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Jim Phillips, 'Containing, Isolating and Defeating the Miners: the UK Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal and the three phases of the 1984–5 Strike', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 35 (2014), 117-141

The thirtieth anniversary of the start of the 1984–5 miners' strike in Britain coincided with the release of various UK government archive papers under the 30-year rule. Media and press coverage of this release concentrated on two issues. First, Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), was broadly right when he argued before and during the strike that there was a secret Conservative government and National Coal Board (NCB) 'hit list', framing the closure over a three-year period of roughly seventy five pits with the loss of perhaps 64,000 of the industry's 200,000 jobs. Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister, discussed this list in a meeting on 15 September 1983 with Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, and Norman Tebbit, Secretary of State for Employment, together with various officials, yet the government consistently claimed in public that a much smaller programme of shrinkage, possibly extending only to twenty pits, was being contemplated. Second, in July 1984 the government examined declaring a State of Emergency to allow military personnel to move coal imports and other materials through the ports to break a short-lived but economically-damaging strike by dock workers. This private discussion jarred with the government's public insistence that neither the actions of the striking miners or any other group of unionized workers were disturbing the normalcy of economic and industrial life in Britain. Media analysis in 2014 of this latter and vital episode in the strike was truncated, dwelling on the details of troop numbers, and evading the complex industrial and political issues,¹ summarized by this author in a letter published by *The Guardian*. The dock workers had withdrawn their labour in a dispute over the handling of coal imports by British Steel Corporation (BSC) employees at Immingham on the Humber. This appeared to threaten the National Dock Labour Scheme, which provided registered dock workers with employment, income security, and an element of joint industrial regulation, and itself a component of the

¹ N. Higham, 'Cabinet papers reveal "secret coal pits closure plan"', BBC News, 3 January 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-25549596>; A. Travis, 'Thatcher had secret plan to use army at height of miners' strike', *The Guardian*, 3 January 2014.

wider social-democratic legacy of the 1940s which Thatcher and her ministers were dismantling. Thatcher's Secretary of State for Transport, Nicholas Ridley, pledged in the House of Commons that his government had no plans to abolish the Scheme. The dockers returned to work, although some with major misgivings, and the government's immediate economic difficulties were resolved.² The Dock Labour Scheme was abolished in 1989, by a Conservative administration reconstituted after the 1987 General Election, but only in this narrow sense had Ridley – speaking about the existing government's plans in 1984 – not misled Parliament.

This article develops analysis of these two headline issues. With the closure programme it is argued that Ministers were determined to ensure that the NCB could shut pits unilaterally, without the agreement of the NUM and other industry unions. This marked a major rupture with the nationalized coal industry's system of joint regulation and its related 'moral economy', where significant changes were reached only with the agreement of unions and where the economic security of coalfield communities was preserved. With the July episode the scale of the Prime Minister's antipathy to the Dock Labour Scheme is demonstrated, along with the duplicity of her ministers in ensuring that dockers ended their stoppage so that the striking miners remained isolated. Huw Beynon, in a recent lecture to the Manchester Industrial Relations Society, argued that there were three phases to the strike: initial division of the coalfields, between working areas and striking areas; followed by a 'face off' between striking miners and the government; and then the long 'entrenchment', with divisions in communities in all coalfields as striking miners slowly returned to work.³ In this analysis a three-phased model is also adopted. Initially, from March to May, the government sought to contain the scale of the strike and its economic and political effects; then, roughly from May to October, the striking miners were isolated from other groups of unionized workers and inhibited in their construction of broader social and political anti-government alliances; and thereafter Thatcher and her ministers moved to secure the unconditional defeat of the strikers and the NUM. These phases – or the strategic priorities pursued by the government within these phases – overlapped to an extent. So in the opening weeks the government worked to contain the strike in part by isolating the

² *The Guardian*, Letters, 4 January 2014.

³ H. Beynon, 'The Great Miners' Strike, 1984-5: Reflections and Legacies', Lecture, Manchester Industrial Relations Society, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, 20 March 2014.

miners; and in the isolation phase ministers were already working – from June onwards – to inflict defeat on the NUM, chiefly through the NCB’s ‘back to work’ campaign.

The article is based on the 350-plus pages of minutes of the Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal (CMGC) which were also released on 1 January.⁴ These provide a detailed record of government thinking and action. Meetings took place usually twice a week from the start of the strike in March until the end of October, when NACODS, the union of pit deputies and safety officers, agreed a revised system for consultation and agreement on pit closures with the NCB. This lifted the threat of a complete stoppage of work in the coalfields and was the government’s second and final crisis of 1984–5 after the docks episode in July. The CMGC met just once a week thereafter. The personnel of the Ministerial Group further under-lines the centrality of its work. The Prime Minister usually chaired its meetings, which were attended by core Cabinet figures in Walker, Lawson, Tebbit, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by this point, plus Ridley, Tom King, Secretary of State for Employment, Leon Brittan, Home Secretary, Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for Defence, and Michael Havers, Attorney General. George Younger, Secretary of State for Scotland, was either present or represented by one of his Ministers of State. Peter Dorey has pointed out that while each of these figures served on this Group because of ‘functional’ or departmental role, Lawson, Tebbit, King and Ridley were all key Thatcher supporters; Walker, Heseltine and Younger were not Thatcherites, but unyielding all the same in criticizing the NUM and the strike.⁵

The general thrust of existing literature is that Thatcher and her ministers were determined to defeat the NUM, and covertly intervened in the strike in a number of ways.⁶ This is broadly confirmed by the CMGC minutes, which show the extent of government micro-management in three crucial areas: NCB strategy and negotiations with the NUM and other industry unions, plus the ‘back to work’ campaign; the handling of related disputes,

⁴ Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal (hereafter CMGC), CAB 130/1268, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA).

⁵ P. Dorey, “It was Just Like Arming to Face the Threat of Hitler in the late 1930s”. The Ridley Report and the Conservative Party’s Preparations for the 1984–85 Miners’ Strike’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations (HSIR)* 34 (2013), pp. 173–214.

⁶ T. Brotherstone and S. Pirani, ‘Were There Alternatives? Movements from Below in the Scottish Coalfield, the Communist Party, and Thatcherism, 1981–1985’, *Critique* 36–7 (2005), pp. 99–124; A. Richards, *Miners on Strike. Class Solidarity and Division in Britain* (Berg, Oxford: 1996); R. Samuel, B. Bloomfield and G. Bonas (eds), *The Enemies Within: Pit Villages and the Miners’ Strike of 1984–5* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1986).

such as that in the docks; and the conduct of policing, ensuring that striking miners were prevented from mustering at power stations, steel works, and other pressure points. More significantly, the CMGC files also provide unambiguous evidence that the government's chief goal in the strike was the removal of effective union representation from the coal industry, with important demonstration effects across the economy more generally. This was hinted at by Martin Adeney and John Lloyd, writing in 1986,⁷ and represented one of the main conclusions of Seumas Milne's analysis of the British state's determined campaign against the NUM and its leadership, originally published in 1994.⁸ It was also the core theme of Beynon's recent Manchester lecture, but more broadly has been absent from the main body of literature on the strike, both contemporaneous and historical, and whether focusing on high politics,⁹ operational details,¹⁰ or the community and social effects.¹¹ Dismantling the right of workers to meaningful voice, in the workplace and in the boardroom on higher level strategic questions, including disinvestment, was arguably more important than closing inefficient or 'uneconomic' collieries. The analysis of the three phases of the CMGC discussions is prefaced by a contextual examination of the changing political economy of coal in the decade preceding the strike, starting with the Conservative Party's 'Stepping Stones' approach to curtailing union influence, which had a particular saliency in the coal industry. There was subsequently tension between the Thatcher government's enhanced prioritization of pit-level and NCB area economic performance, embodied in the 1980 Coal Industry Act, and the established moral economy of the coalfields, which the striking miners tried unsuccessfully to defend in 1984–5.

