

IN CRISIS AND WAR

William Gallacher

NO other body of workers or workers' organisation have had such a dour, stubborn, tragic, heroic history as the miners and the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. All this is amply demonstrated in the third volume of their official history, *The Miners in Crisis and War*.^{*} And what lessons it holds, not only for the miners but for the whole working class under attack today, as British capitalism twists and turns to weaken the workers and their organisations, to push on to their shoulders the ugly burden of crisis and war. This book tells the story of fourteen hard and difficult years, the eight years leading up to the Second World War and nearly six years of war-time. It begins with the miners and their organisation fallen on evil days, oppressed and divided. It ends with the mining industry transformed in the course of the war; and with the Federation of many district and county organisations also transformed—at long last—into a single union for mineworkers.

When the story opens in 1931, just thirty years ago, the miners were haunted by closed pits and whole coalfields half idle. They were harried out of their homes, they were driven from their villages. Those who remained saw their families broken up, their children ill-nourished and robbed of opportunity. They were treated like second-class citizens, for whom the monstrous inquisition of the Means Test was invented by callous bureaucrats—bureaucrats together with the sprinkling of university dons who are always ready to do the dirty work of the capitalist rulers. Then as now the mining industry was used as a milch cow. Then, however, it was the coal-owners linked up with the steel magnates. Now it is monopoly state capitalism that delivers the blows at the miners and this vital industry.

The coalowners had deliberately set themselves to the task of destroying the Miners' Federation—and they very nearly succeeded. They had broken off all discussion with, or recognition of, the Federation; they forced a whole series of different agreements on the districts. They went further; they set out to disrupt all independent organisation in the coalfields. The employers set up and subsidised yellow unions—company unions, like that bossed by Spencer in Nottinghamshire—to break up trade unionism in the

^{*}*The Miners in Crisis and War : A History of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (from 1930 onwards)*, by R. Page Arnot. Allen & Unwin. 452 pp. 42s.

industry. Spencer unions were set up in most counties—everywhere except in places where it was not worth the employers' while, because right-wing opportunist leaders were on top and all too ready to truckle to them. Where there were leaders so little capable of putting up a fight, or even a show of a fight, the employers had no need to spend their money on Spencer unions. (I am sorry to recall that in the thirties the Scottish coalfield was one of those places; what a change, when the workers were free to put men like Abe and Alex Moffat at the head of their union.) As a result of this two-fold attack membership had fallen from over nine hundred thousand in 1920 to 529,958 by the end of 1930.

Then we are given the record of how the miners turned for help against the coalowners to the second Labour Government, seeking the protection of a new Minimum Wage Bill, whilst they gathered their forces. But the Labour Government replied anxiously: Would the owners agree? They would not! And so, would the Labour Government therefore compel the owners? As well ask Ramsay MacDonald and his cabinet to take a chunk of meat out of the jaws of a hungry tiger as ask him to fight the coalowners. But despite the accumulation of troubles the Federation leaders, loyally backed by the depleted membership, doggedly kept fighting for increased wages and for national recognition. Besides these, two other tasks lay before them, the fight against Spencerism and the battle to transform the Federation into a national union. In 1931 the President, Tom Richards, full of honour, passed quietly to rest and the Vice-President, Ebby Edwards, was elected to occupy the post. Then the Secretary, A. J. Cook, passed away and Ebby who had actually been carrying on the work for some time, was elected as permanent secretary.

Many urgent matters confronted the miners and their leaders. The long correspondence between Ebby Edwards and Ramsay MacDonald given in the book shows a masterly understanding on the part of Ebby of the difficulties that were holding back the proper organisation of the mining industry, and, as a consequence, keeping down the wages of the miners. He had the measure of the shifty, shoddy, trickery of the former god of the labour movement. There was much that the miners had to face, under Ebby's leadership, including the terrible tragedy of the Gresford Colliery disaster. There was the historic dispute at Harworth Colliery which brought the fight against Spencerism to a head, while the local officials of the Federation made a heroic stand against coalowners, Spencerists

and exceptionally brutal police action. Finally the Federation secretary and his executive forced the issue to a showdown which led to the elimination of the company unions. The vicious two-year sentence on Mick Kane and other local leaders arising out of the Harworth dispute created very bitter feeling in the district and throughout the country. It opened the eyes of many of the miners who had been led astray by Spencerism, and showed that whole generation of workers the role of the law courts in a class society.

One most important factor in unifying and gradually building up the strength of the miners from the low state to which they had been reduced was the great wages struggle, the campaign for the Miners' Two Bob. And what a test of sincerity was the degree of devotion with which it was fought! It soon sorted out the right-wing opportunists. When it was at its height I was elected to the House of Commons for the first time as Member for the mining constituency of West Fife. I have been connected with the miners ever since I began agitating as a socialist speaker in mining villages nearly sixty years ago; but the first time I was able to speak for them in the House of Commons was on December 4, 1935, when I campaigned for the Miners' Two Bob in my maiden speech. (It made history, too, by getting under the Tories' skin to such a pitch that they started to interrupt me, in breach of the traditional smooth reception of a maiden speech.)

