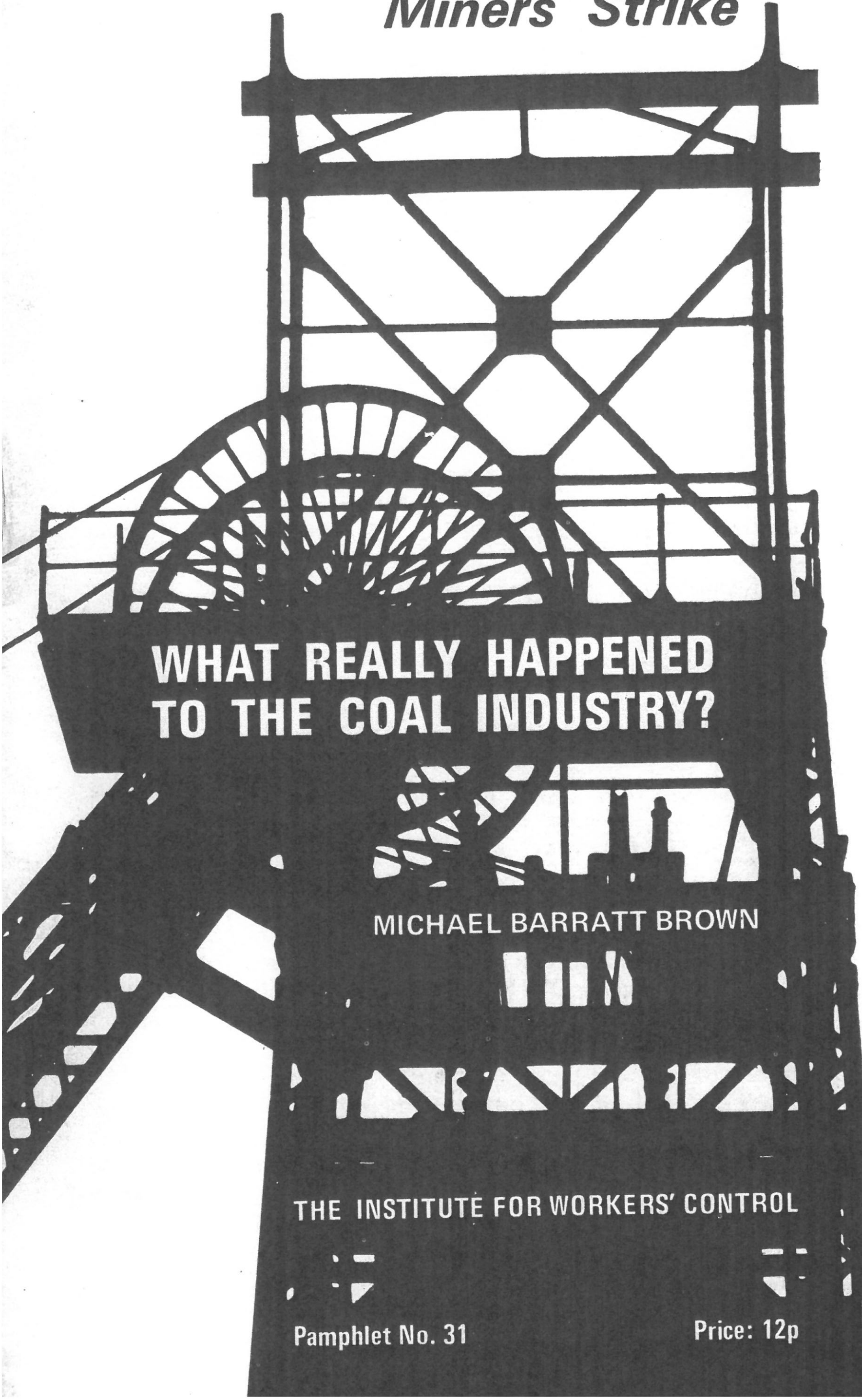
The Background to the Miners' Strike



WHAT REALLY HAPPENED TO THE COAL INDUSTRY?

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The setting up of the Court of Inquiry under the Chairmanship of Lord Wilberforce to enquire into the Miners' Wage Claim provides the occasion for a long hard look at the experience of the last decade in the Coal Industry. The Court will be failing in its task of reaching an acceptable solution if it limits its inquiries to a comparison of the last year or two of the wages and productivity increases of miners and of other workers. What has to be determined is not simply whether in the light of the current economic situation miners' wages are a special case, but in the light of the last decade of cutting back in the demand for coal, whether the nation in fact wants to have a coal industry in the U.K. and thus to conserve one of the country's few national assets. It is in the light of these wider national considerations that the current claim has to be judged; and it is to bring these considerations to the attention of the Court that this evidence has been prepared.

The Reality and the Myth

> *". . . the test we all have to meet – to leave to one's successors better prospects than we inherit."*
>
> excerpt from Lord Robens memoirs, *Ten Years Stint*, published in the *Sunday Times* January 30, 1972.

