this dispute was memorable more for its passivity than for mass activity. 'I remember the first day, on the Monday,' says Robert King:

Five or six of us went up to picket the pit. That's all there was there. I think there was me, Tommo, Jip, Ian Utley, Gary Hutsby. It was a really bad atmosphere. The management were peeping at us from everywhere. And the deputies were all stood there. I think that was the reason that we'd gone up there, to ask the deputies not to work . . . We felt very uncomfortable, because really it wasn't an NUM picket line, it was a militants' or even an SWP picket line. Another reason why we felt uneasy was that some of those on the picket line were still on warnings from the Glyn Fryer dispute, and we felt that the management would try to sack some of these with warnings. We were wondering why there weren't any branch officials there, so somebody phoned Steve Tulley up and he came. But after this we phoned other people up and told them that the pit was solid and not to bother coming up, because we didn't want anybody to come up and get victimised because there were so few of us on the picket line. At your own pit you expect forty or fifty to turn up.⁴⁶

When the strikers met to discuss the direction of the stoppage on Saturday 10 August, the strike took a dramatic turn when it was disclosed that only recently an electrician at Denby Grange Colliery near Wakefield had merely been fined £300 for

⁴¹ *Yorkshire Post*, 12 August 1991.

⁴² Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

⁴³ *South Yorkshire Times*, (South Elmsall and Hemsworth edition), 9 August 1991.

⁴⁴ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁵ *South Yorkshire Times* (South Elmsall and Hemsworth edition), 9 August 1991.

⁴⁶ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

falling asleep instead of being dismissed.⁴⁷ It was now all too obvious to the Frickley miners that British Coal deliberately wanted a showdown with them because of their leading role within the NUM since the Big Strike. Thus they responded by resolving to step up the action. Nevertheless, caution still prevailed, and the branch tried to side-step the legal restrictions rather than confronting them head-on. 'We tried a new tactic with Tony Proverbs; deliberately taken within the committee,' says Johnny Stones:

Rather than go back to work and let Area organise a ballot of Yorkshire - with all the legal ramifications at that particular time that needed to be complied with - we went a different road. We asked pits to organise their ballots rather than Area. Because Area, in order to comply, had got to call meetings, have an Area Council meeting to debate it, go back from the Council with a recommendation back to branches to hold general meetings, to agree to have a ballot - all that paraphernalia. We saw a quicker way - and not having any interference from the Area officials, or bringing the Area officials in, and we told them - was to go to collieries, address general meetings, and ask them to hold their own ballots, in compliance with the law as it was at that particular time, and ballot to support Tony Proverbs at their pit.⁴⁸

The first step in this strategy involved leafleting the other pits. The response seemed favourable. On Monday 12 August miners at Bentley stopped work in support of Frickley. In Gary Hutsby's view, 'It was quite a testament to the Bentley miners, that after all the kickings that we'd had, that still, at this stage in the game, they marched out spontaneously.'⁴⁹ But this was the limit of any solidarity action. On Wednesday, the Bentley miners returned to work after Area officials promised a ballot for action at the end of the week.⁵⁰ 'It was a similar sort of tale up at Stillingfleet up in Selby,' says Gary Hutsby.⁵¹

Defeat

At the weekend of that second week of the strike, NUM branches throughout Yorkshire met to discuss the dispute and prepared for ballots later in the week. The result of the coalfield ballot was not to be determined by the total of the Yorkshire NUM membership voting for action but rather by the aggregate of pits voting in favour. 'We knew that we couldn't win the whole of the Area,' recalls Gary Hincliffe:

But we also weren't convinced that if we got an Area ballot that a lot of men wouldn't work. So we thought that we'd got a good chance of getting some of the Doncaster pits, our traditional allies, to vote to back us up, and then try to

⁴⁷ *Yorkshire Post*, 12 August 1991.

⁴⁸ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁹ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁰ *Socialist Worker*, 24 August 1991.

⁵¹ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

take it from there . . . I went down to Manton and spoke to their branch. We'd all been delegated to pits that we had to go to.⁵²

With the rank-and-file activists and branch-level NUM officials in the pits lacking confidence to campaign actively in the dispute due to the legal pressures and management threats, a positive lead from the Yorkshire Area officials was essential, especially given the wider consequences of the latest confrontation and how a more sustained assault from British Coal and the government was in the offing. But the amount of propaganda arguing the Frickley case was minimal, and there was no recommendation to support the strike on the ballot papers. The result, when it was announced, was a shattering blow to the strikers: only three pits, Kellingley, Whitemoor in the Selby complex and Thurcroft, voted to support Frickley.⁵³ Although there was a possibility of substantial support elsewhere if Frickley and the three other pits had sent out flying pickets in the traditional manner, unfortunately, as Gary Hinchliffe testifies:

. . . the proviso that was sent from two of the pits was that they would support us, but not on their own. They said that they could carry it, but while ever there was only a few pits out, the men wouldn't wear it. When they'd voted they expressed that they would support us while everybody else is out on strike. So we sent people to see them and thanked them for their support, but we decided that we wouldn't squander the handshakes and the goodwill that had come from these pits over our strike.⁵⁴

With no desire to fight on alone after three weeks out, on Saturday 24 August the Frickley strikers voted to return to work and allow Tony Proverbs' case to be taken to an industrial tribunal. 'We thought he'd win an industrial tribunal and we could prove his case without a shadow of doubt, and they'd have to reinstate him,' recalls Jeff Johnson. But, he continues, 'We lost the tribunal. We lost everything with Tony.'⁵⁵

Ultimately, the failure of the Tony Proverbs strike, as one Frickley activist notes, 'finally knocked on the head any real resistance at Frickley.'⁵⁶ But the ramifications of the dispute went much further than a defeat for miners at a single workplace. Given that further pressure on jobs and closures was expected in the near future, and resistance needed to be mounted, it was a significant and unnecessary defeat for the NUM as a whole. Crucially, the NUM's Area and national leadership had done precisely nothing when one of the pits which had become synonymous with the miners' resistance had been singled out for a strategic attack by British Coal and left to fight alone. Little wonder there was now widespread despair among the union's militants about how to challenge the industry's bosses.

⁵² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁵³ *Socialist Worker*, 31 August 1991.

⁵⁴ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁵ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁶ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: CLOSURE

The Rothschild Report

Speculation continued relentlessly in the press about the bleak future facing the coal industry. The main concern was over the supply contract between British Coal and the two power supply companies, which stood at between 65 and 70 million tonnes of coal a year and which was set to end in March 1993. National Power and PowerGen were contending that imported coal was far cheaper. While the average price of a tonne of BC coal was put at £47, estimates put imported coal at just £36. Consequently in September 1991 it was reported that National Power, British Coal's biggest customer, had signed a £65 million deal to construct a massive coal-importing facility at Bristol, which could handle over 5 million tonnes of foreign coal a year and have the capacity to handle double that amount if need be. Four pits would be threatened directly. Additionally, National Power was in the process of negotiating similar projects on the Humber, the Tees and the Tyne. The company would soon have the capacity to import 14 million tonnes of coal a year, around one-third of the amount it currently took from BC.¹ And not long afterwards it was announced that PowerGen was to build a £40 million terminal in Liverpool capable of handling 5 million tonnes of coal from overseas.² The power generators were also in the process of diversifying to other fuels, particularly gas. Estimates suggested that there was already 6,500 megawatts of gas-fired generating plant under construction and a further 10,000 megawatts was likely to go ahead, which all added up to the equivalent of 30 million tonnes of coal. Besides this, the power generators were attempting to overcome pollution controls so as to burn Orimulsion. Contracts for 8.5 million tonnes of Orimulsion had already been drawn up by December 1991.³

In October there was an even more worrying forecast for miners when a leaked report on the privatisation of coal by merchant bankers N M Rothschild suggested that the Tories intended to almost eradicate what remained of the coal industry. The report indicated that within three years as many as four out of every five miners currently working would be sacked and that the privatised coal industry would operate with as little as 14 pits and a mere 11,000 miners. Of the 26 pits operating in Yorkshire in October 1991, just seven would stay open.⁴

It transpired that one of the pits apparently to be spared the axe was Frickley. But this did not give much hope to miners at the pit, as Gary Hutsby recalls:

For a few years previous, there had been a lot of talk about these secret hit lists of pits they were going to shut. But these were all rumours. But Rothschild's, this was a government sponsored report, and they had actually stated who they were and weren't going to shut. So it gave people hard, concrete proof of what was going off. They said a lot of pits were going to close, but everybody in the pits

¹ *The Guardian*, 11 September 1991.

² *The Guardian*, 24 January 1992.

³ *The Guardian*, 14 December 1991.

⁴ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 17 October 1991; *Socialist Worker*, 19 October 1991.

knew that it was coming. We knew that privatisation was at our door. The way that I remember it was that they could have said they were going to close all the pits - your expectations were so low you expected the worst. When they said there were only going to be about twelve pits left, it was like, 'Oh, is there?'⁵

Transferees such as Robert King had heard such forecasts about pits being safe when they had worked elsewhere:

Personally, I couldn't see a future for Frickley because I had seen the investment they had put in at Kirkby, and the pits at Selby and Kellingley were in a lot better position than Frickley. But you heard that many reports. Was this one true, or wasn't it true? If the economic situation changed the year after they might want thirty or even fifty pits. You didn't know.⁶

And yet, even though there was widespread gloom amongst miners after such disclosures, the implementation of the measures predicted by Rothschild were not necessarily a foregone conclusion. Britain's miners still held enormous political and industrial muscle, and it was for this reason that the Conservatives' energy secretary, John Wakeham, immediately played down the leak, stating that the reports of Rothschild's advice 'were highly speculative'.⁷

Despair

There was further depressing news for NUM activists in mid-November 1991 when the union's membership yet again rejected a call for industrial action over wages in a ballot. So deep was the despair in the industry that even the normally militant Yorkshire miners had voted against action this time around. For activists, it was now a matter of once more going 'back to basics', of building on any small disputes that erupted, if they were to rebuild confidence in the pits.⁸ For some activists, though, this was too much to ask. Steve Gant, for so long a stalwart of the resistance at Frickley, admits that by this time he had had enough:

I've more or less said 'Fuck it' by now. By '91 I started having time off on the sick. I was involved in other things than politics at that time. You get sick of banging your head against a brick wall . . . I was still on the union, but if I tell the truth, my heart wasn't in it. I was missing meetings. I was thinking of resigning. This would be just after the Tony Proverbs strike; and when that went down as well, when they had that pit-by-pit ballot and it failed, and Tony just remained sacked, that was it. We were never going to win things. The more defeats that you go through, especially when you are at the front of them, it just grinds you down eventually.⁹

⁵ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

⁶ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

⁷ *Socialist Worker*, 19 October 1991.

⁸ *Socialist Worker*, 23 November 1991.

