

1984/85 MINERS' STRIKE

The miners' strike that began in March 1984 is a subject which to this day inspires strong feelings in those who were most closely involved. At the time it was a bitterly fought battle, which nobody felt they could afford to lose, and it is still a highly controversial topic.

The Conservative government, led by Mrs Thatcher, believed that the coal industry should be run without a huge government subsidy, which stood at over £900 million in 1983. This in turn meant that the National Coal Board, under the leadership of its Chairman Ian MacGregor, needed to make the industry more competitive and bring it into line with market forces. One way of doing this was to close non-economic pits to ensure the overall survival of a viable industry.

Miners working for the National Coal Board saw this as a direct threat to the security of their jobs, either in the short or longer term. Therefore, in March 1984, when the NCB announced its plans to close Cortonwood colliery in South Yorkshire and Polmaise colliery near Alloa, local strikes were



*Ian MacGregor, NCB
Chairman*

called across the country. The National Union of Mineworkers, headed by Arthur Scargill and Mick McGahey, its President and Vice-President, declared the strike official but refused to hold a ballot for fear of undermining the men already on strike. Some miners saw this as an illegal move by the union and continued to work.

Some Union officials declared that Mrs Thatcher's government was working to a different agenda, and that the real motive was to break the power of the unions that had crippled the Conservative government of the 1970s. Their argument was further supported by the introduction of new trade union laws enforced by the police to try to break down trade union solidarity. From the early 1980s changes in social security laws penalised striking workers and this was also cited as evidence of a long-planned campaign against the unions.

Throughout the strike, picket line violence between police and strikers became an important symbol of the continuing struggle. Miners argued that the police used unnecessary force, while police listed instances of threats, violence and



*Arthur Scargill and Mick
McGahey, N.U.M.*

1984/85 MINERS' STRIKE

intimidation of miners who chose to work by striking miners. The National Coal Board argued that had the strike been led by someone other than Arthur Scargill, it would have ended after 6 months, and that rather than settling he kept it going for his own political beliefs.

Coal had been stockpiled at the pitheads and power stations in the months prior to the strike and even after nearly a year on strike coal was still plentiful. Gradually, disillusioned with the strike, men began to return to work, and by February more men were at work than on strike. On 5th March 1985 the union officially ended the strike with nothing gained by the miners from their year long battle.

