

## **Moving to a Green Economy?**

### **The Story of an “Unjust” Transition in the UK**

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#### **Introduction**

Coal played a central part in the discussions at the COP26 conference on climate change held in Glasgow in 2021. Here it was established as the most deadly of the carbon fuels with the future of the planet depending upon its eradication. This was a cause some concern for the leaders of China and India and also for some of the smaller economies strongly linked to the coal export trade, including Colombia and Australia. It was in this context that considerable thought was given to the need to carefully consider the transition from coal and the need for this to be done in a just manner. Prime Minister Johnson had contributed to this debate by asserting that the UK led the way in this regard. In his view Mrs Thatcher, in her defeat of the National Union of Mineworkers and the early closure of the industry that followed, had given Britain a head start in moving towards a green economy. This, however, was no recipe for others to follow. It was in fact the classic case of an *unjust* transition, which has had serious, and long-term deleterious effects upon the country’s economy and society. It shows others what not to do and, though obtusely, this negative exemplar provides elements for a more positive framework of future policy.

#### **The Decline of Coal**

The famous Labour Party politician Aneurin Bevan once described Britain as the “island built on coal”. In no other capitalist economy was coal mining so dominant or so vital to all aspects of economic and social life (Britain was virtually a single fuel economy until the middle of the 1950's). In 1920 the industry employed 1.92million workers and the Miners Federation of Great Britain was by far the largest association of miners in the world. This was the high point of an industry that became known as “King Coal”. Since then, it has been in decline, gradual at first – there were 700,000 miners when the industry was nationalised in 1947 – but then rapidly in

two extraordinary periods of contraction (Figure One). We discuss these fully in our book *The Shadow of the Mine*<sup>1</sup> .

***Insert Figure One here.***

The nationalisation of coal was a long-term aspiration of the miners' union and state ownership consolidated the presence of the newly established National Union of Mineworkers within the consultation and conciliation structures of the National Coal Board. From the beginning the union's deep commitment to the industry's success underpinned a highly cooperative relationship with management. However, this was put under strain when the availability of cheap oil from the Middle East saw governments pressing for a severe reduction in coal output. As a result, the numbers employed by the NCB reduced from 665.000 in 1959 to 290.000 in 1970. The fact that this took place in a period of economic boom and social change eased the many difficulties encountered by miners and their families. Many left, looking for opportunities in the new industries, some moved to the old coalfields by government directive. Redundancy payments were introduced by the new Labour government in 1964 which also eased the transition, as did support with the costs of moving, given to miners who wished to remain in the industry by working in another area. However, the overall policy framework was *de rigueur*, pushed forward by government at a faster pace than was wanted by the trade unions or the management of the industry. Undoubtedly its success owed much to the general macro-economic circumstances, and the positive sense of social change that encouraged many younger men to look for pastures new. Nevertheless, and in spite of all these positive aspects, these closures left their scars. It damaged belief in the progressive nature of nationalisation and paved the way for a new militancy within the NUM. It also affected the coal field areas disrupting the post-war pattern of full employment, especially in Wales and the North of England where unemployment levels rose and never fully recovered<sup>2</sup>. Generally, it left some feeling that they had been bullied and pushed too far. As one old miner in Durham explained when asked in 1983 about his life: "Ay, there has been some progress; but it has been a devastating kind of progress".

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<sup>1</sup> Huw Beynon and Ray Hudson, *The Shadow of the Mine: Coal and the End of Industrial Britain*. London, Verso, 2021

<sup>2</sup> MacKay R and Davies R. (2012), 'Collective Learning, Effective Demand, Loss of Work and Loss of Direction: The Growing Regional Divide within the UK' *Regional Studies*, 46(7) 859-871

