

THE BRITISH MINE WORKERS' STRIKE

In Britain on 12th March 1984 the National Union of mineworkers (NUM) called a strike against the National Coal Board's plan to close 20 'uneconomic' pits which would result in the loss of 20 000 jobs. An estimated 80% of Britain's 175 000 miners rallied to the strike call, closing two-thirds of the industry.

According to the miners, this dispute hasn't happened overnight.

The history of uneconomic pits goes back over 8 years. Management has made the pits uneconomic by reducing the number of workers and by not investing in new machinery in order to reach the coal. The workers believe the policy of the board and the government is to run down their pits and then sell off the good ones to private enterprise. What the government calls uneconomic offends the miner's morality code. The miners do not believe in economic individuality.

The past 10 months have been a living hell for the striking miners who have had to face continuous police brutality, increasing poverty and the unrelenting, unflinching Prime minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher. She refers to the striking miners as the enemy within. Hatred for the police is immense. People of the mining communities see the police and the courts as the tools of the employers. The police often surround mining villages and conduct house-to-house searches for pickets. In some villages defence committees have been set up to resist the militarisation of police tac-

tics. There are striking parallels here in South Africa with regard to the role of the police. During the recent Vaal triangle (S.A.) rent uprising a national two day strike was called after which, the armed forces of the S.A. government launched a massive house-to-house search for so called agitators. The violent clashes between workers and the armed forces of the ruling class are common to all struggles where workers are striving for a just, anti-exploitative society.

Despite the many battles and difficulties the striking miners have had to face, they have maintained a high morale throughout. According to the NUM president, Mr Arthur Scargill, the strike has entered "an entirely new dimension not of the Union's choosing." People have discovered themselves, their talents and abilities, their understanding and compassion. They have discovered a community spirit and a link with each other that has frightened the living daylights out of the opposition.

Roy Jones, a striking miner, who visited S.A. as guest of NUM (S.A.) during November and December 1984 had a lively discussion with ACTION YOUTH where he explained the role of the strike committee:

"The strike committees are based on the local union branches, but extended to include anybody wanting to work on the committee. Women are playing a prominent role in the strike committees. The committees organise transport, put out

press releases and ensure distribution to the food centres. The strike committee deals with all the problems that arise for strikers and their families: At the food centres we keep in touch with the 'stay-at-home' strikers and combat government propaganda and try to get everyone involved in the strike."

As far as support for the strike is concerned, the miners have the active backing of the railway workers, power workers and the dockworkers. Roy Jones also told us that workers from other progressive unions in the Trade Union Congress (TUC) have also realised that the time has come, not only to express moral support, but to stand united and to actively struggle in the interest of all workers.

On the question of working class leadership, it is clear that the workers have taken the lead in the strike. They will not be controlled by bureaucrats or careerist politicians. Many miners now see the fight as one against CAPITALISM and not just against a particular employer. If final victory against the capitalists is sought, the need to build international solidarity between rank and file trade unionists in different countries, becomes absolutely essential.

