

The Case for
Workers'
Control
in the Mining
Industry

by Eric Varley



With a foreword by Peter Heathfield and a postscript by Ken Coates

Foreword

Through their victorious industrial action earlier this year, the National Union of Mineworkers showed to the nation, not only the determination of miners to stand together for a wage that more nearly reflects the hard and hazardous nature of their work, but also their clear appreciation, in the face of widespread doubts and attacks, of the absolutely crucial role of the coal industry to the national economy. Never again must coal be neglected as the main long-term source of the nation's fuel and energy, whatever the short term appeal of oil and natural gas from our own shores. And as a direct result of the miners' victory, we have in Eric Varley, a Minister of Energy who is not only an ex-miner from the Derbyshire Area, but one who has over many years, been committed to social planning of the nation's use of fuel resources, rather than leaving them to the vagaries of the market.

Coal has still to be won in conditions of great difficulty and danger and on the other side of the coin whereon is stamped the need for a large and guaranteed output, there must be recognised the need for miners themselves to extend their own control over their conditions of work and over the wider policies of the Coal Board. Here again, the National Union of Mineworkers can claim a long and powerful commitment to the principles of workers' control, from the publication by the South Wales Miners' Reform Committee of *The Miners' Next Step* in 1912, to the strong support of miners for the recent Conferences of the Institute for Workers' Control. If ever there was a moment when the miners must try to find ways and means of making that great tradition into a reality, this is surely it.

And again, we are lucky in having a most perceptive analysis of workers' control in the mines, prepared over ten years ago by the same Eric Varley, our Energy Minister. This was published in 1963 in the *Derbyshire Miner*, and I am more than happy to introduce it now to a wider public in this small pamphlet. Now is the time to begin to put these ideas into practice and show to working people everywhere how we can establish a new kind of nationalised industry serving the people's needs and democratically managed by the workers in it.

Peter Heathfield
Secretary
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WORKERS' CONTROL IN THE COAL MINING INDUSTRY

by *Eric Varley*

Workers' Control in the coal mining industry has always been linked with nationalisation and to anyone considering the history of the Miners' Union it must seem very strange why it was not achieved in 1947 when the pits were nationalised by the Labour Government.

There is, however, one exception to the demand for workers' control and its link with nationalisation and this came out of the South Wales Reform Committee of 1912. This unofficial body who published a pamphlet entitled "The Miners' Next Step" is worthy of mention for its authors are claimed to be A.J. Cook who was later to become secretary of the Mineworkers' Federation of Great Britain, and one of the miners' leaders during the 1926 strike, and Noel Ablett who became a member of the MFGB's Executive Committee.

The South Wales Reform Committee claimed that far from improving the position of the miners, nationalisation would make it worse. In the place of nationalisation they suggested a militant policy of industrial action which would reduce output and they hoped eventually that the mines would become so uneconomical that they could be taken over by the workers in a syndicalist organisation.

The policies advocated in the "Miners' Next Step" were never accepted by the MFGB and were rejected at many miners' conferences.

Officially the miners themselves proposed varying policies for nationalisation and control which culminated in the evidence presented by Mr. William Straker, an official of the Northumberland miners, before the Sankey Commission on the Coal Industry in 1919. In his evidence Straker presented a fairly detailed scheme for shared control. He suggested that the whole industry should be under the administration of a Mining Council consisting of twenty members, ten appointed by the MFGB, ten appointed by the Government and presided over by a Minister for Mines. In districts, here again a council would exist half of whom would be appointed by the MFGB. At each colliery there was to be a Pit Council half of whom would be appointed by local miners. From Straker's evidence it must be assumed that the powers of both District and Pit Councils would be laid down by the National Council but nevertheless workers were to be given a share in the industry's control.

On matter such as the appointment of mines managers, Straker said that this function would be performed by the District Councils. Once appointed the manager would have power to engage and dismiss workmen but he would have to account for his actions to the Pit and District Councils.

The scheme implied a national plan for the coal industry with committees to supervise the plan.

There is no doubt that whilst the scheme had not been fully worked out by the MFGB, it was the most detailed to the advocated by any large trade union up to 1919,

and certainly the only one ever adopted even up to this day by the Miners' Union. As we have seen, however, eventually the miners did not build upon the ideas but retreated from them.

