The South Wales Miners 1964-1985

Ben Curtis

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD at the University of Glamorgan / Prifysgol Morgannwg.

February 2007
Contents

Acknowledgements iii.
List of maps v.
Abbreviations vi.
South Wales and south Wales: a note on capitalisation ix.
Introduction 1.
Chapter 1 The Politics of the South Wales Miners 19.
Chapter 4 Interlude: 1974-1979 145.
Conclusion 300.
Appendix I: Oral History Sources 305.
Appendix II: Chief Officials of the South Wales Miners 1898-2007 318.
Bibliography 323.
Acknowledgements

Writing a PhD is both a solitary and a communal activity. Writing is solitary in that no-one else in the world understands exactly what you are really doing, no-one else must put in the long hours and years of research, writing, revision, frustration and small triumphs. It is communal in that it would be impossible to make it through the solitary struggle without the help and support of a great many people. I would like to acknowledge the many debts of gratitude that I have accumulated over the course of my work, the principal ones of which are listed here.

Firstly, due credit must go to my PhD supervisors, Professor Chris Williams of University of Wales Swansea and Dr Andy Croll of the University of Glamorgan. Chris Williams has been my primary supervisor for the duration of my studies although, following his transferral to Swansea, Andy Croll has been my main contact at Glamorgan. I thank both of them for their advice and assistance along the way, from planning and carrying out my research to writing it up and finally submitting the completed thesis. I would also like to thank my examiners, Professor Nina Fishman of the University of Westminster and Dr Chris Evans of the University of Glamorgan.

Given that my research is a study of the history of the south Wales miners which relies primarily on the publications and internal records of the NUM as its source material, I am especially grateful for the assistance shown to me by the NUM South Wales Area. Without the many months I spent working through the archive at the NUM Area Office in Pontypridd, it would not have been possible for me to have completed my thesis in the form that I intended. Consequently, I would particularly like to thank Wayne Thomas, Dorothy Lewis, Carole Jones and Ron Stoate for being unstintingly helpful towards me during my time there. Much of the rest of my research was conducted at the South Wales Miners’ Library and I would also very much like to thank Siân Williams and the staff there as well. In addition to this, I would like to note my appreciation for the assistance I received from Darren
Treadwell and the other archivists at the People’s History Museum in Manchester during my visit there.

I would like to thank all the people who I interviewed during the course of my work, whose names are listed in the bibliography section of the thesis. These interviews gave an invaluable ‘feel’ for the viewpoints of miners during the turbulent period covered by this study. For me, these meetings constituted one of the main highlights of my research programme.

I am very grateful to all my friends for their companionship, which has been important in keeping my morale level up throughout the course of writing my thesis. Amongst them, I would especially like to thank those who have shown an interest in my research, offering encouragement and comment on it along the way. Particular thanks go to Chris Beck, whose IT skills were largely responsible for the creation of the maps that form part of this thesis. In addition to him, I would also like to thank Jack Smith, Darren and Siân Williams (a different Siân to the one mentioned above!), Shahid Mian, Rebecca Edwards, Steffan Morgan, Leighton James, Dan Jay, Ian Elsbury, Stephen Marsland, Ian Thomas, and Ben and Veronica Cottam.

Pontypridd RFC, Caerphilly UKGT Taekwon-do Club, Bedlinog RFC, and Saffron the cat all also made their own distinctive contributions, providing much-needed displacement activities.

Last but by no means least, I would like to thank my family: my mother Krystyna, my brother Sam, my sister Lucy and her fiancé Matt Strand, and also my aunt Mary Harman. Their support really has been invaluable to me, through the good times and the bad. This thesis is dedicated to them.
List of Maps

The collieries of south Wales in 1964 55.
The collieries of south Wales in 1984 234.
The collieries of south Wales in 2004 299.
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACAS</td>
<td>Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEU</td>
<td>Amalgamated Engineers’ Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANL</td>
<td>Anti-Nazi League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APEX</td>
<td>Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>NUM South Wales Area (unless otherwise stated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASLEF</td>
<td>Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUEW</td>
<td>Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (later AEU)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACM</td>
<td>British Association of Colliery Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLOC</td>
<td>Broad Left Organising Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSC</td>
<td>British Steel Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAWU</td>
<td>Clerical and Administrative Workers’ Union (later APEX)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEGB</td>
<td>Central Electricity Generating Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COHSE</td>
<td>Confederation Of Health Service Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COSA</td>
<td>Colliery Officials and Staffs Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP(GB)</td>
<td>Communist Party (of Great Britain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DHSS</td>
<td>Department of Health and Social Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>Executive Council (of the South Wales NUM unless otherwise stated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EETPU</td>
<td>Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPEA</td>
<td>Electrical Power Engineers’ Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBU</td>
<td>Fire Brigade Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FNV</td>
<td>Federatie Nederlands Vakverbond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMBATU</td>
<td>General, Municipal, Boilermakers’ and Allied Trades Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMWU</td>
<td>General and Municipal Workers’ Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS</td>
<td>International Socialists (later SWP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISTC</td>
<td>Iron and Steel Trades Confederation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JNNC</td>
<td>Joint National Negotiating Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFGB</td>
<td>Mineworkers’ Federation of Great Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MINOS</td>
<td>Mine Operating System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MI5</td>
<td>British Security Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NACODS</td>
<td>National Association of Colliery Over-men, Deputies and Shotfirers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCB</td>
<td>National Coal Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCC</td>
<td>National Co-ordinating Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>National Executive Committee (of the NUM unless otherwise stated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NF</td>
<td>National Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPLA</td>
<td>National Power Loading Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUGMW</td>
<td>National Union of General and Municipal Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUM</td>
<td>National Union of Mineworkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUPE</td>
<td>National Union of Public Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUR</td>
<td>National Union of Railwaymen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUS</td>
<td>National Union of Seamen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPEC</td>
<td>Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLP</td>
<td>Parliamentary Labour Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMT</td>
<td>Rail, Maritime and Transport union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROLF</td>
<td>Remotely Operated Longwall Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOGAT</td>
<td>Society of Graphical and Allied Trades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWMF</td>
<td>South Wales Miners’ Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWP</td>
<td>Socialist Workers Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TGWU</td>
<td>Transport and General Workers’ Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUC</td>
<td>Trade Union Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCATT</td>
<td>Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCS</td>
<td>Upper Clyde Shipyard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDC</td>
<td>Urban District Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDM</td>
<td>Union of Democratic Mineworkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VERS</td>
<td>Voluntary Early Retirement Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCSMC</td>
<td>Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTUC</td>
<td>Wales Trade Union Council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Endnote Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAC</td>
<td>NUM (South Wales Area) Annual Conference minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASC</td>
<td>NUM (South Wales Area) Special Conference minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>NUM (South Wales Area) Executive Council minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSIR</td>
<td><em>Historical Studies in Industrial Relations</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HWJ</td>
<td><em>History Workshop Journal</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRSH</td>
<td><em>International Review of Social History</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LHR</td>
<td><em>Labour History Review</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>Morning Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHM</td>
<td>People’s History Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW</td>
<td><em>Socialist Worker</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE</td>
<td><em>South Wales Echo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWM</td>
<td><em>South Wales Miner</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWML</td>
<td>South Wales Miners’ Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCBH</td>
<td><em>Twentieth Century British History</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNA</td>
<td>The National Archives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHR</td>
<td><em>Welsh History Review</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM</td>
<td>Western Mail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
South Wales and south Wales: a note on capitalisation

Throughout the text of this thesis, recurrent references are made to both ‘south Wales’ and ‘South Wales’. The aim of this is not to confuse the reader but to provide a greater degree of clarity about the subject under discussion. Where I have utilised these terms, ‘south Wales’ refers to the southern part of Wales, whereas ‘South Wales’ is used exclusively as an abbreviation of the NUM South Wales Area. The same distinction is also drawn when discussing north Wales and the North Wales NUM. When quoting from a literary source, however, I have retained the original capitalisation format – which may or may not accord to the policy that I have followed.
Introduction

In May 1981, at the South Wales Area NUM annual conference, Area president Emlyn Williams addressed the delegates and told them that the south Wales miners 'are associated in people's minds with resistance and struggles ... There is no doubt in my mind that miners have an historical mission to lead in class struggles'.¹ This statement expressed the conscious self-image of the South Wales Area and was also a reaffirmation of an important historical trend. During the twentieth century the miners were generally considered to be amongst the most militant sections of the British labour movement, with South Wales very much in the forefront of this. This thesis examines both how and why the south Wales miners held this prominent 'vanguard' role.

My research explores the history of the south Wales miners between 1964 and 1985, examining the interrelationship of coal, community and politics through the prism of their Union. The period covers the concerted run-down of the coal industry under the Wilson government, the growth of miners' resistance and the brief prospect of a secure future for them, through to eventual NUM defeat in 1985. In this socio-political history, the emphasis is on the dynamics of the relations between colliery lodges, the South Wales Area and the national NUM, the response of the Area to industrial and political developments, and also the impact of this upon its relationship with the wider labour movement.

In many respects however, labour history is not currently 'fashionable'. The decline of the densely-unionised heavy industries, together with the global hegemony of neo-liberalism, has led many to believe that this subject is no longer relevant – even though the working class has not disappeared just because more people in Britain now work in call centres and supermarkets than in collieries or steelworks. Nevertheless, as McIlroy and Campbell point out, '[t]he [current] debility of labour studies ... have to be related to the defeats and the consequent sense of demoralisation the labour movement has suffered from, as well as state policies and academic responses to them'.²
Within academia, the advent of the ‘linguistic turn’ has questioned the validity of concepts such as ‘class’, emphasising instead the disparate nature of individual and community identities. Going beyond this, postmodernist historians have effectively denied the existence of social structure and material forces beyond language and subjectivity. Within the field of working-class history the main postmodernists have been Stedman Jones, Joyce and Vernon, with Vernon denouncing defenders of empirical historiography for their allegedly ‘authoritarian’ and ‘phallocentric’ aims.

Unsurprisingly, many social historians have not embraced postmodernism. Kirk criticises its ‘subjectivist and idealist practices’, which ‘falsely conflate language and reality, and fail adequately to link saying and doing, consciousness and structure, and the intended, unintended and unrecognised aspects of life’. Hobsbawm is very sceptical of the postmodernist claim that ‘[t]he past we study is only a construct of our minds[, since] ... without the distinction between what is and what is not so, there can be no history. Rome defeated and destroyed Carthage in the Punic Wars, not the other way round’. Similarly, McIlroy, Fishman and Campbell espouse ‘the intellectual necessity to confront and reject post-modernism’s epistemological core and its approach to history ... The lure of post-modernist novelty should not lead us to trim, still less desert, basic touchstones, from class to the reality of the past and our ability to know it’.

A particular target for postmodernist historians has been historical materialism, the analysis of history through studying the dynamic interrelationship between individuals, material factors and social structures. Joyce et al. accuse this of a crude ‘social determinism’ which seeks to explain everything in terms of uncomplicated class conflict and simplistic economic factors. However, from E.P. Thompson and Hobsbawm onwards, many historical materialists have rejected the notion that ideas and language can be seen simply as passive reflections of an economic base. Rather, they have explored the various ways in which material factors set limits to, and exert pressures upon, other forms of social activity, including language and consciousness; ideas and cultural processes retain an important ability to influence actions but are not fully autonomous phenomena. This approach is a far cry from ‘social determinism’. Kirk, for instance, argues persuasively for ‘the continued
utility and fruitfulness of a materialist framework of historical analysis which explores the dialectic between, on the one hand, consciousness and agency (embracing language) and on the other, conditioning and structure'.

Despite the claims of its adversaries, it is inappropriate to speak of a general crisis of labour history. The subject remains relevant both to study of organised labour and also to broader social and cultural questions. McIlroy et al. call for 'a history which situates unions within the complex web of community associations, parties, employers, economy and state. Starting from trade unionism as ... the animating core of the labour movement ... [remains] the most fruitful way to proceed'.

A union-based labour history retains several advantages. On a pragmatic level, trade unions are definitely-existing institutions which generate written records dealing with many of the issues which are most central to the working lives of their members – and as such should not be dismissed lightly. Furthermore, this approach 'need not glorify organizations or their leaders, or ignore the problematic relationship that seems always to obtain between leaders and the rank-and-file ... 

Similarly, Gildart asserts that miners' class consciousness was rooted in their everyday experiences in the workplace, with this continuous interaction with their historical material environment informing their broader ideological outlook. The organisational forms of this class consciousness offer deep insights into the world of the miners, their families and communities – a fact often forgotten by historians too keen to escape an institution-orientated perspective.

By the same token, a labour history sensitive to broader political and societal factors has crucial insights to offer to industrial relations studies, in terms of introducing the central explanatory dynamic of the agency-structure dialectic. As Gramsci states,
‘[t]he trade union is not a predetermined phenomenon. It becomes a determinate institution, i.e. it takes on a definite historical form to the extent that the strength and will of the workers who are its members impress a policy and impose an aim that define it’. In any given case, this process occurs within a particular employment relations framework, which is itself acted upon by wider political and socio-economic considerations. Consequently, ‘[a]ny adequate interpretation of trade union development must … link theoretically the active initiatives of union members and representatives, the purposes and ideologies which inform their actions, and the external material forces which influence and constraint them’. Academic industrial relations analysis has, however, typically resisted such integrated understanding, instead treating unions as self-enclosed ‘systems’ on which an external ‘environment’ impinges only through a limited set of channels. In contrast, Mclroy and Campbell argue for a systematic consideration of industrial politics as a factor within the decision-making of trade unions at every level, thereby examining in practice how developments within the workplace are contextualised within industry-wide or national political frameworks. It follows from this that a totalised historically-informed awareness of how political-economic processes and phenomena develop and interact is a necessary prerequisite for understanding how unions operate and have operated in the past.

Starting from the miners’ ‘archetypal proletarian’ image, academic debate has sought to explain this militancy through ‘ideal types’ delineating as causal factors the social relations supposedly peculiar to mining. The most well-known of these is Kerr and Siegel’s ‘isolated mass’ theory. According to this, ‘miners … form isolated masses, almost a “race apart”. They live in their own separate communities [with] … their own codes, myths, heroes, and social standards[, in which strike action] … is a kind of colonial revolt against far-removed authority’. Acknowledging the flaws within this theory, subsequent academics have sought to produce models that more accurately reflected reality. The most important sociological contribution was provided by Bulmer, who stated that the social structure of mining communities could essentially be defined by: geographical isolation from major urban centres; the economic predominance of mining; the dangerous nature of the work; the social consequences of this occupational homogeneity and physical isolation; collective patterns of leisure activities; markedly differentiated gender roles within the family;
sharp economic and political conflicts of interest between miners and mine-owners; and finally, communal relationships in which the 'social ties of work, leisure, family, neighbourhood, and friendship overlap to form close-knit and interlocking locally based collectivities of actors. The solidarity of the community is strengthened ... by a shared history of living and working in one place over a long period of time'.

The fundamental problem with these sociological models stems from their conception of the mining community as an essentially immutable, homogeneous construct – a characterisation which often does not fit the empirical evidence. Any assessment of the actions of any social group must acknowledge the historical and material conditions in which they occurred. How, then, have historians dealt with this question?

The earliest research on the history of mineworkers in Britain was carried out by people such as Robin Page Arnot and the pioneering Ness Edwards. Their work was 'largely institutional, inspirational, descriptive, etching the ascending fortunes of organization ... into an iconography celebrating the irresistible rise of the working class'. However, from an early twenty-first century perspective, the incorrectness of the 'inevitability' of their assumptions is evident. Similarly, this approach conceptualises the internal decision-making processes within the miners' union in a 'monolithic' way, disregarding the potential for disagreement within and between its various echelons. In many important respects, therefore, this historiography has been superseded.

During the 1960s and 1970s, labour history was transformed by the rise of a 'history from below'. Following the work of E.P. Thompson, this aimed to locate working-class organisations more accurately within their broader societies. Within mining historiography, Independent Collier was the first main embodiment of this approach. It portrayed an occupation subject to different economic, geographical and cultural influences, encompassing conflict and co-operation, one which could only be understood by examining the reality of historical experience, rather than via sociological 'ideal types'.

5
Subsequently, the methodology for studying mining unionism has increased in sophistication as historians have grappled with the complexities of the past. As Campbell has commented, work in this field requires 'an analytical framework which can distinguish structural and cultural differences between regions as well as localities within them, and also encompass political agency and the construction (or the absence) of solidarity upon these local and regional terrains', to be effected via 'a multi-level comparative study of miners and mining communities, employing the full range of qualitative and quantitative techniques in the toolbox of the modern social historian'.

Since the publication of *Independent Collier*, numerous local-based studies have underlined the diversity of experience amongst mine workers. The aggregate perspective derived from this historiography is summarised by Geary, who shows how the nature of the state, company paternalism, the industrial relations system, geological conditions, ethnic and religious divisions, specific economic conjunctures, technology and differential pay systems, generational experience, migration and gender relationships all played key roles in determining levels of solidarity and militancy within coalfield societies. He concludes that 'industrial militancy was never a necessary consequence of being a miner'.

Recent NUM historiography has reflected this emphasis on diversity and moderation. As Howell has commented, '[t]he National Union, in fact rather than aspiration, has never been ... the solid militant politically radical union of legend'. Similarly, Ackers and Payne argue that there has been an undue focus on 'peripheral' militant coalfields such as south Wales and Scotland and on the national strikes in 1926, 1972, 1974 and 1984-5. This perspective has been co-opted in some quarters to argue that a lack of solidarity was 'normal' in working-class politics. However, acknowledgement of the existence of complexity does not at all preclude the possibility that class solidarity *could* be constructed – a point first made in 1975 by John Williams in his perceptive essay entitled 'The myth of miners' solidarity'. An awareness of variability 'does not necessarily involve ... rejection of an overarching conception of class and class struggle; ... [r]ather, such an approach is essential to an understanding of class formation and a prerequisite for
examining the nature of collective action and division in mining communities'.
This is very much the perspective that I have sought to utilise.

Contemporary methodology is dominated by the requirement that the study of
mineworkers' organisations and experiences be grounded in the locality, coupled
with an emphasis of exceptions to every generalisation. However, as Fredrickson
states, 'the comparative historian needs to begin with the assumption that each of her
cases may be equally distinctive, equally likely to embody a transnational pattern or
to depart from it'. Accepting that a phenomenon is the product of a unique
historical process does not mean that it is not also a part of a general pattern. Ackers
and Payne dismiss the south Wales miners as being an 'exceptional' case – but this
does not mean that their actions were not a concentrated expression of phenomena
that existed in a more diffuse form elsewhere. As Dai Smith has tellingly pointed
out, 'to be in advance of the column is not necessarily to be out of touch or even in
the wrong place'.

Complexity and variety provide a valuable corrective to static concepts and
deterministic theories but historians should not allow the subject to collapse into a
dislocated empiricism. Culver and Greaves reflect this concern and identify common
research areas: class and class consciousness; the strategic decisions by mineworkers
within specific production settings and political contexts; and the impact of
exogenous economic and political factors. Sociologically-derived concepts – such
as 'community', 'collective action' and 'protest' – underpin much historical
investigation, as Abrams has asserted. Similarly, Taylor argues that 'railing against
concepts generally can only weaken analysis[, since they] ... are the basis of
knowledge and comparison ... The correct methodological response is not to take
concepts as given, or as hopelessly contested and unusable, but to specify clearly
which concepts we are using and why'.

It is both very easy and completely correct to criticise the sociological theories for
their rigid ahistorical structuralism. This does not mean that they are completely
discredited as a way of thinking about the important role of the labour process and
the social environment within mining communities, as long as they are located
within a specific chronological perspective which acknowledges the significance of
broader 'sociocultural factors'. Building on this point, both Harrison and Shubert argue for coalfield societies to be analysed 'in terms of shifting sets of interacting variables', acknowledging each mining community as the specific outcome of a unique historical process. They list a range of areas for investigation, from geology, geography, economics and the labour process through to consideration of the role of social structures and political and cultural influences and affiliations. In this respect, there is not an unbridgeable gap separating Bulmer and Harrison. A study of socio-economic factors and structures, albeit one stripped of the assumption that a predetermined model will provide the answers, remains an important area of consideration for historians of mining communities. The approach is one of transcending the artificiality of 'ideal types' through basing observations on analysis of the dynamic historical context, rather than rejecting the idea that we can obtain insights into coalfield societies through an investigation of the kinds of subject matter with which the sociological models sought to engage. In keeping with this, my thesis has sought to utilise a framework that integrates workplace and community to explain both change and continuity within a chronological continuum.

There were strong dialectical connections between politics, community and identity within coalfield societies. As Howell comments, '[t]he distinctive self-image of each NUM Area was fundamental to the conduct of its internal affairs and to the character of its interventions in the National Union'. Similarly, *Miners, Unions and Politics* seeks to utilise regional studies to exemplify how miners' institutions were shaped by the varying patterns of interaction between the labour process and the historically-derived structure of mining communities, with the potential for markedly different outcomes in each case. Consequently, '[t]he centrality of the union for miners could vary accordingly. In occupationally monolithic South Wales, the lodge could be central to communal life; in Lancashire, with its diverse occupational structure, commuting miners and workplace branches, the union was inevitably more marginal'.

Throughout the twentieth century, the south Wales miners remained one of the most militant sections of the British workforce:
In South Wales, the [SWMF] ... became much more than a union. Its Workmen's Institutes spread through the coalfield, ran leisure and cultural events, including film shows, laid on medical schemes and built libraries for their members. Moreover the 'Fed' had the abolition of capitalism written in to its rulebook in 1917. Much later, no other group of workers contested Thatcherism more obviously than the colliers of South Yorkshire, South Wales and Scotland, not only by their industrial action but also in local politics.35

A recurrent feature in discussions about the south Wales miners was the extent to which their Union was an integral feature within Valleys society.36 There are unmistakable echoes here of the Kerr-Siegel characterisation of mining communities, particularly in their statement that '[t]he union becomes a kind of working-class party or even government for these employees, rather than just another association among many'.37 As Church, Outram and Smith point out, in coalfields where coal was economically central and where the union held an important role within society, this situation could indeed 'produce social practices, beliefs and actions which are in turn necessary conditions for high levels of strike activity'.38 This class/community synthesis is an important focus of attention for my research.

Although south Wales mining historiography has retained the class-based analysis of the Page Arnot paradigm, it has adopted a less teleological view of political behaviour and demonstrated an enhanced awareness of the complexities within this. The pre-eminent work on this subject, The Fed, uses its focus on the SWMF 'to write about the principal institutions used and devised by the South Wales miners within, and for, their society'.39 Furthermore, its breadth of source material facilitates access to a variety of intra-union viewpoints, thereby illuminating the internal debates and strategic choices made as the Federation attempted to recover from the disaster of 1926.

In recent years however, The Fed has not escaped censure: Lieven has criticised its 'heroic' class-oriented perspective, whilst Zweiniger-Bargielowska has questioned miners' militancy in south Wales.40 It is true that there are always exceptions to
general patterns – however the historian should not lose sight of the fact that the south Wales miners were consistently amongst the most militant workers in Britain for most of the twentieth century, whether this is measured by strike activity or support for radical socialist politics. This is not at all to say that this was ‘inevitable’. Instead, it was the outcome of the myriad interactions between individual miners, the lodges and the Area structure within a specific socio-economic and political framework which was subject to change over time.

Zweiniger-Bargielowska has studied miners’ militancy by analysing industrial relations in four south Wales collieries in the mid-twentieth century. Her conclusion is that ‘militancy at colliery level was determined by a combination of local pit conditions, the balance of power between lodge and management, the degree of lodge leaders’ control over the rank-and-file membership, and managerial strategies’.41 This is an incontestably accurate assessment; however, her very specific focus militates against sustainable wider generalisations about the South Wales NUM. A detailed study of the situation in a few collieries in the 1940s and 1950s (a period of relative prosperity) is not well-placed to comment on the turbulent history of the south Wales coalfield in the later twentieth century, particularly since the main problems the miners faced were industry-wide ones. In contrast to this, my approach is to examine the south Wales miners as a whole via the prism of their Union, whilst retaining an awareness of the potential for diversity within this overall framework.

One of the central elements for consideration when discussing the industrial politics of trade unions is the interrelationship between activists, the official leaderships and the broader union membership. Whilst cautioning that ‘[t]he “ordinary member” should not be ignored’, Mcllroy and Campbell comment that ‘[t]he active minority’s importance lies precisely in its immense significance to the development and sustenance of consciousness and action among broad groups of workers. What made unionists and what motivated them, as well as the complex processes of interaction (in the workplace and beyond), between members, representatives and officials, are central to understanding trade unionism’.42 This was very much the case with the south Wales miners. The overall left-wing orientation of the South Wales NUM was readily apparent but this should not disguise the complexity of its internal relations.
Important strategic questions could be a source of fierce controversy during crucial junctures in the history of the south Wales miners – as the historiography shows.\textsuperscript{43} Consequently, the interactions between the various levels of the Area structure is a key focus of attention for my work.

Union policy and strategy provided the environment within which the membership, lodge activists and the leadership interacted. Hyman observes that several trade unions experienced active rank and file movements which emerged in the late 1960s but had declined or disintegrated by the late 1970s, suggesting that this was due to them being outmanoeuvred by the official leaderships and becoming isolated as the unrest of the early 1970s subsided.\textsuperscript{44} Taking a different approach, Lyddon asserts that events of this period proved the effectiveness of strike action when large numbers of trade unionists participated actively in it; that unofficial action could aid official union objectives; and that secondary solidarity action by other workers could be the difference between success and failure.\textsuperscript{45} These issues are considered throughout my analysis.

A key debate on this subject has been over ‘rank-and-filism’, the attempt to write non-institutional histories of industrial relations which focus on economic and social processes. Here, Hyman has stated that an awareness of the perennial potential for conflict of interest between grassroots members and full-time officials is an essential prerequisite for understanding the complex internal dynamics of trade unions.\textsuperscript{46} Building on this theme, Campbell et al. caution that union politics cannot be reduced to a polarisation between ‘militant’ rank and file and ‘moderate’ bureaucracy. Instead, they present a picture of ‘competing interest groups within the membership and multi-layered levels of lay- and full-time officials, whose strategies were the complex outcome of personal attributes, ideological commitments, material status, and organisational loyalties and routines, and which were constructed within the constraints of widely divergent coalfield economies’.\textsuperscript{47}

In the context of the south Wales miners, Zweiniger-Bargielowska’s discussion of ‘rank-and-filism’ postulates a dichotomy between a radical activist/leadership minority and a passive majority – an inversion of the general historiographical perspective.\textsuperscript{48} My research addresses this question within the context of the travails
of the south Wales miners, from the rapid decline of their industry in the 1960s through the struggles of the 1970s to their eventual defeat in 1985. Within this, there was always the possibility of tension between the official leadership, lodge activists and the broader membership, particularly during phases of acute crisis. The results of this study defy any simple and consistent bifurcation of the south Wales miners into ‘radical leaders’ and ‘passive miners’, reaffirming Hyman’s assessment and raising questions about the validity of the conclusions drawn by Zweiniger-Bargielowska.

South Wales was one of the few places in Britain where the Communist Party was able to establish any long-term roots. Even though it was massively outnumbered by Labour in the Valleys, the CP remained far more influential than its size would infer. There was a degree of symbiosis between the CP and the Union: the overwhelming majority of south Wales CP members were miners, whilst many Communists were actively involved at every level of the Area. Any study of the South Wales NUM, therefore, has a pertinence to the general body of CP historiography. My research engages with some contemporary issues within this field: the Fishman characterisation of the Communists as ‘revolutionary pragmatists’ and the work by Callaghan and McIlroy on the CP’s post-war industrial strategy, particularly the role of the ‘Broad Left’. 49

More broadly, the historical events and processes analysed within this thesis address wider questions about politics and economics. One theme which emerges strongly is that economics is inherently political and also that politics has direct economic effects. Economic transformation necessarily produces winners and losers, amongst individuals, sectors, communities and classes – and it is precisely because this involves a redistribution of power in society that it must also be seen as a political process. As Tenfelde has commented, ‘Labour and working-class history did not and does not take place in a sphere free of politics’. 50 The abstract separation of ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ into hermetically-sealed spheres, a common practice amongst economists and political scientists, is a major impediment to understanding the decisions and activities of individuals, organisations and governments in any given point in time. As McIlroy et al. have shown, trade unions demonstrated the artificiality of this division by playing a central role in both economics and politics.
in Britain in the post-war decades.\textsuperscript{51} Building on this perspective, in this respect my work strikes a chord with economic discussions about the coal industry which are very aware of the political factors which informed actual decision-making, such as \textit{The Coal Question}.\textsuperscript{52} The unparalleled scale of the collapse of coal under the Thatcher regime has generated several other pertinent contributions, particularly by Parker. His comparison of the differing situations in Britain and Germany is an illuminating one. During the 1980s and 1990s, the rapid contraction of the relatively efficient British industry contrasted starkly with Germany’s continued subsidisation of its high-cost industry coupled with gradual consensus-led adaptation. He asserts, convincingly, that this disparity cannot be understood except in essentially political terms.\textsuperscript{53} Similarly, Golden concludes that the 1984-5 strike was provoked by forces external to the coal industry as part of a broader political imperative aimed at a fundamental reorganisation of the industrial relations system in Britain.\textsuperscript{54} My work concurs with this, both in terms of Golden’s specific contention and also more generally, by demonstrating that ‘economic’ struggles of the south Wales miners cannot be meaningfully separated from the political context in which they occurred.

Although the eventual outcome was neither uncontested nor inevitable, an underlying theme within the later twentieth century history of the south Wales miners was one of deindustrialisation. The booming coal industry of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the main driving force behind the creation of modern south Wales – consequently, the decline of its principal economic rationale was a source of profound crisis. This development is a very clear example of a much broader phenomenon. The story of the south Wales miners and their society, of protracted economic struggle and the eventual deindustrialisation of a former heavy industry region, is one which resonates deeply with workers’ experiences from the Ruhr to the Ukraine and from Pittsburgh to New South Wales.\textsuperscript{55} In this respect, the decline and fall of coal-mining in south Wales encapsulates a central theme in the modern history of the global economy.

Methodologically, this thesis has utilised an array of documentary and oral evidence types. This approach aimed to obtain the most comprehensive overview possible of the workings of the South Wales NUM, the processes by which decisions were taken and various political, social and economic developments occurred, and also the
context within which groups, individuals and communities interacted with the Union. The main source consulted was the internal records of the Area, stored at the South Wales Miners’ Library (attached to the University of Wales Swansea) and the NUM South Wales Area Offices in Pontypridd. Over forty interviews were also conducted, with miners and with women who were support group activists during the 1984-5 strike. This research was augmented by a study of the archive of several newspapers, selected to provide coalfield-level detail and a spectrum of liberal and conservative editorial viewpoints.

The aim of my research has been to produce a socio-political study of the south Wales miners in the later twentieth century, a defining period in modern British history. They played a key role in the economics, politics and society of industrial south Wales during these years; their history raises issues of perennial relevance for the historian and sheds light on work in other social science disciplines. The story of the south Wales miners, with all its struggles, achievements and setbacks, deserves to be saved from the ‘dustbin of history’ and documented for posterity. This thesis is my attempt to do just that.
Notes to Introduction


2 John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, ‘Still setting the pace? Labour history, industrial relations and the history of post-war trade unionism’, *LHR* 64 No.2 (1999), p.186.


8 Kirk, op. cit., p.89.

9 McIlroy, Fishman and Campbell, op. cit., p.12.


15 McIlroy and Campbell, op. cit., p.191.


36 This point was reaffirmed on numerous occasions during the interviews which I conducted with mineworkers and support group activists.

37 Kerr and Siegel, op. cit., p.193.


41 Zweiniger-Bargielowska, op. cit., p.383.

42 McIlroy and Campbell, op. cit., p.193.


44 Hyman, op. cit., pp.51-2.


47 Campbell, Fishman and Howell, op. cit., p.5.


51 McIlroy, Fishman and Campbell, op. cit.


Chapter 1  
The Politics of the South Wales Miners

Throughout modern British history there have been few trade unions with as strong an engagement with political activism as the South Wales Area of the NUM. The aim of this chapter is to examine this phenomenon during the later twentieth century, one of the most dramatic periods in the history of the coal-mining industry. The focus of investigation will be on the constituent aspects of the politics of the south Wales miners: the effect of the Area’s structure, geographical considerations, the role played by the various hues of activist within the South Wales NUM, together with the interaction and ebb and flow of all these factors.

Analysis of the politics of the south Wales miners necessarily involves a degree of generalisation. Every broad pattern has its exceptions – particularly when dealing with something as complex as the political ideas and actions of tens of thousands of miners spread all the way across the south Wales coalfield, all working in collieries subject to varying geological and economic conditions, all having varying degrees of affinity with differing strains of pro-labour and socialist politics, with all of the above being subject to change over time. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the distinctive political culture of the South Wales NUM amounted to more than the sum of many disparate parts.

The politics and policies of the South Wales NUM in the period under study were the product of the dialectical interaction between the leadership and the rank and file. As the 1960s unfolded, growing grassroots uncertainty about the future of coal developed into outright pessimism, with thousands of miners leaving an industry which was being cut significantly by government policy. This viewpoint was reflected by the Area leadership: even though both Will Whitehead and Dai Francis (Area president and general secretary, respectively) were Communists, neither believed that industrial action would solve the problem, or that the membership would support it. Prospects of a showdown between the south Wales miners and the Wilson government were reduced further following the election of staunch Labour loyalist Glyn Williams as Area president in 1966. Nevertheless, rank and file
resentment against declining relative wage levels and the colliery closure programme built up gradually as the decade wore on, leading to the emergence of groups of lodges who advocated action. By the late 1960s, these militants had secured representation on the Area Executive Council, thereby reinforcing the position of other activists (such as Emlyn Williams) who already held official posts. The crises over surfacemen's hours and wages, in 1969 and 1970 respectively, precipitated a struggle between the 'unofficial movement' and the Area leadership, in which the former sought to make the latter adopt more combative policies. As one leading lodge activist pointed out at the time, '[t]he miners' leaders in South Wales have said in the past that they were prepared to lead but they did not have an army. Well, we've provided the army. And we want them to win the battle'.

By the early 1970s, this process had been completed to a significant degree. Consequently, South Wales delegates to national conferences were in the forefront of pushing for the wage increases necessary to restore the relative earnings position of mineworkers, backed up by the prospect of industrial action if necessary. This, following government refusal to back down, led to the strikes of 1972 and 1974. As Brynlliw lodge secretary Terry Thomas pointed out at the time, 'this strike was brought about by the militant action of the rank and file in 1970. It was this that showed the leadership that if they did not take the lead, the rank and file would have taken the lead out of their hands'. The successful outcome of these strikes for the miners consolidated the rise of militancy within the South Wales NUM. By the mid 1970s, the majority of the official Area leadership were radicals or men who had risen to prominence during the upsurge of the preceding few years.

The reasonably favourable situation facing the miners in the 1970s enabled the Area to focus on securing improved benefits and conditions for its members. In this there were some notable successes, although the wages question became bound up in the struggle against the Social Contract and the re-introduction of piecework into the coal industry.

By the early 1980s, South Wales faced essentially the same kinds of problems as it had in the 1960s: an unfavourable economic situation and a government committed to sweeping cuts in the size of the coal industry. The stakes were higher here,
however, since there were far fewer collieries by this time, there was little prospect of alternative employment and the Thatcher administration set to its task with an unprecedented zeal. The South Wales NUM as a whole reacted to the threat much more proactively than it had done in the 1960s – in no small measure because many of its leading figures were men who had been in the forefront of the unofficial movement’s struggle against closures fifteen or so years before. Throughout the first years of the 1980s, the Area leadership worked to prepare the rank and file for a showdown with the government over colliery closures. After several ‘false starts’ between 1980 and 1983, in 1984 the national situation drew the south Wales miners into strike action against the threat to their industry. A year later, the defeat of the NUM paved the way for the effective destruction of the south Wales mining industry in any recognisable form.

That was the path taken by the Area from the mid 1960s through to the mid 1980s. The remainder of this chapter will analyse the respective roles of the various factors which collectively comprised the distinctive ‘traditional radicalism’ of the south Wales miners.

**Union Structure**

Organisationally, the South Wales NUM was essentially a direct-line continuation of the structures established by the reorganisation of the rules of the SWMF in 1933. Following the recommendations of the syndicalist-inspired pamphlet *The Miners’ Next Step* (1912), the workings of the Union were designed so as to put as much power as was practicable in the hands of the rank and file miner.

The most senior figures within the Union were the Area Officials: the president, general secretary, vice-president, and the miners’ agents (initially one for each of the five districts, although this number declined during the later twentieth century as the coalfield shrank). With the exception of the vice-presidency – which was decided triennially by a mandated card vote at the Area Annual Conference – these posts were all full-time and were elected via a membership ballot, after which their incumbents stayed until they retired or stepped down. Although these were the ‘leaders’ of the south Wales miners, the Area was structured to ensure that they were not able to dominate policy-making without securing the support of the Executive
Council, a body directly in touch with and responsible to the rank and file membership.

The central governing body within the Area was its Executive Council. It was composed of rank and file Union members elected, on a triennial basis, to represent one of the five districts that comprised the Area: Swansea; Maesteg; Aberdare-Rhondda-Merthyr; Rhymney Valley; and Monmouthshire (later Gwent). Each district was represented by two Executive members (or three if its membership exceeded 18,000 – a situation which was rapidly ceasing to be the case anywhere as the 1960s progressed). Given that each was of approximately equal size, this did not cause disparities; it also meant that no single district could dominate decision-making within the Area.

The supreme policy-making forum of the Area was its Annual Conference, held in the late spring. Additionally, Special Conferences could be convened as appropriate, to take the key decisions facing the Area. The voting in these conferences reflected the mandates given to the lodge representatives by their respective committees, to whom they were accountable. In this way, voting patterns reflected the balance of opinion within the coalfield reasonably accurately. Nevertheless, there were a few occasions when this proved conspicuously not to be the case – for example, the grassroots reluctance to ratify conference decisions to strike in February 1980 and March 1984.

The district committees operated in the space between the Area leadership and the lodges. According to Area rules, these committees were to meet every two months to receive reports from the respective miners' agent for the district. They appointed their own secretaries, presidents and treasurers and received their finances from the lodges affiliated. In this way, the district committees were able to maintain a measure of autonomy within the Area structure. Consequently, although it was not their ostensible purpose, they provided a ready-made aegis for any combined activity between their constituent lodges – throughout this period, the Aberdare joint lodges committee was generally the most active in this respect. These district meetings were valued by the lodge committees, as a way of both obtaining a more detailed picture of the wider situation within the coalfield and also providing a
The essential foundations of the strength of the South Wales NUM were the colliery lodges. They were the basic framework through which the miners were organised and articulated via their elected lodge committees – it was through these that collective rank and file opinion could be expressed. It is worthwhile to bear in mind the influence wielded by some of these lodge leaders. Although they never attained high-ranking office, men such as Cyril Parry (Morlais), Bryn Williams (Cwm), Mike Griffin (Penrhwiwceiber) and Tal Walters (Bargoed) were prominent figures within the Area in their own right and important advocates at Conferences of their particular political viewpoints (which ranged respectively, in these given examples, from Communism through to right-wing Labour loyalism). In addition to this, every lodge leadership had a significance within its community derived from the fact that the miners all looked to their Union as the first point of contact for resolving their various work-related grievances. Consequently, the local prestige of someone like Bill King, who was lodge secretary at Merthyr Vale from 1962 until 1985, was considerable – and his position was by no means unique in this respect. In the view of one former lodge official, ‘I think the leadership was very good in south Wales, because each pit had a recognised leader ... And one person that stick out tremendous is Mike Griffin. From Penrhwiwceiber ... [Men such as him were] good orators, they could speak – and ... they was genuine trade unionists and they fought hard in what they believed in’.3

Political Geography
The large number of lodges within the south Wales coalfield, together with the relatively small number of men who were Area Officials or EC members, makes it problematic to generalise about the influence of individual lodges within the South Wales NUM as a whole.4 Typically, most lodges only ever provided one individual who became an Area leader during these years, not least because of the working of the representative nature of the Executive structure. There were exceptions to this pattern though – and these help to illustrate in a fairly basic way some of the more
significant lodges within the coalfield, whether by size, political influence, or both. Measured thus, some of the key south Wales lodges in the later twentieth century (together with the leaders who came from them) were: Maerdy (Emlyn Williams, Haydn Matthews, Arfon Evans); Coedely (Don Hayward, Ron Saint, Mike Banwell); Lady Windsor (Will Fortt, Emlyn Jenkins); Oakdale (Dan Canniff, Gary Woolf); Brynliiw (Evan John, Terry Thomas, Eric Davies), Fernhill (Cliff True, George Rees); Celynen North (Tom Jones, George Pritchard); and Cynheidre (Tommy Walker, Islwyn Rosser).

Although it is difficult to say much with any precision about the influence of individual lodges within the Area as a whole, the picture is a lot clearer when considered at district level. Throughout the history of the south Wales miners dating back to the formation of the SWMF in 1898, there was a broad tendency for the leadership to be drawn from the central Valleys of (what became, following local government reorganisation in the early 1970s,) Mid Glamorgan. In the early twentieth century, almost all of the famous leaders had come from the Rhondda Valleys: Noah Ablett, A.J. Cook, Arthur Horner and Will Paynter. This was not a completely rigid picture: the obvious exception during the period studied here was Dai Francis, who hailed from the Dulais Valley. Nevertheless, looking at the other Area Officials, the general pattern was quite strongly pronounced: for example, Will Whitehead, Emlyn Williams, George Rees, Don Hayward and Des Dutfield all came from lodges in or around the Rhondda. The significance of this tendency becomes even more marked if we consider that all of these rose to prominence within the Area on the basis of their reputations as militants, whether as Communists or Labour left-wingers.

Obviously, these people were products of the circumstances of their backgrounds. Consequently, it should not be a surprise that the majority of radicals within the broader Area leadership were generally from this part of the coalfield. Ron Saint and Emlyn Jenkins, for example, personified the personnel 'overlap' between the official leadership and the unofficial movement, providing a conduit of opinion from these lodges right the way through the Area structure. At Area Annual Conferences throughout this period, it was lodges such as Fernhill, Coedely and Maerdy that submitted most of the militant and political motions for debate. Reflecting on this
'traditional radicalism', Emlyn Jenkins later commented that ‘I’m probably very biased because I’m from the centre [of the coalfield], but I think all good things stemmed from the centre!’

The inverse corollary of the militancy of the geographical centre of the coalfield was the relative inclination towards moderation in its eastern and western regions. Although this too is a generalisation, it is one which is confirmed clearly by the aggregate weight of evidence, in terms of Conference reports, Area minutes and oral history testimony. My explanation for the principal underlying cause of this phenomenon was the fact that the fringes of the coalfield had never been quite as completely dependent on the coal industry as the central Valleys had been, with steel manufacturing in Gwent and agriculture and tinplate in Carmarthenshire providing alternative poles of economic attraction. The social ramification of this was that the lodges were never quite as central a presence within their respective communities, with the consequence that the radicalism that characterised the Area as a whole was not quite as deeply ingrained as it was elsewhere. Politically, most of the Gwent district could be characterised as being right-wing Labour: this was the case with, for instance, Celynen South, Oakdale, Beynon, Abertillery New Mine, and Cwmtillery. Correspondingly, Gwent collieries were less strike-prone than other pits in south Wales – for example, they were essentially unaffected by the unofficial strike-wave that swept large parts of the coalfield in 1969 and were reluctant participants in the Area-wide strike a year later, which they saw as ‘unofficial’ since it was not sanctioned by the national NUM. It was a similar picture with the west Wales lodges. There, industrial and political quiescence had been augmented in the early 1960s by the influx of around a thousand men from Durham, to help to fulfil the manpower requirements of the new ‘super pit’ projects at that end of the coalfield. The paradigm exemplar of these trends within the anthracite field was Cynheidre. Ever since mining began there in the early 1960s, Cynheidre had had a reputation for ‘moderation’, a tendency that had been reinforced by its ‘receiver pit’ role. Commenting on this, an Executive member for the Swansea district (which included Cynheidre) later observed: ‘I mean, the trouble with Cynheidre: it was a lodge of mixtures. Historically it wasn’t a sound lodge … It was a mixture of people coming from different collieries that had closed down’. The other Swansea district
EC member concurred, stating that 'they were a bloody odd lot down there ... [T]here was a sort of an anti-[Area] ... leadership element in Cynheidre colliery'.

Whilst this overall pattern persisted throughout the period under study here, there were definite variegations within it. Although operating within the same general political, social and economic atmospheres as the other collieries in south Wales, the outlook of each lodge was also the product of its own particular mix of factors: the geological considerations that could promote either pacific or militant industrial relations; the influence of charismatic or respected individuals; and the role of lodge tradition and history in inculcating a particular political milieu. Consequently, although the Rhondda traditionally had the highest proportion of left-wing lodges, it was not true that that district was everywhere a hotbed of radicalism – for example, right down to its closure in 1983, Tymawr remained steadfastly right-wing Labour in outlook. Correspondingly, there were several militant lodges in west Wales: Brynlliw and Morlais, for instance, whilst the upper Dulais Valley was something of a Communist stronghold before the closure of its collieries in the early 1960s. By the same token, Six Bells was noteworthy in that it had one of the few Communist lodge secretaries in Gwent; likewise, Celynen North was generally reckoned to be more left-wing than most other pits in that district (a factor which prompted a brief falling-out between it and neighbouring Celynen South over the latter's lack of enthusiasm for the 1970 strike).

All the above discussion focuses on the radicalism or moderation with which each of the mentioned lodges was typically associated; the reality of the situation, though, was that these traditions were not immutable and were capable of change, given the appropriate circumstances. The main exogenous catalyst for a shift in a lodge's outlook was the threat of closure. Throughout the period, there were occasions in which lodges known for their pacific industrial relations and political moderation were spurred into an unofficial strike by news of the closure of their colliery. One of the most prominent examples of this was Coegnant in February 1981, which succeeded in galvanising the rest of the coalfield into action as well. The primary endogenous method of change was the election of lodge leaders who held markedly different views to their predecessors. This was necessarily a dialectical process, since the election itself showed that the membership were prepared to back the
incoming officials. One of the most notable examples of this was the replacement of
the politically moderate Phil Stafford as lodge secretary of St John’s in 1978 by the
militant Ian Isaac. By the same token, it was only once Mike Richards had replaced
Tommy Lewis as lodge chairman at Lewis Merthyr in the early 1970s that the lodge
there began to be seen to any extent as a radical one.

The Labour Party
The pre-eminent point which needs to be made about the party politics of the South
Wales NUM is that, as with the trade union movement in general, it retained
institutional links with the Labour Party and most of its members who were
politically active were Labour members. As a consequence of these factors, the
whole strategy of the Area was framed around Labour as the primary vehicle for
effecting political change. In this respect, throughout the period in question the
attitude of the South Wales NUM (indeed, that of the trade union movement in
Britain in general in the twentieth century) towards Labour was defined by a mixture
of support for the Party and pressuring it to adopt more fully the policies advocated
by the Area. The relative prominence of these two strategic imperatives naturally
fluctuated according to the broader context of the moment. When Labour was in
Opposition, the principal political goal of the Area was to work for the return of a
Labour administration; once this was achieved, the focus was then to press the
government to carry out the policies that it wished to see implemented. In this way,
the sharpest tensions between the Party and the unions in this period emerged during
the tenure of the Labour administrations in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, this
reliance on the Party as the political organisation of the labour movement prevented
these disagreements from reaching a real crisis point. Whatever its disappointments
and grievances with the Wilson and Callaghan governments, the South Wales NUM
acknowledged that ultimately it had no other electoral alternative before it but to
continue to support Labour.

The election of the Wilson government in 1964 had been seen by the miners as an
opportunity to safeguard the future of the industry. The Party’s policy of an annual
coal output of 200 million tons was supported enthusiastically by the NUM, which
thereafter used it as a benchmark figure for its various plans for expansion of the
industry. Consequently, the rapid acceleration of the colliery closure programme that
ensued was not what the miners expected or had been promised. Nevertheless, NUM loyalty towards Labour remained a very real factor in how the Area faced up to the situation in the 1960s. In interviews conducted years afterwards, key figures within the Area recounted candidly that conscious choices were made not to create a furore over pit closures that might jeopardise the stability of the first Labour government for thirteen years. The same held true for the wages question. Although Area Annual Conferences in the mid and later 1960s typically carried denunciations of the government’s incomes policy, there were always delegates who argued forcibly that the labour movement had a duty to help the Labour administration to implement this policy.

The positions adopted by the Labour MPs representing south Wales coalfield constituencies during this period were based overwhelmingly on the official standpoint of the Wales Labour Party (which, in turn, was largely a reflection of British-level party policies). Nevertheless, in the 1960s there was still potential for divergence of opinion on such a contentious topic as colliery closures. The spectrum of opinion expressed by Labour MPs on this subject ranged from one of opposition to the closure programme to the welcoming of closures as an opportunity to create a more efficient industry and also give the Valleys an opportunity for economic diversification.

This divergence was encapsulated concisely by speeches made by two Labour MPs to mass gathering of south Wales miners during 1966. In February, Donald Coleman (MP for Neath) addressed a pit-head meeting of the workforce of closure-threatened Cefn Coed and assured them that he would do his utmost to prevent further collieries being shut down in the area. In contrast, at the Area Annual Conference in May of that year, Ness Edwards (MP for Caerphilly) defended the government’s planned reduction in the size of the coal industry, on the basis that ‘it is better to have a plan to control our destinies than to leave them to the blind forces of economics’. Rather than campaigning against closures per se, Edwards advocated diversification and throughout the 1960s oversaw the creation of several new industrial estates within his constituency. Given that pit closures seemed to many miners to be an inevitability, there was a significant degree of support within the Area for this approach: in May 1967, for instance, Glyn Williams welcomed the decisions to
move the Royal Mint to Llantrisant and the DVLC to Swansea, demanding that they be augmented by a programme of government-directed factory building. Similarly, Area Annual Conferences in 1966, 1967 and 1968 passed resolutions calling for alternative industries to be established in south Wales.

The policies of the Wilson government did provoke a reaction from the south Wales miners, even though this did not begin to really gather momentum during the first year or two of the administration. In many respects, the Communist Party provided the lead here: many of the leading South Wales militants were CP members, whilst the lodges in the vanguard of the unofficial movement were generally ‘Communist lodges’. Despite this, the situation was not simply one of ‘Communist versus Labour’ – for instance, Emlyn Williams was a Labour member and also one of the most important radical figures within the Area at that time. At the Executive meeting on 20 November 1967, for example, Williams was one of the speakers advocating strike action against the closure programme, unilaterally by South Wales if necessary. Despite opposition to the move from Glyn Williams, the EC decided to convene an Area Conference and recommend to it the calling of a national strike against the government’s fuel policy – even though it was composed mainly of Labour members. Moreover, the surge of unrest that had developed within the coalfield as a whole by 1969 would not have had the significance that it did had it not struck a chord with the Area membership, who were also generally Labour in their allegiance.

Events of the 1970s brought about a greater degree of affinity between the positions of Labour and the NUM regarding the coal industry. During the 1972 and 1974 strikes, the official Party policy was one of supporting the miners’ struggle for improved wages and conditions.9 This position was supported by the Labour MPs for south Wales, albeit with an undercurrent of complaints from some of the region’s miners who felt that this public endorsement of their case amounted to no more than ‘lip service’.10 Thereafter, given the context of the international energy situation in the 1970s, the thrust of the Labour governments’ policies towards the coal industry in that decade – as embodied in the Plan for Coal – was predicated on the assumption that coal would play an expanded role in obtaining the goal of energy self-sufficiency for Britain within the next decade. This was more in keeping with
the aspirations of the south Wales miners and much more closely represented the approach that they wished to see implemented.

The pull of ‘Labour loyalism’ was not as conspicuous in the 1970s as it had been in the 1960s – partly because the government was not implementing a colliery closure programme and partly because there was a stronger mood of militancy amongst the south Wales miners than existed a decade previously. Consequently, there was a greater readiness to speak out against aspects of Labour policy with which the Area disagreed, such as the Social Contract. Although himself a Party member, Emlyn Williams’s call at the 1976 Area Conference for £100 a week wages for faceworkers – which caused panic on the stock market – was as clear a rebuff from a trade union leader as any experienced by the Callaghan administration during its term of office.

Notwithstanding its disagreements with the government in the later 1970s, through into the 1980s the South Wales NUM continued to support essentially the same coal policy as Labour Party Wales, that is, of pushing for an expansion and development of the industry. Throughout these years, both maintained their call for an annual national coal output of 200 million tonnes, together with stating their total opposition to colliery closures, ‘except where reserves are exhausted, and then only where alternative jobs are available with equivalent pay and conditions’.11 At this time, Labour Party Wales supported strongly the miners’ defence of their livelihoods. Following the short-lived Area-led strike wave of February 1981, for instance, its annual conference that year declared that it ‘welcomes the success achieved by the miners in stopping redundancies and pit closures. We further support the miners’ policy that pits should only be closed due to exhaustion or on health and safety grounds’. It then proceeded to demand subsidies to the coal industry equivalent to its competitors, cancellation of all outstanding payment to past owners and for the next Labour government to introduce an energy policy that nationalised the supply and distributive parts of the coal industry, together with replacing the NCB with a democratically elected Board consisting of representatives from the miners’ unions, the TUC and the Labour government.12

Given its strong tradition of left-wing Labourism, it was unsurprising that the rise of Bennism in the early 1980s struck a chord with the South Wales NUM. In May
1981, its Annual Conference endorsed Tony Benn’s campaign to become Labour Party deputy leader – contrary to the stance taken by the Wales Labour Party as a whole, which backed Denis Healey. In the 1981 and 1982 Annual Conferences, Emlyn Williams argued for a radicalisation of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the enforcement of its accountability to the broader Party. Similarly, in June 1983 the Area was one of the first unions to call publicly for Neil Kinnock to be the next Labour leader, since he was at the time still seen as a left-winger. As part of this outlook, South Wales was an enthusiastic supporter of the Alternative Economic Strategy. Between 1979 and 1983, every Annual Conference of the south Wales miners called for radical solutions to the crisis, ranging from demands for a break with monetarism to the implementation of a socialist economic strategy and a commitment by the next Labour government to a major programme of re-nationalisation. During the depths of the recession, as unemployment was reaching three million, the Area leadership even began to discuss measures that went beyond the PLP. At the 1981 Annual Conference, for instance, Emlyn Williams advocated ‘extra-Parliamentary action’, calling on the TUC to take its own steps to rectify the situation, such as taking over factories to prevent their closure, controlling usage of redundancy payments and organising its own import controls. It was in this context of economic crisis that the south Wales miners found themselves thrown into the struggle to defend their communities and livelihoods in March 1984.

Given the gravity of events and their eventual outcome, Labour’s attitude towards the 1984-5 strike inevitably became a contentious issue. Different strata of the Party responded very differently to the challenge presented by the situation. At a local level, rank and file Labour members were a fundamental part of the bedrock on which the miners’ support groups were built. The Labour Party Wales annual conference in Tenby in May 1984 opposed all colliery closures except on the grounds of exhaustion and called on the Labour NEC to formulate a national fuel policy based on coal, oil and gas. The MPs of the south Wales coalfield were also generally supportive, whether through attending picket lines in a symbolic show of solidarity or, in the case of Bridgend MP Ray Powell, offering his constituency office as a base for the local support group. Furthermore, in June that year the Welsh Parliamentary Labour group met the Area leadership to give its endorsement to the
strike — although its members were noticeably more circumspect about making strident public declarations to that effect.\textsuperscript{14}

In contrast, the national Labour leadership retained a distinct reticence about supporting the miners in their struggle, preferring instead to call on the government to negotiate a speedy resolution to the dispute. This approach provoked strong criticism from some miners, with some of the bitterest attacks on Labour leader Neil Kinnock coming from South Wales members. In the view of the Six Bells chairman, he ‘deliberately kept his distance from us. He was no help whatsoever’.\textsuperscript{15} Admittedly, as MP for Islwyn he did address an Oakdale lodge meeting in December 1984 and attend a Celynen South picket-line in January 1985, although these seemed to many to be merely an exercise in tokenism. Consequently, by late 1984 the EC had written to him to condemn his handling of the dispute. At the end of the strike, Emlyn Williams attacked Kinnock, stating: ‘His utterances were tragic. He sat on the fence but in the end he fell the wrong way … He should have come out for us from day one’.\textsuperscript{16} This stance, of continuing identification with Labour together with a persistent dissatisfaction with many of the policies adopted by the Party leadership, epitomised a recurrent and unresolved tension within the politics of the south Wales miners during the later twentieth century.

**The Communist Party**

A key ingredient in the ‘traditional radicalism’ of the south Wales miners was the important historical role of the Communist Party within the Area. In sheer numbers, it was completely dwarfed by the Labour Party, which was a hegemonic political presence in most Valleys communities. Nevertheless, there was still a definite symbiosis between south Wales miners and the CP. The Valleys was one of the few areas where the CPGB ever put down any serious long-term roots; similarly, a clear majority of Communists in south Wales were also NUM members — whilst local miners’ leaders such as Allan Baker, Ron Saint and Cliff True were long-term stalwarts of the Party’s Welsh Committee throughout the period under consideration here.\textsuperscript{17} By the 1960s, the CP was not as potent a social force as it had been in preceding decades, largely as a consequence of the Cold War. Despite this, the South Wales NUM remained a real Communist stronghold. In the view of one lodge activist and former CP member, ‘the South Wales NUM was more or less run by
members of the Communist Party. I mean, the Labour Party members would say that’s wrong, but if you look at the officials you had at the time, ... they were all members of the Communist Party’.\textsuperscript{18} Whilst this is obviously something of an exaggeration, a sizeable proportion of the Area Officials, miners’ agents and EC members \textit{were} in the CP: for example, Will Whitehead (Area president 1959-66) and Dai Francis (Area general secretary 1963-76). Indeed, as the \textit{Western Mail} commented at the time, ‘[i]t is as traditional that a Communist be president of the South Wales NUM as it is that the chairman of the Cheltenham Women’s Institute be a Conservative’.\textsuperscript{19} However, the significance of the CP presence within the Area leadership was not so much in terms of numerical predominance as in the influence that they were able to exert over the left-leaning Labour members on the EC, who shared many of the same political viewpoints as the Communists in any case. Throughout the later 1960s for instance, Labour men such as Will Woods and Ben Davies, from the Rhondda and Dulais valleys respectively, were keen supporters of the campaign for increased wages and a tougher line against colliery closures.

The Communists’ prominence within the Area hierarchy was not an ‘infiltration’ of the organisation by ‘shadowy subversives’ but instead reflected the position within a significant minority of lodges. Admittedly, CP members from around the coalfield \textit{did} meet periodically to discuss Area policy – although this was scarcely a secret and Labour caucuses operated in an identical fashion in any case. Within south Wales, the Communist presence was most prominent in lodges in the Rhondda area. In Coedely, for instance, the lodge chairman, secretary, compensation secretary and assistant compensation secretary were all CP members; in Maerdy and Fernhill, the majority of committee members were Communists.\textsuperscript{20} Beyond this, it was still possible for there to be a Party presence even in the more moderate lodges: for example, Jim Morgan was a CP member and lodge secretary at Coegnant until 1966, during which time the lodge used to buy the \textit{Morning Star} and distribute it in the canteen. Similarly, Brian Elliot was Penallta lodge secretary from the mid 1970s through until after the 1984-5 strike and also a CP member.\textsuperscript{21} In many cases, the relative popularity of Communists reflected the fact that they were amongst the staunchest defenders of workers’ rights. Their profile within the Area gives credibility to the claim of one former activist that the CP were ‘a small force but we were a very influential force ... [W]e were presenting policies and resolutions which
would enhance the miners’ case ... The miners themselves recognised that Communist miners’ leaders were men of integrity’. 22

The whole thrust of the CP’s post-war policy towards the trade unions was aimed at mastering the machinery of existing unions and using these to effect change, rather than creating new ones. Instead of pitching rank and file organisations against the official leadership of the unions, as the Minority Movement had done in the 1920s, the CP now aimed to build from the shop floor to secure its candidates for trade union office. As part of this, during the winter of 1964-5, the CP leadership resolved on a new general tactic: the Broad Left. 23 The Broad Left amounted to a recognition of the need for left-wing allies in the unions and the necessity for more open CP organisation within the unions. The time was deemed to be more appropriate for this than it had been in the 1950s and the Broad Left aimed to engage with the shop steward stratum within the trade union movement – within the South Wales NUM, this equated to the activists and committee-men within the lodges. This policy was augmented by the Party’s decision to establish the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, a body to co-ordinate leftist activity across the unions and pressurise the trade union leaderships. The model example of this type of Communist-Labour alliance within the unions by the late 1960s was the NUM, where the Broad Left was led by former Communists (Lawrence Daly), Communists (Mick McGahey, Dai Francis) and Labour leftists (Emlyn Williams). Within South Wales, where there had been a CP presence amongst the Union leadership since the days of Arthur Horner, this was by no means a completely new phenomenon. This success fed into the second strand of the CP’s industrial strategy: campaigning for wage militancy within the unions. In this way, the CP became a key factor in defining the whole tenor of industrial relations in Britain during the turbulent early 1970s.

In many respects, the rise of the Broad Left within the NUM has strong parallels with the emergence of the ‘unofficial movement’ in the south Wales coalfield in the later 1960s. Both were, generally speaking, initiatives led by the Communist Party. Both shared the same basic objectives: wage militancy, opposition to the Wilson government’s incomes policy, and strike action to defend the industry from the colliery closure programme. Furthermore, certain individuals – such as Emlyn
Williams – were active in both of them. Despite these fundamental similarities, the activities of the unofficial movement in this period were not simply reducible to being those of the ‘South Wales branch’ of the Broad Left, for several reasons. Firstly, lodge activists in the Cynon and Rhondda valleys had been working to galvanise coalfield-wide industrial action against pit closures since 1964, before the inception of the Broad Left. Secondly, rooted as it was within a number of militant lodges, it retained a significant independence of action – for example, attempting to organise unofficial strikes against the closure of Rhigos in 1965 and Cambrian in 1966 and defying the Area Officials by appealing to Conferences to support this action. Consequently, even though it had supporters at every level within the Area’s structure, it could be characterised more as a rank and file ‘ginger group’ than anything else. Thirdly – and most surprisingly, perhaps – despite Dai Francis’s status as the most senior member of the Broad Left within the South Wales NUM, he had no input into or control over the unofficial movement within the coalfield. Indeed, by late 1969 he was being openly critical of what he saw as its divisive activities; Coedely and Cwm lodges, which were in the vanguard of the movement, responded by passing votes of no confidence in him. 24

By the late 1960s, therefore, the CP’s dual strategy of encouraging grassroots militancy and securing influential positions within the Union hierarchy had led to the situation in south Wales whereby Communist lodge activists (such as Ron Saint and Cliff True) were clashing directly with the most senior Communist in the Area over a fundamental tactical issue. In this respect, the attitudes of individual CP members within the Area to particular strategic courses of action were conditioned primarily by the logic of the pressures placed upon them by their own specific positions within the Union structure. Francis’s role as a member of the NUM National Executive Committee meant that he was obliged to argue the NEC case at Area level; in contrast, the rank and file status of Saint et al. within the Area put them in the vanguard of unofficial militancy.

The strikes of 1969 and 1970 in the south Wales coalfield provided the scenario within which the rank and file alliance of Communists and Labour militants was able to bring about a significant shift in Area policy. During the ‘surfacemen’s strike’, the unofficial movement had demonstrated that a significant proportion of
the south Wales miners were prepared to take industrial action in order to remedy their grievances provided they were given an unambiguous lead – even if this did not come through official channels. Building on this, the following year the lodge activists and their supporters on the Executive Council were able to overturn the opposition of the Area leadership to a unilateral strike in south Wales following the national ballot defeat on the wages question and even managed to get the strike to be declared official there, contrary to the wishes of the Area Officials. Rank and file activism had succeeded in galvanising the South Wales NUM as a whole into a more militant pursuit of its objectives.

Beginning around 1969, the combination of the growing prominence of certain ‘leading lights’ within the unofficial movement, together with the responsive and participatory nature of the Area’s structure, meant that there began to be a blurring of the distinction between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ within the South Wales NUM. Generally speaking, the leading militants of the 1960s had become the Area’s leaders by the 1970s: the career of George Rees, for example, illustrates this point perfectly. This was not a simple process of ‘selling out’ – in most respects quite the opposite, since it represented the fulfilment of one of the central tenets of the CP’s trade union strategy. Furthermore, the overall effect of this was for the official Area policy to become more robustly militant with regard to such issues as wages and colliery closures. This development within south Wales was mirrored in other coalfields across Britain – and could be seen in the national strikes of 1972 and 1974, together with the conversion of Yorkshire into a left-wing Area. However, the inevitable consequence of the effective ‘take-over’ of the Area leadership by these people was the evanescence of the ‘unofficial movement’ as a distinct entity in its own right within the affairs of the Area, together with an increasing tendency amongst Communist miners to look to the official Union machinery as the best vehicle for their activities.

Despite this, coherent Communist input into the affairs of the South Wales NUM began to be curtailed from the later 1970s onwards. The main underlying cause of this was the organisational decline of the CP (with national membership falling from 28,378 in 1974 to 20,599 by 1979) and the consequent faction-fighting which developed between the *Morning Star* supporters and the Eurocommunists, whose
most prominent publication was the journal *Marxism Today*. In terms of representation within the Area hierarchy too, from around the mid 1970s onwards (say, following George Rees's election as Area general secretary), the CP began to lose ground. Whereas the 1960s had seen a reasonably significant minority of Communists within the leadership, which had been increased in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this process thereafter effectively came to a halt. With the sole exception of Arfon Evans, all of the new Executive members elected in the late 1970s and early 1980s were Labour members instead.

This did not mean that the Communist Party became irrelevant to political developments within the Area. Indeed, through into the 1980s Party members in south Wales remained ready to criticise the monetarist policies of the Callaghan and Thatcher governments and to organise support for lobbies and ‘Day of Action’ protests against these. The 1979 Welsh Party Congress called for ‘a Broad Alliance of all anti monopoly and democratic forces potentially uniting the overwhelming majority of the Welsh people against monopoly capitalism’. Communist miners also continued to support strike action against the colliery closure programme. Building on this approach, in September 1980 Allan Baker (a member of the CP’s Welsh Committee and the Oakdale lodge secretary) stated: ‘We need to get the South Wales miners to take a decisive stand against the whole concept of the rundown of the coal mining industry, not just on one pit or even a group of pits, and in the process involve the South Wales communities and through them hopefully have a political influence on the rest of Britain’.

In March 1984, once the miners had begun their strike in opposition to the government’s colliery closure programme, CP members within the NUM swung into line behind the resolution of the Party’s Executive Committee ‘to work for maximum solidarity with the miners and other trade unionists in action in defence of jobs, wages and conditions, developing broad left activity wherever possible’. In the first two months of the dispute – contrary to its later change of mind on the issue – the CP as a whole endorsed the picket-based strategy used by the NUM to spread the strike: on 17 March, for instance, the *Morning Star* editorial stated plainly that ‘[t]he answer is for the minority to fall in line with the striking majority. That way
the pits and jobs can be saved, and the attempt to use the anti-union laws to smash
the NUM can be thwarted'.

Nevertheless, by May 1984 doubts had begun to be expressed by the
Eurocommunist-dominated CP leadership about the efficacy of the NUM strategy.
That month, the Party's industrial organiser Pete Carter claimed that the strike
'could make a positive contribution towards building a broad alliance around the
miners' but warned that '[i]t would be dangerous and sectarian to think that a major
dispute of this character can be won by industrial muscle alone, even in the face of
hostile public opinion'. 28 According to this perspective, the strike was primarily a
struggle against government policy, as opposed to being a straightforward 'strike' in
the classic sense. The main contention here was that the miners would not win
purely on a 'syndicalist' basis of industrial action but required a policy of concerted
interaction with the wider political process via a series of 'broad democratic
alliances'. Within south Wales, the main advocates of this 'popular front' policy
were miners such as Allan Baker and prominent supporters such as Hywel Francis,
with the latter spelling out his views on the subject in an essay in Marxism Today in
February 1985 entitled 'Mining the Popular Front'. In a later interview, Baker
reiterated his view that the focus of the NUM's strategy on mass picketing was too
narrow and that a broader campaign of mass demonstrations and public meetings
was needed to isolate the government from mainstream British political opinion.
According to him, the strike 'was conducted as one of the last great nineteenth
century industrial struggles by "the powers that be" ... in the Union. Whereas we
were in the ... late twentieth century, fighting a radically different type of
[government] policy'. 29 The ultimate conclusions of this line of argument did not
represent the majority opinion amongst the south Wales miners during the strike.
Furthermore, there was a massive difference between this assessment of the strike
and the stance taken by CP rank and file activists such as, for instance, Glyn Roberts
of Tower lodge, who were (and remain) committed supporters of the methods used
by the miners in 1984-5. 30

The most distinctive contribution of the CP in Wales during the strike was to attempt
to put its words into action through pressing for the formation of its own 'broad
democratic alliance', the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities. 31
Encompassing a diverse array of organisations extending beyond the ‘traditional’ labour movement, the WCSMC was launched in the autumn of 1984 with the aim of consolidating the ‘alternative welfare state’ built by the miners’ support groups. The Congress also established several local branches and organised public meetings and demonstrations, helping to maintain the solidity of the strike during its final months. Its organisers envisaged it developing into a multi-issue pressure group and a Welsh ‘popular front’ against Thatcherism; however, the effective life-span of WCSMC did not extend a great deal beyond the struggle that had given birth to it.

Within South Wales, a key role in bringing the strike to an end in 1985 was played by a number of CP members. ‘For all the images of fiery Welsh Communists which history provides, it was [they] … who quietly suggested … a return to work without a settlement …[After] Christmas [1984] … the majority of the Communist miners at Maerdy pit were talking about “broad alliances” and the possibility of an orderly return to work with “dignity and honour”’. Amongst the main advocates of this were Kim Howells, Arfon Evans (EC member and Maerdy chairman) and Peter Evans (Merthyr Vale chairman), who discussed this in such isolated locations as a pub in Llanwonno, in the hills above Ynysybwl. This plan was unpopular with other left-leaning activists who were aware of it: one lodge secretary later commented, ‘there was a cabal then of Communist Party members and fellow travellers, with Kim Howells and the rest of them, they got together, to end the strike. And I thought that was a terrible thing’. Nevertheless, it was this type of development that ensured that talk of an organised return-to-work had begun to circulate within the Area by early 1985.

Towards the end of the strike, the disparity of viewpoints held by South Wales CP members regarding how or whether to maintain the struggle makes it misleading to look for a coherent ‘party line’ within the Area on the subject. Instead, different Communists were advocating a series of positions that reflected the various options open to the Area: some were in favour of ending the strike via a return to work without a settlement; others preferred an immediate negotiated agreement; others still wanted to continue the fight until the government could be forced to concede terms. Ultimately, at the end of the February, faced with the deteriorating situation across the various coalfields, the South Wales leadership decided to recommend
adoption of the policy of calling for a return to work without a settlement. In this way, fittingly, the Area's Communists, who had played an central role in defining the 'traditional radicalism' of the south Wales miners in the twentieth century, were an important influencing factor on the decision that signalled the end of an era in the history of their coalfield.

The Trotskyist Left

It is something of an understatement to point out that Trotskyism does not feature prominently in the historiography of coal-mining trade unionism. Largely this is because much of this academic work is concentrated on events of the early twentieth century, when essentially there were no Trotskyists in Britain. This situation changed during the 1970s and 1980s, however. Trotskyism was a factor within the NUM during this period, with some miners either becoming members of the various emerging leftist organisations or acquiring an ideological affinity with it. Notwithstanding this, the reluctance to acknowledge the existence of organisations to the left of the CP persists in the historiography. Despite its many other qualities, for example, nowhere does the article by Francis and Rees on the 1984-5 strike mention that one of the Area Executive Council was a member of Militant – even when it refers to him indirectly.35

The industrial unrest of the early 1970s saw the emergence for the first time of a number of Trotskyist organisations within the NUM. Although these began as an absolutely tiny presence within the south Wales coalfield, the militant picketing tactics of the 1972 strike and the politicised context of the 1974 strike provided a fertile environment for their ideas to take root. During the 1972 dispute, both Militant and the International Socialists supported the miners' struggle wholeheartedly, calling respectively for solidarity action by other unions and for a one-day general strike to back up the NUM's full pay claim. Two years later, the NUM once again embarked on strike action with the unambiguous backing of the main Trotskyist groups. The IS wanted a direct re-run of the 1972 strategy, echoing Scargill's appeal for 'hundreds of Saltleys', in other words, solidarity action from other trade unions, flying pickets and mass picketing of power stations, cokeworks and steelworks.36
These organisations expanded because their outlook appealed to a growing audience of radical-minded mineworkers. As the IS spelt out at the time, their programme with regard to the coal industry centred on ‘building a strong rank and file organisation within the NUM based on a programme of action over wages, conditions and union democracy’. In the run-up to the 1974 strike, Socialist Worker said that ‘[m]eetings of IS miners in South Wales … during the past week have reported considerable advances in the [size of the] organisation’, whilst pro-strike leaflets written by the IS miners’ group had been distributed throughout the coalfield. Evidence of the veracity of this claim was provided a few weeks later by The Times, which noted apprehensively that the IS had doubled in size in the last few years through its involvement in key industrial disputes, whilst their role in the 1972 strike was sufficiently significant to attract criticism from both NUM national president Joe Gormley and John Gollan, the CPGB leader. In an attempt to build on this foothold, IS Executive member Jim Nichol urged: ‘[t]he important thing for IS miners is to establish a party identity in the pits ... IS miners must get together more to give a clear political lead’. Whilst they had no major breakthroughs, both the IS/SWP and Militant spent the remainder of the decade consolidating their NUM presence. In their stances on the key issues facing the miners in the later 1970s – opposition to the Social Contract and public spending cuts, opposition to the introduction of the incentive bonus system into the industry, and in favour of strike action in December 1976 over the inadequate early retirement scheme being proposed by the NCB – they showed that they were able to provide a clear radical platform with which the militant vanguard within the Union could identify.

