

Topic 3:

Industrial Unrest

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Section 1:

The 1972 and 1974 Strike

On January 9th 1972, the miners of Britain went on national strike for the first time since 1926.



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On January 9th 1972, the miners of Britain went on national strike for the first time since 1926.

Prior to that there had been various local disputes:

It wasn't so much the unions that brought the men out; the men themselves would. There were more strikes because of water and water money than anything else.

Billy Crawford

“Sometimes you hit wet spots and obviously when I say wet, it was torrential. I've seen roadways flooded and on occasions spending a whole day...trying to get water pumped out....When you had break-ins of water, men would be soaking...We did on occasion try to get water money for the men working in these conditions because it was pretty drastic.”

William Menzies

Water was a real problem in all mines and Barony was no exception.

When the water would be dripping on top of you all the time and you can't get out of the road of it - there's no 'rained off' - you've still got to get to work whether it's 'raining' or not!...I've worked in places where you put corrugated sheets up on every strap of wood and you're still soaking. Men would do the toilet without taking their trousers down, they were that wet so what was the point of taking off their oilskin trousers - you're wet anyway...and it was warm water!

Billy Crawford

There was also unofficial action - this means strikes that were not authorised by the union.

Unofficial strikes would be loads of things; in my opinionit was about solidarity. Most of it was about 10p in your loss of wages.... All the unofficial strikes were about men and their pride.

Billy Crawford

However, in 1972 all the men were out on strike at the call of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) over pay. The NUM had been in negotiation with the NCB for 3 months and this had ended in deadlock. The Conservative Government under Prime Minister, Edward Heath, declared a state of emergency and instituted a 3 day working week to conserve electricity supplies at a time when the weather was bad and demand on supplies was high. Domestic power cuts were also introduced to conserve energy. The strike lasted 7 weeks. On the 19th February an agreement was reached between the Government and the NUM which secured a deal that increased their workforce's wages considerably as well as improving general conditions.

Despite these improvements there was another strike in 1974. On the 4th February 1974, 81% of the miners in Britain voted to strike as their pay demands had not been met. It was still the Conservative Government in power with Edward Heath as their leader and this time he refused to compromise and called an election for the 28th February believing that the public would support him. The Conservatives lost. The new Labour Government, with Harold Wilson as Prime Minister, reached an agreement with

the NUM which substantially increased their wages. The new agreement was worth double the figure on offer under the Conservatives.

1972 and 74...I think 74 was the one where Ted Heath's Government fell. These strikes didn't last so long and we got a substantial pay rise - pounds not pennies. If you worked from 8 o'clock at night till 7 in the morning, you got paid what was called unsocial hours and that had never happened before.

David Savage

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Section 2:

The 1984 - 85 Strike

In 1983 Margaret Thatcher won a second term of office for her Conservative Government.

In 1983 Margaret Thatcher won a second term of office for her Conservative Government. It was no secret that she wanted to reduce the power of the unions in Britain and in this term of office she set about the task. Her measures were introduced one at a time, slowly stripping away the power of the trades unions. One of the most important measures of this Government was to make it illegal for secondary industrial action to take place - this meant if a union went on strike for a particular grievance another union in a different trade could not come out on strike in support of them as had happened in the past. However, the measure that was to prove most significant for the NUM was the law making it illegal for union leaders to call a strike without first holding a ballot of its membership to make sure it had the support for action.

Apart from her desire to reduce the power of the unions, Margaret Thatcher believed in reducing subsidies to nationalised industries and making these industries more competitive with market forces. The coal industry received a huge subsidy of over £900 million in 1983. If the subsidy was to be reduced the coal industry had to become more economically efficient and one means of achieving this was to close pits that were regarded as uneconomic - often pits which had not received upgrading in the past so would require more money spent on them to make them efficient. However, as early as 1982, Arthur Scargill, the NUM National President, had said it was the intention of the Coal Board to close pits citing a leaked Coal Board document as his source.

On 12th March 1984, in response to the decision by the NCB to close Cortonwood Colliery in Yorkshire, Snowden in Kent and Polmaise in Stirlingshire, Scargill called the NUM members out on strike.

