

27th June 1985

Chairman: John Hannam

13 Members present

Speakers: Mr Tom Peet and Mr Ron Catherill, Conservative Trade Unionists and Mr Tony Ellis, National Working Miners Committee

Mr Catherill began by outlining the current situation in the coal industry. Many miners were still suffering harassment and physical intimidation although the number of cases was slowly decreasing. However, a considerable problem remained: those miners who had returned to work before the end of the strike, because they have been subject to intimidation were more likely to take voluntary redundancy or make a voluntary move. Thus they could not apply for NCB grants to assist their transfer. Miners who remained on strike were less likely to seek voluntary moves and consequently, when they transfer to another colliery they receive, from the Coal Board, healthy contributions to cover expenses incurred.

Payments, he said, could amount to £2,000 over a 2 year period and this figure did not include substantial house sale grants. Former working miners, he added, have found it impossible to sell their property - 'scab houses' as they are known - and consequently very often suffer severe financial hardship, remaining unaided by the Board.

The Board, though, was not entirely at fault. Matters concerning redundancy and transfer were dealt with by the Industrial Relations Officers in each colliery. Most of these Board employees were former members of the NUM and generally in favour of the strike. There was plenty of evidence to suggest that these IRO's were extremely unsympathetic to the plight of former working miners and more willing to offer generous transfer payments to militants.

Mr Catherill gave an example of this in practice. On June 6th the manager of the former moderate pit at Selby advertised fifty vacancies. Four hundred former working miners applied for transfer but were rejected, out of hand, by Mr Ted Dyke, a well-known figure of the Left and a former NUM official, now Industrial Relations Officer at Selby. Then, on the following day, he filled the vacancies with forty-five militant strikers from other pits.

He then gave an example of how some NUM branches indulged in flagrant violation of union procedural rules. One branch elected its militant conference delegate using an electorate of only eleven and then gave him an additional mandate to give unanimous support, at next week's special conference, to the

proposed rule changes. This mandate was added only after the election with the bulk of the branch members having no knowledge of it. The branch then announced that their candidate enjoyed 'a clear mandate' although only eleven members had actually voted in his election.

Mr Ellis began by saying that, in organising the National Working Miners Committee, he and his colleagues had acted to make, not break the Union. They wanted to destroy Arthur Scargill but to this end they were getting little help. The major barrier to a moderate NUM was the presence of left wing Industrial Relations Officers. Most were former NUM officials and militant activists. Mr Kevin Hunt, the head of the Industrial Relations Officers was himself a former branch official.

When Arthur Scargill first advocated the rule changes it looked very much as though they would not meet with the recommendation of the delegate conference. However, the NCB had succeeded in undermining their own advantage: South Wales, which had previously denounced the proposed changes, now looked as though it would support them after the ill-timed announcement of the sacking of the miner acquitted in this month's murder trial; in Northumberland, the Board had announced the closure of Bates colliery only days before the delegate conference. Such ineptitude, he felt, merely gave Arthur Scargill the ammunition he needed.

He reiterated Mr Catherill's remarks that Selby has now been lost to the militants which he said would represent a severe handicap during the next strike when it happened.

The Government has been doing much for the NWMC since the strike and the Prime Minister has taken a personal interest in the plight of former working miners and their transfer. However, he suggested that all this has happened too late and the militants have wrested the initiative from the moderates through better organisation and the insidious use of an underhand industrial relations strategy.

This October, he had heard, would see the start of another, better organised and more militant assault on the industry and the Government. Because of the indifferent treatment they had received and the intimidation meted out to them, former working miners would not be willing to break the strike for a second time. He could not see how the NUM might be undermined this time.

Mr Catherill interjected that he thought there was a left-wing 'cancer' in Hobart House, particularly in the Industrial Relations department which handicapped any moves towards moderation in the industry. It had to be rooted out and exposed. Members of Parliament, he implored, had to take a lead on this subject.

Andrew Mackay said that it seemed to him the Government had initiated the systematic transfer of former working miners but, from what he had just heard, the action had been left half done.

Mr Catherill said that it was the militants who were manipulating for their own ends, any attempts at industrial reconciliation. Very soon, he warned, Selby would no longer be a Conservative seat.

