Arthur Scargill

In His Own Words

Socialist Labour Party

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Address to the Special Conference of the NUM

Fellow members, this Presidential Address has been completed within the last 24 hours, and obviously I have tried to take account of all the factors which have taken place in what can only be described as the most memorable and certainly the most important period in the history of this Union. This Extraordinary Annual Conference takes place during the eighteenth week of the most bitter dispute seen in the mining industry since 1926 -a strike sparked off by the Coal Board's announcement on March 6th that it intended to close 20 pits and destroy 20,000 jobs over the coming year alone, as part of what Ian MacGregor termed "bringing supply into line with demand".

It was obvious that this decision marked the beginning of the pit closure programme announced by the Coal Board Chairman at a Consultative Council meeting over a year ago. On June 14th, 1983 he declared it was the Board's intention to take 25 million tonnes of capacity out of the industry with the advent of the Selby coalfield. Translated into flesh and blood terms, this meant over 70 pit closures and 70,000 job losses. By the time the Union presented its claim for wages in 1983, it had become clear that the Board's intention was to run down the industry, getting rid of what it termed "uneconomic capacity". This programme for butchering coal was strikingly similar to the industrial vandalism inflicted on the British steel industry, where Ian MacGregor wiped out over 100,000 jobs, and, earlier, at British Leyland, where (in collaboration with Sir Michael Edwardes) he destroyed a similar number of jobs.

The policy now openly pursued by the National Coal Board utterly violates the Plan For Coal, agreed between Government, Coal Board and mining Unions in 1974, reaffirmed in 1977 and, more significantly, accepted by the present Government in 1979 and as recently as 1981. Delegates will not need reminding that our Union has consistently pledged itself to fight against pit closures and reductions in manpower levels, while at the same time demanding decent wages and conditions for British miners.

We do not need reminding of what took place in the 1960s when, in an era of what can only be described as collaboration, the Union acquiesced to a policy of mass destruction of jobs, pits and mining communities. We vowed that never again would we stand by and witness such vandalism – never again would we sit back and watch our people turned into industrial gypsies, wandering from coalfield to coalfield, from pit to pit, searching for work: victims of the narrow, balance-sheet mentality of both Coal Board and Government.

Today, the devastation threatening our communities is dramatically and tragically compounded by the destructive monetarist policies which this Government has unleashed. With over four-and-a-half million unemployed people, Britain's industrial base crippled by lack of investment, and the nation's social services network being torn to shreds, there is a climate of helplessness, hopelessness and outright despair. It

is our responsibility as trade unionists to fight that despair and oppose the policies which created it.

When I was elected President of this Union, by over 70 per cent of the votes cast, I was elected on a programme of total opposition to pit closures and reductions in manpower – a programme demanding better wages and conditions, aimed at restoring the wages of miners to at least the level approved by Parliament itself following the dispute in 1974.

Against this background of the last few years, the Coal Board announcement on March 6th, and its decision to close Polmaise and Cortonwood as part of the programme, the Union decided to approve strike action in the coalfields under Rule 41. This decision, taken within the Rules and Constitution of our Union was in fact a reaffirmation of unanimous decisions taken by successive Annual Conferences, both on the issue of pit closures and on the demand for better wages and conditions.

From the start of this dispute – in fact, from the day our overtime ban began last November-there has been a lot of talk, particularly from the media, about democracy. I have noted with interest that those who are most vociferous in attacking our Union, telling it what it should and should not do, are in fact the non-elected editors of newspapers, or non-elected judges. They include such public figures as Vice Chancellor Sir Robert Megarry, who is now openly trying to run the affairs of our organisation. I would hope that Conference rejects this blatant state interference in the affairs of an independent and democratic trade union. Indeed, what Sir Robert Megarry is trying to do is in violation of I.L.O. conventions, but his actions reveal clearly the level and weight of the state interference with miners in this dispute.

Through the police, the judiciary, the social security system – whichever way seems possible, the full weight of the state is being brought to bear upon us in an attempt to try and break this strike. I would further remind all those super-democrats and others both inside and outside our Union, that in 1977, following a National Conference decision and an individual ballot vote which rejected an incentive bonus pay agreement, there were Areas (Areas which in the current situation have called for a ballot before taking strike action) which on that occasion deliberately ignored a national ballot result. They went ahead and introduced into the coalfields an Area-based scheme which has led to deep and damaging divisions within our Union: a scheme which has set man against man, pit against pit, Area against Area.

Throughout the past eighteen weeks, with over 80 per cent of British miners out on strike fighting for the survival of our industry, our pits, jobs and communities, we have witnessed the sad sight of a small section of our members ignoring, or trying to ignore, the Union's fight for the future. I want to say to all those men who are still at work: no matter what arguments you put forward, you cannot ignore the most important and

precious trade union principle upon which the strength of our movement has been built. When workers are in dispute, you do not cross picket lines.

