

## **Nationalisation of Scotland's Coal Industry**

### **Background**

January 2017 marked the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nationalisation of the British Coal mining industry.

There had been calls for the industry to be nationalised since the 1880s, with Keir Hardie (founder of the Independent Labour Party), arguing for 'Cooperative production under state management.' However, with only a fledgling Trade Union movement to push for this change and a plethora of private mine companies making vast sums of money from their enterprises (and controlled by politically influential owners), there was little likelihood of such a major overhaul of the industry.

However, during the 1920s, political support for nationalising the industry increased. The main argument in its favour was as a potential remedy to strikes. With such a valuable commodity as coal, industrial unrest could cause widespread economic disruption.

The Samuel Commission of 1925-1926 had suggested a limited approach to government management of the industry that gave the government more insight but did not place it directly under their control. The Coal Mines Act of 1930 made regulation of the production, supply and sale of coal a government responsibility. The collieries were divided into 21 districts and reported to the National Central Council, which set minimum prices.

During First World War, the Government took ownership of coal reserves and control of the industry, although the ownership of mining companies remained in private hands. The Ministry of Fuel and Power managed the industry, planning and coordinating production through regional coal boards. By the end of the Second World War, the industry was in crisis and production was in decline.

### **The Implementation of Nationalisation**

The Coal Industry Nationalisation Act was passed on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1946 with the newly formed National Coal Board (NCB) taking over the industry on 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1947. From the start, the industry was at a disadvantage, for while the NCB inherited the physical assets of the mines from the coal companies, they did not receive their capital. The coal companies remained independent, seeking profit in other industrial sectors. The assets the NCB did receive included 1500 collieries and the 60,000 acres of land occupied for mining purposes, 30 manufactured fuel and briquetting plants, 55 coke ovens, 85 brickworks and pipe-works, 1803 farms, 140,000 houses and 27,000 farmhouses, 275 shops and other assets such as private railways across the whole of Britain<sup>1</sup>. Gathering information on these assets was expensive and time consuming.

### **Challenges Facing the Industry**

The NCB was burdened with managing an industry that was already in trouble. The coal mining industry in Britain as a whole and Scotland in particular was already in a state of decline before nationalisation. The Great Depression took its toll on the nation, with Scotland in particular

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<sup>1</sup> *Scottish Collieries: An Inventory of the Scottish Coal Industry in the Nationalised Era* (Miles K Oglethorpe, The Royal Commission of the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland) P.17

suffering. Between 1926 and 1947 600 Scottish pits had closed<sup>2</sup>. When the NCB inherited the industry it was already in an unhealthy state, limiting its productivity.

Additionally, nuclear, hydro and gas power began to compete with coal, which cut into the industry's profits. The increased use of cars made the use of coal for train fuel increasingly redundant. Both of these factors made the British coal industry less profitable and caused the Government to question its value in the long term. This was further exacerbated by the increased use of opencast mining which reduced the need for traditional mining methods. This intensified an already difficult economic situation. The NCB's ability to keep the industry afloat was limited as they were handling a business that was already in decline and was now further undermined by competition from abroad.

From the 1960s, a greater awareness of the industry's impact on the environment caused many people to be concerned about using coal. Under pressure from competition the industry made an effort to improve its image. Bags of cheap coal known as nuggets were made available at vending machines in bus stations. They were a smokeless coal manufactured in Niddrie in Edinburgh, partly because the clean-air legislation had banned the burning of ordinary coal in many urban areas. Additionally, a home delivery service was made available, with drivers dressed in white overalls deliberately designed to resemble milkmen in order to create the image of coal as clean source of energy.

### **Improved Workplace standards: The Successes and Failures of the Industry**

Despite these drawbacks, the NCB implemented a number of successful reforms, especially in improving standards of health and safety. Equipment like kneepads and self-rescuers were introduced and made compulsory. The latter was a small machine on the belt that allowed miners to breathe in an area where the air was contaminated. Regular examinations for dust disease were set up during the mid-sixties along with the introduction of safety masks, though these were not always successful due to miners refusing to wear them. In 1956, free safety helmets and boots were distributed to miners for the first time. Following an outbreak of Weil's disease in Fife in 1951 that resulted in nine deaths, there was a successful effort to eliminate rats from the pits<sup>3</sup>. Greater controls over shot firing were implemented to avoid explosions.

