

The Effects of Conflict with the Police in the 1984/5 Miners' Strike

Overview of the Strike

- The miners' strike of 1984/5 was a nearly year-long strike across the UK of miners
- 26,000,000 strike days – the longest strike since the 1926 general strike
- Unlike most strikes in 20th Century British industrial history, this strike was not about wages, conditions, etc.; it concerned the preservation of the industry itself, and by extension those communities built around the industry.
- 11,291 arrests, 8,392 charged, 5 deaths.
- Not all mining communities went on strike – Nottinghamshire miners were the most prominent, with the creation of the Union of Democratic Mineworkers in 1985.
- Ended in March 1985 with a return to work, albeit a reluctant one for many miners.
- Failure of the strike to change government policy eventually led to the closure of most UK collieries – last colliery in County Durham closed in 1993.

Events prior to the strike

- Miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974 showed that strikes had the potential to work; 1972 strike led to a pay increase; the 1974 strike was called during the three-day-week, and was a factor in Heath's government losing the February 1974 election.
- 'The Battle of Saltley Gate' of 1972 was a mass picket where the miners 'defeated' the police, leading to the closure of an important coal depot during the strike. The success at Saltley Gate showed that mass picketing could work – also propelled one of its organisers, Arthur Scargill, to national prominence.
- In response to the miners' success in 1974, Nicholas Ridley MP wrote a report on the nationalised industries in the UK and how a government could defeat a major strike in one of these industries. Some of his proposals include: Hiring non-union lorry drivers from haulage companies; stockpiling of British coal at power stations; importing coal from non-union foreign ports; to 'cut off' money to striking miners and make the union finance them. The report also included a plan to create a mobile riot police squad to be used against picketers. The Ridley report was put into action in the 1984/5 strike.
- Also legislative developments, including:
 - Employment Act 1980; limited those who could picket to those directly involved in the dispute and introduced a ballot on whether a given industry is a closed shop.
 - Employment Act 1982; Employers could sue unions if strike provisions were breached, and further restricted the parameters for a lawful strike.
- These pieces of historical context are important for framing the strike, the violence that took place, and the way that these are remembered by those communities. Miners were generally politically aware, and still have an awareness of their own history.

The violence of the strike

- The miners' strike was policed differently from previous industrial disputes:
- The police had been centralised; the ability for local forces to control how strikes within their area was weakened – area police committees had substantially less control.
- The deployment of Police Support Units (PSUs) changed the style of policing, and the atmosphere of the strike. PSUs, who were equipped for riot control.
- Police from other parts of the country, particularly the Met police, were often brought in.
- As the strike went on, mining communities became like police states; curfews, road checks, raids in pubs/clubs; Police would often outnumber picketers two or three to one (Lloyd, 1985).
- One interviewee: Even the lollipop lady was arrested
- The most violent single event of the strike was the Battle of Orgreave: 123 injuries; picketers were trapped by police and beaten. Civil Liberties group Liberty described it as a 'police riot'.
- In short; it is hard to argue that the decisions of government - to deploy PSUs, to bring in different forces, to set up road checks, to weaken local police committee control, etc. - were not aiming to 'defeat' the miners through violent means. Orgreave is the most obvious example of the state expecting, and committing, violent acts against miners and mining communities.
- However, local police often did not approve of the presence of non-local police, and the attitudes of strikers towards the two were noticeably different:
 - George Moores, South Yorkshire police authority chairman, on the Met: 'Bunch of yobbos... I don't see why I should pay people to come in here and knock around the people I represent' (Spencer, 1985, 45)
 - One Derbyshire striker: 'Your village [policeman] would be the one the Met would hand you to after they were done with you' (Richards, 1997, 128)
- In Fitzwilliam, South Yorkshire, people demanded a return of 'the local bobby' (Lloyd, 1985, 68).

Short-term effects of violence in the strike

- Attitudes towards the police:
 - Certainly damaged by the strike
- Miner at Cwmgili: 'I used to respect, have faith in the police, but not any-more.' (Richards, 1997, 130)
- Another miner said that he would not stop to help an officer if he saw them being beaten. (Richards, 1997, 130)
- *Did police violence lead to a development of class consciousness?*
 - Generally, miners considered themselves to have lost, though having not gone down without a brave fight.
 - As one young miner remarked, 'If we had one of these every few years, people will really know how this system works' (Beynon, 1985, 402)
 - There was a heightened political awareness among mining communities; a solidification of an 'us vs them' understanding of class (Richards, 1996, 168)
 - While they mightn't have lived up to some 'Platonic ideal' of a revolutionary class, judged against their own history, as we ought to judge them (Richards, 1996, 167), mining communities achieved an impressive level of political consciousness.
 - The anti-police sentiment sown by the violence was matched by an anti-state attitude; the experience of violence led to both a distain of police and of government.



Long-term effects of the violence in the strike

- The general anti-police sentiment has not persisted in mining communities. There is a distaste for those officers who were directly involved at the time, but no longer for police in general. Some potential reasons for this attitude are;
 - The amount of time; as the years have gone on, and those individual officers have left the police, the distrust of the police has subsided
 - Local vs non-local police; by using non-local officers to police the strike, communities were not as divided as they would have been, were local police the largest presence. The fact that the police were not local has helped to solidify the 'us vs them' class understanding of mining communities, where the police, like the interests of the state, were foreign to those communities.
- How we remember the past can serve political ends. The violence of the strike now is remembered not as an indictment of policing as a practice, or particularly of modern-day police. The 'defeat' of the miners was seen by many in the UK as a necessary, albeit unfortunate event. To remember the strike for its violence delegitimises the idea that the government's actions were necessary. Emphasising the violence of the strike shows its needlessness; the decisions of the state were not necessary, and required a concerted, violent effort to enact. When mining communities reflect on the violence of the strike, they are also in some sense undermining a Thatcherite hegemonic order.

Bibliography

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