During the course of this strike, well over 4,000 of our members have been arrested. Nearly 2,000 have been injured – many of them very seriously. Two miners have been killed fighting for the right to work. Each of these facts alone should have convinced any trade unionist to stop work immediately -and give their support to policies for which our members have been prepared to give their lives. Miners on strike and their families are suffering intense hardship in this dispute, and I can only applaud their incredible determination and courage. Not only have they faced deprivation and hunger – they have found themselves in the front line facing the most massive assault on civil liberties and human rights ever launched against trade unionists in this country. On the picket lines, riot police in full battle gear, on horseback and on foot, accompanied by police dogs, have been unleashed in violent attacks upon our members.

We have seen in our communities and villages a level of police harassment and intimidation which organised British trade unionists have never before experienced. Preventing the right of people to move freely from one part of the country, or even county, to another; the calculated attacks upon striking miners in the streets of their villages; the oppressive conditions of bail under which it is hoped to silence, discourage and defeat us – all these tactics constitute outright violation of people's basic rights. It may well be that we will have to go before the European Court of Human Rights to challenge these flagrant acts of injustice. Against such a background I say without equivocation that not one miner should be going to work.

If the Nottinghamshire, South Derbyshire and Leicester Areas – regardless of whatever differences exist – had come out on strike along with their colleagues throughout the coalfields, this dispute would by now have been brought to a successful conclusion. I appeal to those who are still at work: search your conscience. No trade unionist can justify crossing an official picket line. No trade union official can condone or collude in such an action. Look instead at the reasons why your colleagues are out on strike. They are fighting for your future and that of your families as well as for their own.

Through the magnificent solidarity of our membership, this Union has proved that the National Coal Board (despite the public statements of Ian MacGregor) can be brought back to the negotiating table. For the first time over the past two years, we are involved in negotiations at which the Board can no longer treat us with contempt. In the course of this strike, the Coal Board has this far lost 36 million tonnes of production, with a further ten million lost during our overtime ban – a production loss valued at £2,100 million. Add to this the £30 million per week paid by the C.E.G.B., which has increased its oil burn from five to 27 per cent in an effort to defeat the miners' fight for jobs. On top of that is the enormous public cost of the police operations which have hi-jacked our people's civil liberties and human rights. It can

thus be seen that the taxpayers of Britain will have to bear the weight of more than £3,000 million for a dispute caused by Ian MacGregor and the National Coal Board.

Mr. MacGregor's appalling stewardship of our industry is even more incredible when we consider the costs of closing pits and making miners redundant. These costs are more than twice those required at present to keep pits open and communities intact. Negotiations with the Coal Board have over the past week alone involved the Union in a marathon 25 hours of talks aimed at seeking a solution which would maintain our industry and guarantee employment not only for our members today, but for our sons and daughters. Throughout this dispute, however, it has been clear that the Board's negotiators are manipulated in every move by the Prime Minister, who seems obsessed with trying to defeat the National Union of Mineworkers. MacGregor is reported to have said that, rather than settle this bitter and costly dispute which has already savaged our nation's economy, he would prefer to see the miners strike continue in order to try to defeat our Union. We will not be defeated.

The magnificent courage and determination of our people will see us through to victory. And, at this point, I want yet again to pay special tribute to two elements within our ranks which have provided a unique inspiration in our fight for the future. Throughout the strike, we have seen our young miners out on the picket lines, demonstrating a commitment to principle, and to people, which makes me proud to be President of this Union. We have also seen, in every mining village around the country, the birth and growth of women's support groups, displaying and inspiring a community solidarity the like of which we have never witnessed in any industry or any union, ever before. Their work and their campaigning has had its own special effect on the broader trade union movement, within which solid support for our strike grows day by day. Much of that support, of course, is historical and long-standing.

I can only pay the highest tribute to our colleagues in A.S.L.E.F. and the National Union of Railwaymen, whose solidarity has been nothing short of fantastic. To the members of the National Union of Seamen, which has from the very beginning of our strike put into practice the basic principles of trade unionism, and blocked each coal shipment coming into Britain, our Union expresses its deepest appreciation. We will not forget their support. The Transport and General Workers' Union has also been magnificent in backing us. The solidarity of the T.& G. shines triumphantly in the decision of the nation's dockers to take action against British Steel's blatant disregard of trade union rights.

In calling on all our colleagues throughout the trade union movement-including those working in steel, in the power stations and industry generally-to give physical support to our strike, I say: the best way to protect your own jobs and your families is to support the N.U.M.. By violating picket lines, you are supporting the management of British Steel and other key corporations which have combined with the Tory Government to destroy all our industries. They are the ones responsible for four-and-

a-half million unemployed people. There can be no compromise in our Union's principled opposition to the Coal Board's pit closure programme. Ours is a supremely noble aim: to defend pits, jobs, communities and the right to work.