Mr Ellis returned to the impregnable position of the Industrial Relations Officers who were the real cause of the spread of militancy. He had heard of cases where obviously violent militants, convicted of physical assault, had been reinstated at the behest of IRO's and of cases where miners were subject to repeated beatings and attacks on their homes but the culprits went unpunished.

Spencer Batiste praised Ron Catherill for his personal courage - he has had many personal threats to his life. The implications for the industry and the country are very great and it looks as though the NCB has ignored the strategic importance of ensuring the existence of moderate bastions which will continue production throughout a strike. The militant organisation has undermined any hope of success.

Good progress had been made and the Ministers in the Department of Energy had kept up unremitting pressure on the Board to ensure all miners were protected. However, the vexed question of pit transfers has gone a long way towards thwarting further progress. The Board has shown a diminishing interest in the plight of victimised miners which highlighted the extent of NUM sympathy within the NCB.

The NUM rule changes were of fundamental importance. They offer a threat to union democracy and promise to concentrate all power in the hands of Scargill and the National Executive. Militants from Yorkshire will have access to Nottinghamshire branch funds and all moderate areas will effectively be stripped of their existing autonomy. Scargill has plugged all the holes in the union rulebook which had served to undermine his position during the strike.

Mr Catherill lamented the fact that Mr Michael Eaton does not assume his position as head of Industrial Relations until October 1st: by this time Scargill and the militants will have achieved everything they have set out to do. There is some doubt whether this process could, by then, be reversed.

Mr Ellis mentioned that in his capacity as Head of Manpower for North Yorkshire Ted Dyke was able to threaten moderate miners and former working miners with dismissal. He gave one example of an intransigent moderate whom Mr Dyke transferred to Glasshoughton, which is due to close early next year.

Michael Portillo asked how many miners had been transferred from the Yorkshire pits to other areas and what was the morale of former working miners.

Mr Ellis said that morale was low because it was so obvious the militants were regaining the upper hand. In the Selby colliery the NUM branch has just held its annual elections and has elected a group of Left wing militants including one who had been at the colliery for less than 24 hours after being transferred.

He mentioned Lea Hall in Staffordshire, hitherto a moderate and profitable pit, which has now been inundated with transferred militants and has just elected a group of militant branch officials.

Tony Speller asked up to what managerial level in the NCB had sympathy for the NUM permeated.

Mr Ellis said that the head of the Industrial Relations Office was a former NUM militant as were many NCB branch officials. He suggested that Mr Trevor Birmingham and Mr Michael Spanton in Hobart House itself were also active NUM supporters.

Mr Peet reiterated that the biggest threat came from the Industrial Relations Officers at colliery level. Once selected by the NCB (who nearly always choose former NUM officials) they are trained for twelve months and then return to work, fully versed in Left-orientated industrial relations.

Sir John Osborn felt that the Conservatives must take some sort of initiative with the NUM and the Coal Board. He asked what sort of positive contribution Members could make.

Mr Ellis asked that the Government should stop providing funds to the NUM (through Hobart House) for training. The money is given directly to the unions and it is the union that decides which of its members go forward for industrial training. The dangers inherent in this system are all too obvious.

The solution must be to ensure all union officials spend some time actually working underground. At the moment, officials often work for no more than half a day and spend that time planning their strategy of disruption. This is a ridiculous state of affairs, especially in areas where miners are still the victims of cowardly attacks and the police seem powerless to prevent them.

John Hannam wound up the meeting by reading from a Yorkshire NUM circular advertising places - for militants and those who participated in the strike - to attend the Moscow Trade Union School. All applicants must be articulate and ideologically committed in order to be successful, he read.

This had been a sad meeting, he thought, and believed that the peace was still to be won. To this end he implored Mr Catherill and Mr Ellis to maintain regular contact with Members in order that what we had heard could be publicised and the threat averted. The battle was still to be won and the forces of the organised Left were regrouping for an even greater militant assault.

Christopher Guyver
28th June 1985



10 DOWNING STREET

MR BUTLER

Could you, please, give this
to the PM at — or before —
the meeting with Mr Walker?
We received the backbench
Cmttee. minutes late, and have
only now woken up to their
significance.

Clive Lint.

10.7.85