1961 to 1971 – Lord Robens' self-styled "Ten Year Stint" – is the period we have to examine not only to test whether he really left better prospects than he inherited but to discover the causes of the Miners' Strike in 1972. What did Lord Robens inherit and what did he leave behind him? We know what he left behind – the first national miners' strike since 1926 – but of course for this he suggests that the blame rests upon a few left wing organisers who have misled "his good friends, the miners". More about that in a moment; it is an old story to blame a few militants for industrial strife – and outside influence, of course; from France in the Eighteenth Century, from Germany in the Nineteenth, from Russia in the Twentieth, from missionaries, from "politically motivated men" or from the Universities. But we must go back to 1961. What did Lord Robens inherit?

Table I

The Coal Industry – The First Ten Years 1947-56

	1947	1956	Average 1947-56
Coal Output (m.tons)	197	222	210
Coal Sales (m.tons)	190	227	220
Exports (m. tons)	5.3	9.7	14.0
Imports (m. tons)	0.7	5.2	2.3
Manpower (000s)	704	697	705
OMY (tons)	262	297	297
OMS Overall (cut)	21.5	24.8	24.7
Face (cut)	58.4	67.0	65.7
Absenteeism (%)	12.4	12.9	12.4
Accident Rate (per 100,000 man shift)	136.2*	129.7	132
Weekly Earnings % of all male manual workers in production industries	107	125	120
Hourly Earnings ditto	122	150	145
Capital Investment (£m)	19	96	55.8
Reconstruction (£m)	–	40	17.4
Other (£m)	19	56	39.4
– of which from internal sources (£m)	15	47	34.5
Number of Pits	958	840	900
Share of competitive Primary Fuel (Market %)	98	94	95

* 1949 not 1947

Source: N.C.B. *Reports and Accounts*

The Coal Industry before 1961

The nationalisation of the miners in 1946 aroused great expectations among the 700,000 mine workers and their families. The bill introduced into Parliament was the eighth attempt to take the mines out of private ownership. But there were mixed motives involved in the final act. The miners had for long demanded workers' control at all levels of the industry. Private manufacturers wanted a modernised, rationalised, efficient industry to produce cheap coal. Consumers wanted protection against the monopoly of the nation's sole source of primary energy. The Government saw public ownership as an instrument of national economic planning. All these motives were confused in a vague aspiration that coal should be a public service. The facts soon emerged clearly enough.[1]

The miners did *not* get workers' control — the Miners' General Secretary went on to the Coal Board — the only miner on it, together with three ex-coal owners. One miners' leader became a divisional chairman and later Board Chairman, others took divisional and area jobs on industrial relations. A system of consultation and safety committees was introduced and a conciliation procedure. The Board introduced a ladder scheme for promotion from the ranks and greatly expanded educational opportunities. But control was kept in the hands of management, which became increasingly centralised and hierarchical after the Fleck Report in 1955. What the miners did win was a wage to compensate them for the dirt and danger and darkness of their working lives that put them at the head of the "Wages League" and attracted into the industry a steady flow of young men whose fathers had sworn never to let them "go down t' pit."

The other aims of efficiency, monopoly control and economic planning that were involved in nationalisation are not so easily dealt with separately. For they were all transcended by the market position of supply and demand for coal in the fifteen years after nationalisation. For the first ten years coal provided the country's only primary energy fuel for industrial and domestic use, for making gas and coke and electricity. Every ton that could be cut could be sold and in the mid 1950s 25 million tons had to be imported. During this period there was some rationalisation: some pits were closed, others grouped together, borings were made to prove seams of workable coal, and some new shafts were sunk or deepened, new coal cutting machinery was introduced and experiments made with continuous mining and power loading, new washeries and coke ovens were built. On average about £50m to £60m a year was invested, but reconstruction was slow, held back by the overriding demand to maintain current production with the manpower and capital available.[2]

The overwhelming demand for coal in this period up to the end of 1956 was, however, in part the result of government policy. Under the public service concept of controlling monopoly positions and encouraging growth in production for home and export markets, coal prices were kept artificially low. The Coal Board's obligation to ensure that "revenues were not *less* than sufficient to meet outgoings properly chargeable to revenue account on an average of good and bad years" was interpreted to mean that the Board was not to make a profit. It was even charged with £29 millions of losses on imported coal.[3] Given the world price of coal at the time there is no doubt that the Board could have charged marginal and not average costs, and over a decade raised an extra £1 a ton in revenue or some £200m a year. As a result of "gentlemen's agreements" between government and Board, this was not done. Instead the Board had to borrow an additional £260m on top of the £375 million compensation to the coal owners on which interest had to be paid. Thus the low price of coal not only led almost certainly to waste and inefficiency in its use, but slowed down the rate of reconstruction and imposed upon the Board a mounting burden of debt which was to prove extremely onerous.