⁷ M. Adeney and J. Lloyd, *The Miners' Strike, 1984–5: Loss Without Limit* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1986), pp. 3–4.

⁸ S. Milne, *The Enemy Within: the Secret War Against the Miners* (Verso: 4th edition, 2014).

⁹ F. Beckett and D. Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line. The 1984 Miners' Strike and the Death of Industrial Britain* (Constable: 2009); A. McSmith, *No Such Thing as Society: a History of the 1980s* (Constable: 2010); D. Stewart, 'A Tragic "Fiasco"? The 1984–5 Miners' Strike in Scotland', *Scottish Labour History* 41 (2006), pp. 34–50.

¹⁰ A. Maxwell, *Chicago Tumbles: Cowdenbeath and the Miners' Strike* (Barr Printers, Glenrothes: 1994); J. Stead, *Never the Same Again. Women and the Miners' Strike, 1984–5* (Women's Press: 1987); J. Winterton and R. Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict: The 1984–85 Miners' Strike in Yorkshire* (Manchester University Press: 1989).

¹¹ V. Seddon (ed.), *The Cutting Edge. Women and the Pit Strike* (Lawrence and Wishart: 1986); P. Gibbon and D. Steyne, *Thurcroft: a Village and the Miners' Strike: an oral history* (Spokesman, Nottingham: 1986); J. Owens (ed.), *Miners, 1984–1994: A Decade of Endurance* (Polygon, Edinburgh: 1994).

The changing political economy of coal, 1974–84

There was a Thatcherite ‘turn’ in Conservative thinking on unions and the economy after the defeat of the Heath government in 1974.¹² Two initiatives can be emphasized, both developed in 1977–8: the *Stepping Stones* political and communications strategy, and the ‘Ridley Plan’. *Stepping Stones* was written by John Hoskyns, policy adviser to Thatcher, and Norman Strauss, of Unilever, and included a lengthy annexe, ‘The Union Problem’.¹³ Unions were presented as an oppositional barrier to a Conservative government rather than a potential social partner. Their workplace voice and political influence were to be eroded indirectly, however, through legislative and political increments, including a concerted government communications strategy directly relating an exaggerated view of Britain’s alleged economic and industrial problems to union wage demands and opposition to productivity improvements.¹⁴ The ‘Ridley Plan’ was a four-page appendix to the final report of the Conservative Party’s Nationalised Industry Policy Group, leaked to *The Economist* in 1978. This argued that Conservative plans for achieving greater ‘efficiency’ in publicly-owned industries and utilities could be defeated by determined union opposition. In the coal industry this would necessitate four counter measures: stockpiling reserves; converting power stations to dual coal/oil firing; recruiting non-union road haulage firms to move coal and confound sympathetic action by unionized rail workers; and establishing mobile police units to outmanoeuvre flying pickets.¹⁵ Dorey’s recent analysis of this plan used in its title the words of Nigel Lawson, from an interview on the tenth anniversary of the strike: ‘It was

¹² P. Dorey, ‘Conciliation or Confrontation with the Trade Unions? The Conservative Party’s “Authority of Government Group”, 1975–1978’, *HSIR* 27/28 (2009), pp. 135–51; C. Howell, *Trade Unions and the State: the Construction of Industrial Relations Institutions in Britain, 1890–2000* (Princeton University Press: 2005), pp. 131–73; P. Smith and G. Morton, ‘The Conservative Governments’ Reform of Employment Law, 1979–97: “Stepping Stones” and the “New Right” Agenda’, *HSIR* 12 (2001), pp. 131–47.

¹³ P. Dorey, ‘The *Stepping Stones* programme: The Conservative Party’s struggle to develop a Trade Union Policy, 1975–79’, *HSIR* 35 (2014), pp.

¹⁴ J. Tomlinson, ‘Thatcherism, Monetarism and the Politics of Inflation’, in B. Jackson and R. Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher’s Britain* (Cambridge University Press: 2012), pp. 62–77; J. Hoskyns and N. Strauss, *Stepping Stones*, November 1977, Margaret Thatcher Foundation: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/111771>.

¹⁵ J. Saville ‘An Open Conspiracy: Conservative Politics and the Miners’ Strike, 1984–5’, *The Socialist Register* 22 (1985–86), pp. 295–329.

just like arming to face the threat of Hitler in the late 1930s'.¹⁶ This could be seen as a composed rationalization of actions after the event, but was consistent with the Conservative government's approach to the coal industry before the strike as well as Thatcher's notorious characterization of the striking miners in July 1984 as 'the enemy within'.¹⁷

Stepping Stones and the Ridley Plan guided the government's general strategy after 1979 as well as policy details in the nationalized sectors and industrial relations. The budgets of 1979 and 1980 squeezed the money supply and inflation, restrained economic activity and widened social inequality, reversing the trend since 1945.¹⁸ Ostensibly the government's economic agenda was liberal, 'rolling back the frontiers of the state', with decreased public expenditure and industrial stake to release private enterprise and investment and so stimulate economic growth. But the shock therapy of monetarism created unexpected economic problems, especially a much greater and more permanent loss of industrial employment than had been anticipated, which the government was politically obliged to manage, chiefly with increased welfare expenditure, financed by North Sea oil revenue. Beatty and Fothergill have shown that the extent of joblessness was hidden after 1979-80, with ex-industrial workers incentivized to withdraw from economic activity altogether by the structures and mechanisms of the social security system. Those who registered as disabled, or 'permanently sick', and were therefore nominally unable to work, received more attractive benefits than those officially registered as unemployed, these being slightly higher in payment and not means-tested. Many recently redundant industrial workers in the 1980s had modest occupational pensions which they could access alongside sickness benefits, and the earnings of other household members were unaffected. Many 'permanently sick' individuals were neither physically incapable of work, nor seeking to evade it, and were unemployed in all but official name. The fundamental problem was the disappearance of meaningful economic opportunities. Among all men of working age (16-64) in Great Britain in 1991 the official measure of unemployment was 10.4% but the 'real' level was 14.9%. In the coalfields of England, Wales and Scotland unemployment among

¹⁶ Dorey, 'The Ridley Report', p. 173.

¹⁷ M. Thatcher, Speech to 1922 Committee ('the enemy within'), 19 July 1984, Margaret Thatcher Foundation: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105563>.

¹⁸ J. Tomlinson, 'Mrs Thatcher's Macroeconomic Adventurism, 1979-81, and its Political Consequences', *British Politics* 2 (2007), pp. 3-19.

working age men accelerated after the 1984-5 strike: officially 12.4% in 1991, but ‘really’ 22.5%.¹⁹

The willingness to fund enhanced benefits for displaced industrial workers was of a piece with *Stepping Stones*, a practical exercise in minimizing opposition to the government’s larger strategic objectives. These were less geared to lowering public expenditure as an end in itself, and more to constructing a stronger defence of property rights and market forces, and widening inequalities in the distribution of economic and power resources.²⁰ The right of managers to manage, unbridled by workforce voice and joint industrial regulation, was part of this broader strategy, and also pursued in *Stepping Stones* fashion. In this connection Ralph Miliband’s concept of ‘class struggle from above’ is apposite. Conservative ministers engaged in highly politicized combat against organized labour, to redistribute authority from employees to employers,²¹ supported by a range of social and business elites, including those in the largely anti-trade union print and broadcast media.²² Disputes were sequentially triggered by the government with key but isolated groups of unionized workers, starting with steel workers in 1980–1, followed by the miners in 1984–5, and others in due course, including dock workers. In each instance the dispute finished with managerial prerogative significantly enhanced.²³

The government’s strategy transgressed the moral economy of the coalfields. This had two main elements: substantial changes to the organization of work, including closures, redundancies and redeployment of labour, should be effected with the agreement of union representatives; and such changes could only be acceptable to workers where the economic security of their communities was guaranteed.²⁴ E. P. Thompson’s moral economy related to popular customs and expectations developed over a long time frame, from the sixteenth to

¹⁹ C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, ‘Labour Market Adjustment in Areas of Chronic Industrial Decline: The Case of the UK Coalfields’, *Regional Studies* 30.7 (1996), pp. 627–40.

