

ARTICLE BY THE RT HON PETER WALKER MBE MP FOR PUBLICATION IN THE MAIL ON SUNDAY ON 2 SEPTEMBER 1984

It is nearly 30 years since I first stood for Parliament. In that time I have seen both Conservative and Labour Governments suffer under the effect of strike action. Mr Callaghan's Government was in fact destroyed by strikes in the winter of discontent. Many strikes have been disruptive, and many deeply damaging to our prospects of winning orders both at home and abroad. Many have caused great inconvenience to the public. Some of these strikes have been justified, some not. Some have been caused by the political aspirations of trade union leaders and others can be attributed to a lack of union leadership, but many can be put down to bad management. All strikes, however, have helped our competitors throughout the world, and damaged the prosperity of our own country.

In all these 30 years no strike I have witnessed has had less justification, or proved more costly to the men who fought it, than the present dispute in the coal mining industry, which started without reason and without a national ballot six months ago.

The miners have been offered a good pay increase, a guarantee that every one of them who wished to remain in the industry would be certain of a job, and a massive investment programme to ensure a prosperous and successful future for coalmining in this country. Just look at what would have happened if, instead of manipulating a strike without a ballot, Mr Scargill had abided by the National Union of Mineworkers' procedures and called a national ballot. He would have lost, as he lost on the previous three occasions when he called for conflict. It is clear that he would have lost because a third of the men in Britain's coal fields rejected his manoeuvre and held ballots. 70,000 miners voted and more than two-thirds of them voted decisively not to strike.

If there had been no strike those miners who have been forced not to work would each be £4,200 better off. £200m more could have

been invested in the coal industry - investment that has had to be postponed because of the strike. At least 700 firms would have converted from using gas or electricity to burning coal. Instead, industries which used to burn coal are now converting to gas and electricity. Several thousand miners in their 50s would have taken early retirement and each received a large capital sum and an average of £104 per week. This country would be emerging as the dominant provider of coal for Western Europe. We alone have made the commitment to make a further massive £3 billion investment in the coal mining industry. Coal production in Germany is swiftly declining, and the Socialist Government of France has decided to cut its coal mining industry by half.

If the National Union of Mineworkers, with creative leadership, had wished its industry to succeed, it could have drawn up an agreement based on "Plan for Coal" with the National Coal Board. This could have provided Britain and Europe with cheap coke and coal and resulted in coal production rising in Britain instead of falling as in past years. The miners could have improved their own standard of living by claiming their share of the improved productivity which would have been obtained. All of this was available without a strike. This was the option Mr Scargill rejected but which those miners who had the opportunity of voting decisively decided to accept.

The strike option has been crippling to the miners who were not allowed to ballot and who have been kept on strike by mob picketing. The National Union of Mineworkers has not paid strike pay to striking miners and their families. What they have done is paid those who agreed to join the mobs. Mobs have proved to be necessary to prevent miners from returning to work. Future markets have been lost, coal faces destroyed, and substantial wages foregone for ever. Over 6,000 arrests for criminal offences have been made in the course of the dispute. Mining communities have suffered violence and intimidation on an unprecedented scale.

Fortunately for Britain, the police have saved the steel industry and the power stations from the paid mobs. Had they not done so, thousands of trade unionists throughout the country would be

suffering the same unemployment and misery which the two-thirds of miners deprived of the ballot have suffered over the last six months. Fortunately also the surplus production of coal which could not be sold for the cost at which it had been produced meant that Britain possessed a massive coal mountain. Stocks of coal at power stations and collieries have meant that no power cuts have been necessary, and will mean that in this foolish and unjustified strike there will be no power cuts for months and months to come. The miners who were told last February by Mr Scargill and his comrades that there were only 8 weeks coal stocks remaining at power stations must feel very embittered.

Next week is a testing time for the TUC. Are they really going to endorse the tactics of violent picketing and intimidation? Are they going to express themselves in favour of the views imposed on the two-thirds of miners deprived of a vote or are they going to support the third of the miners who democratically and decisively voted against the strike and who have worked every day since? Why should the TUC back miners in Yorkshire deprived of a vote against miners in Lancashire, North Wales, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Staffordshire, Cumbria, Warwickshire and Nottinghamshire who voted and said they wanted to work. What the TUC should say is that if the National Union of Mineworkers needs TUC support, then it must ensure that picketing is peaceful and in accordance with the best TUC guidelines. The NUM must stop trying to destroy other people's jobs. They must allow the miners of Britain a national ballot to let them make their own decisions. Better still, the TUC should tell Mr Scargill that he has on offer a wage increase, guarantees of no compulsory redundancies, and an investment programme which will provide a marvellous future for his industry, which together are the envy of other unions. They should point out that it is time he and his members co-operated to secure that future instead of conducting a violent conflict which, if continued, can only destroy the prospects now available.