We are now entering a crucial phase in our battle for the survival of this industry. For the first time since the strike began, even the pundits and the experts have started to admit that the pendulum is swinging in favour of the N.U.M.. Coal stocks have dropped dramatically; there are little more than 14 million tonnes at the power stations, and the situation in industry generally is becoming critical. As we move towards the autumn and the winter, even the most intransigent Tories must recognise that our negotiating position will improve, while that of the Coal Board, backed by the Government, will steadily deteriorate.
When I was elected President of the N.U.M. at the end of 1981, I promised that I would never betray the decisions of this Conference, the rights of our members, nor the principles enshrined in the history of our Union. At the same time, I said I believed that the leadership had the right to demand from the rank-and-file the same loyalty and commitment that the leadership was prepared to give. Over the past eighteen weeks I have witnessed in our rank-and-file a degree of loyalty and commitment that is almost unbelievable, and a dedication to principle among British miners which has roused admiration around the world. I have always felt proud and privileged to be a member of this Union, but never more proud than at the present time.

This Conference has the task of re-dedicating itself to the policies laid down to protect pits and jobs. We are fighting in defence of our communities for the right to work-and for our dignity and self-respect. The sacrifices and the hardships have forged a unique commitment among our members. They will ensure that the National Union of Mineworkers wins this most crucial battle in the history of our industry. Comrades, I salute you for your magnificent achievements and for your support – together, we cannot fail. I feel privileged to be your President.

19th April 1984

Future Strategy for the Left: A Discussion Paper

FOR YEARS, the Left inside the Labour Party has generally accepted that whilst the party might from time to time adopt right-wing policies, it has always been possible to fight to reverse those policies – because the party's constitution has been committed to the eradication of Capitalism, the establishment of Socialism and common ownership.
That perspective has been held by many on the Left who whilst not individual Party members belong to party-affiliated organisations and support "Left" policies.

This acceptance was based on the fact that the party constitution embodied in Clause IV a commitment to common ownership of the means of production, distribution and

exchange, a commitment not introduced (as is generally believed) by two middle-class Fabians in 1918, but which (like proportional representation) sprang from the trade union movement and Socialist groupings that were in existence before the ILP, Labour Representation Committee or the Labour Party were even founded.

It is commonly agreed that the Labour Party was born out of the trade union movement and various Socialist groups with the aim of creating a parliamentary party to give expression to a Socialist political agenda in the House of Commons.
At the time of its formation, the Labour Party had both a constitution and policies which projected a Socialist philosophy, policies and programme.

Its affiliates included the Communist Party, Cooperative Party, various Socialist societies and trade unions whose members were automatically regarded as being members of the Party. For example, candidates for Parliament and local authorities were selected at meetings where trade unions were allowed to send substantial numbers of delegates; even if they were not in individual membership of the Party, they were accepted as members as a result of belonging to affiliated unions.

The newly-formed Labour Party made clear its aim of abolishing Capitalism and establishing a Socialist society – an object which many trade unions incorporated into their own rule books.

The party was also firmly committed to proportional representation – *not* because it believed in consensus politics but because it recognised that true proportional representation is a class issue. It is significant that this constitutional demand was ditched by Ramsay MacDonald and other party leaders who not only supported the "first past the post" system but Capitalism itself.

The aim of common ownership as set out in Clause IV was introduced in two stages: in 1918 and in 1929. Rather than hint at an unspecified objective, it was designed to clearly commit the party to a strategy for achieving Socialism.

The party later became a so-called "broad church" because the "modernisers" of the time wanted to embrace sections which were not committed to a fundamental change in the nature of society. The term "broad church" was introduced to assist the right-wing, not the left.

It was the "modernisers" who were responsible for expelling the Communist Party from affiliation and introducing the bans and prescriptions which were prevalent in the '30s and later during the Cold War period of the '50s.

The party's right-wing has always sought to destroy the trade union bloc vote and, tragically, we have seen many members on the left enthusiastically supporting this aim

in the mistaken belief that Constituency Labour Parties would be able to control the Party Conference and ensure that Labour became a vehicle for Socialist change. Instead, we have seen the current party leadership systematically dismantle Labour's commitment to Socialism – a process in which the "spin doctors" merely put a media gloss on the machinations of the leadership.

The debacle over Clause IV exemplifies this point very clearly indeed. Some of us repeatedly warned prior to Labour's 1994 Annual Conference that the party leadership would attempt what Gaitskell had failed to do 30 years before, and try to ditch Clause IV.
Nobody should have been surprised when Blair, in the Leader's address to Annual Conference last year announced his intention to get rid of Labour's fundamental commitment to common ownership.

