Introduction

The Miners' Strike has now been going on for nine months.

Tony Benn has said that it is the most important strike in Britain this century. Peter Heathfield, Secretary of the NUM, has recently said that it is a strike which will decide the future of the trade union movement for the next generation.

Nevertheless, at the end of nine months, the miners are no closer to victory. It is said by some that this is because of the intransigence of the Thatcher Government. In the light of the evidence of 1980, this is a difficult conclusion to substantiate. In 1980, when Thatcher judged that the miners were in a strong position, and indeed when Joe Gormley had the results of a strike ballot behind him, she retreated swiftly and without hesitation.

If the Thatcher Government has been intransigent in 1984, it has been able to stand firm for two reasons: firstly, there is no threat to electricity supplies because coal continues to be produced and sent to power stations; secondly, the NUM has at no time made its objectives in this strike clear. How can Thatcher sanction a compromise settlement when the NUM do not even know what they want! Compromise, after all, is only possible when both sides have a goal towards which they are aiming, and then an interim goal for which they are willing to settle.

Plan for Coal

Arthur Scargill, when pressed, says that the NUM want the NCB to renew their commitment to the Plan for Coal. That sounds reasonable, and indeed it is a modest enough goal. Yet, Arthur Scargill contradicts himself, repeatedly and with great conviction, when he says that the NUM wants no more than what is in the Plan for Coal. He has also promised the miners that they are fighting to keep pits open, even when they have been judged to be uneconomic. He has promised miners that if they fight this strike to the bitter end, their jobs, and jobs for their children and grandchildren, will be safe.

There is nothing in the Plan for Coal about keeping uneconomic pits open; and there is nothing in it about safeguarding miners'

jobs for perpetuity either. This is not surprising. The Plan for Coal was agreed between the Labour Government, the NUM and the NCB in 1974. What justification could the Labour Government give to the nation then for keeping uneconomic pits open when there were also uneconomic shipyards, car factories and railways which were being slimmed down and whose management were being told that they must become more efficient? Why should miners be the only workers who had full property rights over their jobs? No other workers, after all, have the right to bequeath their jobs to their sons.

An Appendix at the end of this pamphlet gives details of the Plan for Coal. It deserves careful reading. It shows that the last Labour Government was no more willing to give an open-ended commitment to underwrite the lo-ses of uneconomic pits than this Tory one. There is certainly no socialist justification for according coalminers more privileged treatment than other workers. Socialism has always attacked aristocracy of all kinds, and supported equality and social justice. Arthur Scargill's demand that miners be accorded the right to pass on their jobs to their sons is a demand for a miners' aristocracy, i.e. where privilege is acquired by inheritance.

The Plan for Coal does, of course, provide a reasonable framework for running the mining industry. But Arthur Scargill on the one hand says that the NUM only wants a renewed commitment to that Plan, whilst on the other hand demanding jobs for miners in perpetuity. No one in the TUC or the Shadow Cabinet has so far reminded Scargill and the nation of exactly what the last Labour Government pledged itself to support in the Plan for Coal. The contradiction between the Plan for Coal and Scargill's demands has been studiously ignored for the last nine months!

There have been signs that management in the NCB, particularly Mr. Ned Smith, and Mr. Peter Walker, Energy Minister in the Tory Government, have recognised that Scargill has been equivocating over the Plan for Coal. These men have wanted to bring out into the open the fact that Scargill has been demanding aristocratic status for the miners. So far, their inclination to exploit the contradictory and aristrocratic nature of the NUM case, as put by Scargill, has been blocked, probably by anti-union elements in the Tory Government (including Thatcher) and Ian McGregor.

Opposition in the Labour Movement

Inside the Labour Movement, it has been left to Mr. Jimmy Reid to point out the glaring contradictions in Mr. Scargill's leadership

of the strike. Why have the rest of the Movement stayed silent?

Why, if Scargill is leading the miners in a fight which is getting nowhere fast, have the rest of the Movement acquiesced? Is there a death wish which has mysteriously overtaken the trade union leaders and made them indifferent to allowing the Movement to get mixed up with a strike that is on a hiding to nowhere?

We should first look at the one union which has officially, and repeatedly, stood out against Mr. Scargill, the EETPU. The electricians' union have opposed Scargill, without hesitation, because their leaders are different to the leadership of the rest of the Movement. The EETPU leaders do not believe that they are holding trade union office for any other reason than to get the best possible deal for their members out of employers. Not surprisingly, they have viewed the miners' strike with scepticism from the beginning. They could see that Scargill was asking for something impossible: jobs in perpetuity in pits which might or might not have coal which could be usefully mined. Moreover, as union leaders for electricians, they did not understand why they should be supporting Scargill's demands for miners, which were far more than electricians get, could ever hope to get, or would ever dream of asking for.

The EETPU leaders are exceptional inside the Labour Movement in reckoning that their main job is to get the best possible deal for their members. (This is because the union in the 1960's went through a protracted and bitter internal conflict over precisely this question. Those activists inside the union who argued that it should be primarily an instrument for socialist politics exposed themselves to attack by engaging in ballot-rigging and refusing to accept democratic procedure. The result was that the socialist side of the union was defeated totally by the force of members' reaction to the revelations of ballot-rigging and the abuse by left-wingers of leadership positions.) The EETPU leaders have looked at the miners' strike for what it is, because they are simply trade unionists who view the purpose of a strike as being simply to push the employers to make more concessions.

From this point of view, they can see, as can the millions of trade unionists who have followed the strike on their televisions, that Mr. Scargill has been on a hiding to nothing from the very beginning.