In the three years, 1957, 1958 and 1959, annual home demand for coal fell from 217 to 189 million tons. About a third of this was the result of the substitution of oil for coal, another third to the fall in demand for coke, gas and domestic fuel, and the rest to increased efficiency in coal use and to warmer winters.[4] Yet during this period the Board's investment plans were coming to fruition. £110 millions a year was being spent on modernisation, a half of this on major reconstruction. It takes ten to fifteen years to bring a new pit into full production and by the early 1960s these plans meant that an output of 200 to 215 million tons could be produced mainly from new and reconstructed collieries. By 1961 a half of all output was coming from fully mechanised faces. Output per man which had been stagnant throughout the 1950s leapt up by ten tons a year overall, and by 1 cwt per man shift at the face in both 1960 and 1961. With falling sales, closure of old pits was advanced, and manpower was cut back from over 700,000 in 1958 to 570,000 in 1961, partly by retirement of all men over 65. After three years of stagnant earnings, miners in September 1960 won a major increase of wages for all grades, plus a shorter working week. This brought them back near to the head of the Wages League in hourly earnings, although they were below the leaders — vehicles, paper and print — on weekly earnings.

Lord Robens' Inheritance

What Lord Robens inherited may now be summed up: a modernised industry with a capacity of at least 200 million tons, half of it from fully mechanised faces and the prospect three quarters by 1964; rapidly rising productivity with a stabilised accident rate; earnings for miners that were on average at the head of the "Wages League"; but a falling market for coal and a huge burden of accumulated deficits, amounting to some £90m. Interest charges were running at

Table II

The Coal Industry: The Years of Investment 1956 - 1963

	1956	1962	% Change 1956-62
Coal Output (m.tons)	222	197.4	– 11.5
Coal Sales (m.tons)	227	196	– 13.5
of which Power Stations	45.6	61.1	+ 34
Gas and coke	57.1	46.1	– 19
Domestic	38.0	33.8	– 11
Other Inland	76.8	50.2	– 35
Exports	9.7	4.8	– 50
Imports (m.tons)	5.2	–	–
Manpower (000s)	697.4	550.9	– 21
OMY (tons)	297.2	340.5	+ 14
OMS Overall (cwt)	24.8	31.2	+ 25
Face (cwt)	67.0	91.0	+ 36
Absenteeism (%)	12.9	15.4	+ 2.5
Accident Rate (per 100,000 man shift)	129.7	161.8	+ 3.2
Weekly Earnings % of all adult male manual workers in production industries	125	114	– 11
Hourly Earnings ditto	150	145	– 5
Capital Investment (£m)	96	86	(Av.=£97m.)
Reconstruction (£m)	40	39	(Av.=£48m.)
Other (£m)	56	47	(Av.=£49m.)
– of which from internal sources (£m)	47	84	(Av.=£65m.)
Number of pits	840	616	– 26
Share of Competitive Primary Fuel Market (%)	94	77	– 17

Source: N.C.B. *Reports and Accounts*

over £40m a year, compared with an average of £20m in the 1950s; depreciation charges at over £60m, compared with around £30m in the mid 1950s. At this point the Government introduced the April 1961 White Paper on Financial and Economic obligations of the nationalised industries. Under this White Paper, the Board was now free to raise prices to cover not only revenue calculated over a five-year period, but to build up financial reserves to meet increased costs of replacement and premature obsolescence.

This setting of commercial criteria came just when coal was faced with the most vigorous competition from oil and after a decade when the Board had been prevented from setting a commercial price and building up reserves to meet such a contingency. Some of us argued most strongly that the Board's debts should be written off then and there *and* a part at least of the derelict capital equipment inherited from the old coal owners for which compensation and interest were still being paid.[5] Perhaps Lord Robens will tell us whether he supported this argument. What he did obtain was a tax on fuel oil of 2d. a gallon (equivalent to about 26/- per ton of coal). As general prices rose the value of this protection was of course eroded, while the burden of debt by contrast accumulated. But Lord Robens' first Report (for 1961) spoke only of "the excellent spirit of the industry. . . .in the face of a tremendous challenge of changing circumstances". A financial reconstruction was discussed in 1962 but the Minister and the Board agreed, according to the 1962 Report (p.4) that this was "not appropriate" in the midst of the "vigorous efforts to make the industry viable and competitive." From then on the fatal battle was engaged between coal and oil for victory in a fiercely competitive market. To maintain the 200 million ton coal target, prices were once more held for five long years (1961 - 1965).

At first all went well for the Board. With two cold winters, 1962/3 and the fuel oil tax, rapidly rising productivity from increased mechanisation in new and modernised pits, output and sales were held at over 190m tons a year. But the accident rate rose ominously; absenteeism rose too. Additional rest days were won by the miners and the end of Saturday working. The rise in their earnings, however, failed increasingly to keep up with the rise in productivity. Between 1956 and 1963 (April to April) the real weekly earnings of miners after discounting for price increases failed to rise at all, but their productivity rose by 20%. Weekly earnings of surface workers actually fell by 10% in real terms over this period. It was only on an hourly basis that miners maintained a place near the top of the League. Yet the Board's finances were still relatively strong. Debt was being paid back and a much reduced investment programme was fully covered from internal finance. Even after payments of over £40m of interest a year and allocating sums to reserve, a small surplus was shown in the years 1962 to 1964.