In these years the miners were deeply concerned with what was going on outside these islands too as the record shows. With fascism in Italy being followed in 1933 by Hindenburg handing over to Hitler and the Nazis, there was an ever-increasing threat to peace. Ebby Edwards was the Federation representative on the Miners' International Conferences and throughout played a leading part in the fight against fascism and war. The record of the Federation in aiding their fellow miners who were victims of fascism and above all in the Civil War in Spain is one which every miner, and every British worker, should read with pride, again and again.

Such is the story of the first half of the book, the eight years essential for understanding the miners' position in and after the war. The second half is the story of the war years. For the miners the key was the struggle to get the fullest consideration given to the operation of the mines and to the remuneration of the miners. Control Boards were set up and through two awards, the Greene award in 1942 and the Porter award in 1944, the miners' wages, underground, were brought up to £5 per week. The control Boards,

however, raised a problem, the problem of 'Dual Control'. The Boards had control of the pits and were responsible for increasing coal production; but the managers operating for, and paid by, the coalowners had control and bossed the mineworkers—in many cases very badly. I spoke a lot in Fife and other Scottish areas attacking this Dual Control and insisting that men and management be put at the service of the Board. I was invited to meet the Board in Edinburgh and to explain to this body what it was all about. The Chairman, Lord Traprain, said that he and the other two members, Carlow Reid, formerly managing director of the Fife Coal Co., and James Barbour, a former county official of the Federation, were very interested to hear what I had to say. Then Carlow barked, 'Come on, Gallacher! Cards on the table. What's all this you've been saying about Dual Control?'. I explained how unworkable it was. Traprain and Barbour listened with keen attention, but not so Carlow Reid. He exclaimed: 'A lot of damned nonsense'. I looked at the others and said: 'That reminds me of a passage in Ponsonby's book about his father, who was private secretary to Queen Victoria. When they went to Balmoral Castle, an old lord always claimed the right to read the lesson from the Bible when there was a religious service in the Castle. On one occasion he ended the reading with: "It is easier for the camel to pass through the needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, a lot of damned nonsense, let us pray".' Carlow, who had shut his mind to anything I was saying, immediately retorted, 'Well, if it's in the Bible it's true'. He could not understand what we were laughing about. Later on, the same Carlow Reid was chairman of the mining Commission that submitted the Reid Report, which just stopped short of nationalisation, but did prepare the way.

It is impossible in a short article to give more than a brief review of these fourteen years of struggle, so rich in lessons for the working class, and told by Robin Page Arnot with such rich scholarship and skill. He gives warrant for every single statement, with utmost care, despite the tremendously voluminous record, which must have entailed years of painstaking research. Yet it is intensely readable because of his mastery of the art of making everything alive and interesting. So he succeeds in a field where many have failed. Arnot explains his method in his Preface: it is to use the actual words of the delegates in speeches and resolutions. In so doing he makes a most skilful and balanced selection of key passages.

This volume ends with the formation at last of one union for the

mineworkers. And how long belated that was! The truth is clear; right-wing leadership in most of the coalfields not only hampered the development of the full fighting policy in the Federation, but also held back for many a year the accomplishment of a single miners' union. Naturally this being the official history, told from the official records, cannot go into some of the personal recollections or private records, such as the late Ebby Edwards could provide in abundance. So from the book we only get an occasional glimpse of the jealousy and parochial behaviour of some of the right-wing leaders—not least those petty chieftancies in Scotland, who could get on so cosily with the employers in their own backyard. Indeed, it was under the cloak of parochialism or 'local patriotism' that these right-wing leaders hampered the coming together of all mineworkers into a single union for so long. Thus it was that they hindered the creation of an organisation which, given a correct policy, could have so much earlier raised the miners out of their appalling conditions into which they had been driven.

The Foreword, signed by the President, Vice-President, and Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, refers to the Second World War, and 'how strenuously the miners fought to avert that terrible disaster; they must strive with even greater zeal in the new dangerous situation that menaces their lives, their homes and their families'. It is shocking that the miners should now, as a consequence of right-wing leadership, be lined up with the tories of Britain, the tory multi-millionaires of America, with De Gaulle and Adenauer, against their fellow-workers and fellow-miners of the Soviet Union. High time for the miners to change this unnatural and appalling situation.

THE GOLD STANDARD

When we are victorious on a world scale I think we shall use gold for the purpose of building public lavatories.

(Lenin: 'Importance of Gold Now and After the Victory of Socialism'.

Pravda, November 7, 1921.)

An aircraft load of the newest status symbols was flown from Newcastle to Paris today. Instead of cars and wide screen television sets, smart sets are buying plug holes, bathroom taps, and toilet fittings—in 24-carat gold.

(*The Times*, September 16, 1961.)