At the Sankey Commission the official Miners' scheme was not accepted and their representatives gave support to a scheme proposed by Mr. Justice Sankey which outlined limited advisory powers on matters of safety and health. The Government rejected the Sankey report on this matter and the proposals were never administered.

As I have already mentioned historically the official miners' demand for workers' control has always been associated with nationalisation and it is necessary to examine why it was not accomplished in 1947 or even during the years of public ownership.

In 1941 at the annual conference of the MFGB held at Ayr a long resolution appeared on the agenda sponsored by the Executive Committee. It was headed "Coal Trades Policy" and whilst it covered a wide range of matters it included a clause which read:—

"That we seek to establish a National Board to cover the Mining Industry. The Board to be composed of an equal number of representatives from the Mining Association of Great Britain and the Mineworkers' Federation of Great Britain."

In the debate that took place, workers' control was never referred to and delegates devoted all their remarks to the iniquities of the district wage systems. Threatened with the withdrawal from the Federation by the Nottingham Association the Conference remitted the resolution back to the Executive Committee and it did not discuss the matter further.

The war-time joint production committees set up to examine local matters soon fell into disrepute so much so that in 1943 only one in four was operating. Responsible to private owners, mines managers and workers' representatives always had conflicting interests which made any effective participation abortive. The MFGB considering the matter continually argued that the Government should nationalise the industry.

On the eve of the 1945 General Election the NUM met at their annual conference at Blackpool and again re-affirmed their attitude to nationalisation; however, no mention was made of the role of the worker in the industry. Indeed the President, winding up a debate on the matter said that the details of nationalisation would have to be worked out by a sub-committee of the Miners' Union, the TUC and the Labour Party. It is not clear what this sub-committee had to say about workers' control or if in fact it gave it any serious thought, but what did emerge were two fairly distinct attitudes which can be summarised as follows:

1. The Union must remain a free and independent body and not become part of the Coal Board's administration.
2. Whilst remaining free and independent the policy of the union must be complementary to the policy of the NCB and not oppositional as was the case in the days of private enterprise.

The only reference to workers' participation, however, came in the Nationalisation Act of 1946 clause (4) (c) which laid upon the NCB a duty of consulting the workers in the industry.

Early Years of Nationalisation

In the early years of nationalisation, all the energies of the Union were turned towards co-operating with the NCB and the Labour Government. Every assistance was given in helping to plan production and improve technical efficiency of the pits. The miners' leaders co-operated actively in joint consultation committees.

In 1948 both at the Labour Party and NUM conferences, discussions took place about the NCB's administration. The miners' meeting at Whitley Bay heard along address from A. Horner, their secretary, who told them that the districts had been asked to comment on the NCB's activities. The districts had implied that the Board's organisation had become bureaucratic and the production members of the National coal Board and Divisional Boards had become too dominant in the overall determination of policy.

It was considered that the Labour representatives of the Board, which was what Horner called them, had become subordinate to production members. It was contended by some local pit branches of the Union that labour officers ought to be taken out of the administration altogether for they purely expressed the view of pit production management. Arthur Horner said to the delegates at the conference: "It is because they (labour officers) are not working in the manner they were expected to work that you have got this feeling of defection and this abandonment of the rights that Labour gained in the administration of the Coal Board."

"We will not sacrifice labour representation. On the contrary, from the reports it appears that the time has come when we must press for an extension of labour rights in the administration and there are those who advocate with a good deal of justification that the time has come when we shall have to consider direct representation of the Union in the Coal Board's administration."

Mr. Sam Watson, an official of the Durham miners and an executive members of the Labour Party in the same debate and following Mr. Horner said: "I, as a member of the National Executive Committee, do not intend to be committed by a statement which says that we as a trade union should seek direct representation upon the National Coal Board."

These statements were made only eighteen months after the pits had been nationalised and already men were detecting serious weaknesses.

At the Labour Party conference of the same year a composite resolution was debated which included a paragraph which read:—

"The principle of workers' participation through their trade unions in the direction and management of the nationalised industry at all levels should be adopted in practice."

