

STOP PIT CLOSURES

The picketing in the coal strike in Britain is not limited to the coal mines themselves, or to the steelworks. Pickets are regularly stationed at power stations to stop the bringing in of more coal supplies. In this interview FOSATU Worker News talks to miners from south Wales who are picketing the Didcot power station. As the strike by hundreds of thousands of miners enters its sixth month, the giant Trades Union Congress (Britain's national trade union federation) has pledged its support. Meanwhile, the National Coal Board and the National Union of Mineworkers have begun new talks in a bid to settle the dispute.

What is the position at Didcot Power station?

There are only a few pickets at each gate. There is no coal going in. ASLEF (the train drivers' union) has backed our strike and there are no trains to bring in the coal. The management at the power station asked the joint shop stewards committee at the plant to accept coal brought in by road but they refused. At present two of the three huge generators are being serviced. Only a small amount of power is being produced. It's very quiet down there. There are no police stationed at the site. They just drive past two or three times a day to check on things. But this situation is typical of the strike as a whole. The conflict happens only where the National Coal Board and the government pick targets and use police force to keep back the pickets while scabs cross or coal is brought in.

What's the position at your own pit in South Wales?

South Wales is a unique situation. If the pits close down there at our pit there will be no jobs at all. In the area everything depends on the coal industry. There are no alternative jobs. Since closing down the steel plants in 1980 there have been no jobs for the steel workers laid off. They took redundancy money at the time because they believed they would get other jobs. Now they are regretting not having fought to save their jobs. We've learnt from that. We're not falling into the same trap. It is a community issue in our area. Everybody will suffer if the pits close. Even the mine manager is on our side. His own job is on the line. He calls the scabs 'bloody parasites'. The pickets at our plant are just token - there is no-one working. But the pickets are not on the street, they are in the pit yard, with management approval. We even have free use of the NCB (National Coal Board) phone.

Is your pit in line for closure?

Most of the South Wales pits are under threat. They are high up on the list of the so-called uneconomic pits.

What does 'uneconomic' mean?

That's a good question. The

newspapers give the impression that we want to keep open pits that have no coal in them. That's nonsense. What we're saying is "Don't close pits with coal left in them." What the NCB wants is to shift production to mines like the Nottinghamshire mines. There you've got seams six feet high. You can automate pits like that to a high degree. But in Wales the seams are thinner, more broken up. It's harder work to dig it out. What we're on about is this: we've produced profits from the Welsh pits that have enabled the NCB to develop fields like the Nottinghamshire field. We don't expect to be kicked out of our jobs now that the investment capital we've raised has been poured into other pits. If it's easy now to dig coal in Nottinghamshire then the whole industry should benefit, not just the wealthiest pits.

What is behind the attitude of the Nottinghamshire miners in refusing to join the strike?

In fact many of the miners there are out on strike. But those that are working are blinded by the money. They're earning between 300 and 400 pounds a week (between R600 and R800), with their bonus scheme and those ideal conditions for production.

What was the attitude to the press calls for a national strike ballot at the earlier stages of the strike?

As far as we're concerned our National Conference has the authority to call a strike. That is in our constitution. That is good enough for us. As a matter of fact, right at the beginning of the strike our pit voted against striking, because we thought that the strike was just about the closing down of one pit in Yorkshire. But when we learnt what it was really all about, we changed our minds. Now we support the strike. And anyway, once pickets from the other areas started picketing, we were not going to cross them. Were we? So what use was the ballot? You also have to understand the problem in our industry with ballots. Out of 180 000, 40 000 are clerical, managerial and so on. They always vote against strike action. So for us to get a 50 percent strike vote we have to get 75 percent among production workers



A woman narrowly escapes serious head injuries when attacked by a truncheon-wielding mounted policeman on the picket line outside Orgreave. The Orgreave coking plant has been the site of bitter battles between miners and police.

More generally, what do you think of the picture of the strikers presented by the newspapers?

Well, they've shut up now about the ballot because it is clear we support the strike and would vote for the strike if there was a ballot. But what gets us is the lies about no compulsory redundancies. We know that is just

wisely and then refuses to pay you any dole. All the money boils down to is unemployment pay in a lump sum, which you are forced to live off until it's all gone. Another lie is the 'political strike' line. We're just striking for our jobs that's all. We'll work under any government as long as we have jobs.

The degree of organisation in

Fight for jobs

a line they are pushing to get us back to work, but the media reports it like Gospel. The media also reports the NCB propaganda about redundancy payments, saying there's 1 000 pounds (R2 000) for every year of service. In fact that is a theoretical maximum while some may get it, but nobody we know would get that. And anyway there is no point in accepting money because you'll never work again afterwards and when the money has gone, what will you do then. You can't even spend the money on buying a house because the dole office (unemployment office) classes that as spending the money un-

providing transport, accommodation and food for the pickets here is impressive. How is all this co-ordinated?

It wasn't co-ordinated to start with. It was chaotic. One day we would be picketing at Leicester, next day it was somewhere else. There were no food supplies, whereas now we even have a cook! Gradually things got organised by NUM Wales and the regional offices. In our area, the Labour Council provides the Community Centre and free phone calls, we organise food parcels, free dinners three times a week for single miners. There is a weekly meeting to arrange

collection of donations and distribution of food. People realise it's an all or nothing situation, so the support is incredible.

At the end of the day people know that there are no alternative jobs in South Wales. There are hundreds of new factories in the area which have been built and never used. Now they are boarded up. If the mines close, that's it. There is over 4 million unemployed in Britain and there has to be a fight about where things are going or there will be 8 million unemployed. If we lose this strike we have no future. We have got to win.