However, the second transition in the eighties and nineties was to be even more devastating. It saw a highly mechanised, capital-intensive industry, employing 236,900 workers in 1980 reduced in twenty years to a rump of large mines in an industry employing 10, 939. The NUM had opposed the closure of mines on economic grounds and this led to a year-long strike conducted across most (but not all) of its Areas in 1984-5, The strike was defeated and when the miners returned to work, they were to experience a new and harsh regime of discipline knowing that 966 of them were left outside the gates having been sacked during the strike. Rapid mine closures followed, alongside the privatisation of the electricity generating industry, the main market for coal. The privatisation of the sixteen remaining deep mines followed in 1993 and even then mines continued to close, eventually leaving Drax in North Yorkshire as the last of the British deep mines. The mine delivered coal to the large *local* electricity generating plant which continued to operate after the mine was closed in 2015 with coal *imported* from Russian mines. Clearly, the policy was not to move away from coal, but away from coal specifically produced in deep ,mines in Britain,. As these mines were closed, Britain became willingly dependent upon imports from other coal producing regions around the world.

### **The Closure Process**

While on strike the miners had been repeatedly assured that the claims by the NUM with regard to large numbers of mine closures were untrue..<sup>3</sup> The subsequent speed of mine closures after the end of the strike was confirmation for the miners that the NUM had been right all along, creating a renewed sense of severe injustice. The fact that the closures were extended to the loyalist areas of the Midlands, where the strike had been resisted, amplified the view that those in power could not be trusted.

During the 60s we have seen how many of those miners who left the industry did so of their own accord. Reacting to the new closures, the government argued that none of these redundancies were compulsory either. However, there was a considerable amount of coercion involved. Sometimes this was very subtle, at other times quite brutal. As closures were

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<sup>3</sup> This turned out to be a lie and this was subsequently confirmed when Cabinet minutes were published Phillips, J. (2014) ‘Containing, Isolating and Defeating the Miners: The UK Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal and the Three Phases of the 1984–5 Strike’ *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 117-141.

announced miners were made aware of enhanced redundancy payments available to them within a limited timescale on condition that the mine closed. The supposed conditionality of these payments created fear amongst miners, often leading to divisions within the workforce. In the early phases the management also had powers in relation to the choice of alternative employment in other coal mines, and since some mines were seen as better than others as workplaces this was an additional form of pressure. So successful was this strategy in persuading miners to accept the closure of mines that government ministers felt able to divert criticism with the suggestion that the closures were actually *welcomed* by the miners. This was refuted by Robin Cook for the Labour Party in this way: “. It is a grotesque travesty of the language to say that any of them have taken voluntary redundancy. Let us at least give them the dignity of recognising what the Government forced on them-- compulsory redundancy in all but name<sup>4</sup>“

### **The New Future**

In the 60s there had been ideas of progress and of new kinds of futures, new and better ways of living as well as working, but these thoughts had become calcified by the middle 80s, when in sharp contrast the emphasis was solely on the market as the arbiter of individual and collective fates. Government policies both reflected and reinforced this shift. The social issues raised by the closures of the mines were seen to be resolved by payments to individual redundant miners, along with some support built around the idea of entrepreneurship and a strong sense that the levels of unemployment would be resolved through market forces<sup>5</sup>. Although some re-training schemes were established, these were ad hoc, under-resourced with careful attention given to the particular needs of this labour force and the availability of suitable alternative work. In assessing this experience, surveys of miners in different areas came to similar conclusions<sup>6</sup>. While looking for work, miners were generally disillusioned with the schemes, feeling that they were being treated as numbers and feeling that the work that was available to them was underpaid and unrewarding. Those who did manage to find employment were generally paid 30% less than they had been paid in the mine and many said that with their

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<sup>4</sup> Cook, R. (1993) House of Commons Debate, 5 July *HC Debate* Cols. 36-37

<sup>5</sup> Rees, G. and M. Thomas (1991), ‘From Coal Miners to Entrepreneurs? A Case study in the Sociology of Re-industrialisation’, in M. Cross and G. Payne (eds), *Work and the Enterprise Culture* (Lewes, Falmer Press) pp. 57–75.

