

Scargill on Saltley: 'Here was the living proof that the working class has only to flex its muscles and it could bring governments, employers, society to a total standstill'

My greatest day

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What does NUM president Arthur Scargill want from the miners' dispute – a successful coal industry or a successful class struggle? In 1975, in a revealing interview with the magazine *New Left Review*, he looked back at the crippling disputes in 1969, 1972, and 1974 – and also looked into the future

The first thing that we did in the 1969 dispute was to ask ourselves, first of all, was every pit in Yorkshire out? And the answer then "yes". That was completely sewn up. The next step was to get out every other pit in Britain if we could.

Then we launched pickets into Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. We decided that the best way that we could produce an effective stoppage was to have a rapid mobile picket. We'd used this before in the Yorkshire coalfield, but on a very limited scale and never in an organized way. We launched from the coalfield here squads of cars, minibuses and buses, all directed on to pre-determined targets, with five, six, seven-hundred miners at a time. Of course, the police were going to come, but they couldn't cover forty points at a time, without bringing the British armed forces in.

I believe in a class war you have to fight with the tools at your disposal. 1969 was a foretaste.

Did you get other groups of workers involved?

No, we didn't because the big problem was that we were not able at this stage to get out our own men. The subsequent result wasn't a victory in the sense that you can say "We've got it" but it would have been a terrible defeat if we'd kept the men out on strike. So we took a decision to go back to work victoriously, and we led them back. I don't care who the historian is but if he regards '69 as anything other than a complete victory, it's time that he went and did some more thinking about it. Because '69 was responsible for producing all the victories that were to come.

Did you keep the rank and file organization in being after the strike?

Well, there were groups of miners in the coalfields who came together. For example, a number of us had launched an organization called the Barnsley Miners' Forum, of which I was secretary. This forum was a platform for the left and a platform for ideas within the movement. You cannot have this sort of forum without having a concentration of ideas, and some kind of unity developing in the coalfields. So to that extent the left were keeping together. In 1970 we had an abortive strike in Yorkshire. This was mainly because the issue at stake was the wrong one; we couldn't get the unity we wanted among the left and there were splits. But at the same time many valuable lessons were learnt because nearly half the coalfields in Britain came out on strike. After the '69 and '70 disputes it was clear that the union was never, ever going to be the same again.

Of course it's a matter of history that the '72 strike took place after an overtime ban. But what is not generally known is where the picketing started in 1972 – it started in Yorkshire. We had every pit picketed on the first morning to get out the weekly-paid industrial staff-members, who were not members of the Yorkshire NUM, to make sure they were out on strike straight away. After this we immediately switched our attack to every major coal depot and power station in the region. We had a thousand pickets deployed into East Anglia, and we had a major battle inside the Strike Committee. The differences of opinion were whether we should concentrate the pickets on one target or whether we should dispatch them



Saltley, Wednesday February 9, 1972: a Scargill forewarning of things to come

all over East Anglia to all the power stations.

The argument that won the day was the one to send them to Yarmouth, to Bedford, to Cambridge, to Ipswich, to Norwich, to all the different power stations. I said this was stupid and would not prove successful. For three days we battled with police in the East Anglia area. Then we had a weekend Strike Committee meeting and changed the policy.

I picked the phone up and called East Anglia HQ and said "Move everything in on to Ipswich dock, move everything we can". We produced a thousand pickets in an hour-and-a-half in Ipswich dock, and stopped the dock in an hour. We left a token picket at the docks, moved on, and closed down the power stations one by one. Within two days we'd shut down the whole of East Anglia.

How did the strike develop on a national basis?

The picketing had been launched in all the areas. But mobile pickets directed on targets outside the pits had been sent mostly from Yorkshire. You see, we took the view that we were in a class war. We were not playing cricket on the village green, like they did in '26. We out to defeat Heath and Heath's policies because we were fighting a government. Anyone who thinks otherwise was living in cloud-cuckoo land. We had to declare war on them and the only way you could declare war was to attack the vulnerable points.

What was the permit system that you were operating?

Well, the miners' union was not opposed to the distribution of coal. We were only opposed to the distribution of coal to industry because we wished to paralyse the nation's economy. It's as simple as that. We were fighting a class war and you don't fight a war with sticks and bladders. You fight a war with the weapons that are going to win it.

What were the circumstances that produced the confrontation at Saltley?