A serious problem when studying the role played by activists within a broader movement is that of availability of evidence. In the case of the South Wales NUM, the overwhelming majority of meetings between and within the various political groupings in the Area were informal and would have left no written record of their activities. Almost by definition, unofficial groups do not tend to leave behind minutes for historians to examine. Although it is not ideal, the only solution to this available to the historian is to study the ‘party line’ emanating from the principal Trotskyist newspapers at the time and then compare this with the verbatim Area Conference records. In the case of Militant in south Wales, this process is made much more straightforward by the fact that the majority of articles that appear in its
newspaper from around 1980 onwards regarding the coal industry were written by Ian Isaac, the St John’s lodge secretary and the most prominent Militant activist in the coalfield.

The relationship between ‘fellow travellers’ within the South Wales NUM and actual card-carrying members of the Trotskyist Left was essentially a complementary one in the period under consideration here. People such as Tyrone O’Sullivan (the Tower lodge secretary) illustrate the extent to which formal party affiliation could be a misleading guide to levels of workforce combativeness. Although he was (and remains) a staunch Labour supporter, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s he was consistently in the vanguard at Area Conferences in calling for a militant policy of opposition to colliery closures: for example, arguing for the continuation of the South Wales-led strike of February 1981, supporting the spread of industrial action via picketing in March 1984 and vehemently opposing the decision to return to work a year later.

The reason for this convergence was because from the 1970s onwards, there was a great deal of potential for ‘radical common ground’ over issues such as pit closures and wages, in no small measure because this was the dominant discourse within the South Wales NUM at that time. In many ways it did not really matter whether or not people such as Mike Griffin (Penrhiwceiber) or Ivor England (Maerdy), for instance, were members of the SWP, or whether or not Tyrone O’Sullivan or Phil Bowen (Blaenant) had any formal connection with Militant. Instead, what was important was that they were happy on several occasions to either write articles for or be interviewed in the Socialist Worker or Militant, in which they outlined viewpoints which concurred with these organisations’ analyses of the situation. In this respect, whether or not there was any degree of direct causality, there was a strong congruence between what these Trotskyist groups were calling for with regard to developments in the south Wales coalfield and the approach being pursued by militant activists at such lodges as Tower, Penrhiwceiber and St John’s.

From the 1970s onwards, a process can be discerned whereby Militant, the SWP and various other radical elements began to take up the mantle of a ‘new unofficial movement’ in south Wales. Even though it was never discussed or acknowledged in
these terms within the discourse of the Area, this development has obvious parallels with the activities of the CP in the 1960s. Indeed, these groups constituted themselves collectively as the Broad Left Organising Committee, essentially a pro-Scargill campaigning organisation within the NUM. Alongside the Communists, it was these groups who were the driving force behind his comprehensive victory in the national NUM presidential election in late 1981. As with the rise of the unofficial movement a generation before, the growth in their influence was a reflection of the broader feeling throughout several Areas of the NUM of the need for determined resistance to the government's colliery closure programme.

At no stage did the various Trotskyist groups active within the South Wales NUM ever form more than a very small percentage of the total Union membership. Nevertheless, this did not mean that they were insignificant. Off-the-record comments made during the interviews for this thesis indicated that members of the SWP and Militant were able to get elected to senior positions within their lodges from the 1970s onwards. The single most prominent indicator of the growing influence of the extra-Communist Left was the election of Ian Isaac onto the Area Executive Council in August 1983. As with Labour and the Communists, these groups maintained a network of contacts throughout the coalfield, meeting occasionally to discuss issues pertinent to the NUM and the coal industry and decide on policy with regard to them. On the (admittedly far from comprehensive) evidence in Militant and Socialist Worker of miners who were willing to be interviewed by or write articles for either of those newspapers from the early 1970s through until 1985, it seems as though Militant activists and sympathisers could be found in the west and also through into the middle of the coalfield, whereas SWP activists and sympathisers tended generally to be confined more to the central Valleys. At least part of this analysis was confirmed in late 1985 during the unsuccessful election campaign for the Area presidency by Ian Isaac, during which the Area EC noted that the Militant newspaper was being sold at several lodges in the west of the coalfield.

In terms of direct and measurable influence, it is difficult to detect any aspects of Area policy which were exclusively the work of the various Trotskyist groups. In no small measure, this was because they were already 'swimming with the tide' of
opinion within the Area; policies such as opposition to the colliery closure programme or for increased wages were precisely those being advocated by the Area leadership in any case. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the South Wales NUM would have intervened in the controversy within Labour regarding the attempts to expel Militant if there had not been at least a modicum of sympathy for the Tendency within the coalfield. Between December 1981 and February 1983, for instance, several criticisms of this were made by the Area leadership and the lodges at Blaenant, Tower and St John's, whilst Annual Conferences in 1982 and 1983 called on the Labour leadership to attack the Thatcher government rather than carrying out internal 'witch hunts'. During the 1984-5 strike, the South Wales NUM supported appeals by Militant members who were facing expulsion from Labour, arguing that such actions detracted attention away from the miners' struggle. In this respect, at this point it was more pro-Militant than the Welsh Labour Party was: a majority vote at the Labour Party Wales annual conference in May 1984 rejected appeals to overturn the expulsion of a Rhondda-based Militant activist.43

It is clear, however, that the Trotskyist-influenced 'new unofficial movement' was a significant factor in the politics of the south Wales miners in the 1980s, in terms of pushing for a more rigorous application of the Area policy of opposition to colliery closures. The first major opportunity for action was the British Steel strike which began in January 1980. Here, Militant, the SWP and also the CP-led Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions called for other trade unionists to support the steelworkers through the 'blacking' of all movement of steel. Lodge militants in south Wales, who were well aware of the importance of the steel industry to their coalfield, saw the possibility of the Area opening up a 'second front' in the struggle against the government's economic policy. Following the south Wales miners' participation in the WTUC's mass 'day of action' stoppage in late January, this seemed a real possibility. In response to pressure from ISTC activists and also from lodges such as Penrhiwceiber and Maerdy, who demanded the establishment of strike committees across the Area, the EC decided to call for strike action from 25 February. Fernhill vice-chairman Keith Barnes told Socialist Worker that '[u]nless the miners join the steelworkers our jobs situation will be very grim indeed. Things are getting so bad that people will rise up'.44
The south Wales miners decided against taking strike action on this issue, however. Examining this result, the Area’s left-wingers pointed out that there were several reasons why there had been this surprising rejection of industrial action. Writing in Militant, Ian Isaac cited the reluctance of the south Wales miners to take unilateral action on this issue in isolation from the rest of the NUM. In addition to this, lodge activists attributed the rejection of action to the delays over when the strike was due to take place, which had allowed the momentum of the issue to dissipate. Although they supported the EC strategy of attempting to begin a strike in support of the steelworkers on the understanding that this would then be a springboard for national action by the other NUM Areas, rank and file militants were critical of what they saw as insufficient canvassing work by the Area leadership in the run-up to the ballot. As Peter Thomas (Nantgarw Cokeworks lodge) pointed out: ‘Emlyn Williams was right in a way – but he was wrong in the way he went about it. The difference between reformist ideas and socialist politics is organising before you speak. Yet Emlyn wasn’t seen in the area – around the pits. If you want to win a strike you have to go round the pits and argue for it’. Proof of the efficacy of this approach was provided by Mike Griffin, who was able to win the backing of Penrhwceiber’s membership for support for the call for strike action after explaining the issues to them at a lodge mass meeting.

The next opportunity for action was provided by the announcement in February 1981 of a further round of pit closures. In the lead-up to this, South Wales militants agitated for vigorous implementation of the Area’s anti-closures policy. Their stance was made crystal clear by Mike Griffin:

Miners should not wait for the actual announcement to start fighting ... In South Wales we have a fine position on colliery closures. Our policy is that when the first pit is issued with a closure notice we will be out on strike ... But we have to keep campaigning. We have to continue having demonstrations and such like to keep the kettle boiling and rank and file members involved. At the moment the South Wales Area Executive are resting on their laurels. I think that’s a mistake. They should be organising lobbies and demonstrations with other unions now, so that when the time comes we are ready to fight.
On the whole, the south Wales miners were more prepared for action than they had been the year before. In the days before the closure announcement, an Area Conference decided that all-out strike action would commence as of 23 February, whilst strike committees were established in the coalfield. Both the Area leadership and the lodge activists agreed about the necessity for the South Wales NUM to take a stand against closures. Galvanised by unofficial action from some of the closure-threatened pits, South Wales began its strike several days ahead of schedule. The Area’s strategy was to instigate unilateral action and then widen this into a national stoppage by appealing for solidarity from the other coalfields. This was exactly the approach being argued for by rank and file activists. Ian Isaac, for instance, stated that ‘[t]he South Wales Area have taken the first historic step in the struggle to defend miners’ jobs against pit closures and compulsory redundancies ... If the leaders in each area follow the lead of the South Wales miners the NUM nationally will move into action as one united body’.49

The apparently comprehensive concession of defeat by the Thatcher government after only a few days’ strike caught the south Wales miners completely by surprise. On 20 February a Special Area Conference decided to call off the stoppage, although lodges such as Tower, Penrhiwceiber and Maerdy were sceptical and voted against ending the strike. Nevertheless, the overall tone amongst the Left in south Wales was one of optimism in the immediate aftermath of the ‘U-turn’. Mike Griffin, for example, stated that ‘[a]lthough I’m unhappy to be back ... and I still have reservations[, t]here’s no doubt it is a victory and in general political terms it shows the lady can be turned’.50

The government’s climb-down in February 1981 proved to be a ‘false dawn’ for the south Wales miners. The promised investment did not materialise and the colliery closure programme continued. Frustration grew and as a result the Area, with the most radical lodges in the vanguard, committed itself to strike action as of January 1983. Writing in Militant, Ian Isaac argued that this was an issue that affected every coalfield and so the strike planned for south Wales should be a springboard for solidarity action throughout the other Areas.51 These plans were thrown into disarray by the Scottish NUM decision not to oppose the closure of Kinneil colliery. Mike
Griffin expressed concisely the south Wales militants' frustration at this news: "Mick McGahey gave words of support but his actions were disastrous ... We've been through these [pit closure] problems before in the 1960s ... [but i]n 1981 we showed it could be tackled. But this decision in Scotland has not helped. We cannot afford another defeat". Following Kinneil, a South Wales Special Conference accepted the recommendation of the Area leadership to postpone the strike planned for 17 January. This move was criticised by Militant and the SWP – and also at the conference by the delegates from Penrhiwceiber, St John’s, Trelewis Drift, Lewis Merthyr, Blaengwrach, Britannia, Merthyr Vale, Tower and Maerdy. Mike Griffin’s assessment was that ‘we have not learned the lessons of the last four years. The only thing that matters is action because a thumping of the drum will get us nowhere’, whilst Charlie White (St John’s) warned that calling off the strike ‘is simply giving licence to the Board to crush us’.

Although there is no evidence of direct Militant or SWP involvement in the Lewis Merthyr stay-down strike of February 1983, this was precisely the kind of unofficial action aimed at building a wider solidarity-driven stoppage that the Area’s rank and file activists and these organisations had been advocating. Speaking to Socialist Worker, Alan Davies (Lewis Merthyr assistant lodge secretary) explained that ‘a lack of urgency by the [Area’s] executive committee in responding to pit closures’ had led them to bring about the ‘stay-down’. The other radical lodges responded immediately with their own unofficial strike, thereby generating the momentum that led to the rest of the Area officially joining the stoppage. Writing in Militant, Tyrone O’Sullivan and Ian Isaac stated: ‘For all miners this is a make or break situation. Either we stop the closures now, or we will be trampled on ... The revolt against pit closures has come from below ... After South Wales comes out [on strike] the miners will go all over Britain for support ... Support the miners’ fight for jobs’. In the Area-led campaign that developed, the Trotskyist Left endorsed the call for action, with the SWP suggesting that the Union’s policy of opposition to colliery closures made a national ballot on the issue unnecessary. Following the unsuccessful ballot result, the Party compared this unfavourably with the strategy used in 1981. It concluded that there should have been more unofficial activity, with south Wales miners meeting directly with rank and file miners from other coalfields, rather than relying on officials to spread the message on their behalf. At the Area Conference
on 12 March called to discuss the issue, Mike Griffin echoed the SWP 'line' on this subject exactly, whilst Tyrone O'Sullivan declared: 'In future we don’t want another ballot ... We should say “No more Ballots in South Wales”.

From the outset of the miners' strike in March 1984, both Militant and the SWP gave their wholehearted support to the decision to take action, together with the strategy of spreading the strike via picketing and appeals to trade union solidarity. This was reflected in the stance of their activists in the south Wales coalfield. Ian Isaac declared: 'The only unity now possible is that of direct action. At this stage in the dispute, there can be no question of a national ballot; the momentum must be developed ... The majority have already made it clear where they stand'. He reaffirmed that '[t]he task of the striking majority now is to convince the non-striking minority of the need to fight. When pickets from my own colliery, St John's, went to Nottinghamshire we received an extremely friendly response. We are confident that all non-striking pits will listen to the class appeals of their brother miners and join the fight to stop pits being closed'.

Following the failure of Nottinghamshire to join the strike, the question arose of the appropriate strategy to ensure an NUM victory. As the largest section of the Broad Left Organising Committee within the Union, the position recommended by Militant was obviously an important factor. In keeping with its broader aim of building a radical left-wing leadership within the trade union movement, throughout the strike Militant endorsed the decisions of Scargill and the NUM national leadership, particularly with regard to its picketing policy. In May 1984, it called for the mobilisation of the 'triple alliance' of the steel and rail unions to assist the NUM and backed the agreement between South Wales and the ISTC to allow enough coal into Llanwern steelworks to enable it to continue on a 'care and maintenance' basis. Militant subsequently endorsed the hardening of the NUM line on this subject in June, calling for solidarity action from rank and file steelworkers and power station workers. Looking to the broader trade union movement, it called for a twenty-four hour general strike to halt the government’s attacks on workers. Following the declaration of support made to the miners at the TUC annual conference in September 1984 it called for these words to be put into action by stopping coal
supplies to the power stations, together with expressing optimism that other left-wing leaderships would be able to deliver this solidarity.\textsuperscript{58}

The SWP position towards the miners’ strike strategy was the product of its ‘rank and filist’ emphasis on the primacy of workers’ self-activity and opposition to any kind of reliance on union bureaucracy. Throughout the dispute, it argued that a key problem for the NUM was the insufficient level of grassroots activism of the kind common between 1969 and 1974. Consequently, it claimed that Scargill and the other left-wing Union leaders had become ‘prisoners of the trade union machine’, unable to replicate the tactics that brought them victory in the 1970s. In contrast, the SWP looked to lodge activists to take their own steps to bring about this mass participation, pointing to the 1969 surfacemen’s strike as an example of the successful use of unofficial methods. This viewpoint led it to place a greater emphasis on mass picketing than either the NUM leadership as a whole or the other socialist parties involved in the struggle. The Party was a key presence at Orgreave for instance, with its placard slogans of ‘turn Orgreave into Saltley’.\textsuperscript{59} It argued that mass mobilisation of rank and file support from other trade unionists, as had been the case at Saltley, was the only way for the miners to achieve their strategic objectives. This viewpoint was echoed in south Wales by some of the militant lodge activists. Towards the end of the strike, Ivor England asserted that ‘[t]here’s a 1974 attitude amongst our leadership. They go to the leaders of these unions instead of going to the rank and file ... We should have gone directly to the steel workers and power workers, and not depended on their leaders’.\textsuperscript{60} The SWP took a similarly hard-line position over the steel question. It called for the NUM to stop all production at Llanwern and Ravenscraig, criticising Area leaderships (such as South Wales) who were reluctant to implement mass picketing and enforce a complete blockade of the steelworks. Despite its scepticism at the likelihood of its occurrence, the SWP remained sufficiently pragmatic (or optimistic) to call on the TUC to ‘turn words into action’ following its decision in September to support the miners’ struggle.\textsuperscript{61}

Through until the end of the strike, South Wales militants remained determined to continue the struggle, reiterating the ‘stand firm’ demand and calling for solidarity action by other unions to be increased – although acknowledging the serious
problems faced by the miners. The emphasis in strategy varied slightly here, with the preferred Militant option being a twenty-four hour general strike, whilst the SWP called for an expanded programme of round-the-clock mass picketing of the power stations.\(^{62}\)

Throughout the dispute, the SWP – unlike Militant – had remained somewhat critical of the tactics of the South Wales Area leadership. As the strike dragged on into 1985, this was reflected in the opposition by lodge activists to any compromise with the NCB. In early January, for instance, miners from Tower, Penrhiwceiber and Maerdy lobbied the EC to urge it not just to stand firm but also to step up the strike, with mass pickets of power stations and demands for a recall TUC conference.\(^{63}\) The SWP sought to explain this ‘wavering’ by the Area leadership at this stage of the struggle, despite the continuing solidity of the membership behind the strike, in terms of its strategy of ‘total reliance to keep the strike going on the miners’ historic loyalty to the union and the strength of the pit communities’, a policy which had ‘seen the strike stay solid but dangerously passive’. This approach was contrasted to the ‘rank and filist’ approach of using the lodges’ activist base to build the level of engagement of the mass membership in the struggle. Ivor England expressed this critique concisely in late February 1985:

\[
\text{No union can depend totally on loyalty. This dependence has weakened the}
\text{strike here ... You can’t leave workers to what they read in the newspapers}
\text{and see on TV. You must counteract it. I think the area leaders are feeling}
\text{insecure about the amount of support that still exists for the strike. Now they}
\text{are worried and want folk to go out on pickets. But how the hell can you}
\text{expect them to come out on pickets if they don’t have the consciousness?}^{64}\]

The decision in March 1985 was inevitably an extremely controversial one. Despite the adverse circumstances facing the NUM, six lodges – Penrhiwceiber, Tower, Cwm, Nantgarw, Merthyr Vale and Trelewis Drift – opposed the recommendation made by the South Wales leadership at the Area Conference on 1 March to call for an organised return to work without an agreement.\(^{65}\) Once the dispute was over, the key concern for activists became to call for the reinstatement of all of the miners who had been sacked during the course of the strike. In this respect, together with
the inevitable wave of recriminations that followed on from the defeat, leftist opinion was reflected throughout the mainstream of the South Wales NUM. Some blamed the Nottinghamshire Area for not joining the strike; others agreed with Emlyn Williams and the SWP and castigated the Labour leadership and the TUC for not doing more to assist the miners. Here, as was the case throughout this period, radical politics was at its most influential within the coalfield when it accorded with broader outlook of the south Wales miners as a whole.

Conclusion
Several basic conclusions can be drawn about the politics of the south Wales miners in the period considered here. Firstly, the overall effect of the democratic structure of the South Wales NUM was to facilitate the promotion of policies and individuals who reflected the requirements and aspirations of the broader membership. In this way, the historically-created and culturally-reinforced 'traditional radicalism' that emanated primarily from the central Valleys lodges came to play the defining role within the Area as a whole. On a party-political level, the basic outlook of the south Wales miners was 'left Labourism'. Not only did an affinity towards Labour define the general ideological milieu within which they operated; it was also the case that some Labour leftists such as Emlyn Williams were amongst the Area’s most influential radicals. Within this broad ‘labourist’ framework, Communist Party and Trotskyist activists made important contributions to the overall tone and direction of politics within the coalfield. In both cases, their primary role was to work towards bringing about a more militant policy over the questions of wages, conditions and colliery closures – and being generally successful in their attempts to do so. Whilst the Communists were definitely the most prominent militants within the Area for the first part of the period studied here, from the later 1970s their position in the ‘political vanguard’ had been encroached upon significantly by lodge activists who were more inclined to be Trotskyist-influenced in their outlook. Overall, it was the combination and interaction of these factors that brought about the distinctive political radicalism of the south Wales miners.
Notes to Chapter 1

1 \textit{Miner}, No.10, Nov. 1969.
3 Interview with Colin Thomas, 14 January 2004.
4 See Appendix III and the maps of the coalfield provided.
5 Interview with Emlyn Jenkins, 5 March 2004.
6 Interviews with Dane Hartwell (10 December 2003) and Eric Davies (30 January 2004).
7 Glyn Williams SWML interview (AUD/113); interview with Dan Canniff, 17 February 2004.
9 See, for example, \textit{Labour Weekly}, 14 January 1972 and 1 February 1974.
15 Interview with Jim Watkins, 18 February 2004.
16 \textit{Guardian}, 5 March 1985; EC, 6 November 1984.
17 \textit{WM}, 27, 28 March 1962; CP Welsh Committee papers, 1943-79 [PHM, CP/CENT/ORG/11/1-2]; .
18 Interview with Mike Richards, 27 January 2004.
20 Interviews with Mike Banwell (9 March 2004), Kevin Williams (25 March 2004) and George Rees (8 December 2003).
21 Interview with Verdun Price, 15 March 2004; Brian Elliott SWML interview (AUD/123).
22 Interview with Arfon Evans, 1 April 2004

24 EC, 14 November, 2 December 1969; ASC, 18 November 1969.


27 CP EC minutes, 10-1 March 1984 [PHM, CP/CENT/EC/20/05]; *MS*, 12 March 1984.


30 Interview with Glyn Roberts, 19 March 2004.


34 Interview with Bill King, 4 March 2004; *SW*, 12 January 1985.

35 Francis and Rees, op. cit., p.64.


38 As quoted in ibid., 12 January 1974; *Times*, 11 February 1974.

39 *Militant*, 1974-7 passim; *SW*, 1974-7 passim.


41 EC, 9 August 1983.

42 Ibid., 3 December 1985.
The glaring exception to this list was St John's. However, at the conference, Ian Isaac (who had been sacked by the NCB a few weeks before) and Charlie White supported the recommendation, pointing to the prospect of the NCB encouraging the formation of rival unions and using these to break the NUM if the dispute continued for much longer.
The Collieries of South Wales in 1964
Chapter 2  

Closures: 1964-1970

The 1960s brought pessimism and frustration for the coal miners of south Wales. Looking back, Dai Francis (South Wales Area NUM general secretary between 1963 and 1976) felt that it was ‘one of the most difficult periods that I can remember in my fifty years with the Union’.¹ Far from the security which they believed they had obtained following the nationalisation of coal in 1947,² this decade was characterised for the south Wales coalfield by a dramatic colliery closure programme, which attained its maximum speed under the Wilson governments of 1964-70. Britain was not the only industrialised country to see its coal industry shrink in the 1960s, although this trend was amplified by the energy policy decisions of successive governments. Coal’s nationalised status, together with the fact of there being a Labour administration in office, led official NUM policy to attempt to mitigate the effects of this decline rather than challenge the entire system – a perspective with which the South Wales Area generally agreed. As the decade unfolded however, it was becoming clear that an increasing proportion of the membership were dissatisfied with this approach. Although it was not immediately apparent at the time, the rapid contraction of the industry had set in motion interconnected tensions and processes, both economic and political, which were to have a profound impact not just on the south Wales miners and their coalfield but for the whole tenor of industrial relations in Britain.

For south Wales and the other coalfields however, broad continuities existed within this period of dramatic change for the miners and their communities. The National Coal Board, for instance, remained the biggest employer in south Wales: there were 88,000 mineworkers on its books in 1962, 14 percent of the total labour force.³ Similarly, the South Wales NUM retained its important social role within the lives of its members. In the cultural sphere, this was most noticeable through the Miners’ Gala (established in 1953) and the Miners’ Eisteddfod (which began in 1948).

In the 1960s, before the advent of affordable foreign holidays, the Miners’ Gala was a major highlight of the social calendar in south Wales. Held in Cardiff every June,
the Gala reached the zenith of its popularity around the middle of the decade. Colliery lodges organised free buses to take people to the Galas and convoys of them descended on Cardiff from all around the coalfield: over 30,000 miners and their families attended the 1965 Gala, for instance. The scale of events encompassed within the Gala was striking. Brass bands played an important role: in the 1960s, it was not uncommon to have up to fifteen different bands there. In addition to music, there were art and craft exhibitions, plus rugby, soccer and tug-of-war tournaments. The defining feature of the Gala was its successful blend of politics and entertainment. In addition to criticising government policy and calling for better pay and conditions for the mining industry, a recurrent feature of resolutions passed at Galas in the 1960s was a call for the end to the Vietnam War. Internationalism remained a key theme, with Czechoslovak and Hungarian miners invited in 1964 and 1969. The main guests at the Gala were often those in the forefront of the struggle against fascism or imperialism abroad, such as Greek seamen's leader Tony Ambatielos in 1964 or a North Vietnamese delegation in 1970.

The Miners' Eisteddfod was a unique cultural event and was a source of pride for many miners. The only festival of its kind to be sponsored by a British trade union, it was influential in stimulating numerous cultural activities, particularly choral music. The Eisteddfod was very popular, mainly with people from the predominantly Welsh-speaking western end of the coalfield, many of whom would spend the whole day there. Held annually in Porthcawl, its prestige was sufficient to prompt a fraternal visit from TUC general secretary Vic Feather in 1969. The Eisteddfod – and also the Gala – were seen to be important in helping to maintain cultural standards and solidarity with miners in other coalfields and countries, in the face of the adversities facing their industry.

May Day provided another focal point for community self-expression, underlining the ready synthesis in mining areas of social activities, politics and sporting events. One of the biggest and most important May Day celebrations was held at Aberdare. In 1966, this included a march, speeches by Will Paynter (NUM national general secretary from 1959 to 1968 and former president of the south Wales miners), Glyn Williams (Area president between 1966 and 1973) and Dai Francis, in addition to a programme of sports competitions. Reporting in the Area's newspaper,
Penrhiwceiber lodge secretary Mike Griffin observed that ‘[a]ll the threads of the speeches and events seemed to weave a fabric that socialism holds the prospect of Peace, Prosperity and Happiness ... [L]odge members went away tired, but yet invigorated for the tasks ahead’.

Despite such expressions of community solidarity, in the 1960s south Wales miners found increasingly that their daily lives were being disrupted by changes within their industry. Colliery closures were the most notable feature here. Although these generally led to men being transferred to other pits rather than being made redundant, they nevertheless caused problems. Moving to a new pit often meant increased travel-to-work time, with men having to get up at 4 a.m.; a nominal working day of eight hours could in reality mean one of over eleven hours. This development inevitably affected miners’ family and social lives. Reflecting this concern, the Area’s Executive Council called on the NCB to improve the Assisted Travel Scheme to help workmen who live awkward distances from their pit to travel to work by car.7 Transferral typically presented the challenge of a bigger and more anonymous working environment, where it was more likely that new and unfamiliar coal-cutting machinery would be in use. More significantly, men were often downgraded when they started work in a different colliery. In this context, it was possible for the ‘seniority rule’ – a vital protection for trade unionists against victimisation – to lead to a form of ‘tribalism’, as men sought to retain their status in the face newcomers from other pits. In September 1964, for instance, there were problems at Marine colliery in Cwm, Ebbw Vale, owing to the NCB’s decision to transfer men there from nearby Waunllwyd.8 Men were reluctant to transfer to other collieries and would often choose to leave the industry instead. As one miner who experienced transferral observed, ‘every colliery’s different. When you go to a strange colliery ... you’re not going to have the same sort of status as you had when you’re in your pit before – and a lot of men finished ... They just couldn’t handle it’.

Transferrals had almost as significant an effect on the ‘receiver pits’ as on the men who were displaced. In some cases, it was feared that an influx of manpower without a corresponding increase in output per man-shift (OMS) could make the receiver pit itself a target for closure. Transferrals also led to an increasingly
'cosmopolitan' workforce. As opposed to miners at a pit living in the adjoining village, by the 1960s men were being drawn in from several miles away. Some pits experienced this phenomenon to a far greater degree than others. Cwm colliery, in Beddau, employed men from as far afield as the Garw Valley and even had men transfer there from Scotland and Derbyshire - a striking contrast with 'village pits' such as Maerdy in the upper Rhondda Fach. Penallta, in the Rhymney Valley, was similarly 'cosmopolitan'. Although most of its workforce lived locally, some men travelled in from Merthyr Tydfil, Senghenydd and Cardiff. Penallta successfully integrated men from several nearby collieries in this period. Mass transferrals of this type could have a variety of different effects on the Union leadership of a receiver pit. At Cwm, the lodge officials - mainly men from local villages - remained in post, despite the influx of newcomers. Conversely, transfers could sometimes help galvanise a lodge leadership. Following the closure in 1967 of International colliery, Blaengarw, transferral of its workforce to nearby Ffaldau led to the effective replacement of its lodge officials by the more politicised ex-International men.

Despite the upheavals of the 1960s, the strong links between collieries and communities remained. 'It was a totally different experience then to today ... [N]early everybody was involved in the colliery in one form or another - whether they were miners, whether they were women working in the canteen. The small shops in the area all revolved around it ... [E]verybody seemed to be involved'. Given the closeness of this bond, it was unsurprising that pit closures had serious repercussions in the Valleys. Reflecting on this, Will Paynter wrote: 'I wonder sometimes if those who decide policies to precipitate the contraction of the coal industry have any idea as to what a pit closure means to the community built around it ... Closure ... represents a disaster as poignant and harrowing as a death in the family'. One of the areas worst affected was the practically mono-industrial upper Afan Valley, which lost its last pit - Glyncorrwg - in 1970. Its miners either moved away or travelled elsewhere to work. Local trade declined, to the extent that the only economic activity in Blaengwynfi now revolves around the workmen's hall, the community-owned Co-op and the last remaining chip shop. The infrastructure withered and socio-economic problems increased. The valley's railway (which formerly provided direct links to Cardiff, Swansea, Bridgend and the Rhondda) was
pulled up, its tunnels filled in. Cultural life inevitably suffered. When its local pit
was open, Blaengwynfi had a drama group, a brass band, a library and a debating
society. All went when the colliery closed in 1969, since they were all organised
through miners’ financial contributions. 15

One of the distinctive historical features of the culture of the south Wales miners has
been self-education, mainly via their institute libraries. Although these were
generally established in the early twentieth century, they were by no means
moribund in this period. Indeed, as late as the 1970s, Blaengwrach lodge was
establishing its own library devoted solely to political literature. Miners’ ideas were
sharpened through debate amongst themselves. As one lodge secretary later
reflected: ‘the south Wales miners were well-informed [and] … very much aware of
their own history … I think that’s what made them as they were … [S]ome of the
debates that went on underground, … they’d be a damn sight better than … “Any
Questions”! … [T]hey’d be far more interesting … All those things would be
discussed underground’. 16

The Area’s bi-monthly newspaper, The Miner, was very much a product of this
outlook. It reported on developments within the industry and the Union and also
frequently carried articles on pertinent political or historical topics. Examples of this
ranged from the centenary of the TUC in 1868 and the history of the Chartists, to the
fiftieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the need for solidarity with South
African workers in their struggle against apartheid. It was not even uncharacteristic
of The Miner to feature an article in which one of the Area’s leaders could argue that
‘socialism can come into being only by the … toppling of the capitalist system from
below … – it involves the direct and formidable class action of the workers in the
mass’. 17

Whilst it is true that by no means all south Wales miners were radicals, they
generally had a much more politically developed outlook than many of their
contemporaries. ‘I think that you could say that we were one of the most radical
[Areas] of the … [NUM] – or of any union, in fact … I mean, south Wales miners
were known for that. We were involved in everything. On the anti-apartheid scene,
in South Africa. Every issue, there was an involvement’. 18 Miners generally
attributed this trait to historical and geological factors: a legacy of the struggle to get a living wage from obdurate coalowners, in conditions unsuited to high productivity. Undoubtedly, many south Wales miners were proud of their reputation as ‘the praetorian guard of the trade union movement’. 19

A consequence of the general politicised outlook of the south Wales miners was their keen engagement with contemporary political issues. Enoch Powell’s racism was condemned unanimously at their 1968 Annual Conference, whilst the 1967 Conference spelt out its opposition to joining the European Common Market. In May 1966, the EC supported the strike by the National Union of Seamen, donating £1,000 to their strike fund and an inviting them to address the 1966 Gala. 20 The Executive criticised the ‘anti-working class’ nature of the 1968 Budget, whilst the Annual Conference that year condemned government education and health policies, particularly the introduction of prescription charges. Dai Francis was a persistent critic of the Wilson government’s economic policy, calling instead for ‘socialism, the only system under which the problems we face today can be solved’. 21 He was by no means alone in advocating such measures. In 1966, the Area Conference demanded the re-nationalisation of the steel industry; the previous year, it had called for the nationalisation of private monopolies as a step towards a planned economy.

At the start of 1964, the south Wales coalfield was at a crossroads. Although the industry had been in gradual decline since the late 1950s, there were signs that this trend could be about to be reversed. This ambiguous picture was reflected in the statistics. On one hand, the outlook could seem gloomy. In 1963-4, the NCB South Western Division (south Wales, plus a few Somerset pits) lost 4,564 men and made operational losses of £1,798,879, or 1/6d. per ton. Absenteeism was 2.5 percent above the national average, with unofficial stoppages around twice the equivalent British figure. Mechanisation levels were 72 percent across Britain but only 50 percent in the Area; national OMS was 34.6 cwt, compared to 23.9 cwt in south Wales. 22

From another perspective, however, there were reasons to be cautiously optimistic. Annual saleable output in the coalfield had recovered from a low of 17.4 million tons in 1961 to 18.9 million tons by 1964. An increasing percentage of output was
coming from new or updated facilities and many major post-nationalisation projects – including Brynlliw, Hafodyrynys, Cwm and Abertillery – were soon due to reach full production. By some calculations, even allowing for further closures of older workings, the coalfield was capable of reaching an annual output of 25 million tons by 1965.\textsuperscript{23} OMS levels, although low by British standards, were increasing year on year, whilst mechanisation was being successfully introduced in coal-faces where it had formerly been thought impossible to do so. In the west, anthracite production was at its highest level for twenty-five years.\textsuperscript{24} Following initial geological problems, the two new anthracite 'super pits' – Cynheidre and Abernant – were gearing up production and were expected to boost output significantly. The coal-fired Uskmouth 'B' power station opened in 1963, as part of the programme to meet the vast increase in demand for electricity. Furthermore, the opening of Llanwern steelworks in 1962 seemed to assure the region's coking-coal pits of a secure long-term market.

The south Wales miners did not share this cheerful appraisal of the situation. In May 1964, Will Whitehead and Bert Wynn (secretary of the Derbyshire Area) published a pamphlet called \textit{A Plan for the Miners}: this criticised NCB policy and the NUM's non-confrontational attitude towards it, calling for immediate improvements in wages and conditions as a means of halting the numbers of men leaving the industry. A more direct reflection of popular unease emerged at roughly the same time, over the proposed closure of Nine Mile Point colliery, Cwmfelinfach. This was significant because it was the first concerted attempt to take a stand against pit closures. Although initially against the closure, after a fruitless meeting with the NCB the EC decided that it could not realistically pursue the matter any further. A few weeks later, this was overturned at the Annual Conference, which demanded opposition to the closure of Nine Mile Point. The Board was unyielding, however. Consequently, in June 1964, a further Conference decided not to oppose the closure, provided that it caused no redundancies – a reaffirmation of official NUM policy. Ray Beacham (Nine Mile Point lodge secretary) warned the Executive and the NEC of the dangers of their policy of not resisting closures and presciently observed that at 'some time in the not too distant future this policy would have to be drastically revised'.\textsuperscript{25}
Throughout the 1960s, NUM policy was to call for a co-ordinated national energy strategy, in which priority would be given to indigenous fuels. Addressing the 1964 Conference, Area vice-president Glyn Williams criticised the Conservative government’s attitude towards the nationalised industries, calling for financial reconstruction of the coal industry, a national fuel policy and an expansion of coal usage. He also reaffirmed the Union view that a Labour government would be the best means of effecting these reforms, a point restated by Whitehead in the run-up to the 1964 general election.26

The election of a Labour government under Harold Wilson in October 1964 was welcomed by miners. While few believed that the new administration would transform society, there was an expectation that there would be a reversal in the fortunes of the coal industry. After the election, Wilson came to Aberdare and assured the miners of ‘a grand future for the pits ... There was an optimism, that we thought Harold Wilson would be the answer to our problems.’27 It was not a surprise that Wilson was seen in this light: he had been one of the architects of coal nationalisation and had stressed the importance of promoting miners’ welfare at the 1960 Party conference. In December 1964, the Area leadership met with the new Secretary of State for Wales, James Griffiths, to discuss the Union’s concerns about the industry’s problems. The south Wales miners’ proposed solutions were spelt out at their 1965 Annual Conference: a government-guaranteed output target of 200 million tons, a halt to all pit closures except through exhaustion, and substantial improvements in wages and conditions to attract more manpower. In February 1966, the NUM issued an eleven-point plan for government assistance for the coal industry, with proposals ranging from a retention of the current fuel oil tax to a call for greater use of solid fuel by local authorities and government departments.28

Labour’s pro-coal policy had been spelt out clearly in Opposition, with a pledge for an annual output of 200 million tons forming part of their 1964 election programme. Despite this, its stance began to shift as soon as it had been elected. By February 1965, Fred Lee (the Minister for Power) was refusing to be bound by this promise, while the NCB was unable to give reassurance of even a temporary halt to closures. When it was unveiled later that year, the National Plan envisaged a coal output of no more than 170-180 million tons by 1970. Dai Francis attacked this as ‘a betrayal’
and said that 'the plan brings the coalfield face to face with one of the greatest crises in its history'.

The precipitous decline in the fortunes of coal was part of a wider process in which governments in the 1960s sought to maximise use of nuclear power, gas and oil wherever possible. Will Paynter attributed this outlook to the government’s wish to expand nuclear power for military purposes, coupled with the tremendous political pressure wielded by the oil corporations. Oil was also cheaper in the short term (despite its adverse effect on the balance of payments), an important factor in an increasingly ‘free market’ situation in the energy sector.

Another point to consider is the influence of civil servants on energy policy. Between 1961 and 1971, there were ten different Ministers of Power: the only continuity came from the civil servants, who ensured that fuel policy remained the same. When they met miners’ leaders to discuss policy, Ministers would be completely reliant on their brief prepared for them by their civil servants – often reading from it directly. Secret briefing notes for Wilson for his meetings with the NUM in September 1967 show that the official viewpoint was that the government must not be deflected in any way from continuing with this policy. Given the pervasiveness of this thinking, it is unsurprising that a stream of inexperienced Ministers accepted it essentially unquestioned. Paynter’s view of them was that ‘[i]t was so obvious that they weren’t masters in the department that they were supposed to be in charge of’. Similarly, Lord Robens (NCB chairman between 1961 and 1971) stated: ‘In Opposition, Labour had the right policy for the coal industry; in office, it ran away from it because the civil servants were too persuasive and determined for the Ministers Harold Wilson appointed’.

The Wilson government years saw a sharp acceleration of the process of colliery closures which had begun in the late 1950s. Thirty-three pits closed in south Wales between 1959 and 1964; forty-four closed in the five years that followed. More significantly, whilst many of the earlier closures were because of geological factors, a notable feature of many collieries shut between 1964 and 1970 was that they had been formerly considered long-life ‘showpiece’ units. As Ben Morris (Area chief administrative officer between 1964 and 1972) later observed, ‘Then in 1964-66,
[the closure programme] ... started really in earnest – Elliot closed, ... then you had Groesfaen. Big units now, I’m talking about ... And gradually you had this position of a substantial qualitative change taking place in the coalfield'. In November 1965, the NCB announced that twenty-five pits – including twenty-one in south Wales – were now classed as ‘short-life’ units. Both Paynter and Alfred Kellett (NCB South Western Division director) spelt out publicly their viewpoints that the main force behind this closure programme was the Ministry of Power.\textsuperscript{32}

The unwillingness of the government to stick to its former policy made miners’ leaders realise the extent of the crisis facing their industry. In April 1965 Paynter addressed a meeting in Pontycymer, warning that coal was facing the greatest crisis it had ever known and that only a national fuel policy could safeguard its future.\textsuperscript{33} Will Whitehead struck a similarly apocalyptic tone at the 1965 Area Annual Conference when he stated that ‘if the situation continues to deteriorate ... then there will be no mining industry in South Wales as we know it inside ten years’. In April 1965, the Divisional NCB had informed the EC that saleable output had dropped to 18.44 million tons, 1.49 million tons less than expected and 900,000 tons less than the equivalent figure the previous year. Annual operating losses for the Division had leapt to £3 million and OMS had actually fallen (a stark contrast with the national trend of rising productivity). A central factor here was the runaway increase in manpower drift from the industry. The first twenty-three weeks of 1965 saw 186 miners per week leaving the coalfield – a rate, which if it had continued, would have finished coal-mining in south Wales by 1971. External developments did little to improve prospects. In September 1965, an Area Conference called to discuss the region’s poor performance was dealt additional hammer-blows by the news of the discovery of North Sea gas and the prediction that nuclear power would be cheaper than coal or oil by 1970.\textsuperscript{34}

The Coal Industry Acts of 1965 and 1967 were the central pillars of the Wilson administration’s policy towards the NCB. The main feature of the 1965 Act was a write-off of £415 million of NCB capital debt. The effect of this was more ambiguous than it appeared, since it was to be coupled with an accelerated ‘streamlining’ of the industry. As Whitehead commented at the time, this inevitably meant that more south Wales collieries would close.\textsuperscript{35} The Act also enabled the
government to delay the closure of particular pits, with it then covering the postponement costs. This may have looked like Labour aiding its beleaguered mine-working supporters – but it is important to bear in mind who was driving the contraction programme forward. The Coal Industry Act 1967 augmented the 1965 Act in several respects. An important innovation was a scheme to help miners over 55 who had been made redundant. This Act also contained a government commitment to pay part of the social costs of colliery closures, including travel allowances and transfer payments. Furthermore, it was agreed to ban imported oil and continue the fuel oil tax. However, the effect of all this was minimal at best.

One of the single most striking features of the Wilson government’s pit closure programme was the relative lack of protest which it provoked from the NUM. This was mainly because it was a Labour government and therefore could obtain acquiescence for policies which would otherwise have been opposed. Senior Labour members within the Area leadership in the 1960s later recounted that party loyalty was an important factor for them when deciding how strongly to resist closures or fight for better wages. As Dan Canniff, an Executive member at the time, candidly put it: ‘We bent over backwards for the Labour government’. Throughout this period, Glyn Williams argued that, despite the miners’ various complaints, it was still a priority to ensure that Labour was re-elected.

Instead of confronting the Wilson administration head-on, the official Area policy in the 1960s kept within the overall NUM strategy of trying to persuade the government to halt the colliery closure programme. This approach took two forms, demonstrations and meetings with individuals. In February 1966, a south Wales contingent led 1,500 miners on a march through London to meet Fred Lee and lobby parliament. Additional lobbies, of parliament and the Welsh Office, were arranged for February and September 1967 respectively. Local MPs could be supportive of the miners’ case: Donald Coleman (Labour MP for Neath), for instance, addressed a mass meeting of Cefn Coed lodge, pledging to assist their campaign. Meetings with Welsh Office Ministers were unhelpful, merely serving to emphasise that all the governmental decision-making power here lay with the Ministry of Power. In September 1966, Ben Morris told George Thomas (Minister of State for Welsh Affairs) that ‘[w]hat the Union is not prepared to accept is that there can be any
wisdom in the unholy haste to close pits. By their very action the Government were not creating a sound and healthy heart to the industry, but were in fact doing the exact opposite’. At the meeting with Cledwyn Hughes (Secretary for State for Wales) in December 1966, Dai Francis stated: ‘Frankly we have not had much change out of previous meetings and it is no understatement that we are deeply disturbed with the present position. We do not want a perpetuation of Tory policy ... It is my personal opinion that this Government is intent on creating a pool of unemployment’. Hughes appealed to the Minister of Power, Richard Marsh, on behalf of the miners – but nothing was forthcoming.37

Although the Ministry of Power made the big strategic decisions about the coal industry, these plans were implemented by the NCB. Consequently, for many miners, it very much looked like it was the Board that was determined to close down the south Wales coalfield. In early 1966, Whitehead commented gloomily that ‘All Welshmen realise there is a strong anti-Welsh lobby at Hobart House [NCB national headquarters]’. Paynter later said: ‘I don’t think south Wales featured very high in the consideration of the Labour government as a coalfield to be preserved or expanded’, agreeing that the Board itself had an anti-Welsh attitude.38

At pit level, it often seemed to miners as though the NCB made a point of closing collieries with strong traditions of militancy. In the view of Emlyn Williams, probably the most important activist in the coalfield in this period:

[T]he intent [of the NCB was] ... to slaughter the Welsh coalfield. Because what is significant during that period was, the militant pits that closed like Seven Sisters, Rhigos ... I believe that these pits were deliberately selected for closure because within these pits, you had this militancy that had grown up there ... I was always amazed with the Seven Sisters closure [in 1963, but] ... I believe it was because of the militancy [there] ... [D]uring that period, ... the pits that were closed were the pits that were doing the clamouring to fight, people that were saying, ‘We should resist closures’.39

The decisions made by management at certain collieries had a central bearing on whether they stayed open. Ben Morris felt that the Board ‘undoubtedly’ manoeuvred
circumstances in pits which they wished to close so as to make them uneconomic – for example, by the withholding of investment or conducting unnecessary exploratory work. Rhigos colliery was closed mid-way through an extensive construction programme of new surface buildings, an experience shared by several other pits. The closure of Llanbradach colliery in the Rhymney Valley in 1961 was an early example of this phenomenon. Llanbradach had received substantial investment and had a good workforce and plentiful reserves. However, management’s industrial relations attitude there meant that the best workers decided to leave the industry and work in Llanwern instead. ‘The Board always had an unhappy knack of putting square pegs in round holes ... They could spoil a good pit almost overnight by moving a good manager, promoting him and putting an inferior or incompetent manager into the pit’.

Industrial relations were inevitably coloured by these kinds of factors. Although the late 1960s saw the replacement of the pre-1947 managerial personnel by a new generation more attuned to the NUM viewpoint (such as Philip Weekes, who later became NCB South Wales Director), the dominant experience for miners was one of antagonism, to varying degrees. Men could recount numerous instances of a ‘penny pinching’ attitude amongst managers, whether by surreptitiously docking money from wages or trying to set unrealistically high output norms on coalfaces. On one occasion, Merthyr Vale lodge secretary Bill King was forced to appear before a Divisional Coal Board disputes committee in Cardiff because he called a colliery under-manager ‘comrade’ – although the case was subsequently dismissed out of hand. In many cases, management could appear inaccessible and authoritarian; as one miner reflected, ‘The British Coal style of management was terrible. They had no compassion whatsoever’.

The NCB’s development strategy for the south Wales coalfield in the early 1960s was based on concentrating resources into fewer, bigger collieries. Between 1960 and 1965, the NCB planned for annual investment to increase to £16 million, the second highest figure for any British coalfield. This reflected the geological importance of south Wales, which was by far Britain’s biggest reserve of special quality coal types. The Board employed around 88,800 in south Wales in 1960 but planned that 90-94,000 men would be needed by 1965. Consequently, it was one of
only four coalfields where the minimum output estimated for 1965 was higher than the 1958 output. In addition to the opening of new anthracite projects – the ‘super pits’ at Cynheidre and Abernant, plus Pentreclwydau, Blaengwrach and Cwmgwili – there was extensive redevelopment at more than eighteen collieries. This coalfield-wide reconstruction programme was expected to be largely completed by 1965.43

It is undeniable that this capital expenditure did improve the performance of the coalfield in the period 1964-70. There was further investment, in Deep Navigation, Merthyr Vale and Coegnant. Treforgan, a new drift mine near Crynant which opened in 1966, was one of the most modern pits in Britain at the time. By 1964, the best OMS figures were achieved by selected pits in the Swansea district, with Brynlliw attaining an output of 48cwt. A few years later, Cwmgwili had set an OMS record of 107cwt and become the most profitable mine in Britain, whilst several pits were now operating at an OMS of around 40cwt.44

In several important respects the ‘super pit’ strategy did not deliver the success that it was supposed to do, however. The ‘flagship’ collieries of Cynheidre and Abernant were very ambitious propositions: Cynheidre had been expected to produce one million tons a year of saleable coal (almost double the output of its six immediate neighbours), whilst Abernant, at a cost of £10 million, was one of biggest, deepest and most expensive collieries in Britain. One of the main problems they were to experience was a shortage of manpower, which affected output significantly. In 1964, for instance, Abernant had a workforce of 960, over 400 fewer than the required number. These difficulties were compounded by other factors: Cynheidre was plagued by geological hazards; at Abernant, management’s wish to get production started as soon as possible meant that retreat mining methods were not introduced, thereby compromising the pit’s long-term profitability.45

The single most conspicuous failure of the ‘super pit’ strategy was at Pentreclwydau, in the Neath Valley. Opened in the late 1950s at a cost of several million pounds, it was expected to be the long-term replacement for the older pits in the area. This did not turn out to be the case: Pentreclwydau was closed in 1967. A telling indicator of the underlying problems there occurred when it was announced that it was to shut. The unofficial movement in the coalfield decided to organise strike action against
this – only to be informed that the lodge had agreed to accept closure. A former collier at the pit reflected: 'I think men were glad to see that place shut ... There wasn’t a happy atmosphere down there at all. What had happened, you had The Rock colliery, Glyncastle, Aberpergwm, Rhigos, coming into Pentreclwydau – and they all had different customs. It was a job to weld them together'. Events at Pentreclwydau showed that the NCB’s failure to heed miners’ grievances could have serious implications for its whole strategy for the coalfield.

The single biggest problem facing the south Wales coal industry in the 1960s was the increasing numbers of men choosing to leave the pits and work elsewhere. As early as 1962, it was becoming apparent that this manpower drift meant that the coalfield was becoming less likely to hit the Board’s 1965 output targets. As Whitehead observed in 1964, ‘What started in 1959 as an involuntary contraction when the [NCB] ... closed seven pits, has ended up with a voluntary contraction because ... men ... no longer have any faith in continued employment in the industry ... It is the policy of the Board ... which has brought this situation about’. This exodus became even more serious after 1964. South Wales manpower levels declined at an accelerating rate: 1,800 overall left the industry in 1961, 2,500 in 1962, 4,000 in 1963, 5,000 in 1964 and 8,240 in 1965. Across Britain, between 600 and 800 miners a week were leaving the industry by 1966. Since those who went were more likely to be craftsmen and the younger workers, this manpower drift had a detrimental effect on the composition of the workforce. In 1962, the average age in the industry was 41, with 30 percent of miners aged over 50; by 1970, only around 12 percent of mineworkers were under 25, whereas nearly 40 percent were over 50 years old. By July 1965, Paynter was stressing that falling manpower was now the main threat to the coal industry – and that this could only be remedied by the government halting its closure programme.

The manpower drift in south Wales in the 1960s was caused by the growing uncertainty about the coal industry’s future and the increasing availability of more stable and less arduous employment elsewhere. There was a wide variety of choices open to ex-miners, including Ford in Swansea, BP at Baglan Bay, Borg Warner at Port Talbot, Metal Box at Neath, Cam Gears in Resolven, British Nylon Spinners in Pontypool, Hoover at Merthyr Tydfil and the Llanwern and Port Talbot steelworks.
These jobs were generally better-paid than coal-mining. As one colliery electrician later pointed out: 'wages ... hadn’t kept pace with outside ... and consequently men started to drift from the pits ... They would say, “why stay in the mines? There’s no money there”'.

NCB attempts to reverse the manpower drift were singularly inadequate. Recruitment drives and cinema adverts promising ‘a job for life’ with on-site sporting facilities bore absolutely no relation to reality. Another expedient, which did not really deal with the problem, was to persuade miners from other troubled coalfields to relocate to south Wales: for example, the influx of Durham men into west Wales in the early 1960s, to work in Brynlliw and Cynheidre. The proposal for retired miners to return to work on a part-time basis provoked outrage in south Wales, with Cwm lodge calling for the resignation of NUM president Sidney Ford in July 1965 when he appeared willing to consider the scheme.

In many respects, the ‘super pits’ policy exacerbated the manpower drift problem. Many older workings, some of which were far from being geologically exhausted, were closed specifically to transfer their labour to ‘long life’ collieries. Garngoch No.3, for instance, was closed purely to increase manpower at nearby Brynlliw. From a pit-level perspective, this policy could appear lacking in rationality. Pantyffynnon and Wernos were shut (in 1969 and 1966 respectively) for this reason, despite the anthracite shortage and the fact that they had been modernised successfully. The most glaring failure here was the case of Glenrhondda, in the upper Rhondda Fawr, one of the coalfield’s biggest profit-makers. In 1966 the NCB decided to close Glenrhondda to re-deploy its manpower to Cwm, despite warnings from the lodge that the workers would not accept this. The closure went ahead – and as, the lodge predicted, the overwhelming majority of the men opted to take redundancy instead.

During the Wilson government years, coal’s industrial exodus meant that the process of decline developed its own independent momentum. As Cliff True (an EC member) noted:
During 1964 ... [f]or the first time the Board decided to close pits because of a lack of manpower when hitherto the reasons had been either coal exhaustion or the pits were too uneconomical to work. Men are now leaving the pits faster than machinery can replace them ... One of the main reasons for men leaving the industry at this rate is the feeling of insecurity that has been engendered in the industry by the Coal Board with its policy of closing pits.\textsuperscript{56}

The report presented to the 1964 Area Conference argued that the policy of shutting pits itself led to further closures, due to the manpower shortage created by the feeling of insecurity within the industry: ‘Not only are pits closing falsely on economic grounds but, worse still, mining communities are concluding that the industry is finished and here lies the great danger’.\textsuperscript{57} Even high-productivity collieries could find themselves losing money – or eventually closing – because of a lack of manpower. This process inevitably raised questions about the viability of the entire coalfield. One of the clearest examples of this was the ill-fated Blaentillery Drift mine, near Blaenafon. This highly mechanised pit was scheduled to open in August 1967 – but did not do so, due to manpower shortages. Although the NCB preferred to think of the project as being ‘delayed’ rather than ‘abandoned’, four years later it conceded that it was unlikely that the pit would ever begin production.\textsuperscript{58} Ironically, by insisting that all priority in the south Wales coalfield be given to its designated ‘long life’ projects at the expense of many other collieries, the NCB created a ‘vicious circle’ of closures and manpower losses, in which even the success of the ‘super pits’ was far from guaranteed.

The South Wales NUM had a simple solution to the problem. As Dai Coity Davies, the Area’s social insurance officer, later explained, ‘[t]he way to solve a manpower problem is not to bleed one colliery to get another. The way to solve a manpower problem is to improve the conditions and wages of the men in the pit ... Men \textit{will} go into the pit, but you’ve got to recompense them properly for it’.\textsuperscript{59} In the Union’s view, this was the only way to break the industry’s cycle of perpetual decline. The 1965 Area Conference reiterated this point, with Whitehead stating: ‘What is killing this industry is its failure to attract manpower because the wages it is offering are miserable’. 

72
The inadequacy of wage levels remained a perennial grievance for miners throughout the 1960s. Real wages in the industry stagnated. Overall, after price movements, taxes and social benefits, the net income for an average miner with a wife and two children was 22 percent above the average for manufacturing workers in 1957 but two percent below the norm by 1969.\textsuperscript{60} The Wilson government’s incomes policy was a particular focus of resentment, with strongly-worded condemnations of it becoming a staple feature of Area Conferences. The incomes policy was a source of further controversy within the NUM in September 1966, when the NEC accepted the wage freeze, contrary to the National Conference decision to oppose it.\textsuperscript{61}

Throughout the period 1964-70 in south Wales, talk of action to improve wage levels simmered in the background, seemingly without prospect of boiling over. The more radical lodges in the coalfield – such as Coedely, Morlais and Fernhill – advocated industrial action to further the miners’ case. The 1964 Annual Conference called for the NUM to take industrial action in support of their claim for a 5s. /week pay rise for daywagemen, with the Area leadership striving to restrain the demand for a strike on this topic. The election of the Wilson government did not lead to a lessening of calls for wage improvements but it did generally mean an increased reluctance to consider action to achieve them. The 1965 Annual Conference called for weekly minima of £12 for surface workers and £13 for underground work; the 1967 Conference called for wages of £15.12.0 surface and £16.12.0 underground; in 1969 these aims were increased to £16 and £17 respectively. In November 1968, an Area Conference rejected NEC advice to accept a much-reduced pay offer from the NCB.\textsuperscript{62}

Regardless of these demands, the main trend within the NUM in the mid to late 1960s was for national ballots to accept whatever wages the Board were prepared to offer. On the occasions that the south Wales membership did oppose these minimal increases, they were outweighed by the more moderate Areas. As a collier who began work in this period later commented:
Well, my overriding memory ... of it all was in the Sixties was that the Union was the ones that wasn't prepared to upset the apple-cart in any way, because some of the wage increases we had then were, ... even by the standards of the day, were ludicrous to say the least ... [W]e used to always to accept it because we were persistently reminded that we were a subsidised industry, and if we rocked the boat, then ... it could affect the livelihood of pits. So I can never remember any industrial sort of agitation in them years at all.\textsuperscript{63}

In spite of this lack of progress on the wages question, ironically the 1960s witnessed one of the most significant achievements of the NUM in its history – the establishment of the National Power Loading Agreement, in 1966. The central feature of the NPLA was that, for the first time, daywages were to be paid to faceworkers. As its name implied, it was a spin-off of increased mechanisation: daywages were seen as more feasible than a national piecework system. Paynter was the key figure in making the NPLA a reality. He later recalled that certain sections of the NUM (particularly high-output Areas such as Nottinghamshire and also many faceworkers) were initially opposed to it, fearing it would limit their earning potential.\textsuperscript{64} However, by the early 1970s, everyone in the Union had come to realise the virtues of the NPLA: it enshrined the principle of equal pay for equal work and led to increased unity within the NUM itself. For South Wales, the principal benefit of the NPLA was that it meant a significant ‘levelling up’ in the basic wages of faceworkers, with the weekly rate increasing from £17.10.0 to £22.10.0.\textsuperscript{65} Equal pay at a fixed rate meant miners were less likely to take short-cuts with safety and fostered a more ‘team conscious’ spirit amongst them. Some collieries even experienced an initial increase in output following the introduction of the NPLA.

Despite these benefits, the NPLA was not without problems. Faceworkers in high output collieries, who had been on substantial bonuses, could see their weekly earnings drop from £45 to £22.10.0, which they understandably resented.\textsuperscript{66} However, these men represented only the minority, since most miners were employed in grades that received daywages before the NPLA was introduced anyway. Another initial inequity with the Agreement was that coalface craftsmen were not paid the NPLA rate, unlike the colliers with whom they worked side-by-
side. The miners' main concern about the NPLA in the later 1960s was that it did not bring immediate parity between all faceworkers in all coalfields, planning instead for a gradual harmonisation and a uniform national rate being achieved by December 1971. The south Wales miners argued that there should be immediate equality: at their 1968 and 1969 Conferences, delegates expressed disquiet at the slow rate of convergence, criticising the effect of the Prices and Incomes Act on this process.

The elimination of piecework had far-reaching effects on coal-mining industrial relations. One significant side-effect of a guaranteed wage for colliers was the removal of much of the unofficial powers of 'patronage' wielded by management and overmen within the pits. Ironically, the NCB’s policy of manpower transferral amplified the effect of this, by undermining localised traditions of deference within collieries. It was not surprising that many south Wales miners came to feel that the introduction of the NPLA 'was one of the finest things that ever happened' in the industry. 67

A standardised wage for faceworkers also affected the entire pattern of disputes within collieries. With piecework, by far the most common forms of unrest were localised unofficial strikes and walk-outs at particular pits (or even on individual coalfaces), due to disagreements about the price-lists by which men were paid. Under the previous locally-based set-up, as one miner recalled: 'You’d negotiate a price-list with the [NCB but] ... [s]ometimes you couldn’t clear the bloody coal, because you’d have bad conditions ... It wasn’t a good system ... So ... the disputes were always over ... local wages ... I think Will Paynter worked hard to get rid of that piecework system, which divided people'. 68 The NPLA shifted the focus of the wages struggle from pit-level to national level, reducing the basis for these frequent, small-scale strikes. As a result, the total number of disputes in the south Wales coalfield fell from 582 in 1965-6 to 130 in 1972-3 (the first full year of NPLA parity). 69 A more significant development for the future was that it strengthened the bonds between the various NUM Areas, creating the conditions for the unity which was the basis of the miners’ victories in the strikes of 1972 and 1974.
If the south Wales miners had very clear ideas about what should be done about wages, the question of absenteeism was a far more thorny issue. In 1964, absenteeism in the Area was 2½ percent above the national average. The situation worsened during 1965-6 and in 1969 south Wales still had the worst absentee record in Britain. Attempts by the Board to use this to explain the coalfield’s poor performance met with short shrift from the Area Officials. In September 1965, Whitehead stated bluntly: ‘My organisation does not condone unwarranted absenteeism, but to say that certain pits are closing because of it is a deliberate lie.’ In April 1967, Paynter caused controversy when he addressed a meeting in Bedwas and criticised persistent absenteeism. Nevertheless, Area leaders were concerned about the problem, with Glyn Williams publicly attacking ‘excessive absenteeism’ as ‘a source of danger and irritation to the regular workers’. Lodge committees also took steps to remedy the situation. Newlands lodge, for example, held pit-head meetings in January 1968 to try and improve attendance, as part of their campaign to help keep their colliery open. Another proposal to tackle absenteeism, suggested by Coedely lodge, was a plan to pay a bonus to men who attended regularly.

Whilst it might be easy from a twenty-first century perspective to condemn miners in the 1960s for absenteeism, the context for their actions should be kept in mind. Mining was physically arduous and potentially dangerous work, often in adverse conditions. Holidays were few and far between: the ‘miners’ fortnight’ in the summer, plus bank holidays (which did not include New Year’s Day at that time). The fact that pits seemed to be closing regardless of how hard men worked was a further disincentive for regular attendance. There was also the increase in the average age of the workforce: it was still conceivable that men of sixty years old (or even older) would be expected by the Board to work a full shift cutting coal by hand on the coalface. George Rees, who was a lodge secretary in this period, later pointed out the potential for injustice within this system:

Another thing which we had was the absentee committee. Having men appear before management, having to explain why they weren’t in work. And when you look back, you think, ‘Christ’. They were fetching a man of sixty-two in ... ’cause he’d lost work – and he was still clearing his stent of bloody coal. What right did we have to do things like that, y’know? ... [W]hy
should I sit in judgment on a man who've given his lifetime in the industry? Well, I wasn’t there in judgment, I was there to try to safeguard his job.  

Absenteeism was not so much a cause as a symptom of the underlying problems facing the south Wales coalfield in the 1960s.

The south Wales miners experienced a great deal of change in the day-to-day realities of mining in the 1960s, possibly more so than in any other equivalent period. At the turn of the decade, many collieries were being worked via methods essentially identical to those employed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Pit ponies were still used in some places and it was not compulsory to wear a helmet underground – so some older men continued wearing cloth caps. The majority of coalfaces were ‘hand-filled’, that is, colliers cut their own designated ‘stent’ (a length of approximately five yards) of coal by hand, using pneumatic picks – ‘punchers’ – and shovelling it onto a conveyor belt. There was a world of difference between old-fashioned and modern colliery workings. Ferndale No.5 colliery, for example, used horses and hand-filling, whereas nearby Maerdy had underground locomotives, mechanised coal-cutting (‘power loading’) and a pit-head baths. In 1960, Ferndale was the more representative of the average south Wales colliery; by 1970, it was the other way around.

An increasing level of mechanisation was one of the most significant features of coal mining in south Wales in the 1960s. The Area leadership supported this wholeheartedly, since it removed some of the physical hardship of the work and they believed it would help collieries to avoid closure. Only six percent of the coalfield’s output was cut mechanically in 1955, a figure which had risen to 36 percent by 1961. By the end of 1964, power-loading was responsible for half of total output in south Wales. The remainder of the decade saw this process continue, with mechanisation increasing to 80 percent by 1970. The ‘second phase’ of mechanisation in south Wales began in 1965, when a ROLF installation began production at Marine colliery. By 1967, with the NCB pressing ahead with the introduction of ROLF machinery and hydraulic roof supports, Glyn Williams was predicting that half of the industry’s total output could be coming from remotely-operated coalfaces by 1970-1.
The success of the mechanisation of the south Wales coalfield was readily apparent by the end of the 1960s but it had not been achieved without difficulties. As one miner observed: ‘in the beginning ... they were trying to introduce methods of working which were successful in the flat coalfields of Yorkshire and Nottingham ... And it didn’t work, because of the undulations in the geology of the south Wales coalfield ... But eventually ... they were designing mechanisation and conveyor systems to suit the difficult conditions’.\(^78\) There also remained the perennial potential obstacle of agreeing on a reasonable level of output for each mechanised coalface. Negotiations here revolved around the specific geological conditions, the relative strength of lodge and management at the colliery, plus various logistical considerations. Localised disputes about the establishment of power-loading norms were far from uncommon in this period: for example, at Markham colliery in October 1964 and Brynlliw in June 1965. In time, miners did come to appreciate the advantages of power-loading. This can be seen, for instance, in the threat in October 1968 by Fernhill lodge of strike action unless the NCB introduced mechanisation at their colliery.\(^79\)

For colliers, power-loading brought fundamental changes. In addition to making work less arduous, mechanisation also led to a greater reliance on teamwork within each coalface. It was not a completely unmixed blessing, however. Power-loading introduced a variety of new logistical problems: for example, the need to co-ordinate coalface advances with advances in the supply-road and tail-road, plus the extra work required to install all the relevant machinery in the face. It also made the coalface potentially a much more dangerous place. Whereas accidents on hand-filled faces were relatively minor, accidents on mechanised faces were generally more serious because of the presence of powerful machinery in confined spaces. As a Maerdy collier pointed out, ‘progress’ could seem far more ambiguous when viewed from the coalface: ‘The coal board go on about the improved conditions. It’s only the conditions [for] ... the machines ... that have improved. Conditions for the men are just the same as they always were – hot and dirty. In fact, conditions are probably more dangerous now because all the time you have to compete with the speed and efficiency of a machine’.\(^80\)
In a decade already characterised by depressing developments for the south Wales coalfield, the 1960s saw Valleys communities also having to endure three major disasters. ‘All of these disasters attracted massive press coverage, often bordering on melodrama. By contrast, rarely was there a mention of the miners who died in ones and twos at the coalface or slowly and painfully of dust diseases, at home, mourned only by their families and friends’.  

The first two of them were serious underground explosions at collieries, the worst in post-war Welsh mining history; the third struck a village whose name has subsequently become synonymous with tragedy.

On 28 June 1960, the worst explosion in south Wales since 1927 occurred at Six Bells colliery, near Abertillery, killing 45 men. Five years later, 31 miners died and 13 were injured in a blast at Cambrian colliery, near Clydach Vale, on 17 May 1965. Newspaper reports of the disaster made it clear that those who died had had no chance of survival: ‘The thirty-one took the full force of the ... blast in a coal face only 2ft 8in. high. The men were identified by the numbers on their lamps’. The official report into the explosion was published six months later, which led to the NCB moving towards improving methods of checking for firedamp underground and better procedures for testing electrical equipment underground.

On 21 October 1966, tragedy struck Aberfan when a coal tip on the hill above it slid, engulfing the local school and several houses. Of the 144 people who died, 111 were children. Shortly afterwards, Merthyr Vale miners arrived to lead the rescue effort. They were later joined by the emergency services and men from collieries throughout the region, in a massive rescue operation which lasted several days. Thousands of miners subsequently attended the funeral service for the victims of the disaster.

The subsequent Tribunal of Inquiry into the disaster found the NCB formally responsible, in that it lacked any policy about tipping and was indifferent to the need for safety measures. It noted that ‘much of the time of the tribunal could have been saved if ... the NCB had not stubbornly resisted every attempt to lay the blame at their door’.  

On 24 October 1966, for example, the South Western Division’s chief geologist, Robert Price, stated that the disaster was caused by a spring appearing within the tip, claiming: ‘As far as we can say no water course existed on the site.
before the tip was started ... I have never known anything like this before'. This argument was fundamentally flawed, however: the springs over which waste was tipped – which caused the slippage – are on an Ordnance Survey map of 1919 and a Geological Survey map of 1959. In addition to this, there had been a tip slide further down the valley (in which no-one was injured) in December 1939, whilst the Aberfan tip itself was reported to have moved in 1959 and 1964. In September 1966, Merthyr Vale lodge secretary Bill King noticed that it looked unstable, later recalling that it looked 'like a huge shovel had taken a scoop out of the heart of the tip'. He raised the matter with management at a consultative committee meeting and the following day they sent a team to the tip and used a bulldozer to shore up its base. It was impossible that the NCB could have been unaware of the potential threat which loomed over Aberfan. As the inquiry report noted, 'the disaster is a terrifying tale of bungling ineptitude'.

The NUM had warned management about the potential for a tip slide at Aberfan on several occasions before it occurred. However, the tribunal said that it would be unfair to blame it for doing no more than it did before the disaster. The report decided that '[t]he union lacked easy access to expert knowledge; they were completely reassured by men whom they were entitled to look to and rely upon; and they were doubtless influenced, though unconsciously, by the thought that their livelihood was involved'. The EC endorsed the report and called on the government to adopt its recommendations fully.

The aftermath of the disaster was compounded by the insensitivity of the Wilson government towards the residents of Aberfan. The Aberfan Disaster Fund, which received a total of £1.75 million, became a focus for fierce controversy. Government ministers failed to comprehend local anxieties for the removal of the remaining tips. When the government did agree to act, it extracted £150,000 from the Disaster Fund to assist the operation. This decision denied Aberfan the opportunity to redevelop fully and was a source of continuing local bitterness.

Following the events at Aberfan, tip safety understandably became a key concern for Valleys communities – to which the Board responded by introducing a new system of coal tip inspection and stabilisation. It was, however, a harsh irony that it required
a disaster of the scale of Aberfan to prompt the NCB to begin the process of removal and landscaping of the tips which had blighted the Valleys for so long.

Throughout the 1960s, sporadic small-scale strike action was a recurrent feature across the south Wales coalfield. ‘There was … *always* … a small strike on a local issue’ in this period, although no real prospect of any of these developing into major strike action. Fernhill, one of the most militant collieries, was threatened with closure because of the willingness of its workforce to utilise unofficial action. The single most likely cause of a local strike (in the pre-NPLA period) was the piecework pay-rate at a particular coalface – an example of this occurred at St John’s colliery, Maesteg, in May 1964. Another common grievance was excessive managerial ‘interference’ in the running of a pit, typically through altering established customs: strikes occurred for this reason at Penalita in September 1964 and Parc and Dare in May 1965. The ‘stay-down’ strike was also employed occasionally, as a way of highlighting a particular perceived injustice. At Llanhilleth in September 1967, nine men brought the pit to a halt in opposition to a ‘productivity deal’ which had duped men into accepting sub-NPLA rates; at Groesfaen, near Deri, the same tactic was used in October 1968 in support of the demand for a reappraisal of the Redundancy Payments Act.

Possibly the single most unusual stoppage in south Wales in the 1960s was the ‘swear word strike’ of May 1965, which centred on Deep Duffryn colliery, Mountain Ash. The episode began with an altercation between a young apprentice and a pit deputy. This led to unofficial action by the pit’s 650 mineworkers calling for the deputy and the apprentice to be moved to different sections the colliery, which duly occurred. NACODS members objected to this and struck in retaliation. Events escalated into a strike by the 3,500 south Wales pit officials, which halted production at 56 of the 85 mines. This was the single biggest coalfield disturbance in Britain in 1965-6, accounting for over 40 percent of total lost output that year. The miners themselves were opposed to the NACODS strike: speaking at an NUM Area Conference, Whitehead condemned it as ‘the biggest blunder since the charge of the Light Brigade’. By early June, intervention by the Ministry of Labour had forced NACODS to back down, ending the strike. The incident provides an illuminating
insight into the undercurrent of tension between workmen and colliery officials during this period.