This desperate attempt to beat oil in the battle for the fuel market, largely at the expense of the miners, could not succeed. In an unplanned "free for all" the cards were stacked against coal. To start with, oil is cleaner and easier to use and cheaper to transport. In the years when coal prices were held down at pit head, the retail price of coal rose by 12%. More important even than this, oil production is a capital intensive industry in which huge savings in costs were made possible at this time by increases in scale of operation. By building refineries with a throughput of 10m tons a year instead of 500,000 tons, capital costs could be more than halved and operating costs reduced to a third.[6] The giant tankers commissioned in the early 1960s reduced transport costs by a quarter. There were no similar potential cost reductions in the coal industry which even after a great increase in scale of colliery and mechanisation remained basically labour intensive. Finally, the oil companies could offset their sales of petrol for road and air transport, where coal was not a competitor, against their sales of competitive fuel oil. Losses could be carried to break into the market and then recouped when the market was won.

Of course the Coal Board itself could diversify its activities. Slowly, and apparently reluctantly, this is what it did. It still remains a mystery why the Board, whose own engineers invented the new machinery and mining equipment, generally left production to private firms like Dowty and Powell Duffryn, which made huge profits in the process. The Coal Board was not precluded like the transport industry from manufacturing activities. Nevertheless, slowly, from smokeless fuels, bricks and solid fuel appliances the Board's ancillary activities spread into chemicals for synthetic textiles, computer hire and in the end to natural gas exploration and production. By 1968 to 1970 all these activities were adding £11 - £12 million a year profit, but in the mid 1960s the figure was nearer £3 – £4 million, and in the early 1960s there were losses. It is these activities that the Tory Government propose to hive-off. The failure to hold together in the Board's employment the unique mobilisation of talent – engineering, scientific, managerial – that the industry had attracted, by diversifying when the demand for coal declined, must be held to be a tragedy for the development of public enterprise in Britain, only a little less than the tragedy of the miners themselves. But we anticipate.

The Battle for a Fuel Policy

No-one should have been surprised that after 1965 consumption of coal steadily declined in the face of the rising share of oil in the market. And by then coal was facing competition not only from oil but from new sources of primary fuel. Nuclear power stations were coming into commission and providing by 1965 three per cent of the market. the

Table III

The Coal Industry: The Years of Struggle over Fuel Policy 1962 - 1966

	1962	1965/6	% Change 1962-1965/6
Coal Output (m.tons)	197.4	182.8	– 7
Coal Sales (m.tons)	196	184.7	– 6
of which Power Stations	61.1	68.8	+ 12
Gas and coke	46.1	43.8	– 5
Domestic	33.8	27.8	– 18
Other Inland	50.2	40.7	– 19
Exports	4.8	3.6	– 25
Imports	—	—	—
Manpower (000s)	550.9	455.7	– 17
OMY (tons)	340.5	380.7	+ 12
OMS Overall (cwt.)	31.2	36.1	+ 15
Face (cwt.)	91.0	109.7	+ 20
Absenteeism (%)	15.4	18.0	+ 2.6
Accident Rate (per 100,000 man shift)	161.8	197.3	+ 3.5
Weekly Earnings % of all adult male manual workers in production industries.	114	104	– 10
Hourly Earnings (ditto)	145	134	– 11
Capital Investment (£m)	86	88	(Av.£93m.)
Reconstruction (£m.)	39	33	(Av.£37m.)
Other (£m)	47	55	(Av.£56m.)
of which from internal sources (£m)	84	65	(Av.£84m.)
Number of Pits	616	483	– 22
Share of Competitive Primary Fuel Market (%)	77	67	– 10

Source: N.C.B. *Reports and Accounts*

equivalent of seven million tons of coal, and were expected to double their share by 1970. Natural gas had been found in the North Sea and was supplying 1% of the market by 1965 with a prospective rise to 5% by 1970. Private industry and Government alike were delighted at the prospect of cheap fuel. But there were many warning voices.[7] Nuclear power was not proven either in long-term costs or even longer-term hazard to health. Natural gas at the best estimate would last for 30 years. At current rates of consumption the proved world reserves of oil would hardly last for a longer period. Moreover, the oil producing lands were beginning to demand higher revenues for their one wasting natural asset. By contrast coal reserves had a life of a hundred years or more.

Short of new ways of direct generation of electricity from nuclear fission or from the sun's rays, about which scientists were, and are, extremely sceptical, should we one day have to go back to coal? Close the pits now, let them flood with water, demobilise the miners and there might well be no way back.

These were the thoughts that many experts believed should have informed the decisions of the Labour Government in 1965 when the National Plan was drawn up and in 1967 when at length a paper on Fuel Policy was drawn up.