⁹ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

In January 1992 Malcolm High's brief reign at Frickley came to an end when he was replaced by Kevin Whiteman, a former manager at Nantgarw and Penallta collieries in Wales and more recently a member of British Coal's directing staff at their training colleges in Buckinghamshire and Staffordshire.¹⁰ 'Whiteman,' recalls Steve Gant:

was another one like Lawson. I was in a consultative meeting and he just said the same thing as Lawson did when he took over: 'Steve, oh yes, I know Steve.' He'd never met me! I'd never had a run in with him or owt like that; but that doesn't matter. He's remembered. He knows I'm there and he wants me out - preferably with no severance. This is all that's on my mind after Tony Proverbs has been sacked. I can see what's coming: I'm going to get sacked, I'd got twenty years' service and I'd be out without a penny.¹¹

He says that at one point he was 'set up' by Whiteman. He was due to meet the pit manager because of his recent absenteeism record, but was astonished to find that he was already supposed to be on a final warning. He argued that he had never received notice of any such warning. In reply, the pit manager told him:

'OK then, you are on one now.' He says, 'You are on the edge of a cliff, and I'm going to shove you off.' At this time there was nowhere to go. If it hadn't been for severance and £27,000 being involved, I would have just got up at that meeting and whacked his fucking head off. But you can't. You have to sit there and let him talk to you like a piece of shit. It's either that or fuck off without owt. I thought: 'No, Steve's going out, but he's going out with some coin.' That's all that was on my mind at this time. Nobody wanted to fight back. For me, it was just a question of time before I was sacked: they were putting me on button jobs; they were trying to catch me asleep; I was getting sent onto the worst jobs in the pit. So when I got this final warning, I worked about three months without a day off, solid, and then I threw on the sick, long term; and I never started back again.¹²

Steve Gant was one of a number of key activists at Frickley whose presence would be missed in the coming struggle. Vic France and Ray Riley had left the pit in 1989, while Tony Short had been stricken by a serious illness since the Easter of 1991.

Solid in Newhill

Though a mood of doom and despair prevailed at Frickley, and though resistance was minimal in comparison to earlier years, some industrial action did in fact occur during the following months. On 5 February 1992 there was a strike in the newly-developed Newhill seam. By this time, a number of militants had deliberately volunteered to work in the new seam to stop a situation where transferees were

¹⁰ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 9 January 1992.

¹¹ Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

¹² Steve Gant, interviewed by the author.

starting to tolerate working practices that were unacceptable elsewhere at Frickley. Gary Hinchliffe was one of those involved in this important walkout:

They'd put deputies in there who weren't getting on with the men in Cudworth, who couldn't take the attitude of the men. We called them 'can't cope deputies'. They put them in the Newhill with men who were getting transferred from other pits. When we moved in there - me, Jip and our Paul - it was a regime that we weren't use to, and they were now having to move men in from out of Cudworth; so it was obvious that there were going to be some sparks. What the men in this seam had accepted as normal working practice just wasn't normal working practice as far as we were concerned in Cudworth. And apparently this had gone ahead with the knowledge of the branch as well. Whenever the men had gone in to complain about what they'd had to do, they were told that that's how things were. So we had a big bust up with Steve Tulley and the union. He denied that he'd ever been in to see the manager for help over money, over their contracts, over what they were working in. So we ended up with a couple of disputes in the first month that we were in the Newhill. They wanted us to bucket water onto a belt. I refused to do it. I said, 'You can get a pump in and do it. I don't mind if there's something buried here, if something has got to be done urgently, but as a day-in, day-out job, bucketing slurry onto a belt, no.' The deputy I had, Andrew Savage, backed off. The deputy our Paul had was Andrew Hall - he didn't back off.¹³

The men realised there was going to be a stand-off the following day because Paul Hinchliffe was again going to refuse to shift water with a bucket. But, as Paul Symonds explains, a traditional walkout was now out of the question:

There had been a time when we would have stood on the pit head and held what we used to call a 'gear header', stand at the gear head, get everybody round and say, 'Are we doing it or aren't we? No. Well let's march.' With the trade union laws and having to go through the procedures, we had to tread carefully. But we knew that something had to be done. So we arranged, as we went down the pit, that if Paul got sent out - which he surely would for refusing to do this job - that he had to walk a certain route out of the pit, and not talk to anybody. We didn't want it where he could be said to have incited a strike. They refused him again. Paul never spoke to anybody, and walked out of the pit. But every group of men that he passed, though nobody spoke, they all put their coats on and followed him. All the Newhill came out on strike. We didn't even dare use the phones for fear of the deputies saying that we had rang round to tell the men. But we all knew what was going off, we all whispered to each other and the whisper went round . . . It created an amazing situation: there was no screaming and shouting, there had been no speeches; we just all went home.¹⁴

¹³ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

¹⁴ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

Management retaliated by forcing all the participants in the dispute to sit through individual interviews, where they were quizzed about who were the ringleaders of the walkout. 'They kept plugging and pushing about whether Paul Hinchliffe had asked them to come out on strike in support,' says Gary Hinchliffe:

I'll give them credit, everyone, to a man, said 'No.' And when they were asked why they'd come home they said, 'Because it was a strike.' There were only thirty or forty men involved, but nobody would betray him, even though they were all getting threatened with the sack and put on their final warnings. He was after a head to roll and he was after Paul Hinchliffe's. He didn't get it.¹⁵

Holding back for the election

Because a general election was due in 1992, the government was anxious to play down any gloomy forecasts for the coal industry.¹⁶ Though Labour was not promising to deliver much, expectations were high amongst NUM members for the return of a Labour government to save pits. But there was a price to pay for such hopes, as Armthorpe miners found to their cost when the most important dispute in the Yorkshire coalfield in early 1992 threatened to escalate.

Just prior to Christmas, Armthorpe NUM had been informed that two new faces at the pit were to be developed by outside contractors, while the established development teams were to be disbanded. After protracted talks and selective strike action during March, the Armthorpe branch committee turned to the Yorkshire Area for assistance. Support was promised but the date for a coalfield ballot was delayed.¹⁷ Gary Hutsby recalls attending a meeting where Frank Cave, now the NUM vice-president, addressed the Armthorpe miners. Afterwards, he decided to quiz the NUM official about the delay:

Because we'd got copies of *Socialist Worker* with us, when he turned round he must have thought: 'Who are these? They must be outsiders.' He said something along the lines of: 'Who the hell do you think you are talking to?' At this, my temper started to escalate. I said, 'I'll tell you who I am; I'm the bastard who pays your wages. I'm a miner, I'm a member of this union and I want some answers out of you.' He tried to calm things down then. But at this, you could hear the other miners who were stood in the hall also saying, 'Yeah, how come it's taken you so long?' He says, 'I'll tell you what it is, there's the general election coming up, isn't there? And we can't afford to be having any disputes and embarrassing the Labour Party.' At that I just went berserk and started shouting at him. He jumped up, swore at me, and then stormed out of the meeting. But that is where new realism had got us.¹⁸

¹⁵ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

¹⁶ D. Powell, *The Power Game: The Struggle for Coal*, (London, 1993), p.228.

¹⁷ K, Coates, L. Paterson, M. Reeves and S. Taylor, 'The young ones: they have woken a sleeping tiger', in Armthorpe NUM, *The Kane Story* (Doncaster, 1994), pp.104-107.

¹⁸ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

A coalfield ballot was eventually held on 15 and 16 April. By this time, though, the general election was over - the Tories were back in office with a majority of 21 and were already promising the rapid privatisation of the coal industry. And yet despite the obvious despair which greeted this outcome in the pits, the ballot over Armthorpe actually proved to be successful. But even now the prospect of action was delayed in the hope of talks. However, when talks did take place on 1 May, British Coal simply said they were recommending that Armthorpe close. With no support forthcoming from the Yorkshire leadership over the closure announcement, the Armthorpe miners called off their action.¹⁹ Once more new realism had allowed British Coal to make an example of a pit that had stood firm.

Bloodbath

By mid-September 1992 the day of reckoning seemed to be drawing nearer for the coal industry. Leaked secret documents obtained by *The Guardian* revealed that the Tories were shortly to announce massive closures.²⁰ On 13 October, the waiting was over and the miners' worst fears materialised when President of the Board of Trade, Michael Heseltine, declared that a staggering 31 of the country's 50 pits were to close by the end of March. Of these, six pits would stop working by the end of the week and a further 13 would close by Christmas. In total, British Coal's workforce was to be reduced from 53,000 to 23,000, with output reduced to as little as 25 million tonnes a year. There was to be no more deep mining in Lancashire, North Wales, North Staffordshire and North Derbyshire. South Wales, Scotland, Warwickshire, South Staffordshire and the North East would be left with just one pit each.²¹

Gary Hinchliffe, like thousands of other miners that day, was anxious to find out what had happened:

I was on afters and I phoned out of the pit to the control room. I tried to get the union on at first but there was nobody in. I told the control man who I was and he told me what had gone off. I said, 'Where's the manager?' He said, 'He's in his office. He's gutted.' I said, 'Is he taking calls?' He said, 'No. Steve Tulley is up there with him, and so is Chick Picken and Johnny Stones. But they're not taking calls.' He'd been told that Frickley was shutting!²²

The announced closure of Frickley 'was a big shock' for Johnny Stones. He had always thought the pit was safe:

... with Frickley's size, its infrastructure, its coal clearance system, shaft sizes, and especially with the amount of money that had been spent on it since the strike, to develop a new seam and access for three seams at one pit bottom - tens of millions of pounds had been spent on it, and it had started producing and

¹⁹ Coates et al., op. cit., p.110; *The Guardian*, 2 May 1992; *Socialist Worker*, 9 May 1992.

²⁰ *The Guardian*, 18 September 1992.

²¹ Routledge, *Scargill*, p.232; *The Times*, 14 October 1992.

²² Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

getting results . . . We'd obviously had our problems. But our results were such that we'd made about £26-28 million profit over the previous five or six years. That had reduced a lot because manpower had been run down and we'd had all the internal upsets that you have when running down manpower. But it was the first year that we'd not made a profit - we'd had two slight deficits. Our capabilities were there and they knew they were there.²³

Transferees such as Robert King had faced a similar situation before; but now things were far worse: 'When I lost my job at South Kirkby Colliery, at least there were other pits to go to. But there was no way out now, it was the dole. It was obvious that it was the end of the line.'²⁴

Robert Walker would never work at Frickley again. He had been off sick when the announcement was made but had been preparing to go back to work:

I'd just sent for an unbreakable flask. I sent for it in the morning when the hit list came out on the telly that Frickley was one of them. I was at my mam's. She says: 'Have you sent for that flask yet?' I said, 'Yeah, I sent for it this morning.' She says, 'Come and have a look at this!' And when I walked into the room Frickley was on. I said, 'I don't believe it.' So I went back on the sick then, and kept on. They finished me before the end.²⁵

Outrage

Despite only just having been re-elected, the Tories had in fact been in serious trouble since 16 September, 'Black Wednesday', when they had been forced to devalue the pound and abandon membership of the European exchange-rate mechanism. This meant that the Tories were gambling that the closure announcement would go through with the minimum of fuss. But with the widespread demoralisation in the pits, there was every chance that the gamble would pay off. Two demonstrations were hastily organised by the NUM and the TUC: the first for 21 October, a Wednesday and while parliament debated the pit closures, and then for the following Sunday. But Gary Hutsby recalls that, initially, there was little enthusiasm amongst his workmates to participate in these protests:

I can remember going to work and arguing that we'd got to get down London and lobby parliament, that if we were going to do anything, we had to have as many people down there as possible. And from the full shift of people who I argued with, not one of them said that they would come on the demo. This didn't surprise me, because at that stage in the game everybody was just saying: 'What's the point? They are going to shut us. It's reality.'²⁶

Things did not stay this way. While most miners were despondent about the closures, elsewhere there was widespread public outrage and condemnation of the

²³ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

²⁴ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

²⁵ Robert Walker, interviewed by the author.