A Great Opportunity Lost

Mr. Will Lawther, president of the NUM spoke during the debate and on behalf of his union opposed the resolution. He implied that the consultative machinery set up at the pits was adequate for the workers' to participate. He also said: "The position for the trade union is to remain independent of the Coal Board and independent of whatever Boards of Executives may be set up. It is hardly necessary to add that Mr. Arthur Deakin of the TGWU also opposed the resolution.

The resolution was finally remitted to the Party EC and thus to its burial-ground. It appears to one considering the attitude of the NUM from 1945 towards workers' control that a great opportunity was lost.

In his evidence to the Sankey Commission William Straker said:

“In deciding what is to be the character of mines administration it is necessary to remember that workmen are more than machines, or even ‘hands’ as they are so often termed. Industrial unrest is a question about which everyone is concerned, yet there is a general lack of appreciation of what is the real root of this unrest. In the past workmen have thought that if they could secure higher wages and better conditions they would be content. Employers have thought that if they granted these things the workers ought to be content. Wages and conditions have been improved; but the discontent and the unrest have not disappeared, and many good people have come to the conclusion that working men are so unreasonable that it is useless trying to satisfy them. The fact is that the unrest is deeper than can be reached by merely pounds, shillings and pence, necessary as they are. The root of the matter is the straining of the spirit of man to be free. Once he secures the freedom of the spirit he will, as a natural sequence, secure a material welfare equal to what the united brains and hand can wring from mother earth and her surrounding atmosphere. Any administration of the mines, under nationalisation, must not leave the mine workers in the position of a mere wage-earner, whose sole energies are directed by the will of another. He must have a share in the management of the industry in which he is engaged, and understand all about the purpose and destination of the product he is producing; he must know both the productive and the commercial side of the industry. He must feel the industry is being run by him in order to produce coal for the use of the community, instead of profit for a few people. He would thus feel the responsibility which would rest on him as a citizen, and direct his energies for the common good. This ideal cannot be reached all at once owing to the way in which private ownership has deliberately kept the worker in ignorance regarding the industry; but as that knowledge, which has been denied him, grows, as it will do under nationalisation, he will take his rightful place as a man. Only then will labour unrest, which is the present hope of the world, disappear. The mere granting of the 30 per cent and the shorter hours demanded will not prevent unrest, neither will nationalisation with bureaucratic administration. Just as we are making political democracy world-wide, so must we have industrial democracy, in order that men may be free.”

How far are Straker's words true today?

It is undoubtedly true that miners who can recall or know of the iniquities of the private ownership of the mines would not wish to return to such a system. Nationalisation brought great benefits to the miners, for, prior to 1947, the industry had been starved of investment and technical development save for a few colliery companies who had direct links within the iron and steel industry.

The miners were regarded as expendable, pit disasters, killing dozens of men in one blow were frequent and district wage negotiations resulted in wage-cuts and short-time working, with a consequent high level of insecurity.

Public ownership of the mines brought the whole industry's administration under one Board and this unification for the first time created a basis for more worker participation in the industry's affairs. Unfortunately, whilst a measure of workers' con-

trol has been achieved, the foundation has not been built upon. A mineworker still regards himself, as does any industrial worker, on the crucial issue of job environment awareness. The miner's attitude is not unfair.

The NCB have to take their instructions from a Tory Government; his supervision is still controlled by a person appointed by the Board, the Labour Relations Officers – a large percentage recruited from the trade union – interpret and carry out their functions in relation to dominant productive theories.

The Labour Officer by an empirical process indicates to production management how certain measures would affect labour relations. As a financial accountant or an economist would estimate the effect of a pricing policy change, the Labour Officer's role is analogous. The crux of the matter is that the miner does not have his knowledge used on issues of production. He feels his interests are not safeguarded and as a consequence uses the traditional method of industrial struggle to get production measures modified.

Even the NCB have had to operate in the last 12 years under continual Tory Government obstruction. If anyone doubts this obstruction it was amply brought out by the Select Committee on Nationalised Industries in 1958.

Three years earlier the Tory Minister of Fuel and Power determined the NCB's pricing policy and exercised control without accountability so that a favourable impression could be created before the 1955 General Election.