The N.U.M. again and again demanded from the Labour Government the Fuel Policy they had been promised — a detailed plan, that is, for a guaranteed market for coal and other fuels, even if coal sales had to be phased down over the years. Only thus could the miners and the industry feel any security for the future.[8] But both the Plan and the Paper were committed to the principle of a competitive market and bedazzled by the prospects of cheap energy. Lord Robens fought a rearguard action to protect the coal industry from "unmanageable difficulties" and "inacceptable social costs"[9] in the event of a too rapid rundown of the industry. Within the framework of the competitive policy he had all along supported, he could do no other. The past had been sold long before. Government aid was sought and obtained to help to hold its demands for coal by 1970 at around 155 million tons, including 2 million for export. The 1965 Plan had allowed for 165 - 178m tons of coal by 1970. The fatal gap of 13m tons had been left to be determined by competition between oil and coal. By 1967, when the Fuel Policy Paper appeared, natural gas had entered the picture to take an expected 25m tons away from coal by 1970. What Lord Robens won was a reduction of this 25m to 16m and a tiny cut of 2m into the expected demand for oil.

The form of Government aid supplied to the Coal Industry revealed what could have been done much earlier. In March 1965 the debts of the Board had already been written off to the extent of £415m, thereby reducing the interest charges from £43m a year to £25m and depreciation provision from £77m to £65m. What was done after the Fuel Policy review at the end of 1967 was to delay the input of natural gas into power stations and restrict their use of oil, the extra cost to the C.E.G.B. being met from public funds. In addition the Government provided assistance to the Board, averaging some £20m a year for four years, to cover transfer allowances, resettlement expenses, protection of earnings of men transferred and further assistance through the Ministry of Social Security to meet supplementary payments to miners made redundant at 55 years of age or above. The cost to the miners of the closure programme was in this way reduced but closures were not slowed down, although after angry exchanges at the Labour Party Conference in September 1967, the Prime Minister agreed that the Government would also bear the cost of deferring the closures of 16 pits due for closure that winter in view of the rising level of unemployment. Thus some protection was at last achieved for the Coal Industry to prevent "unacceptable social hardship and serious difficulties for the economy" *after* the Government had made a statistical analysis that purported to have included social cost considerations. The relevant paragraph from the Fuel Policy Paper of November 1967 is so important for what follows as to be worth quoting in full:

> "In certain circumstances the money cost of a particular resource may not be an accurate measure of its real cost to the nation. For example, if the displacement of miners adds to unemployment in the short-term, manpower at marginal collieries may be regarded as costing less in national terms than the wages actually paid. Allowance must therefore be made, in this and other contexts, for the possibility of a divergence between money and resource costs. It is not always practicable to put precise figures on these differences, but the concept can nevertheless be applied by taking a range of assumptions and comparing the outcome in terms of the total resource cost of meeting demands for energy. The results of this approach have not yet been worked out in detail, but the principle has been an important aid in reaching the decisions outlined in the White Paper."[10] *Fuel Policy Cmd.* 3438 p.62)

It is a great pity that Lord Robens and Mr. Marsh did not instruct their experts to work out these concepts in detail, instead of bearing them in mind in a general way. But the importance of the paragraph is that it puts paid once and for all to the belief that free choice in the market and the working of the price mechanism provide the best way of allocating resources in the economy. This becomes particularly obvious when we recognize that the possibility of oil or natural gas running out in 30 years time does not at all enter into its current price. Scarcity is only measured by price as a result of a gap between supply and demand *today,* or in the near future, not in the distant future. It will need governmental and intergovernmental action to conserve the non-renewable resources in the earth's crust and to raise their prices to ensure this. This does not of course imply that the oil companies should be the beneficiaries of such higher prices, but it does suggest that the great weakness of Government fuel policies has been that only a part of the fuel and power industry is under its control.

The oil companies remain a kingdom of their own. Indeed, one of the few attempts by government to control the oil industry was almost fatal to coal. Because imported refined petrol is a much heavier charge on the balance of payments than imported crude oil, when the Government came to allocate gas exploration blocs in the North Sea to the oil companies, it required that applicants should all have refineries in Great Britain and 40% investment grants were offered if they were built in development areas. The resulting rapid expansion of refinery capacity in Britain, combined with a much slower growth rate in the economy, led to the oil companies desperately holding down their prices to capture markets as quickly as possible, so that their large-scale new plant was not running too expensively below full capacity. In the upshot oil was supplying in fact 2m tons (coal equivalent) *more* in 1970 than the oil companies planned for in the 1965 national

Table IV

Shares in the Competitive Primary Fuel Market for 1970, Planned and Actua., for 1975 and 1980

Actual and Estimates	Total Market Size (m.tons C.E.)	Shares of Market (%) Coal	Oil	Natural Gas	Nuclear & Hydro
1. Actual 1964	252	73	23	1.0	3
2. Estimates for 1970					
1965 National Plan	284	58-61	35	1.0	6
1967 Fuel Policy 1.	260	54	29	11	6
2.	260	58	28	8	6
3. Actual 1970	278	55	35	5	5
4. Actual 1971	272	52	35	8	5
5. Estimates for 1975					
1967 Fuel Policy	290	41	30	17	12
Oil Companies 1969	294-324	39-42	29-37	15-18	11-12
6. Estimates for 1980					
1967 Fuel Policy	335	30	18	22	30
Oil Companies 1969	315-370	28-33	33-40	19-20	16-17

Note: Oil for transport is excluded and assumed to be 40m tons (CE) in 1964, 50m in 1970, 55m to 60m in 1975 and 60m to 74m in 1980.