²⁶ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

Tories' actions. In the following days a massive sea change took place in British politics. When a loyal Tory newspaper such as *The Sun* started to abuse John Major's government for being 'a bankrupt, clueless, lying, incompetent, complacent, arrogant administration,'²⁷ it was plain that something was happening. Similarly when 3,000 people marched through the Tory heartland of Cheltenham in protest against pit closures on the Sunday following Heseltine's announcement. Just as in the last days of Margaret Thatcher, again there was talk in the press of a leadership contest or even a general election. 'Life-long Cheltenham Tories,' reported *The Times*, 'have now joined Conservative MPs, church leaders and navy-blue Tory newspapers such as *The Sunday Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* in what only recently would have seemed an unlikely posse of Mr Major's critics.'²⁸ Suddenly, the miners were popular with the media, as Jeff Johnson remembers:

By this time I worked on the surface after some accident I'd had down the pit; and the amount of people ringing the pit up - interviewers, radio people - waiting in the pit car-park to talk to miners. Everywhere you went photographs were taken.²⁹

And one audacious stunt briefly put Frickley in the media spotlight during the early days of the coal crisis. On the same day that 'middle England' marched for the miners in Cheltenham, a group of Frickley miners and their supporters were busy dumping coal at the gates of Michael Heseltine's 400-acre estate in Oxfordshire.³⁰ Resistance, of sorts, was beginning to mount.

On the march

As the day of the first demonstration drew nearer, at Frickley the response was starting to look far more promising than had been anticipated. Branch committee man Gary Hinchliffe was involved in arranging transport down to London for the Frickley miners, their families and friends:

I spent two days booking buses. I could only have nine at first. I kept getting onto Area about it: I'd filled the nine buses with the men who had been putting their names down who wanted to go to this lobby of parliament. I couldn't get buses from anywhere. I was getting buses in the end from Northallerton and York to come down to Frickley to take us down. I think we ended up with nearly forty fifty-seater buses. Very few men worked at Frickley that day. All the pit must've gone down. It was a big demo.³¹

Arthur Scargill's initial reaction to the closure announcement was to recommend that the NUM should hold a strike ballot. But by the following day his tone was entirely different. Now he stressed that he would only support a strike if the

²⁷ Cited in *Socialist Review*, November 1992.

²⁸ *The Times*, 19 October 1992.

²⁹ Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

³⁰ *The Guardian*, 19 October 1992.

³¹ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

government refused to accept 'the logical arguments supported by a wide breadth of public opinion.'³² This emphasis on public opinion was to dominate Scargill's approach to the campaign against closures. It also changed the nature of the coming demonstration. Initially the protest had been billed as a march and lobby of parliament, but with the new-found enthusiasm among miners, activists such as Paul Symonds were starting to envisage thousands of protesters arriving at London and then proceeding to hammer on the gates of parliament, thus forcing the government into a climb-down:

Down the pit we had been laughing that this would be brilliant, there would be that many of us that the MPs wouldn't even be able to get past us to vote. We were saying that the Tories would have to get dressed up as road sweepers to get into the House of Commons. That was the mood, that was the euphoria that was starting to build around it.³³

The size and constitution of the demonstration, organised at short notice, on a working day in mid-week, showed that the plight of the miners touched the hearts of masses of other workers who were looking for a focus to channel their bitterness over a whole range of other issues such as the massive wave of redundancies in process, the threat of wage freezes and the attacks on social services and education. There were upwards of 100,000 people on the march,³⁴ and more than five hundred union banners in evidence.³⁵ 'It was unbelievable,' says Robert King:

I can remember that during the miners' strike of '84/85, we went on demos and it was just miners, with a few people from other industries tailing off at the back of the demo. But this time it was us who were the tail, we were in the minority.³⁶

So huge was the procession that by the time the first marchers had completed a loop of Hyde Park and the surrounding neighbourhood, thousands of marchers were still waiting to set off, two hours after the start of the procession.³⁷ Gary Hutsby remembers the scene in the nearby streets:

... as we were marching through Kensington, which is packed full of antique shops, there were people hanging out of the windows, waving and cheering us on. Some of them had knocked up placards saying: 'No pit closures.' It was quite a shock ... it was an absolutely superb demonstration, which lifted the morale of the men. And so now they were no longer sure of walking all over us. Having said that, it wasn't because the miners were going to stand in their way. It was because of the feeling across the country.³⁸

³² *The Times*, 19 October 1992.

³³ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

³⁴ Routledge, *op. cit.*, p.236.

³⁵ *Socialist Worker*, 31 October 1992.

³⁶ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

³⁷ *The Guardian*, 22 October 1992.

³⁸ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

Many miners had been expecting to head for the House of Commons. Instead the march returned to Hyde Park for another rally. 'Everybody was saying, "What are we doing, we're back in Hyde Park?"' recalls Paul Symonds:

We were saying: 'What the fuck have I had the day off work today for? Just to walk round a park and listen to some speeches?' And this was certainly the attitude amongst the lads when you got to the pit the day after. I don't want to take anything away from the size of the demonstration, but I often think that if that 150,000 had been stood outside parliament, live on TV, and that announcement was made, I reckon that we would have invaded it. We would have taken it over. And who knows what would have happened after that.³⁹

It was not just the missed opportunity to march on parliament that disappointed activists. Many were hoping for the speakers in Hyde Park to make a call for a general strike in support of the miners. Though Arthur Scargill made an emotional speech on the miners' behalf, he made no request for action from the other trade union leaders sharing the platform. 'The mood was there,' argues Robert King, 'there were that many people with us, they were angry and they had all had enough. That call should have been made.'⁴⁰

Courting the Tory 'rebels'

With the government being so unpopular, workers had an unprecedented opportunity to force concessions from the Tories, or even drive them from office. And yet though Arthur Scargill may have liked to have seen industrial action, at the decisive moment he held back for fear of turning the press, the official trade union leadership, and 'sympathetic' Tory MPs against the miners, clinging to the hope that the government would be beaten in parliament - ironically, the only forum where the Tories had any chance of attaining a majority at that time. Of course simple arithmetic showed that if just eleven Tory back-benchers rebelled, the government would lose its majority - and eight had already said they would defy their whips over the issue, with others promising to abstain.⁴¹ With the Tories bitterly divided over Europe and economic policy, a mass protest outside of parliament would have gone a long way towards forcing more Conservatives MPs into backing down over pit closures. Instead, a select number of NUM activists were invited to leave the main march to lobby parliament as the debate on pit closures commenced. Jeff Johnson was one of these, but spent his time trying to find common ground with Tory MPs:

We had a list of the wavering Tory MPs. We went through their calling system and debated with them, in the lobbying chambers, about all sorts of aspects. Some people believed that they should shut pits down because of the ecological damage we were doing to the ozone layer and forests through acid rain; but we counter-acted these arguments by saying that there should be investment in putting filters

³⁹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁰ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

⁴¹ Routledge, *op. cit.*, pp.235-236.

on power stations . . . We even tried to use nationalism - which these Tory MPs stood for - as an argument to keep pits open, to try and get their non-European stance to come behind us. We got promises from thirteen Tory MPs - it took us hours and hours of doing it; non-stop talking - but as they went into parliament, their whips got hold of them and gave them certain promises that there would be a study to see which pits were economically viable. So the vote never came through. They stitched it up.⁴²

With six Tory MPs eventually voting alongside Labour and five abstaining, Heseltine sought parliamentary peace by announcing a freeze on the closures of 21 of the threatened pits until a Department of Trade and Industry report was published in the New Year.⁴³ Gary Hinchliffe was one of many NUM members who were not impressed by this U-turn though, and saw it as a sham to buy time:

. . . the longer it went on you realised what was going to happen. This had happened in 1921, 1926, and 1981. They were going to negotiate through the winter, and carry on with the same plan when it got to the summer. They announced a moratorium. They were going to look into it, they were going to spend a fortune to re-examine these pits to see if they could find any more markets for coal. But you knew they weren't going to.⁴⁴

People power

The second march in support of the miners was even larger than the first, with over 200,000 people in attendance despite torrential rain. It was, one commentator has noted, 'the largest gathering of its kind since the TUC's march against the Industrial Relations Bill more than twenty years earlier.'⁴⁵ That, though, was the high point. At this crucial moment, with the government on the ropes and with millions of workers thinking in terms of widespread industrial action - even a general strike - the TUC refused to sanction the type of action which could cripple the government. But because the miners were not likely to come out on their own over pit closures, Scargill and the leaders of the NUM continued to see winning public opinion, and explaining how the closures were morally wrong, as the only realistic option open to the union. Speaking at a rally in South Kirkby on the day after the second great demonstration, Frickley branch president Steve Tulley made the NUM's stance clear. Sharing the platform alongside Ken Homer, Frank Cave, Labour MP Jimmy Hood, and a local Methodist minister, he called for a 'rolling campaign' of public pressure and sustained 'people power'. 'People power is good,' he explained, 'and the Labour and trade union movements are built on people behind them.'⁴⁶

It soon became apparent what 'people power' actually entailed, as the NUM's campaign settled into a series of local rallies and marches. On Saturday 31 October, 3,000 supporters of the miners marched through Barnsley and a further 2,000

⁴² Jeff Johnson, interviewed by the author.

⁴³ Routledge, op. cit., p.236.

⁴⁴ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁴⁵ R. Taylor, *The Trade Union Question in British Politics*, (Oxford, 1993).

⁴⁶ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 29 October 1992.

through Doncaster.⁴⁷ The following weekend there was another demonstration in Barnsley, this time with 5,000 marchers, while 400 marched in Portsmouth, 2,000 people attended a North West TUC march in Manchester and 2,000 went on a UDM march in Nottingham.⁴⁸ On 14 November, 1,600 people marched through Merthyr Tydfil, 500 in Hull, 400 in Southampton, over 200 in Cannock in the West Midlands, and a further 800 people packed a Scargill rally in nearby Stoke-on-Trent.⁴⁹ Weekend after weekend, this type of activity was repeated in the coalfields and elsewhere. But it was soon becoming evident to miners that this route was getting nowhere, as Gary Hutsby recollects:

For months and months, people marched and marched. In fact, as the campaign went on and on, it got to where you were wasting your breath arguing with miners to go on demonstrations. They were saying: 'March? March where? We are sick of marching. That's all we are doing. I've worn a pair of shoes out in two months. I don't want to march anymore.'⁵⁰

Johnny Stones, a man with a reputation for being a loyal supporter of union policy, goes as far as to say:

We didn't have a campaign. We supported all the Area things in '92 and '93 - we ordered buses and there was nobody on them hardly. There was apathy and a lot of people were looking for other jobs . . . We had a bus laid on to go to Huntingdon, to go to lobby Major's constituency - I don't think we got six on that. We laid them on but they weren't supported.⁵¹

As the campaign dithered, the government went ahead with what the *Yorkshire Post* described as a 'closure by stealth' policy.⁵² Ten of the threatened pits were being kept open only on a care and maintenance basis, with miners having to report for work before then being sent home. Elsewhere, other miners were encouraged to apply for redundancy.⁵³ Over 5,000 miners had left the industry by Christmas.⁵⁴ Under such conditions, Arthur Scargill was becoming desperate for some kind of meaningful action, but wanted this to be officially sanctioned. When the TUC General Council met at a specially convened meeting in Doncaster on 25 November, he aimed for support for a day of action, but this was rejected. Norman Willis informed miners that solidarity action was illegal, arguing that 'there is no way the TUC puts its head in a legal noose.'⁵⁵ Of course with the intensity of the coal crisis and the massive sympathy for the miners, the TUC could not dare to openly betray

⁴⁷ *Socialist Worker*, 7 November 1992.

⁴⁸ *Socialist Worker*, 14 November 1992.

⁴⁹ *Socialist Worker*, 21 November 1992.

⁵⁰ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

⁵¹ Johnny Stones, interviewed by the author.

⁵² *Yorkshire Post*, 26 November 1992.

⁵³ Routledge, op. cit., p.237.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.241.