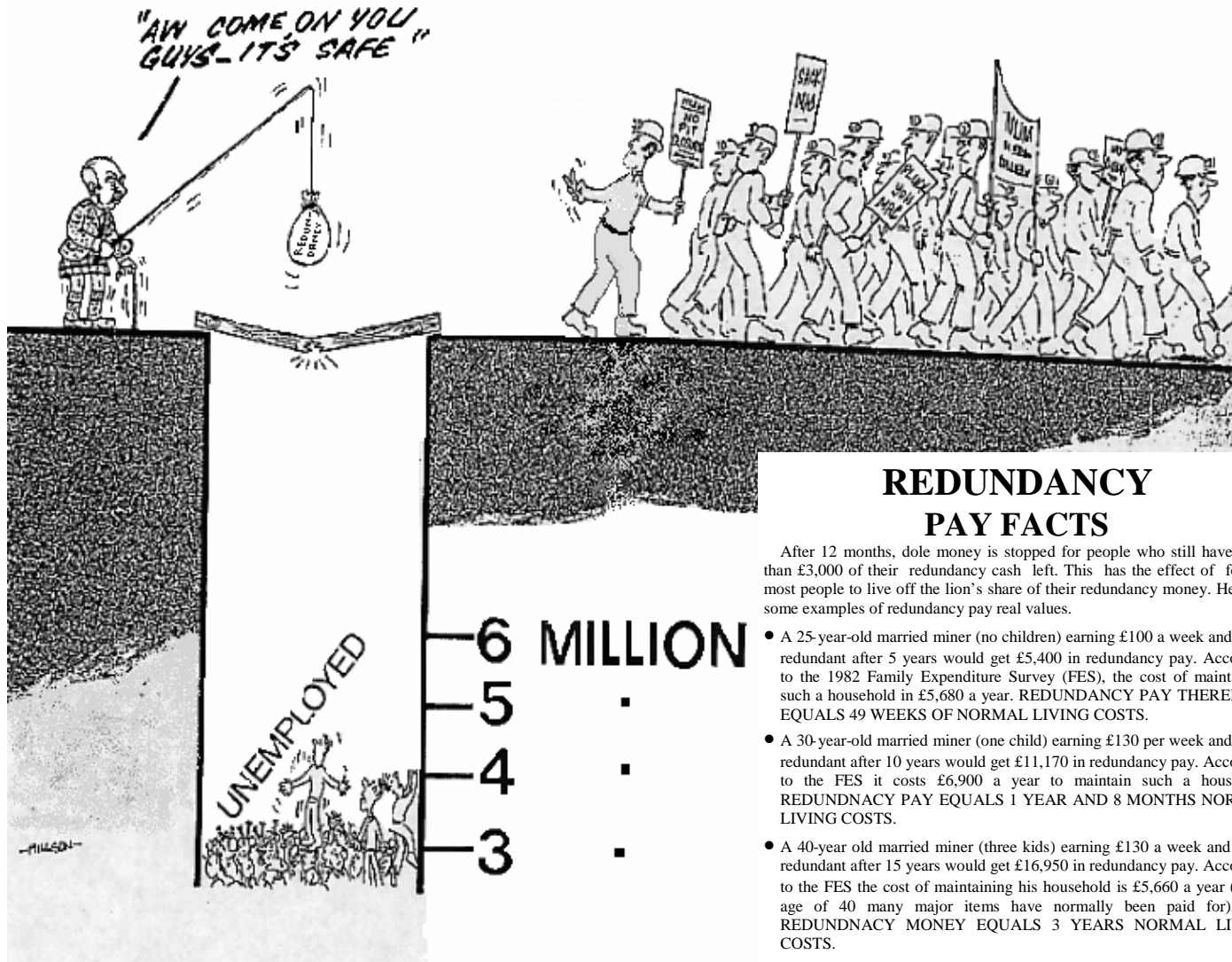
By 1990 the coal industry in Scotland had virtually disappeared with all but one of Scotland's deep pits closed.

The subject is still one fiercely debated with no neat historical perspective. To make your own judgements read the information which follows.



*From 'The Miner Special Issue'
Thursday March 7th 1985*

1984/85 MINERS' STRIKE



REDUNDANCY PAY FACTS

After 12 months, dole money is stopped for people who still have more than £3,000 of their redundancy cash left. This has the effect of forcing most people to live off the lion's share of their redundancy money. Here are some examples of redundancy pay real values.

- A 25-year-old married miner (no children) earning £100 a week and made redundant after 5 years would get £5,400 in redundancy pay. According to the 1982 Family Expenditure Survey (FES), the cost of maintaining such a household is £5,680 a year. REDUNDANCY PAY THEREFORE EQUALS 49 WEEKS OF NORMAL LIVING COSTS.
- A 30-year-old married miner (one child) earning £130 per week and made redundant after 10 years would get £11,170 in redundancy pay. According to the FES it costs £6,900 a year to maintain such a household. REDUNDANCY PAY EQUALS 1 YEAR AND 8 MONTHS NORMAL LIVING COSTS.
- A 40-year old married miner (three kids) earning £130 a week and made redundant after 15 years would get £16,950 in redundancy pay. According to the FES the cost of maintaining his household is £5,660 a year (at the age of 40 many major items have normally been paid for). HIS REDUNDANCY MONEY EQUALS 3 YEARS NORMAL LIVING COSTS.