At the time it was seen by many in the media as an attempt by Arthur Scargill to bring down the Government, while it was equally seen by others as an attempt by Margaret Thatcher to quash the unions and use the NUM as an example - there was clearly no love lost between the two of them.

Margaret Thatcher was determined to crush us, that's why McGregor was brought in - the hatchet man. Arthur Scargill...was intent on bringing down the Government. Only one could win.

David Savage

[Ian McGregor was brought in as Chairman of the National Coal Board in 1983]

I believed in the first strike, 70 something. The last strike I didn't believe in, the reason being the men had decent wages and they [NUM leadership] were after bringing down the Government. That Government told them, 'you fight us and we'll pay you back.' And they did.

Archie Glover



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Scargill did not call a ballot as was now required by law and just to confirm the situation, on 28th September a High Court judge ruled that the strike was illegal because a ballot had not been held.

There was no ballot for the strike and that was the biggest bugbear and to me it was a mistake Scargill made.

Billy Affleck

“No ballot - that was one of the biggest things.... I think if they'd taken a ballot ... the miners would have voted to go on strike at that time because of the issue.”

Jim Dunsmuir

I feel if the NUM had given us the vote, I believe we may have won the strike because I believe the rest of the trade union movement would have supported us.

David Savage

The men were never balloted you know - that was a mistake.

Miner's wife, Muirkirk

The miners felt that this strike was important because it was about securing their future - their jobs. It was not about wages. For this reason they were prepared to support their union leader especially as he had warned them of this as early as 1982. They also had a tradition of solidarity to one another in times of trouble.

What you have to remember about the big strike.....it wasn't about money, it was about employment. I think that's a lot of the things that people don't understand is that we were fighting to save jobs. We weren't fighting to put money in our pockets.

Jim Dunsmuir

Money was tight. Being an unofficial strike cut the men off from any social security benefits as new legislation had been introduced by the Conservative Government in the early 1980s. Having had a High Court ruling that the strike was illegal the NUM was fined £200,000. The Union refused to pay so in October of 1984 their funds were sequestered and the NUM was put into the hands of a receiver by the High Court. This meant the NUM could not provide its members with any money at all and they were, therefore, dependent on their savings, what they could find for themselves, their families and what people would give them.

I lifted all the money I had, all my wife's jewellery, anything belonging to the kids and I put it in a safety deposit box. It cost me £12. It's not like a safety deposit box in the movies - it's a big safe and it's sealed in an envelope. You don't get any interest on your money, but when I got back after the strike I still had my money.

Billy Crawford

I couldn't even afford to pay my road tax. Sometimes I didn't even have the bus fare to get to work.

Miner's wife, Cumnock

We got vouchers like a clothing grant. We got the vouchers to help them get back to school. I was very reluctant to go to the school to get them because of my pride, but my husband went.

Miner's wife, New Cumnock

People would give us things - a cabbage, scones, bread. Folk were kind. And family helped out buying messages and slipping you a fiver every now and then.

Miner's wife, Muirkirk



Donated items from around the country

Photo © East Ayrshire Libraries

“I got married the year of the strike - we'd no presents, just cards filled with IOU's!”

Miner's daughter, Muirkirk

SOGAT'82 fed us for a year. There'd nobody needed to suffer for food... SOGAT'82 they were the union, the amount of support they gave to the miners was unbelievable.

Jim Dunsmuir

(SOGAT'82 - The Society of Graphical & Allied Trades, an amalgamated union formed in 1982 to represent all workers involved in printing/book binding)

The Strike Centre was at the Community Centre and the Soup Kitchen was run from there too. We had a full dinner - soup, meat and potatoes, sometimes a pudding if you were lucky. A lot of local grocers gave towards it as well and we always had a good dinner.

Miner's wife, New Cumnock

The local shopkeepers were quite good at giving credit.

Miner's wife, New Cumnock

The one thing I regret during the strike - down in Dumfries - this wee boy would wake up in the morning his wee black rabbit and his wee white rabbit gone - we ate them! The 2 rabbits, big beauties - rabbit stew. If anything haunts me it's that.