In a cyclically controlled economy and in the absence of a co-ordinated fuel policy, the Coal Board have had to try and plan for an unknown share of an unknown market.

Control at Present

The main argument used against workers' control (even by influential members of the NUM) can be summarised as follows:

that workers' representatives should be separate from Boards of executive management and independent. The Miners' Union, however, find no difficulty in exercising executive responsibility in two important aspects affecting the miners' life.

In the field of social welfare the mineworker's representatives jointly with the NCB administer recreational activities which include welfare clubs, and in our own Area, holiday centres. The Mines & Quarries Act of 1954 provided for an extended provision of miners' representatives on matters of safety. The NUM as we all know, have their own system of mines inspectorate and actively participate in the observance of safety regulations.

In the vital field of production management, however, workers have no initial determination of policy and here lies the whole issue of workers' control.

Why should anyone assume, as some people do, that participation in social welfare and safety "is for our own good" and that participation in production management is not?

The Myth of Joint Consultation

The Nationalisation Act placed upon the NCB a duty to consult its workers and anyone looking at the consultative constitution is left in no doubt that its terms of

reference are wholly advisory. No serious workers' representative at a colliery would claim he was participating in management.

Joint consultation is used primarily to inform workers that certain executive Board decisions have been taken and to inform them of their application. The suspicions and conflicting interests at joint consultative meetings create an unhealthy instability. I would be the first to concede that joint consultation could be strengthened.

Structural changes in its constitution would help to strengthen it but the issue of industrial democracy extension is more fundamental than playing around with consultative machinery.

What about Control for the Future?

The primary condition for a measure of workers' control in coal mining is the return of a Labour government. This must only be regarded, however, as a precondition. One would expect the coal industry's operations to be planned within the framework of our national fuel requirements.

Morrisonian public board business efficiency theory has to be rejected. The aim of workers' participation is not only to create a greater social awareness in mining, to make workers feel a "part", but to establish management by consent. This requires a major change in the decision-taking process.

Management decisions have to be limited, and instead of the purely operational managerial role at present in operation at collieries throughout Britain, the executive decisions which are decided in remote Area Divisional and National Headquarters have to be devolved. This implies that present executive decisions have to be distinguished, but this is possible and necessary. Point of production management in coal mining has precious little control to share at present because of the fetters placed upon it by higher management. As a consequence, colliery managers themselves have sparse executive authority.

The decisions which could be taken, efficiently and conjointly at collieries are many, and in no way would they impede a national plan.

Decisions to hire and fire a man, the promotion of foremen, supervisors, and technicians could all be accomplished. Supervisory accountability, sanctions on supervision, issues of job mobility, are all matters which workers have an acute interest in.

The quickest method of achieving management by consent is to have the practicable, jointly-agreed decisions reached at points of production level turned immediately into executive orders.

The British Labour movement has always stood for an extension of democracy and a new social order. To deny the relevance of workers' control today would be to deny the very basis of socialism.

Postscript

LET THE MINERS THINK

More than fifty years ago, a visiting American author met a group of Derbyshire miners and talked with them about their work. They showed general resentment about the manner in which it was organised.

“One man got up and declared:- ‘there isn’t a man in this room who hasn’t time and again made suggestions and been told he was paid not to think but to work’.”

A number of the men described the suggestions they had made, which seemed, in the main, reasonable. But not only were their own ideas commonly over-ruled: they were, the author reported, frequently “told to do the silliest things imaginable”. At the time that Carter Goodrich was researching his still vivid work on *The Frontiers of Control*, the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain were lobbying for their own scheme of industrial democracy in a nationalised mining industry. Their proposals for “joint control” or management by a board comprising nominees from their own ranks and Governmental appointees, in equal numbers, were accepted, with some modifications, by the Sankey Commission, which had been set up to investigate a report on the problems of reorganising coal-mining in Great Britain.

This Commission joined the hundreds of others whose findings have lain unheeded for decades on library shelves. But in 1947 the coal mines were nationalised, and placed under the administration of a National Coal Board which contained no provisions for effective workers’ representation or involvement in decision-making. True, a number of trade union officers were co-opted onto the Labour Relations Staff of the Board, and procedures for joint consultation were written into the Nationalisation Act, but neither of these expedients served in the least degree to overcome the complaints reported in Goodrich’s book.