Source: *Fuel Policy* Cmd. 3438, 1967.
Shell International Petroleum Company "Energy Demand and supply in the U.K. 1975 to 1980" *Economic Studies* Vol.4, No. 1/2, 1969.
Annual Abstract of Statistics 1971.
Economic Trends December 1971.

Plan. Coal was supplying just 20m tons *less* than the Board planned in 1965 for that year – i.e. about the 155m tons that was agreed to in 1967. A year later in 1971 only 143m tons was sold. The guarantees were over. For the first time in the Spring of that year oil sales surpassed coal sales in Britain, although of course 45m of the 145m tons of oil sold were for road and air transport and other non-competitive uses.

Having accepted a Government target of 155m tons for 1970, on the Government's estimates for the longer-term future after 1970 Lord Robens and the Board openly expressed disagreement. The 1967 Fuel Policy Paper envisaged a rundown of demand for coal to a level of 120m tons by 1975. Lord Robens wrote to *The Times* on November 10th 1967 to announce a proposed figure for 1980 of only 80 million tons. From these

Table V

The Coal Industry: The Years of Decline 1966 - 1971

	1965/6	1970/71	% Change 1965/6 1970/1
Coal Output (m.tons)	182.8	142.4	– 22
Coal Sales (m.tons)	184.7	151.3	– 18
of which Power Stations	48.5	73.5	+ 7
Gas and coke	43.8	28.2	– 36
Domestic	27.8	18.4	– 34
Other Inland	40.7	28.2	– 31
Exports	3.6	3.0	– 17
Imports	–	1.2	–
Manpower (000s)	455.7	287.2	– 37
OMY (tons)	380.7	463	+ 21
OMS Overall (cwt.)	36.1	44.2	+ 22
Face (cwt.)	109.7	143.5	+ 31
Absenteeism (%)	18.0	19.2	+ 1.2
Accident Rate (per 100,000 man shift)	197.3	135.8	– 6.1
Weekly Earnings (% of all adult male manual workers in production industries	104	104	–
Hourly Earnings (ditto)	134	115	– 19
Capital Investment (£m)	88	73.5	– 16
Reconstruction (£m)	33	–	–
Other (£m)	55	–	–
of which from internal sources (£m)	65	60	– 8
Number of Pits	483	292	– 40
Share of Competitive Primary Fuel Market (%)	67	57	– 10

Source: N.C.B. *Reports and Accounts*

estimates and the rate of productivity increase he deduced that the number of miners required by 1975 would be 150,000 and by 1980 64,500, compared with 395,000 in 1967. The shock to the mining community was electric. Only the sharp decline in employment in 1967 and rising unemployment in many areas prevented more miners from voting with their feet and getting out of the industry while the going was good. Voluntary wastage had risen in 1965-6 to 47,000 and continued for the next three years at around 30,000. In areas where alternative work *was* available the Board had increasing difficulty in manning up the collieries. Indeed the fact that coal mining was increasingly becoming concentrated in areas of low unemployment, like the Midlands, and declining in areas of high unemployment, like Scotland and the North, created a permanent problem for the Board, which inter-divisional transfers and redeployment within divisions have not overcome.

The Last Five Years

With Government aid to support demand for at least 155m tons by 1970, with further aid to finance transfer and redundancies and with an increasing shortage of miners in the areas upon which output was being concentrated, and after steady increases in productivity averaging 4% a year overall, 5% a year at the face, it should have been possible for the miners to obtain a major increase in wages after 1965. Unfortunately, the new decisions on the Coal industry coincided with a period of "severe income restraint" following six months of wages standstill. Average miners' earnings were stepped up between 1966 and 1967 by £1 to regain their place in the "Wages League", but the miners were caught in what the Board's report for 1966-7 described as "one of the first productivity agreements to meet the criteria specified by the National Board for Prices and Incomes." They were indeed truly caught because the agreement – the National Power Loading Agreement – comprised two of the longstanding aims of the Unions – the ending of piece-work payments and a national day-wage for all miners wherever they worked. The agreement allowed for no variations in shift-pay, but only of manning according to conditions, and envisaged the reaching of equality of earnings of all mechanised face teams, including craftsmen, by 1971. What this meant was holding back the rise in earnings of men in the central coalfields which had historically higher rates of pay, while the others caught up. The central coalfields were the ones on which output was being concentrated and alternative jobs in other industries were normally much more easily available. This process, therefore, simply

Table VI

Coal Miners Shift Earnings (All Ages) 1967 - 71

by Area (in £s)