The significance of the leadership's position *and* the conference vote 48 hours later rejecting that position was not taken seriously enough by the Left, either in the party or the trade union movement. Here was a party leader blatantly acting contrary to the constitution – an offence which has been used to expel numerous good party members. Yet many leading left figures in the Parliamentary Labour Party and in the trade unions failed to see the implications of what was taking place.

In certain ways, the response of that section of the Left which failed to act and/or campaign in defence of Clause IV is the same response we saw at this year's party conference from all those who are so desperate to remove the Tory government that they are prepared to adopt any measure and accept any proposal made by Blair and the leadership.

The significance of last month's constitutional changes including the ditching of Clause IV has not been fully appreciated by many left comrades who should know better. They believe it is still possible to reverse the "setbacks" suffered as a result of Blair's destruction of Clause IV and abandonment of fundamental socialist policies.

Is the Labour Party Socialist?
In addressing this question it is essential to examine the party's policies together with the constitutional changes which have been systematically Introduced over the past four years, including one member one vote, reduction of the trade union bloc vote and now the abandonment of Clause IV and introduction of new rules and a constitution which embrace Capitalism and adopt the "Market Philosophy".

Labour is now almost indistinguishable from the Democratic Party in the United States, Germany's Social Democrat Party or, nearer home, the Liberal Democrats.

It is interesting to note how Labour has changed its policies on all the fundamental issues which have been determined by the party conference over many years –

including privatisation, national minimum wage, unemployment, pensions, health care, education, Europe, nuclear disarmament, anti-trade union legislation and the party itself.
Where does Labour now stand on these issues?

Privatisation
Labour has abandoned not only its commitment to common ownership but its policy on public ownership and privatisation. For example, the party has made clear it will not renationalise privatised industries, but will merely use the "excess" profits of those industries and utilities to help pay for a programme of work and education.
This means that Labour intends to leave our key industries including the utilities in private hands. A party committed to Socialism and common ownership would insist that Labour will renationalise water, electricity, coal, gas, British Telecom and all the public industries and services which have been sold off over the past 16 years – including our railways.

National Minimum Wage
The Labour Party, whilst undertaking to introduce a statutory minimum wage, refused to agree a formula or state a figure; even more significant, the party accepted that any minimum wage could only be introduced in consultation with "social partners", including the CBI and the Institute of Directors.
In other words, a statutory minimum wage will only be at a level acceptable to our traditional class enemies.
The pressure on this issue applied to trade union leaders at the TUC Conference in September was designed to accommodate this social "partnership" or "co-determination" policy.

Unemployment
Labour has always had a commitment to full employment – but the party now says: "No-one pretends we can solve unemployment overnight" – a clear warning that unemployment will continue under a Labour Government.

But a Labour Government *could* solve unemployment – even within a Capitalist society – overnight, provided it introduced a four-day working week with no loss of pay, banned all non-essential overtime, and introduced voluntary retirement on full pay at age 55 – measures which are fundamental to the regeneration of Britain, but which are anathema to private enterprise and Capitalism.

It is economic insanity to pay out £10,000 per year to keep a worker unemployed whilst half that amount would eliminate unemployment straight away.

Pensions
The Labour Party is already departing from the essential principle of "universal" pensions, and is looking at ways for people to "put together" income from public *and*

private sources. In other words, workers are going to have to pay an additional "insurance policy" *to guarantee a minimum* standard of pension – and even then its value would be questionable.

Health
Labour's pledge that it will "establish regional centres of excellence" and retain the "beneficial freedoms" of fund-holding is typical of how vague its commitment is to restoring and rebuilding the NHS.

Britain spends less on health care than most other "advanced" Western countries, and a Labour Party which was serious about protecting our National Health Service would commit the resources necessary to enable it to provide health care on demand, providing for everyone from the cradle to the grave.

Education
Labour's pledges on nursery school places, infant school class sizes and the needs of all. pupils, students and teachers are hollow without an accompanying timescale; nor do they address the demise of opportunity and aspiration for working class children over the past 16 years. Tragically, Labour continues to support privileged private education which is a vital prop to our class-ridden society.

Europe
The Labour Party which was once implacably opposed to the European Common Market is now one of the most ardent supporters of this bastion of International Capitalism, outdoing the Tories and Liberal Democrats in enthusiasm. Labour's about-turn on this issue is of major economic and political importance; it represents a betrayal of all that the Party stood for.

Unilateral Nuclear Disarmament
Possibly the most shameful about-turn, however, is that on unilateral nuclear disarmament. After years of campaigning in favour of banning all nuclear weapons, Labour has now become pro-nuclear – in a world torn by regionalised and imperialist wars from the Middle East to the Balkans, from South East Asia to Latin America.