<sup>6</sup> Guy, G. (1994), *Dole Not Coal: The Labour Market Experience of Redundant Miners Since October 1992* (Barnsley, CCC, Coalfield Communities Campaign).

wife working full-time they were still worse off than when the mine had been open. All the miners over the age of 50 found it increasingly difficult to obtain any sort of work and became resigned to decades of inactivity, relying on welfare payments. More generally men felt that they had left an industry that served an important social purpose in producing energy for employment in jobs that were underpaid and seemed less worthwhile. Moreover, people generally came to lose any sense that their children could live better lives than they had.

This weakening of the ties to work that followed the closure of the mines was also associated with a decline in the social life of the community<sup>7</sup>. These once stable places built around strong kinship networks became dislocated. Young people left and schoolchildren increasingly found it difficult to establish a pathway for themselves within the community through education. There was increasing tension between the generations and also within households leading to an increase in divorce rates and the rise in cohabitation outside marriage. These changes were linked to the growth of a variety of mental health problems, both among older ex-miners unable to come to terms with life without the mine and younger people who could see no future in the coalfields, often resorting to taking drugs as a result. One doctor in South Shields in the North East of England explained that all of his patients suffered from the same problem. Her called in SLS – Shit Life Syndrome, poor jobs, poor housing, poor transport, poor prospects.

### **Justice For Miners**

For decades the health problems suffered by miners as a result of working in the mines had been either ignored or systemically downplayed by the NCB and also, to a degree, by the NUM in its concern to maintain the industry. However, in the wake of the final mine closures these problems didn't go away and became a focus of concern in the coal field areas. Here, the NUM could no longer be recognised as a trade union and in Durham and elsewhere the local union reverted to its previous pre-war name. The reformed Durham Miners Association was registered as a charitable trust concerned with the welfare of ex-miners and successfully pursued compensation cases through the courts for occupationally specific illnesses and diseases. These compensation payments were important to individuals but also in aggregate in boosting spending power in communities.

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<sup>7</sup> Waddington, D., C. Critcher, B. Dicks and D. Parry (2001), *Out of the Ashes? The Social Impact of Industrial Contraction and Regeneration on Britain's Mining Communities* (London, H.M.S.O). Waddington, D., M. Wykes and C. Critcher (1991), *Split at the Seams? Community, Continuity and Change after the 1984–85 Coal Dispute* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press).

In the decades that followed the closures of the mines various organisations were also set up to “highlight the injustices which took place during and since the strike”<sup>8</sup> This focused on the behaviour of the police at the Orgreave coke works picket, the treatment of the Mineworkers Pension Fund and the future of the men who had been sacked with the consequential loss of employment rights and benefits for what were often trivial offences of obstruction or breach of the peace. The Select Committee on Employment had considered these to have been “summary dismissals” that should be reopened. The Scottish Area had been particularly severe in its approach, both in the numbers sacked and its refusal to reconsider the cases of these men. It was this, together with the failure of Westminster governments to intervene, that contributed to the rise in the support for the Scottish Nationalist Party which in 2001 passed an Act pardoning the affected Scottish miners.

## **Conclusion**

It is perhaps ironic that in contrast to Britain, in Germany from the 80s, with private ownership of the mines, mine closures were linked to a coherent policy of retraining and the provision of new jobs, often in environmental industries to clean up the effects of pollution from earlier mining. This was a policy grounded in discussion between trades unions, employers (principally Ruhrkohle AG) and governments and there are similar examples from the global south (Colombia, Ghana and Indonesia) where trade unions have also been involved in these processes, securing elements of a “just transition” from coal-based export economies to more socially-just sustainable and green economies.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, we have considered the way in which the closures of the British coal mines in the 80s and 90s was conducted and how it was seen by the mining communities as involving an *unjust transition* away from coal.