Area	1967/8		1968/9		1969/70		1970/71		1970/71 as % of 1967/8	
	Face	All	Face	All	Face	All	Face	All	Face	All
Scottish N & S	5.1	4.3	5.3	4.6	5.5	4.85	6.1	5.4	120	125
Durham N & S	4.9	4.2	5.1	4.4	5.3	4.65	5.9	5.2	120	124
Wales W & E	4.35	4.15	5.05	4.35	5.4	4.7	6.0	5.25	138	127
Yorkshire All	5.4	4.45	5.6	4.6	5.8	4.9	6.4	5.5	118	123
North Trent	5.55	4.35	5.65	4.55	5.8	4.9	6.4	5.5	115	126
N.Derbys.	5.75	4.55	5.85	4.7	6.0	5.0	6.6	5.55	114	122
S.Midlands/ Staffs	5.45	4.4	5.5	4.65	5.85	4.9	6.3	5.4	115	122
Notts, N & S	6.05	4.7	6.0	4.7	6.2	5.1	6.65	5.65	110	120
All inc.Kent and N'umberland	5.35	4.4	5.5	4.6	5.75	4.9	6.3	5.45	118	123

Note: Retail price index, October 1967 = 100, was 120 for October 1970.
Source: N.C.B. Reports and Accounts

could not have been achieved except in a period of universally high unemployment affecting job opportunities, even in the Midlands, combined with a period of rapid rundown in the industry. The result was to push the miners steadily down the "Wages League" for five consecutive years.

This was not all. Between April 1967 and April 1971 miners weekly wages on average rose by 24%, but retail prices rose by 28%. In real terms therefore, their wages fell by 3% over the period. Moreover, the effect of the holding back of wage increases in the better paid areas after 1967 was that up to 1970/71, for which we have figures, miners' earnings overall rose by 23%, but face men's earnings rose by only 18%, while prices over this period rose by 20%. In Nottinghamshire all earnings rose by 20% and face men's earnings by 10% only, so that their earnings in real terms fell by over 8%, and the fall continued in 1971. It was this fall in real living standards as prices rose that created the growing demand in many areas of the coalfields throughout 1970 for a major increase in wages and led to the unofficial strike of 1969 over the refusal of the Board to grant a 40-hour week including overtime for the surface workers. This strike was followed in 1970 by a pressure for official strike action in support of the Union's renewed wage demands to maintain the living standards of its members. Over 55% of the union members voted for strike action, but the rules required a two-thirds majority. When the rules were altered in 1971 to make 55% enough, 59% voted in December 1971 for the strike which began on January 10th 1972.

It would be wrong to suppose that the unofficial strike of 1969 or the official strike of 1972 were purely about money. This is obviously the first demand since living standards have actually been reduced and since miners are now being asked to brave the dirt and dark, the din and danger of the pits for a lower wage than can be had in the clean and bright and relatively safe and quiet surroundings of a modern factory.

There are however, other considerations which any attempt to understand the unanimity and solidarity of the 1972 strike must take account of. The first is lack of security. For over a decade now the miners have not known whether their work was really necessary. First they were told in 1956 that the nation needed 240m tons of coal by the mid 1960s, then in a revised plan that it would be 214m tons, then in 1965 when sales were down to 193m, that 162m to 175m would do by 1970, then their 1970 target was reduced in 1967 to 142m and raised again to 155m. By 1975 the miners are told that only 120m tons will be needed and by 1980 perhaps under 100m. Is their daily sacrifice of light and health and the risk they take of life and limb actually wanted by the nation? They would be the first to opt for other jobs if any existed near their homes and families. Many will never go down the pit again and this knowledge makes the others utterly determined to win from this strike, not just £5 or £6 to get them back what they have lost, but a real guarantee of security for the future.

And there is still another consideration. The transfers of men from pit to pit as one is closed after another is not only demoralising; it has broken up the old work groups that gave mutual confidence in dangerous conditions. The day -wage under the National Power Loading Agreement has done more: it has taken away from these groups their power of control over the job – the pace and method of work – that the old contract system gave them. Of course the face workers know that the new machines require more planning of supplies, more co-ordination of different operations, more and varied skills than the old hand-cutting and shovelling. It is a less toilsome job but the conditions are no better and the driving pressure of the machines is an added horror. They are not

Table VII

Coal Miners Weekly and Hourly Earnings
Compared with those in other Industries 1960 - 1971

(April of each year £s.)

Industry	Weekly or hourly	1960	1961	1966	1967	1970	1971
All Production Industries	W	14·1	15·06	20·25	20·55	26·8	29·7
Industries	H	·295	·315	·44	·58	·58	.67
All Manufacturing	W	14·81	15·76	20·96	21·13	27·3	30·2
Industries	H	·314	·335	·456	·47	·61	·68
Coal Industry	W	15·96	16·87	21·6	22·6	27·7	28·0
	H	·4	·46	·61	·64	·67	·68
Coal % of All Production	W	113	112	106·5	110	104	95
	H	135	145	139	142	115	102
Coal % of All Manufacturing	W	107	107	103	107	102	93
	H	127	137	134	137	110	100

Note 1. Hours worked by miners assumed to be 40 in 1960, 36·7 in 1961, 35·5 in 1966 and 1967 and 41 in 1970 and 1971.

