



REMEMBERING THE BATTLE OF SALTLEY GATE

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On February 10 1982 the Morning Star published an article by Frank Watters on the 10th anniversary of the “Battle of Saltley Gate.”

It stated: “Ten years ago today, February 10 1972, will go down as one of the greatest events in the proud history of the British working class.

“It was the day when thousands of Birmingham workers walked out of their factories and building sites and joined the miners’ pickets at the Saltley Coke Depot in Birmingham, where a mountain of coke was piled, estimated at over 100,000 tons.

“That coke mountain was intended to be the Heath government’s answer to the rail workers’ solidarity with the miners — they had stopped all coal moving out of the pits.”

The event was recorded in a mural now at South and City College campus at Digbeth.

Only part of it is on view and currently there is a need to find a more fitting place to display this remarkable commemoration of the Battle of Saltley Gate.

Pictured is the accessible part of the mural. The figure speaking from the top of the public lavatory in Nechells Square, megaphone in hand, following the closure of the gates on Thursday February 10 is Arthur Scargill.

He told the assembled crowd: ““This will go down in trade union history. It will also go down in history as the Battle of Saltley Gate. The working people have united in a mass stand.”

Scargill has made it clear he had not been prepared for what he saw that day on his first trip to Birmingham. His own description of the tense wait when the streets were eerily empty and nothing moved until “...over the hill came a banner.

“As far as the eye could see it was just a mass of people marching towards Saltley. There was a huge roar and from the other side of the hill they were coming the other way. They were coming from five directions...”

It was due to his seizure of the moment to take a lead instructing the marchers to stop as they reached the gate, countermanding the police instructions to keep going, that forced the police to give the order “close the gate.”

The Socialist Labour Party has held meetings to remember the anniversary of Saltley Gate each year following the 40th anniversary in 2012 when Birmingham Trades Union Council organised a public meeting on a freezing February day.

Scargill was one of the speakers along with Bob Crow and Ken Capstick.

We are about to celebrate the 47th anniversary of Saltley Gate and once again Scargill will be speaking, along with Ian Scott, president of

Birmingham Trades Union Council, and Graham Stevenson, trade unionist and CPB candidate for West Midlands mayoral elections.

This will be an opportunity to reflect on Saltley Gate in the context of another anti-union Tory government. Today we have a distinct lack of leadership for the 17.5 million people who took the opportunity to protest against the neoliberal agenda now engulfing the world and the engine of the European Union's agenda.

Who represents them? Votes in Parliament show the vast majority of their representatives at Westminster are bending over backward to ensure a "no-deal" exit from Europe is avoided. Let's compromise.

Elsewhere the global experiment is showing its true intentions as oil vultures hover over Venezuela as well as Syria. US national security adviser John Bolton has been let loose to take control of Venezuelan wealth which has been used to provide education and health for the many.

The US wants this on the cheap at the risk of fuelling yet another conflict resulting in mass destruction and death of countless numbers of civilians.

The EU is no different with its ever closer relations with NATO and endless wars from the Balkans to the Middle East. The likes of Bolton and Dick Cheney are holding their hands out as the arms industries of Western nations demand bigger and better wars for their shareholders. Shall we all compromise?

Norway anyone? "If you want to run Europe, you must be in Europe. If you want to be run by Europe, feel free to join Norway in the European Economic Area," is the view of a Norwegian Conservative MP.

Speaker after speaker at the Socialist Labour Party Conference held in Birmingham in October last year spoke of the reasons why we should leave the EU since any deal will leave Britain chained to its rules in perpetuity.

Nato's wars, the "capitalist crime" of austerity, the true nature of the EU revealed across a Europe attacking workers' rights and now the failure to act on the result of the 2016 referendum all point to a sell-out of those protesting against the status quo by a majority of members of the Westminster Parliament across parties.

Scargill pointed out, looking at the 2017 general election alongside the referendum, that 75 per cent of constituencies represented by Tory MPs voted to leave. For Labour it was 61 per cent. If that was reflected in Parliament there would be no need for the protracted and convoluted arguments continuing to dominate our lives at the expense of all else.

Professor Costas Lapavistas described the existential crisis facing the EU in spite of its apparent stabilisation in recent years.

While its various institutions, including banks and courts of law, have acquired extensive power, no-one has voted for them. There is now a "democratic abyss" in a system in which neoliberalism is entrenched.

This is not a policy that can be changed by voting for one party or another. Whichever party you vote for will end up with the same result. While the right understands this, the left has failed to grasp this reality and continues to see the EU as a champion of workers' and human rights.

Compromise should not be in the vocabulary of socialists when it comes to maintaining principles underpinning human rights. This was demonstrated by the leadership shown at Saltley Gate and consistently since by the leader of the SLP.

John Tyrrell is President of the Socialist Labour Party.