Archie Glover

In '84 with the big strike...I'd worked all year for nothing simply because you were helping all your customers, giving them extended credit, doing all sorts of things. The credit was just written off because they didn't have the money.

John Stewart, local grocer in Auchinleck

At Christmas, the French miners gave presents for all the children and we all got a chicken and a party in the local pub.

Miner's wife, New Cumnock

Where we lived there was a play park and climbing frames made out of wood opposite the house. One morning I woke up and they were gone - they'd been chopped down for fire wood. And I remember 'striker's roast' we used to call it - an old hollowed out loaf filled with potatoes, the bread and maybe a wee bit of meat roasted in the oven.

Miner's daughter, Muirkirk

The Council let us off paying the rent - though we'd to pay when it was over. There was a loan from the Social Work Department - all together £941 and when my husband started back to work after the strike we'd to pay it back at £5 a week.

Miner's wife, New Cumnock

Wives had to pay everything. I was working in a carpet factory doing 14 hours a day, 6 days a week, £44 - that was it. The strike broke up marriages - the strain of it.

Miner's wife, Muirkirk

The leaders of the strike, Arthur Scargill, the President and Mick McGahey, the National Vice President of the NUM came to Cumnock and took part in a rally locally.

There was a rally in Cumnock. Scargill and McGahey were both there. There were huge numbers of people.

Miner's wife, Cumnock

Although the Barony was closed routine maintenance work had to be done to ensure there was a pit to return to after the strike was over.

We got sanctioned to get working 2 days a week because the management told the Union, 'Right you withdraw your winding engine men and the pit floods, we're shutting the pit before you get back...it's up to yourselves. So the Union sanctioned it and we got 2 days a week. There were 6 winding engine men and we got 2 shifts a week.

Archie Glover

If you were an official you had to go underground about 3 days a week to see that it was safe....engineers and electricians had to do the same just to see that if the strike finished everything was ready for starting. The boys who were picketing would let you in because they knew you were keeping the pit open for them going back.

John 'Tug' Wilson

I worked through the strike because we were deemed 'Safety'. I never had any trouble getting through the picket line. If I went out at lunch I had to bring pies up for the boys on the picket line.

Jean Armstrong, nurse at Barony medical centre

[The pickets were the striking miners who gathered at the colliery gates to protest and try to stop non-strikers from crossing the picket line and going to work.]

“My father was a safety officer at the Barony, so he worked during the strike. The men on the picket line would let him through, but there were days when he couldn't get through and he wouldn't cross the picket line without permission.”

Miner's daughter, Muirkirk

Some men returned to work. This resulted in violence within the mining communities and hatred towards those who returned and their families.

Once my husband went back to work we became victims - no one spoke to me. People were screaming and shouting outside the house.

Miner's wife, Cumnock

The house was attacked, the windows smashed, my son was in bed.

Miner's wife, Cumnock

There were 2 men who went back, they had mortgages to pay and kids - they've never been forgiven to this day.

Miner's wife, Cumnock

They were insulting to the kids. One woman came up to my son and said, 'do you know your daddy's a scab' - he was only at nursery.

Miner's wife, Muirkirk

My son was threatened on the way to school.

Miner's wife, Cumnock

Those who chose to return to work had to get there. As usual the Barony provided buses, but these were 'fortress buses' - buses with thick wire netting on the windows. Those on board had to endure abuse - verbal and physical.

They threw bricks at the windows.

Miner's wife, Cumnock

There were 2 men who were working who were ostracised by the community. As they got on the bus each day, everyone congregated and hurled abuse at them - verbal hatred was directed at them. It was the negativity; I was really frightened by this adult hatred. And it happened on a daily basis. I still can't get over the real hatred I saw. I'll always remember it.