The one area where most south Wales miners remained relatively quiescent in the 1960s was – seemingly surprisingly – the question of pit closures. There was a general acceptance of the NCB’s argument that obsolescent workings had to be shut in order to concentrate production on more modern facilities. Closures were seen as inevitable, particularly since there were still enough collieries for men generally to be able to transfer to work somewhere relatively nearby. Whilst meetings were organised to oppose closures, they failed to make much headway. After initial protests, many lodges offered no real resistance to the decision to shut their collieries. The main forum in which south Wales miners expressed the need to fight the industry’s contraction were the various Area Conferences held throughout the period. Even here, though, the dominant trend was for delegates to reaffirm the official NUM policy of not opposing colliery closures which did not cause redundancies.

This reluctance by the miners to take direct action to defend their industry was the product of a variety of factors. A key consideration was that many miners felt that coal faced inevitable decline in the face of increasing competition from alternative energy sources and did not want to do anything which they thought might hasten this process. Associated with this was the reluctance of some older miners, who remembered the dark days of the 1930s, to take any steps which might damage ‘their’ nationalised industry. The majority of the Union’s leadership in the 1960s – such as Paynter, Glyn Williams and Dai Francis – were of this generation, men whose experiences of earlier defeats had made them cautious and led them to believe that it was impossible for miners to achieve their aims through strike action. Furthermore, any decision about the Area ‘taking a stand’ against the closure of any particular colliery always ran into opposition from men whose own pits had been closed and who had transferred elsewhere, who were resentful that a similarly combative stance had not been taken in their own case. Press speculation about the viability of particular pits also sapped miners’ morale: in September 1966, the EC condemned this as ‘insidious propaganda’. All these coalfield-level impediments to action were compounded by the overall British situation in the 1960s. The south
Wales leadership felt that there should be a national campaign against closures; however, the main NEC view was that this was only a problem for a few Areas, who should therefore resolve it themselves. NEC inactivity was a product of its domination by right-wing Areas and was a real source of frustration to Paynter during his tenure as general secretary.\textsuperscript{95}

The so-called 'jeopardy procedure' was introduced by the NCB in the 1960s to warn failing pits that results needed to improve or they would be closed. Once placed 'in jeopardy', however, it was almost inevitable that a colliery would soon shut. In 1965, the Board categorised the Area's pits into three groups (A, B or C), corresponding to profitable long-life units, viable propositions and loss-making pits at risk of closure, respectively. By September 1968, all the 'C' pits had gone (apart from Caerau and Penllwyngwent, which were in jeopardy), together with three from 'B' and one from 'A'. Even collieries that were reprieved seldom escaped in the end. Glyncorrwg, for instance, was first threatened in November 1967 but survived until May 1970 before finally succumbing. Clearly, the jeopardy procedure had a strong element of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' about it – labelling a pit as 'at risk' itself increased its likelihood of closure. Abercrave colliery, for example, was scheduled for closure in early 1967: by the time a reprieve had been announced, in April 1966, 105 men had already left the pit.\textsuperscript{96} Dai Coity Davies (the Area's compensation agent) commented: '[t]he [NCB] policy of "placing in jeopardy" ... is nothing short of industrial blackmail ... When the threat of closure is imposed it has the immediate effect of driving away the younger life blood of the colliery ... Does the Board’s threat of closure intend to preserve the pit, or close it?'\textsuperscript{97}

Once the Board had announced a particular colliery closure, the NUM was entitled to put the pit through the NCB's review procedure if it felt there was a strong argument for it to stay open. The Area leadership only put forward such cases as it thought stood a good chance of success – even so, its efforts were singularly unfruitful. In 1966, for example, the Area appealed unsuccessfully against the decision to shut Albion colliery, Cilfynydd, particularly given that £1 million had been spent opening a new seam at the pit just months before the closure announcement.\textsuperscript{98} Rees Davies (Albion lodge secretary) was bitterly critical, stating: 'The appeals machinery is useless and the only purpose served is to effect a decent
burial at the Board’s Headquarters'. In January 1968, it was agreed to take the case of Ynyscedwyn to review; by the end of February, the NCB had decided to press ahead with closure anyway. Exasperation with this system led to expressions of no confidence in the NCB and calls from the south Wales miners for an independent review procedure. Unsurprisingly, Area leaders came to see the appeals process as a waste of time. Glyn Williams later reflected that ‘when you went up to London [to argue for collieries to stay open], you were just going through the drill – and you felt it’.

For most of the 1960s, the Area’s policy on pit closures mirrored that of the national NUM: closures were not to be opposed by industrial action unless they caused redundancies. Under this approach, lobbying parliament and demonstrations remained the main vehicles for protest against the closure programme. The policy was a recurrent subject of debate in Executive meetings but was probably a fair reflection of the majority view within the coalfield, since conferences at this time returned regular majorities in support of the leadership’s standpoint. Despite this, the Area Officials still felt the need to justify their stance. Speaking at the 1965 Annual Conference, Dai Francis argued that the leadership ‘need not apologise for the role it has played in the policy of containment, which had results because there were no men on the road [made redundant]’. As the decade unfolded, however, this became a more tenuous contention. In May 1966, for instance, 108 men were made redundant when Pwllbach was shut. In none of these cases did the Area leadership call for action, demonstrating that the fundamental point underpinning this policy was a pessimistic assessment of the chances of success of any prospective strike.

Not all the south Wales miners held this gloomy perspective about the efficacy of strikes, however. Beginning with the abortive campaign to save Nine Mile Point in 1964, sporadic attempts were made by some lodges to bring about a more radical policy. Throughout 1965 and 1966, the frequent discussion of colliery closures at Area Conferences was due to this pressure. The necessity of a more combative stance was often stated bluntly. At the 1966 Annual Conference, for example, Ron Saint of Coedely lodge argued: ‘If now is not the time to strike, when is it?’. In September 1965, a delegation of representatives from 28 lodges attended an EC meeting and called for a harder line against pit closures and the policies of the
Wilson government. The discussion of the topic at the 1965 Annual Conference saw several lodges speak out against the status quo. Arthur Owen (Groesfaen) said that he 'could shed tears on the Executive Council’s dilly-dallying over pit closures', whilst Charlie Blewett (Penallta) said that the Area Officials 'are sincere and able men but you can have a kind of prudent inactivity which is close to death'. Cyril Parry (Morlais) summed up the view of many of the radicals, stating that 'change is necessary if we are to stop the slaughter of pits in South Wales ... Either the Executive Council must lead or let the rank and file do the job'.

In the 1960s in south Wales, opposition to the closure programme was not led by the Area Officials but by groups of lodge activists, a loose network known as the 'unofficial movement'. One of the leading lights of this movement later reflected: 'Well, as far as the official leadership of the South Wales Area was concerned, there was no resistance whatsoever - campaigns, yes ... but no positive resistance to pit closures'. The movement centred on pits in the middle of the coalfield, traditionally the most radical region, with the Cwm, Maerdy, Fernhill, Tower, Coedely, Taff Merthyr and Lady Windsor lodges being collectively nicknamed 'the magnificent seven'.

The origins of the 1960s unofficial movement lay in the 'Shakespeare group', a network of activists who met in the Shakespeare Hotel in Neath. After the dispersal of this group in the early 1950s, the movement practically disappeared - apart from in the Cynon Valley, where unofficial organisation was retained under the aegis of the Aberdare May Day Committee. This committee built up contacts with activists throughout south Wales and the other British coalfields in the course of its May Day organisational work but remained in being because it did not present any challenge to the Area leadership. Emlyn Williams (miners’ agent for the Aberdare, Rhondda and Merthyr district) was a central figure in this movement. In December 1964, with EC permission, he set about organising a meeting to discuss the NCB’s pit closures policy.

The gradual growth in the influence of the unofficial movement in south Wales in the later 1960s was a reflection of increasing rank and file discontent. One activist later recalled: ‘There was a hell of a lot of turbulence through the Sixties ... In the
south Wales coal industry, there was a lot of pits closing, a lot of pits with uncertain futures’ – the unofficial movement reflected their frustration at the official Area policy at that time. Much of this unofficial activity revolved around the central Valleys, particularly the Cynon and the Rhondda, but other lodges elsewhere also participated: for example, the Garw Valley Joint Lodges Committee, or the Amman Valley grouping in the west of the coalfield.

The relationship between these unofficial organisations and the official Area leadership was inevitably an ambivalent one. They were not necessarily antagonistic towards each other, however: as Emlyn Williams reflected, ‘we were not a movement against the leadership … we were a ginger group trying to get some movement going in relation to pit closures and other matters in South Wales, particularly on wages’. These groupings were tacitly recognised by the Area hierarchy: it was not uncommon for full-time officials to address meetings organised by joint lodge committees. There was also an overlap in personnel, with Emlyn Williams, George Rees, Don Hayward, Emlyn Jenkins, Will Woods and Evan John all key figures in the Area’s structure and active supporters of the unofficial movement. Even so, the potential for tension remained. Glyn Williams later stated that he was not keen on the whole concept of unofficial groups within the Union, whilst Dai Francis felt that they undermined NUM unity. On one occasion, George Rees was threatened with expulsion from the Executive by Glyn Williams for attending meetings which advocated unofficial strike action. The role played by the unofficial movement remained a controversial subject. At an Area Conference in February 1965, after several speakers had called for strike action against pit closures, the Penllwyngwent delegate stated his view that the EC was the highest authority within the Area, not the unofficial movement in the Aberdare district. Similarly, several months later, Whitehead warned that there could be only one leadership in the coalfield. By late 1969, the activities of the unofficial movement were being criticised by both the Area Officials and an Area Conference, whilst Coedely and Cwm lodges passed votes of no confidence in Glyn Williams and Dai Francis.

The strategy of the unofficial movement in the later 1960s was to attempt to pressurise the Area leadership into adopting more combative policies. Its activities
were not confined to being a 'ginger group', however: on some occasions, it set about orchestrating unofficial strike action to try to spark a more militant opposition to colliery closures. This can be seen clearly in the campaigning against the closures of Rhigos in 1965 and Cambrian in 1966.

The opposition to the closure of Rhigos colliery in early 1965 was the first significant attempt at 'taking a stand' by the unofficial movement. Events began here in October 1964, when deputations from Rhigos and Glyncastle (which was also threatened with closure) met with the Executive in an unsuccessful attempt to persuade it to call for industrial action. Despite this setback, the unofficial movement began preparations for action over Rhigos. By January 1965, Mike Griffin (chairman of the Campaign Against Colliery Closure Committee) was predicting that there would be a week-long strike by 10,000 miners from 16 lodges in the Aberdare-Merthyr area. As it turned out, the only pits to take strike action were Penrhiwceiber and Rhigos. The reason for this climb-down was the NEC announcement that NUM policy was now to call for a complete stand-still on colliery closures until the Wilson government introduced a national fuel policy. George Rees (Fernhill lodge secretary at the time) also later claimed that the strike had been launched pre-emptively by Mike Griffin, before other lodges had been able to discuss the matter. In February 1965, an Area Conference reaffirmed support for the NUM policy of calling for the government to guarantee an annual coal output of 200 million tons – but voted not to oppose the closure of Rhigos and Glyncastle. Following the failed strike bid, Whitehead went to Penrhiwceiber and told them that they must submit to the elected leadership of the Area. The lesson which militants drew from this episode was the need for greater co-ordination if their campaigning was to be successful.

The second major intervention by the unofficial movement centred on the struggle to save Cambrian colliery in 1966. In August of that year, the NCB announced that the pit would soon close. The Cambrian lodge was determined to resist this, refusing to co-operate with the Board in arranging for men to be relocated to other pits and then going on strike in September 1966. An Area Conference was held on 15 September to discuss support for the lodge’s action, with a large contingent of strikers travelling to Porthcawl to lobby the delegates. However, even despite this
and the fact that the majority of the speakers were in support of a strike, the conference voted not to oppose the closure. Although this was a setback for the unofficial movement, it nevertheless proved that there were groups of miners active in the Area who were convinced of the need to confront the NCB over the run-down of the industry.

In addition to this campaigning work within their own Area, the unofficial grouping which arose in the central south Wales valleys in the 1960s was the key component in the revival of radicalism in other British coalfields. The Aberdare May Day Committee played an important role, with May Day celebrations being used as a platform to establish contacts in other Areas. This unofficial movement grew, building up its resources until it was able to establish the Miners' Forum as a national focal point for left-wing activists within the NUM. The Miners' Forum, which met in Leeds, became an important means of communication between left-wing elements (mainly from Yorkshire, south Wales, Kent and Scotland) within the different Areas. The aim of the Miners' Forum was to change NUM policy on wages and pit closures, via conference decisions. It realised that Yorkshire (the largest Area) would have to be won completely over to the Left for them to stand any chance of making this a reality. Left-wingers on the NEC (including the South Wales representatives) also met to discuss Union policy. Although formed in the late 1960s, the Miners' Forum would come to play a central role within the NUM a few years later, in the struggles of the early 1970s.

Despite the campaigning of NUM activists, the mid 1960s seemed full of gloom for the south Wales miners. The pit closure programme reached maximum speed in 1966-8 and the Area was faced with the prospect of inexorable industrial decline. Efficiency gains from mechanisation were outweighed by haemorrhaging manpower levels and increased absenteeism due to low morale, leading to falling output. In August 1967, the coalfield discussed the unwelcome news that the government intended to reduce its overall annual coal output requirement, from 170 million tons to 155 million tons. In September 1967, the NEC met Harold Wilson at the Labour Party conference in Scarborough, to call for a halt to the colliery closure programme. At the meeting Wilson - who was anxious to avoid adverse political repercussions – agreed to postpone all closures until the end of the year. Paynter
was very sceptical of this, calling the arrangement ‘nothing but window dressing’.\textsuperscript{117} This view was proved to be correct when the closure programme resumed in earnest in 1968. Between 1966 and 1970, the number of south Wales collieries fell from 77 to 52, with manpower dropping from 64,600 to 40,300.\textsuperscript{118}

By the later 1960s, it seemed to many miners as though pit closures were inevitable. As a result, one viewpoint which developed amongst them was that they should instead focus on calling for new jobs to be brought into the Valleys. The Area’s Annual Conferences in 1966, 1967 and 1968 passed resolutions calling for alternative industries to be established in south Wales. In May 1967, Glyn Williams welcomed the decisions to move the Royal Mint to Llantrisant and establish the National Motor Vehicle Registration and Licensing Centre at Swansea, demanding that they be augmented by a programme of government-directed factory building. A year later, he called for more new industries to be brought into south Wales to provide employment for former miners. In January 1969, the EC urged Minister of Power Roy Mason to reduce the rate of pit closures and bring additional employment into the coalfield.\textsuperscript{119}

The coal industry’s problems intensified after the appointment of Richard Marsh as Minister for Power in 1966 and the discovery of North Sea gas at roughly the same time. Robens thought Marsh ‘was too ready to close pits, a bit over-eager to usher in the white-hot technological revolution. He was going to go down in history as the Minister who brought in the North Sea gas’.\textsuperscript{120} Even after the drastic run-down in preceding years, Marsh claimed that ‘the coal industry is seriously encumbered by a lot of unprofitable capacity and that the sooner it can concentrate production upon the better pits, the greater its chances of providing any long term security for the miners’.\textsuperscript{121}

Marsh’s 1967 White Paper on Energy Policy consolidated the Wilson administration’s views on the coal industry, confirming the miners’ worst fears. Whilst national coal output in 1966 had been 175 million tons, the White Paper said that this would fall to 155 million tons by 1970 (with a total of 135,000 miners to be displaced) and 120 million tons by 1975.\textsuperscript{122} Paynter pointed out the folly of this policy: ‘Concentration and rationalisation were preceding at a manageable rate until
the Government called for an acceleration of closures in mid-1965 and forecast an intensive and continuous run-down to 1975 and beyond. He also made a far-sighted appraisal of the dangers involved in reliance on other forms of fuel, highlighting the safety risks from nuclear energy and pointing to the instability of supply of oil (due to political upheavals in the Middle East) and its adverse effect on Britain's balance of payments. Paynter and Robens calculated at the time that if the trends spelt out in the White Paper were to continue up to 1980, there would be only 65,000 mineworkers left in all of Britain — a staggering loss of 320,000 jobs over a twelve year period.

In these circumstances, it was unsurprising that the miners began to take a harder line against pit closures. In early November 1967, 4,000 mineworkers lobbied parliament, the first national lobby since the formation of the NUM. A few weeks later, the Area leadership discussed the White Paper with the Labour MPs for south Wales. Here, EC member Will Woods called it 'a complete betrayal of the trust we reposed in the Government'.

At the same time, the reaction to the crisis was causing significant shifts in official Area policy towards colliery closures. On 20 November 1967, the EC's left-wingers succeeded in convening an Area Conference and recommending to it a national strike against the government's fuel policy. By the time the conference was held three days later however, Britain had been hit by the major financial crisis which caused the devaluation of sterling. The government's subsequent statement that it would re-evaluate its fuel policy meant that the EC resolution now deferred any talk of strike action until the terms of this reappraisal became known. Nevertheless, the implications of this change in policy were readily apparent. At the Area Conference, speakers from several moderate lodges expressed concern at the new stance; the leadership justified it by stating that different circumstances required a different approach. The conference passed the EC's recommendation overwhelmingly, with Don Hayward expressing the majority viewpoint: 'If we don't stand and strike, then all we are saying is if pits close and men go to the road, there is nothing further we can do about it'.
The first effects of the reappraisal of the Area’s policy towards pit closures began to make themselves felt in early 1968. In March 1968, an Area Conference restated its opposition to NEC caution and underlined its support for a national campaign of ‘guerrilla’ strikes. Significantly, Glyn Williams stated that ‘if we are going to take industrial action, we should take it now, not some time in the future when we would be considerably weaker’, later adding, ‘I, too, believe we have reached the end of the road as far as talking is concerned’. Following this, it seemed quite possible that south Wales would lead a campaign of industrial action with the support of the Derbyshire, Kent, Scotland, Nottinghamshire, Durham and Yorkshire Areas – a prospect which alarmed the Secretary of State for Wales. The fact that this did not occur was due partly to the narrow defeat of the Conference’s proposals by a ballot of the Area membership, by 24,050 votes to 21,550. This result was a rebuff to the EC’s new policy but even here, the closeness of the margin of defeat indicated that opinions were changing within the coalfield. The 1968 and 1969 Area Conferences underlined this trend, accepting the need for strike action to defend pits from closure and conveying a rising tone of radicalism.

The increasing willingness of the south Wales miners in the later 1960s to consider taking drastic action to halt the run-down of their industry was mirrored by a growing bitterness towards the Wilson government. Relations started to sour around 1967: in that year, Minister of Labour Ray Gunter had a very hostile response at the Miners’ Gala in Cardiff to his suggestion that the miners should welcome the changes underway in their industry. A few months later, The Miner was equally scathing: ‘The government has shown an arrogance totally out of keeping with the finest traditions of the movement. This arrogance can be best illustrated by the government’s insistence (despite all warnings by the miners – and indeed, from the Coal Board) to accelerate pit closures’. At rank and file level, men began to see that government policy was the cause of the pit closures. This attitude was reflected even at ‘secure’ collieries: at Deep Navigation, for instance, one miner stated that ‘[t]he real villains as far as I’m concerned are the Government. They’ve let us down badly’. In July 1968, in his final speech to NUM National Conference before retiring, Paynter savaged the closure programme, saying that it had made him ‘a very bitter man’. Dedicated Labour supporters like Charlie Blewett viewed developments with dismay: ‘In 1964, ... [t]here was a great resurgence and great
hopes. There is no such feeling today and the Labour Government has brought the Labour Party near to heartbreak'. This disaffection became sufficiently pronounced for some miners to raise the possibility of withdrawing the political levy from Labour.\textsuperscript{131}

The most conspicuous backlash by frustrated miners against the government came in the series of shock by-election results in south Wales in the later 1960s. In Carmarthen in July 1966, the success of Plaid Cymru was a product of discontent in the mining communities in the Gwendraeth and Amman valleys. Even more strikingly, by-elections in Rhondda West in 1967 and Caerphilly in 1968 saw previously impregnable Labour seats being reduced to wafer-thin majorities by huge swings to Plaid. Glyn Williams described the Rhondda result as a ‘massive protest vote’ at the Wilson government’s closure programme.\textsuperscript{132} Following Labour’s narrow victory in Caerphilly, the party’s election agent there commented: ‘It is understandable that the miners wished to protest at the Government ... [T]he coal industry contracting ... is bound to bring hardship to individuals. They have a right to feel aggrieved about it’. Echoing this, a local lodge official said that ‘[m]iners feel bitter at pit closures ... Something drastic will have to be done before many vote Socialist [that is, Labour] again’.\textsuperscript{133} In both instances, the Area’s failure to get its nominees selected as the Labour candidates in what were still considered ‘mining seats’ was a further disincentive to miners to support the Party.

By this time, miners’ frustration at low wages and pit closures was becoming increasingly evident. The tone of the Area’s 1968 Conference, for instance, was one of simmering resentment. Reflecting on this period, one miner observed: ‘Bit by bit, on all sides, there was a spark ... of fightback ... against ... the Board, against governments ... Towards the end of that 1960 period, ... something was breaking out here and there. The resolutions to the national conferences started to get harder, firmer. It was a very slow growth. But you could see it. Looking back now, you could see how it was building up’.\textsuperscript{134}

This bitterness was given direct expression in two events during 1968. In February 1968, when the NCB announced the closure of Cefn Coed and Ynyscedwyn (despite a reprieve obtained as recently as October 1967) at the same time as Wilson was in
Wales, Cledwyn Hughes was worried that the Prime Minister would be met by a ‘mass movement of social protest’. In actual fact, Wilson’s itinerary took him through Cefn Coed, where he was met by a crowd of protesters. He decided not to stop and carried on, ‘to the amazement of the local people and the television crews and reporters’. Wilson did later meet with lodge leaders – but the episode did little to allay miners’ fears of government indifference to their plight. Another dramatic confrontation occurred in Blackpool in September 1968, on the opening day of the Labour Party Annual Conference. Here, around 200 south Wales miners stormed the conference in protest at pit closures, holding up proceedings and making ‘a terrific impact’ on the assembled delegates.

An important factor underpinning this revival of South Wales militancy was the impact of the younger sections of the workforce. In part this was their response to the broader political and cultural context of the later 1960s but it was also a consequence of specific developments within the industry. As one miner (who started work as an apprentice in 1959) later explained: ‘a hell of a lot of men left the industry at that time, to go to factories ... but the men that remained, the younger men then, were hell-bent on changing things ... I was a young man myself, y’know, and we had young ideas. And we weren’t prepared to be pushed around’. This generation of miners had never worked under the old coalowners and were generally less deferential towards management, taking at face value the belief that nationalisation meant that the collieries were ‘owned by the people’.

The changing mood of the south Wales miners in the late 1960s was exemplified by a transformation of the Area’s rank and file Executive Council in the elections at the end of 1968. One of the new arrivals onto the EC later reflected: ‘There did seem to be a want of a clearing out of the old school, then, and new blood coming in’. Six new members were elected, the biggest change in personnel since the Area’s structure was reorganised in 1933. Furthermore, three of them – George Rees, Emlyn Jenkins and Evan John – were Communists. These, together with Emlyn Williams, Don Hayward and Will Woods, constituted a strong left-wing presence within the Area leadership. The effect of this was discernible even at pit-level: one lodge secretary later recalled that ‘You had a change of heart among the Executive. It seemed to put fire in their bellies again’. The effect of this radical overhaul was
soon apparent in the call by the EC for an extra £5 a week for miners – an ambitious demand, given the low wages in the 1960s. Equally significantly, the militants in the leadership were able to strengthen the power of the rank and file EC members, at the expense of the full-time Area Officials and appointed officers.\textsuperscript{141} Whilst this caused minor ructions within the Area hierarchy at the time, it ensured a even greater level of democratic accountability within the Union.

In this context of bitterness and increasing radicalisation amongst key sections of the south Wales miners, the government’s ‘In Place Of Strife’ legislation – aimed at curbing trade union powers – was never likely to be received favourably by them. In February 1969, miners from south Wales and Scotland lobbied parliament in protest at the proposed legislation. Following on from this, the Area’s 1969 Conference called on the NEC to organise a one-day strike against ‘In Place Of Strife’. Cyril Parry (Morlais) spoke for the majority of delegates when he said: ‘If this White Paper becomes law, then ... we should go down to that Dorset village and dismantle the trade union cottages that are there in honour of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. This White Paper is [intended] ... to strangle the movement that gave birth to the Labour Party and the Labour Government.’

Although the dominant trend in 1969 for the south Wales coalfield was for an exacerbation of the tensions which had been apparent throughout the 1960s, it also provided one noteworthy divergence. For the first time during the Wilson government years, it was possible for a few pits which had been threatened with closure to avoid this fate – for instance, Caerau (near Maesteg) and Beynon (near Nantyglo). The two most interesting examples are Celynen South and Penallta, where miners used unorthodox strategies to avoid closure. At Celynen South, the lodge committee took the controversial step of siding with management in an attempt to reduce losses, becoming responsible for sacking persistent absentees. This was ‘hugely unpopular’ with the workforce at the pit and also within Area in general – it was, however, an important factor in the colliery coming off the jeopardy list in October 1969.\textsuperscript{142} At Penallta, the lodge ran a waste minimisation campaign and hired a public relations firm to help them argue their case. The story attracted the attention of the national press and the consequent boost in men’s morale at the pit helped them raise production sufficiently to escape closure. By June 1969, Penallta
had been saved.\textsuperscript{143} For Vince Court (lodge chairman in 1969), ‘the men who actually saved Penallta were the men working there ... It was ... the extra efforts of the men that brought us from the jeopardy position into a profitable position because within six months we showed a profit of about £250,000’.\textsuperscript{144}

One colliery which was shut in 1969 was Avon Ocean, Abergwynfi. In this respect, it was no different from dozens of others in the 1960s – what made it stand out was that it was the first time that the Area leadership recommended strike action in opposition to a pit closure. The Avon (pronounced ‘Afan’) was an unlikely candidate for closure: its OMS was considerably above the Divisional average, it had one of the youngest workforces in south Wales and a good absentee record. However, the Board wanted to shut Avon because it claimed there was no market for its coal – even though this would push local unemployment up to 15 percent.\textsuperscript{145} At an Area Conference on 18 June 1969 called to discuss the situation, Evan Jones (Ogilvie) said: ‘The report on Avon is ... most frightening ... because few pits in South Wales have outputs better than Avon’. Glyn Williams cautioned against a strike; however, he found himself in a minority amongst the Area leadership. In August 1969, urged on by its more militant members and galvanised by widespread discontent on other issues within the coalfield, the EC took the unprecedented step of recommending strike action against the closure of Avon. At an Area Conference on 20 August, however, delegates rejected the strike call by 49 votes to 32. Whilst some of those who opposed it criticised the unconstitutional nature of such action, probably a greater number were influenced by veiled NCB threats that pits which shut down to participate in industrial action might never be reopened. This defeat was underlined by a coalfield ballot held a few weeks later. In December 1969, the Area leadership reassessed its policy in the light of this experience. In the future, even despite having a radical position on many other issues, it remained conscious of the difficulties of securing united strike action in defence of a particular colliery. The closure of Avon illustrated clearly the deep-seated problems still facing the south Wales miners.

Despite the despondency caused by the closure of Avon Ocean, within weeks the coalfield was gripped by major unofficial strike action, on the question of surfacemen’s hours. In some ways, though, it would be misleading to differentiate
between these two developments, since in both cases the driving force for action were the group of lodges in and around the Rhondda. The subject of the strike was an emotive one, since surfacemen were the lowest-paid section of the workforce and were often men who had been disabled by industrial accident or industrial disease. In many respects, the surfacemen’s strike was a culmination of various tensions which had been building up over the preceding decade. As one activist in the strike later recalled:

[I]t had all been leading up to something. You couldn’t *squash* the feeling, ... it was a period of things were beginning to stir, then ... And of course, ... the *major* action was the surfacemen’s strike ... [T]hat was a *much bigger* issue ... in the coalfield. Although it burned out, in its place was a feeling that ... although we’ve lost that, that things *will* change. There was a lot of radical feeling after that.146

The question of surfacemen’s hours had been simmering away for several years before 1969, being discussed in Area Conferences from 1966 to 1968. In July 1968, Cwm lodge led protests at the NUM National Conference in Swansea, calling for a 40 hour week for surfacemen. Eddie Thomas, the lodge’s chairman stated: ‘A 40 hour week was one of the reforms demanded in 1868 but we have not had it yet ... [The NEC] are not even dragging their feet. They are anchored’. The Conference subsequently agreed to aid the surfacemen, calling for wage increases of 15-20 percent for them. That month, Six Bells lodge wrote to the EC, suggesting industrial action on this subject.147

The Area Conference in April-May 1969 increased the likelihood of a clash over surface hours. The motion which was passed – and which subsequently became known as the ‘Cwm resolution’ – was a clear declaration of intent: ‘This Conference demands that the hours of surface workers be reduced to 36½; failure to achieve this just demand by 1st September, 1969, means that *we strike* [original emphasis]’. Interestingly, not one delegate spoke against this. Ron Saint observed: ‘The Cwm Resolution contains the dreaded word “strike” ... The wages and conditions of our people on the surface are a scandal and it is only because we refuse to use the strike weapon ... if we don’t fight on this issue, we won’t fight on any!’ In August 1969,
the Area Conference that rejected action over Avon colliery decided to postpone any strike on this issue until after a lobby of the Joint National Negotiating Committee in September. South Wales miners were enthusiastic participants in the lobby but it did not really produce the desired results. In early October 1969, the Executive agreed to a request from a number of lodges for an Area Conference to discuss the issue. At the conference on 14 October, delegates backed EC proposals for an official national strike. However, a minority of delegates from the more radical lodges argued that this was insufficient, since Yorkshire was already out on strike over surface hours and that the Area should join them immediately. Ron Saint warned that ‘[u]nless we … take … action, then some of the best lodges in the coalfield will … strike … in support of Yorkshire and the surface men’.

The surfacemen’s strike was the biggest stoppage since nationalisation, heralding the return of militancy to the industry. This unofficial strike involved 130,000 miners from 140 pits across Britain and lasted from 13 to 27 October 1969. South Wales played an important role, with 16,000 men from 24 pits becoming involved in the days immediately following the Area Conference. Leading radicals later highlighted the spontaneous nature of this, with miners responding instantly to the strike call.\footnote{148} The strike was led by militant lodges from the centre of the coalfield, which had been at the forefront of the unofficial movement: Maerdy, Coedely, Cwm, Fernhill, Lady Windsor, Taff Merthyr, Tower, Deep Navigation and Wern Tarw (Coedcae) – although some pits from further west, such as Brynlliw, also participated. The strike was spread through appeals for solidarity and picketing of other pits, which met with mixed results; similarly, repeated attempts by Don Hayward, George Rees and Will Woods to get the strike declared official were also unsuccessful.\footnote{149}

Despite isolated setbacks, the main significance of the surfacemen’s strike was that the unofficial movement was able to channel a decade of frustration across the coalfield into decisive action on one particular topic. The strike’s leaders expressed the popular mood concisely. Ron Saint (Coedely) said: ‘The rank and file have been waiting for a call like this for a long time … [The NCB] do not want us to have a victory which might give us confidence in the power of militancy’. Cliff True (Fernhill, chairman of the strike committee) stated: ‘When you squeeze down a spring so hard it eventually explodes outwards … Morale amongst miners has
reached rock-bottom, with everyone afraid of militancy in case their pit is closed. Now men are realising that pits will be closed whether they strike or not and we might as well get the best out of it while we can. ¹⁵⁰

One of the most dramatic episodes of the strike occurred at an Area Conference held on 22 October, when militants attempted to get the dispute declared official. Their central argument was that the Cwm Resolution still applied. However, following the debate, Glyn Williams provoked uproar when he refused to allow a vote, on the grounds that the lodges’ vote on the subject a few days previously (which had supported the EC’s recommendation to call for a national conference to discuss national strike action) made any conference decision unnecessary. Afterwards, there were angry scenes as strikers mobbed him, calling for his resignation and also shouting abuse at the Area general secretary and vice-president. ¹⁵¹ Apart from making a good story for the local press the following day, this conference also provided an illuminating insight into the dynamics at work within the South Wales NUM by the late 1960s. Clearly, the striving of the unofficial movement for an immediate stoppage produced tensions between itself and the Area hierarchy, which felt duty-bound to stick to formal procedures. Nevertheless, this antagonism obscures the fact that all sections of the Area supported strike action – the disagreement was over how it should be achieved. The essential issue was one of tactics and democratic procedure, with the debate revolving around the respective roles of unity and action in taking the struggle forward. In either case, the dialectics of this process helped to revitalise the Union, making it seem more vibrant and powerful than before.

The final issue during the surfacemen’s strike was the NCB’s ‘package deal’. Although the focus of the strike had been surface hours, a subsidiary consideration was a general wage claim by the NUM. Consequently, the NCB bracketed together in one ‘package’ no change over surface hours plus – unprecedentedly – a concession in full of the NUM’s wage claim of an extra 27s. 6d. per week. The Board’s aim was presumably to deflect miners’ attentions away from the original issue: consequently, both the Area leadership and a Conference on 31 October 1969 were in favour of rejecting the proposed deal. Following campaigning against the package deal throughout the coalfield, the Area provided a quarter of all the British
‘no’ votes in the national ballot in November – although the overall result was a resounding acceptance of the deal.¹⁵²

Despite its ambiguous conclusion, the surfacemen’s strike provided the biggest wage increases in the history of the nationalised industry and put militancy back on the miners’ agenda in a way that it had not been for decades. Reflecting in May 1970 on its significance, Ron Saint said: ‘Some say that the last October strike was a fiasco. I would liken it to John Reed’s “Ten Days That Shook The World”. It certainly shook a lot of people.’¹⁵³ The unofficial nature of the strike was undoubtedly a cause of friction but it also gave it a greater significance – particularly in a coalfield like south Wales, where the dominant experience of the 1960s had been one of setbacks and closures. The dispute showed that industrial action could restore miners’ wage levels and popularised arguments about ‘taking a stand’ against pit closures – it was seen as a victory for direct action methods. Emlyn Jenkins later reflected that the surfacemen’s strike ‘brought about the solidarity … [It proved] that something could be done by striking – because surface wages were absolutely disgusting … [I]t did achieve at the end of the day what we set out to do’. For a collier at Coedely, the strike ‘started the miners to start to think … that we could take action and we could get some advances in our wages and conditions’.¹⁵⁴ This development was to have a fundamental effect on the south Wales miners in the 1970s.

Events of the 1960s provided an important development in the history of the south Wales miners, weakening significantly the faith in the belief that the nationalised industry would ensure long-term employment for them. During this decade, the NCB responded to the shrinking demand for coal with a far-reaching closure programme, with which the NUM generally co-operated so as to lessen the blow. Even though the mass transferrals of the 1960s were themselves a key factor militating against the development of resistance to this industrial change, the growth of the ‘unofficial movement’ in south Wales and elsewhere nevertheless both articulated and reflected an increasing sense of grassroots frustration. In an industry with an uncertain future, it became difficult for the NUM to play the positive role envisioned by its leaders when it had been nationalised. Consequently, by the end of the 1960s, the Area leadership had ‘learned not to ask their men to make sacrifices
for their industry and their country, and accordingly the "rank-and-file" did not disappoint them."\textsuperscript{155}

By the time the Wilson government left office in June 1970, a resurgence of NUM militancy seemed likely. Their experiences of the 1960s had led many miners to believe that only direct action could safeguard their livelihoods. Furthermore, Heath had based his election manifesto around a draconian Industrial Relations Bill and suggested that the Conservatives break with their 'one nation' image; by the same token, miners were happier to confront the Tories rather than a Labour administration. Consequently, the years 1970 to 1974 were to see a period of disturbances comparable with the 'Great Unrest' of 1910-14. The 'industrial pyrotechnics' of the early 1970s were the explosive culmination of the pressures which had been building up in the coal industry throughout the preceding decade.
Notes to Chapter 2

1 SWML interview with Dai Francis (AUD/131).
2 Bill Jones, Brian Roberts and Chris Williams, ‘“Going from Darkness to the Light”: South Wales Miners’ Attitudes towards Nationalisation’, Llafur 7 No.1 (1996), pp.96-110.
4 WM, 21 June 1965.
7 EC, 10 May 1966.
8 Ibid., 15 September 1964.
10 SWML interview with Brian Elliott (AUD/123).
11 Interview with Eddie Thomas, 17 March 2004.
12 SWML interview with Berwyn Howells (AUD/21).
13 Interview with Kay Bowen, 14 April 2004.
16 Interview with Dane Hartwell, 10 December 2003.
18 Interview with George Rees, 8 December 2003.
19 Interview with Ray Lawrence, 11 March 2004.
20 EC, 17 May, 14, 28 June 1966.
22 EC, 22 September 1964; ASC, 5 November 1964.
23 Manners, op. cit., p.91.
26 WM, 15 September 1964.
27 Emlyn Jenkins interview.
29 Miner, No.2, Mar./Apr 1966; WM, 5, 10 February, 17 September 1965; Times, 4 November 1965.
30 SWML interview with Will Paynter (AUD/105).
31 TNA, PREM13/1610; Will Paynter SWML interview; Lord Robens, Ten Year Stint (1972), p.170.
32 Ben Morris SWML interview; WM, 22 November, 13 September 1965.
33 WM, 26 April 1965.
34 EC, 13, 27 April 1965; ASC, 22 September 1965.
35 WM, 2, 3 July 1965.
36 Glyn Williams SWML interview (AUD/113); interview with Dan Canniff, 17 February 2004.
37 Miner, No.1, Jan./Feb., No.2, Mar./Apr. 1966; EC, 10 September, 20 December 1966, 7 February, 30 August 1967.
38 Miner, No.1, Jan./Feb. 1966; Will Paynter SWML interview.
39 SWML interview with Emlyn Williams (AUD/161).
40 Quotes taken from Ben Morris SWML interview; Dane Hartwell interview.
41 Bill King interview.
42 Interview with Glyn Roberts, 19 March 2004.
43 WM, 1 June 1960.
45 WM, 27 February 1962, 21 May 1964; SWML interview with Ron Williams (AUD/115).
46 SWML interview with Haydn Matthews (AUD/134).

51 Gordon Bartley interview.

52 Interview with Terry Thomas, 16 February 2004.


54 Terry Thomas interview; *EC*, 23 July 1968; *Town*, op. cit., p.38; *WM*, 17 December 1968.

55 *EC*, 15 February, 5 April, 12 July 1966; *WM*, 1 October 1980.


59 SWML interview with Dai Coity Davies (AUD/382).


61 *EC*, 13 September 1966; *ASC*, 26 October 1966; *WM*, 3 September 1966.


63 Interview with Ron Stoate, 2 December 2003.

64 Will Paynter SWML interview.

65 *AAC*, 1966.

66 SWML interview with Gary Woolf (AUD/112); interview with Mike Richards, 27 January 2004.

67 Bill King interview.

68 Dane Hartwell interview.


70 *ASC*, 5 November 1964; *AAC*, 1969; *EC*, 19 April 1966.


74 George Rees interview.

78 Dane Hartwell interview.
79 EC, 13 October 1964, 29 June 1965, 8 October 1968.
80 Quoted in *WM*, 30 September 1970.
81 Francis and Smith, op. cit., p.458.
82 *WM*, 17 May, 26 November 1965.
83 Quoted in *WM*, 4 August 1967.
84 *Times*, 24 October 1966.
86 Bill King interview.
87 Aberfan Inquiry Report, p.25.
88 Ibid., p.112; EC, 8 August 1967.
89 Interview with Jim Watkins, 18 February 2004.
90 *WM*, 27 April 1965; EC, 4 May 1965.
91 Ashworth, op. cit., p.300; *WM*, 27 May 1965.
92 *WM*, 27 May 1965.
93 SWML interviews with Glyn Williams (AUD/258), Ben Morris and Brian Elliott.
94 EC, 27 September 1966.
95 Glyn Williams (AUD/113) and Will Paynter SWML interviews.
96 EC, 5 April 1966, 21 September 1968.
97 *Miner*, No.6, June 1969.
98 EC, 26 April, 28 June 1966.
99 ASC, 15 September 1966.
100 EC, 2 January, 26 February 1968; *WM*, 23 February 1968.
101 Glyn Williams SWML interview (AUD/113).
102 EC, 10 May 1966.
103 SWML interview with Emlyn Williams (AUD/33).
104 Ivor England interview.
105 Berwyn Howells SWML interview; interview with Eric Davies, 30 January 2004.
106 Emlyn Williams SWML interview (AUD/161).

107 Glyn Williams SWML interview (AUD/113); Dai Francis SWML interview.

108 SWML interview with George Rees (AUD/140).


110 EC, 14 November, 2 December 1969; ASC, 18 November 1969.

111 EC, 13 October, 2 November 1964.


113 George Rees interview; George Rees SWML interview.

114 EC, 9, 23 August, 13 September 1966; *WM*, 13 September 1966.

115 ASC, 21 August 1967.

116 TNA, PREM13/1610; EC, 26 September, 2 October 1967.


120 Robens, op. cit., pp.163-4.

121 TNA, PREM13/1610.


124 ASC, 23 November 1967.


126 *WM*, 19 March 1968; TNA, PREM13/2769.

127 EC, 9 April 1968.


130 *WM*, 30 November 1967.


133 *WM*, 20 July 1968.


135 TNA, PREM13/2769.

136 Robens, op. cit., p.171.

137 *Miner*, No.18, Nov./Dec. 1968; *Times*, 1 October 1968.

138 Dane Hartwell interview.
139 Emlyn Jenkins interview.
140 Berwyn Howells SWML interview.
141 George Rees interview; SWML interview with Don Hayward and Emlyn Jenkins (AUD/381).
143 Interviews with Don Jones (23 February 2004), Gordon Bartley and Ron Stoate; Brian Elliott SWML interview; WM, 18 April, 21 May 1969; *Daily Mirror*, 27 June 1969.
145 EC, 28 May, 11 June 1968.
146 Dane Hartwell interview.
147 EC, 9 July 1968.
148 Don Hayward and Emlyn Jenkins SWML interview.
149 EC, 20, 22 October 1969.
150 Quoted in *WM*, 22 October 1969.
151 Ibid., 23 October 1969.
152 The overall result was 193,985 ‘for’ and 41,322 ‘against’; in south Wales it was 18,594 ‘for’ and 10,116 ‘against’. [EC, 2 December 1969].
153 AAC, 1970.
154 Emlyn Jenkins and Mike Banwell interviews (respectively).
Chapter 3  

Struggle: 1970-1974

The years 1970 to 1974 saw an explosion of industrial unrest amongst the coal miners of Britain, sending shock waves around the entire country. In 1972 and 1974, the NUM held the first national miners’ strikes since 1926 – and unlike in 1926, were victorious on both occasions. In 1974, the Heath government fought – and lost – a general election under the slogan: ‘Who governs? The government or the miners?’ These strikes shattered the prevailing myth of the energy industry in the 1960s, that Britain was no longer reliant on coal. The NUM, with the miners of the South Wales Area in the vanguard, was back in the forefront of the economic and political life of the country. Coal – and the men who mined it – had rarely seemed more important than in the early 1970s.

For the south Wales coalfield, the early 1970s began by following the general trajectory established during the preceding decade. At the Area Conference in May 1970, Glyn Williams (the president of the south Wales miners) stressed the wide variety of useful coal types mined in the region and pointed out the dangers of the too-rapid rundown of the industry. The coalfield was the least technologically advanced in the country, accounting for the majority of the 115 non-mechanised coalfaces in Britain in February 1971. Manpower drift was still a problem, with the total number of south Wales mineworkers falling from 46,300 to 40,300 between 1969 and 1970. The NCB spent £100,000 on a recruitment drive in the coalfield in 1970 but still failed to address the underlying reasons why men were leaving: namely, low wages and uncertainty about the industry’s future. Many faceworkers felt that the introduction of the NPLA in 1966 had led to a decline in their wages, whilst surfacemen could be earning as little as £11 a week after stoppages. Furthermore, the failure of Labour to commit itself to an integrated fuel policy and its subsequent defeat in the 1970 general election made a secure future for the industry seem a remote prospect.

Despite all this, changing trends in the global energy market meant that the early 1970s witnessed a renaissance for the British coal industry. Whereas in the 1960s
the governmental attitude was that coal was a liability retained only because of the social cost of removing it completely, events soon showed that cheap available alternatives could not be guaranteed. Following increases in oil prices, in February 1971 the NCB announced plans to boost annual output to 150 million tons. NCB chairman Lord Robens proclaimed: ‘From now on we are going to ignore the (1967) White Paper’s highly erroneous forecasts … The [NCB’s] “five-year plan” … means no more closures … It means job security for the years ahead’. Electricity generation was seen increasingly as the main market for the modern coal industry. In 1960 the CEGB was using 52 million tons a year but by 1979 power stations were consuming 89 million tonnes. Britain continued to depend on indigenous coal production, with about 75 percent of its electricity being generated in coal-fired stations.

Given the run-down of the industry in the preceding decade, the short-term consequence of rising demand for coal was a shortage. At the 1971 Area Conference, Glyn Williams commented: ‘In the present situation of coal shortage we in the Coalmining Industry, both the Union and the … [NCB], are entitled and have a duty to say – We told you so. We repeatedly warned consecutive Governments of the inherent danger … which would arise from the too rapid run-down of the Coalmining Industry [original emphases]’. He reiterated the long-held NUM view that the only real solution to the problem was to attract more recruits into the industry by increasing wage levels.

The changed energy market circumstances brought to an end the mass closures which had characterised the coal industry in south Wales in the 1960s. Glyncorrwg, which shut in May 1970, was the last pit to close in the coalfield for several years. Although Caeraw, Abercynon, Tower/Fernhill, Penallta, Celynen South, Taff Merthyr, Ogilvie, Beynon, Nantgarw and Morlais were all placed on the jeopardy list in the early 1970s, not one of them closed in this period – a remarkable development, in the context of the preceding decade.

The renewed prospects for coal in the early 1970s meant that it was possible for the miners to view the future with cautious optimism, for the first time since the 1950s. In the south Wales coalfield, the NCB planned a programme of increased investment...
at existing collieries and forecast an improvement in total annual deep-mined output from 11.4 million tons in 1970 to over 12 million tons within the next few years. Abernant was the first pit in south Wales to use high speed 'retreat mining' methods, whilst Treforgan's electronic remote control systems made it the most technologically sophisticated mine in the coalfield. Mechanisation levels in south Wales collieries had increased to 86 percent by 1971. Several collieries showed significant increases in output per man-shift (OMS): Penallta and Britannia reached 43cwt and 45.8cwt respectively in October 1970, Taff Merthyr and Marine had 61.5cwt and 64.7cwt in June 1973, whilst Trelewis Drift showed the full potential of retreat mining techniques by hitting an OMS of 162.7cwt. 

Despite the general pattern of improved circumstances for the south Wales miners, a variety of familiar problems remained in the background. The Area leadership was concerned that the NCB was not committed sufficiently to the regeneration of the coalfield: in April 1972, for example, the Board admitted to operating a policy of selective recruitment at certain pits. In April 1971, the government announced that it would not fund the proposed smokeless fuel plant at the site of Abernant colliery. Even in a relatively good period for the industry, the prospect of closures was never completely absent: Coedcae colliery, near Pencoed, and the Crown Multiheat smokeless fuel plant in Cardiff, were both shut in autumn 1973. Furthermore, by early 1973 the coalfield was faced with declining output and increasing absenteeism – and by August 1973 only eight of its pits were making a profit.

Further changes were at work in the organisation of the coal industry in the early 1970s. One of the long-term post-war trends been towards a rationalisation of the wages structure which the NCB had inherited from the private coalowners. The NUM were keen to establish the principle of equal pay for equal work, whilst the Board wanted a simpler system that led to fewer disputes. The most important steps here had been taken in 1955 and 1966, via the New Daywage Structure and the National Power Loading Agreement respectively. This process was finalised with the introduction of the Third Wages Structure in 1971 and the new Craftsmen's Agreement in 1970.
The first moves towards a Third Wages Structure dated back to 1968, when the south Wales miners called for a new system for those not covered by the existing national agreements. In June 1969, they learned that the NCB was looking at introducing a wage structure which would abolish the last remnants of piecework within the industry. Their main concern was that there should be parity within the scheme – consequently, an Area Conference in November 1969 voted not to cooperate with the NCB’s ‘trial run’ version, since this contained differentials. In May 1970, the Area Annual Conference called unanimously for immediate parity within the Third Wages Structure; the following month, the EC reaffirmed its support for a new structure, albeit one with greater equality built into it. Following the Board’s acceptance of the principle of standardised wage rates, however, the south Wales miners endorsed the proposed structure by a large majority. After further improvements negotiated by the NUM leadership, the Third Wages Structure was introduced in June 1971. The new agreement gave national rates of pay to the remaining 44,000 workers in the industry still not on daywages, thereby removing the last traces of piecework from the industry. This did not mean that the new agreement was beyond improvement. In May 1972, for instance, an Area Conference called for the abolition of the lowest grade – Grade C – of the Third Structure via its inclusion within Grade B.

The new Craftsmen’s Agreement emerged along essentially the same lines as the Third Wages Structure. Six craftsmen grades had been established under the New Daywage Structure of 1955 but this set-up was subsequently deemed inadequate by the men themselves. As one colliery electrician later succinctly expressed it: ‘craftsmen’s wages was rubbish’. This scenario, skilled workers on low wages, meant that craftsmen led the exodus from the coal industry in the 1960s. The Area leadership was keen to see this trend reversed. In May 1969, Glyn Williams told miners’ delegates that ‘We must … call for a substantial advance in the rates paid to craftsmen … which recognises the degree of technical proficiency required by them’.

The NCB’s new Craftsmen’s Agreement proposals were discussed by the south Wales miners in later 1970. Whilst the new scheme planned for three wage grades (essentially: fitters and electricians, skilled, and semi-skilled craftsmen), a minority
of critics argued that there should only be two. Nevertheless, the NCB offer for top-grade craftsmen working on mechanised faces to receive the NPLA rate was supported unanimously by lodges across the coalfield. Despite some reservations about the actual proposed wage levels, the Area’s lodges voted to accept the Craftsmen’s Agreement in December 1970. This was not the end of the story. As the 1971 Area Conference was well aware, there remained problems within the Agreement. These difficulties mainly revolved around differentials, both between the various grades of craftsmen and also between craftsmen and some categories of workers conditioned to the Third Wages Structure. Problems were reported in several pits: for example, at Abernant, Caerau and Deep Duffryn in September 1971 and Penrhiwceiber in June 1972. Area Conferences in August and November 1972 discussed the pay-gap that now existed between coalface- and outbye-craftsmen, with Terry Thomas (Brynlliw) reporting that ‘[t]here is grave discontent in the ranks of the craftsmen in this coalfield, and if this vexed problem is not resolved in the near future, the craftsmen will solve it themselves’. The grievance was felt sufficiently strongly that in May 1973 the Annual Conference called for industrial action on the issue, to begin in November. As it transpired, by that time the miners had become engaged in a broader struggle on the wages question.

Calls for more equitable wage structures in no way precluded campaigning for other improvements in day-to-day conditions by the miners. Surfacemen’s working hours – the issue that sparked the unofficial strike wave in October 1969 – remained an important consideration. The 1970 Area Conference wanted daily surface hours to be reduced to 7¾ (inclusive of mealtimes); the NUM’s JNNC was able to negotiate an eight-hour shift (inclusive of mealtimes) as of November 1970. In May 1972, the Area Conference made an ambitious demand for a six-hour day for underground workers and a 6½ hour day for surfacemen. Similarly, increasing travel-to-work costs led to calls for the NCB to off-set this expense. The outcome of national negotiations on this subject was the Subsidised Transport Agreement, which the south Wales miners accepted in September 1972.

Events in the years 1970 to 1974 marked an upturn in the militancy of the south Wales miners and an important chapter in their history. A concurrent change was the relocation of the headquarters of the South Wales Area NUM, from St Andrew’s
Crescent in Cardiff to the AUEW Building in Pontypridd. This move brought the Area Offices into the geographical heart of the coalfield, in a town whose Rocking Stone had been a meeting place for Valleys miners in the early days of trade unionism in the industry.

Whereas the 1960s had been characterised for the south Wales miners by a defensive campaign against colliery closures, the early 1970s saw them adopt a much more proactive stance, due to an increasing appreciation of the need to fight to defend the industry and working conditions within it. One area where this was most apparent was over pit closures. In December 1970, the EC reaffirmed that its policy was to oppose the closure of any colliery (apart from on grounds of geological exhaustion) whilst market demand for coal continued to exceed supply.\textsuperscript{14} This stance represented a clear step forward from the strategy of the 1960s, which was not to oppose any closures which did not result in redundancies. The 1972 Area Conference saw a further hardening of attitudes. Here, a resolution was passed which called for opposition to any closures which were not due to geological exhaustion – with use of industrial action to enforce this, if necessary. Speaking in support of the resolution, EC member George Rees said: ‘The myth of strikes decimating the coal industry has been smashed ... Over the years many people said industrial action would destroy the mining industry. We did not take action and the industry was massacred’.

An insightful ‘barometer’ of the rising tide of radicalism within the Area during this period is the combative stance adopted by some lodge officials known for their political moderation. A good example is Charlie Blewett, lodge secretary at Penallta. Speaking at the 1970 Area Conference about wages, he stated: ‘Let us say in cold blood that we would be considering strike action, and I know that delegates will applaud to know that Charlie Blewett in these present circumstances is advocating strike action’. This statement prompted Ron Saint, a leading militant, to observe that ‘when you can get Charlie Blewett talking about strike action, then I think we are well on the way to reaching our goal’.

This upsurge of NUM militancy in the early 1970s is inexplicable without an understanding of the context of the widespread bitterness in the late 1960s, which
was harnessed successfully by unofficial forces within the Union and channelled into causes from which the miners could benefit. At a national level, the Miners’ Forum – or Broad Left, as it was also known – was a very important factor, facilitating communication and co-ordination between the left-wing elements within the various Areas. The leftwards shift in the centre of gravity within the NUM in this period was due largely to the conversion of Yorkshire into a left-wing Area. Within south Wales, the years 1969 to 1974 saw the zenith of the unofficial movement – although its activities were not without their controversies. In the aftermath of the ‘surfacemen’s strike’, in late 1969 and 1970 several lodges criticised the unofficial movement (which centred on Coedely, Fernhill and Cwm lodges) and called on it to disband. Tensions were still apparent in August 1970: Glyn Williams told members to abandon the unofficial movement, whilst Area vice-president Emlyn Williams asked militants not to jeopardise the NUM’s new-found commitment to strike action over wages by any pre-emptive sectional action. The movement’s leaders remained unrepentant, however. Ron Saint (Coedely) dismissed suggestions that they should throw their weight behind the official campaign on wages, stating: ‘I would reject [the] ... invitation to come inside the Organisation and fight because you cannot fight effectively with your hands tied behind your back’.

The main strategy of the unofficial movement revolved around introducing a greater level of democracy into the workings of the NUM and pushing for wage levels which would attract more men into the industry. In terms of structure, South Wales had possessed the advantage of a rank and file Executive Council, subject to termly re-election, since 1933. In contrast, after they had been elected, full-time Union officials were in post until they retired. Consequently, at Area Annual Conferences in the early 1970s, the unofficial movement introduced resolutions calling for the re-election of all NUM officials every five years. In 1970 the resolution was defeated – but was accepted the following year on a card vote by 15,000 to 14,400.

Following the unhappy experiences of the unofficial movement in south Wales in the 1960s in trying to get strike action over colliery closures, by the early 1970s the Miners’ Forum had realised that the best prospects for united national action were on the question of wages. As one activist later recalled: ‘We had to build it up. We built it up as a result of forming the Miners’ Forum for the British coalfield, ... coming
back here, building up the Miners’ Forum in South Wales, sending out emissaries, particularly in pits we thought were doubtful. And I would say that it took us two years to build up the kind of force that we felt we would need for ‘72’. The growing influence of the unofficial movement within south Wales can be seen by comparing the strikes of October 1969 and November 1970. With the former, the majority of the EC was opposed to unofficial action; in the latter case, the Executive declared the strike to be official within south Wales, contrary to the wishes of the Area Officials. For the first time for nearly fifty years, the prospect of widespread strike action appeared on the NUM agenda. Retrospectively, both an Area Official and a rank and file activist could agree that the roots of the successful national strike in 1972 lay in the rising tide of grassroots militancy within the Union between 1969 and 1971.

A key issue facing the south Wales miners in 1970 was wages. At their Annual Conference in May 1970, delegates voted unanimously for a £5 a week wage increase for all grades, with weekly minima of £21 for underground and £20 for surface work. Significantly, the resolution – moved by Coedely – called for a national strike if these increases were not forthcoming. As Ron Saint commented: ‘The Resolution uses the word “strike” deliberately because my lodge is of the opinion that one hour’s strike is worth a year’s talking ... In the past when the miners struck it was the coal owners that chose the battle ground. The dustmen and many other groups have chosen their battle ground and fought successfully and achieved substantial increases in wages’. The seeming NCB reluctance to stick to the agreement to introduce complete NPLA parity by 31 December 1971 also concerned delegates sufficiently for them to support talk of strike action to achieve this goal. This south Wales wages resolution was narrowly accepted by the National Conference in July 1970. The official policy of the Union was now to call for wages of £20 surface, £22 underground and £30 NPLA, with the threat of a strike if these were not forthcoming – a scenario that could not have been any more different from the NUM’s cautious bargaining during the 1960s.

Although the NUM was formally committed to strike action over wages, the south Wales miners were keen to ensure that there was no backtracking. In September 1970, they lobbied the NEC in opposition to the NCB’s wage offer. The NEC agreed
that the offer made by Robens was inadequate, calling unanimously on the membership to vote for strike action. As EC member Will Haydn Thomas stated at the time: ‘Miners – nor their wives – certainly don’t want a strike, but without a struggle there can be no hope … Since 1959, we have slipped down the wages table from 2nd to 16th, and this is because we failed to struggle’. The significance of the national leadership’s changed stance was not lost on the Area’s radicals. Bryn Williams (Cwm) commented, ‘Who would want unofficial action when the [NEC] … are now unanimous for strike action. Our aim since last July has been to bring some life to this coalfield and Union where hitherto it was dead … There is going to be a struggle, and it will not be easy, but let us have the courage to face it’.19

The lead-up to the national ballot in October 1970 took place in a tense atmosphere. Heath had raised the stakes by suggesting the need for a showdown over wage levels in the nationalised industries, which prompted threats from NUM national general secretary Lawrence Daly of the potential for a general strike. Robens did little to pacify the situation, suggesting that the NCB might not stick to its agreement to introduce NPLA parity by the end of 1971 and calling on mineworkers to reject their Union’s advice.20 In south Wales, the Area leadership campaigned vigorously, organising pithead meetings across the coalfield to drum up support. The ballot result did not dispel the controversy. A clear majority of the workforce (55.5 percent) had voted for strike action but this was less than the two-thirds majority stipulated by the NUM constitution. There was particular outrage at this result in south Wales, where 83 percent voted for a strike – the highest percentage of any Area.21 On 29 October, Glyn Williams and Area general secretary Dai Francis (who were obliged to argue the new NEC line of acceptance of the NCB’s wage offer) found themselves overruled by the rank and file EC members, who decided to recommend that South Wales strike unilaterally. The following day, an Area Conference backed the EC’s recommendation for strike action as of 9 November.

The strike of November 1970 was much more broad-based in south Wales than the ‘surfacemen’s strike’ the previous year. Unofficial action pre-empted the arranged starting date: by the time an Area Conference was called on 4 November, half the coalfield was already out. At this conference, delegates voted overwhelmingly for a total strike in south Wales – the first complete stoppage there since 1926. By 9
November, 130,000 miners, mainly from south Wales and Scotland, had stopped work. On 12 November, a large contingent of south Wales miners – led by Emlyn Williams – travelled to London to ask the NEC to reject the NCB’s pay offer. At an Area Conference on 14 November, the EC’s call for the strike to be maintained and escalated was carried. Despite this, the collapse of support in other Areas inevitably limited the room for manoeuvre in south Wales. The decision by several lodges to return to work effectively signalled the beginning of the end of the strike and was a cause of local bitterness at the time. Although attempts were made to picket these pits, the Area leadership decided to end the strike in an organised manner. Consequently, Area Conferences on 19 and 21 November decided to return to work but to campaign against acceptance of the Board’s proposed pay offer.

One of the most significant aspects of the strike was the politicised context in which it occurred. Robens set this tone by alleging that it was the work of ‘avowed Communists’ in south Wales and Scotland. Whilst it was true that Communists were active in the NUM in arguing for a full implementation of the Union’s official policy on wages, they were by no means the only ones to do so and their arguments would have carried little weight if they had not been in accordance with the clear majority of miners. As Charlie Blewett (Penallta) observed, ‘Everyone who voted at the delegate conference at Porthcawl last week was mandated to do so. Most of those who voted are members of the Labour Party. There is no question of a small handful of bogeymen influencing events’. Ultimately, this ‘Red scare’ served only to close ranks within the NUM.

As it transpired, the strike was a controversial enough episode within the Area in its own right, despite the backfiring of Robens’s scaremongering. For those who saw the NUM principally as a national union, the strike was still an unofficial one despite EC backing. At Area Conferences held during the strike, this clash between National and Area loyalties produced some bitter exchanges. Mike Griffin (Penrhiwceiber) was one of the fiercest critics, labelling the strike a ‘fraud that has been perpetuated on the members’ and calling on the Area’s leaders to resign. In the weeks following the strike, several lodges condemned the way Glyn Williams and Dai Francis handled the whole matter. Here, the spectrum of views ranged from those who felt that the Area Officials had acted unconstitutionally in calling the
strike to those who argued that they should have campaigned more vigorously at NEC level for opposition to the NCB’s wage offer.26

Despite this conflict of opinions, the November 1970 strike was far from being a disaster. Even though it was not a national stoppage or an outright victory, it secured the biggest wage advances in the industry since 1947: an extra £3 for daywagemen, £2 16s. 0d. for craftsmen and £2 7s. 6d. for NPLA workers, plus improved conditions for surface workers.27 At the 1971 Area Conference, it was clear that miners had begun to think about the strategic lessons that could be learned from the episode: some delegates stressed the need for national-level action, whilst others pointed to the increased confidence within the Union as a result of rank and file activism and the virtues of sustained campaigning on the wages issue. In this respect, it provided a practical platform for further action. Emlyn Williams later observed: ‘the 1970 run-off – that was an exercise to see how far we could go. But what was encouraging about that was that South Wales was the only coalfield that came out under leadership and returned, although defeated, under leadership. They and the Yorkshire panel were the last two to go back’.28 Fundamentally, the strike highlighted the need to combine radicalism with discipline, thereby laying key foundations for the subsequent victories of 1972 and 1974.

The enthusiasm amongst the south Wales miners to fight for improved wages and conditions in their own industry was matched in the early 1970s by a willingness to campaign on wider socio-economic issues. The increasing unemployment in Britain was a subject close to their hearts, given their experiences of earlier decades. The EC protested to the government at the unemployment figure of 750,000 in January 1971, viewing with alarm the increase to 814,000 three months later.29 The 1971 Conference condemned rising unemployment levels unanimously and called for the return of ‘a truly Socialist Government’ as a solution to the problem. South Wales miners also took part in demonstrations against unemployment in 1971 in London, Merthyr Tydfil and Cardiff, culminating in a lobby of parliament in November 1971.

The Heath government presided over a period of intense labour unrest and polarised opinion along class lines far more than its Labour predecessor. Within this, the south Wales miners showed their solidarity with other workers engaged in struggle. In
January 1970, the EC publicly backed the teachers' pay claim; they also supported strikes by the dockers in July 1970 and postal workers in January 1971. Two UCS shop stewards addressed an Area Conference in August 1971; subsequently, the Area donated £1,000 and began arrangements for a regular levy from members to be sent to them. In addition to this, the south Wales miners gave financial support to the UCATT building workers' strike and made a donation to the British Leyland Occupation Committee in September 1972. Further examples of the Area's solidarity with other unions occurred in March 1973, when they offered support to NUPE, COHSE, TGWU and NUGMW in various local disputes and agreed to restrict coal movement in support of a strike by ASLEF.

A central reason for the upsurge of strike activity during these years was Heath's attempt to 'prove his strength' by taking on the unions. Although subsequent experiences of Thatcher changed popular perceptions about what a hard-line Conservative government looked like, it must be remembered that Heath was elected promising to take a more combative stance on industrial relations issues. Consequently, an Industrial Relations Bill aimed at restricting trade union activities had been the central plank of the 1970 Conservative manifesto. This policy provoked a strong union response, with few workers being more determined opponents of it than the south Wales miners.

In south Wales, opposition to the Industrial Relations Bill began in December 1970, when the EC sent representatives to a protest lobby of parliament. Later that month, an Area Conference discussed how best to combat the Bill, which several speakers described as being 'the first steps towards a Corporate State'. Whilst most delegates wanted a National Conference convened to co-ordinate industrial action by the NUM and the trade union movement in opposition to it, a minority of radicals called for immediate protest strikes. After this, the Area leadership sought to increase rank and file awareness about the threat posed by the Industrial Relations Bill by distributing information leaflets and anti-Bill petitions across the coalfield. In February 1971, 200,000 trade unionists (including around 2,000 Welsh miners) demonstrated in London against the Bill. The following month, the south Wales miners lobbied the TUC conference on 18 March on the subject. The 1971 Area Conference condemned the Bill and by November that year the NUM had de-
registered from it, in accordance with TUC instructions. In May 1972, miners’
delegates criticised the harsh treatment meted out to the TGWU via the Industrial
Relations Act and called on the trade union movement to defeat this legislation.
Events took a dramatic turn after the imprisonment of five dockers (‘the Pentonville
Five’) under the terms of the Act. In July 1972, a deputation from Wern Tarw, Cwm,
Coedely, Ogilvie, Maerdy and Fernhill discussed this matter with the EC, who voted
unanimously to bring the coalfield to a halt in protest.\textsuperscript{31} The following day, an Area
Conference called for a strike – although nine lodges had already decided to stop
work. Emlyn Williams told delegates: ‘It is the ultimate struggle and the question is
who will survive, us or ... this Capitalist Government ... We must be solid. We must
be militant, and we must be dedicated or else we are finished for ever’. As it turned
out, the prospect of a general strike prompted the release of the ‘Pentonville Five’
two days later. Although this development represented a significant victory, the
south Wales miners kept up the pressure on the government, calling for the repeal of
the Act at their 1973 Annual Conference and supporting the AUEW in its opposition
to it.

For the Area, an entirely different type of obstacle emerged in May 1971, when Joe
Gormley became the new national president of the NUM. Gormley was a
conservative from Lancashire; in contrast, south Wales had nominated Mick
McGahey (a Communist from Scotland) for president and Emlyn Williams for vice-
president. In the election, McGahey’s votes came mainly from the more radical
Areas: South Wales, Scotland, Kent and Yorkshire. South Wales voted for McGahey
by 21,035 votes to 6,127 – the highest proportion of any Area, apart from
Scotland.\textsuperscript{32} Although McGahey was subsequently elected national vice-president in
1973, Gormley’s victory meant that the most powerful post in the NUM stayed in
the hands of the right-wingers.

Despite the election of Gormley, the National Conference in July 1971 saw a
consolidation of the radicalism that had been developing within the Union for the
preceding two years. There, delegates called for significantly increased wages: £35
per week for NPLA workers, £28 for underground workers and £26 for surfacemen.
An important constitutional development was the conference’s adoption of a south
Wales motion to alter Rule 43, bringing the necessary majority for national strike
action down from 66 percent to 55 percent. The significance of this should not be underestimated: the actual ballot mechanics of the NUM structure could have a pivotal role in shaping political events. In 1970, for instance, over 55 percent of the membership had voted for strike action but had been denied by the NUM’s constitution. Without this change to Rule 43, the ballot result would have been insufficient for national strike action in 1972 – and thus the subsequent history of the NUM would have been completely different.

Reform of Rule 43 was one of several constitutional reforms that the south Wales miners pressed for in the early 1970s. A perennial complaint was the unrepresentative nature of the Union’s National Executive Committee. The Area’s preferred solution was for a more centralised and accountable NUM structure. In many ways, despite its name, the NUM was less a ‘national union’ than a continuation of the federalism of its predecessor, the MFGB – this gave the smaller Areas disproportionate influence on the NEC. Consequently, the 1971 Area Conference called for the integration of the smallest Areas with larger ones, to streamline the Union’s structure. A further proposal was for a national system of Conferences of Delegates, at which representatives from every pit would meet regularly to govern the Union. Whilst none of these suggestions were adopted at national level, they highlight the Area’s aspirations for greater democracy within the NUM structure.

Wage levels were the central item on the agenda for the south Wales miners in 1971. At their Annual Conference, an EC resolution was passed calling for a £5 per week ‘across the board’ wage increases – with failure of the Board to concede this to lead to calls for a national strike. Emlyn Williams expressed concisely the miners’ viewpoint:

[S]ome leaders would prefer wage negotiations without the threat of industrial action, but wage negotiations in the present climate to succeed must have teeth. Last year was the only year we made any real progress because of the threat of industrial action. The cost of living since 1970 has skyrocketed, and this new claim, if conceded in full, will only allow us to remain in the same position ... [W]e warn the Government on the issue of
[NPLA] parity [that] ... we see this as a deep rooted principle from which we are not prepared to depart. The failure of the Government ... to recognise this will lead to mass industrial action.

Following the National Conference in July 1971, the NUM’s wage demands were spelt out clearly; equally apparent was the refusal of the NCB, directed by the government’s incomes policy, to give serious consideration to them. This impasse prompted the NEC to introduce an overtime ban as of 1 November 1971 and arrange for a strike ballot. The overtime ban worked well in south Wales, reducing total output by around 15 percent during its first week of operation. More importantly, it made miners very conscious of their low rates of basic pay and prompted them to look to strike action as the next logical step if the ban itself did not produce the desired results.

The overtime ban sharpened the resolve of NUM members to obtain a better deal and consequently they voted for national strike action, to begin on 9 January 1972. Across Britain there was a 58.8 percent majority; in south Wales, 65.5 percent voted in favour. Both the NCB and the government were surprised at this, since they had expected Gormley’s influence to dampen down militancy. In fact, all Areas supported the dispute fully. Nevertheless, the press was convinced the miners would lose. The Daily Mail, for example, claimed that ‘There’s plenty of coal in stock ... A fight to the bitter finish would ... end in a defeat for the miners as abject as their last official strike in 1926’.

These over-confident predictions failed to appreciate the significance of the wages issue for the NUM at this time. In one respect, the miners’ wish to see full NPLA parity by the end of 1971 explains their sense of urgency. As one lodge secretary later recalled: ‘There is no doubt that parity in ’71 was one thing ... We were afraid we wouldn’t get there, very much afraid. I believe quite sincerely that unless that pressure was on we wouldn’t have had parity in ’71’. By the same token, national wage parity was itself a powerful factor in uniting the Areas into a coherent force fighting for a single aim. As George Rees later commented, ‘if it wasn’t for the [NPLA] ... we wouldn’t have had the national strikes of ’72 and ’74 ...[I]t was the [NPLA] ... that brought everyone together ... And that was the main reason why we
were successful … Because that everybody knew that we were fighting for one thing, and that was for wages'. 37

The NUM’s declared intention to strike in January 1972 gave the NCB over a month to improve its pay offer and avert a dispute, although the Board was adamant that it would not back down. Consequently, on 7 January 1972, an Area Conference backed the NEC’s call for a national strike – the first since 1926. However, as Ron Saint stated at the time, ‘When people compare the position of 1926 to now, they are misunderstanding the position. 1926 was a defensive action – in 1972 we are attacking’.

The 1972 miners’ strike occurred at a time when the Heath government was determined to force the trade union movement into submission, having defeated the Post Office workers and the electricity workers in 1971. Nevertheless, the NUM was convinced of the justice of its case. At the start of 1972, the basic weekly wages for surfacemen and underground workers were £18 and £19 (approximately £16 net pay) – but the government’s official subsistence level was also £18 a week. Emlyn Williams expressed the point concisely: ‘Fundamentally, this is a strike for a decent living wage … Today [the miner] … is well down the wages league. As his income has dropped in relation to other workers, the miner has more than doubled productivity in South Wales’. 38 The enthusiasm with which the South Wales rank and file – particularly the younger miners – responded to the strike call impressed both lodge activists and Area leaders. As the Area vice-president at the time later put it, ‘The miners were of the view they were in the gutter and they intended to come out of it’. 39

The miners’ main advantage in the 1972 strike was the scale and unanimity of their action. This provided the necessary ‘critical mass’ and also enabled the left-wing Areas to engage in successful militant activity. In south Wales, the detail of picket organisation was carried out by district-level committees, subject to overall control from the Area office. At Area level, Emlyn Williams and the miners’ agents allocated picketing duties to the lodges, on the basis of information gathered by Dai Francis. The scale of the operation was very impressive, with south Wales miners picketing targets in, for example, Didcot, Aberystwyth, Basingstoke and
Southampton. This task was made easier by a new tactic – the flying picket, an innovation made possible by increasing levels of car ownership. Mass picketing was another effective means by which the miners were able to drum up support for their cause.

