

# Are the pit rebels winning?

The car park of a pub in north Nottinghamshire. A solicitor acting for the "back to work" movement in the pit strike arrives and is taken aback by the crowd of heavily built miners who, he presumes, have come to disrupt the latest secret conference of moderates organized by "Silver Birch".

Wondering whether he should not turn round, he realizes they are anti-strike miners, who have turned up in larger numbers than expected to hear how to organize a return. The case of mistaken identity is swiftly resolved; in this drama the "goodies" look just like the "baddies".

This incident, which happened two days ago, illustrates how rapidly the "alternative NUM" is growing. Working miners' committees now exist in most striking coalfields. They are operating as a union within a union in opposition to the present strategy of confrontation with the NCB and the Government; not very effectively as yet, but raising NCB hopes that the trickle of men going back to work might turn into a flood.

Initially, NCB managers were inclined to dismiss the claims of Silver Birch, alias Chris Butcher, a 34-year-old Notts pit blacksmith. There was something decidedly improbable about a peace initiative composed of a one-time market trader with a silver-headed cane touring the striking coalfields in the company of a *Mail On Sunday* journalist. The NUM also sneered. Mick McGahey, the union's vice-president, said that Silver Birch was suffering from Dutch Elm Disease and would not succeed.

But now that most of the cloak and dagger stuff has been dropped, it is becoming clear that Butcher's one-man campaign is a catalyst acting on the feelings of the men at a critical juncture in the closures dispute.

Some of the steam seems to have gone out of the strike since the NUM's July 10 conference and the abortive peace talks a week later. Fewer miners demonstrated at a similar delegate gathering last week. August is traditionally a holiday month, but the lull appears to

indicate that the strike has become becalmed.

The vacuum is being quickly filled by the working miners' committees, which have sprung up in places as diverse as Bilston Glen in Scotland and Staffordshire. The Staffordshire committee is publishing its own propaganda sheet, *Fight Back Now*, arguing that there should be a national ballot, that the violence, intimidation and abuse against miners who want to work has been disgraceful; that the law should be obeyed, and that "the only way to save the NUM from total domination by violent extremists is for democratic miners to return to work."

Jim Lloyd, leader of the Lancashire working miners' committee - the "dirty thirty" - to striking colleagues - insisted, that this is an internal NUM affair. "This is not a breakaway union," he says. He does not favour calls elsewhere for a concerted return on a set date. "As far as we are concerned, it's back to work tomorrow."

Yesterday the NCB reported higher attendances in Lancashire for the eighth successive day.

Yorkshire is where the real battle will be fought. Not even Silver Birch expects sudden mass defections there. The appearance of two returnees at Gascoigne Wood, near Selby, yesterday prompted a show picket of 5,000 men from all over the coalfield, and about 20 others who indicated a readiness to return decided not to after being paid a visit by the strikers. The violence of recent months could be nothing

compared to the impact of a civil war within the country's biggest coalfield.

Yet there were 26 miners from 18 Yorkshire pits at the Silver Birch conference. They wanted advice on how to organize a return to work at pits right across the county. Butcher told them, as he tells all the moderates who seek his guidance, to contact their own colliery manager and the police to coordinate protection for those who want to go in. He supplies them with an aide memoire of practical advice - including winning over the opinions of wives, whose attitude can be crucial. Then he tells them to go back and get on with the job.

Yorkshire has never been the left-wing monolith of current popular imagination. Its voting pattern in the last strike ballot in March 1983 was, to say the least, erratic. For the first time since the late 1960s, the overall area result failed to reach the 55 per cent majority then required to stage a national strike.

Among the 18 pits which had representatives at the country pub conference, just over half voted in that poll (see table below) not to go on strike in support of Welsh miners who had already stopped work and wanted to see a "rolling strike" engulf the coalfields.

Local managers talk of "hairline cracks" appearing in support for the strike, and there is also pressure in some branches that had met irregularly, or not at all, to hold special meetings. A revolt against the strike at some or all of the Yorkshire pits seeking the advice of

Silver Birch would create havoc with the NUM's strategy. Pickets would have to be withdrawn from other areas and local industrial targets to defend "the home front". The scenes at Wistow yesterday show how deep the passions run.

Moreover, any breakthrough by the back to work movement in Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland would seriously undermine the NUM's credibility in the run-up to next month's Trades Union Congress. There the NUM will appeal for "total support" from the rest of the labour movement, a £1m-a-week levy from Britain's ten million trade unionists and "physical" support in the shape of refusal to cross miners' picket lines and a blockade of imported coal and iron.

Everybody likes to back a winner, but few relish being associated with a loser. That is why the NUM is likely to redouble its efforts over the next three weeks to stop the haemorrhaging of support in Scotland, Lancashire, North Derbyshire and the Midlands while reasserting its total grip in Yorkshire and the North East.

The NCB and the Government are evidently happy to sit back and wait for what they see as the inevitable collapse of the strike under internal union pressures and the privation resulting from going without wages for more than six months. The rise of the working miners' committees is a key factor in this calculation, and the time may not be far off before Mr MacGregor treats with them directly.

Meanwhile, Yorkshire dissidents Bob Taylor and Ken Foulstone are pressing ahead with their action for a High Court order to compel the NUM to hold a national ballot. They calculate on getting that order by late September. The union would then have four weeks' grace in which to implement it. If it does not, the moderates say they will try to lead a mass return to work in October. The crunch has been a long time coming, but it is now surely not far off.

**Paul Routledge**  
Labour Editor

**Pits represented at the Silver Birch meeting: How they voted when they last had a chance**

	For striking		Against		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Markham Main	893	510	Houghton Main	658	667
Hatfield	715	475	Cortonwood	250	397
North Gawber	453	234	South Kirby	540	719
Manvers Main	760	637	Wistow	148	308
Frickley	1,067	456	Prince of Wales	464	687
Treeton	358	205	Kiveton Park	291	337
Dinnington	412	360	Manton	315	698
Edlington	587	555	Bentley	391	534
			Shireoaks	187	447
			Allerton Workshops	220	373

**Are the pit rebels winning?.**

Paul Routledge Labour Editor.

*The Times* (London, England), Friday, Aug 17, 1984; pg. 8; Issue 61912. (1167 words)

**Category:** News

© Times Newspapers Limited

**Gale Document Number:**CS134582033