²⁰ A. Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: the Politics of Thatcherism* (Macmillan, Basingstoke: 1994).

²¹ R. Miliband, *Divided Societies: Class Struggle in Contemporary Capitalism* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1989), pp. 115–66.

²² G. Williams (ed.), *Settling Scores: The Media, the Police and the Miners’ Strike* (Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom: 2014); Milne, *Enemy Within*, pp. 364–7; G. Philo, ‘News Content and Audience Belief: a case study of the 1984–5 Miners’ Strike’ (Phd, University of Glasgow: 1989).

²³ A. Taylor, ‘The “Stepping Stones” Programme: Conservative Party Thinking on Trade Unions, 1975–9’, *HSIR* 11 (2001), pp. 109–25.

²⁴ J. Phillips, ‘The Moral Economy and Deindustrialization in the Scottish Coalfields, 1947–1991’, *International Labor and Working Class History* 84 (2013), pp. 99–115.

the eighteenth centuries, involving collective action in its defence against profit-seeking employers and traders.²⁵ The coalfield moral economy rested on a shorter evolution, with inter-war roots, and encouraged by the redistribution of wealth and esteem from middle to working class that applied generally in post-1945 Britain,²⁶ along with the material fact of coal industry nationalization in 1947. NCB publicity materials, including nationally-distributed films, emphasized the value of workforce consultation and social justice when arriving at decisions about investment and closures,²⁷ and there was substance to these claims. The radical contraction of the 1960s, where the labour force was more than halved, was consistent with the moral economy, buttressed by the joint industrial structures established under nationalization: NCB officials negotiated the closures with union representatives.²⁸ The management of structural adjustment included, moreover, significant employment stimulation in the coalfields, engineered by enhanced UK government regional policy incentives from 1962 to 1970.²⁹ The 1964–70 Labour governments were especially keen movers of capital and labour from coal and other ‘heavy’ industries to higher value-added consumer goods production, which would contribute to faster rates of macro-economic growth.³⁰ The case of Fife, the largest coalfield territory in Scotland after nationalization, illustrates the inter-connected processes of collective bargaining, mine closures and regional planning. From 1951 to 1971 the number of men employed in coal in Fife fell from 24,111 to 8,040, but this was accepted by union negotiators because there was no overall reduction in the overall number of economically active persons (just over 130,000 in each year). There was a particular increase in the female share of industrial employment, chiefly in electrical engineering, as US firms were established – via UK regional policy incentives – in the New Town of Glenrothes.³¹

²⁵ E. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past and Present* 50 (1971), pp. 76–136.

²⁶ R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 161.

²⁷ Data Film Productions, *Replanning a Coalfield* (NCB Mining Review: 1949), directed by Peter Pickering with commentary by John Slater. This film is preserved by the BFI National Archive, and features on the DVD two disc-set, *National Coal Board Collection, Volume One, Portrait of a Miner* (BFI: 2009).

²⁸ W. Ashworth, *The History of the British Coal Industry, Vol. 5, 1946–1982: the nationalised industry* (Oxford University Press: 1986), pp. 256–63.

²⁹ P. Scott, ‘Regional development and policy’, in R. Floud and P. Johnson (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain. Vol. 3, Structural Change and Growth, 1939–2000* (Cambridge University Press: 2004), pp. 332–67.

³⁰ Department of Economic Affairs, *The National Plan* (London, 1965), Cmnd. 2764, pp. 84–100, 120–22.

³¹ Phillips, ‘Moral Economy’, pp. 104–5.

The rate of colliery closures and associated job losses decelerated in the 1970s. There were two explanations for this. Scale economies in new or surviving pits enhanced the possibilities of mechanization; and the radical upward movement of oil prices from 1973 improved coal's market position. The Labour government elected in 1974 introduced the *Plan For Coal*, negotiated with the NCB and unions, envisaging a stable and long-term future for the industry.³² The position was reversed after 1979, when Thatcher's Conservative government introduced the 1980 Coal Industry Act, a near-direct consequence of the work undertaken by Ridley's Nationalised Industries Group. This projected an end to state subsidy by 1983–4, a highly ambitious aim, according to the industry's official historian in the context of recession and deindustrialization.³³ Further pressure was being exerted on the NCB to control its prices by the Central Electricity Generating Board, which was state-controlled and responding to changing government priorities.³⁴ The government sought further cost reduction by directing the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) to examine the NCB. The MMC, reporting in 1983, found that annual savings of £300 million could be achieved if production was reduced by 10% by closing the least 'economic' pits.³⁵ The MMC findings were based, however, on highly problematic NCB production costs, including expenditure arising from past activities, such as compensation for subsidence, pensions to retired employees and payments to redundant miners. Critics of the report also observed that performance itself was highly subjective, and varied according to investment, with a strong correlation between the 'best' producing pits and those with the highest rates of capital support.³⁶

The new political economy was consolidated in 1983 when the government appointed Ian MacGregor as NCB Chairman. MacGregor was a Scots-American businessman who characterized the MMC report on coal as his 'bible',³⁷ and had recently served as Chairman of the BSC, where costs and union influence had been radically reduced through plant closures and the reduction of employment from roughly 166,000 in 1980 to just

³² A. Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics. Vol. 2: 1969–1995* (Ashgate, Aldershot: 2005), pp. 113–7.

³³ Ashworth, *British Coal Industry*, pp. 414–15.

³⁴ Adeney and Lloyd, *Loss Without Limit*, pp. 15–20.

³⁵ Monopolies and Mergers Commission, *National Coal Board*, Cmnd. 8920 (HMSO: 1983), *Vol. 1*, pp. 363–6, and *Vol. 2*, Appendices 3.3 and 3.5(a).

³⁶ A. Glyn, 'The Economic Case Against Pit Closures', and T. Cutler, C. Haslam, J. Williams and K. Williams, 'The Aberystwyth Report on Coal', in D. Cooper and T. Hopper (eds), *Debating Coal Closures: economic calculation in the coal dispute, 1984–5* (Cambridge University Press: 1988), pp. 57–94 and 161–94.

³⁷ Adeney and Lloyd, *Loss Without Limit*, pp. 23, 27.

71,000 in 1983.³⁸ Literature on the 1984 strike often situates its origins in MacGregor's arrival at the NCB,³⁹ but his anti-union methods, especially unilateral colliery closures and pit-level abandonment of joint industrial procedures, were already being pioneered by Albert Wheeler, Scottish NCB Area Director from 1980. So much was this the case that after a string of pit-level strikes and lock-outs in the course of 1983, roughly 50% of Scotland's miners were already in dispute with local management when the national strike began in March 1984.⁴⁰

The Strike and its Phases

The strike developed out of this changing political economy. The NUM's attempt to secure a complete stoppage in defence of pits threatened in this new environment continues to divide opinion. There was no national ballot of members. Instead the federal structure of the union was deployed so that its discrete constituents, such as the NUM Scottish Area, could utilize area procedures to declare area strikes. Areas on strike then 'encouraged' other areas to join, in the first instance through picketing pits where miners continued working. The rationale for this approach was fairly clear. Miners in dispute with local management because their pit was threatened would not have been persuaded to return to work if the outcome of a national ballot had been against strike action. It was unjust, argued Peter Heathfield, NUM general secretary, for one man, in effect, to vote another man out of a job.⁴¹ The absence of a national ballot was nevertheless highly problematic, contributing to internal union divisions that the government and its supporters exploited. These divisions pre-existed the strike. relates the distinct history and politics of the Nottinghamshire miners to their conduct in 1984–5, with the majority working throughout and resisting the call for

³⁸ M. W. Kirby, 'MacGregor, Sir Ian Kinloch (1912–1998)', in H. Matthew and B. Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press: 2004), pp. 433–5.