Labour should have been seen to be campaigning for an end to all nuclear weapons and a reduction of at least 50% in defence expenditure. The vast resources which go to fund death and destruction should be used instead to rebuild our industries, public housing, health care and to end unemployment.

Anti-Trade Union Laws
Labour – although well aware that picketing, solidarity action and the right of unions to determine their own rule books without state interference are all regarded as human rights by the United Nations Charter – has declared that in government it will retain the vicious laws which have been used to boost unemployment and enforce low

pay over the past 16 years. In other words, Labour is happy to pursue the Tories' aim of rendering trade unions ineffective and compliant.

The Party Constitution: Clause IV

In ditching Clause IV from the constitution, Labour has *erased* its commitment to the aim of common ownership without which social justice, economic democracy and Socialism are impossible.

Last month, New Non-Socialist Labour demonstrated its covenant with Capitalism by its disgraceful refusal to endorse a first-class Socialist, Liz Davies, as a parliamentary candidate.
It had no difficulty, however, in embracing into party membership Alan Howarth, a Tory MP who voted for the policies and philosophy of Thatcher, including the butchery of health care, education, mining and other basic industries and services.

Labour's New Rules

Labour's new rules and constitution can only be described as an unmitigated disaster that make it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for people within the Labour Party to campaign for Socialism – *which is no longer constitutionally enshrined as a vision to fight for*.

The new rule book allows the party's NEC (among other changes) to amend the rules and constitution at any time by calling a Special Conference at which only the NEC can submit amendments to the constitution. CLPs, trade unions and affiliated organisations will have no right to do so – just as on April 29 at the Special Conference.

This means that the party leadership can submit an amendment to any Clause in the Constitution in two-and-a-half years time – i.e. in April 1998 – and irrespective of whether that amendment is carried or lost, any further amendment to that particular clause will be prevented for a further three years, right up to 2001.

This strategy could be deployed literally ad infinitum to prevent, for example, restoring the commitment to common ownership to Labour's constitution.

A Dilemma for Socialists

Today we have a sanitised Labour Party which Blair has admitted should be called Social Democratic.

Socialists faced with this new situation must decide what to do.
Do we meekly accept "New Labour"? Do we passively concede that the party has abandoned Socialism and any commitment to common ownership?

If so, why were we all opposed to the policies of the Gang of Four and the now-defunct SDP – because those are the policies which New Labour (now constitutionally indistinguishable from the Tories and Liberal Democrats) has adopted.

Do we, and others who feel as we do, stay in a party which has been and is being "politically cleansed"?Or: do we leave and start to build a *Socialist Labour Party* that represents the principles, values, hopes and dreams which gave birth nearly a century ago to what has, sadly, now become New Labour?

There are and there will be those – including highly respected comrades – who insist we should stay inside the party and "fight"; but such an attitude fails or refuses to recognise that the party's constitution now effectively prevents this. Opposition will also come from those who say that any "rocking the boat" can only benefit the Tories.

We have been through all this before. The first Labour candidate who stood at a by-election in Barnsley in 1897 was heckled and stoned by *miners* who believed that by representing Labour he was harming the Liberal Party's chances of election to Government.

As late as 1910, there was still a large body of opinion in the Trade Union and Labour Movement which believed that the movement should support the Liberal Party – and that it was not the role of trade unions to be directly involved in politics.

Today, Socialists in the Labour Party and those who are active in affiliated organisations face the same dilemma as did our forebears who broke with the Liberals. If history was to repeat itself, nobody could be genuinely surprised.

Can we continue to exist – let alone try to be active – within such a party?

Socialists and the Left

I believe the case for a Socialist Labour Party (SLP) is now overwhelming – but if such a party is to be born it must be on the basis of class understanding, class commitment and Socialist policies.

A Socialist Labour Party would require a simple Socialist constitution and a structure designed to fight our class enemies. This structure would demand an end to internal wranglings and sectarian arguments.

If a Socialist Labour Party is to be established, it must be done on the following basis:

1. convening a special "Discussion Conference" to which all those committed to founding such a party should be invited with the aim of formulating a constitution and structure for a Socialist Labour Party;

2. an “Inaugural Conference” to be held ideally on May 1, 1996 – May Day having great significance throughout the international labour movement;
3. the new Party and its Constitution would have to ensure that its members and affiliated organisations control the party through its national executive committee. Never again should we have a situation where the parliamentary party takes control of the apparatus, and the political tail wags the dog;
4. if a Socialist Labour Party is established it should commit itself to fight every parliamentary seat – on the principle that Parliament is but one element of democracy, a body in which expression must be given to the political philosophy and issues advanced by our class.

The Challenge Facing All of Us
In this situation, we do not have the luxury of time; sooner rather than later a Socialist Labour Party will be born.

