

Woodrow Wyatt

Arthur Scargill's exhausted seam

The National Coal Board employs some 222,000 men. This week more than 100,000 were not on strike. The National Union of Mineworkers' membership among NCB employees is 189,000 of which over 68,000 were not on strike this week. Why are 121,000 NUM members still not at work?

Intimidation must account for a large number. In tight communities where the majority are not working, the risk of physical attack, house burning and so on is acute. Apart from the intimidated there are two categories, which tend to merge into each other: those who believe in blind loyalty to the union right or wrong; and those who are convinced that Mr Scargill is right when he says the strike can be won.

Scargill has one incontrovertible argument on his side. Last March, the NCB *did* propose a reduction of 4 million tonnes of high-cost coal production with a commensurate loss of jobs (it was 20,000 the previous year) in accordance with its aim of cutting out the worst loss-making pits and concentrating on cheaper coal production.

He asserts that miners do not have the right to accept large voluntary redundancy payments because that would be to take away the jobs of their descendants. In older mining communities based on nearby pits this argument has some appeal, although the NCB would have no difficulty achieving the voluntary redundancies it is looking for.

To keep up the morale of that section of his members voluntarily on strike, Scargill has to convince them that they can win, and the NCB be forced to abandon pit closures and job cuts. From the outset, he has made florid claims to this effect. In May he said power stations had only eight weeks, supply of coal. The hoped-for power cuts should therefore have come in July. He has frequently repeated predictions of power cuts which have never come and apparently his most fervent followers are not yet disenchanted.

Last Monday Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, said that there were stocks of 37 million tonnes of coal, a reduction of only around 76 million tonnes since the strike began in March. The Central Electricity Generating Board has not even begun to import foreign coal, readily available at Rotterdam for £35 a tonne, plus £5 delivery to Britain (against the average cost of £46 a tonne for undelivered home-produced coal). Between August and September the stocks at power stations actually rose from 15.27 million to 15.6 million tonnes.

There are some 22 million tonnes at collieries and open-cast sites. The magic of Scargill presumably convinces his followers that these could not be moved, but despite a few railmen being awkward there has not been any problem in getting coal moved by road. The much vaunted help the NUM was to get from the TUC and other unions has not materialised and is increasingly less likely to do so: something which must be obvious to his members.

It is not a question of power cuts being forced in the winter, early next year or next summer. The strike could continue indefinitely without any power cuts. The 63 pits producing coal are contributing

nearly 600,000 tonnes a week. Alternative fuel and coal imports could easily top up the gaps if the coal stocks are run down.

Though he does not say so, Scargill probably realizes this. To buoy up the hopes of his followers he uses an additional argument that the cost to the nation of the strike is so intolerable that the Government and NCB will have to give in. In his autumn statement, Mr Nigel Lawson put the extra cost of the strike so far on the public sector borrowing requirement at £1,500m. This is by no means unbearable and has not deterred Lawson from promising tax cuts in the next budget. Nor is it easy to assess the true cost of the strike: coal stocks being used have already been paid for and the wages of the miners not at work are being saved. The strike could last for 10 years and the country would still be nowhere near having to give in.

So Scargill is resorting to proclaiming doom for some pits unless all miners join the strike. At Bersham in North Wales on November 8 a narrow majority of striking miners working voted for the strike to continue. Today nearly all the Bersham miners are at work with Scargill declaring that the NCB intends to close the pit. However, the NCB has said officially that the pit can become profitable and denies any intention to close it.

Scargill recently claimed that half of the nine North Derbyshire pits face imminent closure on economic grounds. Mr Ken Moses, the NCB area director, has challenged him to name these pits and debate the issue publicly as the NCB has no plans to close any. Scargill has backed away; he cannot risk being discredited.

He claims the NCB figures of more than 68,000 not on strike are wrong and this week maintained that only 51,725 were non-strikers. The NCB makes the reasonable reply that its auditors would not allow it to get away with paying 68,000-plus for work they are not doing.

Similarly, Scargill asserts that many who went back to work have rejoined the strike. The real figures are that 22 rejoined the strike in the week ending Friday, November 9 and 98 rejoined it in the week ending Friday, November 16.

The drift back to work has slowed down for the time being but Scargill will be hard driven to go on persuading even his more rabid followers that it is not happening. He is undoubtedly a considerable orator and propagandist. It will be interesting to see how long his claim that the strike will succeed will be believed by enough NUM members to maintain it in any significant form. As the record of inaccurate predictions and statements lengthens, the willingness of the genuine, as opposed to intimidated, strikers to believe that the strike can be won must diminish.

The NCB was foolish to prophesy that more than half the NUM employees would be back at work by Christmas, but already over one-third of them are. The erosion of the strike, however slow, is now inevitable and Scargill's rhodomontade will not be enough to hold back more than his most fanatical supporters from becoming non-strikers. Neither the NCB nor the Government need do anything other than wait patiently.

Arthur Scargill's exhausted seam.

Woodrow Wyatt.

The Times (London, England), Saturday, Dec 01, 1984; pg. 8; Issue 62001. (1084 words)

Category: News

© Times Newspapers Limited

Gale Document Number:CS134975361