Source British Labour Statistics
NCB Reports and Accounts
Department of Employment Gazette December 1971

2. To return to 1967 position coal earnings would have to have £32·8 in April 1971 or by the end of 1971 between £5 and £6 above what they were.

against planning but they want a part in it as human beings; and what they have got instead is a role in which they are treated as part of the machine, supervised, driven, ordered what to do and where to go by a management that appears to be more interested in cutting costs in "maximum machine utilisation time" than in leading men in maximum human development.[11]

All this is aggravated by the knowledge of the miners as manual workers that while their numbers are cut and cut again, supervisors, officials and staff workers proliferate. In 1966/7 there was one under-official to every five face men. By 1970-71 there was one to every four. The Board's salary bill which had been 29p for every ton sold in 1966-7 was 40p in 1970-1, a rise of 40%, while the wages bill had risen only 15% from £2.05 to £2.35 per ton.[12] Of course, the miners know that a more capital intensive industry will need more staff but that much more? These feelings among miners about the top-heavy administration of the Board have been greatly worsened by the failure of the officials' unions, whose pay is determined by the N.U.M. rates to support the 1972 strike. After the antagonism of the picket lines the miners who return will have ever stronger reasons for demanding a real measure of workers' control. With the much greater education that they now have before entering the pits and from apprenticeships and other day-release schemes thereafter, they know that they could do the job better themselves, granted that they had sympathetic senior engineers and technicians. This will mean the Union at every level operating effective control on management's power to make decisions – on manning up of faces, on hiring and firing, on planning and its execution, with the books open not just when a pit is about to close (to show how far it is in the the red) but all the time. Indeed, without such an extension of workers' control the output will never again be brought back to the levels of 1971, let alone beyond them.

For these men are not so different from Mr. Smith's happy black men – black they are at work, and happy enough in the working men's Club on a weekend evening, but Lord Robens made the same mistake as Ian Smith. You can push human beings around so far, but no further. Beyond that point they simply say "No!" It does not need a Garfield Todd or Communist militants or University lecturers to rouse men in Britain or in Africa whose wages have been kept down, security threatened and whose intelligence has been daily insulted. Doncaster miners have never forgotten the answer of Lord Robens to a militant heckler at a Doncaster panel meeting in the new lunching room at the Race Course in 1969. "I am the master; I crack the whip". Yes, and so did Ian Smith, but it doesn't work any longer.

And yet the story cannot end there. The nation does need coal and will have to pay a decent wage to the miners who get it. Coal remains a precious national asset that will have to be most stringently conserved, not as a fuel, but as a non-renewable source of chemicals fertilisers, synthetic materials, paints and much else besides. A fuel policy based upon the long-term conservation of this precious resource could give to the miners the long-term security they wish. This is not a matter for higgling in the market. The future of all our children is involved in the decisions that are made now about the carbon deposits in the earth's crust. Britain's coal has powered industrial change the world over. When we depend today so much on oil from less developed lands, we need to consider not only our future but theirs. We cannot hope for much from the giant transnational companies that control these precious resources. But we could make the demand for a world conference on fuel and energy supplies at which the working people all over the world could demand the opening of the books on this crucial question. In the meantime, we have to demand that the British Government give the miners their £6, and write off the Board's capital debt that was incurred at high rates of interest for productive capacity that is no longer needed.[1 2] The Wilberforce Court of Inquiry must look beyond the narrow political calculation of today, to the future of the British Coal Industry, so that the full facts and all their social implications can be presented to the British people and the secret decisions of the politicians and their servants can be challenged.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a full study of this period see M. Barratt Brown "Coal as a Nationalised Industry, *Economic Studies,* Vol.4. No.1/2 1969.
2. See N.C.B. *Report for 1954.* p.22
3. See Select Committee on Nationalised Industries 1957-58. H. of C. Paper No. 187.
4. See National Institute *Economic Review* September 1960. p.26 ff.
5. See John Hughes et.al. in *Lessons of Public Enterprise,* ed. M. Shanks, Fabian Society 1962.
6. See C. Pratten and R. M. Dean, *The Economics of Large Scale Production in British Industry* , CUP 1965.
7. E.F. Schumacher, Economic Adviser National Coal Board, in *Britain's Coal* published report of a Conference, March 25-26, 1960.
8. See especially Lawrence Daly *The Miners and the Nation,* and "A Miners' Programme" in the Bulletin of the Institute for Workers' Control, Vol. 1, No.1, 1968.
9. See *Fuel Policy* Cmd. 3438 November 1967, p.66.
10. See *Fuel Policy* Cmd. 3438 p. 62.
11. For a detailed study of this process see R.H. Heath "The National Power Loading Agreement", *Trade Union Register, 1969.*
12. See NCB *Reports and accounts.*

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