Once the strike was underway, a central priority was to prevent unauthorised movement of coal. For the south Wales miners, part of this work involved monitoring and picketing docks as far afield as Plymouth. The key to success here was the support from TGWU dockers. One of the most notable victories was achieved in persuading Cardiff dockers not to unload two coal ships, the *Alain L.D.* and the *Heina*. These were detained for several weeks, before being forced to sail away with their cargoes still aboard. Lodges also persuaded local coal merchants to only make essential deliveries, to schools, hospitals and old peoples’ homes. As a result of this solidarity, the miners soon controlled all coal movement in south Wales. Ironically, for the rank and file miner on picketing duty, this complete success meant that the day-to-day reality of the strike could be ‘really boring’. As one Blaenant worker later commented, ‘In south Wales, once somebody said they were on strike, *nothing* moved … You’d do your turn at picketing – [but] what’s to picket? Nobody would move anything’.  

Having secured control of the movement of coal, on 13 January picketing operations were expanded to include Aberthaw, Llynfi, Uskmouth, Carmarthen Bay and Upper Boat power stations, Port Talbot, Llanwern and Ebbw Vale steelworks, and all other major coal users. South Wales miners kept up twenty-four hour surveillance on power stations in the coalfield and also the west of England. An important factor here was the secondary action by the NUR and ASLEF in preventing the transport of coal and oil supplies. Round-the-clock picketing began at south Wales steelworks on 18 January and was soon having an effect on output. At Port Talbot, Ffaldau lodge was able to persuade steelworkers to stop all coal movement within three days of picketing.  

NUM success in 1972 was due almost entirely to the physical solidarity of other trade unionists. This level of support meant that miners often found that they only needed to deploy token pickets. South Wales dockers agreed to ‘black’ coal imports
and in some cases were refusing to handle coal even before the appearance of NUM pickets. Lorry and train drivers did not cross picket lines, shutting off supplies to the power stations. Across south Wales, from Llanwern steelworks to Carmarthen Bay power station, miners found that they were well received by the workers who they were picketing. At Pembrey power station, an NUM ‘mole’ there telephoned the local lodges to warn them of any imminent attempts to deliver oil. As the Oakdale lodge chairman later observed: ‘In essence, it wasn’t the miners who won the strikes [in 1972 and 1974]; it was the support from the other trade unionists in the country’.45

Trade union solidarity generally made picket-line confrontations unnecessary – even the South Wales NCB praised the orderliness of Welsh pickets. Despite this, a few flashpoints did occur. In south Wales, most disturbances revolved around COSA, the NUM’s white-collar section. On 15 January, COSA joined the strike and picketed their fellow office workers, who were members of CAWU (the clerical workers’ union). CAWU had promised to respect picket-lines but did not uniformly do so. NUM members had some success in picketing out CAWU members at the NCB offices at Cardiff, Ystrad Mynach, Tondu and Pontarddulais, until instructed not to do so by the EC on 26 January. Some clerks were still being turned away the following week, however. Similarly, at Penrhiwceiber pit, tensions culminated in a confrontation between 300 pickets and police on 4 February over the prevention of NACODS work. This led to the officials’ union deciding that its members should not work for the duration of the strike.46

Safety work was a key area where rank and file activism overrode NEC instructions. Initially, the Union advised its members to continue safety work and to allow NACODS to do likewise. A few days into the strike, however, men at Garw, Ffaldau, Caerau, St John’s and Cwmgwili had defied this, taking matters into their own hands. By the end of January, ten pits in south Wales were completely without cover. On 16 February, an Area Conference called for a complete removal of safety cover in the coalfield and also a National Conference to discuss taking similar steps. Despite this, the Area Officials pressed for the maintenance of safety operations. Nevertheless, cover was not always as essential as it was made out to be: Lawrence Daly said that he thought the NCB was ‘grossly exaggerating’ the extent of the
problem. At Penrhiwceiber, for instance, safety men were withdrawn and the Board subsequently told Glyn Williams that the pit would flood. He informed Mike Griffin (the lodge secretary) that he intended to ask the men to resume safety work to save the pit – only to be informed that the colliery was not at risk and that the whole ‘scare’ was an NCB ruse.

The extensive support from the general public, particularly in south Wales, was a significant bonus for the miners during the 1972 strike. The Area leadership was keen to build on this: around half a million leaflets were printed and distributed as far afield as Swindon, whilst NUM delegations addressed factory meetings to publicise their case further. In the Valleys, some shopkeepers offered food to miners to help them through the strike period. In early February, Gelligaer Urban District Council was the first local authority in Wales to launch its own miners’ relief fund and also sent a message of support to the Area headquarters. This was partly because they were seen to be leading the fight against restrictive government policies and also due to miners’ willingness to ensure the continued distribution of coal where it was urgently needed. A further example of the strong links between the Area and local communities was in Glynneath, where miners spent their mornings during the strike chopping firewood to give free to pensioners and families without coal. Building on this level of public backing, the south Wales miners took part in several highly successful rallies during the strike. On 27 January, over 15,000 miners and their families marched through Cardiff and attended a rally addressed by Lawrence Daly. The Area was also well represented at a demonstration in London in early February and a lobby of parliament later that month.

Across Britain, the defining moment in the strike was the ‘battle of Saltley Gate’. Picketing of the Saltley Marsh coke depot to prevent movement of its coke supplies had begun on 5 February. Welsh miners on the picket-line there recalled that police there had a ‘very nasty’ attitude – so much so that the Maerdy colliery manager allowed miners to collect their helmets and pit boots, to protect them from police aggression. Events reached a climax on 10 February, when 10,000 workers from Birmingham joined the 2,000 miners – including a contingent of 200 men from south Wales – picketing and closed the Saltley gates at 10.42am. This was an important victory: when it was announced at an NEC meeting, Dai Francis recalled
that all the left-wingers present stood up and cheered. Despite this, Glyn Williams felt that the powerful symbolism of this event was not matched by its actual economic and strategic significance.\textsuperscript{53}

Following their success at Saltley, it was apparent that the miners had gained the upper hand in the struggle. An even more telling indicator was the onset of an electricity shortage, with the government announcing a State of Emergency on 9 February. Two days later, a three-day week for industry was introduced, whilst power cuts began throughout Britain. The NEC, backed by a decision at an Area Conference on 16 February, felt sufficiently confident to reject an improved wage offer from the Board. With the Heath government very much on the defensive, a Court of Inquiry – led by Lord Wilberforce – was also set up to examine the miners’ case. This heard evidence on 15 and 16 February and when its report was published several days later, it stated: ‘The British coal mining industry is in some ways unique ... [A] serious fall has occurred in the relative pay position ... [and] it is unreasonable to expect miners’ wages to be held down’.\textsuperscript{54} In addition to a variety of reforms in terms and conditions, the Wilberforce Report recommended substantial wage increases for mineworkers: an extra £5 a week for surfacemen, £6 for underground daywagemen and £4.50 for NPLA workers. The initial reaction to the proposals in south Wales was quite mixed. After negotiation on the details, however, the NEC agreed to the deal, which was seen as being a favourable one. In south Wales, an Area Conference on 21 February supported this recommendation. On 23 February a national ballot voted overwhelmingly to return to work, having been on strike for seven weeks. Although a minority of rank and filers in south Wales argued that the settlement was inadequate and a waste of a golden opportunity, the Area as a whole voted strongly for acceptance of the proposals.\textsuperscript{55}

The miners’ victorious struggle in 1972 sent shock waves through British political and economic life. Reflecting on the significance of the strike, Cliff True (Fernhill lodge) told Area delegates:

We have just written some glorious pages in the history of the miners. Greater perhaps than anything that has happened in the last 50 years ... The working class of this country will never be the same again after this victory,
and we have wrung more reforms from the Board and the Government in this short period than in the last 20 years ... This is not only the biggest victory in respect of wages, but it is for all the working class. 56

Speaking at the Area Annual Conference in May 1972, Glyn Williams called for Heath to be ‘driven from office’ and replaced by a Labour government committed to nationalising other important industries. Furthermore, the strike demolished one of the biggest myths of contemporary economics by proving that Britain still depended on coal for its electricity. Within the NUM itself, the strike’s success consolidated the rising influence of the Left. Less apparent, although no less significant, was the fact that Union leaders schooled in the lessons of the defeats of the 1920s and 1930s – men such as Glyn Williams, Dai Francis and Ben Morris (the Area chief administrative officer) – came to realise that a clash with the government did not lead inevitably to defeat. 57 A younger generation drew more militant conclusions. For Arthur Scargill, the Yorkshire Area president, ‘We took the view that we were in a class war. We were not playing cricket on the village green, like they did in 1926. We were out to defeat Heath’. 58

Ironically, within the coal industry itself, the strike opened up the prospect of enhanced stability and brighter prospects. The key factor here was the increase in miners’ morale: the strike showed the continuing centrality of coal and brought about wage increases which made it an industry worth working in. The combined effect of these changes reversed the manpower drift which had afflicted the industry since the late 1950s. Greater workforce morale had other, more unexpected side-effects – such as increased output and improved attendance levels. 59

Localised industrial disputes remained an intermittent feature of working life for south Wales mineworkers in the early 1970s. Some examples of this included: a work-to-rule at the Phurnacite plant, Abercwmboi, in August 1971; a strike at Nantgarw colliery over a shot-firing accident in January 1973; and a strike at Penrhiewceiber in October 1972 over the non-payment of overtime, a dispute which was not resolved finally until February 1973. These disturbances became markedly less disruptive to overall production within the coalfield in this period, however: total annual tonnage lost in south Wales owing to disputes fell from 209,000 tons in
1969-70 to 94,000 tons in 1972-3.\textsuperscript{60} This reduction did not reflect a decline in the willingness of the NUM in south Wales to struggle but rather a trend towards centralisation of industrial action into national disputes which had the potential to effect significant improvements in miners' wages and conditions.

The formation of the Wales Trade Union Council in 1973 was a further example of this increasing unity. The Area had made sporadic calls for the establishment of a Wales-level TUC structure since 1966 but the project had always foundered on the lack of enthusiasm from other unions. However, events during the 1972 strike made clear the necessity of a WTUC, when solidarity action within Wales during the strike was hampered by the TUC's archaic regional structure. In October 1972, the TGWU Wales Region agreed to the principle of a Welsh TUC and invited the EC to begin discussions on this subject.\textsuperscript{61} These two unions were the driving forces in establishing the WTUC. After some initial problems, the WTUC was formed in 1973-4. Dai Francis was elected chairman at the inaugural conference in April 1974, a reflection of the central role which the miners continued to play within the Welsh labour movement.

Inter-union solidarity was once again to the forefront with the Area's participation in the TUC's one-day May Day strike in 1973 against the government's pay policy. This strike was official TUC policy; consequently, Gormley caused uproar by suggesting that the NUM would not take part, owing to the recent ballot acceptance of a modest pay rise. Glyn Williams said he was 'amazed' at the idea that the miners would not follow TUC policy here, whilst the Area office was inundated with telegrams and phone calls from lodges protesting against non-participation.\textsuperscript{62} At an Area Conference in April 1973, the call for a May Day strike was backed overwhelmingly. As it turned out, the Area was the most enthusiastic participant in the one-day strike in all of Wales, with all fifty of the coalfield's pits shut and all 34,000 mineworkers out on strike. Across Britain, around 1.6 million workers struck – including 125,000 from Wales, one in seven of the working population. In south Wales, the biggest demonstration was the march of 6,000 workers (mainly miners) through Cardiff to a rally at Llandaff fields.\textsuperscript{63}
The struggle by the south Wales miners against the policies of the Heath government was a reflection of a recurrent theme in their history: their ready involvement in the life of Valleys communities and their willingness to lead broad campaigns on their behalf. This synthesis of Union and community is one of the central theses of the work of Francis and Smith – an argument which continues to hold a good deal of viability here, despite its currently unfashionable status in historiographical circles. Undeniably, the historical contribution of the south Wales miners to their communities was immense, both in terms of physical infrastructure (welfare halls, libraries, sporting facilities) and traditions of culture and self-education. This participation in community life remained a feature of the miners right down to the later twentieth century. Brynlliw lodge, for instance, organised an annual pantomime outing to Swansea Grand Theatre for miners’ children, delivered Christmas hampers to all retired members and arranged an annual day-trip to Tenby for them, in addition to paying regular contributions to local charities and organisations – and was by no means unique in this respect. In the Beddau area, the local lodge organised jazz and brass bands, pigeon clubs, darts teams, rugby and football clubs within the community, amongst other social activities. As a lodge official at Cwm colliery later observed, ‘In every community where there was a pit there was an active lodge. And … every part of community life involved the NUM lodge ... The NUM lodge was the community’.

In the context of the clashes of the Heath years, this affinity of lodge and community often manifested itself in the Area assuming a central role in campaigns on local issues not directly connected to the coal industry. This period saw a revival of the Welsh miners’ ‘traditional’ extra-parliamentary role in numerous struggles: for example, Merthyr Borough Council’s opposition to school milk cuts, support for opposition to the Housing Finance Act by Bedwas and Machen UDC, protests against the siting of gas storage tanks in Hirwaun, and the campaign against the closure of DHSS buildings in the Garw Valley. Less dramatic – but no less indicative of this symbiotic relationship – was the Area’s criticism of the inadequacies of arrangements to enable miners to buy their NCB-owned homes, and the call at its 1973 Conference for a major house-building programme to alleviate the shortage of affordable accommodation.
The year 1973 saw the South Wales miners celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the formation of the SWMF. One of the main ways in which the Area leadership sought to consolidate some of the cultural gains made by the miners was through the opening of the South Wales Miners’ Library, in October 1973. Established as a part of University College Swansea and continuing to operate down to the present day, the Library’s role was to maintain a miners’ forum for adult education and also to provide an archive for a wealth of lodge records and books from institute libraries which would otherwise have been destroyed once their respective pits closed. As *The Miner* reported the following month, ‘The library is intended to help forge closer links between the University and the South Wales community as well as being a testimony to a generation of miners fervently committed to improving the standards of working class education’.

Another important landmark in the educational work of the South Wales NUM was the re-establishment of its education courses, to coincide with the opening of the Library. These courses operated on an extra-mural basis, with the Board giving men paid leave to attend them. Miners who took part later recalled that they provided useful information on industrial relations, economics, mining law, safety issues and the Area’s history, as well as enabling men to become more effective trade union representatives. Unsurprisingly, the Area’s education courses had a strong political slant. Hywel Francis, then a lecturer at University College Swansea, was a central figure in establishing and running the courses; one lodge official later remarked that ‘[we] used to called it, facetiously, they were “Hywel’s Marxist courses”. Hywel didn’t like it [being called that], mind! ... But they were very good courses.’ In the view of another miner, ‘what it did, it did galvanise a lot of young people in terms of education ... [and] trade union activities ... [T]his radical tendency was always there ... [but the education scheme] helped to sharpen that strong radical tendency in the Welsh miners’. One key indicator of the scheme’s success was that the vast majority of those who attended it went on to become leading figures within either the Area or their own individual lodges.

The upturn in the levels of struggle by the NUM in the early 1970s was reflected in South Wales in a significant degree of change in lodge committee personnel across the coalfield. Eric Davies, a Brynililiw lodge official in this period, later commented:
In the Seventies, a lot of young people came back into the industry. And so, there was ... a lot of *young officials*, in lodges ... [T]here was that radicalism there. It was a tradition that young people had now taken up ... [I]f you look at some of the lodges around about 1970-ish, who were the leading lights – they were all fairly young people ... [T]here was a lot of younger people coming through. Tyrone O'Sullivan, for example. There was people like Dane Hartwell, people like myself, Terry Thomas, Des Dutfield ... [T]here was people like Ivor England in Maerdy, Arfon Evans. You can go across the coalfield and you can see the young element that was ... *revitalising* the Union in terms of pushing forward.\textsuperscript{68}

Within the Area leadership, the clearest manifestation of this revitalised radicalism was the coalescence of the official hierarchy and the unofficial movement in this period, with militants being elected to most of the senior positions in the South Wales NUM. One of the four new members voted onto the Executive in late 1971 was Haydn Matthews, a prominent activist from Maerdy. Leading members of the unofficial movement who were already EC members extended their influence, with Don Hayward becoming Area chief administrative officer in November 1972 and Emlyn Jenkins becoming miners' agent for the Rhondda, Aberdare and Merthyr district in October 1974. Emlyn Williams, Area vice-president, was returned unopposed as the new president of the south Wales miners in October 1973 – something which had not happened since Mabon (William Abraham) became SWMF president in 1898. Ron Saint, one of the leaders of the unofficial strikes of 1969 and 1970, stood successfully for a seat on the Council in January 1973, a decision which he explained on the grounds that the Area leadership was now advocating militant policies.\textsuperscript{69} The election of George Rees as general secretary in January 1976 completed this process. By then, three out of the four Area Officials, together with a sizeable minority on the EC, had all been active members of the unofficial movement. Broadly speaking, this was a clear indication of the rising influence of left-wing ideas within the Union's rank and file and the consequent success of those who espoused them. The most significant effect of this was that the leadership of the south Wales miners showed an increased assertiveness on behalf of their members' rights. At the same time, however, an irony in this triumph of the
unofficial movement was that it began the process of absorption into the official structure of the Union, thereby limiting its room for manoeuvre in certain respects.

At the same time as this process of radicalisation was unfolding across the coalfield, a simultaneous influence on the balance of power within the Area was the impact of the industry's increased mechanisation on the actual production process. In 1957, technical craftsmen (primarily electricians and fitters) had comprised six percent of the total workforce; by 1981 this figure had increased to twenty percent. Reflecting this, craftsmen came to assume a more central NUM role. Before the onset of mechanisation, it was practically unprecedented for them to be lodge secretaries or chairmen, owing to the traditional domination of the Union by faceworkers. By the early 1970s however, craftsmen had become leaders in many lodge committees. The career of George Rees exemplifies their rising prominence: in 1958, he was the first craftsman to be become a lodge secretary in south Wales and subsequently became the first craftsman to be elected Area general secretary.

The period 1972-3 was an unsettling one for miners. The gains granted by the Wilberforce Inquiry proved to be transitory, whilst the government continued to struggle with Britain's economic problems. Even Union 'moderates' felt aggrieved at the inadequacy of miners' incomes. By April 1973, the average miner earned only 88 percent of the average manufacturing wage – as compared with 93 percent when the Wilberforce Report was published, just over a year before. As NUM leaders were well aware, high wages were necessary to boost recruitment in order to fulfil the expanded tasks being set for the industry. At the 1972 Area Conference, delegates called unanimously for wage increases of £7 a week for underground and surface daywagemen and men on Grades B and C of the Third Wages Structure, and £5 per week for NPLA workers and men on Grade A of the Third Wages Structure. Emlyn Williams warned that if this demand was not met, the south Wales miners would expect the NEC to call for strike action in 1973. This resolution was subsequently adopted at the National Conference that year, making the official NUM position a call for weekly minimum rates of £40 NPLA, £32 underground and £30 surface.
During 1973, the South Wales NUM was at the forefront of attempts to ensure that the miners’ hard-won gains were not lost. In January and February 1973, many lodges wrote to the EC demanding that they press for the full implementation of the NUM’s wage proposals. An Area Conference on 20 February called for national strike action and the following month the Area leadership organised a lobby of the TUC in support of the wage claim. In March 1973, the NEC’s decision to ballot the membership on industrial action was followed in south Wales by a series of meetings across the coalfield in support of the official NUM wage policy. Despite this campaigning, the national ballot gave a clear rejection of the strike call. In May 1973, in his final Annual Conference speech before retiring, Glyn Williams observed that the miners had slipped from sixteenth to twentieth place in the ‘wages league’ and sought to explain why they had rejected strike action: ‘[i]n the present situation … [our members] decided to accept the wages laid down by law [that is, the government’s incomes policy]. But let the Government be under no illusion – the miners are determined … to win their way back to the top of the industrial workers wages league.’

In keeping with this stance, the conference at which Glyn Williams spoke saw the Area call for weekly rates of £50 NPLA, £43 underground and £34 surface, backed by the threat of industrial action. Speaking in support of this, Emlyn Williams pointed out the inherent politicisation of negotiations as a result of Heath’s incomes policy: ‘basically this claim is a reasonable one, but in order to obtain this figure we have to enter conflict with this Government’. Although in June 1973 several lodges wanted to campaign around the £50 NPLA claim, the Area endorsed the national decision to call for wages of £45 NPLA, £40 underground and £35 surface. In October 1973, frustration at the lack of progress in negotiations led the south Wales miners to call for an overtime ban. The NEC rejected unanimously the NCB’s wage offer of a seven percent increase and on 26 October 1973, a National Conference decided on an overtime ban as of 12 November.

The overtime ban soon made its presence felt – the day after its introduction, coal rationing was introduced for hundreds of households in south Wales. In the run-up to the ban, Glyn Williams had stated that ‘[i]t may well be that we could lose public sympathy this time, but … we have an energy crisis on our hands and to get more
coal the coal board must pay wages which attract men back to the pits'. This was a very pertinent point, since recruitment to the industry was still not quite keeping pace with the gradual decline in manpower levels. President-elect Emlyn Williams predicted a national strike early in 1974 and warned: ‘This is a mere prelude – a skirmish before we really go to town’. In January 1974, Dai Francis told the EC that the overtime ban had cut the coalfield’s output by 49 percent – an indication of the vital role played by overtime in the production process. Despite this, the introduction of a three-day working week and concentration on maintaining maximum output from oil-fired power stations by the government lessened the effectiveness of the ban. Consequently, the Area leadership called for an intensification of the overtime ban and arranged a Conference to discuss the calls from some of the more radical lodges for strike action.

During the overtime ban, Union leaders at both lodge and Area level in south Wales strove to obtain the maximum possible rank and file support for the struggle against the NCB and the government. Rallies throughout the coalfield in November 1973 were strongly in favour of lobbying the NEC in support of the wage claim, whilst a mass meeting of trade unionists in Cardiff expressed solidarity with the miners’ struggle. Within the Area leadership, Dai Francis called for a public relations ‘charm offensive’ centred on Cardiff and Newport: by early January 1974, 250,000 leaflets explaining the NUM’s case had been issued to the general public. The miners also enlisted the aid of the south Wales Labour MPs, who agreed to speak out in support of the wage claim. In January 1974, mass meetings were held in every district in the coalfield, whilst the NCB’s modest pay offer of an extra 40p-70p a week for mineworkers was dismissed by Emlyn Williams as ‘not even worth commenting on’. Despite inevitable NCB warnings that any strike would threaten some collieries with flooding, the south Wales miners reacted enthusiastically to the NEC’s decision in late January to hold a national ballot. As in 1972, the overtime ban concentrated miners’ attentions on the inadequacy of their basic wage and in the ballot there was a 81 percent vote for a strike. South Wales was the most enthusiastic for industrial action, with 93.15 percent in favour.

The run-up to the strike saw the government raising the stakes, with Heath calling a General Election in early February 1974, to be held three weeks later, under the
slogan ‘Who governs?’. The NUM was under some pressure not to strike during an election but the NEC decided to continue with it, a viewpoint with which an Area Conference on 7 February concurred. The same conference discussed picketing arrangements, whilst plans were also drawn up to ensure that the CEGB did not stockpile coal in the run-up to the stoppage. The days immediately preceding the strike saw an intensification of action, as miners grew impatient at the delay. Thousands of tons of production were lost in late January, with production halted at fifteen pits across south Wales. In early February, the coalfield was only operating on 30 percent of total output due to the numerous unofficial walk-outs. Predictably enough, the days before the strike saw attempts by the conservative media and business organisations to discredit the South Wales NUM – for example, unfounded allegations of ballot-rigging in the Swansea district and also a ‘Red scare’ by right-wing business organisations, which branded the Area’s leaders as dangerous extremists. Leaders from other trade unions rallied to the Area Officials’ defence, whilst Lance Rogers (the Rhymney Valley district miners’ agent) said:

I speak for all South Wales miners in defending the integrity and motives of both Dai Francis and Emlyn Williams in the face of the attempt … to bring them into disrepute. Thank God the miners have leaders, Marxist by training and understanding, who have led our cause and who are committed to restoring the miners to their proper place in society.

The second national NUM strike in two years began on 9 February 1974 and lasted four weeks. Having refused to compromise its pay restraint policy, the government announced a State of Emergency and a three-day week for industry, which some miners saw as unnecessarily provocative. For Allen, Heath’s actions were the key factor in politicising this strike: ‘The Government [in 1974] was in an untenable position. It intervened in the running of the economy on a large scale and in such a way as to touch the subsistence interests of workers at every important point so that trade unions could not take up even marginal matters concerning wages, hours of work and working conditions without offending Government policy. Yet whenever this happened the Government cried “constitutional crisis”’. Essentially, the whole exercise was a calculated political risk for Heath – but it backfired because he misread the general mood of the population.
The occurrence of the miners' strike during a general election campaign inevitably meant that it would be somewhat different to its predecessor in 1972. The most obvious effect of this was the campaigning by the NUM in support of Labour candidates in the Valleys; in return, Labour MPs addressed miners' meetings across the coalfield. Men from the Rhymney district also put in a lot of work on behalf of Tony Benn in his Bristol constituency. Despite the solid support for Labour from the south Wales miners, this election provides an insight into the changing relationship between them in the shape of Charlie Blewett, the Labour candidate in Cardiff North West. As it turned out, he was to be the last in a long line of 'miners' candidates' to stand in a parliamentary election in south Wales. His lack of success in 1974 was not due to a shortage of enthusiastic campaigning by fellow miners but was instead because the NUM no longer wielded sufficient influence within local Labour branches to be able to have their candidate accepted in any of the 'traditional mining seats' in the Valleys.

The on-going oil crisis was a very significant factor in the 1974 strike. In autumn 1973, OPEC had cut back production and quadrupled oil prices, making the government less able to rely on the main alternative energy source to coal. As one miner later observed: 'if you put it in a nutshell, I think we won '72 and '74 because of the shortage of oil ... I know it's not as simple as that, right. But there was a shortage of oil at the time – and full advantage was taken of it ... [O]il played a major factor, I think, at the time'. Indeed, Ben Morris later went so far as to claim that the miners would not have been successful if the price of oil had stayed as low as it had been throughout the 1960s. As it was, though, the continuing centrality of coal to Britain's energy requirements meant that voltage reductions and power cuts soon became necessary once the strike was underway.

Although the strike was similar in many respects to the 1972 dispute, Dai Francis believed that in comparison '1974 was a picnic'. There were none of the large-scale confrontations which had been a feature of the 1972 strike – and certainly no re-run of the Saltley Gates episode. Picketing was relatively low-key but the increased level of solidarity shown by other trade unions in 1974 meant there was even less need for any more than token NUM picket-lines. The NUR, ASLEF and
other unions took their own initiative in preventing the movement of coal stocks, whilst the steelworkers co-operated in reducing their output level to a practical standstill. South Wales miners also monitored docks further afield, in Bristol, Bournemouth and so on, to prevent unloading of coal there. The completeness of the stoppage prompted a Garw Valley lodge secretary to reflect that ‘[t]he 1974 strike was meek and mild. We had so much public support, I doubt if we picketed anywhere’ – and comment that this situation was very close to becoming a general strike.

In south Wales, as in the other coalfields, miners established their own services in response to social welfare problems caused by the strike. The Area leadership and the lodges provided coal for schools, hospitals and OAP homes and refused to collect payment for coal delivered to needy families. Miners volunteered for hours of unpaid work moving this coal, to ensure that it was carried out properly. Similarly, the Area took steps to ensure that safety work was done where it was necessary to prevent the flooding of a particular pit – over the course of the strike, this was carried out at Ogilvie, Blaenant, Morlais and Clydach Merthyr.

In 1974, the actions of the Heath government shifted the focus of the dispute from being purely a industrial issue to one of central significance to British politics. In this respect, circumstances acted to reinforce the NUM’s historical ‘vanguard’ role by placing them in the forefront of the confrontation. In south Wales, the miners’ awareness of the wider needs of the community, plus the active support of the trade union movement, ensured that they received the overwhelming backing of the public. The Area leadership nevertheless remained keen to give the maximum exposure to the miners’ case: at the Wales versus France international rugby match at Cardiff Arms Park, for instance, miners handed out thousands of leaflets to fans. On 26 February, over 5,000 people attended a miners’ rally in Cardiff, with such a strong belief in the certainty of imminent victory that the Western Mail said that ‘[t]he rally could have been a celebration’.

Despite its numerous parallels with the 1972 dispute, developments in policing methods in the 1974 strike prefigured the far more draconian measures which would be used against the miners ten years later. Surveillance and intelligence-gathering
were the clearest examples of this, with South Wales Police Headquarters establishing a special communications room to collate information on miners’ pickets. In the run-up to the dispute, Emlyn Williams told the Executive that ‘there is no doubt that the Police will take a harder line than in the 1972 Strike and will start to arrest some of our members’. The fact that this did not happen in 1974 further underlines the importance of trade union solidarity in ensuring the completeness of the miners’ victory.

As the strike rumbled on, the NUM’s case was submitted to a Pay Board inquiry for consideration. The miners’ contention was that faceworkers needed an extra £8.90 a week (a 24.2 percent increase) merely to restore the position won by the 1972 strike. The investigation of the Pay Board confirmed that miners’ wage levels were eight percent behind the average manufacturing wage and that they would require at least an extra £5 a week to bring them into line.

The election of a minority Labour government in early March 1974 led to a speedy resolution to the dispute, along with a promise to repeal the Industrial Relations Act and return to free collective bargaining. The NEC accepted the new proposals: £32 per week for surfacemen, £36 for underground workers and £45 for NPLA, with an extra 50p a shift for Craftsmen Grade IA elsewhere below ground and on non-mechanised faces, and a number of benefits regarding holidays and shift allowances. A South Wales Conference on 8 March agreed to the NEC’s decision, despite some complaints that the award was not quite what the miners had campaigned for and would not be backdated to November 1973. A ballot of the Area’s membership voted overwhelmingly for acceptance, by 27,075 votes to 1,466. In the immediate aftermath of the strike, Emlyn Williams called it ‘a wonderful victory. It has brought down the Tory Government, and has been the means of introducing free collective bargaining’. Speaking at the same conference, Dai Coity Davies (head of the Area’s Social Insurance department) reiterated this point and made a prescient observation:

This was a brilliant victory both industrially and politically. I want to hold … the Government to the promise that has been made – ‘The Miners made it possible to elect a Labour Government and the Labour Government will never forget the Miners for this’ … I would like to sound a note of warning.
Coal is important, and we are, at the moment, riding on the crest of a wave, but in less than ten years there will be oil made available and, I say to this Conference – take advantage while the sun shines.

The strikes of 1972 and 1974 had important consequences for both the NUM and British politics in general. Within the Union, success compounded both left-wing optimism and right-wing cautiousness. Gormley’s opinion was that ‘success led to an attitude of mind ... where people, the moment they don’t get what they want, think and talk of strike action immediately’; for Scargill, ‘[h]ere was the living proof that the working class had only to flex its muscles and it could bring governments, employers, society to a total standstill’. As Ashworth notes, the strikes made the miners more radical, for several reasons. Firstly, they were successful when everyone else believed they would fail, with dire results for the industry. This gave strikes a new prestige. Systematic use of mobile mass pickets increased the ability of miners to achieve dramatic results, as at Saltley in 1972. Additionally, the government took the key step of politicising the strikes, particularly by calling an election over the issue in 1974 – whereas the main catalysts for action had originally been miners’ concerns over wage levels. Henceforth the idea arose that the miners could now not only win a strike but also topple a government. Within Labour, the miners’ victories gave an impetus to increased Left demands for more radical policies. However, the Conservatives did not forget their defeats in 1972 and 1974. After their fall from office, the perceived need for an aggressive solution to ‘the trade union problem’ became an important undercurrent in Tory thinking. As one collier reflected: ‘I think the damage was done for later years by certain parties who directly believed that we had pulled the government down. It was not our intention to pull the government down – our intention was to increase our wages’.

In many respects, the years 1970 to 1974 were one of the most successful periods of the post-1947 history of the coal industry for the miners of south Wales. During the term of the Heath government, coal was reasserted as the most important fuel source for the British economy, as result of both global increases in oil prices and also the practical example of the 1972 and 1974 strikes. The era of mass pit closures of the 1960s gave way to a cautious optimism about the future prospects for coal. Within the NUM itself, these years saw the realisation of developments which originated in
the previous period: a change in personnel and policies within the Union as a result of the radicalism caused by discontent at low wages and colliery closures. In south Wales, the 1970 strike was an example of this increasing rank and file ferment, which was sufficient to prompt the EC to give official support for 'unofficial' strike action. In the early 1970s, reform of the wage structure in the industry (particularly the NPLA, but also the Third Wages Structure and the Craftsmen’s Agreement) had the inadvertent effect of drawing the Areas closer together, by providing the miners with a tangible focus for their aims. The combined effect of these developments, increased militancy and greater unity, was to open up to the NUM the prospect of taking decisive national action in support of clearly-defined goals – something which had never seemed likely throughout the 1960s. All these specific factors were given increased significance by the confrontational industrial relations policy of the Heath government, which politicised the miners’ dispute and pushed them into reasserting their ‘traditional’ historical role as the vanguard of the trade union movement. In this context, it was unsurprising that the history of the south Wales miners in this period was characterised by struggle and radicalisation.
Notes to Chapter 3

1 EC, 23 February 1971.
3 WM, 30 September 1970.
8 Ibid., 30 June 1970.
9 ASC, 8, 16 March 1971; EC, 6 April 1971.
12 EC, 6, 20 October, 29 December 1970.
13 ASC, 31 August 1972; EC, 12 September 1972.
14 EC, 29 December 1970.
17 SWML interview with Emlyn Williams (AUD/33).
18 SWML interviews with Dai Francis (AUD/131) and Haydn Matthews (AUD/134).
19 ASC, 23 September 1970.
20 WM, 26, 29 September 1970; EC, 6, 29 October 1970.
21 WM, 24 October 1970.
22 EC, 10 November 1970.
24 WM, 10 November 1970.
26 EC, 7, 24 November, 15, 29 December 1970.
28 Emlyn Williams SWML interview.
29 EC, 26 January, 20 April 1971.

31 EC, 24 July 1972.

32 **Miner**, No.29, June 1971.

33 EC, 9 November 1971.

34 **WM**, 3 December 1971.


36 SWML interview with Berwyn Howells (AUD/21).

37 Interview with George Rees, 8 December 2003.


39 Emlyn Williams SWML interview.

40 Dai Francis SWML interview; EC, 17 January 1972.


42 Interview with Phil Bowen, 26 March 2004.


44 Interview with Howard Jones, 10 February 2004.


48 SWML interview with Glyn Williams (AUD/113).


51 Interviews with Bill King (4 March 2004), Glyn Roberts (19 March 2004) and Tyrone O'Sullivan (22 March 2004); Haydn Matthews SWML interview.


53 Dai Francis and Glyn Williams (AUD/258) SWML interviews.

54 Quoted in *Times*, 19 February 1972.


56 ASC, 21 February 1972.

57 Glyn Williams (AUD/258), Ben Morris (AUD/22) and Haydn Matthews SWML interviews.


61 EC, 10 October 1972.


64 Interviews with Eric Davies (30 January 2004) and Terry Thomas (16 February 2004).

65 Interview with Billy Liddon, 1 April 2004.

66 EC and Area minutes, 1970–4 passim.

67 Quotes taken from (respectively) interviews with Dane Hartwell (10 December 2003) and Eric Davies.

68 Eric Davies interview.


72 ASC, 20 December 1972.


74 ASC, 18 October 1973.


81 Ibid., 31 January, 2, 5 February 1974.

82 Allen, op. cit., p.244.


84 Dane Hartwell interview.
85 Ben Morris SWML interview.
86 Quoted in Francis and Smith, op. cit., p.477.
88 Berwyn Howells SWML interview.
90 *WM*, 12 February 1974.
91 EC, 6 February 1974.
94 EC, 12 March 1974; *WM*, 4 March 1974.
97 Glyn Roberts interview.
Chapter 4

Interlude: 1974-1979

In the history of the south Wales miners, the years 1974 to 1979 represent something of an interlude between their epic clashes with the Conservative governments of Heath and Thatcher. Continuing trends in the energy industry and the influence of the NUM (as underlined by the strikes of 1972 and 1974) combined to ensure that this period saw coal consolidate its centrality to the British economy. Within this context of progress the miners were able to win several reforms, which improved conditions in what was still an arduous and dangerous industry. This was undoubtedly one of the best times in the whole post-war era in which to be a mineworker. Despite this seemingly uncomplicated optimism, the term of the Labour governments in the 1970s saw several paradoxes. After the victorious strike of 1974 rank and file radicalism was at its most widespread, yet there was no major clash with either the government or the National Coal Board. In the later 1970s, this militancy saw left-wingers build upon their prominence within the South Wales Area and the NUM as a whole, whilst at the same time conservative forces were able to augment their dominance of the upper echelons of the Union’s structure. Most significantly, this period opened with the miners fresh from having demonstrated the great extent of their solidarity - yet saw the unfolding of developments which had serious implications for the unity of the National Union of Mineworkers itself.

Having recently defeated the Heath government on the question of wages, the south Wales miners were in an optimistic but determined mood in the spring of 1974. Addressing their Annual Conference, Area president Emlyn Williams spelt out the lessons which the Union had learned over the past few years and made several prescient observations about the key issues which were to face them in the later 1970s. Reflecting on the success of the 1972 and 1974 strikes, he said:

The real lesson is that in this form of society survival depends on the use of strength when you have it. We have been fools for too long. Indeed, we were fools between 1946 and 1956 when we had the strength in the economy but
did not use it. We were fools after 1956 when we believed the [NCB] ... and successive Governments that nothing could be done about it.

He condemned productivity deals as 'a tactic of the Board to destroy the newly won militancy of the British miners' and reiterated the need for good wages to attract new recruits into the mining industry. He concluded on a note of quiet confidence:

The months that lie ahead will be testing, but as long as we maintain the solidarity ... that we have over the past five years, we will find that our demands for a better industry will be met ... We are entering an era of the new miner, and whilst we emphasise our loyalty to a Labour Government, we also remind them that our greatest loyalty is to the men we represent.

The election of the new Wilson administration in March 1974 seemed to contemporaries to represent 'a new dawn' for coal. The south Wales miners were strong supporters of several of its key policies, welcoming plans to abolish the Industrial Relations Act and also extend nationalisation into further sectors of the economy. Their 1974 Conference also called on the Labour administration to re-nationalise the sections of the NCB which had been transferred to private ownership under the Heath government.

The Labour governments of the 1970s were the most pro-coal of any since the Attlee administrations of 1945-51. In 1974, approval was granted for the NCB's Plan for Coal: this aimed to increase annual production from 130 million tons in 1973 to 135-150 million tons by 1985, together with a £600 million programme of investment in the industry's infrastructure. The Department of Energy also inaugurated a Tripartite group, comprising government, NCB and NUM, to examine the future of coal. In 1977, this recommended that annual production be increased to 170 million tons by 2000, with the prospect of up to thirty new mines being opened. At that time, the government stated that Britain was well on the way to achieving energy self-sufficiency by 1980. The 1974 strike had established the miners as one of the most secure and best-paid sections of the labour force and the later 1970s also saw a decline in absenteeism and increased recruitment, both factors reflecting the transformation of coal into a 'high-wage high-productivity industry'. Furthermore,
Secretary of State for Energy Tony Benn pressed for increased research into advanced uses for coal (such as liquefaction and other conversion technologies) and sought to find out why British coal received almost no EEC subsidisation compared with the French and Belgian coal industries.\(^5\)

Within south Wales, the mid 1970s brought a relative degree of calm to the mining industry. George Rees (Area vice-president 1974-6, thereafter Area general secretary) later commented: ‘I think in the Seventies we thought that there was a future for the industry. Everybody thought there was a future for it’.\(^6\) The six-fold increase in oil prices between 1970 and 1974 had led to a reappraisal of the importance of coal. This was a highly pertinent point in the case of south Wales, the main source of anthracite in the Western world and also the highest quality coking coal in Europe. Commenting on the discovery of a vast coal bed near Margam in 1977, \textit{The Times} observed that ‘[m]ining in Wales no longer has the dog-eared and depressed look it had between 1955 and the early 1970s ... The pendulum is swinging back ... Now a lot of money is being spent on the search for reserves of coal that will be part of Britain’s energy bank in the next century’.\(^7\) As several miners later acknowledged, another factor in the renaissance in south Wales was the appointment of Philip Weekes as NCB Area Director in 1973, since he took seriously the need for development.

Increased NCB capital expenditure was a defining feature of the mid to late 1970s, with over £90 million being invested in the coalfield.\(^8\) The most important development was the new drift mine at Betws, near Ammanford – opened in March 1978, this was the first new pit in south Wales for over ten years. A similarly ambitious undertaking was the sinking of a new drift at Blaenant in 1975-6, together with the complete reorganisation of the colliery. In addition to this, Taff Merthyr, Cynheidre and Aberpergwm all underwent extensive redevelopment. Further indicators of increased investment in south Wales were the opening of the first £500,000 coalface, at Merthyr Vale in January 1976, together with the allocation of £6 million for new equipment for 1976.\(^9\) Optimism about the future of mining in the coalfield was given an additional boost by NCB decisions in 1977 to consider sinking new collieries at Margam and Ystradgynlais.\(^10\)
During the 1960s, the decline of coal in south Wales had been driven by a 'vicious circle' of 'rationalising' the industry via shutting 'uneconomic' collieries and the consequent exodus of manpower in search of more secure work. In the years immediately after the 1974 strike, the opposite occurred: men returned to the coal industry in the belief that it would provide a decently-paid, long-term job. As the 1975 Area Conference noted, improved wages and conditions were the key to solving the manpower shortage – a point which the NUM had argued throughout the 1960s. This could be seen clearly in the increased Area membership, up from 27,380 in 1974 to 28,879 in 1976.¹¹

The willingness of the NCB to consider an expansion of the industry in south Wales in the mid 1970s meant that its aims were much more in line with those of the NUM than there had been in the 1960s. At the 1974 Area Conference, Emlyn Williams called for greater flexibility for local management and more investment in the industry, in addition to improved wages, conditions and job security for miners. In his annual Presidential Address in 1977, he pointed to the major projects at Betws and Blaenant as the first steps towards the kind of investment that the Union wanted. The traditional antagonism between employer and employees was not completely absent, however. Addressing miners' delegates in May 1975, the Area president accused management of expensive miscalculations regarding technical equipment and materials costs and said: 'It is time that the method of scrutinising the operations of nationalised industries was improved so that the ... cover by which managers hide their inefficiency and place it unjustly on the shoulders of working miners can be removed'.¹²

Industrial democracy, or workers' control, was an important feature of NUM discourse in the later 1970s, the product of a powerful Union thinking optimistically about improving an industry which seemed assured of a bright future. In interviews conducted with contemporary and recently-retired Area Officials in around 1980, a recurrent aspiration was for workers to have a greater voice in the running of their industry. As Emlyn Williams pithily expressed it, 'I would rather have seen socialisation than nationalisation'.¹³ In many ways, coal-mining was a good candidate for workers' control: the dispersed nature of working underground (with coalfaces within one colliery sometimes several miles apart) was not suited to
centralised managerial control structures; the Union regularly carried out safety checks, via its own system of inspectors; lodges took an active role, in conjunction with management, in assigning tasks to the appropriate personnel. In 1975, the EC called for elected trade union representation on the NCB’s board of directors and also sent representatives to a conference in Chesterfield on industrial democracy in the mines.\textsuperscript{14} Area Conferences in 1975, 1976 and 1980 all called for the introduction of democratic structures within the coal industry, whilst Professor Vic Allen of Leeds University spoke to the 1978 Annual Conference about industrial democracy. In April 1977, the EC agreed to organise a weekend school on workers’ control, whilst in December of that year Area representatives took part in an NEC-organised forum in Harrogate on the subject, addressed by Tony Benn and Cliff Shepherd (the NCB Industrial Relations Director).

As the presence of a government minister and a senior NCB figure at the Harrogate forum infers, both parties were quite receptive towards the idea of industrial democracy in this period. Ultimately, however, the NUM decided against accepting any such proposals as the Board were prepared to concede, on the grounds that the Union’s primary duty was to represent the men. Mike Griffin, a South Wales representative at the forum, expressed this view clearly:

\begin{quote}
[W]hat they [the NCB] have always wanted is a production committee to set targets. Is that to be the role of the NUM – to sit down with management to increase production? ... [T]he NCB has failed to fulfil its promise to increase production [and so] we are here discussing how to increase production. If they want production committees, let them say so – don’t dress it up in fancy clothes and call it industrial democracy. We have never had power and we have never had anything out of consultation. All we have is all we have fought for.
\end{quote}

Des Outfield (another South Wales delegate there) underlined this point, stating that ‘There are no halfway measures. You either have control or you do not have it, and unless and until we have it, the responsibility for running the industry must remain where it is now, and not on the shoulders of the workmen’.\textsuperscript{15}
Despite the eventual failure of the movement towards industrial democracy, the mid 1970s saw the NUM show a real willingness to co-operate in making the industry a success. George Rees later recalled: 'We partook in the production drive, something which we’d never, ever done before ... And we lifted the production levels in south Wales in a number of pits to better than they’d ever been before.'\(^\text{16}\) As of July 1974, lodges took part in productivity committees with management, whilst in March 1975 the Area agreed to ‘teach-ins’ aimed at creating ‘1,000 ton faces’ at selected pits. Further participatory ventures in this period included accepting the Board’s new National Scheme for Training for Work and joint NUM-NCB initiatives to persuade local councils to choose coal central heating.\(^\text{17}\) The 1975 Area Conference also called for lodges to have a greater voice in decision-making at their respective collieries. Co-operation with the NCB was not unquestioning compliance, however. In a meeting with the Board in October 1975, the EC expressed concern that NACODS was not treating the productivity drive with the same seriousness as the NUM. It also reaffirmed its willingness to help make the coalfield viable – but saw little point in boosting output whilst there were large coal stockpiles throughout the region.\(^\text{18}\)

Participation by the south Wales miners in the productivity drive remained tinged with scepticism. In October 1975, Coedely lodge complained to the EC that it was not the job of the NUM to get the men to produce more coal for the same wages. For all the talk of co-operation, the potential for friction on production-related issues remained: for instance, a man-management problem at Penallta in June 1974. A particularly clear example of this occurred at Graig Merthyr colliery, where management insisted on significant increases in the rate of advance right up until the day the pit closed, in June 1978. Unsurprisingly, miners’ dissatisfaction with this type of situation eventually filtered up through the Area’s structure. Speaking at the 1977 Conference, Emlyn Williams criticised any attempt to tie unions to managerial structures via ‘workers’ participation’ schemes, pointing to the Area’s disastrous post-war experiences of co-operation with the NCB. In February 1978, south Wales miners temporarily suspended all consultation with the Board in protest at its interference in their ballot on the incentive bonus scheme.
Given the nature of work in the coal industry, a residual level of localised disputes was inevitable: for example, an overtime ban at Maerdy in May 1976 over the sacking of a miner. Despite this, the overall trend in industrial relations in this period was one of relative harmony. The main reason for this was the existence of national-level wage agreements and colliery-level consultative committees, both of which lessened the incidence of disputes. As a Blaengwrach miner later recalled:

I was a lodge official at that time in the Seventies ... [W]e took an interest in our individual pits because, I mean, that was our job ... [A]s soon as you saw things not being done correctly, you’d make it known to the manager ... [Y]ou also had, and I think you got to give the Coal Board credit where it’s due, they set up these production meetings and safety meetings ... [S]o there was a much better dialogue in the pit, there was a much better system of dealing with disputes. All the years I was lodge secretary, I don’t think we had one dispute in my own pit ... And, I mean, that wasn’t unique, during that period. Because ... the structures were set up to deal with the situations ... I’m not saying it always worked like that ... [but] you didn’t have the pit disputes in the 1970s that you had in the early Sixties.19

The contrasting rates of colliery closures was another important indicator that the south Wales coalfield in the later 1970s was not faced with anything like the same level of crisis that it had been a decade before. There were closures in this period but they were a whole order of magnitude less than under the first Wilson government. Between 1974 and 1979 there were seven colliery closures; the equivalent figure for 1964-9 was forty-eight. Unlike in the 1960s, in the Seventies the government wished to retain the coal industry at its current size – pits were generally only closed if they had irreparable problems. Consequently, such closures as did occur in the later 1970s were relatively uncontroversial. Beynon, for instance, never re-opened after a major fire there in April 1975. Glyntillery, Bargoed and Caerau collieries were all closed due to geological difficulties (in December 1975, June 1977 and August 1977, respectively), with their lodges offering little more than formal protestations of opposition.
During the tenure of the Labour governments of the 1970s, the only closure in south Wales which was contested seriously was that of Ogilvie colliery, near Deri. Despite being a high-output colliery with an excellent industrial relations record, Ogilvie was threatened with closure because the Board deemed that too high a percentage of its coal was unsaleable. Following the news in April 1974 that the NCB intended to close the pit, an action committee – comprising the lodge, miners’ wives and local residents – was formed to keep it open. The following month, the Area Annual Conference called on the NEC to support the appeal to save Ogilvie. Meanwhile, the local action committee organised a 300-strong lobby of parliament and a meeting with Energy Minister Eric Varley. This ‘unofficial’ initiative took the Area leadership by surprise but it nevertheless joined the campaign. Emlyn Williams warned that ‘[i]f the closure of Ogilvie becomes a reality it will bring dismay and resurrect in the minds of the miners and their families the spectre of pit closures that was a by-word when the Labour Government were in office from 1964 to 1970’. In January 1975 however, the NCB announced that Ogilvie would shut. Whilst the lodge wanted to fight on, the EC accepted the closure reluctantly. The Area president observed that every option to save Ogilvie had been tried apart from strike action ‘and on the basis of past closures we would never get the support of the membership’. Ogilvie shut in April 1975, without the threatened sit-ins and demonstrations. Evan Jones, the lodge secretary, said: ‘I saw men of 50 or 55 leaving the pit with tears running down their cheeks ... [T]o lose a pit ... is like having a death in the family. It’s difficult for outsiders to understand how emotionally involved a man can become’. Ogilvie showed that, even in a relatively stable period, the threat of an uncertain future was never completely absent for the miners of south Wales.

Throughout the 1970s, the South Wales NUM retained its traditional cultural role for its members. The Miners’ Gala and Eisteddfod, in particular, remained showpiece events. In May 1975, Dai Francis called the Eisteddfod ‘the most important cultural event in the country’. The film star Richard Burton thought it sufficiently significant to donate £100 to the Eisteddfod Fund and express the wish to attend the 1970 Eisteddfod. The Eisteddfod remained in touch with other developments in Welsh cultural and sporting life: for example, the Welsh contingent of the victorious British Lions rugby team were awarded souvenir miners’ lamps at the 1971 Eisteddfod.
The Area Gala also remained popular, with the Galas of 1975 and 1976 being amongst the largest ever organised. The 1976 Gala commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the General Strike and featured Tony Benn as guest speaker, in addition to presentations being made to Mervyn Davies and Terry Yorath (captains of the Welsh rugby and football teams) – an example of the synthesis of culture and politics in south Wales mining communities. These occasions were a ready-made forum for political ideas, as could be seen by the array of left-leaning groups allowed to have stalls there in the later 1970s: from Militant and the CP to the Spanish Solidarity Committee and the Anti-Nazi League.  

The years 1974 to 1979 were a period of progress in many respects for the south Wales miners. Although there had been a great degree of technological development in the preceding decade or so, coal mining still retained several anomalous features – by the end of the 1970s, these had been replaced by much more ‘modern’ practices. In 1976, for example, the NCB retired the last of the pit ponies still working in south Wales collieries. The late 1970s saw the introduction of payment of miners’ wages via bank credit transfer, rather than cash. Metrication was introduced into the industry in April 1978. It was also not until the very end of the 1970s that the NCB was prepared to issue work clothes to miners free of charge – up until then they had been expected to pay for them.

In addition to this modernisation process, the mid to later 1970s saw the introduction of several reforms aimed at providing a greater degree of equitable treatment for mineworkers, from providing reccompense for those whose health had been affected by working in the industry to redressing inequities in working conditions. These measures reflected the overall situation within the coal industry: the strength of the NUM in achieving real benefits for its members, the reasonably sympathetic attitude of the Labour government and also the general sense of buoyancy within the industry.

One of the most important reforms at this time for miners was the Pneumoconiosis Compensation Scheme, introduced in 1975. This scheme provided a loss of earnings allowance for men forced out of work by pneumoconiosis. Also, even a one percent diagnosis was eligible for a decent lump sum payment – whereas before, men only
received disablement benefit from the DHSS. The only restriction under the scheme was the necessity for claimants to have worked ten years underground. Prior to this, pneumoconiosis sufferers were paid a pittance pension, without compensation, under the Workmen’s Compensation Act. The Pneumoconiosis Compensation Scheme was not perfect, however. Its single biggest anomaly was that miners who had commuted their pensions into (relatively meagre) lump sums prior to nationalisation were ineligible for it.26 Despite this, the 1975 Area Conference recognised that the Pneumoconiosis Compensation Scheme was a definite step forward. Even so, this did not preclude Annual Conferences for the rest of the decade calling for further improvements to it.

The Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme was another legislative innovation which occurred in roughly the same period. This new superannuation-based scheme was introduced by the government in April 1975 and greeted by miners as a positive move. The 1978 Area Conference called for the upgrading of the pension from superannuation to a non-contributory basis, although this did not materialise. In addition to this legislation, the south Wales miners took a broader campaigning interest in pensions. Resolutions passed at their 1975 Annual Conference called for widows of mineworkers to be included under the terms of the Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme, as well as for a ‘threshold agreement’ for all British pensioners, to ensure their income kept up with the cost of living.

The introduction of the Voluntary Early Retirement Scheme (VERS) in 1977 represented the attainment of a long-held aim by the miners. Under this scheme, mineworkers aged between 62 and 65 (the lower limit was later reduced to 60) received a tax-free £500 lump sum and retired early on an income only marginally less than their previous year’s earnings. Despite its popularity amongst those eligible for it, the VERS had ambiguous consequences for the Union as a whole. On the one hand, the retirement of many of the most senior men in the pits created the conditions for the emergence of a new generation of lodge leaders: men such as Phil Bowen at Blaenant and Ian Isaac at St John’s (who were only 30 and 24 when they became lodge chairman and secretary respectively).27 On the other hand, it was not guaranteed that those who retired would be replaced – so the VERS created manpower shortage problems that would not otherwise have existed.
The struggle for the VERS was a key NUM priority in the mid 1970s. Demands for this had featured recurrently at Area Conferences between 1971 and 1976, before becoming Union policy in July 1976. After negotiations with the NEC, the NCB's final offer was for early retirement for those aged 64. An Area Conference in November 1976 agreed with the NEC's rejection of this, with the Area president commenting that the fight for early retirement 'is not a campaign, it is more of a crusade'. A ballot in December backed the call for industrial action, with South Wales (with 92 percent voting for action) in the vanguard. Following this show of defiance, the NCB quickly offered a compromise. The deal which emerged was for early retirement for men aged 62 years as of August 1977, reducing down to 60 years as of August 1979 – this was accepted by both an Area Conference and a national ballot in January 1977. Despite this agreement, several matters still concerned the south Wales miners. The key failing of the VERS was its stipulation of twenty years' aggregate underground service, which barred around twenty percent of surfacemen who could otherwise benefit from it from taking early retirement. Spurred on by grassroots pressure, the NEC persuaded the NCB to alter the scheme. As of April 1978, it was modified substantially to cater for surface workers. The attainment of the VERS, on essentially the terms of its own choosing, was undoubtedly one of the most significant reforms won by the NUM during this period.

The aftermath of the 1974 strike made the south Wales miners aware of a number of pit-level problems, with one of the most potentially serious of these being private contractors within the coal industry. The 1974 and 1975 Area Conferences criticised the use of private contractors and demanded that all NCB employees be unionised. In May 1977, miners' delegates called for an end to all underground contract work, since private companies were siphoning money out of the industry and taking work away from NUM members. The issue was raised in a sharp form over the extensive redevelopment work at Blaenant in early 1975, for which the NCB wanted to use outside contractors. This caused bitterness with the lodge, who had a team of workers capable of driving the new drift. A key obstacle to this, however, was that any such development work would have to be paid at a level in keeping with the national NUM-NCB agreements, so as not to undermine them – despite the fact that
contractors would have been paid a much higher, piecework-derived, rate. Blaenant lodge eventually insisted that they would carry out the work themselves, with the Board equally insistent that the drift had to be completed on schedule. Within a year, this whole question of enhanced rates had become embroiled in the single biggest intra-NUM controversy of this period – the incentive bonus scheme.

Craftsmen were amongst the most dissatisfied workers in the later 1970s, with a central grievance being the wage differential between different grades. The 1974 Area Conference demanded reduced differentials between surface and underground grades, with George Rees stating ‘We do not want differentials, the bigger the differentials the bigger the problem’. By September 1974 there was unrest at Brynlliw, with a number of other lodges threatening strikes in support of the surface craftsmen. Consequently, the NEC’s decision during the following month to accept the NCB offer without consulting the membership met with protests from several lodges. For the south Wales miners, the issue remained unsatisfactorily resolved. Area Conferences in the later 1970s featured regular calls for improvements in craftsmen’s pay and conditions, with the 1978 Conference demanding a complete reconstruction of the Craftsmen’s Wage Structure.

The strikes of 1972 and 1974 had re-established the miners in the vanguard of the trade union movement, popularising a buoyant radicalism. At the 1974 Area Conference, Charlie Blewett (Penallta lodge) observed: ‘although [Conference] ... is quiet this arises because of our confidence ... The last 3 years have shown us that power is there when we need it’. A further indication of this was discernible at the following year’s Annual Conference. Here, moderate lodges such as Bargoed and Oakdale moved resolutions on topics ranging from the introduction of industrial democracy to a call for the immediate end to internment without trial in Northern Ireland, whilst the Penallta delegate expressed the desirability of establishing a socialist state in Britain. This radicalism was mirrored to a certain degree at national level. Reporting back on the 1976 National Conference, Emlyn Williams commented that ‘[i]t was an excellent Conference and the mood of the delegates left no doubt where they stood, and were serving notice on the Government that something must be done on the miners’ behalf in the very near future’.
Colliery closures was one topic where a more radicalised stance had become standardised throughout the NUM after the 1974 strike. This new consensus was exemplified by the NEC’s decision in February 1976 to implement a national overtime ban against the proposed closure of Langwith colliery, in Derbyshire. Although the ban soon ended, it was unprecedented for the NEC to consider such action to defend one particular colliery. South Wales miners were amongst the main advocates of the overtime ban. The 1976 National Conference supported unanimously the Area’s demand for opposition to pit closures. Moving the resolution, EC member Des Dutfield stated: ‘[i]n the Fifties and Sixties, when a pit was put on the jeopardy list, it was no use looking to other pits for support – the men were too afraid that they might end up with their pit on the list ... We must not allow that position to return. We must ... not tolerate pit closures’. Proof that the NUM national leadership now seemed willing to contemplate a more combative policy came in October 1978, when the NEC decided to ballot the membership on industrial action against pit closures.

In south Wales, calls for opposition to pit closures went hand-in-hand with a desire for the democratisation of the upper echelons of the NUM hierarchy, so as to better reflect the views of rank and file miners. The biggest problem with the NEC’s structure was its unrepresentative nature, due to the retention of much of the old MFGB federalism within the NUM’s constitution. South Wales miners resented the fact that tiny Areas (such as North Wales and Cumberland, each with only 1,000 members or less) all had the same voting power on the NEC as much larger ones such as Scotland (which had around 19,000 members). This set-up gave the small Areas a significance at the top of the NUM’s structure out of all proportion to their actual size. Consequently, Area Annual Conferences in 1974 and 1975 called for the amalgamation of the smallest Areas with the larger ones. At the 1978 Conference, Emlyn Williams reiterated this demand. In tones redolent of *The Miners’ Next Step*, he stated: ‘We in South Wales intend to democratise our union so that we may proceed on a national basis to revolutionise our industry’.

Trade union solidarity remained a defining feature of the south Wales miners during the later 1970s. The clearest example of this was the strike at the Grunwick factory in London in 1977, over wages and the right to trade union representation – a
dispute whose clashes between pickets and police were to provide a foretaste of events during the miners’ own strike of 1984-5. In June 1977, the EC and a busload of pickets from south Wales (in addition to representatives from other militant Areas) went to London to bolster the picket-line there. The Executive members were ‘astounded at the brutality of the police’ who ‘were acting like fascists’, agreeing to participate in a National Day of Protest in July 1977 about this. 34 At the request of the Grunwick Strike Committee, south Wales miners also joined the mass picket in October 1977 and participated in a trade union conference held in the November in Pontypridd, which a speaker from the Committee attended. There were many other instances of this kind of solidarity. South Wales miners opposed the imprisonment of two building workers, Des Warren and Ricky Tomlinson, attending several UCATT demonstrations in London in 1974 and 1975 calling for their release. Support for the wage claim by the nurses in mid 1974 was widespread amongst the miners: the Area leadership urged the NEC and the WTUC to back them and made public statements approving NUPE’s stance, whilst miners at Brynlliw, Morlais and Graig Merthyr staged token strikes in response to an appeal by flying pickets from Morriston Hospital, Swansea. The Area also gave official backing to NUPE demonstrations against public sector cuts in February 1976 and February 1977. Similarly, in December 1977, an Area Conference reaffirmed support for the strike by the FBU and stated that it would ensure that no miners crossed picket-lines. The miners also remained deeply concerned about rising unemployment levels: Annual Conferences in 1975 and 1976 called for employment for all, whilst south Wales miners also lobbied the Welsh Office in May 1976 and parliament in April 1977 on this subject. 35

In keeping with its traditional radicalism, the South Wales NUM retained a keen interest in contemporary politics. The Area’s plans for reviving the British economy were robust and militant: its 1975 Annual Conference carried a resolution to cut arms expenditure by £1 billion, the 1977 Conference called for increased investment and public spending, whilst in 1978 Emlyn Williams proposed the nationalisation of all the country’s major financial institutions. Condemnation of cuts in social services and health expenditure imposed by the government and the IMF was a recurrent feature of Area Conferences in the later 1970s. The miners were strong supporters of the creation of a Welsh Assembly and the Area leadership were very active in the
ultimately-unsuccessful devolution campaigning in late 1978 and early 1979. In the other referendum held in the 1970s, Annual Conferences in 1974 and 1975 called for a ‘no’ vote on continuing membership of the EEC. The democratic ethos of the NUM was understandably appalled by the rise of the National Front during this period. The EC called for a lobby of an NF rally in Cardiff in June 1976 and the following month the NUM National Conference demanded action against the Nazis. In March 1978, the Area affiliated to the Anti-Nazi League and that August agreed to support the ANL’s National Carnival. Annual Conferences between 1975 and 1977 all carried resolutions opposing the government’s military ‘solution’ to the troubles in Northern Ireland. The South Wales NUM also remained an inveterate supporter of many other left-wing and progressive causes.

By the mid 1970s, the radicalisation of 1969-74, together with the victories of 1972 and 1974, had led to the situation in South Wales whereby a left-wing leadership presided over a membership that looked favourably on militant solutions to the problems facing them. This was clearly seen in the case of Emlyn Williams, installed as president at the start of 1974. His speech to the 1976 Annual Conference was arguably his finest hour as a Union leader, a syndicalist clarion call with strong echoes of Noah Ablett and A.J. Cook. Defending his demand for £100 /week wages for faceworkers (with appropriate differentials for other grades), he said:

\[
\text{It is becoming necessary each year to spell out reasons for seeking wages which are reasonable and just. At the same time we are compelled to explain why we reject government policies which deny us the right to seek wages that are reasonable and just … For face workers this [proposal] amounts to about a 33% increase. Why should we demand that type of wage? My answer is ‘why shouldn't we?’}
\]

\[
\text{At some point of time some workers have got to challenge the grossly unequal distribution of wages in British society … [and] insist that we are all paid according to what we contribute to the community … Why should men who risk their lives through injuries and disease, who work physically hard, who produce a commodity which is essential for British industry, not be paid accordingly? And if the answer is that society cannot afford it, then my reply is that society must be changed so it can afford it.}
\]
This uncompromising statement panicked stockbrokers into causing a fall in the exchange rate and the value of the stock exchange, propelling the Area president into national prominence with such rapidity that the report in the *Daily Mail* on the conference inadvertently featured a picture of the playwright and actor Emlyn Williams instead.\(^{36}\)

During the 1970s and beyond, Emlyn Williams's style was one of 'leading from the front and relying on the dying art of platform oratory'.\(^{37}\) At the 1978 Annual Conference, he called for a new militancy amongst miners in response to the clouds of uncertainty on the industry's horizon, emphasising: 'we have got to ... create a new resolve amongst South Wales miners ... We must campaign until every miner is involved ... We want an articulate, intelligent, politically-conscious labour force, for that is our only safeguard against being prostituted in the future by money and false promises'.

In addition to this work within the NUM, Emlyn Williams was also very involved in the campaign for the democratisation of the structure of the Labour Party. As the NUM's elected representative on Labour's NEC between 1974 and 1978, he was arguably the most significant Marxist within the Party. As a member of the League for Democracy, he advocated such reforms as the right to democratically elect the Labour Party leader, the right to have reselection of MPs and the assertion of the authority of conferences as the ultimate decision-making body within the Party. One of the key themes of his address to the 1978 Annual Conference was the need for a democratic overhaul of the Labour Party's internal machinery. In 1980, Emlyn Williams optimistically predicted 'the inevitability of true democracy' within Labour.\(^{38}\)

After Labour, the other main political party within the South Wales NUM was the Communists. However, the post-war decades had seen a waning of CP influence: Will Whitehead, who had resigned in 1966, was the last Party member to be Area president. In the later 1970s, the fortunes of the CP declined further following the retirement of Dai Francis as Area general secretary in 1976. Although his successor, George Rees, was also then a Communist, Dai Francis had been a major figure for
the south Wales miners. One indication of his personal prestige was his election to the Gorsedd of Bards in August 1974 (the first miner to be admitted into the Gorsedd, in recognition of his contribution to Welsh culture via the Miners’ Eisteddfod) and his nomination for the post of Chancellor of the University of Wales in July 1976.\(^\text{39}\) This type of respectability and its concomitant responsibilities was not without its paradoxes for a party built ostensibly on grassroots militancy. As Gwyn Alf Williams observed in *When Was Wales?*, the ‘residual prestige [of the CP] ... was such that, pariahs elsewhere except in Scotland, Communists in south Wales found themselves in the disconcerting predicament of having become almost as respectable as an eisteddfod’.\(^\text{40}\) In October 1977, for example, an Area Conference discussed the NCB’s sacking of four Taff Merthyr men for leading several walk-outs, and also their links with such ‘subversive organisations’ as the South Wales New Miners’ Charter Movement. Here, long-standing Labour member Mike Griffin (Penrhiwceiber) observed: ‘We have spoken about subversive elements in the past, but these men argue in accordance with their beliefs. Not so long ago the Communist Party members were called subversives, but now the boot is on the other foot’.

At national level, a similar mixture of progress and setback was experienced by the Miners’ Forum movement, in which South Wales played a key role. In some respects, the emergence of Yorkshire as a left-wing Area in the late 1960s and early 1970s had shifted the political centre of gravity within the NUM. This meant that the Forum’s usage of conferences to bring about change in Union policy met with a reasonable degree of success in this period. It also provoked much resentment from the right-wing forces which had traditionally dominated the NUM. Consequently, left-right factionalism became prevalent: for example, during the 1978 National Conference, Yorkshire delegates called repeatedly for Gormley’s resignation.

However, one failure for Union militants was their attempt to enable the leading figure in the Forum – Mick McGahey, the Scottish miners’ president – to stand for the NUM national presidency. Gormley was due to retire but hung on until the 1980s, in order to prevent a Communist becoming president – by which time (under NUM rules) McGahey was then too old to be eligible for consideration. All attempts to alter this rule proved ultimately unsuccessful. With McGahey thus barred from
leading the challenge, the NUM Left turned its attentions to Arthur Scargill, one of its ‘rising stars’. This development had consequences for the subsequent direction of left-wing strategy in the Union. One lodge secretary later recalled:

When I first went [to Broad Left meetings, in around 1973]... I thought it was good. But, ... in the end, ... it became ... a *listening* place rather than a talking place ... Arthur was on the Broad Left – but, of course, when Arthur came to prominence, it changed it slightly ... and then we used to go up and listen to Arthur ... We didn’t have that part to play, then, as it was before. 41

In the aftermath of the miners’ defeat in 1985, Emlyn Williams reflected bitterly that, with the shift in the NUM ‘balance of power’ towards the Left in the 1970s, there was a failure on the part of the Broad Left to maintain the same level of strategic thinking which it had employed in the 1960s: ‘We built this Union on strategy – and then when we became the power in the NUM, we just threw it overboard’. 42

Any assessment of the strategy of the NUM Left in the 1970s has to keep in mind that its actions followed from an approach which sought to radicalise the official Union structure and use this as a vehicle for the pursuit of militant objectives. The intra-NEC factionalism of the later 1970s was exacerbated by left-wing frustration at the stymieing of the wishes of the democratic majority of NUM members by the right-wing’s procedural manipulation and dominance of the Union upper echelons. The three interrelated phenomena here were: the democratic deficit in the workings of the NEC; the power of Gormley; and the role of patronage and careerism. In this respect, the machinery and operation of the NEC structure was a real material factor in the mitigation of NUM militancy at the moment of its greatest potential influence.

For the south Wales miners, the biggest problem with the NEC was its unrepresentative composition. Their Area, with its membership of approximately 28,000, had two seats on the NEC – the same number as the seat each for Cumberland and North Wales (which were both no bigger than one fairly large colliery). South Derbyshire and Leicestershire each had one representative, despite their memberships of only about 3,000. Power Group No.2 had less than 2,000
members but was still represented on the NEC – by someone who was actually in the GMWU rather than the NUM. Consequently, the smaller Areas wielded disproportionate influence in the NEC – a situation analogous to the ‘rotten boroughs’ in eighteenth-century parliamentary politics. These Areas were decidedly ‘moderate’, believing that whatever a Labour government did, it was for the best. Rule 7 of the Union’s constitution stated that the NEC should review the situation occasionally with a view to integrating the smaller Areas, to ensure a representative make-up of the NEC – however, its built-in right-wing majority meant that the status quo remained. Even compromise solutions, such as the call for NEC voting to use a card vote system weighted to reflect the actual sizes of the Areas, were rejected because they would have democratically undermined the power of the ‘moderates’.

The ‘keystone’ in the NEC’s ‘arch of conservatism’ was the national president, Joe Gormley. Ever since the formation of the NUM, the presidency had been held by right-wingers, who kept a tight grip over the Union’s rules. What was new about Gormley’s tenure was that he wielded more power than any of his predecessors. One factor was the centralisation of decision-making processes as a result of the many national-level agreements in place by the 1970s. Another reason was that Lawrence Daly – who the Miners’ Forum had hoped would oppose NEC conservatism – had capitulated, handing over use of his powers to Gormley. Thus armed, Gormley could get the NEC to reject policies decided by National Conferences, supposedly the highest authority within the Union: for example, overturning the decision to oppose the Social Contract in 1974. As Emlyn Williams told the 1976 Area Conference: ‘There are people in this union who are more concerned with preserving the right-wing control of the NEC than they are with practising democracy’. Gormley was a master of procedural chicanery and bending the rules to suit his own ends: George Rees, one of the Area’s two representatives on the NEC, later commented that ‘Joe was a clever man, mind. Cleverer than a cart-full of monkeys.’ He also gave a vivid example of Gormley’s style of chairing meetings:

Arthur [Scargill], now, was challenging him on procedure. And Arthur was good. You got to hand it to Arthur, I had the greatest admiration for him. And he was challenging Joe on procedure, and me and Emlyn were sitting there, and Emlyn said to me, ‘we got Joe this bloody time’. And he started
quoting Walter Citrine and he started quoting Wal Hannington [authorities on chairing trade union meetings] ... You could have heard a pin drop ... [Gormley] said, 'Arthur, you're right. You're dead right in your interpretation, right as far as Citrine is concerned, and right as far as Wal Hannington. But', he said, 'there's only one difference.' And Arthur said, 'what's that, Joe?' 'I'm the bloody chairman here, not Walter Citrine! Put it to the vote.' And they put it to the vote and we lost!45

Patronage and careerism were the cement which held together the right-wing dominance of the NUM national leadership. The numerous small Areas together constituted a majority on the NEC; each of these Areas depended completely on the president, without whose support they might be absorbed into a more rational and democratic structure. Whilst such a shake-up would not have affected the miners in the smaller Areas significantly, it would have had serious implications for their salaried full-time representatives who sat on the NEC. In this period, the value of these posts to their incumbents was increased further by the NEC decisions in 1974 and 1978 to introduce significant pay rises for Area Officials. In September 1978, the South Wales leadership sent a letter to the NEC questioning its award of two wage increases to National and Area Officials that year (which Emlyn Williams and George Rees had voted against), stating that the membership would react very badly to it.46 By the end of the 1970s, the salary of a miners' agent was almost double the money earned by an ordinary mineworker – a factor which inevitably created a degree of distance between senior full-time officials and the rank and file. However, even this was not enough for certain people: in May 1978 the south Wales miners criticised those full-time NUM leaders (who were not named but were certain to have included Gormley) who took up directorships of private companies in addition to their trade union work. In the view of one lodge secretary, some national Union leaders were very 'careerist' and 'looked to their lifestyle rather than looked to championing the needs of their members'.47

One of the fiercest controversies within the trade union movement between 1974 and 1979 was over the Social Contract, the government's wage control policy. This question was posed in a much sharper form than it had been under the Heath administration, since miners were now forced to choose between maintaining the
wage levels earned through the 1974 strike and their loyalty to the Labour government. Although the position was never uncontested, South Wales Annual Conferences voted consistently against the Social Contract. At the 1975 Conference, Emlyn Williams was one of the first trade union leaders to reject it outright. This stance brought the south Wales miners into open conflict with official NEC policy on the subject.\textsuperscript{48} Towards the end of the decade, this defiance spread within the NUM, with the 1977 and 1978 National Conferences opposing the Social Contract. Speaking at the 1977 Area Conference, Emlyn Williams stated:

The South Wales Miners have consistently opposed the Social Contract ... There has always been a substantial minority against the Social Contract. What is happening now is that the rank and file members are revolting against their own union policies ... What is happening is a triumph for democracy ... The Government is applying an IMF\textsuperscript{7} policy, not one representing the Labour Movement ... It is applying Tory policies and ... is doing the dirty work for employers and the Conservative Party.

