

Debating the Miners' Strike

Black Flag

1984

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The Miners and the Left

The activities of certain of the groups of the ‘revolutionary left’ during the present miners strike raise whole questions about what is and what is not solidarity?

The major activity of most ‘revolutionaries’ on the left has of course been selling ‘THE PAPER’, but it is not the selling of the paper that is so bad as what is actually written in them. Many of the ‘revolutionary’ parties have used their papers to attack the strategy of the strike, personal union officials and in some cases the whole principles of the strike.

The principle that no person has the right to sell another person’s livelihood has been attacked by the Revolutionary Communist Party who want a national ballot and Workers Power who want a branch ‘show of hands’. It may not have occurred to these vanguards of the working class but people are voting everyday with their feet.

The overall strategy of the strike has been attacked by all and sundry but the main aggressor has been the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP has made personal assaults on people such as Jack Taylor, Yorkshire Area President, over the handling of the Orgreave situation, although the directing of pickets is neither controlled by Taylor or Scargill but by the Yorkshire region co-ordinating committee. They believe that Taylor has deliberately held back on the picketing of Orgreave and restricted the movement of pickets.

The overall strategy of the strike has been good, considering the lack of pickets, the wide number of targets and the determination of the police to stop them, the only tactics available to the miners has been the hit and run tactics of guerrilla warfare. Orgreave was of course a diversion from this strategy and the end result was hundreds of arrests and injuries for very little other than an education in the true nature of the police.

Although we as anarchists have different ideas about organisation than the hierarchical structures of the NUM and different political principles to people like Scargill and Taylor, this is not the fight that we are engaged in. There is little that we can criticise these two on during this strike. Both of them have thrown themselves into the frontline, both have been assaulted by police, they like all other paid NUM officials have given up their wages and during this strike have been nothing more than propaganda and symbolic figure heads.

Getting back to the SWP’s assault on the miners. They have argued for Orgreave to be turned into a mass symbolic battle, day in day out (perhaps they want a permanent pitch to sell their paper), being totally unaware of the limitations of such an action and ignorant of the forces that the state has, to fight such a pitched battle.

But it is not just the words in the papers of the left that are dubious, but all their other forms of 'solidarity'. Fund raising 'for the miners' is a great thing to latch on to. The SWP started off its miners fund, which has not [now?] reached £14,000, the purpose of this fund 'to put the miners case over to other workers', i.e. fund the paper, and other SWP propaganda. Money is also raised by many groups to send miners to their conferences and meetings. But more often than not it is used by the party to control situations, pay for busses etc, and build up their prestige. Of course not all of the 'left' groups are as bad as each other and some have given useful solidarity work to the miners and their families.

This brings us onto the question, what is solidarity? Solidarity comes in various forms, first is propaganda and education in support of people involved in struggle. In most cases strikes and other struggles go hardly noticed and any form of propaganda is useful. But there is propaganda in support of the strike and propaganda for your own cause, the best example is the Support the Miners Posters by the Revolutionary Communist Party, which has RCP taking up a third of the poster, a true poster of solidarity should have the name of the group showing solidarity in print, that has to be looked for.

Likewise the written word, either in papers or leaflets, should be used to inform people of the struggle and the events going on, and not as a means to criticise the people involved, point out the ideological differences, but the aim of solidarity is to educate and propagate not to take over.

On the question of fundraising, it is very simple if all funds are handed over to those who are going to use them, now we think it would be better if we did this with the money people have entrusted to us, if people gave money for a specific purpose such as buying food, then to buy food direct.

There is also more direct support like attending picket lines and demonstrations in solidarity. On both these events we are there to add our weight, either to show our banners and flags in support or to add bodies to the push, blockade or in a symbolic manner depending on the nature of the event.

Returning to the miners strike our job as anarchists is to give solidarity. Although this fight affects all of us, it is primarily the fight of the miners and their families. We may not like the the structures they choose to work within, we may not like their individual politics or religion, but these things are irrelevant, just as irrelevant as if a policeman is an atheist or in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament. There will be plenty of time after the strike to put our political theories over, but during this dispute there is only one form of propaganda, and that is propaganda by deed, through no strings, non dogmatic, consistent and practical solidarity.