⁵⁵ *Financial Times*, 26 November 1992.

the NUM, and so had to be seen to be doing something about pit closures. The result was the 'National Day of Recovery' on 9 December. It was perhaps the most pitiful effort of a pitiful campaign. At least in earlier crises during the Tories' rule the TUC had sanctioned token action: over the anti-union laws in 1980, over the health service in 1982, over GCHQ in 1984, and even limited action over the ambulance workers in 1990. With not the slightest hint of shame, this is how the TUC later described its action on behalf of the miners that day:

More than 100,000 leaflets were distributed to trade union activists urging them to approach employers that day on job losses and seeking support for the TUC's programme for National Recovery. A national campaign conference was also held on the day at Congress House, which was attended by senior trade unionists and representatives from industry and local government. A keynote address was given by Mr Zygmunt Tyszkiewicz, General Secretary of UNICE, the European employers' organisation.⁵⁶

Rather than hitting the employing class, who at that time were laying off hundreds of thousands of workers and whose political representatives were in the process of sacking thousands of miners, the leaders of the organised working class wanted to talk to the bosses. Little wonder there was cynicism among NUM members about this initiative, as Gary Hutsby recalls:

People at the pit were saying, 'What does that mean? A National Day of Recovery sounds like we are all going to get pissed-up on a Saturday night and then on Sunday we'll lay in bed recovering.' The idea was, apparently, because the economy was in such a dire strait, for the employers and the unions to sit down and talk about how they were going to get the economy out of the mess. What planet do they live on?⁵⁷

Another TUC initiative was 'Switch off Saturday' on December 19, in which supporters of the miners were asked to turn off their lights for five minutes. A more serious proposal would have been to have asked power workers to turn the lights off. Gary Hurst says that he never expected anything from the TUC after what had happened in the Big Strike; but this latest effort 'was just a waste of time.'⁵⁸ In Robert King's view, the public 'should have been turning lights *on* for the miners, to use up more power - not turning them off.'⁵⁹ Things did promise to escalate that month though, when, faced with the TUC's inaction, Women Against Pit Closures began a short occupation of Armthorpe Colliery and Arthur Scargill issued a call for miners and rail workers - who were also facing privatisation and closure - to stage a South African-style 'stayaway' protest for 19 January.⁶⁰ Scargill was starting to recognise that public opinion was of little use unless something was done with it. In

⁵⁶ TUC Conference Report, 1993, p.154.

⁵⁷ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁸ Gary Hurst, interviewed by the author.

⁵⁹ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁰ M. Simons, 'A battle undermined', *Socialist Review*, December 1993, p.14.

Gary Hutsby's view, however, the NUM leader did not seem to realise the full significance of what he was pushing for with stayaways and people power:

I listened to him and the other NUM leaders speak on loads of occasions and they kept using the examples of South Africa and Eastern Europe, about what had happened in Romania. They were saying that these were the kinds of examples that we should be looking at . . . but if you looked at Romania, what had they done to the head of their country? They'd shot him on Christmas Day. If you looked at South Africa, you'd got the ANC leading a guerrilla army against the state. The NUM leaders had to come up with something, but they didn't want to talk about strikes, and so talked about people's power and stayaways. But in South Africa a stayaway was a general strike. So Scargill was trying to moderate his language, but using examples which were far more extreme than the solutions people were actually arguing for. It was quite funny in one sense, because I was all for using the solutions that the Romanians had used against the people who ran their lives - but I would have been quite happy to have started with a general strike.⁶¹

Sit-ins

Although the call for a stayaway was welcomed, a minority of activists in the coalfields had been organising for something different for some time. 'We came out with the idea of miners occupying their own pits,' says Gary Hutsby.⁶²

As early as 14 October 1992, Arthur Scargill had stated his support for pit occupations as a means of fighting closures at the meeting of the NUM executive. However, the NEC and a special delegate conference the following day both took a different view. Scargill has since argued that if miners had seriously considered occupying pits, they could have gone ahead with them:

I was approached at different times by a number of NUM members who claimed they only needed my 'go ahead'. On every occasion, having stressed the decisions of the NEC and the special delegate conference, I nevertheless made clear that if anyone took direct action including occupation to defend pits, jobs and communities the union would support any and all actions designed to save our industry.⁶³

But, as we shall see, this is far from how Frickley activists who attempted to organise pit occupations recall Scargill's stance on the issue.

In the very early stages of the campaign, Paul Symonds, like many other activists, had put his faith in the call for a general strike. But then, in late October, he received a telephone call telling him that leading NUM figures at Trentham Colliery near Stoke-on-Trent wanted to meet with Frickley miners to talk about fighting the closures. After Paul Symonds had informed the Frickley branch officials about this request, he and Steve Tulley travelled down to Trentham:

⁶¹ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

⁶² Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

⁶³ A. Scargill, 'History distorted', *Socialist Review*, February 1994.

We met them in their welfare club. All their branch officials were there. Their delegate had worked there for 40-odd years, he was saying, 'I'm not bothered about my redundancy money, I want this pit to stay open.' The branch secretary, he was in his mid-40s, he was the same: 'They are not shutting this pit.' They wanted to occupy. And they wanted Frickley to occupy with them. This was like music to my ears. I thought: 'These men aren't idiots. They are serious men, prepared for something big.' They knew of Frickley's reputation, that's why they had got in touch with us. They were wanting to occupy and they were asking us what to do.⁶⁴

But Paul Symonds soon found out that the Frickley branch officials were not as enthusiastic about the proposal as their Trentham counterparts:

Back at Frickley, I argued with Steve Tulley that we had to do it. I said, 'And Steve, you've got to lead it as well. It can be done.' But he wouldn't have it. You have to understand the consequences of all this. These were men with a lot of years' service. If their jobs are going to go, they want their redundancy money. If you occupy a pit and it goes wrong, you are sacked, you are on the dole. On a personal level, for the miners involved, the stakes were as high as they could get - apart from being shot. This cannot be taken lightly. These were blokes with families and mortgages. And you had to be prepared to throw away £40,000 on a gamble. Steve Tulley didn't refuse as such, he was saying all the right things, but he wasn't going to do anything. He was saying things like: 'The time's not right, let's wait.' I thought Johnny Stones might be on for it so I tried him. He didn't slam the door in my face, it was: 'Mmmm, it's an interesting idea, I'll think about it.'⁶⁵

Paul Symonds decided to go ahead with the plan for an occupation despite the branch officials' reluctance. First he needed to pull a group of supporters together:

I started sounding all the lads out. I remember spending the next week or two sat with lads down the pit. There was no work done. We started to pull a core of people who would. But people said they would, and the day after they would change their minds. The next day they would be on for it again.⁶⁶

One of the early recruits was Robert King who 'thought it was a great idea.' However, because of the threat of sackings, he found it difficult to recruit anybody else:

I didn't get anybody. Jip asked me to have a word with one lad who I knew really well. He was interested. But he asked how many others were going to do it. I had

⁶⁴ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁵ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁶ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

to be honest and tell him. He just said, 'No chance.' That was it, he didn't want to know any more. There were four of us, with him. It wasn't enough.⁶⁷

In such circumstances, a mass occupation of the pit was out of the question. However, Paul Symonds contends that:

You don't need a hundred men to occupy a pit; you only need six or seven . . . It's a high-risk strategy. We said that if we were able to get into the Newhill, we would have been able to isolate the shafts. You could knock a fail-safe device off by pressing a red button and they couldn't override it from the surface. Don't get me wrong, we were aware of the impact this was going to have. But there was an opinion that the miners didn't really want the pit to shut. You couldn't hold an open meeting and decide to do this, it had to be kept secret otherwise you would never have got down the pit to occupy it.⁶⁸

Time to move

In late October/early November, Paul Symonds met with the Trentham activists to iron out details such as when the occupations at the two pits would take place. Other events, though, suddenly upped the pace of the agenda. On 5 November, Russ Telford, an ex-miner, forced his way down Armthorpe Colliery armed with a gun, in protest against the pit closure programme.⁶⁹ 'We in the SWP realised that now was the time to move,' says Paul Symonds:

We initiated a public meeting in Armthorpe for the Sunday night after this incident, and we persuaded Scargill to speak at it. He didn't want to do it at first, then Paul Foot coaxed him into it. We also invited Bob Anderton and his posse from Trentham to come up. The meeting was packed. On the platform were Bob Anderton, Brenda Nixon, Arthur Scargill and a couple of branch officials . . . At this meeting, I spoke from the floor, and I really raised the temperature. I talked about the TUC, about it being a shit campaign, that the NUM had its hands tied. I didn't attack the NUM because Scargill was on the platform. I said that it was time we did something; I said everything barring mention an occupation.⁷⁰

He was under the impression that 'this must be music to Scargill's ears,' but soon realised his mistake:

When I sat down, Scargill really laid into me. He was pointing at me, and then he made a really savage attack on the SWP. He said that his strategy was absolutely right, that it was working. Scargill blamed the men for taking the money.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁸ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁶⁹ *Yorkshire Post*, 6 November 1992.

⁷⁰ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁷¹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

Paul Symonds argues that not only did Scargill kill the euphoria that had been building up at the meeting, but also frightened off the Trentham contingent:

I spoke to Bob [Anderton] after the meeting; he wondered what was going off. With Scargill being so aggressive towards me, Bob was worried. He loves and respects Arthur Scargill, but he has only known me for a week. All of a sudden, he's unsure. He must have been wondering who he was working with; was I some kind of maverick? Basically, that was it. We were blown straight out of the water. And Scargill knew that. He had intended to scupper the occupations. All that was left then was to start building bridges again. That was the first time Scargill did this; he would do it again.⁷²

Another try

This first attempt at pit occupations had been limited to just two pits. Soon, however, moves were under way to mount an even more substantial operation.

There was now a great deal of animosity between Paul Symonds and the NUM leadership whenever their paths crossed at demonstrations and rallies. However, the Frickley activist was surprised when not long afterwards Frank Cave approached him to discuss the prospects for widespread pit occupations. 'There were three meetings,' recalls Paul Symonds:

it was all a bit cloak and dagger. He said, 'We've got to talk about it Paul, but me and Arthur can't be seen to be party to anything like this.' He was the go-between, the liaison, with Scargill. We would meet in The Plough in South Elmsall and then drive off somewhere. I set off building a picture of pit occupations in Frank's mind . . . I said, 'Frank, we are serious. We are not talking about getting outsiders to do it. We are talking about members who have worked in the pits all their lives, risking everything, and staying down until we can get the pit closure plan scrapped.' He was nodding his head and agreeing . . . What they were most worried about was that with it being illegal they could be taken to court and have the union's funds sequestered. I said, 'But the main problem is, we've got a handful of SWP members and others in the pits who will definitely do it, but they need to know if you will support it. If you give me a nod and a wink that if we occupy you will throw the full weight of the NUM behind us, we can pull it off. But these men have got to know this.' He says, 'But we can't tell you.' He wouldn't budge off this because of the courts.⁷³

Eventually it was arranged that an historical article on pit occupations in South Wales would appear in the next issue of *The Miner* as a signal of Scargill's support. It was hoped that 1993 would begin with at least eight pits under occupation, creating a momentum that would transform Scargill's call for stayaways into a massive strike throughout industry.⁷⁴ Gary Hutsby was one of a group of miners who toured the coalfields trying to raise the profile of the planned occupations:

⁷² Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁷³ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁷⁴ Simons, op. cit., p.14.