In the context of the Social Contract, inflation and the successful strikes of 1972 and 1974, the struggle over wages was a central topic for the south Wales miners in the later 1970s. In 1974, they called for weekly wages of £65 for NPLA, £50 for underground work and £40 for surfacemen. Despite this, a national ballot in March 1975 accepted the NCB’s offer, a reflection of general satisfaction with the 1974 settlement. The escalation of the cost of living led to a hardening of the miners’ stance: the 1975 Area Conference backed the call for rates of £100 NPLA, £85 underground and £80 surface. Although this resolution was carried at the National Conference, Gormley allowed the NEC to overturn it on the basis of adhering to TUC policy, prompting Cliff True (Fernhill) to exclaim: ‘How the hell Joe Gormley gets away with this, really amazes me’.\textsuperscript{49}

In accordance with its policy, the Area leadership organised meetings throughout the coalfield against the NEC’s acceptance of wage controls. Although the south Wales miners rejected the Board’s £6 pay offer in August 1975 by 12,161 votes to 10,253, they were outvoted nationally by 60.5 percent to 39.5 percent.\textsuperscript{50} The following year, the Area Conference reaffirmed the call for £100 NPLA rate, with the EC deciding
to publish a leaflet in support of this. In the national ballot in June 1976, growing
discontent on the subject led to a fall in the majority in favour of acceptance to 53.4
percent, with south Wales being one of five Areas to return an overall ‘no’ vote. At
the National Conference the following month, Gormley caused uproar by refusing to
allow any discussion of wages, on the basis of the recent ballot decision. The
frustration felt by many miners was expressed clearly by Area representative Terry
Thomas at the 1977 National Conference, who reminded delegates that in 1972 Daly
had proclaimed that miners would never again accept an incomes policy: ‘Well, we
are on our knees again. What we won in 1972 and 1974 we have given back with
wage restraint’. By 1978, the question had become complicated by the incentive
bonus scheme but the National Conference still called for a basic wage of £110
NPLA (with appropriate rates for other grades) – the amount needed to regain the
purchasing power levels of March 1975. Although take-home pay had increased
between November 1971 and March 1978 for surfacemen from £20.67 to £43.54, for
underground workers from £22.06 to £47.54, and for NPLA from £28.27 to £57.01,
the increase in the Retail Price Index of 134.5 percent meant that the real value of
their wages had declined by 10 percent, 8 percent and 14 percent respectively. Despite this, concern about the industry’s prospects prompted a national ballot to
accept the NCB’s modest £6.50 pay offer in early 1979.

Although the south Wales miners began this period in full support of the Labour
government, increasing bitterness at its policies – particularly the Social Contract –
forced them to reassess their viewpoint. It has to be remembered that the first post-
war British administration to adopt monetarism was the Callaghan government. The
NUM Left objected to Labour implementing policies which would have been
opposed fiercely by the trade union movement had they been proposed by a
Conservative government. One of the most dramatic expressions of the Area’s
resentment was the annual presidential address by Emlyn Williams. In May 1976, he
called the Social Contract ‘a sop’ to the IMF and stated that ‘if the Government
wishes to survive it must pursue Socialist policies. If it has the death wish, it is not
the miners’ responsibility’. At the 1977 Conference, he warned the government to
ignore the CBI and instead implement its 1974 election manifesto. The following
year, the Area president launched a scathing assault on the Labour government,
criticising it for blaming workers for the economic crisis whilst leaving profits
untouched, for being ‘a lackey’ to the IMF, for attacking civil liberties and for pandering to the Tory Right and the National Front over immigration. Even so, the Area’s broad political strategy remained unaltered. Albeit reluctantly, the South Wales NUM was prepared to help work towards the re-election of the Callaghan government.

The late 1970s was an unsettling time for the south Wales miners. In addition to their disillusionment with the Labour government, these years saw the resurfacing of issues which had plagued their industry in the recent past and also the first signs of serious problems for the future. Although these factors did not amount to a crisis for the miners on the same scale as they had withstood in the 1960s, collectively they indicated that the ‘new dawn’ for coal which had seemed so tangible in 1974 might well prove to be merely an interlude in the broader pattern of struggle and confrontation.

Whilst pit closures remained uncommon in south Wales in the 1970s, one phenomenon which began to occur with increased frequency was integration, the underground link-up of previously autonomous collieries. In the anthracite region, Cynheidre and Pentremawr were merged in March 1974; a year later, the integration of Lady Windsor (in Ynysybwl) and Abercynon, Garw and Ffaldau (in the Garw Valley), and Windsor (in Abertridwr) and Nantgarw took place. Morlais joined with Brynlliw in 1977. In January 1975, plans were announced for the future linking-up of Deep Navigation, Taff Merthyr and Merthyr Vale. Later that year, the NCB’s ten-year plan for south Wales admitted that mergers and closures would continue in the future. Consequently, at the 1975 Area Conference, miners’ agent Emlyn Jenkins complained that ‘the Board ... are deliberately destroying good pits by these amalgamations’, whilst other delegates saw link-ups as part of a programme of preparing the coalfield for another round of closures.

Fears for the future of the south Wales coalfield were given another dimension by the emergence of EEC plans for the long-term restructuring of coal and steel production within the European Common Market. At the 1975 Area Conference, Emlyn Williams drew ominous parallels between this and the NCB’s policy of colliery integration, stating: ‘To me it has all the signs of a contraction policy in line
Coal imports and the consequent stockpiling of colliery production in south Wales had become a source of concern for the Area by the end of the 1970s. Due to the failure of Aberthaw to operate at full capacity, over two million tons of power station coal were stockpiled in Wales by the end of December 1975. The Area spelt out its solution to this in early 1976: an expansion of NCB coal consumption at Aberthaw, Uskmouth, Carmarthen Bay and Didcot power stations, together with support for the attempts by the Secretary of State for Energy to establish a coordinated fuel policy. Tony Benn was himself keen to see a reduction in stockpiles, intervening in mid 1976 to ask both the Central Electricity Generating Board and British Steel to increase coal consumption in south Wales. The decline in the steel industry in the late 1970s posed a real threat to the Area's coking coal collieries, since BSC reduced its order significantly. On investigation, however, it transpired that Llanwern steelworks was still importing coal, even though this was £10-12/ton more expensive. The continuation of BSC imports led to increasing stockpiles of coking coal. The most pressing situations were at Maesteg and Nantgarw, where 700,000 tonnes and 480,000 tonnes respectively were being stored by May 1978. In September 1978, the EC arranged to discuss again the question of coal imports with the trade unions at the BSC plants. By June 1978, even this problem had been overshadowed by the surplus of power station coal – with stockpiles reaching 2.6 million tonnes, mainly due to difficulties at the giant Aberthaw B station. With each tonne of stockpiled coal costing the NCB £3.50 to handle and store, it was clear that this was becoming a serious drain on the already-stretched resources of the South Wales Board.

In 1974, increased investment and brighter prospects in their industry had given the south Wales miners the impression that they were assured a secure future. By April 1975, 18 of the coalfield's 43 collieries were profitable, a number which was
increasing as productivity improved. However, with the onset of the steel recession and the gradual evaporation of the optimism brought about by the victories of 1974, the Area began to face up to the likelihood of hard times ahead. In March 1977, Coedely lodge complained that the NCB was conditioning some pits for closure by withholding investment and allowing problems with morale to develop. In November 1977, the Area leadership met the NCB to discuss the problem of declining output. The Area’s preferred solution to the situation was to increase the morale of the men through pit-head meetings with top management and Area Officials, an attendance bonus payment to combat absenteeism and more pit-level industrial democracy. It also pointed out that, too often, insufficient investment outbye caused bottlenecks in clearing the coal, nullifying the effect of improved coalface mechanisation. The following month, miners’ delegates rejected NCB allegations that the main cause of the problems was a ‘malaise’ amongst the men, instead pointing the inadequacies of management (for example, failure to procure sufficient supplies to ensure continuous production, inability to organise operations effectively, and the low quality of work done by colliery overmen). Regardless of the actual reasons for the coalfield’s problems, the situation was scarcely helped by comments by Weekes in the Daily Express about ‘lazy’ south Wales miners, to which the Area responded with amazement and indignation.

Despite the disagreement over the reasons for it, it was clear that by the late 1970s the future of the south Wales miners no longer seemed as bright as it had only a few years previously. In 1975-6, the coalfield was in a reasonably viable position: ten pits made a total profit of £9.6 million, although this was outweighed by losses in the other twenty-five collieries. By 1977-8, nine collieries were still profitable but total losses had climbed to £32 million. Another cause for concern was the return of a gradual manpower drift away from the industry. Whereas the mid 1970s had seen an increasing number of mineworkers, in 1977 the Area’s membership fell from 28,879 to 27,600. One of the most important projects discussed in this period had been a major new coking coal colliery at Margam. In May 1978 however, the NCB announced that this would be shelved, due to the steel recession and also the coalfield’s shaky financial position – a ‘Catch 22’ scenario with which the south Wales miners were only too familiar. Several other pits faced uncertainty in the late 1970s. In 1978, the NCB considered closing Abernant and Maerdy, both heavy loss-
makers employing over 2,000 men each, before deciding against it. The seriousness of this situation prompted meetings between Tony Benn, the South Wales Board and the Area Officials in June and September 1978. In the latter meeting, Benn told Weekes that employment levels must not be allowed to drop, announced the formation of a tripartite committee, and expressed optimism that £250 million would be invested over the course of the next decade to develop the coalfield.63

Although Emlyn Williams told an Area Conference on 10 August 1978 that ‘the economic situation in the South Wales coalfield has never been more grave’, there was nothing to suggest that it faced irrevocable decline. The Callaghan administration, for instance, saw the situation as far from being a lost cause. In November 1978, a Tripartite Group sub-committee was established to develop the south Wales coalfield and put it back on a viable financial footing. Its report was published in March 1979: this proposed an annual investment of £25 million between 1979 and 1984, which would improve the performance of the south Wales coalfield by £29 million a year by the end of that period. After the general election result of May 1979, however, there was absolutely no chance that the new government would consider any such policy.64

All of the main problems facing the south Wales miners in the later 1970s – stagnant output levels, the wages struggle, and the conservative dominance of the NEC – were brought to a head via a single issue, the introduction of the incentive bonus scheme. Alongside the strikes of 1972 and 1974, this was the most important development in the history of the NUM in that decade. The scheme represented the antithesis of the factors within the Union which had brought about the victories of the early 1970s. As such, it played a crucial role in undermining NUM unity, which was to prove decisive in 1984. Consequently, the incentive bonus scheme has been a focus of historiographical attention. For Ashworth, it was an ambiguous development that boosted miners’ average earnings but also lessened inter-Area solidarity. Francis and Smith point out that the problem of improving basic wages was aggravated by the scheme because it weakened the National Power Loading Agreement. For Allen, the whole episode showed that the NUM Right was happy to ignore its much-vaunted ‘constitutionalism’ in order to push through the incentive system.65
The introduction of the NPLA in 1966 had been one of the biggest gains made by the NUM in the whole post-war period and was the realisation of a long-held Union objective. Establishment of a daywage system across the whole industry had had several far-reaching repercussions – for example, the dramatic reduction in the number of localised strikes which had previously characterised coal-mining industrial relations. In 1956, the industry accounted for 78.4 percent of all strikes in Britain; by 1970, following the onset of the NPLA, this figure was only 4.1 percent. Payment of the same wage for the same work was seen by the south Wales miners to embody an important principle. Furthermore, a universal daywage system shifted the onus for production away from the workers, since they were now paid a guaranteed rate. Consequently, productivity levels begin to stagnate from around 1974, as management proved unable to increase output. The NCB’s proposed solution was an incentive bonus system, whereby miners would earn more the more they produced – in other words, a return to piecework.

Hostility to the bonus scheme was particularly widespread in south Wales, partly because of safety factors, partly because of difficult geological conditions there but also because it undermined unity, creating competition and tension at every level of the NUM as miners strove to maximise their own output – the antithesis of cooperative trade union principles. As Emlyn Williams commented in 1978: ‘It’s the law of the jungle and we haven’t even got spears’.

As a result of these concerns, in the mid 1970s the Area discussed several solutions which addressed the output question without forcing miners into competition with one another. Following the first ballot defeat of the incentive bonus scheme in late 1974, the NUM adopted Dai Francis’s plan for a national-level productivity system. Under this, output bonuses were tied to a national target, without individual collieries being labelled as either ‘successes’ or ‘failures’. The NCB seemed prepared initially to consider this type of option, before events swung back more in its favour. As late as May 1977, however, South Wales was still reaffirming its support for a National Bonus Scheme. The other main suggestion which the Area discussed in 1975 was for a increase in faceworkers’ wages relative to those of other grades, so as to increase the numbers of the men most directly responsible for
extracting coal. This was far from ideal – but it was deemed better to retain a
daywage system rather than abandon it in favour of a piecework ‘free-for-all’. As it
turned out, neither of these plans became a reality.\textsuperscript{68}

Although the proposals for an incentive bonus scheme were couched in terms of
increasing pits’ productivity and securing their future, the broader political
implications of the reintroduction of piecework were never far from the surface. The
NCB supported this as a way of both increasing profitability and compromising
NUM unity, thus hindering the growth of left-wing influence within the Union. The
secret Miron Report, produced for NCB chairman Derek Ezra in December 1973,
had argued that incentive schemes, in addition to the promotion of non-NUM unions
within the industry, would be an important part of breaking Communist and Marxist
influence within the NUM.\textsuperscript{69} Whilst they were unaware of this report, many miners
nevertheless saw the bonus scheme as a politically motivated attempt to curtail the
power of their union. As one lodge secretary later reflected: ‘The productivity
scheme ... [started] to create fissures and splits in the Union. And I think, to be
perfectly candid, I think that the Labour government ... weren’t sorry to see that
come in ... I mean, there was at that time an element in the Labour Party that saw the
unions as an impediment.’ In the view of Terry Thomas, then an EC member,
‘Callaghan’s government decided that they could not afford to have the miners
united. \textit{That} is why that incentive scheme was introduced’.\textsuperscript{70}

The NCB’s incentive bonus scheme proposals first emerged in its 1974 \textit{Plan for
Coal}. Although the NEC was willing to discuss it, the Area leadership was
completely against the idea. In September 1974, a South Wales delegation lobbied a
National Conference to reiterate their opposition to piecework. In the run-up to the
ballot on the subject, the miners were subjected to a massive campaign by the media
and colliery management, which criticised the NUM and called on its members to
accept the scheme. As part of this, Gormley campaigned actively in support of
incentive bonuses. Despite this pressure, the NUM membership rejected the bonus
scheme comprehensively, by 62.7 percent to 37.3 percent. The south Wales miners
responded even more emphatically: 83.1 percent ‘against’ and only 16.9 percent
‘for’.\textsuperscript{71}
Following this unambiguous ballot result in November 1974, any prospect of an incentive bonus scheme faded into the background for a few years as the NUM and the NCB discussed other means of boosting productivity. However, by April 1977 rumours were circulating in south Wales that some other Areas were defying Union policy and allowing their members to work under piecework systems. At the 1977 Area Conference, miners’ delegates underlined their opposition to the incentive bonus scheme. Emlyn Williams warned: ‘we can see the products of the old type incentive bonus schemes in our pits – broken men, riddled with disability and disease, all because they undertook unnecessary and dangerous risks to ensure they obtained their bonuses’. Emlyn Thomas (Maerdy) stated that ‘piecework schemes [are] ... another feature of the capitalist system designed to exploit and coerce workmen ... [W]e will not support a return to a piecework system ... [A]nyone who has the temerity to suggest such a change has not got the wellbeing of his members at heart’. Eddie Thomas (Cwm) had an even more blunt appraisal: ‘Piecework is immoral’. Nevertheless, in August 1977 Gormley allowed various Areas to arrange their own incentive bonus schemes – a complete abrogation of NUM policy. In October 1977, the south Wales miners restated their position at an Area Conference and also lobbied the NEC, protesting against the plans to foist incentive schemes on the Union. Later that month, the NUM held its second national ballot on incentive bonuses – and once again voted against them (by 55.7 percent versus 44.3 percent). South Wales Area was the most resolutely opposed, with 83 percent rejecting piecework.

Even a second clear national ballot victory was unable to prevent the introduction of the incentive bonus, however. Shortly after the result was announced, it became apparent that Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, South Derbyshire, North Western, and Midlands were intent on establishing their own incentive schemes. South Wales miners condemned this development, lobbying the NEC in protest. In December 1977 Gormley ruled, with the support of a majority on the NEC, that any Areas which had voted in favour of incentives could introduce them anyway. A South Wales Conference voted for industrial action in protest at the NEC’s stance and called unanimously for Gormley’s removal from office. Terry Thomas told delegates: ‘What we are facing now is far more important than production and wages put together, we are fighting for the preservation of this Union’. The South
Wales leadership also joined the Yorkshire and Kent Areas in taking the NEC to court to stop the maverick coalfields. Unfortunately for them, however, the High Court ruled that the national ballot result was not binding on the NEC and decided in favour of the 'rogue' Areas.\textsuperscript{74} Gormley's role here infuriated south Wales activists so much that, a quarter of a century later, some of them still stated that '[t]he biggest traitor, to my mind, was Joe Gormley' and '[w]e hated Gormley – he had sold us out'.\textsuperscript{75} A letter from a Brynlliw worker in \textit{The Miner} in the immediate aftermath of the High Court's ruling expressed concisely the Area's bitterness on the subject:

RIP – On 21 December, 1977, the [NUM] ... died in the High Court, London. Pallbearers were the South Wales, Scotland, Yorkshire and Kent Areas which tried in vain to uphold the result of a democratic secret ballot against any kind of productivity deal with the NCB. Executioners were Jim Callaghan, ably supported by Joe Gormley and Lawrence Daly who will go down in history as the men who dissected a once great Union into small, fragmented, greedy collieries.

Although this flouting of democracy by the Right was controversial enough in its own terms, it created a powerful precedent and was to have even more significant consequences in 1984. Then, when 'moderates' claimed that the Left had ignored the Union's democratic decision-making processes, striking miners could respond by recalling the way in which incentives had been foisted on the NUM.

Once the incentive bonus scheme was a reality in the 'moderate' coalfields, it became increasingly difficult for other regions to avoid it. Opposition in most of the militant Areas crumbled quickly and in January 1978 only south Wales and Yorkshire were still holding out. Amidst the growing realisation that South Wales was fighting a losing battle and grassroots pressure in several collieries to 'accept the inevitable', it was decided to ballot the Area's membership – although even this was not controversy-free, since the Board issued pro-incentive leaflets to miners prior to the vote. The result of the ballot, announced in late January, was for the south Wales miners to accept a pit-by-pit bonus scheme, the last Area to do so.\textsuperscript{76}
Acceptance of the incentive bonus scheme by no means ended the problems it caused for the south Wales miners. On the contrary, by May 1978, the Area Conference noted that the return of piecework had led to risks being taken and safety standards being compromised. Increasingly, men were asked to speed up production, tempted by bonus payments. Some were also paid for working through meal-breaks, a factor which produced tensions between faceworkers and outbye workers. Within a short period of time, a myriad of technical complications and anomalies caused by the scheme had emerged.

All the difficulties caused by the incentive bonus scheme were indicative of a more significant failure of its main ostensible aim: it did not do much to boost the overall performance of the south Wales coalfield. Four months after the scheme began, it was reported that output had only increased by around two percent (as opposed to the projected figure of ten percent) and that the scheme was not proving to be self-financing, as had been supposed. Of the thirty-eight south Wales pits, only ten showed noteworthy increases in output; ten others showed a very slight improvement, whilst the remaining eighteen lagged behind. This vindicated those who had argued beforehand that incentives would not aid productivity significantly, since it would have no bearing on many factors essential for successful mining operations, such as investment levels, sufficient technical equipment and geological considerations. Consequently, many miners remained deeply unimpressed with the incentive scheme. Brynlliw lodge secretary Eric Davies commented that ‘[s]ince the scheme came into operation I’ve spent more time dealing with disputes over delays than in the last 10 years. Small problems are cropping up all the time’. As he later reflected: ‘[W]hat it actually did, it didn’t help pits in Wales, it put nails in the coffins of pits in Wales ... And unfortunately we were caught up in it ... But still, I’m opposed to it as much as I was [back then] ... Totally opposed to the introduction of piecework’.

Once the incentive bonus scheme was in place, however, the south Wales miners realised that it was there to stay and so took steps to mitigate its worst effects. Wherever possible, lodge officials ensured that the expected production levels for a given coalface were not too high to exclude the possibility of earning bonuses; also, some lodges organised pooling schemes which ensured that every worker on a given
grade received the same bonus rate. In addition to this, the Area leadership was keen to introduce a more equitable bonus system. In August 1978, an Area Conference agreed that there should be an equal rate for surface and outbye workers in collieries which were part of integrated units. Following discussion with the Board, the EC pressed for a uniform Area Bonus for all surface and outbye grades throughout the coalfield. Miners' delegates agreed to this in December 1978, although it was subsequently overturned on a mandated card vote from the lodges in February 1979.78

Although ultimately it had little choice but to accept the incentive bonus scheme, this did not mean that the Area was happy about it. Speaking at the 1978 Annual Conference, Emlyn Williams criticised the damage which had been inflicted on the NUM: 'The acceptance of piece rates was ... a rejection of principles that lie at the core of our union ... Those of us who believe in the unity and dignity of miners have suffered a severe blow far greater than the rejection of any wage claim. Unity is easy to damage, but it is difficult to repair'. Following the presidential address, Charlie Blewett (Penallta) made a telling assessment of both the significance of the introduction of the incentive bonus scheme and the role of the Area in the struggle against this:

We know in South Wales that radical thoughts and actions are of vital importance. Moderate thoughts lead to stagnation and could lead to a retreat from objects which we have already obtained.

I am pleased to see by the [Presidential] Address that militancy has not eroded because we all know, in the past that some of those who reach the top ... move from left to right. This has not been the case with our President ... Emlyn ... has correctly diagnosed the defects and the retreat of the moderates who have sacrificed National Unity for 30 pieces of silver. This is shown quite clearly by the introduction of the Incentive Scheme and those who have accepted the 30 pieces of silver to my mind are traitors. They seem to make their own principles as they go along. If history will show this treason it will also show that the South Wales Miners fought hard ... against the Incentive Scheme.
The establishment of the incentive bonus scheme signalled the end of wage equality in the coal-mining industry. Although ‘equal pay for equal work’ had been a long-held aspiration of the miners, it was only a reality for a few years – between 1971 (the first year of full NPLA parity and the introduction of the Third Wages Structure) and 1978, when piecework was reintroduced. The incentive scheme was not, as Ottey suggests disingenuously, merely a golden opportunity for mineworkers to boost their incomes. In contrast, the more politically-conscious miners of south Wales were aware of the threat which it posed. The scheme was not self-financing and did not really boost output – instead, it rendered the workforce more passive and less militant. The NCB was also able to manipulate the bonus scheme to persuade men to accept transferral to other collieries. Furthermore, possibly the most significant consequence was that it reinforced the conservatism of the ‘moderate’ coalfields, such as Nottinghamshire, which were soon receiving astronomical bonus payments. These Areas subsequently became determined opponents of any kind of disruption that might upset the money they were earning. All these factors, together with the bitterness caused by the way that piecework was forced upon the membership, ensured that the NUM was never again as united as it had been before the introduction of the incentive bonus scheme.

For the miners of south Wales, the years 1974 to 1979 were a mixture of respite, misplaced optimism and disappointment. In some respects, it was one of the best phases of the post-war era for them: there was investment into the coalfield, as well as various reforms which improved the situation of many current and former mineworkers. These developments reflected the continuing importance of coal in world energy markets and also the favourable bargaining position established by the NUM via its strikes in 1972 and 1974. This relative stability was emphasised by the absence of any significant programme of colliery closures and also the short-term increase in the numbers of miners in the coalfield.

Despite this progress, a number of developments during this period ensured that a much more pessimistic scenario confronted the Area by the end of it than had seemed possible at its outset. The ‘new dawn’ heralded by the Labour victory in 1974 proved to be a mirage, particularly following the onset of IMF-imposed austerity measures from 1976 onwards. Although the government’s Social Contract
was opposed consistently by the south Wales miners, it was accepted overall by the majority of the other Areas – resulting in an erosion of the favourable wage levels established earlier in the 1970s.

An important consideration in this period was the conservative role played by the NEC and the National Officials. Although National Conferences were theoretically the highest authority in the NUM, in reality any of their decisions with which the leadership did not agree were either reversed outright or ignored quietly. Right-wing dominance of the Union hierarchy was perpetuated by the archaic NEC structure, together with the increased powers which had accrued to the national president. These developments to a large extent nullified the previously successful strategy of left-wing forces within the Union (such as the South Wales Area) of using conferences to promote a more militant stance by the NUM.

A de facto monopoly of NUM executive power enabled Gormley and the leaders of the ‘moderate’ Areas to circumvent the aspirations of the left-wing Areas and begin the process of undermining the grassroots solidarity which had brought about the Union’s victories in 1972 and 1974. The introduction of the incentive bonus scheme, despite being rejected twice by the national membership, proved that the zealous ‘constitutionalism’ of the NUM Right meant less to it in practice than the pursuit of its own broader objectives. Whilst men in some Areas may have earned more as a result of the return of piecework, this was bought at the expense of the unity which had been the key to re-establishing the prestige and strength of the NUM in the early 1970s. Ultimately, despite the optimism which they had felt in 1974, the south Wales miners ended this interlude in the disconcerting knowledge that they were in a weaker strategic position to resist the policies of the new Thatcher administration than they had been when they had stood up to the previous Conservative government.
Notes to Chapter 4


5 *WM*, 21 March 1978.

6 Interview with George Rees, 8 December 2003.


12 *WM*, 6 May 1975.

13 SWML interviews with Emlyn Williams (AUD/33), Glyn Williams (AUD/113) and Dai Francis (AUD/131).

14 EC, 1 April, 19 August 1975.


16 George Rees interview.


18 EC, 18 November 1975.

19 Interview with Dane Hartwell, 10 December 2003.

20 *WM*, 8, 9, 14 May 1974; EC, 21 May, 4 June 1974.


22 EC, 21 January 1975.

23 *WM*, 11 April 1975.


27 Interviews with Phil Bowen (26 March 2004) and Ian Isaac (2 and 8 April 2004).

29 Miner, May/June 1978.
30 AAC, 1977; EC, 4, 21 February, 29 April 1975.
31 EC, 10 September, 29 October 1974.
34 EC, 28 June 1977.
36 WM, 4, 6, 7 May 1976.
38 Emlyn Williams SWML interview.
41 Dane Hartwell interview.
42 SWML interview with Emlyn Williams (AUD/574).
43 Miner, May/June 1978; Emlyn Williams (AUD/33) and Dai Francis SWML interviews.
44 Dai Francis SWML interview; Emlyn Williams SWML interview (AUD/33).
45 George Rees interview.
46 EC, 9 July 1974, 12 September 1978.
47 Ian Isaac interview.
49 Ibid., 18 July 1975.
52 Miner, July/Aug. 1977.
53 NUM Wages Pay Claim 1979 (Appendix B).
54 Miner, April/May 1979.
55 Emlyn Williams SWML interview (AUD/33).
58 Miner, April/May 1978; EC, 12 September 1978; AAC, 1978.
59 WM, 30 June 1978.
The underground area of the colliery away from the coal faces.


Miner, June/July 1979.


Interviews with Dane Hartwell and Terry Thomas (16 February 2004) (respectively).

EC, 14, 28 August, 9, 19 November 1974, 21 January 1975; ASC, 2 November 1974; Miner, Jan./Feb. 1975.

EC, 15 April 1977.


Interviews with Billy Liddon (1 April 2004) and Tyrone O'Sullivan (22 March 2004) (respectively).


ASC, 10 August, 6 December 1978, 22 February 1979; EC, 24 October, 7 November 1978.

The years between 1979 and 1983 were a period of crisis and confrontation for the south Wales miners. The optimistic future for the coal industry which had seemed a certainty during the 1970s was replaced in the early 1980s by a pit closure programme on a scale unseen since the first Wilson governments. Unlike the passive resentment which had characterised the British miners for much of the 1960s, this development provoked NUM anger – with no-one offering more determined resistance than the South Wales Area. This resolute opposition to the run-down of their industry was a product of militancy and desperation, a reaction against the harsh economic and ideological climate of the ‘brave new world’ of Thatcherite monetarism. In the early years of the Thatcher administration, the growing tension was punctuated by a succession of stand-offs, in which the south Wales miners sought to ensure that their jobs and their whole way of life were not consigned to ‘the dustbin of history’.

Despite the recurrent confrontations during the first term of the Thatcher government, there was no decisive showdown between the miners and their opponents – instead, the pressure built up until exploding in the 1984-5 strike. The massive significance of this epic clash was self-evident, with the result that the historiography of mineworkers in Britain in the 1980s has (understandably) focused heavily on it. Nevertheless, developments between 1979 and 1983 provide a variety of insights and explanatory contexts for the events of 1984-5. The eventual defeat of the miners in 1985 was all too real – however, subsequent political myth-making about ‘the Iron Lady’ has overemphasised the ‘inevitability’ of this outcome. For the south Wales miners, the early 1980s was a period of ‘false starts and false dawns’ in the fight to save their coalfield and their industry. In every year of the first Thatcher administration, the Area was in the vanguard of attempts to galvanise the NUM into action aimed at overturning the government’s plans – and for a brief while, it even seemed to have succeeded.
Held in the middle of May, the 1979 Annual Conference of the south Wales miners was well-placed to offer an immediate reaction to the general election defeat of the Labour government. Delivering his verdict, Area president Emlyn Williams said that Callaghan lost because he insisted on wage controls despite trade union opposition. Although critical of the general thrust of the government’s policies, he reserved praise for former Energy Secretary Tony Benn, stating that ‘I shudder to think what might have happened with a less committed Minister. We view the future with some apprehension’.

The south Wales miners viewed Thatcher’s election victory with dismay. As one collier later reflected: ‘we hated Thatcher. The miners and the Conservative Party – we hated the Conservative Party and all they stood for’. The Cwmtillery lodge secretary stated that ‘[w]e knew what sort of government Thatcher was – it was right of a Conservative government and just left of a fascist government’. This visceral opposition was made clear by frequent demonstrations by Area members outside high-profile Conservative events throughout this period. Despite this resentment, the Thatcher administration was generally expected to be a transient phenomenon in a broader pattern of Labour governments, much as Heath had been between 1970 and 1974 – particularly since it presided over a deep recession and was very unpopular for most of its first term.

The 1980s saw the worst recession in Britain since the 1930s. Unemployment increased from one million in 1979 to 3.1 million by late 1982, staying at over three million until 1987. Emlyn Williams articulated the feelings of the south Wales miners when he stated that ‘[t]his level of unemployment is not a disgrace to be deplored, it is a crime against humanity’. The Area campaigned actively against unemployment: for example, supporting the National Union of Unemployed and Workers and participating in the People’s March For Jobs to London in mid 1981 and September 1982.

In addition to the unemployment situation, the miners were also concerned at the public expenditure cuts being made by the Thatcher government. In November 1979, 900 south Wales miners participated in a mass lobby of parliament against this. The 1981 Area Conference opposed the government’s education and social
security cuts and also criticised Labour-run local authorities that were willing to implement them. In May 1982, miners' delegates called for strike action against a reduction in social security benefits. The south Wales miners also campaigned against the closure of local hospitals, with one of their main successes being in keeping Rhydlafar Hospital open. On a broader level, a perennial feature of Annual Conferences at this time were calls for the improvement and defence of the NHS. The 1980 Conference, for instance, asked the NUM National Conference for industrial action against government health service cuts.

As Heath had done, Thatcher came to power determined to take on the trade unions. Consequently, the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts curtailed unions' collective bargaining powers and restricted their ability to take legal strike action. At their 1979 Conference, south Wales miners condemned plans to outlaw secondary picketing and restrict 'closed shop' agreements, whilst Emlyn Williams said that the government's proposals 'means the return of the scab, this is the reason for Thatcher introducing the legislation'. The 1980 NUM National Conference called for non-cooperation with the Employment Bill, whilst the Area lobbied the 1980 annual conferences of both the TUC and Conservatives on this topic. The South Wales Annual Conferences in 1981 and 1982 expressed hostility towards the new legislation and called on the TUC to defy it. At the 1981 Conference, Emlyn Williams stated: 'As real democrats we have a responsibility to stop an oppressive Government just as in the early 1930s the German trade unions had a responsibility to prevent the spread of Nazism ... We have a social responsibility to take extra-Parliamentary action against Mrs Thatcher's Government'.

In facing up to the Conservative threat, the Area was well aware of the need for solidarity with other unions engaged in struggle. The clearest example of this was the industrial action by NHS NUPE members in 1982: the south Wales miners held one-day strikes in support of the health workers in June and September 1982, with the EC also asking members to join nurses' picket lines in July 1982. A march through Cardiff on the 'day of action' in June 1982 was attended by around 15,000 demonstrators, with the miners comprising a major contingent. In January and July 1982, the Area assisted ASLEF in its struggle against the government; similarly, during the National Union of Seamen's strike in November 1980 the Executive sent
a busload of miners to help picket Southampton docks. Furthermore, the Area was a stalwart defender of trade unionism in other prominent cases, asking the TUC in November 1979 to call a strike in support of Derek Robinson, the TGWU convenor sacked from the Longbridge car plant and also backing the campaign by GCHQ workers for the right to belong to a union.

The south Wales miners’ industrial militancy was augmented by a wider awareness of contemporary political developments. In the heightened Cold War tensions of the early 1980s, nuclear power was once again a pressing concern. Area policy was clear, calling for a ban on nuclear weapons and attacking the government’s fixation with atomic power. South Wales miners took part in CND demonstrations in London in October 1980 and October 1983, whilst Emlyn Williams spoke at a conference in Llandrindod Wells in March 1980 against government plans to dump nuclear waste in Wales. At the 1981 and 1983 Annual Conferences, he argued for unilateral nuclear disarmament as a key step towards world peace. Similarly, South Wales was an active supporter of the Greenham Common protesters. Speaking at the 1983 National Conference, Area vice-president Terry Thomas opposed the American military presence in the country, arguing that Britain should not be allowed to become Reagan’s ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier’.

Government policy towards the NUM in the 1980s was shaped by the events of the 1970s. Following the downfall of the Heath administration, many Tories became convinced of the need for a showdown with the miners. The Ridley Plan, leaked in 1978, stated explicitly Conservative intentions to defeat the unions as part of their broader political objective of a monetarist reconfiguration of the economy. Thatcher’s election in 1979 made it inevitable that there would be a major period of coal ‘rationalisation’, as the government sought to break the power of the NUM and rapidly shrink the industry as a prelude to its privatisation. As George Rees (Area general secretary from 1976 to 1997) later commented: ‘Many of us saw the introduction of Margaret Thatcher at that time as the beginning of the end. And she wasn’t long in establishing what she wanted in the coal industry – she wanted it closed!’
The year 1979 represented a fundamental turning point for coal. In the 1970s, the main trends in the industry had been increased production and investment. After 1979, the coalfield was hit by several adverse developments: the election of a much less sympathetic government; a world recession in steel; a decline in output; and the BSC decision to use imports rather than Welsh coal. These meant that, once again, the south Wales miners faced a major pit closure programme.

The Area leadership did not react to this new threat with the reluctant compliance which had characterised its approach in the 1960s, adopting instead a combative strategy against closures. The campaign in 1978-9 to save Deep Duffryn colliery, near Mountain Ash, was a key development, drawing explicit links between the fate of the mine and its dependent community: ‘that’s what men were fighting for – fighting for their livelihood and fighting for their communities. And Deep Duffryn was all about that’. Mobilisation of local action groups and nearby pits also pointed to this ‘community socialism’, which was to become a feature of the 1984-5 dispute. In several important respects, the Deep Duffryn struggle was the initial ‘skirmish’ in the broader ‘war’ over pit closures.

When the Board announced in late 1978 that Deep Duffryn was to shut, the south Wales miners agreed to resist the closure. In March 1979, Emlyn Williams reminded lodge leaders that the campaign should be on the general threat of pit closures, so as to maximise unity. Although the Area leadership supported the fight, a key factor was the readiness of local lodges to carry out their own campaigning work. The Cynon Valley lodges organised public meetings and Action Committees were established in the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys, which enlisted aid from councils, trades councils and a local Chamber of Commerce. In April, Deep Duffryn, Penrhiwceiber, Mountain Ash Mechanical and the Cynon Valley COSA members took one-day strike action and lobbied the NEC. In July 1979 the Deep Duffryn Action Committee travelled to Jersey to persuade the NUM National Conference to assist them. There, Area after Area pledged their support: Scottish Area president Mick McGahey declared that ‘Deep Duffryn is not a South Wales issue. It’s an issue for every coalfield in Britain’. As the momentum for a strike began to gather, the NCB backed down, agreeing to reprieve Deep Duffryn. At an Area Conference on 10 July called to discuss this news, Emlyn Williams expressed the optimism of
delegates, stating that ‘[i]t now seems clear that this Union will not take closures as lightly in the future as in the past’.

The epilogue to the Deep Duffryn campaign proved disappointing for the south Wales miners. The Area had pinned its hopes on a new coalface but by early September 1979 bad geological conditions meant that there was no alternative but to accept the closure of the colliery. Nevertheless, the episode was to have significant consequences for the NUM. As a result of the appeals to save Deep Duffryn, the 1979 National Conference endorsed a South Wales motion calling for strike action if the NCB proposed a closure to which the NUM objected. It was this resolution which was used in March 1984 to get the NEC to call for a strike against the closure of Cortonwood colliery in Yorkshire.

As Deep Duffryn showed, the early 1980s saw the re-emergence of the spectre of mass colliery closures. One Maerdy miner later recalled: ‘coming up into the Eighties – pit closures ... were then starting to bite. And men could see there wasn’t going to be no end to it ... And south Wales was taking the brunt of it, at that time’. In early 1979, the Board stated its intention to shut ten south Wales collieries by 1984. Addressing the 1979 Conference, Emlyn Williams warned: ‘Our Coalfield is under threat ... [W]e are facing a massive programme of contraction’. Area Conferences in 1979 and 1980 called for strike action against any closure not caused by geological exhaustion. This point was emphasised at the 1980 Conference by Mike Griffin (Penrhiwceiber), who said that ‘[l]he only policy the NCB knows ... to make the Industry viable is to close uneconomic collieries. This policy can easily be exposed by what took place in the 1960s when pits were closed but still the Industry was not made viable’.

Within the Area, there was an awareness that this new wave of pit closures was the result of a systematic policy of reducing productive capacity in the ‘peripheral’ coalfields. Between 1980 and 1984 the pace of closures increased dramatically, with the total mining workforce declining by an average of 13,300 a year – in comparison, the South Wales workforce in January 1984 was 22,000. To make matters worse, in December 1982 the Commons Select Committee on Energy called for an accelerated closure programme. A leaked NCB document obtained by the
NUM in later 1982 said that 17 south Wales pits would shut in the next five years, plus 78 closures in other British coalfields. In June 1983, a Monopolies and Mergers Commission report called for the closure of no less than 27 out of the 33 collieries in south Wales.  

The prospect of sweeping closures went hand-in-hand with a rapid deterioration in the financial performance of the south Wales coalfield. In 1979-80, it made an operating loss of £61 million; this climbed to £72.5 million in 1980-1 (despite a 4.5 percent increase in productivity, a 200,000 tonne increase in output and a fall in real operating costs), due to the low global coal prices. By 1981-2, only Deep Navigation and Betws made a profit, whilst only Blaenant, Taff Merthyr, Penallta, Marine and Cwm/Coedely came close to breaking even. A dramatic example of this decline was Trelewis Drift mine. In later 1979 Trelewis Drift had set a Welsh output record of 10,000 tonnes in a week but by February 1983, it was one of the biggest loss-makers in the coalfield.

In this atmosphere of crisis, the readiness of the NCB to employ private contractors inevitably provoked opposition from the south Wales miners. In November 1979, for instance, a strike broke out at Trelewis Drift against the amount of work being done by outside contractors. An additional source of ire was the attempt in November 1981 by a private firm to 'poach' NCB-employed miners. As a result of this type of situation, the 1980 and 1981 Area Conferences called for the removal of all private contractors from the industry. On 5 March 1982, the EC met with Board representatives to discuss the increasing prevalence of private plant-hire in the coalfield. There, the Area asked whether the NCB had an ulterior motive in the systematic introduction of private contractors and equipment into what was still a nationalised industry.

A key cause of the decline of the south Wales coalfield in the early 1980s was the cessation of real NCB investment in it. In the 1970s, the 1974 Plan for Coal had ensured that by the end of the decade the industry had begun to stabilise after the substantial contraction of the 1960s. Despite this, south Wales still suffered relative under-investment – even though it was Britain’s main source of specialised coals and there was a world-wide anthracite shortage. Research carried out by the Area
discovered that (with the exception of three years) NCB capital investment between 1970 and 1983 was less per capita for south Wales than anywhere else, with most of the coalfield’s operations carried out on current revenue and then charged to the individual collieries at high interest payments. The Area’s opinion was that there was ‘an anti-South Wales bias existing within the National Board’.¹⁸ In 1981-2, only £30 million in capital had been allocated to south Wales, compared with £1.6 billion for Yorkshire, £400 million for Nottinghamshire and even £140 million for Scotland (which was a much smaller coalfield).¹⁹ NCB expenditure per capita on major projects in south Wales was under three percent of the figure for Doncaster and less than one percent of the figure for north Yorkshire in 1983-4. The new MINOS computer technology was deployed overwhelmingly in the Midlands and Yorkshire; although south Wales, Kent, Scotland and Durham represented 35 percent of the total number of pits, only twelve percent of MINOS applications were situated there.²⁰ If the peripheral Areas were ‘uneconomic’, it was as a direct result of NCB investment patterns.

NCB investment in south Wales did not cease completely in the early 1980s but the situation was nevertheless deeply unsatisfactory to the miners. In July 1981, the Area and the NCB had agreed an Anthracite Strategy to develop reserves in order to meet the demand for it. Two years later, however, the plan had not been implemented: much of the promised investment had not materialised, the geological surveying at Cynheidre and Abernant was making only ‘tortoise-like progress’ and there were major uncertainties about whether work would begin on the proposed Glyncastle New Mine, near Resolven.²¹ Similar doubts surrounded the future of the Phurnacite smokeless fuel plant at Abercwmboi. The south Wales miners argued against proposals to cease production there, since its six supplier pits would face closure without it. Although the NCB eventually agreed to modernise the plant, before any work could commence events were overtaken by the outbreak of NUM strike action in March 1984. For the Area, the Board’s most damning failure was its reluctance to sink the major new £200 million coking coal colliery at Margam, a plan which had been on the drawing-board since the 1970s. In January 1982, this work was postponed in the light of the decline in BSC demand. This delay led to suspicions within the Area that the government wanted to wait until the industry had been privatised before the Margam project began.²²
South Wales miners were concerned at the lack of investment because they knew that pits could not operate efficiently without sufficient capital expenditure. One miner later pointed out: 'it's quite easy to make a pit lose money. Management could do it ... [by] not getting the right stuff into the pit ... Buying old [machinery and] ... things that are not suited to the conditions ... Lack of investment, it'll close pits, look. They can condition a pit for closure – on any pit ... And that's what we faced in the Eighties'.

At an Area Conference in January 1983, the EC outlined its proposals: commencement of the Margam and Glyncastle projects; new drifts at Nantgarw and Aberpergwm; Phurnacite plant investment; further development at Betws; reconstruction of washery facilities at Maerdy, Lewis Merthyr/Tymawr, Merthyr Vale, Abertillery and Marine; increased surveying of coal reserves; recruitment into the industry; and the replacement of powered roof supports and pit machinery where necessary.

By the early 1980s, the south Wales miners were concerned that NCB unwillingness to invest in their coalfield was jeopardising its viability. In February 1981, strike action had prompted the Board to promise a major capital expenditure programme, with the EC calling for investment in the seven closure-threatened pits. However, this proved something of a 'false dawn' for the Area. In July 1981, the Western Mail commented that '[t]he blank cheque envisaged by miners when the Government backed down ... earlier this year appears to have turned into small change for South Wales mines'. At an Area Conference the following month, miners were unhappy that NCB plans did not mention improvements for the collieries which had been facing closure. By December 1982, the Area leadership had concluded that this was a deliberate tactic to close particular pits, since the failure to develop new reserves would lead inevitably to the cessation of mining there. Speaking in May 1983, Emlyn Williams said south Wales pits were at risk because the NCB was 'starving them of investment'.

A good example of this 'enforced unviability' was provided by Britannia colliery, in the Rhymney Valley. In November 1980, a shortage of available reserves led the lodge to accept NCB proposals for a reduction of the workforce (via transferrals to other pits) in order to extend the life of the colliery; however, the following month it
was reported that Britannia needed a second coalface to remain viable. This was a 'Catch 22' situation, since the transferrals made it unlikely that there would be sufficient manpower to work another face. This relative under-investment is exemplified by the recollections of one miner who transferred to Taff Merthyr and was surprised at the high-technology equipment there, the like of which he had never seen at Britannia. He commented: '[if] Britannia had the machinery that we had in Taff Merthyr, ... Britannia would have been open today ... [W]hat they were doing, they'd starve a colliery of investment and then they'd say, "oh, the pit is not profitable", and then it was earmarked for closure'. In November 1981, Britannia miners held a one-day strike in opposition to the run-down of their pit. In an attempt to reflect these viewpoints, in May 1982 the Executive demanded extra drivages at Britannia. By July, the struggle had become sufficiently high-profile for Arthur Scargill (recently elected NUM national president) to ask the EC for information about the situation. In November 1982, the Board denied that it intended to shut Britannia; however, in April 1983 it announced that one of its two coalfaces would shut, a scenario which guaranteed closure.

The Britannia case highlights a complication faced by the NUM in the struggle against closures: the role played by adverse geology in any decision to shut a given pit. Superficially, the issue appears simple (if a pit is exhausted, unworkable or excessively dangerous, then it should be closed) but in reality geological conditions are in a constant state of flux, particularly in the south Wales coalfield. This meant that it could become a 'grey area', subject to individual assessments. As a Maerdy miner pointed out:

Mining is not like working in the factory. You knock your machine off in the factory, and when you come back tomorrow ... the machine is there and you just start it up ... Mining can change overnight. You could have a perfect place, a face – perfect. You leave it today, you come back tomorrow and there's ... geological problems ... And that's how a pit then becomes non-viable ... Well, in a fortnight, that face becomes viable and the pit becomes viable. But if they wanted to close it, they could use the times that it was non-viable.
Technological advances provided a further element here, since it was possible for these to overcome geological difficulties which would otherwise have caused closure – for example, dust suppression technologies. Consequently, investment levels have a bearing on specific considerations, as the south Wales miners were aware. Their 1980 Annual Conference criticised the NCB’s lack of progress in developing equipment suited to conditions in the coalfield and also called for further research into reducing dust levels.

The struggle at the coalface to keep a troubled colliery working was a dynamic interaction between the efforts of the miners themselves, technical and investment considerations, and geological vicissitudes. Lodges which had been determined to oppose closure through strike action could sometimes be forced to concede defeat owing to poor geology – as happened to both Coegnant and Blaengwrach. These factors could also interact in other ways. In the case of Cwmtillery, the Area persuaded management that a drivage into a new seam could make the pit viable but when conditions there became unsafe, the men were willing to see the pit close, in 1982. At Fernhill, the lodge agreed to focus all production efforts on one particular face; when, in February 1980, the working environment proved dangerously dusty, there was little choice but for it to shut. With Morlais, by April 1981 the problem with excessive water in the coalface was such that the miners had become the leading advocates of its closure, subsequently transferring to Brynlliw and Cynheidre. Exhaustion of reserves was the reason for closure at Blaenafon – although the absence of other geological problems meant that it has been able to continue in its current incarnation as the Big Pit Mining Museum.

Alongside its investment policy, the NCB also contributed directly to the decline of the south Wales coalfield through its recruitment embargo. Across Britain, NCB annual recruitment declined precipitously, from 28,824 in 1980 to 5,730 by 1983. This inevitably sapped the vitality of the industry, especially since the Board seemed particularly reluctant to recruit young men. In 1982, only 62 apprentices started work in south Wales, even though there were 1,400 applicants. As one miner recalled: '[T]hey stopped youngsters coming into the pits ... – '81 it started. I remember Mike Griffin from Penrhwiwceiber lodge bringing it up in the conferences.'
Your future of your pit is ... your young people. If you don’t train your young people, you’ve had it.30

The recruitment embargo did not escape the attention of the south Wales miners. In July 1980 several lodges reported manpower shortages; by late 1980, suspicions were being raised that the Board was attempting to condition pits for closure. In the immediate aftermath of the Area’s short-lived strike in February 1981, the Board agreed to a slight increase in the number of apprentices, although this did little to alter the downward trend in manpower levels.31 By October 1981, the lack of recruitment had become a serious issue. In January 1982, the Area leadership told Philip Weekes (the South Wales NCB director) that twenty-three lodges were asking for extra recruitment. The problem remained a point of contention. In March 1983, the Board proposed to reduce manpower at Abertillery; in contrast, the lodge felt that only increased recruitment could make the pit viable and subsequently resisted attempts to transfer men elsewhere. The NCB also refused appeals for recruitment at Blaenserchan, before relenting partially in September 1983 – although its response, the transferral of seventeen private contractors to the pit, was hardly the solution that the lodge had in mind.32

Transferring men between collieries was an important part of the process of reducing manpower levels. Ian Isaac, the lodge secretary at St John’s colliery, Maesteg, later commented that the NCB had an ‘insidious campaigning method’ to close a pit: it would generate low morale, create petty conflicts and then persuade the men they would be better off in another mine. ‘The Coal Board were well practised [in] ... how to close a coal mine. And they knew how to [demoralise] ... the men, so that they think, “oh, I’ve had enough of this. I’ll go to the next mine, then”’.33 Transferrals occurred frequently in this period: for example, the Cwmgwili workforce was dispersed to other collieries in November 1980 and some men went from Tymawr to neighbouring Lewis Merthyr in March 1981. Transfers were not always unproblematic: controversy erupted in January 1981 when Taff Merthyr lodge refused to accept Britannia transferees, arguing that the Britannia men should fight to retain their own pit and that transfers could lead to overmanning which would jeopardise Taff Merthyr. Furthermore, as the industry shrank, the prospects for a transferred miner of retaining his job-type and pay-grade were reduced.
Following the Brynlliw closure announcement in September 1983, the EC discussed the problem in the light of the fact that 520 Brynlliw men required jobs but only 180 vacancies were available elsewhere, noting with concern that soon there would be compulsory redundancies when pits shut.34

The response of the south Wales miners to the Board’s manpower reduction policy was one of increasing frustration. At an Area Conference July 1980, Dan Canniff (Oakdale) stated that ‘[w]e accepted this position in the 1960s of non recruitment and we allowed countless pits to close. We should not fall into the same trap now’.

In September 1981, Penrhiwceiber demanded an Area-wide strike against the recruitment ban, a call which was reiterated by other lodges. Under this pressure the Board backtracked, agreeing to some selective recruitment and handing over discretionary control of substitute redundancies to the miners’ agents.35 Although this seemed a step forward, the 1982 Area Conference was concerned that men who left the industry were still not being replaced on a one-for-one basis. Some miners were convinced that decisive action was needed. At Celynen South, there was an overtime ban between March and May 1982 against the NCB’s withholding of manpower and investment. Although this was successful in its own terms (in that another 50 men were recruited to the pit), the lodge felt that a chance had been lost for the Area to make a general stand on the question.36 An even more dramatic protest occurred at Bedwas in October 1982, when 19 men staged a brief ‘stay-down strike’.37 Against this backdrop of escalating confrontation, an Area Conference on 8 December 1982 agreed to hold a strike ballot. There, Emlyn Williams stated: ‘Since the [national] Ballot [the previous month, which rejected strike action] we have seen the ... [NCB] at its worst – the Area Director giving public assurances on the future of the South Wales coalfield but in informal meetings indicating quite clearly that the strategy of the Board ... is that of slow strangulation’.

Although the south Wales miners had enough difficulties with internally-generated crises in the coal industry, from the late 1970s onward they also had to face several externally-derived threats. One of the most significant of these was the increasing level of coking coal imports into Britain – a particularly worrying development for the south Wales coalfield, the main source of Britain’s coking coal reserves. The announcement that British Steel intended to import 5.5 million tonnes of coal meant
that annual Welsh production would be cut by 1.7 million tonnes. Since the region’s coking coal output was three million tonnes, this plan represented a direct threat to half its coking coal pits. At an EC meeting in late November, there was also talk of BSC importing nine million tonnes a year, which would leave British pits completely without a market.38

The south Wales miners were determined to resist this challenge. In November 1979, the Area met its trade union allies to co-ordinate opposition to the imminent arrival of an 18,000 tonne coal shipment from the USA. The miners’ campaign received official WTUC backing, with the dockers, the NUR and ASLEF all agreeing to ‘black’ the coal. By early December 1979 the ship had been prevented from entering Newport docks. After a few days’ stand-off, a deal was agreed whereby British Steel would purchase an additional 18,000 tonnes of south Wales coking coal in return for allowing the ship to unload – this was ratified by the EC with reluctance and only after much discussion. As part of these negotiations, BSC agreed to make greater use of south Wales coal. Following this, the Area leadership attempted to build a campaign against imports in conjunction with the WTUC and the other Areas, in addition to organising pit-head meetings to consolidate support for the struggle. It soon became clear that British Steel had no intention of halting its imports, however. In response, the Area leadership asked the dockers to continue their blockade. The confrontation carried on into January 1980, by which time it had become entangled in the ISTC strike against job cuts. By mid February, an agreement appeared to have emerged whereby no more coking coal would be imported in 1980. As it turned out though, the eventual failure of the south Wales miners to agree to strike action brought the blockade to an end. The collapse of this campaign paved the way for BSC coal imports to treble between 1979 and 1981.39

The decline of the south Wales steel industry was a major source of concern to the region’s mineworkers. In December 1979, British Steel announced plans to cut output in Llanwern and Port Talbot by fifty percent and make 11,300 men redundant – a development which threatened the jobs of 6,000 south Wales miners. By February 1980, the Area leadership feared that BSC plans to import Port Talbot’s entire coal requirement meant that twenty-one pits and 15,000 mining jobs could go. Consequently, it was unsurprising that the Area was keen to support the
steelworkers’ struggle against job cuts. An Area Conference on 11 December 1979 pledged strike action if necessary, whilst some lodges wanted the WTUC to call a general strike against the cutbacks. 40

The strike by the steelworkers, which began on 2 January 1980, was a significant opportunity for the south Wales miners to fight for trade union solidarity and also (indirectly) in defence of their own jobs. Realising the implications of the BSC cuts, some colliery managers sympathised with the Area’s actions and gave miners paid leave to hold meetings in support of the steelworkers. Throughout the ISTC strike, the south Wales miners maintained an embargo on steel supplies entering the collieries: any steel which was required had to salvaged from old workings within the pits. This refusal of supplies caused major problems in some places, since there could be no underground roadway advances without steel ring supports – several pits ran the risk of closure through their insistence on sticking to their principles in this respect. 41

In addition to the steel embargo, the south Wales miners also seemed intent on more proactive steps, joining the ISTC in pressing the WTUC for further action. An Area Conference on 11 January (later backed by an overwhelming lodge mandate) called unanimously for a strike from 21 January, with Emlyn Williams declaring that ‘[i]t is better to fight and lose than accept the annihilation of ... the Industrial Base of South Wales’. This plan met with opposition from the TUC and the NUM NEC and only lukewarm support from other unions, so (in spite of the Area’s protests) the WTUC decided on a ‘day of action’ instead, rearranging the proposed strike to 10 March. 42 At an Area Conference on 21 January, the general tone of militancy was reflected by Jim O’Flynn (Llynfi Sundries lodge): ‘I have been a moderate in this Union but I fear that if we do not fight on this occasion then anarchy will arise’. The ‘day of action’ on 28 January 1980 was one of the biggest one-day strikes in Welsh post-war history. Around 100,000 workers took part, paralysing ports, railways, collieries and public transport throughout Wales, whilst 15,000 trade unionists marched through Cardiff. In the aftermath of this stoppage, the WTUC threatened to call a general strike in Wales.
Following the ‘day of action’, it seemed likely that the south Wales miners would strike in support of the steelworkers. In early February 1980, the Executive strove to ensure a sizeable contingent of miners at an ISTC rally in Port Talbot, whilst Maerdy and Penrhiwceiber called for the establishment of strike committees and demanded that the Area begin the strike before the agreed date. Although the majority of unions in the WTUC were reluctant to act without TUC backing, at an EC meeting on 12 February Emlyn Williams said it would be a mistake to wait until 10 March before striking. In his view, there were signs that the ISTC was preparing to accept a wages settlement – this would undermine a united campaign against job cuts and preclude the possibility of other NUM Areas joining the struggle. In response to pressure from the steelworks strike committees and also from some sections of the Area rank and file, the EC decided to press for strike action from 25 February. An Area Conference on 20 February agreed overwhelmingly to this (subject to ratification by lodge meetings), even despite the WTUC decision to cancel its planned stoppage. It seemed that the government had stumbled into a confrontation with a powerful trade union alliance for which it was ill-prepared. In an article entitled ‘Has Mrs Thatcher’s strategy been upset?’, The Times commented that ‘Mrs Thatcher is turning out to be a weak Prime Minister’. Events did not turn out as expected. Across the coalfield, lodge meetings rejected the strike call – this surprised the Area Officials, given the miners’ traditional militancy and the reports of a pro-strike mood at grassroots level. The result was due to a combination of factors: scepticism about the readiness of the ISTC leadership to fight against job cuts and the subsequent shift in the emphasis of its strike from jobs to wages; WTUC vacillation during February 1980; unwillingness to take action in isolation from other unions; NCB interference in the ballot process; and anti-strike pressure from the media. In March 1980, Emlyn Williams conceded that the Area leadership had ‘marched the troops up and down the hill so many times they were confused, and when we wanted an army they were not available’. After the ballot, there was the brief possibility of the steelworkers picketing them out, although they decided against it – even though it was probable that miners would have respected ISTC picket-lines. The failure of the south Wales miners to join the strike also finished their campaign against coal imports, since the dockers ended their embargo following news of the ballot result.
Regardless of the reasons for it, the fact that the south Wales miners did not strike in February 1980 was a serious setback for a campaign against government 'downsizing' of the public sector industries. One lodge chairman later remarked that '[m]iners didn’t quite understand the full implication of not supporting the steelworkers for future attacks to come', especially since many pits relied on the coking coal market. The ballot result was also a personal blow for Emlyn Williams: speaking at the 1980 Area Conference, he called it 'possibly the most humiliating defeat ever inflicted on a [union] leadership by its members'. It is also difficult to avoid the conclusion that united action at that time would have placed the Thatcher government in as difficult an industrial relations situation as that faced by Heath in the 1970s. One lodge secretary later commented that '[t]hat should have been where we made a stand'.

Following the collapse of the steel strike in April 1980, the ensuing cutback in BSC productive capacity had inevitable repercussions for the coalfield. As of May 1980, Port Talbot’s entire coal requirement was imported; Llanwern lacked its own deep-sea harbour and so continued to use south Wales coal. In November 1980, Weekes told the Area Officials that the British Steel cuts would probably lead to closures but that he hoped to mitigate this by arranging for some south Wales coking coal to go to Didcot power station instead. Nevertheless, the loss of much of the coking coal market had serious implications, since the shift to power station usage led to a fall in proceeds of £19 a tonne. This 30 percent drop in revenue meant that many south Wales collieries became heavy loss-makers almost overnight. The other main consequence was increased stockpiles: in September 1980, seven million tonnes of coal were being stored in the coalfield, with this figure rising at a rate of 50,000 tonnes per week.

The steel strike episode taught the NUM a significant lesson about relying on the TUC. In March 1980, a National Conference discussed coal imports in the light of recent events in south Wales. Here, Emlyn Williams called the TUC and the WTUC 'talking shops' and criticised the inadequacy of their policy of sporadic 'day of action' token strikes, commenting that 'if they think that’s the way to defeat this Government they’re living in cloud cuckoo land'. Consequently, it became more
likely that the miners would minimise TUC involvement in any future conflict in which they found themselves. In late February 1980, WTUC general secretary George Wright was told by some EC members that they had no confidence in either the WTUC or the TUC, whilst in September 1980 Emlyn Williams stated: ‘Our destiny ... obviously does not lie within the constitution of the Wales TUC’. In 1981, WTUC willingness to consider support for an incomes policy provoked sufficient Area opposition for the EC to discuss the possibility of disaffiliation from it.51 Despite these disagreements, the south Wales miners still participated in the TUC national ‘day of action’ on 14 May 1980. In Wales, the miners were the largest group of workers to participate in the stoppage, with Emlyn Williams joining George Wright in addressing a rally in Newport.

A prominent trend in the historiography of the British labour movement in recent years has been a postmodernist-driven scepticism of the centrality of institutions such as trade unions to the lives of ordinary working-class people and also a questioning of the relevance of the image of the miner as the ‘archetypal proletarian’. However, as Taylor observes, these viewpoints downplay the extent to which miners identified with their Union as the best vehicle for advancement of their interests and saw themselves as the most politically-conscious section of the working class.52 The south Wales miners exemplified this self-appointed ‘vanguard’ role. As their president pointed out in May 1981, ‘we are associated in people’s minds with resistance and struggles ... There is no doubt in my mind that miners have an historical mission to lead in class struggles’.53 Speaking at the 1980 Area Conference, Emlyn Williams also spelt out in stark terms the crisis facing south Wales and the need for the miners to lead the resistance to this:

We are talking about not just the destruction of miners’ jobs but about the lives of communities ... The social fabric of our valley communities will disintegrate ... We are ... suffering from ... a policy of de-industrialisation which is changing the whole character of British industrial life. It is not a problem that can be resolved by a Labour Government in four years’ time. How can a future Labour Government revive something which does not exist?
Ours is a terminal disease unless we take emergency action ... Not to strike is to capitulate. We know that with sufficient determination Government policies can be altered.

The spur for the miners to galvanise themselves for an impending confrontation was the NCB closure programme unveiled in May 1980, which stated that six of the biggest loss-making collieries in south Wales would close during the coming year. Whilst this was bad enough for the Area, a more ominous development was the Board's intention to shut Lewis Merthyr/Tymawr without going through the usual review procedure. This incensed the NUM, with even national president Joe Gormley insisting that the NCB follow the statutory processes. In defiance of the Board, the south Wales miners suspended participation in the review procedure and initiated a coalfield-wide campaign for national industrial action if the threat of closures was not lifted. In June 1980, George Rees told an Area Conference that '[t]here is no safe Pit left in South Wales ... [T]he Board can manipulate any Pit now into an uneconomic position'. Llynfi Sundries delegate Jim O'Flynn observed: 'I know there were sharp criticisms made earlier this year of the Area Officials ... but ... everyone now realises that if we had gone into the fight in February we would not be in the state we are in today'. Following this conference, the south Wales lodges agreed unanimously to support the struggle.54

The campaign against pit closures in south Wales gathered momentum in the second half of 1980, partly due to pressure from the Lewis Merthyr men and partly as a result of Area leadership strategy. An important figure in both these respects was Des Dutfield, the Lewis Merthyr lodge secretary who had been elected South Wales vice-president that May. In July 1980, he provided an insight into the plan to confront the Board: 'I think that if we win the fight this year that we are going to embark on towards the winter months [my emphasis] to preserve this coalfield ... then, in ten years, we are still going to see a thriving industry. I can't give the alternatives because I can't accept that we will lose this fight'.55 During the summer, several lodges called for an overtime ban as a prelude to any possible strike action, whilst Lewis Merthyr and Tymawr men also lobbied the 1980 National Conference. Between September and November 1980, pit-head meetings were held to galvanise the membership for the struggle against closures. Further support for this stance
came from the NEC, which decided to organise a national withdrawal from the colliery review procedure unless the threat to Lewis Merthyr/Tymawr was lifted. On 20 November, an Area Conference underlined the readiness of the miners to strike to defend their industry. There, Emlyn Williams welcomed the NEC offer of aid but (in a contribution which highlighted the key elements in the strategic thinking of the NUM Left in the early 1980s) stressed the need for the south Wales miners to fulfil a vanguard role in the forthcoming confrontation:

> When the crunch comes the National President will insist on an Individual Ballot ... before strike action. We all know ... that Areas unaffected by closures ... will not succumb to an appeal for industrial action that will be worded against the more progressive Areas. The answer is that somewhere in the British Coalfield one Area has got to make the initial sacrifice and immediately extend their appeal ... for support to the grass roots of the British Coalfield ... Our experience with the British TUC [is] ... one of being constitutionalised out of action, and if anyone thinks that ... the TUC would agree to this action, ... they are living in a fool's paradise ... We have effectively now, for a twelve month, blocked the Coal Board's aspirations on Tymawr/Lewis Merthyr and it is, I hope, possible that discussions will drag out until January of 1981. This has been, and always will be, the right time for miners to show positive resistance to closures. I would plead with the leadership here that the task is to prepare our men for the inevitability of a clash with the Coal Board and this Government ... I want immediate backing for Strike Action if the Board decide to close Tymawr/Lewis Merthyr. We already have the mandate but do we have to kindle the fire?

The certainty of the Area leadership of a clash over colliery closures in early 1981 was driven partly by its own strategy and partly because the Board was scheduled to announce in February 1981 how it would implement the cutbacks proposed by the Coal Industry Act (1980). In south Wales, the miners braced themselves for a confrontation: both they and the Yorkshire Area had strike mandates and rumours were circulating that the NCB planned to shed 25,000 jobs and cut annual output by
nine million tonnes. Faced with the probability that the blow would fall heavily on south Wales, on 9 February 1981 an Area Conference decided that all-out strike action would commence as of 23 February. Emlyn Williams declared: 'I won’t call it a strike. I would call it a demonstration for existence. The miners in south Wales are saying “we are not going to accept the dereliction of our mining valleys, we are not allowing our children to go immediately from school to the dole queue. It is time we fought’".57

Although the NUM had been expecting it, the NCB's announcement still came as a harsh blow: twenty-three pits were to close, five of which (Lewis Merthyr/Tymawr, Coegnant, Brynlliw/Morlais, Britannia, and Aberpergwm) were in south Wales.58 Whilst it was not surprising that Welsh miners were at the centre of resistance to this, what was unusual was that opposition was led by the politically-moderate Coegnant lodge. When placed ‘in jeopardy’ in 1980, the men there had complied with management plans to reduce the labour force, accepted lower earnings and even set up a new £1.5 million coalface a fortnight ahead of schedule. Coegnant passed its ‘fitness test' and on 12 February had been congratulated by NCB officials who had visited the colliery. The next day, the men were devastated and infuriated to learn that their pit had nevertheless been listed for closure. As Coegnant lodge secretary Verdun Price pointed out, '[t]he only answer for us was to become militant – we were left with no alternative'.59 The Coegnant men struck immediately and set about picketing out other south Wales pits. Price later recalled that he received a telephone call from Emlyn Williams at the time, in which the Area president stated his tacit approval for this unofficial action.60 On 16 February, a hastily-convened Area Conference carried unanimously the EC’s recommendation of an all-out strike, to begin the following day.

With the south Wales coalfield solidly on strike, the Area sought to spread its campaign further afield. Arrangements were made to picket the steelworks, power stations and coking plants, as well as various NCB ancillary sites. Other unions agreed to halt coal movement throughout the region, whilst the strike also received WTUC approval. The EC asked the other Areas for support: Kent, Scotland and Durham joined the strike promptly, whilst Yorkshire had a mandate to begin action the following week – all of which defied the National Officials’ requests to wait
until a ballot could be held. Events were gathering momentum and appeared close to becoming a full-blown national strike.

Faced with this prospect, the Thatcher administration panicked. As John Biffen, a Cabinet Minister, noted at the time, ‘the spectre that frightened the government was the very clear evidence that there would be massive industrial action’. Realising that coal stocks were low, on 18 February it agreed to withdraw the closure programme and promised to double the NCB grant. Conservative opinion was outraged at this ‘U-turn’. Back-bench Tory MPs criticised Thatcher and demanded the resignation of NCB chairman Derek Ezra. The director-general of the Institute of Directors slammed the government’s ‘scandalous surrender’, commenting sarcastically that ‘[w]e might as well ask the miners’ union when it wants to call the next general election’. James Prior, the Secretary of State for Employment, denied press allegations that he had been plotting against the Prime Minister via secret meetings with Gormley. It was all a far cry from Thatcher’s later image as ‘the Iron Lady’.

Although the government had apparently conceded defeat, the NUM still had to decide whether to continue the strike. In the NEC, Emlyn Williams and George Rees argued against calling it off until the government had given written guarantees but were outvoted 15-8. Despite this, the strike continued in south Wales until an Area Conference had met on 20 February. This was not simply a formality: since the south Wales miners had begun the strike, they were in an influential position to determine the next step. After a long discussion, the EC agreed to accept the NEC recommendation, albeit with a mandate for an immediate return to action if government promises were not fulfilled. At the conference, Emlyn Williams conceded that he was somewhat suspicious that ‘what has been offered is far more than we came out for’ but pointed out that the NUM needed to be seen to be accepting the victory it had won. Although most delegates concurred, a few still had reservations. Mike Griffin (Penhillceiber) was annoyed that the NEC recommendation was being accepted, even though the NEC ‘majority’ who voted to end the strike represented a an overall minority of the membership. Similarly, Ivor England (Maerdy) warned that ‘[w]e have nothing in writing and I am concerned if we return to work pit closures will continue’.
Given the events which were to occur in subsequent years, the decision of the Area Conference on 20 February 1981 not to continue the strike has assumed a degree of ‘what if?’ historical significance. For instance, Tyrone O’Sullivan contends:

As I saw it, Thatcher was offering us a basket of goods but there was a hole in the bottom of the basket and everything ... was rapidly falling out ... [W]e were bought off and I blame the Union in South Wales. The miners in Yorkshire and Kent were waiting ... [and i]f we had voted for a full strike, they would have supported us – they argued that ... the government was simply playing for time. Unfortunately only seven local lodge votes supported the continuation of the strike and the rest supported the South Wales union leadership. We would live to regret that decision for many years and I believe it was that vote that allowed the Thatcher Government to go on and not only destroy the NUM but also the whole trade union movement.64

Even within the Area leadership, the issue had been a contentious one. Mike Banwell, an Executive member at the time, later argued that ‘we let them off the hook ... I think it was a missed opportunity. I think we should have ... said, ... “let’s get our demands ... met before we return to work”’. In contrast, fellow EC representative Dane Hartwell stressed the difficulties of the situation: ‘once they had done a U-turn, ... it’s very difficult to then to say to your men, “right the threat’s been taken away ... – but you should remain on strike” ... I don’t think the men would have worn it ... [and] we could have been accused of just wanting to prolong the strike’.65

Regardless of later arguments, in February 1981 most south Wales miners felt that they had won some kind of victory against the closure programme. Assessing the strike at the 1981 Area Conference, Emlyn Williams called it ‘a success, but not an unmitigated one’ and pointed out that the key lesson was the necessity of confronting the government over pit closures: ‘It is ... a universal truth that in class struggles, if you fight you stand to win or lose, but if you do not fight, you stand only to lose’.