Letter: The Miners and the Left

Dear *Black Flag*,

Having just read your article “The Miners and the Left” I feel compelled to write to you. Whilst I agree with most of the article – am similarly sickened with the “revolutionary lefts” redefinition of solidarity as selling “THE PAPER”, I believe that funds raised for the miners should go *directly to* the miners; etc. – I disagree with some of the conclusions you made, which seem to be concerned with how @s should behave during disputes generally.

Firstly, as a anarchist, I don’t like to be told what “my job” is – that, I see as authoritarianism. We’re all continually told what to do by the State and its various forms without other @s doing the same. Surely one of the things which makes @ different is its toleration and support of a *variety* of actions/means of changing the social order.

Secondly, I question the writers assertion that any papers or leaflets distributed on picket lines should merely inform people of the particular struggle they are participating in. Don’t you think that people on picket lines are aware of why they are there? Leaflets, it seems to me, are useful in describing the particular struggles of those people in the context of the wider struggle (that we are involved in and fighting).

Finally, I don’t entirely agree that we as anarchists should not be allowed to make any criticism of striking workers and I do not believe that, in the case of the miners or any other group, “the structures they choose to work within are irrelevant”. Whilst I obviously support the premises of much industrial action, as an autonomous, thinking person I do not always *unreservedly* support the action of pickets – I’m not exactly crazy about the sexism of some of the striking miners, for example. I think we should move away from this very middle class, vanguardism view of striking workers as somehow beyond any criticism, “sacred”. *Constructive* criticism can help bring about change particularly if its from people who are quite clearly showing support and solidarity on picket lines, demos or in any other ways.

R. G.(Exeter)

REPLY

The purpose of the article was to stimulate discussion and debate about the nature of solidarity and how it should affect the way anarchists work.

Written propaganda should be used to educate people about the goings on and reasons for a particular struggle and should be directed at those outside the struggle. The widespread ignorance and acceptance of misinformation even amongst political people during the miners strike, points to the need for alternative news. But as anarchists we should not abuse the position of providing alternative information by trying to direct struggles or cause divisions and weakness amongst those we are supporting.

There is no need for us to uncritically support workers involved in struggles, but we should be aware of where our opinions and ideas are going to, and the effect they will have. There is only one way to be sure that our 'criticisms' are constructive and not divisive and that is through personal contact made through giving practical solidarity.

As anarchists we believe that people are capable of organising their own lives and although the NUM may not be organised in the pure libertarian way we would like it has been created by the miners for the miners. The reason why the NUM and all other unions are not organised in a libertarian way, is because of the failure of anarchists over the last 100 years to convince people of the advantages of non-hierarchical federalist forms of organisation. For us to go running in during disputes (and to be honest how many anarchists gave a damn about miners, mining communities and the NUM, before this strike?) laying down the line, attacking the structures and generally being negative, neither does our cause any good or helps those involved in fighting against the state and bosses.

Also we must not let our idealistic purity to get in the way of our basic beliefs. People involved in struggle are quite capable of questioning the structures they are involved in and the wider society as a whole, and people do try to change things. During the miners strike great breakthroughs have been made in the struggle for women's equality (sexism confronted, women organising etc.) in altering people's attitudes to the police, in questioning local power cliques and society generally. Our solidarity besides helping to win the direct struggle, can also go to strengthen and develop new attitudes, but to do this we must be trusted and respected, which means being involved in practical solidarity on a grass roots level without pushing our politics, self-righteousness and arrogance.

M. (Doncaster)

Letter: The Miners' Strike and the Anarchists

The article (The Miners' Strike and the Left) in *Black Flag* 114 was correct to state the paramount importance of the miners' strike for the working class in this country. Considering themselves an integral part of that class it goes without saying that class struggle anarchists up and down the country are committed to supporting the strike and aiding its victory.

The article was also right to point out the various intrigues and manipulations that other groups of the revolutionary Left are indulging in during the miners' strike. But then this was expected; we know from experience the parasitic way Leninists feed off workers struggles. We hope that as libertarians we take a more *principled* position in workers struggles.

However, though the article was right to condemn the Leninists and then emphasize the importance of real solidarity it seems to me it then went on to adopt an attitude that borders on mere liberalism. Because we oppose the Leninists' practices do we really have to throw the baby out with the bathwater and refrain from any kind of specifically revolutionary propaganda about the strike?

The line pushed by the article is currently fashionable: "There will be plenty of time after the strike to put over our political theories, but during the dispute there is only one form of propaganda, and that is propaganda by deed, through no strings, non-dogmatic, consistent and practical solidarity."