Pit head baths and canteens were also introduced<sup>4</sup>, as well as proper medical facilities. Before Nationalisation many collieries had little medical support beyond a first aid room and sometimes depended on the village nurse for assistance. The NCB also made efforts to support workers and their families. 13,000 new houses were built for workers, although there was disillusionment amongst some as these houses were sometimes unfinished when the new occupants arrived.

However, these new policies did not completely manage to improve safety standards as accidents still persisted. At Auchengeich in September 1959 47 miners died from gas poisoning after a fire and explosion caused by a faulty ventilation fan belt. In 1962, 40 men were killed in Scottish Pits, 190 suffered serious injuries and 21,000 were injured<sup>5</sup>. So, while these improvements had a lot of

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<sup>3</sup> *The Mine Workers* (Robert Duncan, Birlinn, 2005) P.254

<sup>4</sup> *Scottish Collieries: An Inventory of the Scottish Coal Industry in the Nationalised Era* (Miles K Oglethorpe, The Royal Commission of the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland) P.24

<sup>5</sup> *The Mine Workers* (Robert Duncan, Birlinn, 2005) P.250

successes they were not fool proof. They would, however, leave a legacy that went far beyond the coal industry as these safety standards would be applied to working practises throughout the UK.

### **The Decline of the British Mining Industry**

The NCB was also successful in spearheading many projects. Midlothian programmes such as Bilston Glen were especially successful.

Unfortunately many new collieries closed down in these years before they could reach their full potential as the modernisation programme turned out to be slower and more costly than anticipated, undermining confidence in the ability of the NCB to produce results.

The 1960s also saw large chunks of the Scottish workforce moving to England. Between 1962 and 1966 the transfer policy moved thousands, including 1,400 to Yorkshire and 1,500 to the Midlands. This process would change during the 1970s as closure of collieries was more likely to result in the redundancy rather than the redeployment of the workforce. Some provisions were granted to, for example, older workers who were often pensioned off.

Scotland's geography also made mining there more finically risky. This meant that the problems that affected the industry elsewhere in Britain were more extreme in Scotland.

1984 was a major turning point with the infamous Miners' Strike, which began after an attempt to shut down Polmaise Colliery. Despite enjoying substantial popularity among miners and their families, the strike wore on long into the winter, deflating much enthusiasm for supporting it. Issues such as the failure to take a national strike ballot undermined its credibility in the eyes of some of the workforce. Despite these issues, large scale protests broke out at many British collieries. 14,000 workers went on strike in Scotland and 100,000 in England and Wales during this period<sup>6</sup>. However, newly implemented Government policies weakened the strike by preventing other industries joining it in support of the miners. New laws also significantly cut the benefits of striking families.

From the 1950s onwards there was a consistent decline in the Scottish work force:<sup>7</sup>

1956: 82,700

1961: 56,700

1966: 43,000

1971: 28,400

1976: 23,616

The changes in policy and the strikes had a significant impact on the industry though, as we can see from these figures, the decline predated these problems. All these factors culminated to deal the mining industry a blow from which it never truly recovered. The Strike ended and the industry would continue on, but began to focus more and more on opencast mining. Longannet, the last deep coal mine in Scotland was closed in 2002 due to flooding.

### **Conclusion**

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<sup>6</sup> *The Mine Workers* (Robert Duncan, Birlinn, 20005) P.259

<sup>7</sup> *The Mine Workers* (Robert Duncan, Birlinn, 20005) P.246

It would be difficult to place the blame on any one factor the decline of the British coal industry. However we can look at these competing factors and come to some agreement regarding their importance. The NCB was burdened by having to manage an industry that was already in decline. Despite this, it introduced many innovative new features to the workplace such as improved safety standards and working conditions. These were not always entirely successful, as major accidents and fatalities persisted. The industry's decline was exacerbated by competition from abroad, internal problems with the management of the NCB and changes in Government policy. Nationalisation was, at times, flawed in its implementation but cannot be blamed entirely for the decline of the Scottish and British coal industries and it made many pivotal contributions to the standards of care and workplace safety in the British workplace.

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