204
The February 1981 confrontation was a defeat for the government, although not ultimately a significant one. As NUM national vice-president Mick McGahey remarked at the time, it was 'not so much a U-turn, more a body swerve'; Terry Thomas (Area vice-president from 1983 to 1989) later commented that 'in rugby terms, we were fed a dummy'. In essence, the 'U-turn' was a tactical concession because the government realised that it was insufficiently prepared for an NUM strike. The main long-term result of the stand-off was that it strengthened Thatcher’s resolve to tackle the Union when the time was ripe. The 'generous settlement' of 1981 proved to be a mirage. Retrospectively, it could be argued that it was a mistake not to get these concessions in writing; on the other hand, it is possible that the government would have eventually evaded any written agreement in the same way that it reneged on its verbal promises. Within a few months, doubts had begun to emerge. In mid 1981, EC member Gary Woolf pointed out that the coalfield had not received the promised investment and that he was unsure about the value of the 'victory' won by the miners. Similarly, in April 1981, Emlyn Williams told an Area Conference: 'we have not yet attained the victory that we so earnestly desired ... and indeed a feeling is creeping in that possibly on taking the word of the National Executive and the President that we returned to normal working too quickly’. In December 1982, he stated pessimistically that 'we were driven back to work by the undertakings given by the media. We should have, looking back in hindsight, returned only when we had copper-bottomed guarantees. Nothing in the March 1981 Coal Industry Financial Bill has been given to the South Wales coalfield'.

In addition to the struggle for a fairer deal for the men in the pits, South Wales retained its long-standing concern for the wellbeing of retired mineworkers. The two interconnected issues here were the Voluntary Early Retirement Scheme (VERS) and pensions. Although the VERS had been a significant step forward when it had been introduced, it was by no means perfect and every Annual Conference in the early 1980s featured calls for improvements to it. Following the emergence of the controversial Redundancy Scheme, the 1982 Conference called for an enhanced VERS lump sum, so that men would opt for this rather than redundancy. The Area was also keen to see an increase in the basic state pension and the Mineworkers’
Pension Scheme, particularly given the high inflation in the early 1980s. Here, again, the Redundancy Scheme made an impact: the 1983 Conference called for a doubling of miners’ pensions, as a means of tackling the numbers of men who were taking voluntary redundancy owing to the enhanced payments for this which were by then starting to feature prominently.

Colliery-level disputes remained a common feature of industrial relations in south Wales – indeed, their frequency had increased following the reintroduction of piecework into the industry several years earlier. One example of this was the strike at Aberpergwm in August 1983 over bonus payments. Many other factors could cause stoppages. At Trelewis Drift, for instance, there were strikes in July 1981 and February 1982 against management’s refusal to allow dispensations for men working in atrocious water conditions. Given the Board’s recruitment embargo, an additional source of conflict was disagreements over the most effective use of manpower: there was a dispute at Marine in April 1981 over shift working patterns and also a three-day strike at St John’s in May 1983 over coalface manning levels. Whilst few of these stoppages related directly to the major problems facing the south Wales miners, they nevertheless reflected the tension within the industry in the early 1980s.

On a more general level, the incentive bonus scheme raised several obstacles to the cause of NUM unity. Reporting to an Area Conference in February 1979 on the effect of the scheme, George Rees conceded that south Wales output was up by 9.3 percent but that this in itself did little to safeguard the coalfield: ‘The more you look at the problem the more complex it becomes. If we do not produce [enough] the Board want to close pits, if we overproduce the markets are not available – [leading to] further pit closures’. In this context, bonuses for certain collieries and coalfields were a major problem for the NUM if they hastened the process of closure elsewhere. Further evidence of the impact of piecework was the acceptance at the 1979 Area Conference of the EC resolution calling for £71 a week for surface workers (with appropriate differentials), a modest demand compared to those of the 1970s. Delegates accepted this reduced aspiration partly to minimise the crisis facing the industry but also because they thought that a call for action would never be supported by men at collieries whose bonuses were far more than the basic rates.
that the NUM would be demanding. As had been predicted before their introduction, incentive bonuses increased disparities between coalfields, collieries and job-grades – and also masked a relative decline in basic wages. Within the pits themselves, the scheme overturned the relatively harmonious industrial relations of the 1970s, as men and management disagreed frequently over the incentive rate and the output ‘norm’ required to trigger bonus payments. This soon became the most common cause of local grievances.  

Once the incentive bonus scheme had been established, the south Wales miners accepted that its wholesale abolition would prove impracticable: their 1979 Conference rejected calls for it to be abandoned, whilst the St John’s proposal at the 1983 Conference for the replacement of pit-level bonuses by a National Productivity Scheme (the Area’s preferred policy in the mid 1970s) did not even receive the support of a second lodge to allow it to be debated. Notwithstanding this, the general response was to work towards mitigating the most divisive aspects of the incentive scheme. For instance, throughout the early 1980s the Area leadership pressed for a uniform bonus rate within integrated collieries for all EBG and surface grades. Also, every Area Annual Conference between 1979 and 1983 called for improvements in the incentive bonus scheme. Some of the main grievances were: discrepancies between different grades; ‘inbye’ craftsmen not receiving the same bonuses as faceworkers; the scheme made insufficient allowance for adverse geological conditions; and the fact that calculation of bonuses on a weekly basis meant that a whole week’s worth of payments could be undone by poor results on any one day. By May 1983, the south Wales miners had concluded that the fairest solution would be an Area-wide bonus scheme, which would pay out at a uniform rate to the various grades across the whole coalfield.  

In February 1981, the plan for a widespread closure programme was met head-on by the miners and rebutted comprehensively. In the years which followed the government changed tactics, introducing piecemeal cutbacks which did not provoke a direct NUM challenge – a policy of ‘rationalisation by stealth’. In south Wales, this meant the withholding of investment and recruitment so that collieries would eventually be forced to close. In August 1981, for example, the miners were concerned that NCB investment proposals made no mention of extra capital for the
pits which had been on the February 'hit list'. A further aspect of this policy was the emphasis on local discussions about any particular colliery in jeopardy, so as to prevent the NUM taking the type of national stand that it had over Deep Duffryn in 1979. By 1983 most of the closures announced in February 1981 had been carried out, reducing total manpower in the industry by 22,000. *The Miner* newspaper warned that the NCB planned to cut a further 70,000 jobs by 1990, together with the closure of 95 pits (out of a British total of 207) by 1987. In an Area Conference in May 1983, EC member Des Dutfield described the NCB's 'divide and conquer' policy as 'the oldest Tory trick in the book' and warned that 'if we don't change our tactics we are going to lose the fight'.

If one half of the Thatcher government's post-1981 policy towards the coal industry was to weaken the NUM without pushing it into a confrontation, the second part was to take steps so as to be able to withstand a strike once it was ready for a showdown. As part of this, coal stocks were built up from 37 million to 57 million tonnes between 1981 and 1984. By early 1983, 750,000 tonnes a year of non-NCB coal was being used at Aberthaw power station, one of the main markets for the south Wales coalfield; at the same time, it was costing the South Wales Board £200 million a year to store unwanted coal. Reporting on these stockpiles, the *South Wales Miner* stated sardonically that '[t]hanks to the genius of the Coal Board's salesmen, [the coal] ... is moving so slowly that spontaneous combustion will claim it before any customer does'.

In addition to this stockpiling policy, a central part of the Thatcher government's plan was diversification of the energy sources used by the CEGB, with the emphasis on oil, gas and nuclear power. In the early 1980s, nuclear power seemed the main threat. The development of the new Sizewell reactor in Suffolk, coupled with the fact that several south Wales coal-fired plants (Uskmouth, Rogerstone, and Carmarthen Bay) were nearing the end of their working lives, led to fears that the CEGB would replace them with nuclear installations, thereby removing one of the coalfield's most important markets - even Aberthaw faced possible replacement. The prospect of up to twelve new nuclear reactors in south-west England, in addition to Hinckley Point and three other generators there, led the Area's newspaper to comment grimly that '[t]he whole Bristol Channel area is rapidly becoming
Europe’s most nuclear-intensive region ... If this nightmare becomes a reality, the people of South Wales won’t need lights in the 21st century [original emphasis]. The glow from their own radioactivity will be illumination enough to guide them to and from the dole office’.74

Within the south Wales coalfield, the NCB policy of ‘rationalisation by stealth’ between 1981 and 1983 was done partly by the ‘slow strangulation’ of selected collieries and also via measures to shrink the overall size of the industry. The prime example of this was the Redundancy Agreement, introduced in March 1981. The South Wales opinion of this was spelt out by Emlyn Williams at an Area Conference the following month, who called it ‘an instrument to destroy the unity of the miners ... [I]t is fool’s gold and no-one has the right to prostitute his job when we have such high unemployment figures’. One miner later recalled the effect of this scheme:

[The government] done a U-turn and in no time they were up to their tricks again ... [T]hey brought in ... redundancy payments ... [t]o split the workers. They actually got men to sell their jobs ... [T]hese men were offered this money, something they’d never seen in their lives before ... They were coming up to retirement, some of them ... And most men finished with ill health anyway. Or incapacity – which was a small amount [of money compared to the redundancy scheme]. So, that’s why we got into difficulties.75

The apparent similarity of Redundancy Agreement and the VERS might make the Area’s strong opposition to the one policy and its support for the other seem confusing. The reason for this approach hinges on the very different aims of the two policies: the VERS enabled men to retire early, whereas the redundancy scheme aimed to reduce the size of the industry. The fundamental distinction between them was that the Board was obliged to replace men who retired under the VERS, whilst it was not under the Redundancy Agreement. Furthermore, redundancy pay-outs were far more than under the VERS, in order to induce men to opt for it in preference. The absence of any formalised NUM input into deciding who was eligible for redundancy also meant that the Board could easily use it to undermine the Area leadership. In mid 1981, for example, redundancy was being offered to
Betws and Cynheidre men without consultation with either the lodge leaderships or the Area NUM – even though there were over a hundred vacancies at Cynheidre. Altogether, 734 men took redundancy in south Wales in 1982-3, at a time when the coalfield required 5,000 new recruits to ensure adequate manning levels. 76 At an Area Conference in November 1981, the situation was spelt out clearly by Mike Griffin: ‘The Board are offering Redundancy because they know that Redundancies cannot continue without collieries closing’.

A similar process of ‘rationalisation’ was at work in the Board’s programme of colliery amalgamations. Whilst these were portrayed as ‘modernisation’, the Area remained unconvinced of their actual necessity. In practice, integration made it very likely that the Board would eventually centralise coal-winding on one of the sites in question, leading to the closure of the other surface workings. Evidence of this was provided in September 1982 and 1983 by NCB proposals to close the colliery surfaces at Blaenserchan (which was to join up with Six Bells and Marine) and Coedely (which was linked with Cwm). 77 This type of scenario ensured that the south Wales miners were deeply unenthusiastic about the Board’s plans, which emerged in August 1982, to integrate Maerdy and Tower and also to link Deep Navigation, Penrhiwceiber and Taff Merthyr. However, if the issue was presented starkly in terms of either integration or closure then eventually miners felt they had little choice – by January 1984, for example, both Tower and Maerdy lodges had agreed to an amalgamation of their collieries. However, no progress had been made on this before March 1984. 78

Despite their active campaigning against the pit closures, the south Wales miners remained keenly interested in NUM internal affairs. One of their perennial concerns was the composition of the Union’s NEC, which gave disproportionate influence to the smallest Areas. This was of particular concern to South Wales in the early 1980s, since if its membership fell below 22,000 (as seemed likely within the next few years) it would be reduced to one seat on the NEC – the same influence as Cumberland, which had only 650 members. Consequently, Area Conferences in 1981 and 1983 called for a democratisation of NEC decision-making. This reform was seen as important because these decisions had a central bearing on critical junctures in the Union’s history. As Mike Griffin pointed out at the 1981
Conference, the strike in February 1981 was called off because of the 15-8 vote in the NEC – even though the eight votes represented 129,000 members, whereas the fifteen vote ‘majority’ only represented 125,000.

An important opportunity for change was the retirement of Joe Gormley as national president at the end of 1981. Gormley had been the bulwark of NUM conservatism for a decade and in many respects represented the antithesis of the radicalism of the south Wales miners. In April 1981, for instance, he provoked outrage within the Area when he reportedly commented that he was happier dealing with Conservative Ministers than he had been with Tony Benn whilst the latter had been Secretary of State for Energy.79 Once he had retired, the Area was free to express its opinion – and did so in characteristically robust language. Its 1982 Annual Conference deplored Gormley’s ‘cavalier’ attitude towards National Conference decisions and stated that any future NUM officials who similarly disregarded the will of the membership should be expelled. Emlyn Williams made an equally damning assessment: ‘Here was a man whose capacity for intrigue knew no bounds ... He ignored any decisions he disliked ... [and it] was indicative of his attitude that he was prepared to help out this hated Tory Government ... [O]ur President retired with members demanding his dismissal’.

Gormley’s departure provided the chance to elect a president willing to play a more proactive role in the struggle against the crisis facing the coal industry. With McGahey ineligible for consideration (on the grounds that, under NUM rules, he was too old), the candidate for the NUM Left was Arthur Scargill, the Yorkshire Area president. Scargill addressed South Wales Annual Conferences in 1980 and 1981, receiving their formal backing. He also benefited from the support of the CP and the various other left-wing groups who were emerging in the early 1980s, all of whom wanted to see the Union adopting a more militant stance. In the run-up to the election, he spoke at several meetings across south Wales. In the NUM presidential election in December 1981 Scargill scored a resounding victory with over 70 percent of the vote, a result which appeared to represent a clear mandate for action against pit closures. 80 Describing Scargill’s election as ‘a tremendous victory for progressive reforms in the Union’, Emlyn Williams said: ‘For the first time in the history of the NUM we have a progressive leadership ... There are no limits this
Union cannot reach with an active, democratic, campaigning leadership’. Scargill’s success, followed by the election of Peter Heathfield (the North Derbyshire Area secretary) as NUM general secretary in January 1984, meant that all three National Officials were now left-wingers.

At grassroots level, one indicator of the radicalisation of sections of the NUM membership was the growth in the 1980s of the influence of the Militant Tendency, the Socialist Workers Party and various other left-wing organisations. Whilst they never achieved the prominence within south Wales that the CP had enjoyed in the mid twentieth century, this was still a noteworthy development. Within the south Wales coalfield, the rising profile of Militant was evident in the permission granted to its newspaper to attend and report on the 1978 and 1981 Conferences and also the Area’s sponsorship of a campaign by the Young Socialists in late 1980 against unemployment levels. In addition to this, the South Wales NUM spoke out on several occasions in the early 1980s against the Labour internal ‘witch hunts’ against Militant. There were members of Militant and other left-wing groups in several south Wales lodges and these met occasionally to discuss matters pertinent to the NUM and the coal industry – a pattern which in many ways has parallels with the CP-led unofficial movement in the 1960s. The most prominent Militant supporter in the Area was Ian Isaac, the St John’s lodge secretary: his election onto the EC in August 1983 further underlined the increasing significance of the non-CP Left in south Wales. Militant, the SWP and unaligned radical elements were to assume a greater prominence during the 1984-5 strike when, according to Blaenant lodge chairman Phil Bowen, ‘[w]e were playing out the Russian Revolution again, just about, in Wales!’ In the post-strike recriminations within the NUM, it was the organisation of these groups as the Broad Left Organising Committee which was the driving force behind the re-election of Scargill as president in 1988.

In the unsettled atmosphere of the early 1980s, the Area leadership was determined to resist pit closures through strike action. In this respect, it is possible to trace a direct ‘line of descent’ from the unofficial movement’s strategy in the 1960s to the official Area policy by the 1980s – a point made by veteran EC member and 1960s activist Ben Davies in his final speech to the Executive before retiring in April 1982. In many ways this was not surprising, given that three of the Area’s four
most senior posts were filled by men who had led the unofficial movement (Emlyn Williams, George Rees and Don Hayward), whilst many other Executive members and lodge leaders had risen to prominence during the 1969-74 upsurge of radicalism. The south Wales miners' historical 'vanguard' role was prominent in the thinking of the Area president. In October 1980, he stated that '[t]here is an understanding now that South Wales have got to make the first sacrifice and I believe that we have got to avoid ... being constitutionalised out of action by ... the National Executive and Joe Gormley'.

By March 1983 however, the British miners had rejected strike action three times in less than eighteen months. Consequently, Emlyn Williams told the 1983 Area Conference:

We have ... to ask ourselves serious questions about the consciousness of our members ... [A]lthough I would like to think that miners were politically different and better than other groups of workers, in reality they often behave like others. All trade unionists in Britain are operating under vicious Government pressures from legislation and criminal levels of unemployment. To put it bluntly, unemployment takes the guts out of people.

On what basis was this statement made? Obviously, the topic is difficult to measure – although the South Wales president was not the only person to make this point at the time. In the early 1980s, for example, the Garw Valley and Abernant lodge secretaries, together with Glyn Williams (the former Area leader) all said that there had been a decline in political consciousness amongst the miners in recent years. Partly this was due to reluctance to jeopardise bonus payments through industrial action – however, the issue was more complicated than that. In 1980, former Area general secretary Dai Francis claimed that Labour right-wingers had fomented apathy so as to retain control of their own localities. Retrospectively the Blaenant chairman made a similar comment, highlighting the role of an 'anti-struggle movement' within Labour in lessening resistance to closures and persuading the miners not to support the steelworkers' strike in 1980. This point was underlined by Emlyn Williams in February 1981, when he attacked 'the Labour Councillors for
Moderation in the South Wales Coalfield’ ‘who in February of 1980 deliberately carried out a character assassination of myself'.

Faced with this challenge, the Area leadership strove to prepare for a final confrontation with the NCB and the government. At the 1983 Area Conference, Emlyn Williams called for a heightened political consciousness amongst the south Wales miners:

[I]t needs more than good intentions by the leadership to persuade the NCB to meet our demands. It needs an alert, politicised membership, not simply at branch officer level but at the level of the ordinary rank and file. This level has been our achilles heel. The evidence of the past year has shown that in many ways the leadership has been ahead of the rank and file and this is not a healthy situation. I am generalising, of course, because there have been situations, over Lewis Merthyr/Tymawr, for example, when this has not been the case. You must also remember that the standards expected of the South Wales miners is high [my emphasis]. In my view it is not a victory when 55 percent of our membership supports an official call for strike action because I expect an 85 percent response. I was disappointed last November when only 59 percent of the South Wales miners supported the NEC call for industrial action over pay and pit closures. Our reputations as political leaders in the British coalfields, built by Arthur Horner, Bill Paynter and Dai Francis, is at stake [my emphasis].

Rather than simply calling for greater radicalism however, in the early 1980s the Area leadership took seriously the task of building up rank and file activism, encouraging the formation of local action committees and emphasising to the membership the need to oppose closures. The Area’s education scheme played a useful role here – partly through its day-release courses, partly in conjunction with Llafur, the Welsh labour history society. In April 1980, for example, the fifth annual Llafur weekend school focused on the crisis facing the coalfield, with the main speakers including McGahey, Will Paynter and Philip Weekes. It was as part of this approach that Kim Howells was appointed as research officer in May 1982, to provide information to assist the struggle. The Area leadership also organised mass
meetings on the subject (including an eight-week campaign in autumn 1980), whilst the 1983 Area Conference called for ‘teach-ins’ to counteract ‘the constant barrage of propaganda from the Capitalist Press’. One indication of the success of these measures was that the percentage of south Wales miners voting for strike action in national ballots rose from 54 percent in January 1982, to 59 percent in November 1982 and 68 percent in March 1983.

One of the Area’s most important campaigning innovations in this period was the launch of a monthly newspaper, *South Wales Miner*, as a complement to the national NUM paper *The Miner*. The first issue appeared in October 1982 and its front page made it clear that its key objective was to galvanise the membership for the struggle:

The ‘South Wales Miner’ will give NUM members ... information about their industry ... normally denied them by the Coal Board, television and newspapers.

Our paper will campaign to reverse the scandalous run-down of this coalfield. It will expose bad management and investment starvation wherever it finds them.

Most important, ... it will provide a voice for the ordinary rank and filer and show that we suffer similar problems right across this coalfield.

Our aim will be to inform and unite our membership so we can abolish the insecurity and doubt which have bedevilled our industry.

Reflecting on the *South Wales Miner*, many lodge and Area leaders said that it was intended to be a counter to the NCB newspaper *Coal News*. In addition to rebutting NCB propaganda and enhancing Union solidarity, the paper provided information on developments within the industry, such as changes to the pension scheme or new safety regulations. The journal also conveyed the Area’s message to members who did not attend lodge meetings regularly and so were not up-to-date on the broader industrial situation. It seems that it was generally well received by the membership.

Although the Area worked consistently in the early 1980s to prepare for a showdown with the NCB, an important strategic question was the choice of the best issue on which to make a stand. Clearly, colliery closures was the main threat –
however, as Emlyn Williams told the 1983 Conference, ‘[t]he most difficult thing in the mining industry is to get coalfield solidarity for action over a single pit ... We have a long history of disappointment and frustration on this issue. Some of you will remember the Afan Ocean Colliery closure in 1969’. In June 1986, he commented that it was far easier to have successful national strike action over wages rather than pit closures. Furthermore, closures was a defensive issue conditional on reacting to an NCB announcement, whereas with wages it was possible for miners to take the initiative. Bearing this in mind, although they were prepared to fight colliery closures wherever necessary, the left-wing Areas (and after Scargill’s election as NUM president, the national leadership) also looked to utilise wages as the ‘spearhead’ for the broader struggle against government plans to run down the coal industry.

Following Scargill’s election in December 1981, three attempts were made to initiate strike action via a national ballot. In each case, the leadership tried to choose the issue which seemed most likely to produce a positive result. In late 1981 and early 1982, the focus was on wages. In December 1981, South Wales lobbied the NEC against the NCB’s offer. An Area Conference on 5 January 1982 endorsed the NEC call for strike action, with Emlyn Williams warning that ‘if we are defeated on the wages issue it will be a mandate for the Board to close Pits’. When the national ballot was held later that month however, the result was a defeat for the NEC, by 113,144 votes (55 percent) to 91,477 (45 percent) – although South Wales voted for a strike by 10,687 (54 percent) to 8,939 (46 percent). The most controversial aspect of this result was the Joe Gormley’s last-minute exhortation to miners to reject the NEC recommendation. Union left-wingers were incensed and although a vote of censure against Gormley on the NEC was defeated by 13 votes to 12, many south Wales lodges called for his instant dismissal. The EC meeting on 22 January ‘made [it] crystal clear that in the opinion of the South Wales Executive Council Joe Gormley had turned into a traitor’.

By the time the wages question re-emerged later in 1982, the Area had made a concerted attempt to learn from the defeat in January. In south Wales, the main steps taken in October 1982 to support the Union’s official policy (calling for a weekly rate of £115 for surface workers, with appropriate differentials) were a series of
high-profile rallies, the implementation of a national overtime ban and the unveiling of the new Area journal. The campaign was conducted on both wages and pit closures, since the NCB claimed that collieries would have close to finance the Union’s pay demand. An Area Conference on 6 October backed strike call, with Emlyn Williams observing that ‘[n]ever [before] have we had a Pit ballot on Pit Closures and this is a golden opportunity’. The overtime ban, which received total support in south Wales, was an attempt to focus men’s minds on the inadequacy of their basic wage-rates and also to deplete coal stocks. Additionally, it was arranged for the Area leadership to tour the pits to argue the case for strike action. The highlight of these meetings was a mass rally at the Afan Lido in Port Talbot, addressed by the National Officials. Despite these efforts, the overall ballot result was a disappointment for NUM militants, with action being rejected by 125,233 votes (61 percent) to 81,592 (39 percent). South Wales supported the strike call, by 12,138 votes (59.25 percent) to 8,287 (40.75 percent). Following this, Emlyn Williams congratulated the south Wales miners on their pro-strike vote, in spite of ‘a propaganda bombardment by the Coal Board and the media which surpassed any in living memory ... [T]he Establishment were terrified of a miners’ strike’. 93

This failure prompted much deliberation in south Wales. Across the coalfield, the view was that the Executive had run a very good campaign – and consequently the Area’s 59 percent vote was quite disappointing. The EC attributed the defeat to NCB and media interference, the ballot being held in the run-up to Christmas, and the belief that some men would rather take redundancy than strike. The Area leadership saw the result as a wasted opportunity. Emlyn Williams slammed the media’s ‘anti-working class propaganda and lies’ and also had stern words for the ‘greed and indifference [which] played a large part in the outcome of the vote’.94 At the 1983 Area Conference, he described the episode as ‘a humiliating setback for the Union’.

The ballot result may have removed the possibility of a national strike over wages but many south Wales miners still felt that decisive action was necessary to prevent the run-down of their coalfield. On 8 December 1982, an Area Conference demanded that the NCB increase investment in south Wales from £14 million to £500 million and allow adequate recruitment into the industry – and if this was not forthcoming by 17 January 1983, the Area would instigate unilateral strike action.
The pit at the centre of this campaign was Blaengwrach, where development work was needed to save it from closure. Soon afterwards, meetings throughout the coalfield backed the strike call overwhelmingly, with only five out of the 33 lodges opposing it. Subsequently, the south Wales leadership contacted other Areas to ask them to join the proposed strike. The intention was clearly for a re-run of the strategy used in February 1981.

January 1983 looked set to repeat the events of two years before. However, solidarity from other Areas failed materialise following the Scottish leadership’s decision not to oppose the closure of Kinneil colliery and combine this with the south Wales campaign planned for 17 January. This lessened enthusiasm for action, causing concern within the EC that it would be compromised by making a strike call which the membership rejected – as happened in February 1980. Also, in a meeting with the Area’s leaders on 11 January, Weekes offered a deal which promised to give serious consideration to NUM investment proposals, an end to the recruitment ban and also gave the coalfield a guaranteed monopoly over supplying Aberthaw. As a result of these developments, the EC decided against pursuing strike action and recommended to an Area Conference the following day that the planned stoppage be called off. This suggestion met with incredulity from some delegates. Charlie White (St John’s chairman) stated: ‘I cannot understand what the Executive Council is doing ... It is simply giving licence to the Board to crush us ... [T]he men are ready to defend their jobs. We have always had promises [from the NCB] in South Wales and these new proposals are simply a waste of time’. Arfon Evans (Maerdy) was concerned that ‘we have not learned the lessons and mistakes of the past’. In spite of this, the majority of delegates gave the Area leadership the benefit of the doubt and the strike was cancelled on a card vote by 379 votes to 121. Following this, Blaengwrach lodge considered picketing out the most militant pits and catalysing a coalfield-wide strike. However, the Area’s leaders felt this was inadvisable and persuaded the Blaengwrach men not to do so – much to the annoyance at the time of lodge secretary and EC member Dane Hartwell. He later claimed that this situation was important in spurring the events which occurred soon after at Lewis Merthyr.95 Reflecting on the episode at the 1983 Annual Conference, Emlyn Williams commented: ‘With hindsight, I think we should have ... struck ... In January we could have acted in a planned, disciplined way over a general issue. It was the right
issue at the right time. But instead we took the NCB at its word and allowed the heat to go out of the situation'.

Whilst calling off the strike was inevitably unpopular with some lodges, it was justified at the time by the expectation that the NCB would deliver on its promises. In meetings with the Board in mid January 1983, the Area pressed for investment at Blaengwrach and Lewis Merthyr and also called for reassurances regarding recruitment, exploration of coalfield reserves and the proposals for a new mine at Glyncastle. However, it soon became clear that none of this would materialise on the terms which the miners had been led to believe. In early February 1983, the South Wales NCB announced that recruitment would not increase significantly and that any which occurred would do so on the basis of further pit closures. George Rees expressed the Area’s disgust at this news, telling the Board directors: ‘You are not to be trusted and … have not carried out your side of the bargain which, it seems, was only used to avert a strike. We have been completely hoodwinked as a Union’. Consequently, the EC decided to convene a conference to bring the Area out on strike as of March 1983. As it transpired, however, this was to be overtaken by dramatic developments elsewhere in the coalfield.

The Lewis Merthyr stay-down strike of February 1983 was significant occurrence in its own right and also the last of its kind in the history of the south Wales coalfield. Events began when Weekes informed Alec Jones (MP for the Rhondda) that Lewis Merthyr and Blaengwrach would close, after which Jones tipped off the Lewis Merthyr men. In response, Des Dutfield led an immediate unofficial stay-down strike of 28 miners at the colliery, which began on 21 February. Although he was South Wales vice-president, the strike began without the knowledge of the other Area Officials – much to their initial annoyance. Dutfield later explained that he led the strike because he felt that his ultimate loyalty was to the men he worked with in the pit, rather than the EC. 96

The stay-down strike intensified the pressure for action against closures. Lewis Merthyr struck immediately and within a few days had been joined by Trelewis Drift, St John’s, Coedely, Britannia, Penrhiwceiber, Maerdy and Tower. Representatives from these lodges met the EC the day after the stay-down had begun.
and persuaded it to call a conference to discuss a coalfield-wide stoppage. The Area leadership recognised the need to retain control of the situation and so recommended a strike ballot to the conference on 23 February, to which the delegates agreed. However, this decision provoked anger from the lodges who were already out, who felt that the December 1982 mandate still applied. Having secured their aim, the Lewis Merthyr strikers returned to the surface. The south Wales miners voted to strike by 9,714 votes (55.4 percent) to 7,817 (44.6 percent): Emlyn Williams attributed the narrowness of this margin to the difficulties in arranging for the pits which were already on strike to take part in the ballot. Although it had been a somewhat untidy process, by the end of February 1983 the south Wales miners were on strike against the run-down of their coalfield.97

Once the strike was underway, South Wales delegates travelled to the other coalfields to ask for their support. Briefly, the possibility existed of an Area-by-Area strike; however, the emergence of dissent at this prospect at several collieries in Scotland, Yorkshire and Derbyshire led the national leadership to opt instead for a ballot.98

The fact that the south Wales miners were already on strike gave them an opportunity to influence the outcome of the ballot, with around two thousand activists lobbying every pit in Britain to persuade them to join the struggle. As Don Hayward commented, ‘[this] is the first time in the history of the mineworkers that we have had a ballot solely on the question of pit closures. It is a clear-cut issue: either we’re going to save our jobs or face unemployment for the rest of our lives’.99 Although this question was vital to the Area, it was by no means certain that miners elsewhere felt likewise – as the delegates that visited the other coalfields found out. In places such as Nottinghamshire, where the collieries were secure and the miners were well-paid, the mood was one of indifference to the prospect of closures elsewhere. Ironically, given events the following year, south Wales delegates later recalled that they fared better in Nottinghamshire than they did in Yorkshire, where they were prevented in some cases from addressing pit-head meetings. Furthermore, the reception was particularly hostile at Cortonwood, the colliery over which the strike began in March 1984. As Ian Isaac later pointed out, the south Wales miners ‘had a very bitter experience of going to Yorkshire in ’83 – virtually feeling as if
they’d been abandoned … It stuck in people’s throats … that the Yorkshire Area did not support the south Wales miners in ’83’. 100

Given this mixed reception it was perhaps unsurprising that the national ballot rejected strike action, by 61 percent (118,954 votes) to 39 percent (76,540 votes). In south Wales – despite the absence of many activists on campaign duty – 68 percent voted for the strike, with lodges such as Garw Valley and Penrhiwceiber returning majorities of 93 and 94 percent respectively. 101 Following this defeat, the south Wales miners had no choice but to return to work. At an Area Conference on 12 March, delegates voted unanimously to end the strike but also attempted to draw out what the lessons of the episode had been. Emlyn Williams said: ‘I know there is a feeling of despondency … [but] we must not sit back and accept the butchery of the South Wales Coalfield’. Significantly, Mike Griffin commented that ‘[w]e could have won the struggle if we used the same tactics as we did in 1981’, whilst Tyrone O’Sullivan (Tower) stated: ‘In future we don’t want another ballot, we must use the mandate that was achieved in the last Ballot. We should say “No more Ballots in South Wales”’.

The failure of a national ballot to support strike action against pit closures inevitably raised questions for the south Wales miners about what this meant for their policy of opposing the run-down of their coalfield. In March 1983, Oakdale lodge called for a greater effort in putting the miners’ case to the public and also a strengthening of inter-Area links in preparation for a showdown with the government. In May, Des Dutfield expressed opposition to the need for successive ballots about closures: ‘I do not believe that the continual holding of ballots on this subject is anything to do with democracy, but it is an excuse [for] … those who wish to avoid carrying out our policies’. 102 Speaking at the 1983 Area Conference, Emlyn Williams criticised the anti-strike propaganda from the NCB, the government and the media in the run-up to the March 1983 ballot and called for a greater degree of organisation of the opposition to pit closures: ‘It is a golden rule of industrial relations that if we are to be successful in a struggle against the NCB, we should choose the issue, the time and the place’.
In the history of the NUM, the events of February and March 1983 represent an important ‘milestone on the road to 1984’, in terms of the mobilisation of the south Wales miners and also the shifting focus of tactics about how best to effect national strike action. The ballot result convinced many NUM activists that the incentive scheme and the uneven impact of closures had made it impossible for a national ballot to support strike action against the run-down of the ‘peripheral’ coalfields. The Lewis Merthyr strike was also a noteworthy episode in itself, a ‘turning point where history failed to turn’. Regardless of the specifics of the case, retrospectively it was apparent that there would have been particular advantages to making a generalised stand against pit closures in 1983 as opposed to 1984. As one EC member later reflected:

[W]hen you look back, I think that that was the time that we should have been on strike ... Over Lewis Merthyr ... It was strategically the best time. Because ... it was the last year of Thatcher’s first term of office. Right? Instead of that, by ... failing to get momentum at that time, we ended up actually coming on strike in the first year of Thatcher’s second term of office ... I mean, it’s speculation. Would Thatcher have moved [against the NUM] if we had moved in the last year of her first term of office? Would she have taken those risks, y’know? ... But, I mean, it would certainly ... have been a far better position. Strategically, it would have been far better ... I think that not enough thought went into it at that time ... I still think that there were people in the Union at that time that could have shown a lot more leadership, then ... I’m not talking about south Wales, I’m talking about national level ... Arthur wasn’t [as] vocal at that time ... [a]s he was the year after. Well, what I’m saying is that the South Wales position was [that 1983] ... was the time that it should have been done.\textsuperscript{103}

Several other leading figures within the Area later concurred about the relative advantages of a strike in early 1983. Another Executive member pointed out that ‘if we had supported Lewis Merthyr at the time, we probably could have won the strike if it came national, because it was a twelvemonth before Thatcher was ready for it’.\textsuperscript{104}
The fallout from the Lewis Merthyr episode also had repercussions within the Area hierarchy. The key facts here were: Emlyn Williams was soon due to retire; the vice-presidency was a vital stepping-stone for anyone who wished to succeed him; Des Dutfield was vice-president but had antagonised the other Area Officials; and also that the post was up for re-election at the 1983 Conference. The stay-down strike had made Dutfield a high-profile figure: he later commented that ‘[s]ome people were saying at that time I was doing it to gain some kudos for the future presidency; I told them at the time, “you’re going to see very shortly the opposite of that”. ’Cause I knew what was being planned behind the scenes’. The Area Officials’ preference for vice-president was Terry Thomas, the west Wales miners’ agent: he was very ambitious and also his former pit, Brynlliw, was the closure-threatened colliery over which they planned to press for strike action. Consequently, it was recommended surreptitiously to lodges to nominate Thomas. In the election at the 1983 Conference, Dutfield lost narrowly on a card vote. After this result was announced, he made a telling address to delegates:

I was elected [in 1980] ... to fight for the South Wales policy in particular relation to pit closures. I have kept to this approach when others have run away ... and if this means losing my position as Vice President then it is a small price to pay. The only regret that I have is that some people worked harder to stop me getting elected than they did to fight against pit closures. I have nothing against Terry ... [and] I know he will do a good job as Vice President. All the rhetoric in South Wales will not save this industry. The only thing that can save it is direct action like we carried out at Lewis Merthyr ...

Following the Conservatives’ victory in the 1983 general election and the subsequent appointment of the ‘union busting’ Ian MacGregor as NCB chairman, the sense of crisis was palpable in the south Wales. On 17 May, Emlyn Williams and W.R. Jenkins (the Area’s safety officer) gave a detailed report to the EC on the situation in the coalfield, stressing that only recruitment and investment could improve collieries’ viability. An Area Conference six days later reaffirmed the need to oppose any future closures. Emlyn Williams told delegates: ‘we must struggle or accept the demise of our coalfield ... We have had two clear ballot decisions in the
South Wales coalfield [in favour of strike action] and therefore with a campaign we can again go on the offensive but we will only win ... if we fight on general issues'. In June 1983, Trelewis Drift called for an immediate national overtime ban as a prelude to an all-out strike that autumn.

In south Wales, miners soon experienced 'the MacGregor effect'. September 1983 saw the NCB announce the closure of Coedely coke works and Wyndham/Western colliery. Although the lodge wanted to fight to retain their pit, a lack of development had left it without any working coalfaces, which made it difficult for the EC to draw up credible arguments for retaining it – but it agreed to take the case to the review procedure anyway. Consequently, it was not particularly surprising that in December 1983 the NCB decided that Wyndham/Western would close.106

For the Area Officials, Brynlliw was the best starting point for a campaign against pit closures. In April 1983, Brynlliw lodge secretary and EC member Eric Davies claimed in the South Wales Miner that 'the Board have just had a taste during the Lewis Merthyr dispute of the kind of reaction they can expect if they try and pull the same trick at Brynlliw'. In June, however, Weekes stated that he intended to close Brynlliw as soon as possible. This news provoked local anger. Miners accused the NCB of reneging on agreed investment and of ignoring a report which had suggested ways of extending the life of the pit by fifteen years. They were incensed that Brynlliw was being closed on a pure 'profit and loss' basis, especially since it had only ended up in that position by being starved of capital for the preceding decade and used as a manpower reservoir for Betws. The NUM appealed against the decision – but at the review meeting in London in August 1983 it was clear that the NCB was determined to shut Brynlliw.107

With the Board intent on closing Brynlliw and the EC backing the fight to save the pit, this situation had the potential to provide the generalised offensive over pit closures for which the south Wales miners had been preparing. In June 1983, Area vice-president Terry Thomas commented: 'This is just one further attack on the mining industry. It is obvious how the miners will react to it, and I believe it will serve to unite them both in Wales and throughout Britain to protect their industry'.108 The Area leadership was convinced of the need to strike but in
accordance with Union procedure this could only begin once the lodge had called for it – however, in the time between when the case went to review and the general meeting at the pit, the Board undermined the resolve of the workforce to fight (by claiming that closure was inevitable and that the men would be better off if they transferred elsewhere), despite the best efforts of the lodge committee. Consequently, Brynlliw decided to accept closure.109

The non-appearance of a strike over Brynlliw in later 1983 was a setback for the South Wales leadership – but its significance was to prove even greater than was realised at the time. Brynlliw was seen as the potential ‘launch-pad’ for the Area to press for national action against closures, in a role similar to that of Lewis Merthyr in March 1983 (and also similar to that which Cortonwood played the following year). However, a strike over Brynlliw would have begun in October, strategically a far better month to begin a miners’ strike than March. If action had begun then, it would certainly have posed an even greater challenge to the Thatcher government than the 1984-5 strike did.

With their plans overturned by the closure of Brynlliw, the Area Officials looked for another potential catalyst for strike action. One likely contender seemed to be Penrhhiwceiber. In September 1983, the lodge began an overtime ban against plans to integrate it with Deep Navigation, since this would inevitably cause redundancies and lead to the complete closure of the colliery in about two years. Penrhhiwceiber received the support of several nearby lodges and there was the possibility that this could have developed into a broader campaign if necessary. When a Penrhhiwceiber delegation met the EC, Emlyn Williams reaffirmed the importance of supporting their efforts since ‘we must build up our resistance in readiness for an all out strike’.110

In October 1983, confrontations within the south Wales coalfield were augmented by the heightening of national-level tensions. The NEC decided to prepare for an impending clash by introducing an overtime ban, which would deplete coal stocks and radicalise rank and file opinion. The south Wales miners agreed readily to this. Addressing an Area Conference about the need to reject the NCB’s modest wage proposals, which were in any case tied to further cutbacks, Emlyn Williams pointed
out that 'if we accept the wages now, we will be discussing pit closures in January, 1984. We have condemned the previous leadership nationally, but now we have a President who is not afraid to take up the cudgels on behalf of the membership'. Terry Thomas stated: 'By tying wages to closures the Board are adding insult to injury. We are now entering a struggle, not merely to protect our living standards but also our jobs and our communities'. The overtime ban began on 31 October, reducing weekly output in south Wales by up to 25,000 tonnes. As the Area's newspaper reported, '[t]he overtime ban is fouling up the Coal Board's operations. That's why Thatcher's messenger boys are suddenly bleating about "democracy". NUM members will remember the use of similar tactics in the run-up to the great strikes of 1972 and 1974'.

This nationally-established initiative against pit closures enabled the Area leadership to resume its campaigning activities. Between October and December 1983, the Area leadership addressed a series of pit-head meetings, in an attempt to ensure that the miners would respond positively to any imminent strike call. It was clear that events in the coal industry were building towards a decisive confrontation. By early 1984, even the slightest provocation was likely to spark a major conflict.

For the south Wales miners, the years 1979 to 1983 were a period of simmering crisis punctuated by inconclusive confrontations with the NCB and the government. Their brief 'golden age' in the 1970s drew to a close under Callaghan's IMF-induced austerity measures but it was not until the election of the Thatcher government that a major reduction in the size of the coal industry became a likely prospect. Whilst the rate of pit closures in the early 1980s (as opposed to after the strike) may not have matched that of the later 1960s, in many ways it was more of a threat to the south Wales miners. With the earlier closure programme, the underlying strategy had been about reformulating the coal industry as a much smaller but more modern part of energy sector. In contrast, by the 1980s the process was driven by the governmental aspiration to cut the industry back to its bare minimum with a view to privatising it. For the 'peripheral' coalfields, this meant their effective disappearance as a mining area. It was for this reason that the south Wales miners featured so prominently in the NUM's struggle against closures.
Throughout the early 1980s the South Wales leadership, conscious of the Area’s ‘traditional radicalism’, sought to prepare the ground for the decisive struggle to defend jobs and collieries. Nevertheless, resistance only developed into full-blown strikes in February 1981 and February 1983, when it was galvanised by unofficial action. Perhaps a pertinent point here is that by the 1980s most of the leaders of the south Wales miners had either participated in the struggles of the 1960s or had risen to prominence in the early 1970s, a period which seemed to prove the efficacy of militant methods. Many of the senior figures within the Area by the 1980s were the men who had led the unofficial movement in the 1960s – and the Area’s policies reflected this. The actions of the leadership in this period were defined by a dynamic between its wish to strike a decisive blow against closures and also its attempts to abide by official procedure. Fundamentally, both the Area’s leaders and its most militant activists were in pursuit of the same goals – the only tension was over how these objectives should be attained.

Whilst the South Wales Area may have adopted the approach of the 1960s unofficial movement in this respect, this policy was revised in the light of its experiences in the early 1980s. These episodes are also important in understanding some of the essential features of the national strike action which began in March 1984. The events of early 1980 seemed to confirm the view of NUM radicals that TUC involvement was more a hindrance than a help. Also, the decision of the miners not to strike, contrary to official expectations, meant that the Area leadership became more hesitant about going too far in front of the membership – this reinforced its preference for obtaining rank and file support before calling for industrial action. The short-lived strike of February 1981 was a very significant development for both the Area and the NUM as a whole, since it proved that it was possible to force the government to back down though the rapid spread of action on an Area-by-Area basis without recourse to a national ballot. This view seemed confirmed by the rejection of the strike call in the three ballots held in 1982 and 1983. Consequently, many NUM radicals came to believe that the NCB made it virtually impossible for a national ballot to endorse strike action, particularly over colliery closures. Despite this, the south Wales miners were bitterly resentful against closures and were prepared to take action if given a clear lead. In this respect, their strikes in 1981 and 1983 helped them to prepare for the decisive clash in 1984.
Whilst these events provide important insights into the NUM strategy during the 1984-5 strike, the historian should not fall into the trap of assuming that they were merely a build-up to it. Indeed, there was no intrinsic reason why any year between 1980 and 1983 could not have seen the final showdown between Thatcher and the miners, rather than 1984 – a development which, if it had happened, would have been more likely to produce an NUM victory. For the south Wales miners, this turned out to be a period of missed opportunities. As one former Executive member later reflected,

[W]e were in a situation from about 1980 up until ’84 of the men didn’t know if they were coming or going. One minute they thought they were coming out on strike, next minute they wasn’t. Work-to-rules were happening ... South Wales miners wanted support from other Areas and didn’t get it over Lewis Merthyr. We tried to get a national strike then and didn’t get it ... We missed a lot of opportunities. And I think that every opportunity we missed, the government then started to stock coal, they started to fetch in industrial laws, and all that, and then ... we had our hands tied ... in 1984.112

In the circumstances of the early 1980s, it was practically inevitable that the miners would clash with the Thatcher government. In the ‘shadow boxing’ between 1979 and 1983, the NUM had several chances to land a knockout blow but these either did not materialise fully or were allowed to pass by in return for transitory concessions. As a result, the Conservative administration was able to survive and strengthen its position for an eventual ‘day of reckoning’ with the NUM. Subsequent events would show that, if the miners could not make the most of their confrontations with the NCB, then the government would ensure that the decisive struggle would be fought once it was prepared for it and in circumstances of its own choosing.
Notes to Chapter 5

1 Interviews with Colin Thomas (14 January 2004) and Graham Bartlett (20 February 2004) (respectively).
3 *Miner*, May/June 1981.
7 Interview with George Rees, 8 December 2003.
8 Minutes, Special Meeting Between NCB and Executive Council, NCB Offices, Llanishen, 2 June 1980.
10 ASC, 14 March 1979.
11 EC, 6 March, 10 April, 22 May, 9 July 1979; *Miner*, Apr./May 1979, July/Aug. 1979.
13 Interview with Mike Richards, 27 January 2004.
17 *WM*, 19 October 1979; minutes, Meeting at NCB Offices, Llanishen, 2 February 1983.
18 ASC, 12 January 1983.
19 EC, 24 November 1982.
23 Mike Richards interview.
26 Colin Thomas interview.
A drivage is a tunnel branching off from existing underground colliery workings
dug in order to access new reserves.


29 Mike Richards interview.


32 Minutes of Meeting with Area Director, Pontypridd, 15 October 1981; minutes of
Meeting at NCB Offices, Llanishen, 29 January 1982; EC, 22 March, 12 April, 7
June, 12 September 1983.

33 Interview with Ian Isaac, 2 and 8 April 2004.

34 EC, 12 September 1983.

35 Ibid., 18 September, 17, 26 November, 15 December 1981; minutes of Meeting
with Area Director, Pontypridd, 15 October 1981.

36 Interview with Ray Lawrence, 11 March 2004; EC, 2 March 1982; SWM, July
1983.

37 ASC, 6 October 1982.

38 Ibid., 14 November 1979; EC, 10 April, 26 November 1979; WM, 7 July 1980.

39 EC, 6 November–20 December 1979 passim, 8 January, 12 February 1980; ASC,
11 December 1979; WM, 15 November–27 December 1979 passim, 23, 25 February

40 EC, 20 December 1979; WM, 3, 8 December 1979, 21 February 1980; Times, 30
January 1980.

41 Interviews with numerous south Wales miners; EC, 25 January 1980.


43 EC, 5, 8, 15 February 1980.

44 Times, 23 February 1980.

45 Miner, March, April 1980; EC, 21, 24 February 1980; WM, 22, 23, 25 February
1980.


47 Interview with Arfon Evans, 1 April 2004.

48 Ray Lawrence interview.


54 ASC, 16 July 1980; *WM*, 22 May, 3, 4 June 1980; EC, 4, 10, 24 June, 1 July 1980.

55 *WM*, 7 July 1980.

56 EC, 18 November 1980.


58 Report of Meeting held at NCB Offices, Llanishen, 13 February 1981.


60 Interview with Verdun Price, 15 March 2004.


63 *Times*, 20 February 1981.


65 Interviews with Mike Banwell (9 March 2004) and Dane Hartwell (10 December 2003).


67 SWML interview with Gary Woolf (AUD/112).

68 ASC, 8 December 1982.

69 EC, 1979–83 passim.

70 Elsewhere Below Ground: underground mineworkers who worked ‘outbye’ – that is, not actually at the coalface (which was termed ‘inbye’).

71 AAC, 1983.
72 ASC, 24 August 1981, 8 December 1982, 23 May 1983; Miner, Nov. 1982; Parker, op. cit., p.35.


75 Mike Richards interview.

76 EC, 30 June, 14 July 1981, 12 April 1983.

77 SWM, June 1983; EC, 2 September 1982, 26 October 1983; WM, 22 October 1983.


79 Ibid., 14 April 1981.


81 AAC, 1982.


84 Interview with Phil Bowen, 26 March 2004.

85 EC, 20 April 1982.

86 SWML interview with Emlyn Williams (AUD/33).

87 SWML interviews with Glyn Williams (AUD/113), Berwyn Howells (AUD/21) and Ron Williams (AUD/115).

88 SWML interview with Dai Francis (AUD/131); Phil Bowen interview; ASC, 9 February 1981.

89 Haydn Matthews and Emlyn Williams SWML interviews.

90 SWM, June 1983; SWML interview with Emlyn Williams (AUD/574).

91 For details, see Taylor, The NUM and British Politics Vol. 2, pp.174-80.


94 EC, 24 November 1982; ASC, 8 December 1982.

95 Dane Hartwell interview; EC, 25 January, 16 February 1983.
96 WM, 22 February 1983; interviews with Des Dutfield (12 February 2004), Kevin Williams (25 February 2004), George Rees, Emlyn Jenkins (5 March 2004) and Terry Thomas.


99 Guardian, 8 March 1983.

100 Ian Isaac interview.

101 SWM, April 1983; Miner, March 1983.

102 EC, 29 March 1983; ASC, 23 May 1983.

103 Dane Hartwell interview.

104 Graham Bartlett interview.

105 Des Dutfield interview.


109 Interviews with Eric Davies (30 January 2004) and Terry Thomas; WM, 27 August, 1 September 1983.

110 EC, 12, 29 September 1983.


112 Mike Banwell interview.
The Colliers of South Wales in 1984
Chapter 6  The Strike: 1984-1985

The miners’ strike of 1984-5 was one of the most important events in twentieth-century domestic British politics. Its scale and duration were unprecedented, with the overwhelming majority of the 200,000-strong National Union of Mineworkers staying out for a whole year. Unlike the strikes in 1972 and 1974, which had been about wages, the issue for the miners in 1984 was nothing less than the survival of their industry. Their eventual defeat proved their fears had been justified – coal-mining has effectively disappeared from Britain. From an early twenty-first century perspective, the miners’ strike represented the ‘last stand’ of an industry and a union that had been integral to British post-war economics and politics. In a very real sense, the aftermath of the strike saw the conclusion of a major chapter in the history of south Wales.

The south Wales coalfield, which had been the paradigm example of general trends within the industry throughout the century, fulfilled this role again during the year-long dispute. After a hesitant start, the South Wales NUM was the most solid Area: as late as January 1985, over ninety-nine percent of its members were still on strike. They remained in the vanguard of the struggle throughout and were crucial to the NUM’s picketing operations around Britain. The strength of the Area was a product of its traditional radicalism and also the extensive support networks which grew out of the Valleys communities. As a result of this, no-one was more committed and loyal to the strike in 1984-5 than the south Wales miners.

The decision by the miners to strike in March 1984 was a defensive response to a direct threat. As one EC member later reflected, ‘[t]he miners’ strike of ’84–’85 was about the right to work … It was about trying to keep jobs for our sons and nephews … to work in the industry. It was about retaining our communities – it was about retaining a way of life’.1 In January 1985, Area president Emlyn Williams stated:

History will record that the British miner decided on a strategy of industrial action because he could not accept that the role of families was to go to
unemployment exchanges ... This has been ... a strike on behalf of every man, woman and child in the United Kingdom. With an unemployment figure of well on five million and the Tories carrying out their policy of further unemployment the miners have said, we are standing up to be counted.²

By early 1984, the NUM was bracing itself for a clash over the fate of the coal industry. In this context, the NCB announcement on 6 March 1984 of the closure of Cortonwood colliery in Yorkshire and Polmaise colliery in Scotland on purely financial grounds and without consultation was seen by the Union leadership as the signal for the long-anticipated conflict. On 8 March, NUM national president Arthur Scargill announced that the strikes already underway in Yorkshire and Scotland were official under Rule 41 of the Union’s constitution and called on the other coalfields to support them. NUM vice-president Mick McGahey declared: ‘I want to make it clear that we are not dealing with niceties here. We shall not be constitutionalised out of a defence of our jobs’.³ Following this lead, at an Area Conference on 9 March the Executive Council recommended a strike, without a ballot (deemed unnecessary because South Wales had supported strike action in its last three ballots on the subject). Area general secretary George Rees warned that ‘unless we take strike action now we can say so-long to South Wales forever. It is either we give the lead or we capitulate’. After discussion, delegates voted overwhelmingly to call for action as of 12 March.

This clear endorsement did not reflect fully the ambivalence that existed amongst the rank and file. In the general meetings called to discuss the recommendation, south Wales lodges voted by 18 to 13 against a strike.⁴ This outcome was both a setback and a surprise for the Area leadership, since many of these decisions seemed superficially to make little sense: ‘moderate’ long-life pits such as Oakdale and Betws voted for action, whilst many of those which rejected the strike (such as Bedwas and St John’s) were themselves threatened with closure. This overall reluctance to strike was the product of recent events, however. Only a year before, Welsh miners had travelled to every British pit in an unsuccessful campaign to save Lewis Merthyr – ironically receiving a particularly hostile rejection at Cortonwood. A large percentage of the membership therefore doubted whether Yorkshire itself
would strike and were bitter about being asked to defend Cortonwood. Consequently, it was not entirely surprising that they were unenthusiastic about strike action.

Following this setback, the Area Officials (Emlyn Williams, George Rees and Terry Thomas, the vice-president) met to discuss their next step. If South Wales did not join the strike there was every possibility that Yorkshire miners would try to picket it out – which could have provoked a disastrous backlash, given grassroots bitterness over the Lewis Merthyr episode. Consequently, they decided to contact lodges that could be relied upon to move quickly and bring the coalfield out on strike. This task was left mainly to Emlyn Williams, although he used Kim Howells (the Area’s research officer) as an intermediary because he could not be seen to be organising what was technically unofficial action. Acting on the Area president’s instructions, Howells arranged a meeting of Broad Left activists for 1.30pm on the following day, Sunday 11 March, at the Ambulance Hall in Hirwaun. Those present were veterans of unofficial movements dating back to 1969 and came from some of the most militant lodges: Tower, Maerdy and Trelewis Drift, later joined by others, notably Penrhiwceiber. As a result of the meeting, pickets were sent to every south Wales colliery the following morning.

Picketing was crucial in generating momentum in south Wales. Although generally only token pickets, these successfully focused Union loyalties into support for the strike. ‘At Deep Navigation colliery, a single picket turned back the coaches of miners arriving for work with the words, “Official picket, boys”. In disciplined South Wales, that was enough’. At Cwm and several other pits, the lodge committee telephoned the Area Office to request that pickets be sent to their colliery, since they knew that this would ensure participation in the strike. Once a lodge had agreed not to cross picket-lines, it joined the process of spreading the strike. By the time the Executive met on Monday 12 March, Maerdy and Tower pickets were there to ask them to make the dispute official. Encouraged by the success of the stoppage (which was likely to escalate whether it received endorsement or not), plus the news that Yorkshire was now out as well, the Executive Council took the momentous decision to call the Area out on strike.
A few lodges remained reluctant to agree to industrial action: Celynen South, Bedwas, Blaenserchan and Cynheidre. Despite this these were brought out over the next few days, through mass picketing and also persuasion from their lodge leaderships. On 10 March a Celynen South general meeting had decided overwhelmingly to reject the strike decision; five days later, a similarly comprehensive majority accepted the de facto position that the pit had stopped work. Most of the pits which were reluctant to take action were in the Gwent region. Ray Lawrence, the Celynen South lodge secretary, later recalled a significant intervention by George Rees. In the first week of the strike, Rees told a Gwent district meeting that they would be traitors if they did not fall into line behind the rest of the Area – which they subsequently did. Consequently, in Lawrence’s view, ‘George Rees on his own saved the strike in south Wales’.

Although the strike began in an untidy fashion in south Wales, the methods used to bring it about had been highly effective. Picketing was central to solidifying the strike – without which it might well not have occurred. A key reason this was the swift, unofficial way in which it began: by the time the EC met on the Monday morning, it had little choice but to endorse the already-existing scenario. Equally important was that the lodge leaderships pushed for acceptance of the Conference decision and were willing to have their pits brought into the strike. As one miner later commented, ‘A lot of people might disagree with the strike, but ... historically, they’ll always ... support the lodge, look. Now, if the lodge say on a Friday, “today is Tuesday”, then the men will generally say “yes, it is”’. Once the lodges had been picketed out, in most cases their leaderships convened meetings which enabled the memberships to state formally their support for the strike, placing it on an official footing. In this way, a combination of unofficial militancy and Union procedures had produced a total stoppage across south Wales by Wednesday 14 March. The strike had begun. Crucially, the miners had respected the ‘sanctity of the picket-line’ and the leadership had quickly confirmed that the strike was official under Rule 41, thus dispelling any lingering doubts. By the end of the week, south Wales pickets were already fanning out across the rest of Britain.

Although initially slow to mobilise, South Wales was the most resolutely pro-strike Area for the duration of the dispute. By 20 August, only one miner had returned to
work in the whole coalfield – and was soon forced to rejoin the strike by the weight of overwhelming community opposition. As late as mid-December 1984, 21 of the 26 British pits still completely ‘scab-free’ were in south Wales. As one lodge secretary later pointed out: ‘the spirit of defiance ... was absolutely fantastic ... The ingenuity of people, whereby their communities and extended families rallied around to look after them during the strike, particularly look after the children, was absolutely phenomenal. And that’s why the strike lasted so long, particularly in south Wales’.

One of the most controversial aspects of the strike was the way in which it began. Following the lead taken by Yorkshire and Scotland, it developed on a ‘domino effect’ basis, with the Areas joining one at a time without recourse to a national ballot. The disadvantages of this strategy became apparent when several English coalfields decided not to join the strike – a major blow for the NUM and a key reason for its eventual defeat in 1985. Consequently, twenty years later, some south Wales miners had come to reconsider the effectiveness of this approach. George Rees reflected: ‘looking in hindsight, it’d have been far better if we’d had a national ballot ... I think had we had a national ballot, we could have won it’. At the time however, as Tyrone O’Sullivan later emphasised, once the strike was underway ‘the miners of south Wales didn’t want the bloody ballot. We agreed with the decision we’d taken ... The miners themselves wanted to go out on strike, they wanted to fight save their jobs’. Speaking at a rally in Aberdare in April 1984, for instance, Emlyn Williams demanded an all-out strike by every Area and argued against a ballot.

Was March 1984 the best time for a showdown with the government? Whilst most miners were sure that the government and the NCB provoked a confrontation at the worst possible time for them, they nevertheless felt there was little option but to respond as they did. The Penallta lodge secretary’s opinion was: ‘It was the only weapon we had. We’d tried everything else ... History shows that ... [the] decision to strike was taken reluctantly. Nobody wanted it. But it was the only way we had, to oppose them’. Dane Hartwell, an EC member during the strike, stated:
I was fully aware of the difficulties ... that we were going into [but] ... we were responding ... to an attack ... There was only two things you could do. You could either say, 'we’ll accept what you’re going to do', ... or the only other alternative was to say, ‘no, you’re not going to do it’ ... I mean, ... it was ... early March ... Strategically, it wasn’t a good time, was it? ... [Y]ou didn’t have to be a bloody genius to work that one out. But ... that was all part of what had been planned ... by the government, wasn’t it? ... [W]e were aware of that. But it was a case of doing nothing or doing something ... I still maintain that we had to do it ... [T]he justification of what we did is evident, is self-evident, now.\textsuperscript{18}

Once the strike was underway, the Area was soon sending busloads of pickets to a multitude of strategic targets around Britain, with around 4–5,000 miners permanently mobilised on duty.\textsuperscript{19} Apart from this high level of activism, also notable was the discipline and organisation of the picketing. Each colliery established its own strike committee, whilst overall co-ordination of activities was carried out by Kim Howells, who was accountable to the Area leadership.\textsuperscript{20}

At the outset, the main goal of the south Wales miners was to bring every Area completely out on strike. By 20 March, they had picketed out North Wales and made good progress in Staffordshire and Warwickshire; by the end of the month they had also brought out the Lancashire pits, as well as 13,000 Midlands miners.\textsuperscript{21} Despite this, it proved increasingly difficult to persuade the other recalcitrant coalfields, particularly Nottinghamshire, to join in. The police presence there, equipped with horses and riot gear, increased the probability of confrontation. The Blaenant chairman, for instance, recalled that ‘we had a real rough time. By that time it has escalated into being a war situation, certainly on a hand-to-hand basis, anyway’. The scale of the task facing the pickets was spelt out by one Taff Merthyr miner: ‘it was incredible ... [T]hey was bringing them into work in buses with bars on the windows ... [Y]ou couldn’t get near the colliery gates, because there was such a heavy police presence. ... [A]s far as the human eye could see, they had transit vans of police each side of the road’.\textsuperscript{22}
The NUM inability to implement a complete national stoppage was due in no small measure to the massive police effort to impede picketing. The police made extensive use of surveillance and roadblocks: during the first six months of the strike approximately 290,000 miners were halted, sometimes hundreds of miles away from their intended destinations. George Rees recalled: ‘And the number of times I used to be stopped going up to Sheffield [NUM National Office]. Stopped the car on the motorway, having to pull over. And they’d say, “where are you going, Mr Rees?”’. And I’d say, “if you know my name, you know where I’m bloody going to!”.

Telephone-tapping was central to police intelligence-gathering operations during the strike. There were many instances of this: south Wales miners recounted hearing mysterious clicking noises on the phone and even occasions when a third voice appeared on the line midway through a conversation. Several miners proved their phones were tapped by using them to make hoax ‘picketing’ arrangements, which resulted in significant contingents of police arriving at the supposed target locations.

South Wales mining communities were under a virtual state of siege during the strike, with miners being followed by police whenever they left the house. The Oakdale lodge chairman stated: ‘In ’72 and ’74, I could get in my car and go where I wanted … But in ’84-’85 … by the time I’d gone from where I’m living … to “The Crown” in Pontllanfraith, which would be about two miles, the police would be stopping me’. In addition to this, local coach companies were prevented from hiring to miners. The combined effect of these activities appeared startlingly authoritarian. A craftsman from St John’s colliery expressed a commonly-held view when he commented that ‘[d]uring the year of the miners’ strike, I would say we were definitely [living in] a police state’.

The main place where miners encountered police during the strike was on the picket-line. The confrontational potential of these situations was exacerbated by the behaviour of some police officers, who goaded miners by boasting about the overtime they were earning and also by the use of plainclothes policemen as agent provocateurs. Police picket-line attitudes varied markedly. Several miners later reflected that south Wales police were reasonably sympathetic, whereas other forces were hostile: one lodge secretary recalled that the Metropolitan Police ‘were like
animals ... We knew if we were encountering them, we were in for ... a savage beating'. 29 Given this approach by many police, it was fortunate that they were not armed. As one miner commented, ‘[i]f there had been guns, there would have been men shot on the picket-lines, undoubtedly’. 30 As it was, the extensive use of police riot equipment made picket-lines potentially very dangerous. Whilst some miners might not have been entirely blameless for some of the violence, they were not the ones equipped appropriately for inflicting it. This was confirmed by the casualty figures. By December 1984, several miners had been killed on the picket-lines and 3,000 badly injured; in contrast, seventy-five police had been hospitalised and 750 had been hurt. As The Guardian commented, ‘If it was a war, you’d know which side was better armed and winning’. 31

The war analogy was an apt one, as the government’s method for tackling the strike blurred the demarcation between the police and the military. During the dispute, the police adopted paramilitary tactics and a centralised chain of command, whilst at the same time military personnel, disguised as police, featured regularly on picket-lines. On several occasions, south Wales miners had relatives in the armed forces who they spotted wearing police uniforms and deployed around the English coalfields. In October 1984 the former Devon and Cornwall chief constable stated publicly that a national paramilitary police force was being used to break the strike. 32 Looking back, the Oakdale lodge chairman condemned police tactics and drew parallels between this and the army’s methods in Northern Ireland; the same point was made by Tony Benn in parliament in April 1984. Indeed, the role of the police was sufficiently controversial to merit an Amnesty International investigation in February 1985. 33

Unsurprisingly, many miners were shocked by the role of the police during the strike. One collier commented: ‘I lost a lot of respect for the police – and I’ve never had it back, really’. Speaking in January 1985, Emlyn Williams expressed succinctly the views of the south Wales miners: ‘The image of British justice has gone out of the window ... There is a deep bitterness which will take many, many years to erode ... Miners have seen people change overnight from ... policemen doing their job to parts of an establishment determined to create trouble’. 34
Whilst the police were a direct obstacle to the miners’ ability to win an early victory, the national media provided a different but equally significant challenge. In some respects these institutions complemented each other, with most media reports portraying the police favourably, whilst denigrating the NUM and its members. Miners were dismayed by this misrepresentation. The Six Bells lodge chairman later commented: ‘I used to watch the television … and read the newspapers [during the strike]. And I used to think to myself, “Well, that can’t be the same place that I was at”. It was so distorted’. Similarly, a Penallta miner recalled: ‘if you picked up the newspapers – well! And I always remember one major headline in the news, in “The Sun”, at the time. It was big black bold letters … that the miners were “scum” … So, certainly not sympathetic. At all ... [T]hey was totally biased’. 35

During the strike, the vast majority of media coverage centred on its most ‘dramatic’ aspects, primarily picket-line clashes and national-level negotiations. This led to it being caricatured as an ideological struggle between Scargill and Thatcher. The south Wales miners were aware that this focus on Scargill and ‘Scargillism’ was an attempt to weaken NUM unity. As one lodge secretary later pointed out,

Arthur Scargill … had very little to do with me being on strike. And my wife, and all the families in our community staying on strike for twelve months. Most of those people had never seen Arthur Scargill. Half of them had never heard him on the bloody TV, even during the strike. They didn’t need encouragement to be on strike – we knew we had nothing around here. Nothing. We had the pits in the Valleys … It was all we had here … – and they were going to take it away. And then for [the media] … to believe that people working in them pits … had to be encouraged to go on strike – what a nonsense.36

A corollary of this media depiction was a tendency to ignore the reasons behind the miners’ decision to strike. When the liberal sections of the media made a more detailed investigation, it was clear that the miners had a genuine case against the closure programme. In the main, however, debate followed the terms set by the government and the NCB. The only consistent exception to this was provided by the various small-circulation left-wing newspapers, although local radio stations and
press occasionally gave miners the chance to present their viewpoint. Overseas media sources also portrayed events more accurately, showing police picket-line aggression and highlighting deep divisions within the Cabinet over the strike.

Despite the forces arrayed against them, the predominant feeling amongst the south Wales miners and their supporters in the first months of the strike was optimism at the likelihood of an eventual victory. One indication of this was their enthusiastic participation in public demonstrations: for example, a gathering of over 10,000 miners in Cardiff in late April, which was addressed by Scargill and McGahey. In Port Talbot a week before, 1,200 miners and their trade union allies had marched from the town centre to a rally at the Afan Lido, cheered along by local residents. There, NUM national general secretary Peter Heathfield stated that the dispute was being ‘taken by the scruff of the neck’ following the recent National Conference decision to declare that the strike was now considered to be national.\(^{37}\)

After the failure of Nottinghamshire to join the strike and the decision not to hold a ballot, the south Wales miners found that by late April the situation had started to become regularised. With the battle-lines drawn and routines established, the strike became almost ‘a way of life’ for them. There were two exceptions to this general pattern in the coalfield during May 1984. The first of these was the occupation of the NCB’s Tondu offices for several weeks in protest at the crossing of picket-lines by members of APEX.\(^{38}\) In addition to this, the first threat to the solidarity of the strike in south Wales occurred when a few individuals attempted to return to work at Cynheidre. This was defeated by a rapid coalfield-wide response, involving a mass picket at the colliery. There was also a 1,000-strong rally at Pontyberem on 26 May, with representatives from all over south Wales, striking Leicestershire miners, the Dyfed Farmers’ Action Group and a wide range of political and community organisations. The exercise was successful and South Wales remained one hundred per cent solid.\(^{39}\)

Despite the massive challenge facing them, the south Wales mining communities remained convinced that they would eventually emerge triumphant. This collective optimism was reflected in the support for the numerous NUM marches and rallies. Two of the biggest gatherings in south Wales during the summer were rallies of
approximately 3,000 at Treorchy in June and 2,000 in Abertillery in July, both of
which were addressed by Scargill. Possibly the biggest demonstrations of the entire
strike occurred in London in early and late June, when around 1,000 south Wales
miners joined with thousands of other NUM members to protest at the closure
programme.

Faced with the prospect of a lengthy strike, the south Wales miners began to think
about how to sustain themselves and their families. Even before the EC decided in
late April to set up relief and fundraising facilities at its three main centres –
Ammanford, Pontypridd and Crumlin – various local initiatives were already
underway. The reappearance of ‘soup kitchens’ in the Valleys evoked images of
the heroic struggle of mining communities during the 1926 strike. The earliest food
collection was recorded on 13 April by Oakdale lodge: these activities subsequently
grew into a massive operation, the Gwent Food Fund (GFF), which operated out of
local council premises loaned to it rent-free in Abertillery and Tredegar. In
Treherbert, the CP played the key role. In West Glamorgan, the Dulais Valley
Support Group eventually grew to encompass the Dulais, Neath and Swansea
valleys. By mid May 1984, every south Wales mining village had a support group,
whilst similar organisations also emerged in Cardiff and Swansea during the
summer. This mobilisation of whole communities was a fundamental factor in
enabling the miners to continue the struggle for so long.

The main business of the support groups was food-collecting and fundraising, a
process which was central to maintaining the strike. Public generosity made this
work very productive: the Caerphilly Miners’ Support Group, for example, raised
around £700 and collected £1,000 worth of food in one week. This money was
used to buy food for each family within the groups’ ‘catchment areas’. Distribution
was a sophisticated logistical operation. Each support group had its own
headquarters (typically the local miners’ institute): all the food supplies were
collected there, packaged into weekly ‘ration bags’ by volunteers and then
distributed to their various ‘satellite centres’. Across south Wales, the scale of this
was truly remarkable. The GFF distributed at least 3,500 food bags every week
during the strike – and in one week prior to Christmas 1984 it managed 7,000
parcels. Although less, the output of other groups was still impressive: for instance,
Maerdy delivered around 700 food bags a week. In addition to this, support groups also assisted the communities of which they were a part in whatever other ways seemed necessary. Examples of this included advising striking miners about their social security entitlements (as the Dulais Valley group did), or organising parties for local miners' children (as the Ogmore Valley group did in Nantymoel in April 1984). It is not an exaggeration to see the support groups as essentially an 'alternative welfare state' for south Wales mining families during the strike.

In addition to meeting the material requirements of continuing the strike, the south Wales support groups were important in maintaining morale levels. In this respect they assumed a greater prominence as the dispute went on, with the collective response to adversity having a positive effect on community spirit. Reflecting this, one miner later commented that it 'was the best year of my life ... It was hard work but it was tremendous just to see people coming together ... It was worth being alive for, to be quite honest, because people were absolutely tremendous'. Furthermore, the year-long confrontation with a government determined to defeat the miners almost inevitably had a politicising effect on the support groups. This could be seen, for instance, in the rally organised by the Gwent and Rhymney groups in Cardiff in November 1984, or the series of public meetings run by the Bridgend group in January 1985. Looking back on the strike, one miner reflected that 'with a lot of the women it ... made them politically aware. And a lot of them became active in politics'.

Women did indeed play a vital role in the support groups and ensuring the smooth running of the food distribution system. The widespread involvement of women was itself a potent propaganda force, showing that the strike was about the defence of entire communities across the coalfields. Many south Wales women were involved in public demonstrations, such as the march by 500 miners' wives through Aberdare in August 1984. Some even went picketing: for example, at Port Talbot and Llanwern steelworks and also at Point of Ayr colliery in north Wales. After this, the Area leadership stated that it would encourage female participation in strike activities. These developments led in June 1984 to the formation of the South Wales Women's Support Group. This attended several high-profile events, such as an all-women lobby of a Conservative Party conference in Porthcawl in June and a
national demonstration by women's support groups in London in August 1984. Many women came to play an increasingly important role as organisers, fundraisers and propagandists. One area where they made a real impact was in public speaking, addressing meetings all around Britain. For many female activists, the strike had a profound impact on their lives. Reflecting on her role in organising a support group, attending picket-lines and speaking to numerous mass meetings, one woman from Seven Sisters later commented: 'I didn't know that I could do what I did ... But I did it ... without thinking about it.' Another Dulais Valley woman pointed out: 'I think the majority of us thought then that we weren't quite happy enough just to be housewives anymore. There was far more that we were capable of doing out there ... It altered me as a person totally – it gave me confidence and made me ... question things, not ... take [them] ... on face value'.