³⁹ Beckett and Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line*, pp. 36–7.

⁴⁰ J. Phillips, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland, 1984–85* (Manchester University Press: 2012), pp. 53–80.

⁴¹ H. Beynon, 'Introduction', in H. Beynon (ed.), *Digging Deeper. Issues in the Miners' Strike* (Verso: 1985), pp. 12–13.

solidarity with workers in other coalfield areas: they had supported the action in defence of wages in the great lock-out of 1926 but returned to work before the dispute ended in most other areas.⁴² Nottinghamshire miners had also been instrumental in establishing the NCB's programme of area-based pay incentives in 1977–8, against union opposition in Kent, South Wales, Yorkshire and Scotland. After the apparent solidarity of the NUM's victories in national pay strikes in 1972 and 1974 this highlighted the limits of cross-coalfield unity, as the NCB had hoped and union critics of area pay incentives had feared.⁴³ In 1984 the Nottingham working miners, distancing themselves further politically from other areas, viewed the absence of a national ballot as a breach of union rules. Howell shows that they were further offended by the presence at their pits of invaders from Yorkshire and other areas seeking to enforce the strike through picketing.⁴⁴

The picketing in Nottinghamshire and rejection of a national ballot were part of the NUM's 'orthodox Marxist industrial relations strategy', the phrase used by Ackers in his study of debates in 1984-5 among 'Eurocommunists' within the Communist Party of Great Britain, including Michael McGahey, NUM vice-president and Scottish Area president. Eurocommunists were troubled by the strategy, especially on the ballot, but also by mass picketing of working mines, power stations and steel works, accompanied as this was by instances of disorder and violence, triggering legal action against the NUM and its members, with arrests, convictions, bindings over, and summary sackings. Such contention constrained the strikers' capacity to build an alliance of anti-government political and social forces. The NUM's strategy isolated the strikers, in other words, with a disastrous long-term legacy of coalfield deindustrialization, unemployment, and deprivation.⁴⁵ This is a serious argument, although it should be added that McGahey, while a guardian at least within Scotland of cross-party political alliances, was also a forceful advocate of proceeding without a national ballot.⁴⁶ Details from the Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal demonstrate, moreover, that the NUM's isolation and defeat were deliberately constructed and secured by the

⁴² C. Griffin, "'Notts. have some very peculiar history': Understanding the Reaction of the Nottinghamshire Miners to the 1984–85 Strike', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 19 (2005), pp. 63–99.

⁴³ Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, pp. 15–17.

⁴⁴ D. Howell, 'Defiant Dominoes: Working Miners and the 1984–5 Strike', in Jackson and Saunders, *Making Thatcher's Britain*, pp. 148–64.

⁴⁵ P. Ackers, 'Gramsci at the Miners' Strike: Remembering the 1984–1985 Eurocommunist Alternative Industrial Relations Strategy', *Labor History*, online, first published 11 March 2014.

⁴⁶ J. McIlroy, and A. Campbell, 'McGahey, Michael (Mick) (1925–1999)', in K. Gildart and D. Howell (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography. Vol. 13* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke: 2010), pp. 242–51.

government, illustrating vividly Miliband's 'class struggle from above'.⁴⁷ Other groups of workers were kept out of the strike, inhibiting the mobilization of broader anti-government forces.⁴⁸ Outwith the labour movement there was limited support for the strike from Church leaders, but otherwise the NUM was able to establish meaningful alliances only with groups that were already marginalized and excoriated by the government and its political and media supporters, notably the Greenham women campaigning against nuclear weapons, and gay and lesbian activists.⁴⁹

Containing the Striking Miners, March to May 1984

The key elements of government policy in the containment phase are evident from the initial three meetings of the CMGC. The priority was preventing the strike from spreading beyond the areas where miners stopped working in the week beginning 12 March: Scotland, Northumberland, Durham, Yorkshire, South Wales, and Kent. A low-key approach, with minimal public statement, would maximize the number of miners working elsewhere, and the strategic importance of Nottinghamshire was recognized. With the situation delicate ministers awaited the outcome of area ballots, held on 16 March in Nottinghamshire and the Midlands,⁵⁰ and then ensured that those voting to work could do so, with full additional costs of policing to be met from the Exchequer.⁵¹ The efforts of local NUM officials to enforce the strike were resisted by the vast majority of Nottinghamshire's 34,000 miners, first in an individual ballot, and then in an area council meeting.⁵² With this highly productive sector in operation Walker reported early in May that coal stocks would last comfortably into 1985.⁵³

Central to the low-key approach was government non-intervention, with ministers publicly insisting that the dispute was between the NUM and the NCB. This was tenuous, given state ownership of the industry and the NCB's obligation to operate within the

⁴⁷ Miliband, *Divided Societies*, pp. 121–6.

⁴⁸ Beynon, 'Great Miners' Strike'.

⁴⁹ D. Kelliher, 'Solidarity and Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, 1984–5', *History Workshop Journal*, online, first published 21 January 2014; D. Edgar, 'Coal Not Dole', *The Guardian Review*, 5 April 2014.

⁵⁰ *The Guardian*, 16 March 1984.

⁵¹ CMGC, 16, 19 and 20 March 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁵² *The Guardian*, 13 April 1984.

⁵³ CMGC, 8 May 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

financial and policy framework established by the government, and the CMGC minutes clearly demonstrate that non-intervention was a fiction. With miners in Nottinghamshire, the Midlands and parts elsewhere voting to continue working, NCB officials were contemplating legal action against the NUM in the final week of March to restrain the movement and activities of pickets outside working collieries. Sometimes numbering hundreds, these strikers were contravening the provisions of the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts which placed restrictions on secondary picketing.⁵⁴ A number of commentators wondered during and immediately after the strike why this legislation was not used against NUM pickets, and explained this in terms of the government's desire to avoid political controversy. Using anti-union Tory laws, as some people characterized them, to prosecute miners acting in defence of their jobs and communities might have strengthened broader labour movement support for the strike.⁵⁵ The minutes of the CMGC confirm that this suspicion was correct, with ministers agreeing to discourage the NCB from taking action in the courts against the NUM picketing. With all pits in Nottingham still working, Walker reported on 19 March that MacGregor had come to see the 'tactical advantage' of adjourning the NCB's proposed action against the NUM in the High Court.⁵⁶

An alternative legal strategy against the strike was subsequently developed, but this did not involve the 1980 or 1982 legislation, and the government was only tangentially involved. A key figure appears to have been David Hart, businessman, Conservative activist and occasional adviser to Thatcher and MacGregor during the strike.⁵⁷ The anti-strike legal manoeuvre was complex. It seems that Hector Laing, chairman of United Biscuits, Conservative supporter and personal friend of the Prime Minister, wrote to leaders of one hundred or so large private sector firms, requesting financial support for working miners.⁵⁸ These donations may have totalled about £500,000, roughly £1.4 million in 2014 values. Hart, it can be surmised, channelled this money to working miners, who sued the NUM over the legal applicability of a 1981 vote in Yorkshire for industrial action in defence of pits. This

⁵⁴ Wedderburn, *The Worker and the Law*, 3rd edition (Penguin, Harmondsworth: 1986), pp. 68–5, 86–90.