We spent all our Christmas touring the country, arguing with people that occupations were a viable way forward. From that, we actually organised a meeting in Doncaster. There were about 35 miners there from across the country, who had come to hear the argument for the occupations. There were fifteen pits represented by these 35. No decisions were taken with this being the first meeting we'd had. People were raising all kinds of arguments, such as the occupations should only take place at those pits that were immediately under threat. The idea was that a handful of individuals could get into their own pit and occupy it, and the snowball effect from that would be that pits would be back onto a national footing, people would have turned on their tellies and seen pits being occupied.⁷⁵

Everything was going to plan, and a further meeting in Doncaster was arranged for the last Sunday of the miners' Christmas holiday. The occupations would go ahead the following Tuesday. Early on Saturday evening though, Paul Symonds received a stunning telephone call from Dave Temple, one of the men involved:

He was from one of the Wearmouth pits and he was a personal confidant of Scargill's. He said, 'Jip, it's urgent, I think, you better see me.' Me and a few others met him in a pub in Doncaster. He said, 'I've got some bad news. I've just left Scargill and he's told me to tell you that if you go ahead with these occupations, he's going to disown them. I'm going to have to tell everybody at the meeting tomorrow that Scargill doesn't support you.' I said, 'You'll kill it. You can't do this.'

Anyway, the meeting went ahead the next day. I kicked it off, I said, 'Everybody knows why they are here, the final plans are laid, with the authority of this meeting we can do it this week. But I think that everybody should listen to what Dave Temple has got to say.' He told them that Scargill wasn't backing it. That was it, he'd killed it. We still argued that the union would never dump us; twelve pits occupying, they would have no choice but to support us. But people started saying that maybe it wasn't the right time now, that perhaps we should wait for this Commons Select Committee report. It was dead now, and there was nothing we could do about it.⁷⁶

The last action

With the failure of the planned pit occupations, the focus of the struggle shifted elsewhere. Early in 1993 the TUC Emergency Committee turned down the NUM's call for a stayaway on 19 January and also Arthur Scargill's alternative date of 15 February. The TUC were now putting their faith in the publication of a Commons Trade and Industry Select Committee report due at the end of January. But the four Labour MPs on the parliamentary committee betrayed the miners by signing a document which, though it recommended a subsidy for the coal industry, did not recommend that all the threatened pits should stay open. While Arthur Scargill denounced the report as 'unacceptable', the people who were calling the shots in the

⁷⁵ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

⁷⁶ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

miners' campaign thought otherwise. Norman Willis congratulated the MPs and claimed that the report 'opens the way forward.' But all it did was enable the government to hold firm against such feeble opposition.⁷⁷

The miners' campaign would remain becalmed until 5 March 1993, almost five months since the great protests against the government, when a ballot for joint one-day strikes with the rail workers was staged.⁷⁸ But the action being recommended was 'tokenism' says Paul Symonds:

Let's be honest, it wasn't on. Were they going to call the pit closure programme off after a day and a half? We had a national strike going for a year! What was two days going to do? All it served to do was demoralise people.⁷⁹

Small wonder then that there was little enthusiasm to campaign for a vote for action at Frickley - as Gary Hutsby found out when he enquired in the union office for some stickers backing the strike call. Steve Tulley told him he had a pile of stickers at home and would bring them to work the next day:

The day after, I went in the union box again: 'Steve, did you get those stickers?' 'Oh no, I've forgot them.' I says, 'OK, bring them tomorrow.' The next day, I went in again: 'Steve, have you got those stickers?' 'Oh no, I've left them at home.' That lack of confidence that I *felt* about arguing with people to take strike action, Steve Tulley was *showing* it. I believed that he wasn't bringing the stickers in because he'd forgot them, but because he felt that nobody in the pit would wear them. And so in the end, when I finished work that night, I actually went to his house and said: 'Steve, the stickers!' And he gave me a great bundle of stickers.⁸⁰

And yet even at this late stage 12,913 NUM members voted for strikes, with 8,465 voting against.⁸¹ The first strike was set for 2 April, but by that time the Tories had sensed they had seen out the worst of the crisis and so on 25 March finally declared their revised plans for the coal industry in the long-awaited DTI report. Not a single extra tonne of output was promised for the industry, but rather a subsidy of £500 million for British Coal to seek new markets in the run up to privatisation. Frickley was named as one of 12 pits on the list of 31 that were to be given a short-term reprieve while production costs were reduced to international market levels. 12 pits were to close and a further six would be mothballed, while one pit, Maltby, would be used for development purposes. 8,000 miners had already left the industry since October, thousands more were now set to join them. The report also declared that the 'dash for gas' would continue, that coal privatisation would be introduced at the earliest opportunity, and that miners would have to spend

⁷⁷ Routledge, op. cit., pp.244-245; Simons, op. cit., p.14; *Socialist Worker*, 30 January 1993; TUC Conference Report, 1993, pp.156-157.

⁷⁸ Simons, op. cit., p.14.

⁷⁹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

⁸⁰ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

⁸¹ Routledge, op. cit., p.246.

more time underground.⁸² Further unease for miners followed when National Power and PowerGen signed contracts with British Coal for just forty million tonnes of coal for 1993/4 and with a reduction to just thirty million tonnes for each of the next four years.⁸³ Frickley NUM branch secretary Steve Tulley told the *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express* that the DTI report had, 'Not done a scrap of good for any of the 31 pits as no extra coal has been negotiated.' He predicted therefore that:

By next year all 31 pits earmarked last October will have closed. They will be followed by five of the 19 remaining and then the pits will be privatised and the government can wash its hands of them. Friday's day of action is the only way forward. We've tried everything else and it doesn't seem to have worked.⁸⁴

The joint NUM/rail stoppage on 2 April was extremely effective. Every NUM pit stopped work. On the railways, there was just one passenger train and one goods train in motion. Scargill insisted that the first national coal strike for over eight years was not the end of the campaign, 'it's the beginning.'⁸⁵ The second joint-stoppage on 16 April was again effective. However, soon after, rail workers' leader Jimmy Knapp abandoned the miners when he called off his union's action, claiming he had secured a deal with British Rail.⁸⁶

Co-ops and buy-outs

The miners were in no position to fight alone following this latest betrayal, and the Tories knew this. Soon after the government started to press forward with more pit closures. Eight pits closed during the last week of April. At other pits miners were volunteering in increasing numbers for redundancy, either through the pull of enhanced redundancy payments or to avoid victimisation and the sack if they remained.⁸⁷ 'Some of them did right getting out,' thought Robert King:

Two lads got sacked for laking, for having time off work. One of them got his job back because the management didn't go through the procedure properly. Phil Greenbank lost all his redundancy money. But five miles away, at another pit, they were sending everybody home on full pay. By this time it didn't really matter. Everybody knew the pit was going to shut. But the management still felt that they had to be vindictive. Dave Turton wasn't even a militant. Maybe it was the management trying to make names for themselves - 'I've done this at Frickley' - for when they went for other jobs.⁸⁸

⁸² N. Walden, 'Energy Policy', in P. Catterall (ed.), *Contemporary Britain*, (London, 1994), p.157; *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 1 April 1993; Routledge, op. cit., p.248.

⁸³ Ibid., p.249.

⁸⁴ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 1 April 1993.

⁸⁵ Routledge, op. cit., p.251.

⁸⁶ Simons, op. cit., p.14.

⁸⁷ *Socialist Worker*, 8 May 1993.

⁸⁸ Robert King, interviewed by the author.

Steve Tulley's prophesy soon began to ring true. On 18 June British Coal began the closure of the 'reprieved' pits. Leaks - apparently from BC's headquarters - indicated that Frickley and two other pits supposedly reprieved in March were now in danger yet again.⁸⁹ With little chance of the labour movement acting to save the coal industry by now, some Frickley activists started looking for other solutions to keep the pit open. One apparent option was a workers' buy-out. 'We didn't really think that was a good idea,' recalls Ian Oxley, but, 'We did investigate it. We talked to someone from Wakefield District Council. We did tentatively look at it. We were absolutely certain that a slimmed-down pit based on Newhill could be viable.'⁹⁰

Superficially, a buy-out seemed like a radical solution. But the reality was that no matter how hard miners worked after a buy-out, they would still have to sell their coal in the very same rigged market that had led to the pit closure programme in the first place. Miners at Monktonhall Colliery in Scotland had already found this to their cost. By April 1993 the consortium which ran the pit had collected debts in excess of £1.6 million, the Bank of Scotland had refused to advance any more cash and a wealthy new business partner was being sought.⁹¹

There were even hopes among some NUM activists that their pits would remain open under a sympathetic owner following privatisation. According to Ian Oxley:

... a lot of people wanted to go with Malcolm Edwards [the former commercial director of British Coal] and basically buy the pits that were going to shut. We thought about that route, keeping contact with him, and seeing if he was interested in Frickley ... and he did come and look at the viability of the pit.⁹²

The end

Throughout the following months, speculation mounted in the local press once more about how Frickley was near to closing. By the early autumn the rumours were starting to have more substance. According to the *Yorkshire Evening Post* of 28 September 1993, Frickley, Hatfield and Bentley were among a new wave of closures to be announced soon.⁹³ But when British Coal chiefs announced that the pit required further review and that a meeting would be held on 12 November to consider Frickley's future, the pit's fate was almost sealed. Union leaders had been informed by BC's Northern Group director Alan Houghton that since the government's coal review in March, developments in the energy market had virtually eliminated the potential for extra coal sales.⁹⁴ Hence it was no real surprise when the four Frickley NUM officials met British Coal chiefs on 16 November and were told that Frickley was to close. It was said that the pit had lost £1.8 million in the first six months of the financial year and as much as 60 per cent of its weekly output was being stockpiled. Further, they were told that Frickley miners would qualify for an

⁸⁹ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 24 June 1993.

⁹⁰ Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

⁹¹ *Socialist Worker*, 10 July 1993.

⁹² Ian Oxley, interviewed by the author.

⁹³ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 28 September 1993.

⁹⁴ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 11 November 1993.

extra £7,000 on top of their redundancy packages if they withdraw the pit from the colliery review procedure and accepted the pit's closure in writing within ten days.⁹⁵

On 20 November a mass meeting of Frickley miners met to discuss the new developments. 'We had the "I'm not voting to shut my colliery" thing,' says Gary Hinchliffe:

I had a disagreement with Jip over this. I'm glad that the pit shut, because that's the first one that we'd had. Jip said that we should take no part in this, we shouldn't have a ballot, we shouldn't do owt, we shouldn't shut the pit. I said, 'We are not shutting the pit, Jip. We are asking the men whether they want to take this money or not. The pit is going to shut.' 'We are shutting the pit!' He'd got this big thing that the men were voting to shut the pit. I said, 'Jip, we've stood up here, this union, and asked these men to come out on strike, I've lost count how many times, since the end of the strike. More than any other pit in the country. We are doing them a disservice if we don't do the honourable thing.' The thing was that British Coal didn't need the vote of the men in the pit. They needed the four branch officials to put their signature to say that this pit wouldn't go into the review.⁹⁶

Gary Hutsby was one of those who wanted to make a final principled stand against British Coal in the face of closure:

It was a foregone conclusion that the pit was going to close, but it was how it was going to close that mattered. Were people in years to come going to say that Frickley miners actually voted to accept closure? This was something we shouldn't do. But the branch officials were arguing that it was something that we should do, that we should have a vote on it, that every member had a right to state what they wanted. It was a big get-out clause for them . . . There was only me, Jip and Andy Butler - who had transferred to Frickley from Armthorpe - out of hundreds of miners at this meeting who argued that we shouldn't be balloting. We were getting booed and hissed. Jip jumped up and shouted, 'I propose that we don't have a ballot for closure. Have I got a seconder?' Either me or Andy Butler seconded him . . . But they [the branch officials] just said, 'We are voting next week, at the pit-head. That's the end of the meeting.' There was no show of hands; they wouldn't accept our proposal - which we knew would get beaten . . . because they knew that they would have to stick their hands up and vote for closure.⁹⁷

Even though the proposition to not vote on the pit's closure was not taken up, as Gary Hinchliffe explains, the Frickley miners still had plenty to be proud of as their final meeting concluded:

⁹⁵ *Yorkshire Post*, 17 November 1993.