Once it became apparent that it would be a lengthy strike, fundraising assumed a central role within NUM activities. Fortunately, the support around Britain for the miners meant this was not an insurmountable task. As they discovered, goodwill towards them was not confined to the labour movement but was widespread amongst the black, Pakistani, Turkish, Indian and Sikh communities – and also, perhaps surprisingly, London's gay and lesbian groups. In order to tap into this, the south Wales miners realised that support groups would have to be set up outside their coalfield. This process was underway by May 1984 and soon developed into a network of large and efficient centres in London, Reading, Oxford, Liverpool, Bristol, Birmingham, Swindon and Southampton, as well as many smaller bases elsewhere, from Plymouth to Aberystwyth and Cambridge. The lodges which established these retained a semi-permanent presence there for the duration of the strike, leading to the emergence of 'twinning' arrangements between them. At Oxford, for instance, the support group – in which car-workers and students were especially active – was developed by Maerdy and Merthyr Vale miners, some of whom stayed for the rest of the strike. Within Wales, an array of left-wing groups combined with local pickets at the Trawsfynydd and Wylfa nuclear plants to twin Ynys Môn, Bangor and Blaenau Ffestiniog with west Wales mining communities. These kinds of arrangements enabled the various support groups to be virtually self-sufficient in terms of funding their food distribution activities back in the Valleys.
In addition to this fundraising work, the Area also received significant financial support from its traditional allies in the labour movement – particularly the trade unions, which provided around £2 million during the strike. One of the most generous unions was SOGAT, raising £9,000 in donations at its annual conference in May 1984 and also buying and delivering thousands of pounds’ worth of food to south Wales, for distribution to miners and their families. At the grassroots level, most aid came from the various left-of-centre political parties. The Labour Party was by far the biggest of these and local Labour activists worked hard to help keep the strike going. This was appreciated by the miners, who generally remained loyal to Labour after 1985. The CPGB (which was by now a relatively small organisation hampered by internecine warfare) played a fairly peripheral role, although its rank and file continued to aid the south Wales miners. Another significant left-wing force at the time was Militant. The Cwm lodge secretary, for instance, later commented that some of the most committed Labour supporters of the strike were also Militant activists. The leading Militant figure within the Area in that period also pointed to the constructive role which it played in assisting the miners and organising support rallies during the strike.

In south Wales, local councils assisted NUM members considerably during the strike – not least because they recognised the miners’ historical role in shaping Valleys communities. The first support arrived in April 1984, when Blaenau Gwent council gave £10 food vouchers to every miner living within its boundaries, whilst Torfaen waived any rent owed by miners for the duration of the dispute. Following this, other councils gave aid, whether through donating to their food funds, loaning them the use of premises or providing free school meals to their children. All of this assistance helped to maintain the impressive solidarity shown by the south Wales miners.

The aid for the miners was truly international in scope, with donations being received from as far afield as the USSR, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Japan. The focus of South Wales overseas fundraising efforts was on Europe, with delegations receiving generous donations as a result of speaking tours of West Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, Sweden and Denmark, amongst other countries. Meetings of over 10,000 were addressed by Welsh miners at Bologna and
Milan. The Republic of Ireland was also a key source of funds for the south Wales miners, with over IR£1 million being raised altogether.\textsuperscript{53}

Although the financial assistance the NUM received was considerable, much more problematic was the level of active solidarity obtained in 1984-5. Most miners recognised that the victories of 1972 and 1974 were achieved with the help of other unions. In 1984, consequently, the NUM was quick to enlist the aid of the TGWU, NUR and NUS (National Union of Seamen). The TUC itself was divided by Thatcher's anti-union drive: some unions embraced 'new realism', whilst others argued for defiance of the new 1984 Trade Union Act. A Penallta miner later commented:

\begin{quote}
[A] lot of legislation was brought in to stop ... secondary picketing ... But then again, ... if you follow the law all the time, we'd still be working seven days a week and women wouldn't have the vote, would they? Sometimes you got to buck the system to get a result, isn't it? I think what the unions are for, aren't they, to support each other ... And if they thought our cause was just ... perhaps they should've worked harder to take a bit more action. But, there we are. We didn't get the support, did we?\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Crucially, industrial support from the trade union movement was much lower than in 1972 and 1974. Most assistance was of a passive type, helpful to sustain the strike but not actually to win it. As George Rees later pointed out, '[w]e had an awful lot of verbal support – but we wanted more than verbal support, we wanted action. On the picket-lines, for a start. We wanted people inside the power stations [and] ... inside the steelworks to say, "we're not prepared to handle this coal".' Furthermore, several unions refused to help the NUM. The EETPU and the EPEA leaderships called for their members to cross NUM picket-lines at power stations and in September 1984, they rejected the TUC's endorsement of the NUM appeal for sympathy industrial action.\textsuperscript{55}

In contrast, several unions were willing to take industrial action in support of the miners. In March 1984, a one-day strike by bus drivers paralysed public transport in the Rhondda, forcing management to reverse its ban on hiring out coaches to NUM
pickets. NUPE members joined the picket-lines outside Port Talbot steelworks in late March and staged half-day stoppages at hospitals and council offices throughout south Wales. At the outset of the strike, the rail unions, TGWU, NUS and ISTC all agreed to prevent the transport of coal and oil across NUM picket-lines. Even by the end of the year, several unions were still prepared to keep to this: for instance, NUR general secretary Jimmy Knapp told a miners’ rally in Swansea in October 1984 that his union would continue to support the NUM ‘physically, financially and industrially’.56

During the strike, trade union support for the NUM in Wales was under the ostensible co-ordination of the WTUC. Events began encouragingly for the south Wales miners, with the WTUC agreeing on 21 March to support them fully. This seemed to offer the prospect of a quick victory – although a fundamental breach soon occurred when the ISTC decided to continue to accept coal imports into Port Talbot. The involvement of the WTUC was nevertheless an attempt to broaden the struggle and resulted in major rallies at Cardiff on 28 April and 12 June 1984 (a rally was also held at Wrexham). This latter date was also declared a WTUC ‘Day of Action’, despite TUC opposition to this move. Even so, the Day of Action was still a success: over 10,000 trade unionists marched through Cardiff, whilst around 250,000 workers in Wales demonstrated their support for the miners.57 As the strike drew on, however, the south Wales miners became sceptical about the WTUC’s ability to organise any useful industrial assistance. This opinion was not improved by their eventual defeat: in April 1985, a proposal made at the EC to disaffiliate from the WTUC because of its perceived lack of solidarity during the strike was defeated only by the casting vote of Emlyn Williams.58

Despite the problematic level of trade union support, once it had become clear that Nottinghamshire would not join the strike the South Wales NUM began to focus on alternative methods of attaining victory. A key concern was coal imports: consequently, many south Wales miners spent much of the strike picketing docks around Britain. As they discovered, however, the main problem was not the large shipping ports but instead the multitude of small unregistered ports scattered around the coast – miners found themselves picketing places such as Watchet in Somerset and Wivenhoe near Colchester, which sometimes had not seen a coal ship for fifty
years or more before the strike. Given the difficulties this presented, the Area leadership attempted to solve the problem from the other way around. In May 1984 George Rees led a delegation to Holland, the main source of coal imports into Britain, to attempt to persuade Rotterdam dockers to implement an embargo. However, no real progress was made in negotiations with the Federatie Nederlands Vakverbond (the Dutch TUC). With the failure to attain an agreement, coal imports remained a problem which could not be resolved completely, regardless of the best picketing efforts of the south Wales miners.

The main measure of success for a strike by coal miners in a modern society is its impact on electricity generation. The 1984-5 strike was no exception to this, although continued working by the Notts Area hindered this task considerably. The south Wales miners were in the vanguard of this campaign, picketing twenty-two power stations across Wales and England by late March 1984. They also picketed oil-fired and nuclear facilities: for example, by early April Blaenant men were turning away CO₂ tankers at Trawsfynydd, near Blaenau Ffestiniog. The persistence of the Welsh pickets paid dividends, with rank and file EEPTU members at Fawley agreeing in late May to ‘black’ plant maintenance work. Similarly, at Didcot (one of Britain’s largest power stations), round-the-clock picketing by Merthyr Vale miners prevented supply lorries entering the site, prompting workers there to vote in June to refuse to accept coal delivered by road. The Area was equally successful closer to home: by September 1984, it was reported that all electricity production from coal in Wales had ceased.

With the onset of autumn, the Area stepped up its efforts to generate more support from power station workers. On one day in October 1984, for example, over 300 south Wales pickets descended on Oldbury nuclear plant, near Bristol, whilst a hundred went to the oil-fired Pembroke station and a further fifty visited Berkeley power station in Gloucester. Later that month, South Wales also provided many of the 500-strong mass picket at Didcot, in protest at the oil deliveries now occurring there. In addition to this, other possibilities for building links with power workers were investigated by the Area. Following a meeting with activists in other unions in November 1984, it was reported to the EC that there was a lot of latent support for the miners amongst rank and file workers but that this needed to be encouraged.
Consequently, the Area leadership decided to invite power station shop stewards to a meeting to discuss future joint action, to take up the offer by EEPTU to publish their case in its own newspaper, and also to print leaflets for distribution to workers within power stations. One of the clearest examples of the determination of the south Wales miners to succeed was provided by the ten Merthyr Vale miners who spent Christmas week manning the Didcot picket-line. Indeed, as late as January 1985, Welsh miners could still be found amongst a picket of Tilbury power station organised by London-based support groups. No-one in the NUM did more to halt the power stations than the south Wales miners. 62

In addition to shutting down the power stations, another key NUM strategic objective was to hit steel production. For South Wales, the first task was to persuade the Port Talbot and Llanwern unions not to handle imported coal. The failure of these negotiations led to hundreds of south Wales miners picketing the steelworks. By April, it was reported that supplies were on the verge of exhaustion. 63 However, the EC realised that starving the steelworks completely would be counter-productive, since without a minimum usage of coking coal their blast furnaces and ovens would collapse. This would jeopardise the jobs of the steelworkers and also the miners whose collieries depended on supplying BSC. Consequently, after meeting steel union representatives in April and May 1984, the Area leadership agreed to allow Llanwern the minimum amount of coal necessary for safety purposes (which would result in a cut in steel output of around forty percent), to be transported there in carefully-monitored quantities by the NUR and ASLEF. In return, the ISTC promised to use only rail-delivered coal, so as to allow the NUM to retain control of the situation. In early June, the EC confirmed that Area policy was to ensure that this commitment continued to be met. 64

The output-limiting agreement did not last. The first signs of a harder stance emerged at the NUM rally in Cardiff in late April 1984, when Scargill said: 'The time has come to begin to tighten the knot ... The quicker other industries are affected the quicker the Government will change their attitude'. 65 Also, by late May there was evidence that the deal was perhaps not quite as 'watertight' as had been supposed. It had been reported that the ISTC was not keeping to the agreed quota – for example, Llanwern had also been receiving coal from Dowd's Wharf in
Newport. On the other hand, Terry Thomas later argued that the complete blockade was a strategic mistake because it alienated rank and file steelworkers, who saw it as an attempt to close them down.

The total blockade of the steelworks began in June 1984. Established by the NEC to oversee all strike-related decision-making, the first act of the Union's National Coordinating Committee was to ask ASLEF to stop all fuel deliveries to the steelworks as of midnight on 19 June if the ISTC did not agree to reduce steel output – which it subsequently did not. This came as an unwelcome surprise to the Area leadership, which had not been informed beforehand and had also previously spelt out to the NEC that the Gwent pits were completely dependent on Llanwern. Despite this, once the decision had been made the Area adhered to it. Within two days, Llanwern output was down by around 33 percent (below the financial break-even point), with reports of serious fuel shortages. Llanwern delegates told the Area's leaders on 20 June that furnace linings there were already damaged and that their plant was vulnerable precisely because it used Welsh coal, whereas other steelworks relied on imports. The EC, however, remained resolute in enforcing the national decision.

The attitude of the steelworkers was a fundamental factor in this situation. The NUM had called for reciprocity for its support for the steelworkers during their strike in 1980 – in other words, no production of finished steel. However, in early July 1984 the ISTC spurned the Union, pledging to maintain maximum output at all plants. It was this complete failure of solidarity towards the NUM which was the essential determinant of the eventual failure of the blockade of the south Wales steelworks.

The NUM plan was for the total blockade of Llanwern to be implemented through the NUR and ASLEF ensuring that the coal trains which supplied the steelworks would not cross picket-lines. Within a week, however, lorry convoys had been established and were travelling daily between Port Talbot (where the coal docked) and Llanwern on the M4, an operation which they continued for the remainder of the strike. In retaliation, the NUM instructed the rail unions to also blockade iron ore, since it was believed to be impossible for BSC to supply Llanwern with this by road because of the vast quantities required (around 50,000 tonnes a week). This
expedient seemed initially to have worked – but by the end of June the convoy had begun to move iron ore as well, with a hundred lorries (each carrying twenty-five tonnes of ore) arriving every day, in addition to the 65 coke-carrying lorries. Eventually, massive convoys of up to 200 giant haulage lorries were making the journey between the steelworks twice a day. Although the rail unions maintained the blockade, this was insufficient in itself to halt Llanwern.  

The convoys were in themselves a source of bitterness for the south Wales miners, since some lorry drivers were TGWU members but ignored the picket-lines because of the fantastic bonus payments they were receiving. Also, many of the lorries – which had been armoured especially for the purpose of blockade-running – were clearly neither roadworthy or safe to other motorists but were allowed to proceed. A further cause of NUM ire was the steelworkers’ eagerness to deal with the haulage firms, even though some of them had assisted BSC in breaking their own strike in 1980. On top of all of this, there were instances whereby miners travelling in minibuses on the M4 at the same time as the convoy were nearly crushed by the aggressive tactics of the lorry drivers.

Enforcing the blockade was a formidable task for the south Wales miners. At Llanwern, management had told employees not to use the plant’s eastern entrance, to enable the convoy to drive at high speed through picket-lines. Hundreds of miners, wives and supporters tried their best but despite an array of tactics and round-the-clock picketing of both steelworks month after month, the convoy was never halted for more than a few days. The inherent dangers of trying to stop a high-speed lorry convoy were illustrated tragically in September 1984, when two Penallta miners were killed whilst on picket duty outside Llanwern. Retrospectively, even committed activists acknowledged the practical impossibility of physically stopping the convoy: ‘It became in the end a futile exercise to be picketing because … if you stood on the road they’d knock you down – knowing that they’d get away with it’. Similarly, another miner commented that ‘[y]ou can’t really stop a convoy that’s in full flow unless you’ve got rocket launchers [- but] … we’re not Osama bin Ladens, we’re south Wales coal miners’.  

254
Whatever the merits of the NUM national plan to blockade the steelworks, it did not work in practice. By October 1984, 600 lorry movements a day meant that Llanwern was receiving one hundred percent of its requirements – significantly more than the amount allowed before the 'total blockade' had been declared. Instead of limiting output, the abandonment of the local NUM-ISTC agreement meant that steel production actually rocketed in south Wales, reaching a three-year high. The failure of the blockade was a significant blow to the NUM's ability to achieve an outright victory.74

The most notorious incident of the entire strike was the 'battle of Orgreave', a mass picketing action that came to a climax on 18 June 1984. Picketing coke-works and the use of mass pickets had been central to the strategy and tactics of the national NUM leadership since the outset of the strike, at least partly because of the symbolic significance of the closure of the Saltley coke-works during the 1972 strike. In contrast, the EC was unenthusiastic about picketing Orgreave because reconnaissance had indicated that it was an open and remote site, whereas Saltley had been an enclosed depot in the Birmingham suburbs, from where it was easier to obtain physical support from other trade unionists. The NUM's failure to prevent the movement of coking coal from Orgreave coke-works was a key turning point. As Emlyn Williams later commented, 'Saltley made Arthur – and Orgreave destroyed him'.75

At Orgreave thousands of miners, including approximately a thousand south Wales pickets, converged on the site. Unlike elsewhere, at Orgreave the police made no attempt to hinder their arrival – and even supervised the parking of the miners' coaches. Consequently, many miners later claimed that the government had engineered the confrontation to strike a decisive blow against the NUM. Once in position, the pickets were met by 8,000 police, equipped with riot gear, dogs and horses: 'The result was the greatest violence seen in a British industrial dispute since before the First World War'.76 In the view of one lodge secretary, "The battle of Orgreave" should have been described as "the massacre of Orgreave". Because if ever anything was constructed to brutalise and savagely beat working-class people, it was Orgreave ... [I]t will live in bloody infamy for what the British government did to working-class people'.77
Even working in a dangerous environment and their picket-line experiences earlier in the strike did not prepare miners for what they faced at Orgreave. Dressed typically in jeans, T-shirt and trainers, the miners were singularly unprepared for a clash with police fully equipped with truncheons, body armour and riot shields. During the struggle, police staged medieval-style mounted charges of unprecedented ferocity and used Alsatians to maul the pickets. Mounted police chased pickets down nearby streets and through gardens, lashing out indiscriminately at them. Welsh miners who were there that day later recalled their experiences of police brutality – as one commented, ‘They done everything bar turn guns on us’. A Maerdy man stated: ‘If you was in the front, up against the shields, you’d had it ... And you seen a lot of heads getting cracked open ... You had to be there to believe what happened. It was carnage ... The police were going nuts’. Similarly, the Tower lodge secretary said that ‘I’ve never seen so much blood in my life ... Everybody seemed to be marked with blood’. The miners’ shock was expressed vividly by a Penallta collier:

Orgreave was a major experience in my life. I’ll never forget that at all ... It was like something ... that happened in Chile or Uruguay, or one of these South American countries ... How the police behaved was abominable, to say the least ... Even now, I’m bitter about it ... It was absolutely terrible what they done ... [O]nce they got us all in one place, then they cut loose ... Dogs. Horses. Policemen with short, round shields. Policemen with long, tall shields. Padded up ... And done with military precision ... It was horrendous.

The media’s depiction of Orgreave added insult to injury, portraying the miners as the instigators of the violence. This image augmented government depictions of the miners as a ‘menace to society’ and was a potent propaganda weapon against them. Pickets who attended Orgreave stated that this was a complete misrepresentation of events – a viewpoint confirmed by later revelations and some of the twentieth anniversary history programmes broadcast to mark the strike. One EC member stated: ‘the media ... showed the miners charging the police, when in fact it was the other way around ... And there’s no doubt about that ... [T]he police were lying, the
media was lying – but that was a concerted effort ... to try and alienate the public against the miners’. 81

If Saltley was a symbol of NUM victory in 1972, then Orgreave was a harbinger of the miners’ eventual defeat in 1985. The fundamental reason for this difference lay not in the specifics of the coke-works’ location or in the systematic police violence in 1984 (although both these factors were important) but in the stark contrast in the level of active physical assistance from rank and file trade unionists in other industries. As Terry Thomas later asserted, ‘Everybody talks about ... miners’ success in Saltley [but this] ... was as a result of other workers coming out in support of miners, not because of anything the miners themselves did’. 82 This point was underlined by an EC member:

Saltley Gates was symbolic ... in 1972 ... [However,] the tactic Arthur was using was wrong [in 1984] ... Saltley Gates wasn’t closed by the miners [but] ... by the car-workers. It was that solidarity of the trade union movement which you had in ’72 – which you didn’t have in ’84 ... Now, Arthur was trying to repeat that in Orgreave. The problem was, first of all, that ... the Establishment wanted Orgreave to take place. It was the battleground which was, again, of their choosing ... I think it was foolish ... [a]nd it was a trap. And it was a trap that could have been foreseen. 83

Following Orgreave, the pressing need within the NUM became the attainment of some successes, however symbolic, as a way of sustaining morale and momentum. After the dispute was over, Emlyn Williams conceded that there had been a failure to come to terms with this defeat and also a confusion between rallies attended by committed activists and genuine mass support: ‘we were failing to communicate [with the membership] – only through mass rallies. And those mass rallies were made up mainly of men who were not only initiated to the strike, but men who adored Arthur Scargill. And the men in the house, of course, we were not getting at’. 84

This perspective was not solely the product of hindsight, however. An important exception to the lack of strategic discussion was the internal discussion document by
Kim Howells entitled *Some Observations on the Strike in the 3rd Month*, circulated in mid May to all south Wales lodges. This criticised ‘much confusion and lack of direction amongst certain area and national leaderships’, focusing on the failure to stop coal movements, ineffective picketing, the inability to create national machinery to feed NUM members and the absence of any ‘short, simple demands or targets’. The document concluded on the questioning of financing the exorbitant costs being incurred by Areas such as South Wales: ‘No one, however, is clear about the role of Sheffield [NUM national HQ] in alleviating of the financial burden. Clarification on this is needed quickly’. These tensions between the national leadership and the Area Officials, implicit even at this stage, did not emerge publicly until January 1985.

Orgreave and the steelworks blockade highlighted with brutal clarity the lengths to which the Establishment was prepared to go to defeat the NUM. This was also evident in the courts’ treatment of miners who had been arrested. Here, the typical sentence was being bound over to keep the peace and a prohibition of attending other picket-lines. Although nominally a judicial measure, the blanket imposition of this judgment emphasised its underlying political purpose – to weaken the ability of the NUM to win the strike. The social security system was another arm of the state used to exert pressure on miners and their families. From the outset of the strike, single miners were denied benefits, despite being without any income. Additionally, the government imposed a cut of £15 per week for miners’ families, together with a further £1 a week reduction in November. This occurred because the miners were deemed to be receiving strike pay, even though it was apparent that the NUM could not afford this. The cut remained in force even after the Union funds had been sequestrated, merely emphasising that it was purely about attempting to force the NUM into submission. It was with some justification, therefore, that the Cwm lodge secretary could later comment: ‘It was a *war* by Margaret Thatcher on what she saw as the enemy … I hope that sometime in the future … people will recognise that this government declared war on a part of society, because of their political trade union beliefs. That’s what happened’.85

Although the government claimed that it was defending Britain from NUM ‘lawlessness’, miners were acutely aware that the Thatcher administration’s
definitions of illegality were tailored precisely to its overall objective of defeating the strike. As one lodge activist commented, '[y]ou didn’t have to be guilty of a crime if you were a miner – you’d be arrested and removed from the picket-line … And yet here was this government deliberately and calculatingly breaking the law', through ignoring the Mines and Quarries Act, encouraging the operation of unsafe lorry convoys and sequestrating NUM assets: '[a]ll these laws were broken in order to defeat what was a genuine trade union action'. There was also evidence of the government using more extreme clandestine methods: for example, the Press Council reported that two 'moles' inside the NEC had been leaking material to the Daily Mail and Yorkshire Post. Similarly, in February 1985, former MI5 intelligence officers alleged that there had been widespread spying against the NUM and that political information about the strike had been passed to the government, in direct contravention of MI5’s charter. This authoritarian application of 'law and order' methods by the government to its opponents, as well as a readiness to ignore any legislation that impeded its overarching political goals, led several south Wales miners to express the view that Thatcher in 1984 appeared to be on the verge of establishing a fascist state.

Despite having the merest fraction of these resources at their disposal, the NUM and its members remained similarly determined to fight their corner – because they were all too aware of the price of failure to do so. Unfortunately for them however, media coverage of the strike prevented them from spelling out that the key issue was nothing less than the survival of a vital industry and a way of life for mining communities across Britain. As the Cwm lodge secretary later reflected:

In every community where there was a pit there was an active lodge … [E]very part of community life involved the NUM lodge … – and that’s … what we was fighting for in ’84 … [O]ur biggest failing [was] we were unable to impart that emotion … to the general public. People didn’t realise … what a lodge was to the community … When Arthur Scargill was saying, … ‘I’m asking you to stand up and fight for your job, your pit, your community and your family’, that’s true – we all knew that.
Late summer and early autumn 1984 saw several developments that impeded the Union's ability to win an outright victory. For the Area, one of the most significant of these was the sequestration of its assets because of its refusal to comply with a High Court order banning picketing at Port Talbot steelworks. South Wales was the first victim of the new Tebbit laws and the political intent behind this move was clear: it was singled out because of its importance to national NUM picketing operations.

On 1 August 1984, the South Wales NUM bank accounts, including its food funds and those of some support groups, were frozen. Anticipating this development, the Executive had taken steps beforehand to disperse the Area's funds and transfer its assets to off-shore accounts. On the day that sequestration occurred, around 2,000 south Wales miners converged on their Area headquarters in the AUEW Building in Pontypridd to prevent any prospective attempts by High Court commissioners to gain access. Additionally, a contingent of over a hundred miners (including the entire Area leadership) barricaded themselves inside the Area Office on the third floor, where they remained for several days. Speaking via a megaphone from the office window, Emlyn Williams told the crowd below: 'We are here as a result of the insidious legislation created by a neo-fascist government ... The South Wales miners will stand ... There is no going back. There is no surrender. We fight, we win, or we die in the attempt'. Within days however, the sequestrators had seized several of the Area's bank accounts – including the main account, which had been transferred to Jersey. Fortunately for those that depended upon them, many lodges and support groups had been able to withdraw their funds from their bank accounts and operated for the remainder of the strike on a purely cash-based system. All the actions taken by the EC regarding the whole episode were subsequently endorsed by an Area Conference on 29 August. Even after sequestration, the south Wales miners were still able to maintain their food centres and picketing operations. Nevertheless, this situation inevitably impacted on the picketing ability of the Area: travel and sustenance expenses had to be reduced to nominal amounts, whilst large-scale picketing actions became less common.

These developments did surprisingly little to demoralise the strikers and their communities. The survival of the Area through another seven months of struggle
without the use of its own bank accounts was due largely to strong local support and the organisational discipline which permeated the struggle. Sequestration inadvertently reinforced social relationships within the Valleys and created the conditions for a wider mobilisation across Wales in support of the miners. Evidence of this was provided by major rallies in Aberdare, Treorchy, Newport and Ferndale during August; mass demonstrations were still being held in October 1984, when hundreds of people attended gatherings in Cardiff and Cwmbran. An entirely different manifestation of this defiance occurred in August 1984, when fifteen members of Maerdy lodge staged an eight-hour occupation of the Birmingham offices of sequestrators Price Waterhouse in protest at their seizure of community hardship funds. 92

The Price Waterhouse occupation was the forerunner to two even more audacious initiatives by south Wales miners. The first hint of these occurred at an Area Conference on 29 August, when Emlyn Williams indicated that ‘a number of special actions’ would take place at ‘crucial picketing targets during the 48 hours following this conference’. As predicted, miners conducted two daring and meticulously-planned occupations within this period, under cover of darkness and within an hour of each other. In the first case, over one hundred strikers infiltrated the huge Port Talbot steelworks and occupied the three massive wharf cranes, to prevent coking coal being unloaded. Additionally, a group of Gwent miners took over the Newport Transporter Bridge, suspending the bridge’s gondola mid-stream and blocking shipping access to Llanwern’s coal wharves. These occupations highlighted different police responses to picketing: at Port Talbot, British Transport Police staked out the cranes over several days, until the miners could be persuaded to give themselves up; in contrast, Gwent Police forced a much more violent conclusion to the transporter bridge occupation. 93

How did these occupations fit into the broader South Wales strategy? At the time, Kim Howells stated that the pickets had been given a week’s food and instructed to stay put for as long as possible, since it was believed that Llanwern and Port Talbot each had less that a week’s supply of coking coal left. To maximise their effect, the raids were also timed to coincide with the on-going dockers’ strike. Retrospectively, miners were more ambivalent about the occupations. For one Executive member,
they were a morale-boosting exercise, ‘highlighting the determination of the miners [and] ... showing that basically the miners aren’t prepared to go down without a fight’. In contrast, another EC representative recalled his private opinion at the time was that it was ‘absolutely crazy’ to place over a hundred of the Area’s best pickets in a situation practically guaranteed to end with them being arrested and barred from any further picketing. Looking back, George Rees later said the whole exercise ‘was bound to fail, but at least it showed that the Union wasn’t sitting back doing nothing. We were trying to do something ... It had gone to a stage where we’d try anything’.

August 1984 also saw the first significant attempts at a co-ordinated ‘return to work’ movement. Unlike most other coalfields, which saw real breaches in their solidarity, in south Wales there were only a few solitary strikebreaking attempts. These prompted a massive spontaneous reaction, with which neither the police or NCB could cope. At Garw, Cwm, Bedwas and the Aberaman Phurnacite plant, individual ‘scabs’ admitted defeat in the face of overwhelming community opposition, with NCB bus drivers refusing to cross picket-lines and in one case a milkman boycotting a strikebreaker’s house. After six months of struggle the south Wales miners – incredibly – remained literally one hundred percent solid.

This unity was very impressive but did not mean that the situation was completely unproblematic in south Wales. By August 1984, for instance, there were rumours of discontent in Gwent, where a few pits had not been overly enthusiastic about the strike from the outset. One place where this was most apparent was Celynen South. Here, Emlyn Williams and George Rees tackled the problem head-on by addressing a lodge general meeting and persuading them to remain loyal to the strike. Despite this success, the EC remained concerned about any potential NCB attempt to organise a ‘return to work’. An Area Conference on 29 August resolved to take decisive action if any ‘scabbing’ occurred, including mass picketing and the coalfield-wide withdrawal of safety cover for at least twenty-four hours. On 3 September, the Area also responded positively to Scargill’s call for miners to picket their own workplaces.
Although the strike remained solid in south Wales, the trend of events during August and September 1984 was a troubling one for the Union. There had been the sequestration of the Area’s assets, the return of the first strikebreakers in other important coalfields and the failure of the TUC to offer effective assistance. Consequently, both Emlyn Williams and George Rees came to realise that the overriding objective for Thatcher was to smash the NUM, not merely to win the dispute. Their concerns were reinforced by no less a figure than Will Paynter, the former NUM national general secretary and Area president. George Rees recalled:

Paynter ... [called] in on us, the strike was then in its fifth month. I can remember him saying, ‘start looking for a way, George, to end this strike. If you don’t, the Union will be destroyed ... [Y]ou can’t win it. It’s gone on too long’ ... And from September on, ... we used to have discussions amongst ourselves in the office ... And whilst we were in full support [of the strike], there were apprehensions starting to build in our minds. Especially when you had people like Paynter telling us, ‘start to look for a way out, boy’. I mean, you’re talking about a man whose experience had been through it all.

As the autumn drew on, doubts began to grow amongst the Area leadership about the likelihood about any kind of eventual NUM victory. One EC member later commented:

[I]t was a very worrying time ... [T]owards the latter part of that year, ... I’d be going down to Pontypridd. Emlyn [Williams] would say, ‘come on in, come in the office’. And then he’d say, ‘what do you think ... about the strike? ... What do you really think?’ ... [And] towards, say, November, I remember saying to Emlyn Williams, ‘to be honest with you’, I said, ‘I think we’re in terrible trouble’. And Emlyn said, ‘I know’ ... Emlyn was of the same opinion.

As 1984 drew to a close, the Area’s miners and their supporters found that the struggle was becoming increasingly a defensive one. Changing circumstances shifted the focus of their activities from picketing and campaigning around Britain to shoring up the south Wales coalfield. For the first time since the earliest days of the
strike, the miners found themselves picketing their own collieries. Although the Area remained significantly more solid than any other, it was clear that the long and painful retreat had finally reached south Wales.

In early November 1984, the NCB orchestrated another ‘back to work’ campaign. South Wales had been the only coalfield to remain absolutely solid – but even here, as the strike began to crumble elsewhere, a small strikebreaking movement emerged, centred on Cynheidre colliery. Remarkably however, despite considerable resources and NCB and police collaboration, the predicted surge failed to materialise: only nineteen men broke the strike in south Wales on 5 November, sixteen of whom were at Cynheidre. The other main colliery where the lodge committee faced difficulties was Celynen South, although the problem here was significantly less than at Cynheidre. Of the tiny number of south Wales miners who had become strikebreakers by late 1984, most were at Cynheidre and Celynen South. On 20 November, for instance, 73 of the 85 strikebreakers came from these collieries (with 53 at Cynheidre and 20 at Celynen South). This general trend persisted for the rest of the strike: in early January 1985, for example, 87 out of the 136 strikebreakers in south Wales were from Cynheidre.\(^{100}\)

Cynheidre was ‘the weak link in the chain’ for the south Wales miners because of a combination of factors. Ever since mining began there in the early 1960s, the lodge had a reputation for moderation somewhat out of step with the traditional radicalism of the Area, whose leadership had generally come from the more militant central Valleys. This tendency had been reinforced by the colliery’s ‘receiver pit’ role. Located on the western extremity of the coalfield, Cynheidre also faced several geographical problems, the main one being that its workforce was drawn from a wide catchment area including Llanelli, Cross Hands and all the small villages across the south of rural Carmarthenshire. Consequently, the NUM lodge was not as integral to local communities as it was elsewhere in south Wales. This had obvious implications for maintaining solidarity but also for other factors such as operating a comprehensive support group network. The glaring contrast was with places like Tower and Maerdy, whose workforces were almost exclusively from the tight-knit Cynon and Rhondda valleys respectively – and where there were no strikebreakers throughout the dispute. These factors were exacerbated prior to the strike by specific
Cynheidre intra-lodge developments: the retirement of veteran lodge secretary Howard Jones in December 1983 and the ballot which replaced Tony Hollman as lodge chairman with the younger and more dynamic Tony Ciano. In this situation, the embittered ex-chairman chose to become a ‘super scab’ in order to advance his own standing. It is far from insignificant that the only pit where a prominent ex-lodge leader was a dedicated opponent of the strike was the least solid colliery in south Wales.

Unfortunately for the south Wales miners, the activities of individuals such as Hollman had an impact far beyond their own localities. George Rees later commented that ‘people like Tony Hollman, … the press made him out to be a hero. He was going to take on the South Wales Area, going to smash the South Wales Area’. 101 This handful of prospective strikebreakers was in contact with the wider movement aimed at undermining the NUM: as early as July 1984, secret meetings had been held in London and south Wales, with rumours that the infamous ‘scab’ leader ‘Silver Birch’ had travelled to the coalfield to assist them. By October, Hollman and his associates were writing letters to the local media on behalf of an organisation known as the National Working Miners’ Committee and also canvassing companies with a view to obtaining financial support for their schemes. The culmination of these efforts was the legal action by five strikebreakers against the Area for alleged ‘misuse’ of NUM rules. 102

Throughout the strike, the relatively absence of confrontation in the Valleys was at least partly due to the unwillingness of South Wales NCB director Philip Weekes to take aggressive steps to try to force the miners into conceding defeat. Within south Wales, the Board remained unenthusiastic about the attempts by a few individuals to return to work and also the harsh methods utilised by MacGregor. The clearest example of this was the series of secret meetings between Weekes and the Area Officials, in which the latter were able to set out the problems facing the Area and thereby obtain a more sympathetic local treatment than would otherwise have been the case. 103

Weekes may have been relatively empathic towards the miners but it was still his job to be an NCB director. Des Dutfield, an EC member at the time, later
commented that 'Philip Weekes was no different from all the other Coal Board officials ... [H]e was just a nicer man, a gentleman ... but he carried out the policies of the Coal Board, of MacGregor'. As of November 1984, the combined pressure from the handful of 'super scabs' and the national NCB finally forced the Board to take a more combative stance in south Wales – hence the first emergence of strikebreakers there. Weekes later told Emlyn Williams that MacGregor had given him an ultimatum: either conform to NCB policy or be sacked. This new approach was apparent in his public calls for a return to work and also the attempt to use a Christmas bonus to coax men into abandoning the strike. Although Weekes denied it, it was rumoured that colliery managers had received training on how to break the strike. Evidence of the correctness of this rumour was provided by the systematic way in which the Board subsequently went about targeting vulnerable individuals and placing them under immense pressure to return to work.\textsuperscript{104}

Despite the NCB’s efforts, the strike proved incredibly solid in the Valleys. By 19 November, 99.6 percent of the south Wales miners were still out (the highest percentage of any Area), as compared with the national average of 73.7 percent. Even though it did not materialise, the threat of a mass return-to-work brought out several thousand men on picket duty at pits across south Wales, which kept strikebreaking to the barest minimum. By mid December 1984, the total number of strikebreakers in the coalfield had stabilised at around 120 – out of a total workforce of around 21,000. At that time, 21 out of the 26 British pits still completely ‘scab-free’ were to be found amongst the 28 south Wales collieries. Speaking at a memorial meeting for Will Paynter (who had died in early December) shortly before Christmas, Emlyn Williams restated the miners’ defiance: ‘We are still amongst the most militant section of the working class movement ... We will not be destroyed ... [T]he South Wales miners will show their loyalty. We don’t intend to live in a society of unemployment. We don’t intend to see our children in the dole queues’.\textsuperscript{105}

By late 1984, a key task for the miners and their supporters was to maintain morale. The Area leadership did this by encouraging lodges to hold general meetings, to disseminate information and also dissipate any return-to-work talk. At colliery level, the lodge committees found that the best solution was to involve as many people as
possible in the struggle, whether through picketing or fundraising. As one Penallta collier recalled:

Well, the morale of the people I was involved with was always high, because they were always active. I think if you wasn’t active, ... you become isolated then, don’t you? ... Whereas when you’re active, you realise you’re not the only one who is in that situation ... And also, by being active, you made yourself available to information as to what to do in certain situations. If you did have ... heavy letters coming through about debts, then the advice was there on how to deal with it ... So, morale was high amongst those that was active and focused on the strike, and believed in it ... Those that weren’t involved, then their problems became their own.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, many activists found that participation in the strike had developed into an all-encompassing routine for them and that they were prepared to stay out indefinitely until the miners had achieved victory.

The most remarkable aspect of the strike in south Wales was the immense solidarity of the miners and their supporters. Undoubtedly, the radicalism that had shaped their history was an important factor. One lodge secretary later reflected that ‘[i]n many places, if you took Arthur [Scargill] out of the game, it would fall apart. In south Wales, you could take Arthur out – or anybody else – and the lodges was just as strong ... So that’s why we didn’t break’. Emlyn Williams underlined this point: ‘[t]he South Wales coalfield has always been possibly the most militant coalfield ... In the 1926 strike they were the last to go back. It’s born in them[,] ... the knowledge that they belong to a class ... The bastion of the trade union movement ... is the South Wales miners’.¹⁰⁷

This ‘traditional radicalism’ shaped the politics of Area activists and also created a ‘culture of solidarity’ amongst the wider membership, in which the vast majority of south Wales miners would never contemplate crossing an NUM picket-line. Towards the latter part of the strike, it was this instinctive loyalty that kept the strike solid in the Valleys. As one Maerdy miner expressed it: ‘Miners in south Wales have always been loyal to the Union. Once they’re out, they’re out ... [M]en wanted to go
back to work. There's no argument about that – the hardship was there. But you was in the struggle – until the Union told us to go back'.

This unshakeable loyalty of the south Wales miners cannot be explained without understanding the importance of the Area to its members. The entire original economic rationale of most Valleys towns and villages was mining and so the Union had been integral to the social fabric there from the outset. As one Tower miner expressed it, 'the Union was everything. The tradition of the trade union movement, of the NUM, the Fed in south Wales – we all grew up with it ... If you was living in the Valleys, yes, you can go and be a bus driver or anything else, but to be a miner ... was a tradition, part of the culture'. The lodges were very involved in community life, whether through the miners' institutes, local brass bands and rugby teams, or whatever. It was this cultural importance, together with the continued significance of mining within the coalfield, which prompted the Maerdy lodge chairman to comment that '[t]he heart of the community was the Union. It influenced all of your life. And not just on the pit life – it was in the traditions of communities. And I think miners respected that. And they respected when the Union said, “let’s go” – they went’. The Union had a real, tangible local presence: lodge leaders were not remote figures but instead worked at the same coalfaces and attended the same social clubs as everyone else. This combination of factors meant that the lodge committee also fulfilled a pastoral role when people came to them for support or advice. The role of the lodge leadership was overwhelmingly about helping people with their problems – and it was precisely this that generated the immense rank and file loyalty seen during the strike. As a Maerdy miner pointed out, ‘the NUM in South Wales is much more than an industrial union, it represents the community more closely than any other organisation’.

The symbiosis of NUM lodge and community in south Wales meant that the former took seriously the responsibilities that it felt towards the latter. One example of this was the decision by Celynen South lodge to organise teams of volunteers to cut and distribute firewood to local pensioners who required it. It was this type of altruism, together with the lodges’ positive social role and the widespread local understanding that the miners were fighting to defend the economic basis of many south Wales communities, which explained the solidarity with the strike shown by
the population of the Valleys – for example, some retired mineworkers paid their pension into strike funds every week during the dispute. Consequently, miners were able to survive through assistance from their local lodge and support group and also from their friends and extended families. This collective response to adversity demonstrated precisely what the strike was all about for the mining communities of south Wales.

By November 1984, the south Wales miners were faced with the unpleasant reality that there were strikebreakers in their coalfield. Although they represented only a tiny minority, the EC decided on a tough policy against them, including disciplinary action, a significant increase in picketing and also the withdrawal of safety cover at any pit where there was ‘scabbing’. The Area also circumvented NCB return-to-work plans by getting its TGWU and GMBATU allies to prevent colliery buses from leaving their depots. This uncompromising stance towards strikebreakers was underlined in January 1985 by Emlyn Williams: ‘We shall never forgive them. To us, they are scabs. And no different from 1926 and 1911. They will be treated as scabs when the strike is over’.112

Withdrawal of safety cover was a drastic not unproblematic way of preventing strikebreaking. In line with every other coalfield, South Wales had ensured that the minimum amount of safety work continued to be done to prevent the pits from deteriorating irreparably. On the whole, the Area leadership was reluctant to withdraw cover, since it knew that the threat of permanent damage to collieries was a weapon of limited effectiveness against Thatcher and MacGregor, who were keen to close whole swathes of the industry. Once the first ‘scabs’ emerged on 5 November however, the south Wales miners withdrew safety cover, to pressurise them into abandoning their strikebreaking efforts. It was not long before several Welsh pits were at risk – although this was insufficient to deter the handful of strikebreakers from defying the wishes of the vast majority of their fellow workers. Consequently, the EC agreed that safety cover should be restored at all pits apart from those where men had returned to work. This decision prevented Penrhiwceiber, Bedwas, Oakdale, Deep Navigation, Britannia pumping station and Celynen North from being flooded completely. Even at collieries that were unable to prevent the return of a handful of ‘scabs’ – such as Celynen South and Abernant – the lodges
ultimately proved unwilling to see their workplaces submerged, instead maintaining the minimum coverage to prevent the pits from being destroyed. By the end of the month, the Area leadership had conceded the need for safety men to go into pits even if there were strikebreakers there. 113

Where established methods failed, south Wales miners and their supporters sometimes adopted more unorthodox approaches to deter strikebreakers. Women’s groups were now increasingly prominent, strengthening picket-line resistance and undertaking some of the more imaginative protests – for example, occupying the pit-head baths and the manager’s office at Cynheidre. On another occasion, over a hundred pickets gathered in Ystradgynlais outside the house of a strikebreaker and sang hymns in an attempt to persuade him to change his mind. 114 The most incongruous episode occurred just before Christmas at Celynen South, the scene of some of the worst clashes in south Wales. Here, lodge officials appeared on the picket-line dressed as Santa Claus and sang carols to the twenty-seven strikebreakers, whilst the police were offered – and declined – presents of plastic toy pigs. Lodge chairman Carl Browning explained: ‘We wanted to enter the festive spirit and show the scabs coming in that we are human beings’. 115

The general Valleys reaction to any ‘scabbing’ during the strike was one of bitter, visceral opposition. The EC sought to utilise this, since the unremitting enmity of entire communities was a powerful deterrent to any prospective return-to-work effort. Valleys people have long memories when it comes to strikebreaking: for example, a Six Bells miner recalled that, during the dispute, his mother drew comparisons between those who had returned to work and the various local ‘scabs’ in 1926 – whose names had all been etched onto her memory. Similarly, one ‘scab’ was ‘named and shamed’ by graffiti painted on the old Llanhilleth pit-head baths; elsewhere, hundreds of people staged peaceful demonstrations outside a strikebreakers’ home in Merthyr Tydfil. 116

Significantly, many of the leading strikebreakers were socially marginal elements or newcomers to south Wales mining communities. As one support group leader observed, ‘[s]ometimes they are miners whom the union has repeatedly had to save from dismissal. Sometimes they are religious fanatics. Sometimes they are disturbed,
come from unhappy homes, or live isolated from the community'. This was reiterated by a Swansea district EC member, who stated that the Cynheidre strikebreakers were 'led by wife-beaters, reprobates, and other people ... [M]ost of the ones that went back in Cynheidre were the bad attenders, the poor performers, men which the lodge had defended'. Several other 'scabs' came from military backgrounds and were alien to the whole ethos of trade unionism. A prominent example this was Gordon Fjaellberg (one of the few strikebreakers at Cwm colliery), a former RAF member who spoke with a Home Counties English accent and who had only worked at the pit for a year or so before the strike began. In the view of the Cwm lodge secretary, Fjaellberg's actions proved that he 'could never have become a miner as long as he lived'.

At this time, the main fear of the South Wales leaders was not the collapse of the strike but a violent backlash from communities hitherto self-disciplined but which were confronted increasingly by police and poverty and who regarded the strikebreakers as traitors. This was encapsulated by a 5,000-strong rally at the Afan Lido in Port Talbot on 13 November. Here, Scargill – in particular – received a rapturous reception. In contrast, when the TUC general secretary Norman Willis appeared to distance himself from their struggle by condemning picket-line violence 'from whatever quarter', he provoked total outrage. In a grim symbolic gesture, furious strikers lowered a noose from the ceiling above him, whilst an Area spokesman likened the speech to the TUC's 'great betrayal' in 1926. Although the EC subsequently felt that the 'noose incident' had detracted from the rally and that the media's distortion of events had been unhelpful, the episode demonstrated graphically the intensity of feeling in the coalfield.

The return of the first strikebreakers in November 1984 brought to south Wales the picket-line scenes that had become commonplace in every other coalfield. The scale of the confrontations overshadowed completely the actual number of 'scabs' – on 12 November, for example, the 54 strikebreakers caused stand-offs between around 2,000 strikers and a similar amount of police. During the last weeks of 1984, picketing occurred mainly at Cynheidre, Marine, Celynen South, Merthyr Vale, Abernant, Nantgarw, Cwm and the Aberaman Phurnacite plant, with the numbers of strikers at any given site ranging from about 100 up to 800. Allan Rogers MP
condemned the use of hundreds of police to force a few strikebreakers into otherwise-solid pits: ‘Is it right for these vast sums of money to be spent on this particular exercise? Why doesn’t the Coal Board ... stop tearing the communities apart?’. Similarly, Kim Howells warned that NCB tactics were leading to escalating levels of confrontation.120

One of the most tragic events in south Wales during the dispute occurred on the last day of November. David Wilkie, a taxi-driver, was killed by a concrete block dropped from a bridge as he drove a strikebreaker to Merthyr Vale. A few days earlier, Ted Rowlands (MP for Merthyr Tydfil) had phoned Weekes to ask him to stop the two ‘scabs’, whose activities were causing intense resentment and increasingly unpleasant picket-line scenes – but he refused, in line with NCB policy. Merthyr Vale was a flashpoint because of its proximity to Aberfan and its location within the most solidly pro-strike district in Britain. Wilkie’s death and the arrest of three young miners (two of whom later stood trial for murder) did little to weaken the strike in south Wales because it was such an aberration. It did, however, have a calming effect on the coalfield, epitomised by Bill King, the veteran Merthyr Vale lodge secretary. The following morning, at the picket-line, a miner recalled: ‘we stood in the pouring rain, Bill King asked ... for two minutes silence for everyone who had died as a result of the strike that was forced upon us. And we stood there, rain dripping off our noses, stunned ... But still Williams [the strikebreaker] came back to work ... in the convoy’.121

By December 1984, the immediate concern within south Wales mining communities was to get the best Christmas possible in the circumstances. The Area leadership and the support groups worked to ensure that every miners’ family received a turkey, in addition to their usual provisions. Special efforts were also made on behalf of the children, with a generous supply of donated toys (including several lorry-loads of gifts from French, Dutch and Belgian trade unionists) and parties being organised for them across the coalfield. In this way, the solidarity that had sustained the miners throughout the year also enabled their families to have a decent Christmas.122

This focus on getting the miners and their families through Christmas meant that – as the EC was aware – questions would return in an even more acute form in the
new year about the progress of the strike. Christmas 1984 represented a psychological turning point for the wider NUM membership. Across south Wales, leaders at both Area and lodge level noticed a changed atmosphere amongst the rank and file, a belief amongst them that it was not now possible to win the strike. This was most pronounced in Gwent and the west of the coalfield but was even discernible in places where the strike was still completely solid. As the dispute carried on into 1985, it was becoming apparent that the only thing keeping many miners going was their loyalty to the NUM.$^{123}$

Sustaining the strike was placing a major strain on the south Wales miners by early 1985. Single men had been without an income for nearly a year; many miners saw their marriages break up; others faced eviction or the repossession of their homes. Union officials recalled occasions where tough and determined men came to them in distress or cried publicly in lodge meetings. As a Marine miner stated, ‘[t]he situations that some of them were in were dreadful, really. A twelvemonth is a long time’. Similarly, the Oakdale lodge secretary commented: ‘[t]he writing was on the wall … Men were exhausted. They were losing their homes, their marriages were breaking up … [T]hey were despondent and demoralised – and it was crazy, it was all bloody crazy’. One stark indicator of this was the increased number of calls to the Samaritans from south Wales men and also the tragic suicide of a young Trelewis Drift miner in January 1985.$^{124}$

By January 1985, Union loyalty was the main bond between committed activists and the majority of strikers, whose participation consisted of hanging on in the struggle. Where appeals for loyalty failed, Area officials became ‘social workers’ and visited strikebreakers’ homes, some of whom were in truly desperate straits. One EC member stated: ‘If you saw … some of the things that I saw, in terms of repossessions, houses [with] no coal, no heating, burning shoes [in the fireplace] … [T]here was no money. People had gone into debt … You attended meetings of miners and you could see this – it was building up, it was marching towards you’. In the view of a Taff Merthyr miner, ‘these boys that tried to break the strike, they must have been desperate … Because once you go back, that will live with them forever … I think they must have gone back in desperation’. ‘In such circumstances, “loyalty” took a perverse new meaning. As the lodge chairman of Blaenant … began
to say publicly, “Does the last striker have the right to call the last but one a ‘scab’?”.

The hardships endured by the south Wales miners makes the resilience of the vast majority who stayed on strike even more remarkable. In early January there were still only 117 strikebreakers in the whole coalfield. Although this figure increased gradually over the following weeks, the percentage involved was tiny. On 9 January, even the NCB admitted that only 0.8 percent of South Wales was back in work (the next most solid Area was Yorkshire, with 7.0 percent). By late January, 17 out of the 30 south Wales lodges were still completely ‘scab-free’. As late as 20 February, 97.5 percent of the Area’s members remained on strike. Maerdy, Tower, Garw, Penrhiwceiber, Taff Merthyr and Trelewis Drift all stayed literally 100 percent solid to the end (the only pits in Britain to do so), whilst strikebreaking numbers in eleven other collieries did not exceed single figures. Of those back at work, over half were concentrated at just four collieries: Cynheidre, Abertillery, Bedwas and Celynen South.

January 1985 saw the NCB intensify its efforts to undermine the strike in south Wales, with MacGregor and Weekes appealing publicly for the miners to return to work. A formidable array of strikebreaking measures were used, including sending letters to miners encouraging them to organise return-to-work groups; promising that anyone returning to work would receive up to £325 for doing so; and even taking prospective strikebreakers out to dinner. In response to this, Kim Howells commented caustically that ‘[the NCB] must be spending more on getting a few scabs in than they’ve invested in some pits in the last ten years’.

The main response of the south Wales miners to this threat was through renewed mass picketing, particularly at pits where there had been a dent in unity. This was their most effective way of halting the return-to-work: on one day in late January, for instance, over 900 pickets were deployed across the coalfield, including 300 at Bedwas. A serious blow to the Area’s ability to maintain the strike occurred in February, when twenty south Wales ‘scabs’ acquired a High Court order restricting the number of pickets at each pit to six. This judgment was highly controversial, creating legal precedent by giving a statutory limitation to picketing numbers. An
Area Conference on 13 February decided that there was no alternative but to accept it: however, this proved difficult to do in practice, since the news had brought large spontaneous picket-line gatherings to demonstrate the community’s support for the NUM.128

Following the banning of any more than token picket-lines, several south Wales lodges decided that their sole remaining option was to withdraw safety cover at their pits. In later January, for instance, this was done at St John’s after seventeen men returned to work; similarly, Oakdale lodge temporarily withdrew cover in protest at the emergence of a few strikebreakers there. The NCB claimed that, as a result of the strike, ten south Wales coalfaces had been ruined. In response, Terry Thomas said that the Board had exaggerated this damage to undermine support for the strike – and commented sardonically that ‘I only wish the coal board had been as concerned before the strike about the condition of pits and coal faces as they appear to be now’.129

For rank and file miners, a key issue towards the end of the strike was the reinstatement of thousands of their colleagues who had been sacked during the dispute. Unlike in many other Areas, only 42 south Wales miners had been dismissed and most of these had been for minor offences – although there were a few exceptions, such as the three Nantgarw men who had occupied the winding-gear of a Staffordshire colliery. An Area Conference on 14 December agreed that the strike should continue until there was an amnesty for every sacked miner, a demand which the EC reaffirmed in mid February 1985. There was no progress on this until after the strike, when it soon became apparent that almost all of the dismissed south Wales miners would be reinstated.130

For the South Wales NUM, possibly the most ominous dismissal case was that of the ‘St John’s Four’. Here, four lodge officials (Ian Isaac, Ron Roberts, Philip White and Victor Sedgebeer) were sacked in what appeared to be a set-up. The intent was clear: to discourage the Area from preventing miners from abandoning the strike. The EC was concerned that the Board would use this precedent to ‘decapitate’ the lodge leaderships right across the coalfield. At the same time as this victimisation was occurring, the NCB was also encouraging leading ‘scabs’ to establish
alternative lodge committees — a very sinister combination of events, from the NUM viewpoint. St John's lodge chairman Charlie White condemned the sackings as 'a conspiracy ... to intimidate the mining community'. This prospect of a 'scab union' had a particularly haunting resonance for miners who remembered the 1930s and for whom industrial unity was paramount.\(^{131}\)

By early 1985, NUM policy was to 'stand firm' in the hope that favourable unexpected developments to enable the Union to negotiate a reasonable settlement.\(^{132}\) Despite the accelerating break-up of the strike elsewhere, the fact that less than two percent of the south Wales miners were back in work meant that an Area Conference on 25 January endorsed the continuation of the struggle. By mid February, however, growing discontent had prompted the leadership to convene a further conference to head off the return-to-work calls from several pits. This repeated the Area's clear support for the official NUM 'line' — but also requested a National Conference to discuss the strike. Although the representatives of the lodges that were still completely solid reiterated their defiance, delegates from lodges where men were returning to work stated that resistance there could be on the verge of crumbling. Other concerns were expressed about what would happen to those who remained on strike once the national percentage of men back in work exceeded fifty percent and that the NUM was 'running the risk of being crushed in'. As late as 22 February however, an Area Conference still accepted the EC's request to 'stand firm', despite growing fears of an impending collapse.\(^{133}\)

The south Wales miners' preferred conclusion to the dispute was a negotiated settlement. One indicator of this was their endorsement of the solution promoted by the Welsh Council of Churches, which they had helped to draft. This plan proposed to establish an independent review body to examine the coal industry in the context of a long-term energy policy. The background to this development lay in the 'popular front' thinking of various sections of the lodge and Area leaderships in south Wales and the links that had emerged out of the WCSMC. Although (or possibly because) these proposals received the formal backing of the Area and also thirty-six Opposition MPs, they were never taken seriously by the government.\(^{134}\)
One of the most prominent features of the final weeks of the dispute was the point-blank refusal of the government to negotiate. By late January 1985, Thatcher was demanding that the NUM state in writing its acceptance of the closure of ‘uneconomic’ collieries as a precondition to any discussion about resolving the dispute. As February drew on, it was becoming obvious that the only outcome acceptable to Thatcher and MacGregor was total NUM surrender.135 In the last weeks of the strike, the absence of any real aid from the TUC inevitably provoked NUM recriminations. The TUC was negotiating with ACAS and the NCB – however, its ‘solution’ was completely unacceptable because it gave no safeguards against further closures. By mid February, the EC was informed that there was a real threat of the destruction of the NUM if the TUC did not quickly produce a more positive proposal. At an Area Conference several days later, Emlyn Williams attributed TUC unwillingness to intervene effectively to its determination to ruin Scargill’s reputation as a union leader.136

Throughout the strike, the south Wales miners had been its most solid supporters. The Area leadership had adhered faithfully to national NUM policy, even when it disagreed with particular decisions. By 1985, however, it had begun to speak out. For many of the coalfield’s leaders, by this stage the primary concern had become the struggle to ensure the survival of the NUM. In January, Emlyn Williams stated: ‘[Thatcher] is out to grind the miners into the dust ... This is no longer an issue of strike – [for her,] it is an issue to destroy the NUM’. Although the South Wales leadership reiterated that it would stand firm for a negotiated settlement, evidence of tension was apparent in the Area Officials’ frustration at a statement by Scargill that he would rather see the return-to-work continue than ‘prostitute his principles’ by bringing the strike to an end.137

A controversial figure at the centre of these intra-Union tensions was Kim Howells. Although never an elected representative, by early 1985 Howells was being used by Emlyn Williams to express viewpoints about the strike which did not conform to the NUM ‘party line’ – which displeased Scargill intensely.138 During January 1985, Howells claimed in the media that south Wales miners were becoming disillusioned with the lack of initiatives from the national leadership and criticised the Union’s mass picketing tactics. The following month, he suggested that South Wales might
possibly return to work without a settlement and made veiled criticisms of Scargill's
conduct of the strike. Unsurprisingly, these statements met with incredulous
opposition at every level of the Area. In response to this, the Area Officials
suspended Howells as their spokesman — although a few days later he was
reinstated. The whole episode highlighted clearly the pressures and tensions within
the NUM hierarchy as the miners were forced to confront the unpleasant reality of
the probability of impending defeat.

Throughout the Area in early 1985, the dominant viewpoint was unstinting
opposition to any ‘sell out’ agreement. This led to a further difference of opinion
between Scargill and the majority of the Area leadership. The national president
insisted that there must be a negotiated conclusion to the strike, ideally on terms that
suited the Union — even though the prospect of this seemed remote. In contrast, by
late January some south Wales miners were inclining towards a general return-to-
work without a settlement, since this would avoid agreeing to a closure programme
and would allow the struggle to continue locally on a ‘guerrilla’ basis. By early
February, the Area’s representatives were arguing unsuccessfully on the NEC for a
national return-to-work without an agreement. Matters were not helped by Scargill’s
statements at that time that the strike was not ‘national’ and that Areas could do as
they pleased, a suggestion that the EC felt was extremely dangerous. In response,
Emlyn Williams reaffirmed that there would never be a unilateral return-to-work by
the South Wales NUM.139

Despite the solidity of the south Wales miners, the accelerating abandonment of the
strike elsewhere increased the prospect of a return-to-work. By the end of February,
as the number back in work across Britain approached fifty percent, it became
possible to foresee the Area having to withstand the entire weight of the NCB
onslaught alone. As the Aberpergwm lodge secretary later reflected, ‘[w]e could see
the end coming ... [S]tories of them drifting back in other Areas was beginning to
dishearten our men ... I would say the last three weeks before we did go back to
work, the feeling was getting strong that we had to go back’. The Area leadership
was aware of this: in later February, Terry Thomas stated that ‘We will do our
utmost to get a national settlement ... But at the end of the day we would not see
South Wales miners kept out in isolation. I can only assure all South Wales miners of that'.

Even the incredible resilience of the south Wales miners had its limits. The last fortnight of February 1985 indicated that there were several places where there was the real possibility of the strike collapsing, as it had done already in many other coalfields. An early indication of this was when a large section of the audience failed to join in the customary standing ovation for Scargill when he addressed a Cynheidre lodge meeting in early January. Throughout February there was also sustained grassroots pressure at Celynen South for a mass return-to-work. If Celynen South had abandoned the strike, many other Gwent collieries would probably have followed suit – as it transpired, their Union loyalty just about kept them from breaking ranks. These tensions were even beginning to be felt to a lesser degree in the central Valleys. Although the EC was aware that several lodges were threatened by a mass return-to-work, as late as mid February it agreed to support the NEC’s ‘stand firm’ line, on the understanding that the national leadership was doing its best to obtain a negotiated settlement.

The end of the month saw a rapid acceleration in the numbers of miners abandoning the strike. In south Wales, this trebled between 19 and 28 February, from 478 (approximately 2.5 percent of the workforce) to 1,471 (7.5 percent). Most of these were at the six pits where there had been the greatest difficulties in maintaining solidarity: Cynheidre, Abertillery, Six Bells, Marine, Celynen South and Bedwas (where, by late February, the percentage back in work ranged from over 40 percent down to about 15 percent respectively). This decline was much more serious elsewhere: after South Wales, the next most solid Area (Yorkshire) had 21 percent back in work, whilst nationally the total number on strike barely exceeded 50 percent. This process continued until the last day of the strike, by which time there were 1,739 men at work in south Wales – and many more across Britain as a whole.

The deteriorating situation facing the NUM was reflected in the changing attitude of the EC towards continuing the strike. By early 1985, some members had concluded
that the miners faced imminent defeat and that a national return-to-work was the best form of damage limitation. A Swansea district EC representative later recounted:

[A] few of us on the Executive, by early '85, ... felt that we wouldn't win that strike and, yeah, there was discussion at the Executive on several occasions. And they brought about a return to work. It was obvious. We had lost. And it was ... about the survival of the Union. Because if you didn't have the Union, whatever came after would be ten times worse. And many of us took that view – I certainly took that view. The onslaught is going to come – but the Union has got to be there, to do the best they can out of a bad job.¹⁴⁴

Within the Council at this time, the contrasting viewpoints were for maintaining the status quo and for calling for a nationally-organised end to the strike. On 13 February, the Executive agreed to support the stance of the national leadership, although it also called for a National Conference. Six days later, fears were expressed on the EC about the imminent possibility of the collapse of the strike, although the majority opinion was to 'stand firm' and await further national-level developments. The Executive meeting on 22 February reaffirmed the need to keep the strike going but also illustrated the deep-seated reservations felt by a growing minority of its members. The main 'stand firm' exponents were the Aberdare, Merthyr and Rhondda district representatives, backed by the Maesteg district members and the Area Officials; in contrast, the Swansea representatives called for a National Conference to organise a return to work without a settlement, whilst the men from the Rhymney and Gwent districts doubted the ability of the NUM to survive in any meaningful form if the drift back to work continued. This balance of opinion tipped further towards ending the strike by events in the last days of February: the decision by the Notts Area to end its overtime ban, the beginnings of a collapse in parts of south Wales, together with a formal appeal from Cynheidre, Betws and Cwmgwili lodges for an immediate Area Conference.¹⁴⁵ It was this small but decisive shift which changed the majority viewpoint on the Executive from one of maintaining the status quo to one of looking to finish the strike.¹⁴⁶
By the end of February 1985, the Area leadership had become convinced of the necessity of an official national return to work without a settlement. Although most south Wales miners initially were in favour of continuing the struggle, the failure of the various peace initiatives meant that support increased for an organised return rather than watching the strike crumble. Underlining this viewpoint, on 27 February Terry Thomas stressed: 'I don’t see ... us getting the kind of victory now that we thought of in March 1984 ... [W]e must ... not abuse the loyalty that has been given to us by many thousands of miners ... and if we don’t give them leadership then I fear for the unity of the NUM'. On 26 February, the EC decided – given the increasingly serious drift back to work and the prospect of the establishment of rival lodge committees as the first step towards the formation of a 'scab union' – to convene an Area Conference and call for a National Conference to have a 'realistic appraisal' of the situation.147

In response to these developments, on 1 March a South Wales Conference decided by 374 votes to 90 to accept the EC recommendation and call for a national return to work without a settlement. Speaking at the conference, Emlyn Williams stressed the need to save the NUM, emphasising 'the vital necessity not merely to come out on strike under leadership, but also to go back under leadership' and that leaders should not 'hide in the shadows'. This decision was not about saving Welsh collieries – many of the delegates who voted for a return knew that their own pits would not survive the year.

The decision to call for an end to the strike was arguably the most contentious step ever taken by the South Wales NUM. Consequently, it is unsurprising that it provoked bitter opposition from a minority of the membership: at Trelewis Drift, for instance, miners accused Emlyn Williams of 'treachery'. Even twenty years later, some lodge activists still condemned the Area Officials for leading the return to work, arguing that continuing the strike for a few more weeks might have forced power-cuts or a rebellion against Thatcher by Conservative MPs.148 In contrast, other south Wales miners felt that there was no choice but to end the strike. The Six Bells lodge chairman, for example, stated 'I believe what he [Emlyn Williams] did was right because we’d lost by then and all we were doing was prolonging the agony and throwing money away'. Similarly, an EC member commented: 'some people ...
said, “oh damn, if we’d stopped out … another fortnight, we’d have won”. Well, we bloody well wouldn’t have won … [W]hen we had gone as far as the March … [of 1985], they knew we’d lost it … [L]et’s not pretend anything different, it was lost”.\(^{149}\)

Fundamentally, the NUM had no real strategic option in March 1985 other than to end the strike. There were several reasons for this: the government had ensured that other key unions received above-inflation pay rises, thereby preventing the opening of a ‘second front’; there was no further prospect of TUC support; the intransigence of MacGregor and Thatcher meant that negotiations were futile; coal was being moved around Britain; and the police were ensuring that power stations kept working. Furthermore, the situation within the Union was dire: the strike was collapsing (or had already collapsed) in most Areas and even in south Wales many miners were close to breaking point. As one Executive member recalled, ‘it was evident from the feedback we were getting from the lodge officers in the coalfield that the lines couldn’t be held indefinitely … [T]he men had had enough, then’. Another EC representative concurred: ‘[Y]ou can get people to do so much and then it gets to a point – why do armies mutiny? … [T]he floodgates were going to burst … I don’t think that strike would have gone on beyond another fortnight’. Emlyn Williams also later pointed to the reports of total chaos in coalfields such as Yorkshire and Scotland, where the leaderships were phoning the South Wales office every day to beg them (as the most solid Area) to call a National Conference. Consequently, the Area led the return to save the NUM from destruction. As George Rees put it, ‘we could see no conclusion … [o]ther than defeat. Utter, complete defeat. The smashing of the Union. That’s why we decided to [end the strike] … [W]e could see the destruction of the Union facing us. And it was more important to get the Union to survive at the end of this twelve months than anything else’.\(^{150}\)

This decision by South Wales did little to endear it to Scargill and the NUM national headquarters, who instead argued that the drift-back be allowed to continue until there remained a ‘hardcore’ of activists whose refusal to work would force the NCB to concede terms. This proposal was seen overwhelmingly in south Wales, and ultimately by the National Conference, as a retrograde step that would enable the NCB to sack the most committed activists and ultimately disenfranchise the majority of Britain’s miners from membership of what would remain of the NUM – in other
words, a recipe for the destruction of the Union. For many of the Area’s miners, Scargill’s biggest failing was not in the decision to strike in March 1984 or in how the dispute was conducted – but in his inability to accept that it had to come to an end in March 1985.

The circumstances of the decision to end the strike were soon eclipsed by the drama of the return on Tuesday 5 March 1985. There was disruption at several south Wales pits: Trelewis Drift men refused to cross token picket-lines of Kent miners; at Merthyr Vale, the miners would not work until a prominent ‘scab’ had been transferred out of the coalfield; there was a furious reaction against another ‘super scab’ at the Phurnacite plant; at Penrhiewceiber and Six Bells, NUM members were sent home for the day after NACODS claimed that they were unmanageable. One Penrhiewceiber miner later recalled that the mood of the men was ‘absolute despondency’: ‘[i]f ever you saw the face of defeat, it was that morning in Penrhiewceiber’. Elsewhere, the return was subdued. As Garw lodge chairman John Jones put it, ‘[w]e went back with our heads down ... – there was nothing to celebrate’. At several collieries however, the men marched back behind the lodge banner, in a show of solidarity: pits where this occurred included Penallta, Cwm and – more significantly – Cynheidre and Celynen South. One of the most enduring images of the entire strike occurred that morning at Maerdy. There, a thousand-strong crowd of miners, their families and supporters marched behind the Union banner and colliery band to the pit, where they were addressed by the lodge chairman, emotional scenes that were subsequently broadcast world-wide. United, defiant and unrepentant, the Maerdy miners epitomised the strengths which had enabled the NUM to remain on strike for the whole year. 151

Across the south Wales coalfield, the reaction to the end of the strike was summarised succinctly by a Penallta collier, who later commented that ‘relief was the first feeling. Bitter disappointment as well ... [I]t would rip my guts out to think of Margaret Thatcher and MacGregor in Chequers that weekend we went back to work, sipping champagne and saying, “we won”’. 152 There was an understandable enmity towards strikebreakers, although at places like Cynheidre a distinction was drawn between the ‘super scabs’ and those who had returned to work in the last month of the dispute. Another commonly-held view was that some other Areas
(particularly Nottinghamshire) and sections of the labour movement (particularly the TUC) had not done enough to help the miners avoid defeat. The wife of a Blaenant miner reflected:

You’d … struggled for so long. And all your struggling … wasn’t for extra pay or better conditions – you just wanted your husband to have a job to bring the money in. And all of a sudden you’re thinking, a whole year – for nothing. To struggle for nothing … [A]ll the way through the strike … you’d got doubts … but you keep on thinking that maybe at the end … you’ll still have a job to hang onto. And then you know your colliery’s going to close … And what are you going to have, because there’s no other industry in the area? Nothing. ¹⁵³

A Penrhiwceiber miner later called the strike ‘a story of heartbreak. Absolute heartbreak. No glory in it … [I]t was the greatest defeat ever inflicted on any trade union movement … And the rest of the British trade union movement fell with us … You was in a war – you either win it or lose it … But we lost it’. ¹⁵⁴

Following the miners’ defeat, the scale of the contraction of the coal industry in the 1980s was truly breathtaking. When Labour left office in 1979, there were still 235,000 miners in Britain; by early 1992 there were 32,000. South Wales felt this impact as fully as anywhere else. Before the strike, 20,000 miners had been employed at 28 pits; by 1994, the government was attempting to shut Tower, the last deep-mine in the coalfield.¹⁵⁵ These closures were followed rapidly by the demolition of the collieries themselves, resulting in coal-mining literally being wiped off the map after the strike.¹⁵⁶

Within the NUM, appraisals of the outcome of the strike varied. Scargill did not see it as a shattering defeat and remained positive about the Union’s potential strength. Whilst this stance was based on a realistic assessment of the role of coal in British electricity generation, it clashed with the majority of opinion within the Union. The Six Bells chairman, for instance, argued: ‘How can it be a victory when we lost all our money, people was in debt … and we still lost the pits? … I’d like to say, “yes, it was a victory.” But it wasn’t. It was a defeat’. George Rees was even more blunt:
‘Arthur still thinks he won [the strike] ... As I said to him, “if this is a victory, God help us we didn’t have a bloody hammering!” There’d have been nothing left of us’. ¹⁵⁷

In the aftermath of the strike, the closure programme began in earnest. South Wales was devastated by closures in 1985: Celynen South on 6 June, Bedwas on 31 August, Markham on 20 September, Treforgan on 30 September, Aberpergwm on 7 October, Penrhiwceiber on 8 October, Abertillery on 9 October, St John’s on 22 November and Garw on 13 December. The popular reaction was one of bitterness and anger, although only at St John’s was there a concerted campaign of opposition. In 1986, Blaenserchan, Coedely and Abercynon were finished as separate units, followed that autumn by Cwm and Nantgarw. In October 1983 there had been 21,500 mineworkers in the coalfield but three years later there were only 11,943. South Wales had long suffered closures but those of 1985-6 removed mining completely from large swathes of the Valleys. ¹⁵⁸

These immediate post-strike closures were the first wave of a programme designed to remove Britain’s dependence on coal. Inevitably, then, they were not the end of the story: Six Bells shut in 1987, Abernant and Lady Windsor in 1988, Marine, Cynheidre, Oakdale, Trelewis Drift and Merthyr Vale in 1989, Blaenant and Maerdy in 1990, Penallta and Deep Navigation in 1991 and Taff Merthyr in 1992. The consequences of this were all too predictable. The closure of Oakdale, for example, led the local council to speak of the ‘social and economic devastation’ caused by the overnight jump in the unemployment rate from 15 to 25 percent. Research published in 2005 revealed that south Wales remained the coalfield worst hit by the collapse, with the overwhelming majority of the jobs lost having never been replaced. ¹⁵⁹

The dramatic collapse of the industry was accompanied by profound changes in its labour relations. Just as coal was formerly the ‘paradigm case’ of nationalised industrial consensus, so it became a by-word for managerial authoritarianism and job insecurity in the later 1980s. Colliery management disregarded established practices and introduced contracts that undercut previous agreements with the lodges. Nationally, British Coal increased the level of piecework within the wage system, undermining payment structures that had been in place for thirty years. A
Tower miner commented that ‘there was a big difference with management … [I]t was, “we are the bosses now, you do as you’re told” … It went back to how it was in the Thirties’. Similarly, a Betws worker stated: ‘I never enjoyed the work after the ’84-5 strike – in fact it was a nightmare up until … I finished [in 1989]. We were squeezed … and squeezed by the managers. It was a totally different atmosphere. We had to give up concessions which we’d fought for, and maintained, for many, many years’. 160

The increased power of British Coal management after 1985 enabled it to coerce miners into accepting an accelerated closure programme. In August 1989, for instance, when the closure of Merthyr Vale was announced, British Coal threatened to withdraw redundancy payments within 48 hours if the workforce did not agree to closure. The lodge secretary condemned this as ‘shotgun industrial relations’ and complained of ‘men being treated like cattle’. 161 Miners also discovered that the review procedure was incapable of even significantly delaying the closure programme.