⁵⁵ Adeney and Lloyd, *Loss Without Limit*, p. 181; S. McCabe and P. Wallington with J. Alderson, L. Gostin and C. Mason, *The Police, Public Order and Civil Liberties. Legacies of the Miners' Strike* (Routledge: 1988); J. McIlroy, 'Police and Pickets: The Law against the Miners', in Beynon, *Digging Deeper*, pp. 101–22.

⁵⁶ CMGC, 16, 19 and 20 March 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁵⁷ E. Pearce, 'Obituary: David Hart', *The Guardian*, 9 January 2011; 'Obituary: David Hart', *The Telegraph*, 5 January 2011.

⁵⁸ Milne, *Enemy Within*, pp. 323–7.

vote had supported the NUM's claim that the strike in Yorkshire was official, which was in turn central to the demand for a national strike, on an area by area basis, at the union's special delegate conference on 19 April.⁵⁹ The High Court in London ruled against the NUM in September, to the effect that the 1981 vote was too remote in time to apply in 1984, and restrained the union from characterizing the strike as official.⁶⁰ NUM leaders felt obliged to defy the ruling, leading in October to the sequestration of union assets in England and Wales, although not in Scotland, where the separate legal jurisdiction found the strike to be lawful.⁶¹ The CMGC files do not show that the government was directing this legal strategy, but there were oblique references in its July meetings to the need to mobilize sympathetic business leaders against the strikes of both miners and dock workers.⁶² Thatcher's papers, it should be added, include letters from Hart indicating that she was kept closely informed about the progress of the anti-strike litigation, which plainly exacerbated the political marginalization of the NUM,⁶³ and formed the basis for the establishment among working miners of the rival Union of Democratic Mineworkers.⁶⁴

The government's interventionist role is demonstrated in another episode from the first phase of the strike. Conscious that the stoppage was having minimal immediate impact on electricity supply, the NUM sought leverage through controlling movements of coal to BSC works. In Scotland the key target was Ravenscraig in Motherwell. NUM Scottish Area officials negotiated a 'Triple Alliance' agreement with rail and steel workers' union officials for the transport of coal by train to Ravenscraig from the BSC terminal at Hunterston on the Clyde coast, sufficient only to maintain the furnaces. This agreement lasted for much of April but local and national BSC managers pressed for increased supply to maintain production.⁶⁵ On 30 April Tebbit advised the CMGC that Ravenscraig's shortage of coal was

⁵⁹ Adeney and Lloyd, *Loss Without Limit*, pp. 161–2, 172–4; Beckett and Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line*, pp. 80–1, 134; Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, pp. 171–8.

⁶⁰ *The Times*, 2 October 1984.

⁶¹ Wedderburn, *Worker and the Law*, pp. 730–46; E. Clarke with B. McLean, 'The Mineworkers' Strike 1984–5: The Role of the Scottish Area as Banker to the Union', *Scottish Affairs* 49 (2004), pp. 138–50.

⁶² CMGC, 16 and 18 July 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁶³ (Andrew) Turnbull (Private Secretary to the Prime Minister) minute to MT, 'Meeting with David Hart', 7 September 1984, enclosing correspondence from D. Negus of Ellis-Fermour Solicitors, Derby, to David Hart, 30 August 1984, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/133524>.

⁶⁴ Winterton and Winterton, *Coal, Crisis and Conflict*, pp. 171–8.

⁶⁵ For a detailed discussion of the Ravenscraig episode see Phillips, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike*, pp. 86–98.

the only major industrial difficulty across the UK arising from the strike.⁶⁶ With the NUM nationally calling for a cessation of all rail movement of coal, BSC management at Ravenscraig broke the 'Triple Alliance' embargo with a major road haulage effort from 2 May. The NUM Scottish Area responded with major pickets at Hunterston and Ravenscraig, a combined force of around 3,000 miners on 7 May. The Scottish Office believed that these pickets could succeed in halting the coal deliveries, in which case production would cease within three days. At this point there was a crucial intervention. Scottish Office materials read by this author under a Freedom of Information request in 2007 indicated that this came from Bob Haslam, BSC chairman, who asked Department of Energy Officials on 8 May whether police officers in Scotland had considered acting to prevent pickets from gathering at Hunterston and Ravenscraig.⁶⁷ This request was passed to the Scottish Office and, it could be inferred, to Strathclyde Police, officers of which force on 10 May halted 290 miners from West Fife, Clackmannan and Stirlingshire on the A80 at Stepps, many miles from Ravenscraig and Hunterston. Dozens of miners were arrested and held for several hours at different police stations in Glasgow. The CMGC minutes indicate that this decisive intervention was in fact from the Prime Minister rather than the BSC chairman. In discussing the crisis at Ravenscraig on 8 May Ministers asked why Scottish chief constables had not shared the readiness of their English equivalents to stop pickets building up at key pinch points. Thatcher directed the Secretary of State for Scotland to explore this specific question with Scottish chief constables, using public order legislation 'to prevent pickets going to the scene of possible disturbances'.⁶⁸ The effect was immediate, the Scottish police acting against striking miners on the open roads of Lanarkshire in the same way that English police were halting the entry of striking miners to Nottinghamshire and other working areas, including Derbyshire.⁶⁹ The pressure on Ravenscraig was released, and the government survived the first major industrial crisis of the strike.

Isolating the Striking Miners, May to October 1984

⁶⁶ CMGC, 30 April 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁶⁷ W. Baird, Scottish Home and Health Department, to David Connelly, Scottish Office Industry Department (hereafter IDS), and Gordon Murray, Dover House, regarding intelligence from R. Priddle, Department of Energy, 8 May 1984, SEP 4/6028, National Records of Scotland (hereafter NRS).

⁶⁸ CMGC, 30 April 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁶⁹ *The Guardian*, 10 April 1984.

On 14 May Thatcher spoke in the CMGC explicitly about ostracizing the striking miners. It was vital, she said, to ‘maintain as far as possible the isolation of the miners from the effective support of the rest of the union movement’. This comment was triggered by a discussion about pay negotiations at British Railways, settled as a consequence of government pressure at the end of May. But the importance of distancing the miners from other unionized workers had already been evident in the strike, chiefly in relation to developments within BSC. Thatcher had noted in April that union members in sectors where production and jobs were jeopardized by disrupted coal supply could be mobilized in the anti-strike effort, and commended the extent to which ‘the steel unions had given a lead’ already.⁷⁰ This was a telling comment. The government and its allies, including BSC management, clearly preyed on the anxieties of steel workers, amplified as these were by the radical restructuring of their industry in 1980–1. This explains the duplicitous behaviour of Iron and Steel Trades Confederation stewards at Ravenscraig, including Tommy Brennan, their convenor, who routinely fed intelligence about union strategy and tactics – gleaned from ‘Triple Alliance’ talks with miners and railwaymen in Edinburgh – to local managers, who passed this to the Scottish Office and Strathclyde Police.⁷¹ For this Brennan and the other stewards were thinly rewarded. The Conservative government blocked pre- and post-privatization BSC plans to end production at Ravenscraig in 1987–88. But the company chose not to reinvest in the plant, and it closed in 1992.⁷²

The government’s ambition to isolate the striking miners is further illustrated by its handling of the NUM’s attempted blockade of the BSC coke depot at Orgreave in South Yorkshire, the scene of intensive picketing and policing on a number of occasions in this second phase of the strike, peaking on 18 June. There is no direct evidence in the CMGC minutes that the government was controlling policing at the depot, which continues to be controversial in the 2010s, with strong indications that senior officers organized the fabrication of evidence against pickets,⁷³ but ministers adopted a highly selective reading of events there. Walker reported the fact of ‘serious violence’ at Orgreave, but offered no explanation for this disorder other than ‘the presence of Mr Scargill’. Thatcher emphasized

⁷⁰ CMGC, 11 April and 14 May 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁷¹ K. W. McKay, IDS, notes, 13 and 18 June 1984, and Scottish Office Situation Report, 21 June 1984, all in SEP 4/6028, NRS; and K. W. McKay, IDS, note, 20 June 1984, SOE 12/572, NRS.