We have to be involved in giving practical aid and solidarity of course (and I have been), but any variety of socialist can do this, and even bleeding heart liberals will collect food for the miners' families (*not many round our way: typesetter*). We should be in the thick of the struggle as anarchists and workers, and we take our own ideas into that struggle.

The article condemns the Socialist Workers Party for taking Jack Taylor (Yorkshire Area President) and other full time officials to task for certain aspects of their handling of the strike. The article says there's little we can criticize these on during the strike (!), and of course they've given up their wages during the strike. Was the article written by Scargill's press agent? True, they have given up their wages during the strike, but then as bureaucrats they've got plenty to spare.

I don't think much of the SWP's strategy, and [it?] is no more valuable than Jack Taylor's (such as their fixation with mass picketing). But I do read '*Socialist Worker*' because it gives probably the best industrial coverage of all the left-wing press, and

I've seen no evidence of the "SWP's assault on the miners" as the article puts it. They have criticised the way the strike has been conducted at various junctures and the failings of full time officials but does this constitute an 'assault on the miners'?

I heard Arthur Scargill speak at a rally a few weeks back. Referring to the NCB closure plan he more or less said "I told you so, you should have listened to me" to the assembled miners. That is the attitude of the most militant of the NUM full time officials; a unionism from the top down. No realization that the grass roots hadn't listened to his warnings because in a reformist unionism the bureaucracy, no matter how left-wing, talks a different language to the grass roots. As anarchists we believe in a unionism by the workers, not an ineffective unionism for the workers. *So save your solidarity for the miners, bureaucrats don't need it.*

This strike holds a number of lessons for the workers movement, and maybe one or two two for the anarchist movement... Firstly it has shown once more the tremendous resilience and power of organised and militant workers. Secondly it has shown the ethical bankruptcy of the Leninist groups whose main priority is selling their paper behind the picket lines while people at the front are getting their heads cracked open. Thirdly it has shown yet again that reformist unionism isn't up to the job. Much of the sacrifice and commitment of the miners and their families has been squandered at times (as when the area NUM leaderships gave "their" steelworks special dispensations to carry on production). As to the response to the bureaucracies of other unions, the less said the better (*wot? - typesetter*).

The article misses the basic point: that the dynamism behind the strike from day one has come from the grass roots of the NUM. On this welcome development, as anarchists and believers in a revolutionary unionism under the conscious control of militant, self-organised workers, we must base our propaganda and activity. We seek working class unity yes. But don't confuse that with entertaining the mistakes and missed opportunities of reformist trade unionism.

D.M.(Middlesborough)

REPLY

There is a difference between revolutionary and anarchist propaganda. Revolutionary propaganda can be seen as the education and agitation which increases peoples understanding of the present society, whilst anarchist propaganda is presenting the anarchist approach to changing society. Whilst revolutionary propaganda in this miners strike, such as pointing out it is not solely a mass conspiracy against the miners, but it is the natural function of the DHSS police etc., is important, putting over the complete anarchist 'package' is not. Therefore the best way to put over anarchism is not by claiming to have the solution to the miners strike, the world and everything, but by proving ourselves as useful allies in the struggle.

Not all NUM bureaucrats (full time, paid officials) are better off than all the miners, some are at the bottom of the structure, are worse paid, these too have given up their salaries. Simplistic attacks on bureaucracies based on ‘they get more money’ etc, is basically petty and shows a lack of understanding of the problem. As anarchists we believe that bureaucracy, hierarchy etc. weakens workers organisations, whether they are paid more or less is irrelevant.

Getting on to the SWP. They have not attacked full time officials, they have attacked selected individuals ie. Jack Taylor, because he is a soft target. Even they aren’t stupid enough to attack Scargill, which could be quite easily done in the same tone as their attack on Taylor. On the lines of [‘]more mass picketing needs national not regional control Scargill’s failure to take control from the regions will lose this strike etc. etc.[’] But they have personalised the miners problems into Jack Taylor – in the same way as the SUN newspaper of the Rupert Murdoch Party blames it all on Scargill.

The *Socialist Worker* may give a good coverage of industrial news but so does the *Newsline* (WRP daily paper) and for that matter the *Financial Times* and the *Sunday Times & Observer* business sections. In all cases there is a need to read between the lines.