⁹⁶ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁹⁷ Gary Hutsby, interviewed by the author.

We stood up and thanked them for their support over the years, and how many times we'd asked them to back the men up: 'Whatever decision you make, don't let anybody say that you've shut your pit. There's nobody done more to keep this industry going than the men have at this pit. And if everybody else had battled as hard against the Coal Board's policies since we came back off strike, we wouldn't be in this position now. So do what you want to do; you've got wives, you've got kids, you've got futures.'⁹⁸

There were still 740 miners working at Frickley Colliery when the ballot over closure took place, but only 357 men voted - many of the remainder were not eligible to vote having let their union subscriptions lapse. All but 27 of Frickley's remaining miners voted to accept British Coal's offer of enhanced redundancy terms. Nevertheless, the historical record needs to acknowledge that it was British Coal and the Conservative government that closed the pit, not the miners. The Frickley miners were simply voting for what they perceived as the best option available to them. If the options had been whether they wanted the pit to close or instead stay open for the next decade, there would have been little prospect of the Frickley closing at that time. Instead, the options, as Paul Symonds points out, 'were "Slow Death" or "Quick death" We were asked whether we wanted to keep the pit open or go into the review procedure. Miners knew that the review procedure had never saved a single pit. It was just more tokenism.'⁹⁹ Thus, on November 26 1993, the coal miners of Frickley Colliery worked their last shift.¹⁰⁰ A decade and more of proud resistance had come to an end.

⁹⁸ Gary Hinchliffe, interviewed by the author.

⁹⁹ Paul Symonds, interviewed by the author.

¹⁰⁰ *Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express*, 2 December 1993; *Yorkshire Post*, 26 November 1993.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: CONCLUSION

By March 1994, exactly ten years since the start of the great miners' strike of 1984-85, all but 17 of Britain's pits had closed. The nightmare that many in the miners' union had envisaged had at last become reality. In September that year, these pits, along with 13 others that had been mothballed, were privatised. When the coal industry had been nationalised in 1947 there had been 700,000 miners. Now there were just 7,000.¹

For some observers the demise of the miners was inevitable. Robert Taylor, for instance, has argued that the miners' strike of 1984-85 was 'the last, almost primeval scream of a dying proletariat.' Though Taylor acknowledges that there was widespread support for the miners in the 1992-93 coal crisis, he says, 'this could not, however, alter the economic logic for a declining industry.'² But was this really so? Did miners have no option but to become a relic of the past in the way of the hand-loom weavers? Is it the case, as one mining historian has put it, that 'these characters who earned their living working in dirty and primitive conditions underground, relying on their muscles and their wits, will soon seem to belong to another species'?'³

Certainly the Conservative government persistently presented the decline of coal as being the inevitable consequence of market forces⁴. And without doubt there was a decline in the fortunes of the coal industry in other developed countries as well. In the decade from 1981 the number of people employed in mining and quarrying in France fell from 136,000 to 81,000; in Spain from 94,000 to 76,000, in Canada from 208,000 to 174,000, and in the USA from 1,118,000 to 733,000. From 1984 to 1991, employment in the same industrial sector in Germany fell from 232,000 to 182,000, and fell from 102,000 to 93,000 in Australia between 1986 and 1991.⁵

But the decline of coal in these countries was of nothing in comparison to what was witnessed in Britain. A rational energy policy would have involved a sustained programme of energy efficiency and conservation, the introduction of clean-coal technology and the use of renewable resources. Under the Conservative government, however, energy policy was what NUM leaders often referred to as 'a conspiracy against coal.' But they would have been more correct to have said there was a conspiracy against the miners. Seamus Milne has argued that the destruction of the coal industry in Britain had much to do with the Conservative Party's desire to avenge their humiliations at the hands of the miners in the early 1970s. The 1972 and 1974 strikes, he says, 'laid the ground for what became a twenty-year vendetta against the miners: a single-minded and ruthless drive to destroy the NUM and, if necessary, the bulk of the British coal industry in the process.'⁶ Milne has exposed a

¹ *The Guardian*, 5 March and 31 September 1994.

² R. Taylor, *The Trade Union Question in British Politics*, p.298.

³ J. Threlkeld, *Pits: A Pictorial Record of Mining*, (Barnsley, 1994), p.7.

⁴ See D. Helm, 'Energy policy and market doctrine', *Political Quarterly*, Vol.64, No.4, October/December 1993.

⁵ Richards, *Miners On Strike*, p.15.

⁶ Milne, *The Enemy Within*, p.5.

huge spying operation and a dirty-tricks campaign against the NUM leadership by the British state as part of that drive to destroy the union.

Nor is this view solely limited to left-wing journalists. Mike Parker, for many years the chief economist at British Coal, has co-written of how: 'It had been clear for some time that the government's objectives for coal had strong political elements including exposing the industry to market forces, permanently to break the power of the NUM and to privatise what was left of the industry.'⁷

As we have already noted in this study, aware that the miners' strength lay in their impact on the electricity supply industry, the government had first tried to supersede NUM-produced coal with both nuclear energy and increased coal imports. Nigel Lawson admitted the real intention much later: 'The need for "diversification" of energy resources, the argument I used to justify the PWR [pressurised-water-reactor] programme, was code for freedom from NUM blackmail.'⁸ When these proved far too costly and insufficient, 'NUM blackmail' was finally threatened with the privatisation of the electricity supply industry alongside a market rigged in favour of the gas and nuclear power.⁹ In his memoirs, Cecil Parkinson, the Energy Secretary who had proudly announced the future privatisation of coal at the 1988 Conservative Party conference, was forthright about the government's intentions in privatising electricity supply and the coal industry. Ending these monopolies, he argued, would 'curtail the power of the miners.'¹⁰

The NUM's argument against the government's policy was a powerful one and accepted widely. 'The truth is that there are no economic reasons to justify closures,' wrote Arthur Scargill as the final closure programme was about to be unleashed:

Tory/British Coal claims about 'economic' and 'uneconomic' pits have been exposed. Britain produces, at an average cost of £40 per tonne, the cheapest deep-mined coal in the world. Australian coal, often referred to as the 'cheapest', receives subsidies - in the form of a 150 per cent tax rebate - on all research and development costs; South African coal - produced by virtual slave labour - receives a 10-15 per cent subsidy; German coal - which has average production costs of £110 per tonne - receives massive state subsidies; *but* British coal receives nothing!

The British nuclear industry, on the other hand - producing electricity 350 per cent more expensively than coal - receives a £1.3 billion per year subsidy. The development of gas-fired power stations is 30 per cent more expensive than the use of Britain's coal. Coal imports, if we compare like with like, are 30 per cent more expensive than our own coal, and disastrously worsen Britain's balance of payments. The subsidies given to nuclear power and gas, together with the cost of unnecessary coal imports, is equal to a £100 subsidy for every tonne of British

⁷ M. Parker and J. Surrey, 'The October 1992 coal crisis and UK energy policy', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.64, No.4, October/December 1993, p.402.

⁸ N. Lawson, *The View From No.11*, (London, 1992), p.168.

⁹ Milne, op. cit. p.8.

¹⁰ C. Parkinson, *Right at the Centre*, (London, 1992), p.280.

coal produced. If only one-tenth of that, i.e. a £10 per tonne subsidy, was given to our coal industry, it would expand rather than contract. *No pits would close.*¹¹

But arguments alone were not enough to stop the government. The fact was that the end of the miners and the NUM *was* inevitable if the union did not mount an effective challenge to the Tories and the vagaries of the capitalist system they worshipped.

'Inevitablism' actually played an important role for those who espoused new realism by diverting attention from the inadequacies of their strategy. The new realists were so mesmerised with the successes of Margaret Thatcher's governments that they took up much of Tory thinking. 'Thatcherism', it was claimed, was symbolic of a society that had changed beyond recognition, towards a 'postmodern', 'post-industrial' order. There was now growing prosperity, marked by a declining working class and a growing white-collar middle class, with a shift away from old collectivist attitudes towards a new individualistic consumerism.¹²

Now it cannot be denied that the working class has changed since the Second World War, especially with the shift away from manufacturing towards the service sector. But the reality is that the working class has constantly changed since the beginning of the industrial revolution.¹³ Indeed, the popular image of miners as the 'archetypal proletarians', still living in close-knit communities made up of row upon row of grubby terraced houses where back doors were always open, with an enthusiasm for racing pigeons and brass band music, was as false for miners as it was for most other working people by the latter decades of the twentieth century. It was no longer the case, as the authors of *Coal is Our Life* had noted of Featherstone in the 1950s, that 'The pollution of the air is such as to reduce clothes, houses, and streets to a drab uniformity.'¹⁴ Coalminers resident in South Elmsall or South Kirkby were just as likely to live in semi-detached houses or bungalows as in a terraced street. More than that, miners experienced all the cosmopolitan trappings of life under modern capitalism. Among other things, they drove cars, went on foreign holidays, listened to rock music, watched world events on colour television and wrote their agitational leaflets using personal computers. Young miners on the picket lines, in their T-shirts, trainers and jeans, looked no different from their contemporaries anywhere on the planet.

These features were already much in evidence prior to the 1984-85 strike, indeed were often said to be bringing an end to class consciousness and struggle in the pits, shown by the three ballots opposing action. The following is how Andrew Taylor summed up the miners' standing at that time:

In the last ten years the workforce has become younger and substantial numbers of miners have no direct experience of the struggles of the early 1970s . . . The ecology of the mining communities has been disrupted: for example, pit closures

¹¹ A. Scargill, 'Resist pit closures', *The Miner*, October 1992.

¹² C. Leadbeater, 'How have-nots can share in working class triumphalism', *New Statesman*, 21 August 1987.

¹³ L. German, *A Question of Class*, (London, 1996), pp.22-28.

¹⁴ Dennis et al, *Coal is Our Life*, p.12.

mean that many miners travel considerable distances to work, technological change at the point of production has weakened or broken up the cohesive work-teams, and the erosion of the coalfields' relative geographical and social isolation has weakened the reinforcing cycle of pit, community and union. The miners have been subject to those forces which have eroded the traditional basis of working class politics and culture.¹⁵

And these doubts about the miners' willingness to fight, we need to remember, were expressed on the eve of the longest mass-strike in British history!

Now if all the theorising about a post-industrial society had been limited to an academic debate it would probably have had little impact on events. But because many in the trade union bureaucracy were influenced by such views, new realism often paralysed trade union effectiveness. Firstly, as with Andrew Taylor above, they argued that workers were not willing to fight any more, that industrial confrontation and conflict were things of the past. It was emphasised that the new role of unions should be to provide members with services such as credit cards, personal pensions, insurance, mortgages, legal advice and skill training.¹⁶ And secondly, when workers did actually fight back they were told that the forces stacked against them were so great they could not win, that the way forward was to attain influence through winning public opinion and do nothing that would upset potential supporters.

Behind this strategy lay the belief that Britain is a democratic society, that the government and the employers are obliged to bow to the will of the people. But this is an illusion. The reality is that as with every other capitalist country, real power is concentrated in the hands of big business and the state machine. These institutions are not in the least democratic, and have proven time and again that they will defy widespread public support for industrial disputes. Failure to recognise this meant that when disputes arose, by not adopting the tried and tested methods of combating their employers, by being passive, by not mobilising people for action, unions did not win. Of course, by not winning workers then frequently accepted the argument that defeat was inevitable in the face of 'market forces'. And this was as true for other 'industrial dinosaurs' such as the printworkers and the dockers as it was the miners.