⁷² P. Payne, ‘The End of Steelmaking in Scotland’, *Scottish Economic and Social History* 15 (1995), pp. 66–84.

⁷³ *The Guardian*, 21 October 2012.

her intention that it be made publicly clear this ‘violent picketing’ would not prevent the movement of materials to BSC works,⁷⁴ and she succeeded in drawing a number of the government’s political opponents into criticizing the NUM, including David Steel, leader of the Liberal Party.⁷⁵ Ministerial pronouncements on Orgreave and other high-profile instances of disorder wilfully ignored or distorted the motives and actions of the strikers, but nevertheless contributed to the wider dissemination – through a pliant and partisan media – of the government’s anti-union agenda and strike strategy. Further political capital certainly accrued to the government, consolidating the containment and isolation of the striking miners.⁷⁶

More troubling for the government, at least for a week or so in July, was the position in the ports. This briefly offered the prospect of the broader labour movement action that ministers were determined to avoid, and was only resolved after Ridley’s dissembling statement in the House of Commons to the effect that there were no plans to abolish the National Dock Labour Scheme. The national dock strike began on 10 July after BSC employees handled materials in the Humber port of Immingham. Under Dock Labour Scheme regulations this work was properly the province of registered dock workers, who were Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU) members. The TGWU and many of its dock members had been worried about threats to the Scheme since the 1960s, when the containerization revolution had transformed the labour process and stimulated the growth of operations in non-Scheme ports.⁷⁷

Tebbit warned the CMGC on 11 July about the damaging effects of the dock strike, with potential problems for steel and ‘early prospect of more serious difficulty for industry generally’ arising from the interruption of imports and exports. Thatcher intervened, stating that government had to show resolve over the next forty-eight hours, to energize public opinion, particularly among workers in industries affected by strike. It was vital, she said, to show that the ‘pretext’ for the dock workers’ action was false: they enjoyed ‘extraordinary privileges’ in job security and pay, given that 4,000 of their 13,000 in number were allegedly

⁷⁴ CMGC, 18 June 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁷⁵ *The Guardian*, 19 June 1984.

⁷⁶ Milne, *Enemy Within*, pp. 329–30.

⁷⁷ F. Lindop, ‘The Dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, Part 1: Shop Stewards and Containerization’, *HSIR5* (1998), pp. 33–72.

surplus to 'the genuine requirements of their industry'. At this point, however, *Stepping Stones* counsel prevailed against a direct attack, the government evading action against the dockers as well as the miners. Amid the twin crises of damaging dock strike and the continuing coal dispute the time was 'not opportune' to abolish the Scheme. The Prime Minister returned to this theme several days later. While the jobs of workers across export- and import-dependent industries were jeopardized, the government would keep Britain working, if necessary by using army personnel. Possibly alluding to the parallel legal strategy developing against the striking miners, Thatcher added that large employers and the Confederation of British Industry should be mobilized to share the work of publicizing the economic damage caused by trade union members. But it was still essential for the government to emphasize that there were 'no plans to abolish or change the National Dock Labour Scheme'.⁷⁸ Ridley duly informed the House of Commons that there would be no repeat of BSC's incursion on dock workers' practices of the type that had triggered the strike, and – more or less using Thatcher's very words – that the government had 'no plans to change or abolish the Dock Labour Scheme'.⁷⁹ After talks at the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), focusing on the use of non-registered labour in Scheme ports, the dock workers ended their stoppage on 23 July,⁸⁰ concluding perhaps the greatest economic and political crisis encountered by the government during the miners' strike, and rendering superfluous the plans to declare a State of Emergency and deploy troops in the movement of cargoes. A shorter strike followed in the ports in September, again arising from the unloading of coal by BSC employees, although this time in Hunterston, but was more patchily supported than the July stoppage. Many of the dock workers involved in this second strike were deeply ambivalent about returning to work, convinced that behind Ridley's public words the government was privately committed to abolishing the Scheme.⁸¹ The CMGC minutes demonstrate that this was indeed the position, and, in classic *Stepping Stones* fashion, having isolated and defeated the striking miners, the government abolished

⁷⁸ CMGC, 11 and 16 July 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁷⁹ *Parliamentary Debates, Sixth Series, Commons*, 64, 33, 16 July 1984.

⁸⁰ *The Times*, 24 July 1984.

⁸¹ *Financial Times*, 18 and 19 September 1984.

the Scheme in 1989, effectively ending joint regulation and employment stability in the ports.⁸²

The government also pursued the isolation of the striking miners by micro-managing the ‘peace’ talks between the NCB and NUM, which commenced in June, and proceeded with several interruptions across the summer and into the autumn. The NUM leadership was criticized by the NCB and the government, and also by other union and Labour Party representatives, for adopting an inflexible approach to these negotiations by insisting that no pits be closed unless it could be proven that reserves were exhausted. In recent literature the alleged rigidities of the union’s approach to negotiations have also been strongly emphasized. Ackers suggests that the NUM should have engaged more effectively with the NCB case for closures, using community-sustainability arguments to pursue a compromise settlement and avoid the ‘heroic defeat’ that hastened coalfield deindustrialization.⁸³ This theme has been explored elsewhere in the literature, sometimes in terms of the counter-factual: had negotiations been led by McGahey, depicted as more pragmatic, astute, and imaginative than Scargill, then a settlement preserving the majority of pits and jobs would have been achieved.⁸⁴ In an important memoir, Ned Smith, NCB industrial relations director, presented an alternative counter-factual, arguing that as president McGahey would have avoided the strike altogether. But Smith also showed that once the strike was underway a settlement was blocked by the intransigence of MacGregor and, he suspected, the government – rather than the inflexibility of the NUM. When the talks commenced in June, Smith believed that MacGregor, operating under government instruction, was already opposed to an agreement on pit closures. Before the penultimate talks in September, Smith overheard MacGregor tell a telephone caller that there would be no settlement. McGahey was likewise convinced that MacGregor was instructed by the government throughout these talks.⁸⁵

⁸² Department of Employment, *Employment in the Ports: the Dock Labour Scheme*, Cm. 664 (HMSO, 1989); P. Turnbull, C. Woolfson and J. Kelly, *Dock Strike. Conflict and Restructuring in Britain’s Ports* (Avebury, Aldershot: 1992).

⁸³ Ackers, ‘Gramsci at the Miners’ Strike’, pp. 16–17.

⁸⁴ Beckett and Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line*, pp. 103–46, 179–200.

⁸⁵ N. Smith, *The 1984 Miners’ Strike. The Actual Account* (Whitstable: 1997), pp. 127–8; NUMSA Strike Committee minutes, 15 October 1984, National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area, Box 13, National Mining Museum Scotland, Newtongrange (hereafter NMMS).

The CMGC minutes confirm that Smith and McGahey were correct in their suspicions. Thatcher told the group on 30 May that the NCB's 'negotiating brief' would have to be 'clearly delineated', meaning that an agreement must only be secured where the NUM accepted that pits would be closed on economic grounds, and that the NCB would have the ultimate authority to effect closures where such grounds existed. Before talks in July she argued that 'it was important that the terms [of any resolution] should be seen to permit the closures sought by the NCB before the strike'.⁸⁶ Negotiations in September were complicated for the government by the intervention of Stan Orme, Shadow Energy Secretary, who proposed that unresolved closures be referred to a panel of two mining engineers and a lawyer.⁸⁷ Thatcher evidently discussed this with David Hart, who handed her a terse formula for a settlement that would entrench the NCB's prerogative powers to close mines against workforce opposition:

It is agreed that pits may be closed on grounds other than exhaustion or safety. Included in this category and deemed to be exhausted are pits where a report of examination by the respective NCB and NUM engineers *does not provide the NCB* with a basis for continued operations which constitute a responsible use of human or financial resources [emphasis added].⁸⁸

In the CMGC that followed Thatcher duly stipulated that the 'most important requirement would be an agreement that would not in any way fetter the NCB in arranging the closure, as and when necessary, of uneconomic pits'. Walker agreed, describing Orme's panel as 'totally unacceptable' because it would deprive the NCB of managerial responsibility for deciding the future of particular pits.⁸⁹

Thatcher and Walker were articulating the core importance of managerial prerogative in coal production. This amounted to a direct attack on the industry's joint

⁸⁶ CMGC, 30 May and 11 July 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁸⁷ *The Guardian*, 5 September 1984.