Letter: Anarchists and the Miners' strike

Dear *Black Flag*,

I was pleased to see the letter from RG (Exeter) in the *Flag* No. 116. I had been furious about the article "The Miners and the Left" and had intended to write to you myself.

I am stunned that any Anarchist can write that the structures that the miners, or any other strikers, work within are "irrelevant". When I read the article a picture immediately entered my head of a hypothetical union run on fascist lines and headed by a dictator. One sunny day the dictator called a strike and threatened to expel/beat up/ murder every worker who did not support it. As it happened a group of Anarchists supported the premises of the strike and joined the dictator and a small band of others in their actions. A few of the @s had some qualms about it and asked: "Is it really libertarian to work with a dictator?" But their newspaper hastily reassured them that the structure of the union was irrelevant.

You can't be serious.

I thought M (Doncaster)'s reply was useful. It clarified a lot of points which should have been said more clearly in the original article. There's a lot of difference between "running in during disputes, attacking the structures and generally being negative" – which I am sure no @ would advocate – and seeing the structures as "irrelevant".

I was amazed to learn that the article was written to stimulate debate about the nature of solidarity. You could have fooled me!

I thought it was a thinly disguised attack on the SWP. Next time could you make it a bit clearer. An interview with the miners as to *their* idea of useful forms of solidarity would have been far more interesting.

Another point about Ms reply to RG. It was couched in terms of disagreement yet to me M seemed to be making very similar points to RG. eg. I was glad to hear that M *does* recognise as does RG, that criticism if it comes from people clearly giving solidarity *can* be constructive.

Last point – above all "The miners and the Left" was a waste of valuable space which could have been filled with info about workers' struggles – in particular about the miners strike, which to me, is the most important industrial action for years and deserves all of our *informed* support.

Fighting with the miners,

C.G. Hackney/ London E8

REPLY

To CG, Hackney,

For your information, the article “The Miners and the Left” was written from a report ‘Bores Under the Floor’, which happened to be written by a miner for miners; also from conversations with miners on picket lines; as our neighbours; as our friends; and as our comrades. Of course it was about the nature of solidarity. As for the attack on the SWP, that comes directly from the miners.

Perhaps I’m wrong, but your hypothetical case seems to be a thinly disguised, cheap and safe attack on A. Scargill! He did not call the strike – this happened as a direct result of miners coming out in support of the Cortonwood men whose pit was threatened with imminent closure. Scargill & Taylor had nothing to do with it – see previous issues of *Black Flag* which spells this out quite clearly. Expulsion of scabs is a call from the rank & file. Of course there are doubts about this, but it is up to the rank & file miners to decide. Plus, the deaths in this strike have been the deaths of pickets; people are lying in intensive care with broken skulls & suspected brain damage – they are pickets injured by thug pigs. Old women have had their homes broken into by pigs wielding truncheons. Children have had limbs broken by these same pigs.

Having been involved with this strike from day one, not only on picket lines daily but also giving economic support, moral support, our time and energy to the communities involved in this dispute – including our own – I find your cheap jibes insulting. If you believe that debating about the nature of solidarity is a waste of space then there’s something wrong – because the nature of solidarity is about workers struggle and vice versa. Our reporting of the strike in this area for *Black Flag* has been informed – if you want interviews with miners go on the picket lines – you’re not too far from Kent, & talk with the people involved there.

There seems to me to be too much attacking of the NUM in this strike¹ and not enough attacking the NCB, the government, or the pigs. The structure of the NUM may not be perfect, but attacking that during the middle of the most important workers struggle in the country for years, is counter-productive. Miners themselves have started to question the structures but want unity now & we should respect this. This is not defending the bureaucrats, only the rank & file. Talk *with* members of the mining communities, don’t patronizingly spout purist platitudes from the safe confines of Hackney. And if you want articles on workers’ struggles, and can’t get to Kent, why not try writing about those struggles in your area – or aren’t there any?!

At the moment we in mining areas feel that we are in a country that is occupied by an enemy force – which we are. Pigs from London, Manchester, in fact from all over the country, are occupying our streets and attacking us. Living here doesn’t allow itself to us wasting time on cheap jibes about a union. Our solidarity is with the men,

¹ by people who know nothing of its history, structure and nature.

women and children who make up the pit communities, & we shall continue to fight with them, and report about that fight.