I started work in the mines shortly after vesting day, at a time when the enthusiasm of ordinary miners for the new dispensation still ran very high indeed. But although materially the miners were at the time, relatively better off than they had been for a very long time, beneficiaries as they were of the new five-day week agreement, to say nothing of postwar full employment, their actual status had not changed one iota. The fact that the pits were grossly under-capitalised meant that working conditions were quite deplorably bad. My first stint by the coalface, as a boy of seventeen, involved driving a face conveyor in a 27in. seam. The ventilation was simply atrocious. To supply the colliers with timber we had to reverse the conveyor because the normal route by which they should have been supplied, a tail-gate or roadway to the far end of the face, was almost completely impassable. The weight of the structure above had reduced what had been dug out as a twelve-foot diameter tunnel to the narrowest of crevices. A skinny youth, I myself could just wriggle through the several hundred yards of almost sealed roadway to the other end of the conveyor I was driving, so that, from time to time, I would be sent for to run

an errand, since bulkier men were liable to get stuck, even as they crawled on their bellies. It was a pretty scarifying sort of journey. Had there been an accident on the face, it would have been quite impossible to move the victims by such a path. Yet the men were not only cheerful: they were exuberant. "They're *our* pits now" the old-time union men would say.

But this mood didn't last long. Remorselessly, the old authoritarian habits reasserted themselves, so that within a short while all the old complaints of the Derbyshiremen could be heard again. I remember so many instances of these frustrations: there was, for instance, a wonderful new machine called a slusher, which was designed, amongst other uses, for road-widening. A dozen of us were set to work for almost a month, getting ready to install a slusher in a supply road. At last it was almost ready to start, and we were called off to other work. Then it was dismantled, without striking a single blow, and taken somewhere else: but none of the men were asked about it, either before, during, or after the whole fruitless operation. There were dozens of similar cases. Perhaps the most outrageous in which I was involved took place at Bilsthorpe, in the early fifties. An Area Official, new from university, came onto the face on which I was working (in a packhole on a ripping lip) and borrowed my pick. The face was six feet high, but there was an eight-foot thickness of coal. Two feet of topcoal were left behind, because otherwise the roof was too weak to hold up. The man from Area crawled up into the gob, and scratched about at the exposed top coal. "I think we'll have these down" he said. And he went out into the roadway to talk to the under-officials. They gasped when he told them, "I think we'll drop this top coal and see what happens". Everyone knew exactly what would happen, and it did. Almost immediately, after the most rudimentary preparations, the order was put into effect, and the result was a huge collapse, in which several men only escaped burial by jumping out inches in front of the disaster.

All the time I worked at Bilsthorpe we never had a strike, but if we had had one every month it would not have cost a fraction of the cost of this "experiment". Even the rawest, newest workers quickly learnt about the difficulties of controlling that particular treacherous roof, and it is absolutely plain that if the work people involved had any say at all in the matter, the whole project would have been vetoed from the first moment. But, of course, we were paid to work, not to think, and if that meant we had to work very hard in unnecessarily dangerous circumstances in order to clear up the mess made by those who were paid to think, that was too bad.

Since I left the employment of the NCB, I have heard stories which indicate that, in spite of various consultative experiments, this sort of nonsense still continues. Coal Board purchasing has often seemed to ignore the needs of those who have had to deploy the equipment purchased. Inventions made inside the colliery workshops have miraculously been transferred to private producers. Quite apart from the various allegations of impropriety in financial matters, which could all be totally unjustified, this kind of policy would still underline the basic inadequacy of Coal-Board-style nationalisation. It is high time to develop new forms of democratic industrial organisation, in which, for the first time, the fifty-year old responses of the Derbyshire miners might become out-of-date.

Ken Coates

The IWC would like to hear from any miner who wishes to add to the indictment already contained in this pamphlet. We are preparing a book on the shortcomings of bureaucratic nationalisation, as part of a campaign for wider democracy, and we would greatly value your help.

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