⁸⁸ David Hart note to MT (NCB pit closure formula), 11 September 1985, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/133529>.

⁸⁹ CMGC, 12 September 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

regulatory framework, and the moral economy assumptions that had shaped coalfield development, including the carefully-managed process of contraction since the 1950s. It is hard to see how an agreement providing the NCB with unilateral powers to determine future closures could have been acceptable to the striking miners, and McGahey understood this. The July talks, for example, foundered on the NCB's insistence on the word 'beneficially': pits would close when their reserves could no longer be 'beneficially developed'. McGahey told the NUM Scottish Area executive that 'beneficially' had an 'economic connotation', and 'if a colliery was not beneficial in terms of profits, it was not economically viable', so the NCB would close it. The NUM could not accept this, he argued, 'rejecting any concept of uneconomic closures, this being the basic, fundamental and central question of the whole dispute'.⁹⁰ Fittingly, given the government's close control of NCB strategy, Walker had informed the CMGC at 6 p.m. on 18 July that these negotiations were about to collapse,⁹¹ *before they had done so*, several hours later that evening.⁹² The government was clearly using the succession of failed negotiations, which its insistence on ending the joint regulation of pit closures had effectively guaranteed, to isolate the striking miners further. The CMGC habitually discussed in advance of talks taking place how their collapse would be communicated to the media. A representative example comes from 4 July, *the day before* NUM-NCB meetings in London. Assuming the talks would fail to reach agreement, Thatcher said a major effort would be undertaken to 'blame' Scargill and 'his intransigence'.⁹³ This anticipated more or less exactly the thrust of the government and NCB response when these talks foundered, two weeks later.⁹⁴

The isolation of the NUM was consolidated by the government's handling of the final significant crisis of the strike, the threat of industrial action by NACODS members in October, also in opposition to colliery closures. These employees were responsible for the safety of underground operations. Had they gone on strike, then production would have ceased altogether, bringing Nottinghamshire and other working areas into the strike, and halting the NCB's 'return to work' in Scotland, Northumberland, Durham, Yorkshire, and South Wales. Ministers worried about the impact of this on energy endurance: substantial

⁹⁰ NUMSA Strike Committee Minutes, 23 July 1984, NMMS.

⁹¹ CMGC, 18 July 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁹² *The Guardian*, 19 July 1984.

⁹³ CMGC, 4 July 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁹⁴ *The Guardian*, 20 July 1984.

reserves existed but would quickly run down, necessitating additional imports and greater oil burn. Thatcher instructed CMGC members not to take action or make public statements that would prejudice the outcome of NACODS-NCB dialogue about procedures for managing closures. At the same time Walker worked to ensure that any changes to these procedures would not compromise the NCB's capacity to reach binding decisions on closures without third-party involvement.⁹⁵ Talks at ACAS duly produced a new procedure that satisfied the NACODS leadership but on fine reading – and in subsequent practice – cemented the sovereignty of the NCB on closures, and the further erosion of joint regulation in the industry.⁹⁶

Defeating the Striking Miners, October 1984 onwards

The NACODS settlement was decisive in terms of the outcome of the strike. It is significant that the CMGC reduced its weekly load thereafter from two meetings to one. Its main business was documenting and encouraging the NCB's 'return to work' effort, which had commenced in June, but only gathered real momentum after October. The government was now more or less explicitly discouraging further negotiations between the NCB and the NUM lest these motivate strikers to persist in the belief that an agreement might be reached. Subsequent approaches to the government from the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the Trades Union Congress, both in December, seeking dialogue as a step towards negotiating an honourable settlement, were handled with discretion. Ministers deferred further meaningful negotiations without showing that the government was blocking a settlement, with the aim of increasing the pressure on strikers to return to work.⁹⁷ Smith lamented in his memoir that the government and MacGregor from the summer of 1984 onwards were committed to 'the grinding defeat' of 'our employees' and 'the dreadful bitterness which that entailed'. The possibility of peace was distanced, Smith argued, in two particular ways: the organized resumption of work by the NCB from September, co-ordinated with armoured buses and reinforced policing; and the

⁹⁵ CMGC, 27 September and 8 October 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

⁹⁶ Adeney and Lloyd, *Loss Without Limit*, pp. 195–7; Beckett and Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line*, pp. 138–45.

⁹⁷ CMGC, 29 October, 10 December and 18 December 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

government's 'verbal violence', with Thatcher's 'enemy within' speech accompanied by Lawson's highly illuminating claim that the economic and financial costs of the strike were a 'worthwhile investment'.⁹⁸ Estimated at £6 billion, or £14 billion at 2014 prices, in lost production and tax revenues, charges for replacement coal stocks and additional oil burn, reduced economic activity, and the huge policing charges,⁹⁹ these costs massively exceeded the NCB's pre-strike projected losses for 1984–5 of £100 million.¹⁰⁰ This juxtaposition of the industry's relatively modest financial losses with the massive economic costs of defeating the miners reinforces the impression that the government's over-riding strategic priority, in the strike and across the 1980s generally, was dismantling joint industrial regulation rather than optimizing economic performance.

The government's goal of complete and unconditional victory can be read in the CMGC minutes, with Walker's weekly reports diligently documenting the smallest signs that the strike was weakening, even – or perhaps especially – in coalfield areas that in truth the government and NCB regarded as marginal to the industry's future. In Scotland miners first returned to work at Bilston Glen in Midlothian in June, but in numbers – thirty initially – that were barely sufficient to produce coal. Walker still regarded this development as key to the growth of 'the momentum of the return to work'.¹⁰¹ The limited resumption in the summer more generally across the areas on strike was therefore frustrating for the government. In July Thatcher told the CMGC that the NCB should accelerate the end of the strike through 'persuasion' and 'concrete' initiatives, including 'secure transport into pits'.¹⁰² Reinforcing the fiction of government non-intervention, these methods were subsequently adopted by the NCB.¹⁰³

The organized back-to-work campaign had three chief side effects, all desirable from the government's perspective. First, bitterness was exacerbated in the coalfields, between strikers and working miners, and between the NUM and the NCB, extending divisions that endured long after the strike, and further diminishing the possibility of a negotiated settlement. Second, there was an escalation in strike-related disorder. This was another

⁹⁸ Smith, *Actual Account*, pp. 29–47, 127–8.

⁹⁹ Brotherstone and Pirani, 'Were There Alternatives?'

¹⁰⁰ Coal Industry National Consultative Committee Minutes, 6 March 1984, COAL 74/4783.