Fighting with the miners (literally)

J & M (Doncaster)

The Miners & Social Change

Strikers now find themselves in major confrontation with the police. It is an eye-opener for all those trade unionists who have been elected to public office, to councils and to Parliament, who sit as magistrates or school governors or on tribunals and fancy themselves as part of the Establishment, to find that a determined government can at one blow wipe it all away. Miners – even the lower echelon of the union machine – are having to battle in the streets, to bleed under truncheons, to face political grilling in police stations, to be stopped at roadblocks, to have their homes searched, to be fined and imprisoned. All this has happened before, but to ‘extremists’... suddenly the ‘extreme’ becomes nearer than they thought.

Only a matter of months ago one odd member of the anti-strike brigade was deprecating the printers of Fleet Street and their high wages (which were fought for over the years) saying how much more he would think of them (not that he would *do* anything) if they were to stop printing lies – regarding this as totally unthinkable. Now they have done just this. They have forced the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* to print the other side, they have stopped the *Sun* altogether because it wouldn’t. (‘An infringement of free speech!’ cry those who think only a few proprietors have the right to freedom of expression).

Amongst the lies being hurled at the strikers is the one that says that this is all a bid for power by or for Arthur Scargill. Mr Scargill is being built up as the Lenin of the strike by the anti-strike brigade: those who fight for it are tarred as wishing to build up a Scargill Government, as puppets of Scargill, as bootlickers of Scargill, as minions of a Scargill dictatorship.

The miners are organised in an authoritarian body, the National Union of Mineworkers, and Scargill at it’s head has the spotlight on him. But to imagine the fight is for ‘Scargill’ is to fall for the most obvious brainwashing we have had since we were told the war was ‘won’ by Churchill. Few men will undergo six months of voluntary semi (or actual) starvation out of hero-worship or blind following – against the brainwashing of the media – however eloquent or handsome Scargill is – and if they did they would not have the backing of the women who have emerged as the greatest of fighters.

Scargill happens to boss the NUM, but then the struggle is not for the NUM. It is the whole structure of the NUM – tied to the closed shop system beloved of British trade unionism because it saves them so much bother and normally excludes having to fight that has caused the division between workers. If an independent miners union wanted to fight and some people didn’t want to, they could go and be damned.

In a closed shop union miners who want to scab – because of greed or fear of the consequences or concern for their families – want at the same time to remain as unionists because it is the only way they know to guarantee having jobs at all. If expelled they appeal, to the courts. What have judges to do with a workers union? A union is to fight economic battles; not to be determined by every law. The fight would have been long won since if those who felt threatened by the closures had been able to part company with those who did not feel the threat affected them yet, and who think they can afford to wait until it does and work meantime, paying their mortgages and hire purchases and keeping their holidays and cars.

If those who had no stomach to fight had been allowed to leave the union, they would have seen there was no alternative but to fight. The notion that ‘they should have balloted’ (echoed by all the reactionaries who never hold ballots on anything affecting themselves) is a false cry. The only purpose of balloting would be to preserve the unity of the closed shop union. No miners would vote yes on whether they wanted pits to close. A number would have disagreed with striking – but obviously they would not be people being closed down, they would be the ones in hopefully secure pits (or so they think).

The struggle has transformed the mining communities politically. Most older miners always hoped that the task of mining as it is known would eventually cease. But nothing is offered in its place. The NCB is taking the means by which whole valleys and communities live and ordering them to be extinct. This is being done by the nationalised coal industry, which was a 75 year ambition of socialism and trade unionism – something which the NUM forgets when it mightily attacks coal chief MacGregor.

The younger miners are battling against police and pickets. But this is not a battle for the streets and it will not be won there. If the police are defeated they bring in the army and all the reserve forces being built up by the new dictatorship. That front must not be neglected and it is one on which major support is needed, but like war the strike will be won or lost on provisions. In this the women of the coalfields have shown superb communal organising ability and received enormous support which has won the admiration of organised workers everywhere. They must not be allowed to perish for want of ‘lease-lend’.

Albert Meltzer.

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Black Flag
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Retrieved on 19th May 2021 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net

From: *Black Flag* no. 114. (vol. 7, no.6C) 1984, no.116 (vol. 7, no.6E, 6/8/84),
no.118 (vol.7, no.6G 3/9/1984) and no. 119 (vol.7, no.7A, 15/10/1984).

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