But by the time of the final pit-closure programme, all the theorising about the strengths of Thatcherism that had plagued the labour movement for so long were being stretched to absurdity. The demise of Thatcher belied the myth that her governments had the majority support of the people of Britain, indeed the rise of John Major to the leadership of the Conservative Party owed everything to how he was able to present himself as being a 'caring' alternative to Margaret Thatcher.¹⁷ In late 1992 Major's government was weak and divided. And so deep was the mood that emerged against the Tories over their plans for the miners that, though Major's administration would cling to office for the rest of its term, they would be obliterated at the polls in the general election of May 1997. But the greatest tragedy for the

¹⁵ Taylor, *The Politics of the Yorkshire Miners*, p.290.

¹⁶ P. Bassett, 'All together now', *Marxism Today*, January 1989; W. McCarthy, 'Trade unionism in the nineties', in *Towards 2000*, TUC discussion document, 1991.

¹⁷ Jones, *Politics UK*, p.397.

miners is that but for the restraint of the new realists, the tide of anger against the Tories could have swept the government aside much earlier and thus saved the coal industry. The utter feebleness and defeatism of new realism was so entrenched that it could be taken to astonishing lengths. When, after almost six months of inaction against the closure programme, the NUM leadership finally decided to initiate token one-day strikes in April 1993, even then this was too much for the Scottish NUM vice-president. 'The days of bringing down governments are gone, but Arthur's about 20 years behind the times,' he complained.¹⁸

But the advent of new realism has only been part of the Frickley story. What this study has shown is that new realist ideas did not go unchallenged; further, we had a glimpse of what can happen when rank-and-file workers take the initiative. The experience of the Big Strike had transformed the lives of a generation of young miners. A minority, as at Frickley, had been radicalised by their involvement and continued their fight on a scale barely imaginable after such a crushing defeat. Above all else, it was their defiance that stopped the onslaught on terms and conditions from becoming a rout. It was over five years after the 1984-85 strike before the coal bosses could begin to get the upper hand at Frickley. But it was a resistance with which the leadership of the NUM, both national and Area, never identified, and certainly never encouraged, as a means to recover lost ground. Even Arthur Scargill, who for much of the time was one of new realism's fiercest critics, concentrated his efforts solely on initiatives from above within the organisation, on unpopular set-piece confrontations, rather than backing the resistance at pit level. Only when we take this into account can we fully understand the widespread demoralisation that existed amongst the union's pit-level activists, and their subsequent inability to mount a sustained challenge against a weak and divided government during the final coal crisis.

And yet while the demise of mining marked the end of an era in British trade union history, the methods that militant miners made popular have not come to an end. The miners actions only seemed like the last scream of a dying proletariat if a narrow view of what constitutes the working class is held. Despite Britain losing its manufacturing base, there are still as many as 8 million trade unionists in the country. And despite the lowest levels of industrial unrest on record, the late 1980s into the 1990s witnessed confrontations involving such groups as teachers, health workers, college lecturers, bank staff and civil servants. As the following extract from a study of banking and finance workers shows, walkouts and flying pickets remain far from exclusive to coal mining:

Barclays BIFU computer workers took industrial action for 7 weeks in 1991 after a large vote for action over pay, and attempts to split up national pay negotiations and introduce performance related pay (PRP). This involved no overtime work, no on-call work, selected walkouts and picketing. The dispute escalated when management suspended some workers for carrying out a work to rule. Some 500 computer workers walked out from Nantwich and Northampton, sending flying pickets to three centres closing down the Manchester computer centre.¹⁹

¹⁸ Cited in Richards, *op. cit.*, p.214.

¹⁹ G. Gall, 'Industrial relations in UK clearing banks', *New Technology, Work and*

Such workers have the potential to become the miners of the future, being able to inflict massive losses on their employers when they strike. Future historians may well collect their oral testimonies. These groups may reside in suburban districts and perceive themselves as 'middle class', but the nature of the capitalist system and its drive for profits has meant that conditions they had taken for granted in the past have come under attack, and they too have had to combat speed-ups, job cuts and difficulties over pay. Service sector workers may not get their hands dirty in the manner of traditional manual workers, but often their work is distinctly manual, repetitive and unpleasant.²⁰ These factors will help to ensure the continuation of a combative tradition within the trade union movement, a tradition added to and exemplified by the miners at Frickley Colliery, and which the present study has hopefully gone some way to illuminate. Major confrontations lie ahead, but the conclusions might be different next time around.

Employment, Vol.8, No.1, 1993, p.68.

²⁰ H. Beynon, 'The end of the industrial worker?', in N. Abercrombie and A. Warde (eds), *Social Change in Contemporary Britain*, (Cambridge, 1992), p.180; C. Harman, 'The working class after the recession', in A. Callinicos and C. Harman, *The Changing Working Class*, (London, 1987).

APPENDIX: THE FRICKLEY ACTIVISTS INTERVIEWED

VIC FRANCE was born on 2 May 1945. He worked at Frickley Colliery from 1970 until 1989 as an electrician. He was a Labour Party and NUM activist. The interview was held in South Elmsall on 8 November 1996.

STEVE GANT was born on 2 October 1955. He started work at Frickley Colliery in October 1972 and worked at the pit until January 1993. He was on the NUM branch committee as the Cudworth seam representative from 1985 onwards. The interview was held in South Elmsall on 20 and 26 September 1996.

LAWRENCE GERTIG was born on 7 April 1954. He worked at Frickley Colliery from the mid-1970s until just before the pit closed in 1993. He was an underground fitter. He was elected as the craftsmen's representative on the colliery's consultative committee after the 1984-85 strike. The interview was held in South Elmsall on 7 December 1995.

JEFF JOHNSON was born on 4 March 1956. He started work at Askern Colliery in 1974, moved to Frickley Colliery in 1975 and worked at the pit until its closure. He was on the Frickley NUM branch committee from 1987 onwards. The interview was held in South Kirkby on 5 September 1995.

GARY HINCHLIFFE was born on 22 February 1958. He started work at Frickley Colliery in February 1979 and finished when the pit closed. He was a NUM branch committee member from the late 1980s onwards. The interview was held in South Elmsall and South Kirkby on 11, 17, 26 November and 3 December 1995.

GARY HURST was born on 22 October 1958. He worked at Frickley Colliery from March 1975 until the pit closed. He was the NUM craftsmen's representative at Frickley from 1987 onwards. The interview was held in South Elmsall on 10 and 17 October 1995.

GARY HUTSBY was born on 5 July 1966. He started work at Frickley Colliery in January 1982 and worked there until the pit closed. The interview was held in South Elmsall on 20 and 21 November, and 18 December 1996.

ROBERT KING was born in September 1958. He started working at Frickley Colliery in 1988 and worked there as an electrician until the pit closed. He had previously worked at South Kirkby Colliery, and briefly at Askern. The interview was held in Moorthorpe on 13 December 1996.

IAN OXLEY was born on 20 March 1945. He started work at Frickley Colliery in September 1962 and worked at the pit until it closed. He was a branch committee member for a short period in the early 1980s and elected again after the 1984-85 strike, and held the post until the pit closed. The interview was held in South Elmsall on 6, 10, 11, 13 and 17 October 1995.

JOHN 'CHICK' PICKEN was born on 9 January 1941. He started work at Frickley Colliery on his 15th birthday and worked at the pit until its closure. He was an NUM committee man from June 1982 until 1987 when he was elected Frickley NUM branch president. The interview was held in South Elmsall on 28 and 29 September 1995.

RAY RILEY was born on 11 November 1958. He started work at Frickley Colliery in November 1979 and finished at the pit in August 1989. The interview was held in South Elmsall on 21 September and 3 October 1995.

TONY SHORT was born on 6 August 1961. He started work at Frickley Colliery in June 1979 and worked at the pit until November 1992. He was an NUM branch committee member from 1985 onwards. The interview was held in South Kirkby on 16 and 17 October 1996.

JOHNNY STONES was born on 28 July 1937. He started work at Frickley Colliery on 28 August 1954 and worked at the pit until its closure. He was Frickley NUM branch delegate from 1964 onwards. The interview was held in South Elmsall on 12, 13 and 14 September 1995.

PAUL 'JIP' SYMONDS was born on 30 June 1955. He started work at Frickley Colliery in December 1974 and worked there until the pit closed. He was an NUM branch committee member after the strike. The interview was held in South Elmsall and Sheffield on 31 March and 25 November 1996, and 2 February 1997.

ROBERT 'BOPPER' WALKER, was born on 13 February 1961. He worked as a collier at Frickley Colliery from 1977 to 1993. The interview was held in South Elmsall on 21 November 1995.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Newspapers and periodicals

Coal News
Doncaster Star.
Employment Gazette.
Financial Times.
Frickley Newsletter.
Hemsworth and South Elmsall Express.
Labour Briefing.
Labour Research
Marxism Today.
New Society
New Statesman
Northern Star.
Socialist Worker.
South Yorkshire Times (South Elmsall and Hemsworth edition).
Pitwatch
The Economist.
The Guardian.
The Miner
The Times.
Voice of Frickley.
Yorkshire Evening Post.
Yorkshire Miner.
Yorkshire Post.

Books, theses and articles

Adeney, M. and Lloyd, J. *The Miners' Strike 1984-5, Loss Without Limit*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1986).
Allen, V. *The Militancy of the British Miners*, (The Moor Press, Shipley, 1981).
Ashworth, W. *The History of the British Coal Industry. Volume 5, 1946-82: The Nationalised Industry*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986).
Aston, B., Morris, T. and Willman, P. 'Still balancing the books: the NUM and the 1984-85 strike', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol.21, No.3, Autumn 1990.
Bassett, P. *Strike Free: New Industrial Relations in Britain*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1987).
Bassett, P. 'All together now', *Marxism Today*, January 1989.
Baylies, C. *The History of the Yorkshire Miners 1881-1918*, (Routledge, London, 1993).
Beecham, D. 'How far has shop-floor organisation been weakened?', *International Socialism Journal*, No.23, 1984.
Bentley, R., Dobson, A., Grant, M. and Roberts, D. *British Politics in Focus*, (Causeway Press, Ormskirk, 1995).
Beynon, H. *Working for Ford*, (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973).
Beynon, H. 'The end of the industrial worker?', in Abercrombie, N. and Warde, A. (eds), *Social Change in Contemporary Britain*, (Polity, Cambridge, 1992).
Burton, A. *The Miners*, (Deutsch, London, 1976).