¹⁰¹ CMGC, 20 and 27 June 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

¹⁰² CMGC, 11 July 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

¹⁰³ Adeney and Lloyd, *Loss Without Limit*, pp. 260–70.

area where government micro-management can be read in the CMGC minutes, as ministers discussed the need to remove delays in legal proceedings against pickets, especially those engaged in more serious alleged offences.¹⁰⁴ Strike officials and activists in Scotland were convinced that the courts were directed to inflict unusually harsh penalties on miners. The CMGC minutes do not bear this out explicitly, but Scottish Office ministers certainly pressed the Procurators Fiscal to accelerate cases against miners as a means of disciplining and discouraging the generality of strikers. Victimization was accordingly proportionately higher in Scotland than elsewhere: 206 Scottish miners, 1.5% of the strikers, were sacked, compared with about 800 or 0.6% of the strikers in England and Wales.¹⁰⁵ Third, the NUM, provoked by the NCB's action, withdrew safety cover from the pits, which it had been providing in the normal way so that production could resume once the strike was over. This led to the premature loss of several collieries to flooding. One of these was in Scotland, where the Area director, Albert Wheeler, responded to the NUM boycott by withdrawing managerial safety cover, with the consequence that Polkemmet in West Lothian – the usual source of coal for Ravenscraig – was disastrously flooded on 28 August 1984. Milne argues that security service officers were covertly involved in this operation, guiding the strike-breaking that provoked the NUM withdrawal of safety cover and then Wheeler's crucial counter-measure.¹⁰⁶ Coal was never produced again at Polkemmet, which closed in 1986.¹⁰⁷ The CMGC discussion of Polkemmet, led by Giles Shaw, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Energy, deputizing for Walker, focused on the NUM's withdrawal of safety cover, and made no reference to Wheeler's arguably decisive contribution. Thatcher saw the incident as an additional means of isolating the NUM leadership, which was to be blamed entirely for the loss of the pit and its employment.¹⁰⁸

The return to work in the striking areas gathered some pace in late autumn. On 13 November, Walker reported that 45 pits – all in the areas working since March – were producing normally; twelve more were turning coal, 48 others had miners present, and 69

¹⁰⁴ CMGC, 16 July and 4 September 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

¹⁰⁵ G. Hutton, *Coal Not Dole. Memories of the 1984/85 Miners' Strike* (Stenlake, Catrine, Ayrshire: 2005), p. 57.

¹⁰⁶ Milne, *Enemy Within*, pp. 319–22.

¹⁰⁷ M. K. Oglethorpe, *Scottish Collieries. An Inventory of the Scottish Coal Industry in the Nationalised Era* (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Edinburgh: 2006), pp. 264–5.

¹⁰⁸ CMGC, 30 August 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

were on strike.¹⁰⁹ The special NCB incentive of Christmas bonuses to all who returned by 19 November then altered the position slightly,¹¹⁰ so that only 24 pits were fully out on 26 November, although two-thirds of NUM members remained on strike. Walker spoke about a particular acceleration of the return to work in the north-east of England and Scotland,¹¹¹ but in the latter case this was confined largely to Bilston Glen and the two Ayrshire pits, Killoch and Barony. Among the 10,000-plus miners elsewhere in Scotland just 185 were working on 5 November, according to possibly inflated NCB data, and of this cohort more than two-thirds were still on strike four months later, on 5 March 1985.¹¹² The government's target generally across the coalfields was 50% of miners in the pits, akin, Walker argued, 'to a vote in the national ballot in favour of returning to work', but this was not yet achieved by 18 December, when the CMGC met for the final time in 1984

. Whitelaw, chairing the meeting in Thatcher's absence, nevertheless congratulated Walker for his recent efforts, including the careful handling with Tom King of a meeting with the TUC on 14 December,¹¹³ which deferred the prospect of any resumption of NCB-NUM negotiations until at least the New Year.¹¹⁴ These talks took place eventually in London on 21 January 1985, with Smith and Heathfield as the main negotiators. Smith felt they were constructive but when Heathfield left at 3 p.m. to consult with NUM colleagues he saw an *Evening Standard* headline declaring that they had failed. This, Smith learned, was the combined work of the Prime Minister's office and senior staff at the NCB, with David Hart involved. The government was continuing in 1985 as it had throughout 1984, obstructing dialogue in order to inflict complete defeat upon the NUM and the striking miners.¹¹⁵ The strike eventually ended without an agreement. Most miners returned to work on Tuesday 5 March, but initial picketing by Kent and Scots miners, to demand reinstatement of their sacked colleagues, meant there was not an effectively full return until Monday 11 March,

¹⁰⁹ CMGC, 13 November 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

¹¹⁰ Scottish Office Situation Report, 19 November 1984, SEP 4/6029/1, NRS.

¹¹¹ CMGC, 27 November 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

¹¹² Phillips, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike*, pp. 123–7.

¹¹³ CMGC, 18 December 1984, CAB 130/1268, TNA.

¹¹⁴ *The Guardian*, 18 December 1984.

¹¹⁵ Smith, *Actual Account*, pp. 153–5.

eight days after an NUM delegate conference in London voted very narrowly for this outcome.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

The CMGC minutes from March to December 1984 show that the Conservative government adopted a highly strategic approach to the miners' strike, with clearly defined and remorselessly pursued goals. The spread of the strike and its economic effects were contained; the striking miners were socially and politically isolated; and then defeated. In this broad sense the minutes offer no direct challenge to the predominant existing interpretation of the strike as a fundamental political and ideological conflict between the government and the NUM. The minutes confirm how important the outcome of the strike was to the government and its broader political strategy, redistributing wealth from lower-income to higher-income groups, and moving authority within workplaces from employees to employers. The strategy was carefully pursued, consistent with the *Stepping Stones* approach set out by Thatcher's advisers in the 1970s and evident at different points in the phased conduct of the 1984–5 strike. Potential allies of the striking miners – notably steel and dock workers, and miners in the working areas, especially in Nottinghamshire – were offered reassurances about the security of their own employment, which they and the generality of other workers, including union members, were encouraged to view as jeopardized not by government policy but by the NUM action. The government maintained employment in these other sectors via a number of mechanisms, including large-scale policing to protect key economic units, notably the working mines of Nottinghamshire, and BSC works. One of the revealing insights from the CMGC minutes, indeed, is the role of the Prime Minister in directing the relief of the siege at Ravenscraig in May 1984, with police officers instructed to prevent striking miners from gathering at the plant to force its closure.

¹¹⁶ *The Guardian*, 4 March 1985; *The Times*, 12 March 1985.

The extent and character of government intervention is further revealed within the CMGC minutes by the government's micro-management of NCB-NUM negotiations. This does represent an important qualification to existing interpretations of the strike. The Prime Minister and her colleagues closely monitored these talks and where necessary destabilized them, to ensure that there was no meaningful preservation of trade-union voice on the high-order strategic issue of pit closures. This was 'class struggle from above'. Future analysis and criticism of NUM strategy and tactics ought to accommodate this valuable conclusion. There may have been scope for broadening labour movement mobilization in defence of joint industrial regulation, had the NUM leadership been more adroit in identifying this as a key issue, along with coal closures, in the strike. But with the ascendancy in the 1980s of arguments about the right of management to manage, a more explicit defence by the NUM of the right of industrial workers to share in the taking of operational and strategic business decisions may have eroded political support for their strike among non-union, non-manual and non-working class groups.

Deindustrialization accelerated after the strike, and the coalfield moral economy was dismantled: closures were imposed on the workforce by managerial fiat, with limited alternative economic activity and employment. A growing portion of the coalfield population became officially classified as 'permanently sick', receiving relatively more attractive welfare benefits than those officially classified as unemployed. This mitigation of deindustrialization's political and social consequences is further evidence that the Conservative government's prime strategic goal was the upward redistribution of economic and power resources rather than the saving of public expenditure or pursuit of economic rationalization. Removing unionized workers from the labour market via elevated expenditure on social security was a necessary transaction cost for ministers seeking to entrench the right of managers to manage. In the same vein the government's pursuit of victory in 1984–5 was clearly not geared solely or even largely to the achievement of greater cost efficiencies in the NCB, or to the provision of cheaper electricity for business and domestic consumers. The primary government goal, in the coalfields as elsewhere, was the elimination of effective union representation and joint industrial regulation.