Today, radical opposition in Britain is symbolised not by the Labour and Trade Union Movement but by the groupings such as those which defeated the Poll Tax, the anti-motorway and animal rights bodies, Greenpeace and other anti-nuclear campaigners, and those fighting against opencast mining.

These are now the voices of protest and direct action, reminding us that only through direct – including industrial – action and defiance of unjust laws can we achieve real advance, whilst a moribund Labour Party and trade union hierarchy pleads with citizens to accept and submit to those laws.

The environmental and community activists are doing a good job, but, inevitably, their aims are "single purpose" with no clear political perspective. It is a tragedy that the Labour Party is not at the centre of coordinating and organising such campaigns.
A Socialist Labour Party would be able to galvanise mass opposition to injustice, inequality and environmental destruction, and build the fight for a Socialist Britain.

We therefore have to decide if we are prepared to carry on supporting a Labour Party which now embraces Capitalism and the "free market", or take a decisive step towards establishing a party capable of not only resisting Capitalism’s attacks but of fundamentally changing society – in other words, establish a Socialist Labour Party.

4th November 1995

We Could Surrender or Stand and Fight

Twenty-five years ago, the Tory government led by Margaret Thatcher declared war on the National Union of Mineworkers. The Tories had been preparing for a showdown with the NUM since before the 1979 general election. They could not

forget the victorious miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974, the second of which had brought down the Tory government in a general election.

But the NUM's historic battle did not begin in March 1984, as so many pundits claim. The seeds of the dispute had been sown long before. A pit closure plan in 1981 resulted in miners, including miners in Nottinghamshire, taking unofficial strike action (without a ballot) and forcing Thatcher into a U-turn, or in reality a body swerve.

At that time, Britain's coal industry was the most efficient and technologically advanced in the world, a result of a tripartite agreement, the Plan For Coal, signed by a Labour government, the National Coal Board (NCB) and the mining trade unions in 1974, and endorsed by Thatcher in 1981. And yet, shortly after I became national president of the NUM in 1982 I was sent anonymously a copy of a secret plan prepared by NCB chiefs earmarking 95 pits for closure, with the loss of 100,000 miners' jobs. This plan had been prepared on government instructions following the miners' successful unofficial strike in 1981.

I took this document to the union's National Executive Committee (NEC) - its contents were not only denied by government and NCB chiefs, but were disbelieved by militant NUM leaders who had been assured that their pits had long-term futures. However, the exposed revelations struck a chord among our members throughout Britain's coalfields where colliery managers - clearly acting on instructions from above - had already begun unilaterally changing agreed working practices, affecting shift patterns and supplementary payments.

It became clear that the union would have to take action, but of a type that would win maximum support and have a unifying effect. The NEC accepted a report from me recommending that we call a special national delegate conference, and link our opposition to the pit closure plan with a demand that the coal board negotiate the union's wage claim. The NEC agreed, and the special conference was held on 21 October 1983. Delegates from all NUM areas were given a detailed report so that they could vote on what action - if any - should be taken. Following a full debate, they agreed to call a national overtime ban from 1 November - until such time as the NCB withdrew its closure plan and agreed to negotiate an increase in miners' wages with the NUM.

Over the next four months, the overtime ban had an extraordinary impact. It succeeded in reducing coal output by 30%, or 12m tonnes, thus cutting national coal stocks to about the same level as they had been during the miners' unofficial strike in 1981.

Then, on 1 March 1984, acting I believe on national instruction, NCB directors in four areas announced the immediate closure of five pits: Cortonwood and Bullcliffe Wood in Yorkshire, Herrington in Durham, Snowdown in Kent and Polmaise in Scotland.

Coalfield reaction was electrifying. On Saturday 3 March, accompanied by the NUM Yorkshire president, Jack Taylor, I spoke at a packed meeting in South Yorkshire initially organised to discuss various issues that had already brought seven Yorkshire pits out on strike. I knew we had to do everything possible to persuade our members to direct their rage in a united way at the pit closure plan and its threat to butcher our industry.

On Sunday evening Taylor and I attended a Yorkshire Brass Band Festival in Sheffield city hall. By then I had consulted my fellow national officials, the vice-president, Michael McGahey, and the national secretary, Peter Heathfield.

It was essential to present a united response to the NCB and we agreed that, if the coal board planned to force pit closures on an area by area basis, then we must respond at least initially on that same basis. The NUM's rules permitted areas to take official strike action if authorised by our national executive committee in accordance with Rule 41. If the NEC gave Scotland and Yorkshire authorisation under this rule, it could galvanise other areas to seek similar support for action against closures.

During an interval in the concert, I used the back of a programme to draft a strike resolution which I asked Taylor to present the following morning to the Yorkshire area council meeting. I told him that McGahey would be doing the same thing at the same time in Scotland.