In many ways, the British case can be read as instructive for future policies in other areas experiencing a similar transition, recognising the acute problems posed by the important objective of moving towards a green economy. The reorientation of the economy, the securing of raw materials and the relocations of workers are certain to be something that cannot be left to market forces, requiring more direct state involvement. However there are important lessons to be learned – albeit belatedly - in seeking to construct a pathway towards a “just transition”, in this there seem to be a number of clear imperatives.

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<sup>8</sup> Bill Etherington, Introduction, *Justice: The Miners Strike 1984-85*. London, Verso, 1986

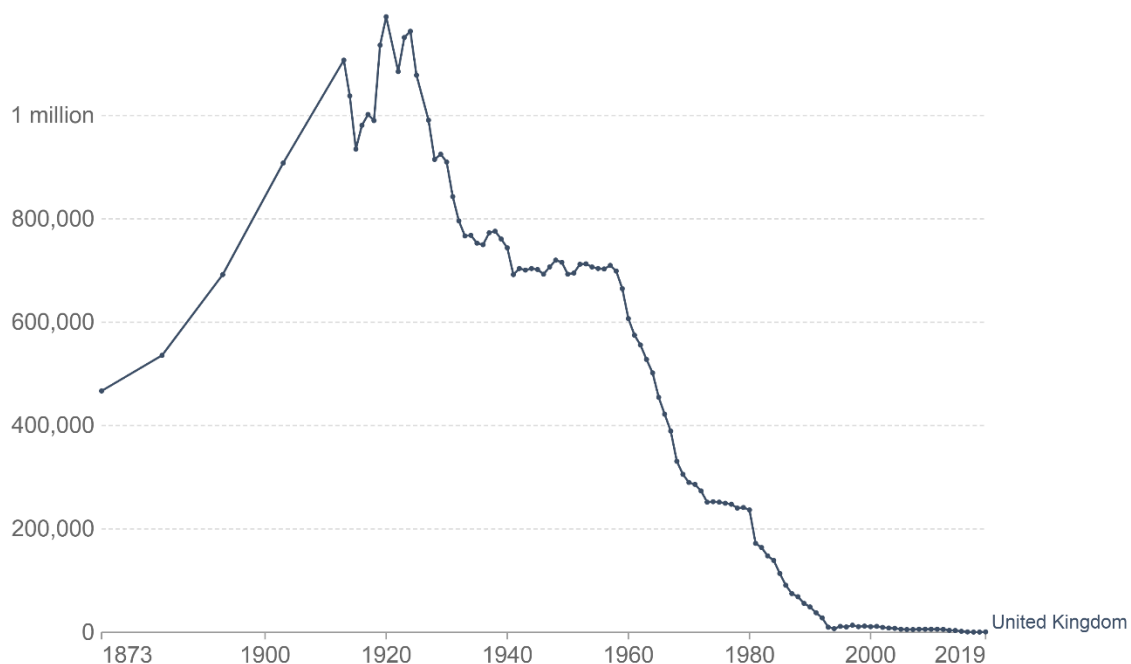
<sup>9</sup> Blachowicz A et al, 2021, *Just Transition for All: Ghana, Colombia and Indonesia* 47 pp Available at <https://climatestrategies.org>

Across the British coal fields the closure of the industry and the experience of miners and their families led to a strong distrust of the people in power and this added to the difficult processes of the transition. To avoid similar developments, the trade unions needs to be directly involved in programmes that establish clear and enabled pathways into new employment that would follow the closure of the mines; employment that would be beneficial to miners and their families. In the UK there was no government programme aimed at systematically retraining the affected workers or introducing employment opportunities appropriate to their needs. There is likely to be significant community dislocation following the mine closures and the trade unions should be involved in developing a coherent welfare policy, including social/family care and public health. Only in finding this better way forward can progress be made and the future of the planet secured.

**Figure One**

### Employment in the coal industry in the United Kingdom

Total number of individuals employed in the coal industry in the United Kingdom. Figures include those employed as contractors by the coal industry.



Source: UK Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS)

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