South Wales communities remained understandably bitter at the outcome of the dispute. The main targets for this acrimony were the strikebreakers and the various haulage companies blacklisted for their role in the NUM defeat. Within the collieries, anger was controlled by lodge discipline and the fear of victimisation; this was not always the case elsewhere. An attack on the wife of a ‘super scab’ whilst driving her car out of Aberaman Phurnacite plant led indirectly to the sacking of five activists. None of these were apparently involved in the incident and this action prompted sympathy strikes at neighbouring pits. On 17 May, two miners – Dean Hancock and Russell Shankland – were found guilty of the murder of David Wilkie. The large demonstrations in their support at Rhymney and Cardiff showed a continued commitment to the struggle. 162

Within the Area, the key concern was to consolidate the NUM’s position following its grave setback. In order to save the Union as a viable organisation, the Area purged its contempt of court, thereby freeing its sequestrated assets. The leadership also negotiated on behalf of its sacked members and by the end of March 1985 all bar five of them had been reinstated. 163 Crucially, the problems faced by the south
Wales miners never turned them against the NUM: only a handful of individuals joined the breakaway Union of Democratic Mineworkers and these were soon won back. The disappearance of the 'super scabs', through early redundancy or transfers to other coalfields, reaffirmed the NUM hegemony. South Wales was the only Area where the UDM made no impact whatsoever.

Significantly, rank and file activism was not completely extinguished in the post-strike period. In November 1985, militant lodges were still demanding strike action against the closure programme. Localised disputes remained commonplace. In 1986, only 15 out of Britain's 125 mines were free of industrial action, whilst there were widespread strikes during 1987-8. In April and May 1987, British Coal lost £2 million because of unofficial stoppages at eight south Wales pits. In this respect, the south Wales miners' long-standing culture of resistance remained, despite the difficulties they faced.164

At national level, defeat intensified NUM inter-Area divisions whilst also realigning traditional left-right factionalism. Encouraged by the NCB and right-wing businessmen, in July 1985 the Notts Area seceded from the NUM, weakening the position of the old-style 'moderates'. The UDM was established in October 1985. The Left caucus also disintegrated, with South Wales and Scotland becoming critical of Scargill's policies. An important underlying factor here was the historical identification of the leaderships of these Areas with the CP. In contrast, particularly in the post-strike period, Scargill's activist support base came mainly from the extra-CP Left – Militant, the SWP and so on. In this way, internal NUM disputes became bitter political dogfights.

The post-strike adoption of 'realism' by the south Wales leadership was a crucial development. The Area Officials had disagreed with some of Scargill's policies during the strike and between January and March 1985 developed their own strategies for resolving the dispute. In the aftermath of the defeat, the main differences between them focused on the potential for renewing the struggle through industrial action, the necessity of a public campaign to reinstate sacked miners, and the centralisation of decision-making within the NUM at the possible expense of local democracy. Given the extent of the crisis, the Area's leaders decided that the
only way to avoid the elimination of mining in south Wales was to be prepared to negotiate with British Coal. Flexible working patterns was a key topic where they led the ‘moderate’ dissenters, an issue that came to a head when British Coal announced that development of the proposed Margam ‘super pit’ was conditional on its acceptance. South Wales decided to break with national policy and in March 1987 Area president Des Dutfield agreed to discuss flexible working.¹⁶⁵ This willingness to be accommodating, however, could do nothing to change the government’s total opposition to any expansion of coal production.

The new outlook of the south Wales leadership was not without its critics, one of the most persistent of whom was Tyrone O’Sullivan, the Tower lodge secretary. There were also a few attempts to establish this opposition on a formal basis. In later March 1985, there was an unsuccessful campaign by EC member Des Dutfield and Cwm lodge secretary Billy Liddon to unseat Emlyn Williams and George Rees as the Area’s representatives on the NEC, in protest at their role in ending the strike.¹⁶⁶ A more significant opportunity was the election for Area president in November 1985, following the retirement of Emlyn Williams. Here, Terry Thomas – as vice-president – was the ‘continuity candidate’ but was beaten by Dutfield, who was then regarded as being a more pro-Scargill figure. The election also demonstrated the increased activity of Militant within the Area, with Ian Isaac (the St John’s lodge secretary) standing for president and running a controversial campaign that had the support of that organisation and also the tacit approval of Scargill. Isaac met with the disapproval of the Area hierarchy but nevertheless received 22 percent of the first-round vote, a reasonably successful result considering he had a far lower Union profile than the other candidates. As he later explained, ‘I stood in that election because I felt the industry was collapsing … [and] there was a strong feeling amongst the rank and file that we should continue to fight the NCB, to keep our jobs and to … protect our industry as best we could’.¹⁶⁷

Tower colliery, the last deep-mine in Wales, provided the only respite in the unrelenting gloom of coal’s decline in the 1990s. Despite the pit making a £28 million profit between 1991 and 1994, in October 1993 British Coal reduced its output targets and called for 200 ‘voluntary’ redundancies. In response, 2,000 people marched through Aberdare in a rally of support.¹⁶⁸ Despite these protests, by the end
of the year British Coal had halved Tower’s workforce. When the closure was announced in April 1994, the miners decided to put the pit through the review procedure rather than accept an extra £9,000 each in redundancy payments, thereby forcing British Coal to keep Tower open. However, management insisted that continued mining was conditional on massive wage cuts and reduced conditions – seemingly leaving the miners with no alternative but to accept closure. Despite this, the imminent privatisation of the industry provided an unlikely source of salvation. Tower was bought by its employees in January 1995 and this courageous decision enabled the mine to prosper under its workers’ ownership, despite fierce energy market competition.169 The success of Tower, although never one of the coalfield’s ‘star performers’, shows that the post-strike decimation of the industry was fundamentally the product of political policies rather than economic considerations.

The 1984-5 dispute was a defining event in later twentieth century British politics. For the Thatcher government, defeating the miners fulfilled a key aim of its Ridley Plan to subdue the trade unions and enabled it to proceed apace with its monetarist agenda. The ensuing pit closure programme was more severe than even the worst predictions, effectively finishing mining as an industry of any significance. Although coal continued to produce thirty-three percent of Britain’s electricity, international price fluctuations and short-term priorities meant that over two-thirds of this was imported.170 The ‘peripheral’ coalfields were the worst affected by this decline. Whole communities were stripped of the focus that had shaped their political consciousness and social and cultural affiliations, often becoming unemployment black-spots. By March 2005, only nineteen percent of the south Wales jobs lost following the closure programme had been replaced by employment in other sectors.171 The Valleys and west Wales officially counted as amongst the least well-off regions in the EU, which is why they received Objective One funding. In this respect, the outcome of the strike continued to cast a shadow over twenty-first century political and economic developments.

For south Wales, the defeat of the miners in 1985 signified the end of an era. The ensuing closure programme all but eliminated mining from a region once synonymous with it. It was fitting, then, that events there during the dispute exemplified the core NUM strengths and also posed in the sharpest form the main
problems facing the miners. In March 1984, unofficial picketing was the key factor in bringing the Area out on strike. Despite the hesitant start south Wales was the most solidly pro-strike coalfield, a reflection of the strength of the historical bond between Union and community within the Valleys. Its miners were central to picketing strategic targets across Britain; however, the failure of the steelworks blockade illustrated a key internal NUM controversy about methods, which was heightened by events at Orgreave. Finally, the role played by the Area leadership in ending the strike further highlighted the importance of South Wales within the NUM. In keeping with the trend throughout the twentieth century, then, the Area encapsulated many aspects of the broader coal-mining picture during the 1984-5 strike. Always in the vanguard of the struggle, the solidity of the south Wales miners epitomised the defining strengths of trade unionism.
Notes to Chapter 6

1 Interview with Ian Isaac, 2 and 8 April 2004.
3 Times, 7 March 1984.
5 SWML interview with Emlyn Williams (AUD/574).
7 Adeney and Lloyd, op. cit., p.96.
8 Interview with Billy Liddon, 1 April 2004.
9 Celynen South lodge minutes, 10, 15 March 1984.
10 Interview with Ray Lawrence, 11 March 2004.
11 Interview with Ron Stoate, 2 December 2003.
13 Ian Isaac interview.
14 Interview with George Rees, 8 December 2003.
15 Interview with Tyrone O’Sullivan, 22 March 2004.
16 Guardian, 16 April 1984.
17 Quoted in Richards, op. cit., pp.111-12.
18 Interview with Dane Hartwell, 10 December 2003.
20 In the interviews which I conducted, several miners commented on the prominent role assumed by Kim Howells and also the relatively low profile of the Area Officials during the strike – with the majority being critical of various aspects of this arrangement.
22 Interviews with Phil Bowen (26 March 2004) and Colin Thomas (14 January 2004) (respectively).

24 George Rees interview.

25 For details of this, see Welsh Campaign for Civil & Political Liberties and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back* (1985), pp.128-44; *WM*, 7 April 1984.

26 Quoted in Richards, op. cit., pp.129-30.


29 Billy Liddon interview.


35 Interviews with Jim Watkins (18 February 2004) and Ron Stoate (respectively).

36 Billy Liddon interview.


38 EC, 17 May, 8 June 1984; *Guardian*, 18 May 1984.

39 EC, 25 May, 8 June 1984; *WM*, 21–8 May 1984; Francis and Rees, op. cit., p.57.

40 Celynen South Lodge minutes, 24 April 1984; *WM*, 19 April 1984.

41 Interviews with Kay Bowen (14 April 2004), Jim Watkins and Phil Bowen; *WM*, 23 April 1984; Francis and Rees, op. cit., p.58.

42 *WM*, 4 June 1984.


44 Kay Bowen and Phil Bowen interviews; *WM*, 24 April 1984.

45 Colin Day interview.


48 Hefina Headon and Kay Bowen interviews (respectively).

49 Various interviews with south Wales miners; EC, 17, 25 May 1984; Guardian, 11 June 1984; Francis and Rees, op. cit., p.58.

50 EC, 17 May 1984; WM, 15 June 1984; Emlyn Jenkins (5 March 2004) and Tyrone O’Sullivan interviews.

51 Billy Liddon interview.

52 Ian Isaac interview.


54 Ron Stoate interview.

55 George Rees interview; Times, 2 September 1984.


58 EC, 8 August 1984, 23 April 1985.

59 Interviews with Graham Bartlett (20 February 2004) and Tyrone O’Sullivan.

60 Guardian, 15 May 1984; interview with Arfon Evans, 1 April 2004; Saunders, op. cit., pp.52-5.

61 WM, 29 March, 30 May, 1, 30 June, 24 September 1984; Guardian, 3 April 1984; interview with Bill King, 4 March 2004.


63 WM, 20, 29 March, 4, 6 April 1984; Guardian, 5 April 1984; Miner, 2 April 1984.

64 EC, 27 April, 17, 25 May, 1 June 1984; WM, 11 April, 5, 16 May 1984.

65 WM, 30 April 1984.

66 Tyrone O’Sullivan and Mike Banwell interviews; EC, 25 May 1984.

67 Interview with Terry Thomas, 16 February 2004.
In addition to these two men, another Penallta miner was killed during the strike, in an accident at the pit in April whilst carrying out safety work. [Interviews with Ron Stoate and Don Jones (23 February 2004); EC, 27 April, 11 September 1984].

Quotes taken from (respectively) Billy Liddon and Colin Day interviews.

Emlyn Williams SWML interview; EC, 8 June 1984.


Billy Liddon interview.

Quoted in Richards, op. cit., p.128; WCCPL and Area, op. cit., pp.99-100.

Kevin Williams and Tyrone O’Sullivan interviews (respectively).

Ron Stoate interview.

Dane Hartwell interview.

Emlyn Williams SWML interview; EC, 20 June 1984.

Billy Liddon interview.

Ibid.

EC, 27 July 1984; Guardian, 21 February 1985. See also WCCPL and Area, op. cit., pp.128-44.

Billy Liddon interview.


Times, 4, 7 August 1984; WM, 6, 7 August 1984; various interviews from around the coalfield; EC, 20 August 1984.

EC, 13, 15 August, 11 September, 9 October 1984.
93 WM, 31 August, 1, 3 September 1984; Guardian, 1 September 1984; various interviews with miners involved in planning and carrying out both occupations.
94 WM, 31 August 1984; Eric Davies, Dane Hartwell and George Rees interviews (respectively).
95 Celynen South lodge minutes, 21 August 1984; WM, 11 August, 4 September 1984; EC, 22 August 1984.
97 EC, 18 September 1984; Emlyn Williams SWML interview.
98 George Rees interview.
99 Dane Hartwell interview.
100 WM, 6–20 November 1984 passim, 5 January 1985; Celynen South lodge minutes, 7, 12, 14 November 1984.
101 George Rees interview.
103 Terry Thomas interview; Emlyn Williams SWML interview.
106 Ron Stoate interview.
108 Interview with Mike Richards, 27 January 2004.
109 Quotes taken from Glyn Roberts and Arfon Evans interviews (respectively).
111 Celynen South lodge minutes, 17 March 1984.
113 WM, 6, 7, 14–17 November 1984; EC, 6, 26 November 1984; Celynen South lodge minutes, 14 November 1984.
Quotes taken from MS, 15 December 1984, and Eric Davies interview (respectively).

Billy Liddon interview; WM, 2 January 1985.


Quoted in Francis and Rees, op. cit., p.63; Guardian, 23, 27 November, 1 December 1984; WM, 22, 23, 24, 30 November, 1, 4 December 1984; Bill King interview.


EC, 18 December 1984; Emlyn Williams SWML interview; Phil Bowen, Ray Lawrence and Terry Thomas interviews.

Quotes taken from John Mason and Allan Baker interviews (respectively); WM, 18 December 1984, 19 January 1985; Terry Thomas and Graham Bartlett interviews.

Eric Davies and Colin Thomas interviews; Francis and Rees, op. cit., p.64 (respectively).


WM, 7, 30 January, 12, 14 February 1985; Times, 12, 13 February 1985.


Emlyn Williams SWML interview; EC, 8, 21 January, 2 February 1985; WM, 8, 9, 16 January 1985.


138 Emlyn Williams SWML interview.


141 Guardian, 8 January, February 1985 passim; WM, February 1985 passim; ASC, 13 February 1985; Celynen South lodge minutes, 12 February 1985; Ray Lawrence interview.

142 EC, 12, 19 February 1985.

143 Although the numbers quoted are NCB figures, the overall development which they illustrate is undeniable enough. [WM, 20–8 February, 1, 5 March 1985; Times, 27 February 1985; Guardian, 26 February 1985].

144 Eric Davies interview.


146 This seems the most satisfactory explanation for the Area leadership's actions at the end of February 1985. The alternative view, articulated by a minority of lodge activists, was that the Area Officials capitulated under pressure from Kinnock and Weekes.


148 Guardian, 5 March 1985; Glyn Roberts, Tyrone O'Sullivan, Dai ‘Dosco’ Davies and Billy Liddon interviews.

149 Jim Watkins and Dane Hartwell interviews (respectively).

150 Quotes taken from Dane Hartwell, Eric Davies and George Rees interviews (respectively).

151 Quote taken from Dai ‘Dosco’ Davies interview; WM, 6 March 1985; Times, 6 March 1985; Guardian, 6 March 1985; Ron Stoate, Eddie Thomas (17 March 2004), Arfon Evans, Ivor England and Mike Richards interviews.

152 Ron Stoate interview.

153 Kay Bowen interview.

154 Dai ‘Dosco’ Davies interview.

As of 2007, the only extant winding-gears in south Wales were at Tower and Penallta, plus those of Lewis Merthyr, Blaenafon and Cefn Coed (all three of which are now part of mining museums); some of the Trelewis Drift buildings form part of the Welsh International Climbing Centre.

157 Jim Watkins and George Rees interviews (respectively).


159 Richards, op. cit., p.211; WM, 4 March 2005.

160 Interview with Dennis Davies, 19 March 2004; Betws miner as quoted in Richards, op. cit., p.208.


163 ASC, 9, 30 March 1985; EC, 9, 12, 26 March, 9, 19, 23 April, 4, 18 June, 16 July, 8 October 1985; WM, March 1985 passim; Francis and Rees, op. cit., pp.66-7.


166 WM, 14 March 1985; ASC, 30 March 1985; Billy Liddon interview.


169 In 2006, however, it was forecast that Tower would be unable to raise the investment necessary to continue mining operations beyond 2009 [WM, 25 January 2006].

170 Professional Engineering, 8 February 2006.

The Collieries of South Wales in 2004
Conclusion

The years between 1964 and 1985 represent the final phase in the history of coal-mining in south Wales as a major source of employment. This period saw the effective demise of an industry which had shaped and epitomised south Wales and also the last years of the distinctive contribution to the labour movement by the South Wales NUM as a sizeable organisation. Retrospectively, this decline might seem an inexorable process – but this would not be the viewpoint of men who had spent their working lives in the industry. It is true that there were protracted crises and recurrent threats of colliery closures – but there was also an unbroken theme of struggle, with miners fighting to make coal-mining an industry worth working in and to provide a secure future for their families and communities. There was absolutely nothing inevitable about their eventual defeat and we should heed E.P. Thompson’s warning about ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’ when studying their actions.  

In this thesis, I have attempted to write a mining union history within a historical materialist framework which avoids simplistic structural reductionism and acknowledges the semi-autonomous role of cultural and ideological factors in miners’ decision-making, although asserting that ultimately these were formed as part of the process of miners’ interaction with the actually-existing material conditions. Despite this awareness of the complexity of the factors involved, the history of the south Wales miners proved that it was possible for them to retain their long-standing tradition of militancy. Following the Harrison historiographical approach, this thesis has been formulated on the basis of understanding that this ‘vanguard’ role was not at all ‘inevitable’ but was the specific historical outcome of the interaction of a myriad of factors. The south Wales miners made their own history, although not in circumstances of their own choosing.

The south Wales coal miners were consistently one of the most militant groups of workers in Britain in the later twentieth century, both in terms of industrial combativeness and political radicalism. Broadly speaking, their distinctive industrial
politics can be explained as the combined effect of particular geological-economic, social and ideological factors: the difficult geology of the coalfield, which produced a tendency towards antagonistic industrial relations and therefore provided a greater impetus for militancy than existed in many other coalfields; the social centrality of the miners and their Union within Valleys communities, in which the identities and interests of the two overlapped to a significant degree; and the ‘traditional radicalism’ of the south Wales miners, a response to their socio-economic environment but also an objective ideological factor in its own right produced by activists within the South Wales NUM, which built upon the workforce’s ‘collective memory’ of earlier struggles.

This radicalism was articulated by the south Wales miners via their Union, both through the official Area structures and also in the dialectic between this and lodge-level activists. My analysis of the period 1964-85 presents a complex picture of the interactions between the respective layers of the South Wales NUM organisation and also the tension between militancy and moderation, with these differing dynamics co-existing, overlapping and contradicting each other at different times and in different places. Far from being either an irrelevance or a ‘Red menace’, left-wing activists played a key role in developing and implementing Area policy, an influence which was at its greatest when it reflected the basic values of the broader Union membership and the Valleys mining communities. Within the South Wales NUM, the overall trend was for the containment of rank and file activism within official Area structures. The ‘leading lights’ of the 1960s ‘ unofficial movement’ had become the senior figures within the Area by the 1980s, thereby helping to steel the miners against the challenges threatening their industry. This development was in keeping with the long-term historical tendency of the south Wales miners to look to work through their Union to effect political change, together with the participatory structure of the Area, which enabled them to do so. South Wales miners’ ‘rank and filism’ was always located squarely within the colliery lodges, since these were the bedrock on which the Area was built.

A central theme within this thesis has been the class/community synthesis produced by the strength of the links between South Wales NUM lodges and their respective mining communities. As a result of the economic centrality of coal-mining in the
Valleys, the Union, its traditions and culture had been integral to the social fabric from the outset. The Area had a real, tangible local presence: lodge officials and committee members were not remote and unaccountable figures but instead worked at the same coalfaces and attended the same social clubs as all the other miners. This combination of factors meant that the role of lodge leaders was overwhelmingly about helping people with their problems – and it was precisely this solid day-to-day work that generated the immense rank and file loyalty to their lodge and their Union. In this way, the South Wales NUM represented the community more closely than any other organisation. Consequently, it is only through a study of this that the historian is able to approach the possibility of producing an overarching social history of the south Wales miners.

Obviously, this picture was not a static one; south Wales mining communities were as subject to change over time as anyone else. Undeniably, there were long-term trends at work throughout the later twentieth century which were acting to reduce the hegemonic role of coal-mining within the regional economy – and consequently the social centrality of the NUM. Nevertheless, the general pattern remained true throughout this period: the mobilisation of entire communities behind the banner of the NUM and the impressive solidarity shown by the south Wales miners during the 1984-5 strike proved that they remained a central force within the Valleys.

In its most general and non-determinative aspects, the ‘archetypal proletarian’ image does resonate with the historical experience of the south Wales miners, located within the class/culture synthesis of Valleys communities as outlined by both The Fed and this thesis. Community solidarity was a real material factor in their history, as demonstrated clearly during the major strikes of 1972, 1974 and 1984-5. Ironically, in a historiographical context, it is this correspondence in several key respects to the ‘ideal type’ coalfield society that makes the south Wales mineworkers something of an ‘exceptional’ case.

It is precisely because of this ‘exceptionalism’ that the south Wales miners in the later twentieth century remain pertinent to industrial relations studies, as a discursive starting-point for understanding the origins of the contemporary ‘social partnership’ paradigm. Although coal-mining has practically disappeared from Britain, the
history of the NUM tells us about how workers within a strategically important industry reacted to long-term structural change and to perceived threats to the future of their industry. The story of the south Wales miners illustrates how attempts at building consensus within the nationalised coal industry fell apart during the 1960s and 1970s. This prompted a widespread revival in miners’ militancy, which was in itself used by leading Conservative ideologists as proof of the ‘need’ to enact sweeping monetarist reforms – with grave consequences for trade unions in Britain. The main response of the union movement has been to adopt ‘new realism’, particularly following the miners’ defeat in 1985. In this way, the history of the NUM is the single main explanation for the current ‘social partnership’ industrial relations situation in Britain today. The turbulent history of the south Wales miners also retains relevance because of ‘the inevitability of conflict in industrial relations’. The growth in influence of monetarist orthodoxy within global capitalism has not lessened this tendency. Consequently, the miners’ experience of Thatcherite neo-liberalism may provide significant lessons for workers in the future.

In conclusion, the coal miners of south Wales have fulfilled an exceptional vanguard role within British labour history. Over the course of the later twentieth century, no-one was more unswerving in their commitment to finding radical solutions to the problems facing them – and no-one was hit harder by the eventual demise of deep-mined coal in Britain. Even in defeat, with their industry all but eliminated, the south Wales miners remained ‘the conscience of the labour movement’. 
Notes to Conclusion


Appendix I

Oral History Sources

Oral history is a crucial method in terms of shedding light on the experiences of individuals whose viewpoints would otherwise go unrecorded. It is also a useful tool for addressing directly issues of consciousness and opinion, important questions for the historian which are not readily accessible from conventional institutional histories or through quantitative measurement.

Oral history possesses its own particular limitations, however. As Hobsbawm states, oral history deals with 'personal memory, which is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts' and can potentially 'go wrong' unless we can 'check it against some verifiable independent source'. Consequently, oral history evidence needs to be utilised alongside a wide variety of other primary sources and a comprehensive survey of secondary literature, so as to provide a framework against which it can be gauged and assessed.

These considerations have had practical implications for how this thesis has dealt with such evidence. Oral history has been used primarily to gain insights into the particular ways in which events were viewed within coal-mining communities; its secondary role has been to provide a factual base for historical analysis and commentary, although more readily verifiable sources were utilised in addition to or instead of this wherever possible. This has inevitably meant that many of the most eye-opening assertions made by the people who were interviewed have not been included in the thesis, since there was no satisfactory way of backing them up objectively. The general guidelines which were followed on the rare occasions in which an oral history statement has been cited as fact unsupported by other evidence types have been: that it does not place emphasis on the historical significance of the contribution made by the individual concerned; that it does not run counter to known evidence from other sources; that it does not in itself make any claims of sufficient significance to alter my line of argument or analysis to any meaningful degree; that it is in keeping with the general 'feel' of other evidence gleaned on other topics or instances. Although inevitably an 'inexact science', in this way hopefully most of
the benefits that oral history can provide have been obtained whilst at the same time avoiding its most serious potential pitfalls.

It is also worthwhile to state explicitly what was hoped to be achieved in the numerous occasions throughout the thesis in which someone is quoted directly. The objective with these quotations was not to use them as a proxy mouthpiece through which the author states what he considers to be 'the truth'. Instead, their importance lies in them being a reflection of either the majority viewpoint within the coalfield on a particular issue, the perspective of a strategically significant section of the workforce or the articulation of a discordant minority viewpoint. In each case, the point is not whether the statement in question is objectively verifiable or not but that that was how the issue in question was seen by the individual in question. Given that people interact with the world around them on the basis of how they perceive it, it is precisely through the usage of 'unreliable' oral history evidence that it is possible to obtain clearer insights into the subjective human factors which play such a key role in helping to determine the material reality of historical events.

During the research for this thesis, forty interviews were conducted with miners who worked in the industry during the period in question and two interviews with women who were support group activists during the 1984-5 strike. Although this was an insufficient number to draw any rigorous quantitative conclusions, the people who were interviewed nevertheless provided a matrix of perspectives, with a representative geographical spread across the coalfield and a vertical cross-section within the Area structure, from rank and file level through to the most senior officials. This was augmented by drawing on the oral history archive at the South Wales Miners’ Library. Most of these interviews which were used were conducted in the early 1980s, thereby enabling access to the recollections of activists and leaders who had since passed away and also providing further evidence for the early part of the period.

Due consideration was given to the methodology that would be used to carry out the interviews, so as to make the most of them. Prior to the interviews themselves, the initial step was familiarisation with the basic details of the study-period in question, so as to be in a position to ask informed and pertinent questions. This process was
aided by the fact that many of the interview subjects had featured with varying degrees of prominence in the records of proceedings of the South Wales Area NUM. Bearing this in mind, it was possible to tailor the questions according to the background and career of the person who was being interviewed.

In terms of conducting the interviews themselves, a semi-structured methodology was utilised. This meant that a list of pre-prepared pertinent questions was used but that sufficient flexibility was retained to be able to adapt the format of the interview depending on how each one developed, generally through being prepared to ask spontaneous questions in response to particularly interesting or informative statements made by the person being interviewed. This approach ensured the maximum possible combination of openness of interview and relevance of the material discussed. In contrast, a strictly structured questionnaire format would have been unable to engage with unexpectedly useful or insightful oral testimony; similarly, a completely unstructured discussion style might well have impeded detailed discussion of the subject matter and could well have produced a significant degree of material that was irrelevant to the history of south Wales coal mining trade unionism.

The basic objective with this oral history work was to provide the people who were interviewed the opportunity to give their own perspectives on the events of the period in question. Consequently, a conscious attempt was made by the interviewer to remain as marginal a presence within the discussion as possible: the aim was to obtain essentially a monologue from the interviewee which nevertheless dealt with pertinent general subject areas. Two-way debates with the interview subjects were avoided, as were interrogative lines of questioning. Additionally, consistent attempts were made to frame the questions in as 'neutral' a way as possible, so as not to 'lead' people into giving the answers that they may have thought they were 'supposed' to provide. The general approach used was to raise a particular topic and then ask the interviewee what they remembered about it and also what they thought about it. As an example of this, questions such as 'How was the election of the Conservative government in 1979 viewed by the south Wales miners?' were asked, rather than saying, 'Am I right in thinking that the south Wales miners hated Thatcher?'
A basic tape recorder with internal microphone was used to record the interviews onto ninety-minute cassettes. Despite the fact that this is by no means the most high-technology recording equipment available in the early twenty-first century, it was still generally possible to obtain a good sound quality by ensuring that the tape recorder was placed close to the person with whom the interview was being done.

Overall, the oral history work that was done forms a key component of this thesis. Even though people's memories can be fallible and testimony can be subject to distortion or misrepresentation, these issues are not solely the preserve of oral history evidence. The benefits from conducting oral history interviews greatly outweigh the potential drawbacks. The interviews which were conducted were a very important source of information, not primarily about precise facts or dates but about how particular events or developments were viewed by the people who experienced them at first hand. Providing that this testimony is handled with the appropriate care, it provides an insight into the subject matter in a way that no other historical evidence can match.

Listed below are brief biographies of all the people who were interviewed during the course of the research project.

**Allan Baker** (interview conducted in Pentwynmawr, on 13 February 2004):
Allan Baker began work as a 'Bevin Boy' in 1944, at Britannia colliery. He joined the RAF between 1946 and 1954 but returned to work as a miner after that. He worked at Oakdale colliery from 1967 until 1986, when he retired. He was Oakdale lodge secretary from 1978 until mid-1985.

**Mike Banwell** (interview conducted in Williamstown, on 9 March 2004):
Mike Banwell began work in 1964, at Coedely colliery. He worked there until 1986, when Coedely was closed and he transferred to Cwm colliery. Cwm closed in 1987. He started on Coedely lodge as a youth delegate, before becoming face representative, vice-chair and then finally chairman of the lodge, from c.1978 to 1986. He was a face-worker. He was elected onto the South Wales Area Executive
Council in 1980, as a Maesteg district representative, serving until he finished work in the industry.

Graham Bartlett (interview conducted in Abertillery, on 20 February 2004):
Graham Bartlett began work in 1953 at Cwmtillery colliery, aged 15. He stayed there until July 1982, when Cwmtillery closed and he was transferred to Marine colliery. He was compensation secretary at Cwmtillery, before later becoming lodge secretary. On transferral to Marine, he became lodge secretary there. He was also on the South Wales Area Executive Council from 1977 until 1989.

Gordon Bartley (interview conducted in Cefn Fforest, on 22 January 2004)
Gordon Bartley started work in 1959 at Wyllie colliery, as an electrician. When Wyllie closed in 1968, he transferred to Penallta colliery and worked there until it closed in 1991.

Tommy Bowden (interview conducted at the NUM Offices in Pontypridd, on 19 January 2004):
Tommy Bowden began work at Pengam House Coal colliery. He transferred from there to Britannia when it closed, in c.1956. He was elected onto the lodge committee in c.1958 and subsequently became a lodge 1-2-3 safety inspector. He later became lodge chairman and was the lodge secretary at Britannia when the colliery closed in 1983.

Kay Bowen (interview conducted in Dyffryn Cellwen, on 14 April 2004):
Kay Bowen was the organiser of the Dulais Valley Support Group during the 1984-5 strike and is also the wife of Phil Bowen.

Phil Bowen (interview conducted in Dyffryn Cellwen, on 26 March 2004):
Phil Bowen began work at Blaenant colliery in 1965-6 and stayed there until it closed, in 1990. He became a collier and was active on the lodge committee from an early age. In 1979 he became lodge chairman, a post which he retained until the colliery closed.
Dan Canniff (interview conducted in Hengoed, on 17 February 2004):
Dan Canniff began work at Oakdale colliery in 1940 and stayed there until he retired, after the 1984-5 strike. He was elected onto the lodge committee in the 1960s and subsequently was lodge chairman for over twenty years. He also served a term on the South Wales Area Executive Council in the 1960s, up until 1966.

Dai ‘Dosco’ Davies (interview conducted at Tower Colliery, Hirwaun, on 19 March 2004):
Dai Davies began work in 1960, in No. 4 Area central workshops, Mountain Ash, as an apprentice fitter. He became a fitter at Abergorki colliery for a few years, before leaving the industry in 1964. He returned in 1970, to Penrhiwceiber colliery and stayed there until it shut in 1985, when he transferred to Tower colliery. At Penrhiwceiber, he was the craftsman’s representative on the lodge committee from c.1979 until 1985.

[NB Dai ‘Dosco’ Davies should not be confused with Dai ‘Ropey’ Davies, who was one of the leading figures on Penrhiwceiber lodge during the 1970s and 1980s and was also a member of the South Wales Area Executive Council.]

Dennis Davies (interview conducted at Tower Colliery, Hirwaun, on 19 March 2004):
Dennis Davies began work at Tower colliery as a maintenance fitter in 1966 and has worked there ever since.

Eric Davies (interview conducted at Transport House, Cardiff, on 30 January 2004):

Howard Davies (interview conducted in Neath, on 26 February 2004):
Howard Davies began work at Seven Sisters colliery in 1958. He transferred to Cefn Coed colliery in 1962 and then to Blaenant colliery in 1968. In 1975, he became
lodge secretary at Blaenant, retaining this position until after the 1984-5 strike. He later became an NCB training officer, from 1985 until 1990.

**Colin Day** (interview conducted in Blaengwynfi, on 18 March 2004):
Colin Day began work in 1960 as an electrician at Avon colliery, Blaengwynfi. He left there when the pit closed in 1969, transferring to St John’s colliery. He worked outside the coal industry from 1970, before returning to it and working briefly at Coegnant colliery in 1976. However, he was transferred back to St John’s, where he stayed from 1976 to 1986. In c.1981, he became the craftsmen’s representative on St John’s lodge committee. He also became a member of the lodge safety team and a 1-2-3 safety inspector.

**Des Dutfield** (interview conducted at the NUM Offices in Pontypridd, on 12 February 2004):
Des Dutfield began work at Dare colliery, part of the Parc and Dare mining complex, in the mid-1950s. He transferred to Lewis Merthyr colliery in 1962. By the early 1970s he had become Lewis Merthyr lodge secretary and also served on the South Wales Area Executive Council between 1975 and 1986. He was Area vice-president from 1980 until 1983 and later became president of the South Wales Area NUM in 1986, until he retired in 1991.

**Ivor England** (interview conducted in Llwyncelyn, on 27 February 2004):
Ivor England began work at Lewis Merthyr colliery in 1953, as a collier. In 1958, he went to work in Ferndale No.5 colliery but was subsequently transferred to Maerdy colliery in 1959. He finished work in the coal industry in 1986. At Maerdy, he became lodge vice-chair and also a 1-2-3 safety inspector. He was elected lodge secretary in 1979 but no longer held this post by the time the 1984-5 strike began.

**Arfon Evans** (interview conducted in Penderyn, on 1 April 2004):
Arfon Evans began work at Maerdy in 1962 and worked there for the duration of his mining career. He was an electrician and was the craftsmen’s representative on the lodge committee, before being elected lodge chairman in the early 1970s, a position which he held until after the 1984-5 strike. He was also elected onto the South Wales Area Executive Council as a craftsmen’s representative at the end of 1983.
**Lyn Harper** (interview conducted in Port Talbot, on 29 March 2004):
Lyn Harper began work in 1962 at Blaenant colliery. Apart from four years spent working outside of the coal industry, he was at Blaenant until it shut, in 1990. He was a face fitter at the colliery and had been elected onto the lodge committee as the craftsmen’s representative by the time the 1984-5 strike had begun.

**Dane Hartwell** (interview conducted in Hirwaun, on 10 December 2003):
Dane Hartwell began work in 1959 at Rhigos colliery and was there until it closed in 1965. He transferred to Pentreclwydau colliery and then onto Tower colliery, where he was active in the unofficial movement within the coalfield at that time. He stayed at Tower until 1972, before leaving the industry for a few months. On returning, he worked at Blaengwrach colliery. He soon became lodge secretary there and retained that post until the colliery closed in 1983. He went to Aberpergwym colliery and then when it shut after the 1984-5 strike he transferred to Blaenant colliery. He was a member of the South Wales Area Executive Council from 1982 until he left the industry in 1988.

**Hefina Headon** (interview conducted in Seven Sisters, on 31 March 2004):
Hefina Headon was the secretary of the Dulais Valley Support Group during the 1984-5 strike.

**Ian Isaac** (interview conducted in Port Talbot, on 2 April 2004 and 8 April 2004):
Ian Isaac began work at St John’s colliery in 1974, having spent three years as a shop steward at the British Leyland car plant at Cowley, Oxford. He became lodge secretary at the colliery in 1978 and remained so until St John’s was closed, in the aftermath of the 1984-5 strike. He was also elected onto the South Wales Area Executive Council in late 1983.

**Emlyn Jenkins** (interview conducted in Tonteg, on 5 March 2004):
Emlyn Jenkins began work in 1941 in Lady Windsor colliery, Ynysybwl. He continued to work there until he was appointed miners’ agent for the Aberdare, Merthyr and Rhondda district in 1974. At Lady Windsor lodge, he was a committeeman, then assistant secretary and then secretary. He was lodge secretary
between 1965 and 1974 and was a member of the South Wales Area Executive Council between 1969 and 1974, during which time he was also a prominent figure within the unofficial movement which was active in the south Wales coalfield.

**Browell Jones** (interview conducted at the NUM Offices in Pontypridd, on 19 January 2004):
Browell Jones began work at Deep Navigation colliery in 1938 and stayed there until after the 1984-5 strike, when he retired. For the latter part of his time at the colliery, he was lodge secretary there.

**Don Jones** (interview conducted in Cefn Fforest, on 23 February 2004):
Don Jones started work in the coal-mining industry in 1950 at Britannia colliery, before later transferring to Penallta colliery. He was lodge vice-chairman at the time of the successful campaign against the closure of Penallta in 1969. By the time of the 1984-5 strike, he had become a colliery official and a member of NACODS.

**Howard Jones** (interview conducted in Pontyates, on 10 February 2004):
Howard Jones began work in 1937 at Morlais colliery, aged fourteen. He moved to Pentremawr colliery in 1942. In 1974, he was transferred to Cynheidre and worked there until 1983, when he retired. He was elected onto the Pentremawr lodge committee in 1943 and he became lodge secretary there in 1961, until the colliery was integrated with Cynheidre. He became Cynheidre lodge secretary in 1980.

**Bill King** (interview conducted in Merthyr Tydfil, on 4 March 2004):
Bill King began work in 1935, in Glynneath colliery. During the Second World War, he served in the navy. After the war, he went to work in Aberpergwm colliery. In 1962, he was elected lodge secretary at Merthyr Vale colliery, a post which he held until he retired in 1985.

**Ray Lawrence** (interview conducted in Oakdale, on 11 March 2004):
Ray Lawrence began work in 1960, in Cwmcarn colliery. When Cwmcarn closed in 1968, he transferred to Celynne South, staying there until it closed after the 1984-5 strike. He was a colliery electrician. He became active in the Union in around 1970, becoming elected onto the lodge committee. He became lodge secretary in 1974 and
remained in post until Celynyn South closed. He also served a term on the South Wales Area Executive Council between 1974 and 1977.

**Billy Liddon** (interview conducted in Pontypridd, on 1 April 2004):
Billy Liddon entered the coal industry aged sixteen and did his training at Wattstown, before transferring to Cwm colliery. At Cwm, he worked as a collier. He joined the lodge committee and eventually became lodge secretary. He was lodge secretary for around ten years, from 1977 until 1987.

**John Mason** (interview conducted in Nantyglo, on 24 February 2004):
John Mason began work in 1953, at Vivian colliery in Abertillery. This merged with Six Bells colliery in the mid-1950s. He worked at Six Bells until c.1965, when he left the industry because he could not see any future in it. In 1979 he returned to it and worked at Marine colliery, where he stayed until it closed in 1989. He was a lodge committeeman at Marine, eventually becoming compensation secretary there.

**Tyrone O’Sullivan** (interview conducted at Tower Colliery, Hirwaun, on 22 March 2004):
Tyrone O’Sullivan began work in 1961, at Fforchaman colliery, as an electrician. He then went to Abergorki colliery and stayed there until 1967, when it closed. He transferred to Tower colliery and has been there ever since. He was active in the lodge from the early 1970s onwards and by the late 1970s had become lodge secretary there, a position which he held through until the successful workers’ buy-out of Tower in 1995.

**Verdun Price** (interview conducted in Maesteg, on 15 March 2004):
George Rees (interview conducted at the NUM Offices in Pontypridd, on 8 December 2003):

George Rees began work at Fernhill colliery in 1951, where he worked until 1976. In 1958, he became the first craftsman in the coalfield to become a lodge secretary. He was one of the leading figures in the unofficial movement in the south Wales coalfield in the later 1960s and in 1968 he was elected onto the South Wales Area Executive Council. He became the Area vice-president in 1974. In 1976, he was the first craftsman and rank and file miner to be elected general secretary of the South Wales NUM. He held this post until 1997, when he retired.

Mike Richards (interview conducted in Maerdy, on 27 January 2004):

Mike Richards worked as a collier at Lewis Merthyr colliery from 1953 (notwithstanding a two year period of national service with the army) until 1973, when he transferred to Maerdy colliery. He was the lodge chairman at Lewis Merthyr. When he went to Maerdy, he was 1-2-3 safety inspector. After the 1984-5 strike, he became lodge chairman there.

Glyn Roberts (interview conducted at Tower Colliery, Hirwaun, on 19 March 2004):

Glyn Roberts began work at Tower colliery in 1965 as a collier and has been there ever since. He joined the lodge committee as a sixteen year old youth representative and remained active in Union affairs. After the 1984-5 strike, he became vice-chairman of the lodge.

Harry Samuel (interview conducted in Glynneath, on 20 January 2004):

Harry Samuel began work at Aberpergwm colliery in 1946. Despite periods of employment at The Rock colliery in the 1940s and Pentreclwydau colliery in the 1960s, he spent most of his working career at Aberpergwm. In 1974 he became lodge secretary there, a post which he held until the colliery closed following the 1984-5 strike.

Chris Skelding (interview conducted in Pontypridd, on 6 January 2003):
Chris Skelding entered the coal industry in 1968 and worked mainly at Bedwas colliery. He left south Wales in 1979, to begin a mining career in Africa and Australia.

**Ron Stoate** (interview conducted at the NUM Offices in Pontypridd, on 2 December 2003):
Ron Stoate began work as a collier at Britannia colliery in 1966. He stayed there until he was transferred to Penallta colliery in 1980. A prominent activist during the 1984-5 strike, he later became lodge secretary and was briefly the first chairman of the South Wales Area NUM, before Penallta closed in 1991.

**Colin Thomas** (interview conducted in Cefn Fforest, on 14 January 2004)
Colin Thomas began work at Britannia colliery in 1956, as a collier. In the early 1960s he was elected onto the lodge committee and eventually became the vice-chairman there. In 1983 he transferred to Taff Merthyr colliery, where he continued to work until it was closed in 1992.

**Eddie Thomas** (interview conducted in Llantrisant, on 17 March 2004):
Eddie Thomas began work at Cwm colliery in January 1938, aged fourteen. He stayed there until he retired in 1983. He joined the lodge committee in 1951 and became lodge chairman in 1953. He held this post until 1980, when he was voted out by a ballot of the membership.

**Terry Thomas** (interview conducted in Gowerton, on 16 February 2004):
Terry Thomas began work as a miner in 1960, after previously being in the merchant navy. He started work as a fitter in Garngoch No.3 colliery and was there until 1965, before being transferred to Brynlliw colliery. By the early 1970s he had become the lodge secretary there. In 1974 he was elected onto the South Wales Area Executive Council, as a craftsmen's representative. In 1980, he was appointed as the miners' agent for the Swansea district. In 1983, he became the Area vice-president, a post which he held until he left the industry in 1989.
Jim Watkins (interview conducted in Six Bells, on 18 February 2004):
Jim Watkins began work at Six Bells colliery in 1949, staying there for the duration of his mining career, until 1986. A colliery electrician, he became the craftsmen’s representative on the lodge committee. He was elected as lodge chairman in c.1972, a post which he retained until he finished in the industry. Between 1978 and 1983, he was also a craftsmen’s representative on the South Wales Area Executive Council.

Kevin Williams (interview conducted at Tower Colliery, Hirwaun, on 25 March 2004):
Kevin Williams began work in 1976 at Lewis Merthyr colliery. He worked there until it closed in 1983, when he went to Maerdy colliery. He was transferred to Tower colliery in summer 1985 and has been there ever since. He is the current Tower lodge secretary and also the chairman of the South Wales Area NUM.

Viv Williams (interview conducted at the NUM Offices in Pontypridd, on 25 February 2004):
Viv Williams began work in 1954 at Taff Merthyr colliery, aged 15. He joined the lodge committee in the early 1960s, becoming lodge compensation secretary in 1972. He was elected onto the South Wales Area Executive Council in the late 1970s. In 1980, he was appointed as a full-time assistant to Haydn Matthews, who was then the head of South Wales NUM’s social insurance department. He filled this role during the 1984-5 strike and continued as social insurance officer for the South Wales Area until he retired several years later.

Notes to Appendix I

Appendix II

Chief Officials of the South Wales Miners 1898-2007

Presidents
William Abraham 1898 to 1912
William Brace 1912 to 1915
James Winstone 1915 to 1922
Vernon Hartshorn 1922 to 1924
Enoch Morrell 1924 to 1934
James Griffiths 1934 to 1936
Arthur Horner 1936 to 1946
Alf Davies 1946 to 1951
Will Paynter 1951 to 1959
Will Whitehead 1959 to 1966
Glyn Williams 1966 to 1973
Emlyn Williams 1973 to 1986
Des Dutfield 1986 to March 1991

General Secretaries
Thomas Richards 1898 to 1931
Oliver Harris 1931 to 1941
Evan Williams 1941 to 1943
W.J. Saddler* 1943 to 1946
Evan Williams 1946 to 1947
William Arthur 1947 to 1951
W.H. Crews 1951 to 1958
Dai Dan Evans 1958 to 1963
Dai Francis 1963 to 1976
George Rees 1976 to 1997
Wayne Thomas 1997 to date

Chairmen
Ron Stoate March 1991 to October 1991
Barry Yoxall October 1991 to October 1993
Tyrone O’Sullivan October 1993 to January 1995
Anthony Jones February 1995 to December 2002
Kevin Williams January 2003 to date

* Acting General Secretary (appointed by the EC during Evan Williams's absence)
Appendix III
NUM South Wales Area Officials, Miners’ Agents and Executive Council Members 1964-1985

1964
Will Whitehead – president; Glyn Williams – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary
Dennis Puddle, Dan Canniff, E.J. Jones, Len Jones, Cliff True, Tom Evans, Bryn Jenkins, Ben Morris, Emlyn Hughes, Emlyn Williams, Trevor James, Jim Evans, Jim David, A.C. Davies, Don Hayward, Ben Davies, Cliff James, Walter Price, Will Fortt, Ted Cooper

1965
Will Whitehead – president; Glyn Williams – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Ben Morris – chief administrative officer
Dennis Puddle, Len Jones, Trevor James, Cliff True, Emlyn Hughes, Will Fortt, Ted Cooper, Bryn Jenkins, Emlyn Williams, Jim Evans, Dan Canniff, Jim David, Ben Davies, Lance Rogers, Walter Price, Will Woods, Tom Evans

1966
Will Whitehead – president; Glyn Williams – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Ben Morris – chief administrative officer
Dennis Puddle, Tom Jones, Trevor James, A.C. Davies, Ben Evans, Emlyn Hughes, Emlyn Williams, Don Hayward, Will Fortt, Will Woods, Jim David, Ben Davies, Jim Evans, Ted Cooper, Tom Evans, Lance Rogers, Bryn Jenkins

1967
Glyn Williams – president; Emlyn Williams – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Ben Morris – chief administrative officer
Dennis Puddle, L. Jones, Tom Jones, Bryn Jenkins, Ben Davies, Will Haydn Thomas, Trevor James, Lance Rogers, Arthur Haywood, Jim Evans, Emlyn Hughes, Don Hayward, Will Woods, A.C. Davies, Tom Evans, Will Fortt, Ben Evans, Ted Cooper

1968
Glyn Williams – president; Emlyn Williams – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Ben Morris – chief administrative officer
Dennis Puddle, L. Jones, Tom Jones, Bryn Jenkins, Ben Davies, Ted Cooper, Will Haydn Thomas, Trevor James, Lance Rogers, Arthur Haywood, Jim Evans, Don Hayward, Will Woods, Bryn Jenkins, Emlyn Hughes, Ben Evans
1969
Glyn Williams – president; Emlyn Williams – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Ben Morris – chief administrative officer
Emlyn Jenkins, Will Woods, George Rees, Arthur Haywood, Evan John, Will Haydn Thomas, Islwyn Rosser, Jim Evans, George Mann, Gwilym Burton, Bryn Jenkins, Trevor James, Don Hayward, Emlyn Hughes, Ted Cooper

1970
Glyn Williams – president; Emlyn Williams – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Ben Morris – chief administrative officer
Will Haydn Thomas, Evan John, Islwyn Rosser, Tom Jones, George Mann, George Rees, Emlyn Hughes, Bryn Jenkins, Will Woods, Don Hayward, Emlyn Jenkins, Gwilym Burton, Arthur Haywood, Lance Rogers, Trevor James, Ted Cooper

1971
Glyn Williams – president; Emlyn Williams – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Ben Morris – chief administrative officer
Trevor James, Will Haydn Thomas, Emlyn Jenkins, Tom Jones, George Mann, Islwyn Rosser, Evan John, Arthur Haywood, Gwilym Burton, Lance Rogers, Ray Locke, George Rees, Don Hayward, Emlyn Hughes, Bryn Jenkins, Ted Cooper

1972
Glyn Williams – president; Emlyn Williams – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Ben Morris – chief administrative officer
Evan John, Will Haydn Thomas, Islwyn Rosser, Tommy Walker, Emlyn Hughes, Don Hayward, Emlyn Jenkins, George Rees, George Mann, Ray Locke, Haydn Matthews, Arthur Haywood, Gwilym Burton, Vince Court, Bryn Jenkins, Ted Cooper, Tom Jones, George Pritchard, Lance Rogers

1973
Glyn Williams – president; Emlyn Williams – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Will Haydn Thomas, Evan John, Islwyn Rosser, Tommy Walker, Emlyn Hughes, Ron Saint, Emlyn Jenkins, George Rees, Haydn Matthews, Lance Rogers, Arthur Haywood, Vince Court, Bryn Jenkins, George Mann, George Pritchard

1974
Emlyn Williams – president; George Rees – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Will Haydn Thomas, Evan John, Islwyn Rosser, Tommy Walker, Emlyn Hughes, Ron Saint, Emlyn Jenkins, Haydn Matthews, Arthur Haywood, George Mann, J. Howells, George Pritchard, Lance Rogers

1975
Emlyn Williams – president; George Rees – vice-president; Dai Francis – general secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Will Haydn Thomas, Emlyn Hughes, Emlyn Jenkins, Tommy Walker, Terry Thomas, Ben Davies, Ron Saint, Arthur Haywood, Vince Court, George Mann, Haydn Matthews, George Pritchard, Ray Lawrence, Des Dutfield, Lance Rogers
1976
Emlyn Williams – president; Will Haydn Thomas – vice-president; George Rees –
general secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Tommy Walker, Terry Thomas, Ben Davies, Emlyn Hughes, Ron Saint, Emlyn
Jenkins, Haydn Matthews, Des Dutfield, Lance Rogers, Arthur Haywood, Vince
Court, George Mann, George Pritchard, Ray Lawrence

1977
Emlyn Williams – president; Will Haydn Thomas – vice-president; George Rees –
general secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Terry Thomas, Ben Davies, Emlyn Hughes, Ron Saint, Emlyn Jenkins, Haydn
Matthews, Des Dutfield, Arthur Haywood, Vince Court, Glyn Smith, George Mann,
George Pritchard, Ray Lawrence, Lance Rogers, Tommy Walker

1978
Emlyn Williams – president; Will Haydn Thomas – vice-president; George Rees –
general secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Tommy Walker, Terry Thomas, Ben Davies, Emlyn Jenkins, Haydn Matthews, Des
Dutfield, Lance Rogers, Vince Court, Gary Woolf, Jim Watkins, George Mann,
George Pritchard, Graham Bartlett, Ron Saint, Emlyn Hughes

1979
Emlyn Williams – president; Will Haydn Thomas – vice-president; George Rees –
general secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Terry Thomas, Ben Davies, Emlyn Hughes, Ron Saint, Haydn Matthews, George
Mann, Emlyn Jenkins, Des Dutfield, Vince Court, Gary Woolf, Jim Watkins,
Graham Bartlett, Lance Rogers, Tommy Walker, George Pritchard

1980
Emlyn Williams – president; Will Haydn Thomas – vice-president; George Rees –
general secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Ben Davies, Emlyn Hughes, Jim Watkins, Graham Bartlett, Emlyn Jenkins, George
Mann, George Pritchard, Terry Thomas, Des Dutfield, Viv Williams, Ron Saint,
Gary Woolf, Vince Court, Tommy Walker, Lance Rogers

1981
Emlyn Williams – president; Des Dutfield – vice-president; George Rees – general
secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Terry Thomas, Ben Davies, Islwyn Rosser, Emlyn Jenkins, George Mann, Bill
Goode, David Davies, Vince Court, Gary Woolf, Jim Watkins, Graham Bartlett, Eric
Davies, Verdun Price, Mike Banwell

1982
Emlyn Williams – president; Des Dutfield – vice-president; George Rees – general
secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Terry Thomas, Eric Davies, Mike Banwell, Islwyn Rosser, Verdun Price, George
Mann, Emlyn Jenkins, David Davies, Bill Goode, Gary Woolf, Graham Bartlett,
Vince Court, Jim Watkins, Ben Davies
1983
Emlyn Williams – president; Des Dutfield – vice-president; George Rees – general secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Terry Thomas, Dane Hartwell, Verdun Price, Mike Banwell, Islwyn Rosser, Emlyn Jenkins, David Davies, George Mann, Bill Goode, Gary Woolf, Vince Court, Jim Watkins, Eric Davies
Also present: Kim Howells – research officer

1984
Emlyn Williams – president; Terry Thomas – vice-president; George Rees – general secretary; Don Hayward – chief administrative officer
Emlyn Jenkins, Eric Davies, Ian Isaac, Gary Woolf, Bill Goode, Arfon Evans, Ron Williams, Dane Hartwell, Mike Banwell, Des Dutfield, Graham Bartlett, David Davies, Basil Hamer
Also present: Kim Howells – research officer

1985
Emlyn Williams – president; Terry Thomas – vice-president; George Rees – general secretary
Eric Davies, Ron Williams, Dane Hartwell, Ian Isaac, Mike Banwell, Arfon Evans, Des Dutfield, David Davies, Gary Woolf, Basil Hamer, Graham Bartlett, Bill Goode, Emlyn Jenkins
Also present: Kim Howells – research officer

NB This list shows the composition of the Area leadership as of the January of the year in question. Triennial elections were held for the Executive Council seats. During this period, they occurred towards the end of the years 1965, 1968, 1971, 1974, 1977, 1980 and 1983 respectively.
Bibliography

A. Oral History Evidence

I. Interviews

Allan Baker (Pentwynmawr), 13 February 2004
Mike Banwell (Williamstown), 9 March 2004
Graham Bartlett (Abertillery), 20 February 2004
Gordon Bartley (Cefn Fforest), 22 January 2004
Tommy Bowden (NUM Offices, Pontypridd), 19 January 2004
Kay Bowen (Dyffryn Cellwen), 14 April 2004
Phil Bowen (Dyffryn Cellwen), 26 March 2004
Dan Canniff (Hengoed), 17 February 2004
Dai ‘Dosco’ Davies (Tower Colliery, Hirwaun), 19 March 2004
Dennis Davies (Tower Colliery, Hirwaun), 19 March 2004
Eric Davies (Transport House, Cardiff), 30 January 2004
Howard Davies (Neath), 26 February 2004
Colin Day (Blaengwynfi), 18 March 2004
Des Dutfield (NUM Offices, Pontypridd), 12 February 2004
Ivor England (Llwyncelyn), 27 February 2004
Arfon Evans (Penderyn), 1 April 2004
Lyn Harper (Port Talbot), 29 March 2004
Dane Hartwell (Hirwaun), 10 December 2003
Hefina Headon (Seven Sisters), 31 March 2004
Ian Isaac (Port Talbot), 2 April 2004 and 8 April 2004
Emlyn Jenkins (Tonteg), 5 March 2004
Browell Jones (NUM Offices, Pontypridd), 19 January 2004
Don Jones (Cefn Fforest), 23 February 2004
Howard Jones (Pontyates), 10 February 2004
Bill King (Merthyr Tydfil), 4 March 2004
Ray Lawrence (Oakdale), 11 March 2004
Billy Liddon (Pontypridd), 1 April 2004
John Mason (Nantyglo), 24 February 2004
Tyrone O’Sullivan (Tower Colliery, Hirwaun), 22 March 2004
Verdun Price (Maesteg), 15 March 2004
George Rees (NUM Offices, Pontypridd), 8 December 2003
Mike Richards (Maerdy), 27 January 2004
Glyn Roberts (Tower Colliery, Hirwaun), 19 March 2004
Harry Samuel (Glynneath), 20 January 2004
Chris Skelding (Pontypridd), 6 January 2003
Ron Stoate (NUM Offices, Pontypridd), 2 December 2003
Colin Thomas (Cefn Fforest), 14 January 2004
Eddie Thomas (Llantrisant), 17 March 2004
Terry Thomas (Gowerton), 16 February 2004
Jim Watkins (Six Bells), 18 February 2004
Kevin Williams (Tower Colliery, Hirwaun), 25 March 2004
Viv Williams (NUM Offices, Pontypridd), 25 February 2004
II. Interviews Undertaken by the South Wales Coalfield History Project

Dai Coity Davies, 19 June 1976 (AUD/382)
Brian Elliott, 7 May 1981 (AUD/123)
Dai Francis, 1979-82 (AUD/131)
Mike Griffin, 27 January 1981 (AUD/31)
Don Hayward and Emlyn Jenkins, 19 June 1976 (AUD/381)
Berwyn Howells, 3 March 1980 (AUD/21)
Haydn Matthews, 22 October 1980 (AUD/134)
Ben Morris, 1979-82 (6.5.1981) (AUD/22)
Will Paynter, 1979-81 (AUD/105)
George Rees, 22 October 1980 (AUD/140)
Emlyn Williams, 19 June 1976 (AUD/161)
Emlyn Williams, 22 October 1980 (AUD/33)
Emlyn Williams, 1 June 1986 (AUD/574)
Glyn Williams, 20 March 1973 (AUD/258)
Glyn Williams, 1979-82 (AUD/113)
Ron Williams, 28 January 1981 (AUD/115)

B. Official Records

Premier's papers PREM13 / 1610
Premier's papers PREM13 / 2769
Premier's papers PREM13 / 3311

Report of the Tribunal appointed to inquire into the Disaster at Aberfan on October 21st, 1966

C. Trade Union Records and Publications

I. Trade Union Records

NUM Report of Annual Conference 1989
NUM Report of Reconvened Special Conference 19 April 1984
NUM (South Wales Area) colliery files 1984-5 strike period
NUM (South Wales Area) Conference minutes
NUM (South Wales Area) Executive Council Annual Reports
NUM (South Wales Area) Executive Council minutes
NUM (South Wales Area) Executive Council minutes, Finance and Organisation Sub-Committee
NUM (South Wales Area) Executive Council minutes, Safety Sub-Committee
NUM (South Wales Area) Executive Council minutes, Social Insurance Sub-Committee
Celynén South Lodge minutes

II. Miscellaneous Trade Union Publications
Howells, Kim (on behalf of NUM South Wales Area), *South Wales Coal & The Common Market Energy Strategy* (South Wales Miners' Library, 1982)
James, Archie (on behalf of NUM South Wales Area), *The Industrial Injuries Act, Damages at Common Law and other Legislation* (Cardiff, 1957)
NUM (South Wales Area) Diary (1983 edition)
NUM (South Wales Area) Rules (1971 edition)
St John's NUM & Communities Action Campaign Committee, *Keep Mining In Maesteg* (Maesteg, 1985)

D. Political Party Records and Publications

I. Political Party Records
CPGB Executive Committee minutes and papers
CPGB Industrial Department papers
CPGB Political Committee minutes and papers
CPGB Welsh Committee District files
Labour Party Annual Conference Reports
Labour Party Wales Annual Conference Reports
Labour Party Wales Executive Committee Annual Conference Reports

II. Miscellaneous Political Party Publications
CPGB pamphlet, *A Plan For The Miners*, by Will Whitehead and Bert Wynn (1964)

E. Newspapers and Periodicals

Coal News
Daily Mirror
Daily Worker
The Economist
Financial Times
The Guardian
Labour Monthly
Labour Review: Marxist monthly journal of the Workers Revolutionary Party
Labour Weekly: The Newspaper of the Labour Party
Marxism Today
Merthyr Express
Militant

The Miner: The Magazine of the South Wales Area of the National Union of Mineworkers (ceased publication 1968)
The Miner: Voice of the National Union of Mineworkers (began publication 1969)
Miners Vanguard
Morning Star
The Observer
Professional Engineering
Socialist Review
Socialist Worker
South Wales Echo

South Wales Miner (began publication 1982; ceased publication 1988)
Sunday Telegraph
The Sunday Times
The Times
Valley Star
Western Mail
F. Theses and Dissertations

Howells, Kim, ‘A View From Below: Tradition, Experience and Nationalisation in the South Wales Coalfield 1937-1957’ (Ph.D., University of Warwick, 1979)
Morgan, Kevin, ‘Class Against Class in the South Wales Coalfield: the East Rhondda Election 1931’ (B.A. thesis, Manchester University, 1982)

G. Published works

Abrams, Philip, ‘Sociology and History’, *Past and Present* No.52 (1971), pp.118-125
Abrams, Philip, ‘History, Sociology, Historical Sociology’, *Past and Present* No.87 (1980), pp.3-16
Allen, Meg, ‘“Weapons of the Weak”: Humour and consciousness in the narratives of Women Against Pit Closures’, *Socialist History* No.25 (2004), pp.1-19

328
Bacchetta, Aldo, and Rudd, Glyn, *Porth: Gateway to the Rhondda* (Stroud, 2000)
Bain, George Sayers (ed.), *Industrial Relations in Britain* (Oxford, 1983)
Barnes, David, *Black Mountains: Reflections Of A South Wales Miner* (Talybont, 2002)
Berger, Stefan, ‘And What Should They Know of Wales?: Why Welsh history needs comparison’, *Llafur* 8 No.3 (2002), pp.131-139


Black, Jeremy, A New History of Wales (Stroud, 2000)


Bourke, Joanna, Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity (London and New York, 1994)

Boyce, Max, “I Was There!” (London, 1979)


Callinicos, Alex, Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique (Cambridge, 1989)


Carter, Pete, ‘Striking the Right Note’, *Marxism Today* (March 1985), pp.28-31

Chitra, Joshi, ‘On “De-industrialization” and the Crisis of Male Identities’, *International Review of Social History* 47 supplement 10 (2002), pp.159-175

Church, Roy, and Outram, Quentin, *Strikes and Solidarity: Coalfield Conflict in Britain 1889-1966* (Cambridge, 1998)


Cornwell, John, *Collieries of South Wales: 1* (Ashbourne, 2001)


Cronin, James E., *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain* (London, 1979)


Crook, W., *The General Strike* (London, 1930)


Curtis, Tony (ed.), *Coal: An Anthology of Mining* (Bridgend, 1997)

Darlington, Ralph, and Lyddon, Dave, *Glorious Summer: Class Struggle in Britain* 1972 (London, 2001)
Darlington, Ralph, ‘There is no alternative: Exploring the options in the 1984-5 miners’ strike’, *Capital & Class* No.87 (2005), pp.71-95
Edwards, Ness, *The Industrial Revolution In South Wales* (London, 1924)


Evans, Neil, 'Writing the social history of modern Wales: approaches, achievements and problems', *Social History* 17 No.3 (1992), pp.479-492


Evans, R. Meurig, *One Saturday Afternoon: The Albion Colliery Explosion of 1894* (Cardiff, 1984)

Fagge, Roger, "Citizens of this Great Republic": Politics and the West Virginia Miners, 1900-1922", *International Review of Social History* 40 No.1 (1995), pp.31-50

Fagge, Roger, *Power, Culture and Conflict in the Coalfields: West Virginia and South Wales, 1900-1922* (Manchester, 1996)

Feldman, Gerald D., and Tenfelde, Klaus (eds.), *Workers, Owners and Politics in Coal Mining* (Oxford, 1990)


Finn, Janet L., *Tracing the Veins: Of Copper, Culture and Community from Butte to Chuquicamata* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998)
Francis, Hywel, Miners Against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War (London, 1984)
Francis, Hywel, ‘Mining the Popular Front’, Marxism Today (February 1985), pp.12-15
Francis, Hywel, ‘Emlyn Williams (1921-1995)’, Llafur 7 No.1 (1996), pp.5-7
Francis, Hywel (ed.), Adult Education in the Valleys: The Last Fifty Years (Cardiff, 1986)


Greaves, T.C., and Culver, W.C. (eds.), *Miners and Mining in the Americas* (Manchester, 1985)


Griffin, Colin, “‘Notts. have some very peculiar history”: Understanding the Reaction of the Nottinghamshire Miners to the 1984-85 Strike’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* No.19 (2005), pp.63-99


Harrison, Royden (ed.), *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered* (Hassocks, 1978)
Herbert, Trevor, and Jones, Gareth Elwyn (eds.), *Post-War Wales* (Cardiff, 1995)
Herbert, Trevor, and Jones, Gareth Elwyn (eds.), *Wales Between The Wars* (Cardiff, 1988)
Hopkins, K.S. (ed.), *Rhondda Past and Future* (Rhondda, 1975)
Howard, Chris, “‘The Focus of the Mute Hopes of a Whole Class’: Ramsay MacDonald and Aberavon 1922-1929”, *Llafur* 7 No.1 (1996), pp.68-77
Howell, David, ‘When Was “The Forward March of Labour” ?’, *Llafur* 5 No.3 (1990), pp.57-70
Hutt, Allen, *British Trade Unionism: A Short History* (London, 1941)


James, Peter, *The Future of Coal* (London, 1982)

Jenkins, Emrys, and Green, Roy, *Upper Rhondda: Treorchy and Treherbert* (Stroud, 1997)


Jenkins, Richard, and Edwards, Arwel (eds.), *One Step Forward? South and West Wales Towards The Year 2000* (Llandysul, 1990)


Jones, Bill, Roberts, Brian, and Williams, Chris, “‘Going from Darkness to the Light’: South Wales Miners’ Attitudes towards Nationalisation’, *Llafur* 7 No.1 (1996), pp.96-110

Jones, Bill, and Thomas, Beth, *Teyrnas y Glo / Coal’s Domain* (Cardiff, 1993)


Jones, J. Barry, and Balsom, Denis (eds.), *The Road to the National Assembly for Wales* (Cardiff, 2000)


Joyce, Patrick, ‘History and Post-Modernism, I’, *Past and Present* No. 133 (1991), pp. 204-209


Joyce, Patrick, ‘The end of social history?’, *Social History* 20 No. 1 (1995), pp. 73-91


Lawrence Ray, *Celynne South 1873-1985: A Short History to Commemorate the Closure of the Colliery* (Celynne South Lodge, 1985)


Lieven, Michael, *Senghenydd: The Universal Pit Village 1890-1930* (Llandysul, 1994)
Light, Julie, ‘Manufacturing the Past – The Representation of Mining Communities in History, Literature and Heritage: “... Fantasies of a world that never was”?’,* Llafur* 8 No.1 (2000), pp.19-32
Livingstone, Ken, *If Voting Changed Anything They'd Abolish It* (London, 1987)
Lyddon, Dave, ‘Rediscovering the Past: Recent British Strike Tactics in Historical Perspective’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* No.5 (1998), pp.107-151
Manners, Gerald, *Coal in Britain: An Uncertain Future* (London, 1981)
Manners, Gerald (ed.), *South Wales in the Sixties: Studies in Industrial Geography* (Oxford, 1964)
Mayfield, David, and Thorne, Susan, ‘Social history and its discontents: Gareth Stedman Jones and the politics of language’, *Social History* 17 No.2 (1992), pp.165-188

339


McIroy, John, 'Look Back in Anger: Mining Communities, the Mining Novel and the Great Miners' Strike', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* No.18 (2004), pp.135-164

McIroy, John, and Campbell, Alan, 'Still setting the pace? Labour history, industrial relations and the history of post-war trade unionism', *Labour History Review* 64 No.2 (1999), pp.179-199


Moore, Robert, *Pit-men, Preachers and Politics: The effects of Methodism in a Durham Mining Community* (Cambridge, 1974)


Paget, Mary (ed.), *Man Of The Valleys: The Recollections Of A South Wales Miner* (Gloucester, 1985)


Pierce, Gareth, *Nabod Cwm Rhymni* (Llandysul, 1990)
Powell, Dean, *Pontypridd: A Market Town* (Stroud, 2005)
Price, Richard, ‘The labour process and labour history’, *Social History* 8 No.1 (1983), pp.57-75
Richards, Andrew J., *Miners on Strike: Class Solidarity and Division in Britain* (Oxford and New York, 1996)
Rowlands, Ted, ‘*Something Must Be Done*: South Wales vs. Whitehall 1921-1951’ (Merthyr Tydfil, 2000)
Savage, Mike, ‘Social mobility and class analysis: a new agenda for social history?’, *Social History* 19 No.1 (1994), pp. 69-79


Slater, Montagu, *Stay-Down Miner* (London, 1936)


Smith, Dai, *Aneurin Bevan and The World of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1993)

Smith, Dai, *Wales: A Question For History* (Bridgend, 1999)

Smith, Dai, “‘Excesses of the Past’: Or Stopping the Narrative’, *Llafur* 8 No.4 (2003), pp.107-114


Steel, Mark, *Reasons To Be Cheerful* (London, 2001)

Stephens, Meic (ed.), *A Rhondda Anthology* (Bridgend, 1993)


Stone, Lawrence, ‘History and Post-Modernism, III’, *Past and Present* No.135 (1992), pp.189-194


Swain, Fay, and Williams, Cory (eds.), *Penallta: A Brief History of Penallta Colliery in the Rhymney Valley* (Ystrad Mynach, 1994)
Tanner, Duncan, *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990)
Tanner, Duncan, Williams, Chris, and Hopkin, Deian (eds.), *The Labour Party in Wales 1900-2000* (Cardiff, 2000)
Tenfelde, Klaus (ed.), *Towards A Social History of Mining in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Munich, 1992)
Town, Stephen W., *After the Mines: Changing employment opportunities in a South Wales Valley* (Cardiff, 1978)

Vernon, James, ‘Who’s afraid of the “linguistic turn”? The politics of social history and its discontents’, *Social History* 19 No.1 (1994), pp.81-97


Welsh Campaign for Civil and Political Liberties and NUM (South Wales Area), *Striking Back* (Cardiff, 1985)


Williams, Chris, ‘The South Wales Miners’ Federation’, *Llafur* 5 No.3 (1990), pp.45-56

Williams, Chris, *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society 1885-1951* (Cardiff, 1996)

Williams, Chris, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield 1898-1947* (Cardiff, 1998)

Williams, Chris, “‘Going Underground’? The Future of Coalfield History Revisited”, *Morgannwg* XLII (1998), pp.41-58

Williams, David, *A Short History of Modern Wales* (1961)

Williams, Gwyn, ‘Dai Francis, People’s Remembrancer’, *Llafur* 3 No.3 (1982), pp.6-8


Williams, John, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics* (Cardiff, 1985)


Williams, John, *Was Wales Industrialised? Essays in Modern Welsh History* (Llandysul, 1995)


Williams, L.J., ‘The Road to Tonypandy’, *Llafur* 1 No.2 (1973), pp.41-52


Zeitlin, Jonathan, “‘Rank and Filism” and Labour History: A Rejoinder to Price and Cronin’, *International Review of Social History* 34 No.1 (1989), pp.89-102


H. Broadcasts, DVDs and Internet-based Material

I. Television programmes

_Cau Pwll: Lladd Cymuned?_ – broadcast on S4C on 6.4.04

_Rock Solid_ – a series, broadcast on ITV1 Wales on 19.2.04, 26.2.04, 4.3.04 and 11.3.04

_Strike: When Britain Went To War_ – broadcast on S4C on 25.1.04

_The Coal War_ – broadcast on BBC1 Wales on 8.3.04

_The Miners’ Strike_ – broadcast on BBC2 Wales on 27.1.04

_Wales In Our Time_ – a series, broadcast on BBC1 Wales on 18.2.04, 25.2.04, 3.3.04, 10.3.04 and 17.3.04

II. DVDs / Videos

_The Welsh Miner: The History of Miners and Mining in Wales_ (Artsmagic, Ebbw Vale, 2004)

III. On-line research publications

Christina Beatty, Stephen Fothergill and Ryan Powell, ‘Twenty years on: has the economy of the coalfields recovered?’ <www.shu.ac.uk/cresr/news/index.html>

IV. Pertinent Internet Sites

www.gtj.org.uk

www.mineofinfo.ac.uk

www.worldwidewales.tv