



Mr Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mineworkers, leading a long procession of supporters at Barrow yesterday.

THE UNION LEADER

Scargill: the fighter who led from the front

By David Felton
Labour Correspondent

The coal strike has, if nothing else, confirmed that Mr Arthur Scargill occupies a unique position in the labour movement and there is little to suggest that, in spite of the outcome of the dispute, he will not continue to fly in the face of trade union orthodoxy.

Throughout the strike Mr Scargill maintained a public and private conviction that the fight to halt pit closures could be won in spite of the overwhelming odds. That continued optimism about the final outcome had some of his closest political colleagues wondering whether they were really going through the same dispute.

He led from the front from the start of the strike, was fined twice by the courts, changed tactics on numerous occasions, not least in finally recognizing the authority of the courts, but maintained to the end that he would never sign a document that accepted pit closures. When the end came he would have none of the talk about defeat, the titanic struggle by the miners was itself a victory, he said.

It was very much Scargill's strike and if the National Union of Mineworkers' executive began to exercise some control over their president in

Born January 11, 1938, at Worsborough, Yorkshire. Attended primary and secondary schools in Worsborough. Left school at 15 to work at Woolley colliery, near Wakefield. Joined Barnsley Young Communist League, March 1955. Defeated as Communist Party candidate in elections for Worsborough UDC, May 1960. Elected to NUM branch committee, May 1960. Married Anne Harper, September 1961. Left Young Communist League, 1962. Elected branch delegate to NUM Yorkshire area council, 1964.

BIOGRAPHY

Joined Labour Party, 1966. Elected to NUM national executive, 1972. Came to national prominence at "Battle of Saltley Gates", 1972. Elected president of Yorkshire NUM, 1973. Played key role in 1974 national strike. Elected national union president with 70.3 per cent majority, 1981. Lost ballot on action over pay claim, January 1982. Lost ballot on action over pay claim, December 1982. Ballot rejection of call for action over S Wales pit closure, March 1983. Led "rolling strikes" over pit closures, March 1984.

the strike's dying days, for most of the 51 weeks he was the guiding influence in a dispute that had been expected from the moment he won the 70.3 per cent vote in the 1981 election to succeed Joe Gormley as president.

His critics, and there are many on the left as well as the right, complain of his reluctance to take advice and an unshakeable belief that he knew what was best for the miners on strike and their committees with whom he maintained a close affinity. That rapport was returned by hero worship particularly by

the younger pitmen, who quickly developed a taste for the strike and the frequent picket line confrontations with the police.

A key element of Mr Scargill's strategy for the dispute, which he also saw as a vehicle for the workers to bring about a change, if not in government then at least in Thatcherite policies, was the avoidance of a national ballot.

The triumvirate of Mr Scargill, Mr Peter Heathfield, the general secretary and Mr Michael McGahey, the NUM vice-president, stamped their authority on the dispute,

although it was not long before the president was going his own way.

General secretaries are not normally regarded as a sensitive breed but several took great exception to what they saw as "snubs" when they were trying to help Mr Scargill prosecute the strike. The NUM president's response from about June onwards was to concentrate on small private meetings.

"One of Arthur's problems has been that he is not interested in attending meetings that he is not able to control. Another problem is that he is a very difficult person to work with; he does not trust anyone and so people tend not to trust him", one influential figure in left trade union circles, said.

The public Scargill persona, of hectoring and haranguing, is very different from the private man who displays a shy and warm nature and who can become passionate and emotional in a quiet way when talking about the coal industry which he joined when he was 15.

He likes being compared to A. J. Cook, who led the miners during the 1926 general strike but ended up a broken man. He shares with Cook a single-mindedness and unyielding

belief in himself that was described by one union leader as "tunnel vision. Arthur can see where he wants to go and nothing, but nothing, will make him deviate from that course."

Mr Scargill has attracted hostility from right-wing union leaders who variously have described him as a "dangerous buffoon", "nursery revolutionary" and "unfeeling man".

During the strike, Mr Scargill, who is 47, regularly worked 18 hours a day seven days a week.

On his election to the £27,500 a year job in 1981, the NUM faced a Scargill leadership into the 21st century but now the Trade Union Act 1984 is likely to end the job for life tradition of the NUM presidency. As a voting member of the executive Mr Scargill will need to stand for election by December next year after the relevant clause of the Act comes into force on October this year.

The only way of avoiding an election, if the law is to be obeyed, would seem to be to renounce his vote. If an election for the presidency is held it is certain that the substantial resources of the working miners' movement, and disaffected union members will combine to try to defeat Mr Scargill

The Union Leader.

By David Felton Labour Correspondent.

The Times (London, England), Wednesday, Mar 06, 1985; pg. 2; Issue 62079. (968 words)

Category: News

© Times Newspapers Limited

Gale Document Number:CS34181222