On 6 March, at a consultative meeting at NCB London headquarters, the coal board chairman, Ian MacGregor, not only confirmed what we had been expecting, but announced that in addition to the five pits already earmarked for immediate closure, a further 20 would be closed during the coming year, with the loss of more than 20,000 jobs. This, he said, was being done to take four million tonnes of "unwanted" capacity out of the industry, and bring supply into line with demand.

The Scotland and Yorkshire NUM areas did vote to seek endorsement from the NEC for strike action, and at the NEC meeting on 8 March were given authorisation under Rule 41. South Wales and Kent then also asked for authorisation. The NEC agreed, and confirmed that other areas could, if they wished, do the same. We realised that the NCB announcement on 6 March had amounted to a declaration of war. We could either surrender right now, or stand and fight.

A question that has been raised time and time again over the past 25 years is: why did the union not hold a national strike ballot? Those who attack our struggle by vilifying me usually say: "Scargill rejected calls for a ballot."

The real reason that NUM areas such as Nottinghamshire, South Derbyshire and Leicestershire wanted a national strike ballot was that they wanted the strike called off, believing naively that their pits were safe.

Three years earlier, in 1981, there had been no ballot when miners' unofficial strike action - involving Notts miners - had caused Thatcher to retreat from mass closures (nor in 1972 when more than a million workers went on strike in support of the Pentonville Five dockers who had been jailed for defying government anti-union legislation).

McGahey argued that the union should not be "constitutionalised" out of taking action, while the South Wales area president, Emlyn Williams, told the NEC on 12 April 1984: "To hide behind a ballot is an act of cowardice. I tell you this now ... decide what you like about a ballot but our coalfield will be on strike and stay on strike."

However, NUM areas had a right to ask the NEC to convene a special national delegate conference (as we had when calling the overtime ban) to determine whether delegates mandated by their areas should vote for a national individual ballot or reaffirm the decision of the NEC to permit areas such as Scotland, Yorkshire, South Wales and Kent to take strike action in accordance with Rule 41.

Our special conference was held on 19 April. McGahey, Heathfield and I were aware from feedback that a slight majority of areas favoured the demand for a national strike ballot; therefore, we were expecting and had prepared for that course of action with posters, ballot papers and leaflets. A major campaign was ready to go for a "Yes" vote in a national strike ballot.

At the conference, Heathfield told delegates in his opening address: "I hope that we are sincere and honest enough to recognise that a ballot should not be used and exercised as a veto to prevent people in other areas defending their jobs." His succinct reminder of the situation we were in opened up an emotional debate to which speaker after speaker made passionate and fiercely argued contributions.

Replying to that debate, I said: "This battle is certainly about more than the miners' union. It is for the right to work. It is for the right to preserve our pits. It is for the right to preserve this industry ... We can all make speeches, but at the end of the day we have got to stand up and be counted ... We have got to come out and say not only what we feel should be done, but do it because if we don't do that, then we fail."

McGahey, Heathfield and I had done the arithmetic beforehand, and were truly surprised that when the vote was taken, delegates rejected calls for a national strike ballot and decided instead to call on all miners to refuse to cross picket lines - and join the 140,000 already on strike. We later learned that members of one area delegation had been so moved by the arguments put forward in the debate that they'd held an impromptu meeting and switched their vote in support of the area strikes in accordance with Rule 41.

During the strike I was also criticised, indeed attacked - by my own colleagues - for arguing that the NUM's prime picketing targets should be power stations, ports,

cement works, steelworks and coking plants. But evidence now available shows my argument was correct.

My passionate conviction that the Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire should be selected as a main target was rubbished at the time. Yet, it has now been revealed from official sources that show coal stocks at steel plants - particularly Scunthorpe in Yorkshire, Ravenscraig in Scotland and Llanwern in Wales - were so low that these works could only continue in production for a matter of weeks, with Scunthorpe - where British Steel had already laid off 160 workers due to coal shortages - actually earmarked for closure by 18 June 1984.

The issue of dispensations that would allow provision of coal supplies created divisions among the most militant sections of the NUM. I had argued passionately that there should be no dispensations for power stations, cement works, steelworks or coking plants, whose coal stocks were extremely low.

Many on the union's left - particularly those in the Communist party - argued that the union had a responsibility to ensure that a minimal amount of coal could be delivered in order to keep the giant furnaces and ovens "ticking over". Heathfield and a number of others on the NUM left agreed with me that there should be no dispensations and that if steelworks had to close down, as British Steel's chairman, Bob Haslam, warned was inevitable, then the responsibility lay firmly at the door of the government, not the NUM.