Bibliography

- Callinicos, A. and Simons, M. *The Great Strike*, (Socialist Worker, London, 1985).
- Callinicos, A. *Socialists in the Trade Unions*, (Bookmarks, London, 1995).
- Carson, I. 'Coal: the new trouble in store for Thatcher', *The Times*, 15 March 1986.
- Cliff, T. 'Patterns of mass strikes', *International Socialism Journal*, No.29, 1985.
- Cliff, T. and Gluckstein, D. *Marxism and the Trade Union Struggle: The General Strike of 1926*, (Bookmarks, London, 1986).
- Coates, K., Paterson, L., Reeves, M. and Taylor, S. 'The young ones: they have woken a sleeping tiger', in Armthorpe NUM, *The Kane Story* (Armthorpe NUM, Doncaster, 1994).
- Crick, M. *Scargill and the Miners*, (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985).
- Croxall, B. and Roberts, L. *Contemporary British Politics*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1994).
- Davies, G. and Metcalf, D. *Pit Closures*, (London Weekend Television, London, 1984).
- Dennis, N., Henriques, F. and Slaughter, C. *Coal is Our Life*, (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1956).
- Dorey, P. *The Conservative Party and the Trade Unions*, (Routledge, London, 1995).
- Douglass, D. *Pit Life in County Durham: Rank and File Movements and Workers' Control*, History Workshop pamphlet No.6, 1972.
- Douglass, D. 'The Durham Pitman', in Samuel, R. (ed.) *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1977).
- Douglass, D. 'The Doncaster Panel, 1969-84', in Samuel, R., Bloomfield, B. and Boanas, G. (eds), *The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1986).
- Douglass, D. 'Letter from Yorkshire, March 1986', in Samuel, et al., *The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1986).
- Douglass, D. *Pit Sense Versus the State: A History of Militant Miners in the Doncaster Area*, (Phoenix Press, London, 1994).
- East, R., Power, H. and Thomas, P. 'The death of mass picketing', *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol.12, No.3, Winter 1985.
- Edwards, C. and Heery, E. 'The incorporation of workplace trade unionism? Some evidence from the mining industry', *Sociology*, Vol.19, No.3, August 1985.
- Edwards, C. and Heery, E. *Management Control and Union Power: A Study of Labour Relations in Coal-Mining*, (Clarendon, Oxford, 1989).
- Foot, P. 'Battle for the NUM', *Socialist Review*, January 1988.
- Foot, P. *Words as Weapons*, (Verso, London, 1990).
- Francis, H. 'NUM United: a team in disarray', *Marxism Today*, April 1985.
- Francis, H. 'The law, oral tradition and the mining community', *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol.12, No.3, 1985.
- Frickley NUM pamphlet, *Commemorative Concert to Honour Our Women for the Role They Played in Our Historic Struggle*, (Frickley NUM, South Elmsall, March 1986).
- Gall, G. 'Industrial relations in UK clearing banks', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol.8, No.1, 1993.
- German, L. *A Question of Class*, (Bookmarks, London, 1996).

Bibliography

- Gibbon, P. 'The miners' strike of 1984-5', *Economy and Society*, Vol.17, No.2, 1988.
- Gibbon, P. and Bromley, R. "From an institution to a business"? Changes in the British coal industry 1985-9', *Economy and Society*, Vol.19, No.1, 1990.
- Gibbon, P. and Steyne, D. *Thurcroft: A Village and the Miners' Strike*, (Spokesman, Nottingham, 1986).
- Giddens, A. *Sociology*, (Polity, Cambridge, 1989).
- Gilbert, D. 'Imagined communities and mining communities', *Labour History Review*, Vol.60, No.2, Autumn 1995.
- Glyn, A. *The Economic Case Against Pit Closures*, (National Union of Mineworkers, Sheffield, 1984).
- Glyn, A. 'Planning for chaos', *Pitwatch*, No.3, December 1985/January 1986.
- Goodman, G. *The Miners' Strike*, (Pluto, London, 1985).
- Gospel, H. F. and Palmer, G. *British Industrial Relations*, (Allen and Unwin, London, 1993).
- Griffin, A. R. *The Miners of Nottinghamshire, 1914-1944*, (Allen and Unwin, London, 1962).
- Griffiths, L., Lewis, B. and Schuhle, R. (eds) *Privy to Privatisation*, (Yorkshire Arts Circus, Castleford, 1988).
- Hanson, C. G. *Taming the Trade Unions*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1991).
- Haralambos, M. and Holborn, M. *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, third edition, (Unwin Hyman, London, 1990).
- Harman, C. '1984 and the shape of things to come', *International Socialism Journal*, No.29, 1985.
- Harman, C. 'The working class after the recession', in Callinicos, A. and Harman, C. *The Changing Working Class*, (Bookmarks, London, 1987).
- Harman, C. *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After*, (Bookmarks, London, 1988).
- Helm, D. 'Energy policy and market doctrine', *Political Quarterly*, Vol.64, No.4, October/December 1993.
- Hillyard, P. and Percy-Smith, J. 'Miner offences that cry out for an amnesty', *The Guardian*, 18 March 1985.
- Huddle, R., Philips, A., Simons, M. and Sturrock, J. *Blood Sweat and Tears: Photographs from the Great Miners' Strike 1984-1985*, (Artworker Books, London, 1985).
- Humphries, S. *The Handbook of Oral History: Recording Life Stories*, (Interaction Trust, London, 1984).
- Hyman, R. *Strikes*, (Fontana, Aylesbury, 1984).
- Jackson, B. and Wardle, T. *The Battle for Orgreave*, (Canary Press, London, 1986).
- Jones, B. (ed.) *Politics UK*, (Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1994).
- Jones, M. *Killed on the Picket Line: The Story of David Gareth Jones*, (New Park, London, 1985).
- Kelly, J. and Heery, E. *Working for the Union: British Trade Union Officers*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994).
- Kerr, C. and Siegel, A. 'The interindustry propensity to strike - an international comparison', in Kornhauser, A. Dubin, R. and Ross, A. M. (eds), *Industrial Conflict*, (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1954).
- Lane, T. and Roberts, K. *Strike at Pilkingtons*, (Fontana, London, 1971).
- Lawson, N. *The View From No. 11*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1992).

Bibliography

- Leadbeater, C. 'How have-nots can share in working class triumphalism', *New Statesman*, 21 August 1987.
- Leman, S. and Winterton, J. 'New technology and the restructuring of pit-level industrial relations in the coal industry', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol.6, No.1, 1991.
- Lloyd, C. 'A national police force', in Fine, B. and Millar, R. (eds), *Policing the Miners' Strike*, (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1985).
- Lloyd, J. *Understanding the Miners' Strike*, (Fabian Society, London, 1985).
- Lummis, T. *Listening to History*, (Hutchinson, London, 1985).
- MacFarlane, J. (ed.) *Essays from the Yorkshire Coalfield*, (Vavator, Sheffield, 1979).
- MacGregor, I. *The Enemies Within*, (Collins, London, 1986).
- MacGregor, I. '1985-6 a year of progress', *Coal News*, August 1986.
- Marsh, D. *The New Politics of British Trade Unionism*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1992).
- McCabe, S., Wallington, P., Alderson, J., Gostin, L. and Mason, C. *The Police, Public Order, and Civil Liberties: Legacies of the Miners' Strike*, (Routledge, London, 1988).
- McCarthy, W. 'Trade unionism in the nineties', in *Towards 2000*, TUC discussion document, 1991.
- McIlroy, J. *Trade Unions in Britain Today*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988 and 1995).
- McNeill, P. *Research Methods*, (Routledge, London, 1990).
- Michels, R. *Political Parties*, (The Free Press, Glencoe, 1949).
- Milne, S. *The Enemy Within: MI5, Maxwell and the Scargill Affair*, (Verso, London, 1994).
- National Union of Mineworkers, *A Century of Struggle: Britain's Miners in Pictures 1889-1989*, (National Union of Mineworkers, Sheffield, 1989).
- Parker, M. and Surrey, J. 'The October 1992 coal crisis and UK energy policy', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.64, No.4, October/December 1993.
- Parkinson, C. *Right at the Centre*, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1992).
- Percy-Smith and Hillyard, P. 'Miners in the arms of the law: a statistical analysis', *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol.12, No.3, Winter 1985.
- Pitt, M. *The World on Our Backs*, (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1979).
- Powell, D. *The Power Game: The Struggle for Coal*, (Duckworth, London, 1993).
- Richardson, R. and Wood, S. 'Productivity change in the coal industry and the new industrial relations', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol.27, No.1, March 1989.
- Richards, A. J. *Miners on Strike: Class Solidarity and Division in Britain* (Berg, Oxford, 1996).
- Roberts, R. 'The Big Strike', in MacFarlane, J. (ed.) *Essays from the Yorkshire Coalfield*, (Vavator, Sheffield, 1979).
- Robinson, B. 'How large a coal industry?' *Economic Outlook*, December 1984.
- Routledge, P. *Scargill: The Unauthorized Biography*, (Harper Collins, London, 1994).
- Rusiecki, P. *The Plough and the Pick: The Industrial Transformation of Two Yorkshire Villages*, (Wakefield Metropolitan District Libraries, Wakefield, 1986).

- Samuel, R., Bloomfield, B. and Boanas, G. (eds), *The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1986).
- Samuel, R. 'Foreword', in Douglass, D. *Pit Life in County Durham: Rank and File Movements and Workers' Control*, History Workshop pamphlet No.6, 1972.
- Saundry, R. A. 'The impact of economic restructuring upon industrial relations in the coalmining industry', (MA dissertation, University of Leeds, 1988).
- Scargill, A. 'Resist pit closures', *The Miner*, October 1992.
- Scargill, A. 'History distorted', *Socialist Review*, February 1994.
- Seddon, V. (ed.) *The Cutting Edge: Women and the Pit Strike*, (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1986).
- Simons, M. 'The enemy within?', *Socialist Review*, October 1986.
- Simons, M. 'A battle undermined', *Socialist Review*, December 1993.
- Stead, J. *Never the Same Again: Women and the Miners' Strike 1984-85*, (The Women's Press, London, 1987).
- Taylor, A. J. *The Politics of the Yorkshire Miners*, (Croom Helm, Beckenham, 1984).
- Taylor, A. J. 'Consultation, conciliation and politics in the British coal industry', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol.19, No.3, Autumn 1988.
- Taylor, A. J. *Trade Unions and Politics*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989).
- Taylor, A. J. 'Militancy is not enough', *Labour History Review*, Vol.55, No.3, Winter 1990.
- Taylor, R. *The Trade Union Question in British Politics*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1993).
- Thomas, D. 'Paying the price of coal', *New Society*, 12 July 1985.
- Threlkeld, J. *Pits: A Pictorial Record of Mining*, (Wharncliffe Publishing, Barnsley, 1994).
- Towers, B. 'Posing larger questions: the miners' strike of 1984-85', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol.16, No.2, Summer 1985.
- TUC Conference Report*, 1993.
- Undy, R. and Martin, R. *Ballots and Trade Union Democracy*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1984).
- Urry, J. 'The end of organised capitalism', in Hall, S. and Jacques, M. (eds), *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1989).
- Waddington, D., Wykes, M. and Critcher, C. *Split at the Seams?* (Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1990).
- Wade, E. 'The miners and the media: themes of newspaper reporting', *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol.12, No.3,
- Walden, N. 'Energy Policy', in Catterall, P. (ed.) *Contemporary Britain*, (Institute of Contemporary British History, London, 1994).
- Walker, M. and Millar, S. *A State of Siege*, (Yorkshire Area NUM and Greenwich NALGO, London, 1984).
- Wakefield Metropolitan District Council Planning Department, *Elmsall District Plan*, (Wakefield, 1977).
- Warwick, D. and Littlejohn, G. *Coal, Capital and Culture: A Sociological Analysis of Mining Communities in West Yorkshire*, (Routledge, London, 1992).
- Watson, D. *Managers of Discontent: Trade Union Officers and Industrial Relations Managers*, (Routledge, London, 1988).
- Watters, F. *Being Frank*, (Armthorpe NUM, Doncaster, 1992).

Bibliography

- Webb, S. and Webb, B. *A History of Trade Unionism*, (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1920).
- Wilkinson, A. *A History of South Kirkby*, (Wakefield Metropolitan District Libraries, Wakefield, 1979).
- Wilsher, P., Macintyre, D. and Jones, M. *Strike: Thatcher, Scargill and the Miners*, (Coronet, London, 1985).
- Winterton, J. 'The demise of collective bargaining in the British coal mining industry', in O. Kourchid and R. Temple (eds), *Cent Ans de Conventions Collectives: Arras 1891/1991*, (Revue du Nord, Lille, 1994).
- Winterton, J. and Winterton, R. *Coal, Crisis and Conflict: The 1984-85 Miners' Strike in Yorkshire*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989).