Solidarity

The British working class has a strong and highly developed sense of solidarity. But, contrary to the illusions of utopian leftwingers, who have little experience of the working

class and no desire to reflect candidly about what they do know, this solidarity does not extend to the reflex of supporting every outbreak of the economic struggle with the forces of the whole class.

The impulse for all workers to join together in every encounter in the economic struggle is a natural one at the beginning of a national working class's emergence into history. The British working class displayed such inclinations in the 1820's and 1830's. However, as soon as the experience of fighting capitalist employers had had a chance to be absorbed by the class, it was clear that such a response was inappropriate and would not achieve the desired results.

The British trade union movement rejected in the 1860's the path which had been tried in the 1820's and 30's. The movement did not build One Big Union which would enter into mortal combat with the capitalist class as a whole. The capitalist employers were variegated, different in their policies, approaches and attitudes. To fight them, unions must needs develop the ability to fight individual battles and skirmishes. Unions divided into local and craft-based associations, which were then loosely centralised by the men with whom Marx consorted in the First International.

The members of these New Model Unions had just as strong a sense of belonging to one class as did those men of the previous generation who had tried for One Big Union. The difference was that the men of the 1860's had learned that workers in one town and trade had to be able to fight their own battles and win with their own force. Financial help, blacking work, and moral support were all, of course, important; but in the end, the workers concerned had to be strong enough themselves to win.

The Development of Modern Trade Unionism

In the closing years of the 19th century, the increasing concentration of industry produced more centralised unions. As capitalists became bigger, so did the unions. However, the lesson which had been learnt by the 1860's continued to be understood. The trade unions came together in the 1890's, but not for the purpose of fighting the economic struggle. They came together, first to form the Parliamentary Committee of the infant TUC, to make representations to Parliament and made certain that legislation which was beneficial to the working class as a whole was enacted. Then they came together to form the Labour Party to help obtain the same goals.

The period just prior to the Great War was full of pitched class battles, of the miners, railwaymen and dockers. Though, not surprisingly, notions of the whole class uniting in One Battle Formation, again appeared, they were never translated into practice. The first attempts at a Triple Alliance aborted before 1914, and though the Russian Revolution revived the impulse towards such united action, the Triple Alliance of 1919-21 was equally barren. In a society as complicated and dense as Britain, any notion of all-out battle between the classes was unrealistic and supremely impractical.

In fact, the trade union movement went from strength to strength. The crucial place of munitions workers, miners, etc. in the war economy gave the unions the chance to win concessions for their members which had been thought impossible before 1914. Those gains were consolidated after the war, despite the unexpected and precipitate economic slump which occurred in 1920. The gains were kept because union leaders made it clear that they were willing to fight to keep them, and employers were unwilliig to risk the consequences of such a conflict o In 1922, the Engineering Employers won a national lockout over the maintenance of managerial prerogative. But, they declined to press their advantage home: the unions remained at the nub of the industry, and collective bargaining was underpinned by an elaborate agreement, the York Memorandum, which the EEF was pledged to enforce upon its members.

A successful Union Strategy

The advance of the trade union movement and the Labour Party was the result of the skilful use of the circumstances and opportunities of the Great War by union leaders. The formation of the TUC General Council to replace the old Parliamentary Committee showed that tehse men had reflected upon their experiences of the previous decade and learnt from them. The General Council, and the construction of a permanent staff of experts to service it, were signs that the working class intended to influence the formation of Government policy on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, the General Council was also intended to guide th^ conduct of the economic struggle, insofar as that was possible, given the normal dispersed and various patterns of that struggle which had returned with peace.

The union leaders could see little point in using force against the employers unnecessarily, when other forvi- of pressure would suffice. Thus, the General Council tried to

counsel the various unions, and to exert pressure at the highest levels on their behalf. It tried to see that the economic struggle was fought on Clausewitzian principles—the ones that beat Napoleon that is—that objectives of class war should be from the outset clearly conceived and then fought for single-mindedly. In this way, force was not wasted and the minimum necessary was risked.

The success of this strategy in the inter-war period, and then during the 1939-45 war against Germany was impressive. Despite high levels of unemployment in the North of England, Scotland and Wales, union leaders deployed their forces so skilfully that real wages increased and the profound social advances of holidays with pay and a shorter working week were also achieved.

It is not surprising that after a run of such successes, most trade union leaders still view their job as being both to get the best possible deal for their members, as well as acting as the organising force for the working class as a whole inside the society. The sum of the working class advance over the last fifty years has been achieved as much by the shrewd politicking of the TUC, its loose generalship of the economic struggle and marshalling of political opinion, as by the actual conflict between the classes on the shopfloor.

Defeat and “New Realism”

Most trade union leaders in 1984 have inherited the historical tradition of acting for the class as a whole. They take it very seriously. The mantle of the socialist pioneers and Tolpuddle Martyrs sits heavily upon their shoulders, and they are not slow to remind their members of its weight. The problem for this generation of union leaders is that they have no results to show for their tenure in office. All they can point to are defeats and humiliations. The election of two Thatcher Governments and three lots of trade union legislation; the decimation of the engineering industry, which had formed the backbone of the working class's power since the second world war; and the Government's apparent indifference to the effects of its monetary policy on manufacturing. Not only has union membership fallen with the contraction of industry, there has also been the shrinking of union power on the shopfloor, ushered in by the sacking of Derek Robinson at Longbridge in 1979.

It might be assumed that after suffering such signal setbacks, there would be a serious examination by union leaders