Despite the passionate arguments made by Heathfield and myself, areas did give dispensations. Two months went by before it dawned on Yorkshire, South Wales and Scotland that they had been outmanoeuvred by British Steel, and the leadership of the steelworkers' union, and that British Steel was moving far more coal than the dispensations agreed with NUM areas. Yet there was still time to stop all those giant steelworks, and if the steelworkers' union would not cooperate with the NUM to stop all deliveries of coal to the steelworks then the National Union of Seamen and rail unions Aslef and NUR had already demonstrated that they would stop all deliveries.

The scene was set for the battle of Orgreave.

Orgreave coking plant was a crucial target for mass picketing. I knew that its coal supplies could be cut off as had been the case at the Saltley coke depot in Birmingham in 1972 - a turning point after which that strike was soon settled.

Contrary to popular mythology, Orgreave was closed twice: first on 27 May 1984, when together with dozens of others I was injured on the picket line. Second, on 18 June, when 10,000 pickets faced 8,500 riot police in a scene reminiscent of a battle in England's 17th-century civil war.

So fierce was the conflict on 18 June that dozens of pickets were hospitalised (including me), but the picketing resulted in British Steel's chairman sending a telex closing down Orgreave on a temporary basis - exactly as had been the case at Saltley coke depot in Birmingham 12 years before.

The fundamental difference between Saltley in 1972 and Orgreave in 1984 was that in 1972 following the first closure at Saltley, picketing on my demand was increased the following day - while at Orgreave, on 19 June 1984, the pickets were completely withdrawn by the NUM Yorkshire and Derbyshire areas and other coalfield leaders, despite my desperate urging that picketing be stepped up.

Had picketing at Orgreave been increased the day after 18 June, I have no doubt that Orgreave - and Scunthorpe - would have faced immediate closure, forcing the government to settle the strike.

For 25 years, I have been accused of refusing to negotiate a settlement with the NCB, and of "snatching defeat from the jaws of victory" - a blatant lie. The NUM settled the strike on five separate occasions in 1984: on 8 June, 8 July, 18 July, 10 September, and 12 October. The first four settlements were sabotaged or withdrawn following the intervention of Thatcher.

The most important settlement terms were agreed between leaders of the pit deputies' union Nacods and the NUM at the offices of the conciliation service Acas on 12 October 1984 and included a demand that the NCB withdraw its pit closure plan, give an undertaking that the five collieries earmarked for immediate closure would be kept open, and guarantee that no pit would be closed unless by joint agreement it was deemed to be exhausted or unsafe.

Nacods members had recorded an 82% ballot vote for strike action, and their leaders made clear to the NCB that unless the Nacods-NUM terms were accepted, the Nacods strike would go ahead.

I was later told by a Tory who had been a minister at the time that when Thatcher was informed of the Nacods-NUM agreement she announced to the cabinet "special committee" that the government had no choice but to settle the strike on the unions' terms.

However, when she learned that Nacods - despite pleas from the TUC and the NUM - had called off their strike and accepted a "modified" colliery review procedure, she immediately withdrew the government's decision to settle. Nacods' inexplicable decision led to the closure of 164 pits and the loss of 160,000 jobs.

The monumental betrayal by Nacods has never been explained in a way that makes sense. Even the TUC recognised that the Nacods settlement was a disaster.

The fact that Nacods leaders ignored pleas from the NUM and TUC not to call off their strike or resile from their agreement with the NUM not only adds mystery but poses the question - whose hand did the moving, and why?

Over the years, I have repeatedly said that we didn't "come close" to total victory in October 1984 - we had it, and at the very point of victory we were betrayed. Only the Nacods leaders know why.

A full account of the strike of 1984/85 is still to be written. However, we have learned more and more about the then Labour party leader, Neil Kinnock's treachery, the betrayals by the TUC and the class collaboration of union leaders such as Eric Hammond (the electricians' EETPU) and John Lyons (Engineers and Managers Association), who instructed their members to cross picket lines and did all they could to defeat the miners.

We have also seen how many who, like Kinnock, bleated constantly about the need for a ballot during the miners' strike didn't call for the British people to have a ballot in 2003 when Tony Blair took the nation into an unlawful war and the occupation of Iraq.

During the past 25 years, many who have attacked the NUM, and me, about the need for a ballot, or argued that we selected the wrong targets have done so to cover their own guilt at failing to give the miners a level of support that would have stopped the Tories' pit closure programme and thus changed the political direction of the nation. Britain in 1984 was already a divided and degraded society - it has become much more so in the 25 years since.

The NUM's struggle remains not only an inspiration for workers but a warning to today's union leaders of their responsibility to their members, and the need to challenge both government and employers over all forms of injustice, inequality and exploitation.

That is the legacy of the NUM's strike of 1984/85, a truly historic fight that gave birth to the magnificent Women Against Pit Closures and the miners' support groups. I have always said that the greatest victory in the strike was the struggle itself, a struggle that inspired millions of people around the world.

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