Young man, Muirkirk

It was not only the returning workers who were attacked. Coal was still being moved from the docks at Hunterston to the power stations by lorry convoys. There were not always large numbers on picket duty. There was always a presence, but it was only at times when they knew something was happening, for example the arrival of men to work, that large numbers came to give support to each other. The movements of these convoys were kept as secret as possible because it was realised that the lorry drivers would be pressurised not to cross the picket line. However, sometimes the strikers found out:

There was some people within the management did let out some information about coal movements etc. I'm not saying who it was, but we did have people within giving us information.

William Menzies

The NCB offered incentives to get miners back before Christmas, and gradually men went back to work.

Men started drifting back; some went before Christmas - not a lot. I went back in January 1985 and what made up my mind was I was listening to the news...and that night I thought I'm in the wrong strike here, because he's [Scargill] telling us to follow the NUM leadership but he's telling the rest of the trade union movement - 'you come out and your leaders will follow.' I decided I'd walk straight through the picket line, 2 boys came forward and said, 'I don't think you should go.' I said, 'I've had 8 months of this, I'm sorry I'm going in.' And I went in through the picket line.....What did the boys think when I walked in there?...Well they said, 'At least he didn't come behind the fortress bus, he walked in.'

David Savage

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Section 3:

The End of the Strike

As it became more evident that the Government was not going to back down, more men returned to work and by March 1985, it was all over.

As it became more evident that the Government was not going to back down, more men returned to work and by March 1985, it was all over. On March 3rd at the Trades Unions Congress (TUC) headquarters in London, the NUM National Executive voted for a return to work without any deal over pit closures. It was, however, a very close vote; 98 to 91 for a return to work.

“To this day men don't speak to each other.”

John ‘Tug’ Wilson

The Government had won and had been determined to do so from the beginning. Large stockpiles of coal had been accumulated at pitheads and power stations for the eventuality of a strike. The weather during the strike had been good, 1984 having a particular warm summer and the winter being mild which, therefore, meant there was not the same demand for energy. When the Central Electricity Board met its highest demand for power in January 1985, the miners knew there would be no power cuts for consumers or industry and that the end was near.

The strike left behind it a legacy of bitterness which is still there. All the women who were interviewed on the subject of the strike did not want to be identified because they felt more than anyone that they had suffered and in many cases were still suffering for what had happened, either as the wife of a miner who went back early or as a wife who had stood by her husband until the end of the strike.

That strike changed my personality. After that I was no longer Mrs Meek and Mild, I was no longer giving of myself. I supported my husband when he returned to work.

Miner's wife, Cumnock

The miners' strike was a difficult time for everybody; wives and families especially I felt had it difficult.....and the strike...let's be honest it was a rough time... and I made a promise to my wife, 'once the strike is by, I'll come out of the Union' [as an official] because I just felt I'd put her through more than most wives had to go through....and the abuse she was getting in the place.

Miner, New Cumnock

“I hated what it did to the village - it set folk against folk.”

Miner's wife, New Cumnock

There was brother against brother. As time's progressed I think things have got a bit better, though there is still some ill feeling which will always be there.

Billy Affleck

I'm not giving my name. It's taken me a long time for people to speak to my family again.

Miner's wife, Muirkirk

After 8 or 9 months there was a chance to settle and Arthur, for his own reasons, chose not to; and I want it on record I'm no Scargillite - I think he did the movement a disservice, I honestly do.

Jim Dunsmuir.

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Section 4:

The Return to Work

The men returned, but things were very difficult.

The men returned, but things were very difficult.

One of the biggest problems we had after the strike was we still had to function as a union, but obviously there were clear disparities among the workforce. One of the things was you had the men who had gone back to work before Christmas, the men who went back to work after Christmas didn't like the men who'd gone back before Christmas and then you had the men who had stuck the strike out who didn't like any of them. So it was a case of building bridges.

William Menzies

As predicted by the NUM, mines started to close. In 1985 Bogside, Frances and Polkemmet were closed followed by Comrie and the nearby Killoch in 1986. It was to be Barony's turn in 1989.

When asked about whether Scargill had been proved right as the mines started to close, this was what Jim Dunsmuir had to say:

Whether we went on strike or whether we hadn't, it was an open secret that's what the Coal Board's plans were.

Jim Dunsmuir