*From 'The Miner Special Issue',
March 1984*

1984/85 MINERS' STRIKE

CHRONOLOGY OF THE STRIKE

- 1970s** Conservative government crippled by strikes.
- 1979** Conservative party wins General Election; Margaret Thatcher becomes Prime Minister.
- 1980** Coal Industry Act: NCB required to operate without a subsidy by 1984 (then over £900 million).
- 1981** **Feb** NCB announces plans to cut 10 million tonnes of capacity and close 50 pits. NUM threaten strikes; the plans are withdrawn. Coal production exceeds consumption and stocks start to build up.
- Dec** Arthur Scargill elected NUM President.
- 1983** **June** Conservative Party wins second General Election with a huge majority.
- Sep** Ian MacGregor appointed Chairman of NCB with orders to run the coal industry without a subsidy. NUM rejects 5.2% pay rise; overtime ban starts.
- 1984** **1st Mar** 58 million tons of coal stockpiled at pitheads and power stations. Closure of Cortonwood Colliery in South Yorkshire and Polmaise Colliery in Stirlingshire announced.
- 6th Mar** NCB announces new policy to bring production in line with demand by closing uneconomic pits.
- 8th Mar** NUM Executive makes strikes over closures official, and calls for nationwide support. No ballot is held; some miners declare this illegal and continue to work.
- 1984** Picketing begins as NCB encourages men to return to work and the NUM tries to stop them. Picket line violence between police and pickets becomes a symbol of the struggle.
- Sep** Working miners persuade the courts to declare the strike unlawful due to the lack of a ballot; union assets seized. NCB and NUM negotiations break down.
- Nov** NCB offer Christmas bonuses to persuade more men to return to work.
-

1984/85 MINERS' STRIKE

1985 **Jan** Following a mild winter 36 million tons of coal are still stockpiled at pitheads and power stations.

Feb Over 50% of miners have returned to work.

5th Mar After one year the strike ends.

 Some pits did not reopen due to flooding.

1985 Bogside, Frances and Polkemmet closed

1986 Comrie and Killoch closed

1987 Polmaise closed

1988 Seafield closed

1989 Barony and Bilston Glen closed, and Monktonhall mothballed.

 Castlebridge is Scotland's only remaining colliery.

1984/85 MINERS' STRIKE

QUOTATIONS

"The greatest achievement is the struggle..."

Arthur Scargill

"A wise man would never take on the Pope or the National Union of Mineworkers"

Stanley Baldwin (Prime Minister 1920s and 1930s)

"Scottish miners have no heart for the struggle."

Durham miners picketing at Bilston Glen

"We were solid during the strike at Polmaise. There was not a single attempt at scabbing throughout the whole year. No-one even tried to get to their work, so we didn't need a picket line."

'Polmaise: The Fight for a Pit'

"I am always ready to listen if somebody has some logical arguments to put forward. I have not heard any ... so far."

Ian McGregor, NCB Chairman

"This is the first miners' strike... without a national ballot. It has set area against area and divided families and villages amongst themselves."

Peter Shore, Shadow Trade Minister

"The NCB is producing much more coal than it can find a market for..."

Monopolies and Mergers Commission, 1983

"What we have seen is an attack on democracy and the rule of law."

Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher

"...the clearest attempt... to use violence, intimidation and industrial blackmail to force out of office a democratically elected government."

Home Secretary, Leon Brittan

"Mrs Thatcher's hatchet man was brought in to close as many pits as possible."

Arthur Scargill of Ian McGregor

"In the Falklands, we had to fight the enemy without. Here the enemy is within, and it is more difficult to fight, and more dangerous to liberty."

Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher

"People are now discovering the price of insubordination and insurrection. And boy, are we going to make it stick."

Ian MacGregor, NCB Chairman

1984/85 MINERS' STRIKE



Eric Clarke, Secretary of the Scottish NUM



Mick McGahey, Vice President of the NUM

1984/85 MINERS' STRIKE



Miners from Polmaise Colliery



Campaigning for the reinstatement of sacked miners.