By the time Saltley came up everything was quiet. It was a Saturday and the telephone in the headquarters here in Barnsley had been remarkably silent. Every point was covered and the permit system was operating. The telephone rang at four o'clock on that Saturday afternoon. It was someone from the national office: "Can you get as many pickets as possible into Birmingham?" "Pickets to Birmingham?" I said. "What for?" "There's a coke depot there," this bloke said, "lorries are going in, hundreds of them!" Then he put the phone down.

What do you do on a Saturday afternoon? How do you get three, four-hundred pickets to Birmingham? And to go to a coke depot –

ten men ought to be able to control a coke depot. Anyway, I thought, the only thing to do is to get it organized. So I put out the call and within three hours we had 200 on their way. Within five hours we had 400 men on their way down to Birmingham in coaches.

I drove through the night and arrived in Birmingham at three o'clock in the morning. I went into the centre of Birmingham and found our lads who were in the Communist Party HQ. I was then briefed on this coke depot and we went down on the Sunday.

I have never seen anything like it in my life. It was estimated that there was a million tons; it was like a mountain. It was an Eldorado of coke. There were a thousand lorries a day going in and you can imagine the reaction of our boys, fresh from the successes in East Anglia, fresh from the successes in Yorkshire. Battles raged outside that coke depot and at ten o'clock they closed it.

On Wednesday, it was a struggle all day. Most of the leadership of the strike in Birmingham were getting no more than two hours a night sleep. We were getting home at one, two o'clock in the morning and getting up at four. We were stationed all over Birmingham in houses and the people of Birmingham were absolutely fantastic. The solidarity of the working class was never more evident. On that Thursday it produced the greatest day of my life.

The whole of the East District of the Birmingham AUEW were out on strike, 100,000 were out on strike. It was tremendous. And they were still marching in from Coventry and other places, still advancing into Saltley. It was estimated that there were 20,000 in this area. Maudling, who said that the gates wouldn't close, suddenly found that they were bloody closed and locked. The Chief Constable said: "That's it, I'm not risking any more here, those gates stay closed." He then turned to me – this is absolutely factual – and said: "Will you please do us a favour? Will you please disperse the crowd?" And I said on two conditions: first that I can make a speech to the crowd. He said: "Agreed." And secondly that I can use your equipment, because mine's knackered. He said: "Agreed."

Then I spoke from the urinal in Birmingham, with this police equipment. I gave a political speech to that mass of people and told them that it was the greatest victory of the working class, certainly in my lifetime. The lads who were there were overcome with emotion, emotion in the best possible way. Here had been displayed all that's good in the working-class movement. Here had been displayed what for years had been on a banner but had never been transferred from the banner into reality. You know the words: "Unity is Strength",



"Workers of the World Unite", "Man to Man Brother Be". They're big words. Sometimes they'd been ridiculed. Through all that ridicule, all that sneering, they survived. Here was the living proof that the working class had only to flex its muscles and it could bring governments, employers, society to a total standstill. I know the fear of Birmingham on the part of the ruling class. The fear was that what happened in Birmingham could happen in every city.

This was the first major defeat for the Heath government and it set the scene for its defeat later in the same year on the Industrial Relations Act and on the imprisonment of the dockers. Did the miners have any direct relationship to those struggles against the Industrial Relations Act?

Oh yes. You can't separate this from the experience of Saltley because it was so intertwined, beyond belief. We had more people arrested at Saltley, for example, than in the rest of the strike put together. I was the only official of the NUM arrested and subsequently convicted. It was incredible. I was taken to court for picketing and for organizing picketing. But the situation was that later on we were able to use the experience of the strike, when the dockers were put in prison. Yorkshire miners went on strike. We didn't have to ask them, they were out! This is what political education had done for them. They had become aware.

At the moment the militant left wing of the trade union movement defines itself mainly by fighting vigorously for wage claims. However necessary this is, in present circumstances wage battles alone will not be able to defend the living standards of the working class. Shouldn't the left in the unions fight for a fuller, rounded-out programme to meet the crisis as it affects the working class in every aspect of life?

The problem is that once we start to divorce wages from politics, then we lose our perspectives, we begin to suggest that the trade unions have lost their sense of direction, that they are no longer projecting the real issues of the day, which are nationalization of the means of production, distribution and exchange. And not just nationalization, but common ownership, real common ownership. But you see, you will not get common ownership of the means of production, you will not get real control of the society in which we live, unless you commit and convince the working class of the need to struggle.

It may be that we get a strike situation on our hands similar to '72 or '74 where another Saltley can occur. If we get another Saltley then the whole picture can change from one where you have a peaceful road to one where you do not have such a peaceful road.

Research by Michael Trend