

Workers' Control

**A
Reply to
Arthur Scargill**

by Ken Coates

Arthur Scargill is a brilliant advocate, and he has served the miners in a very talented way for a long time now. His record as an organizer is distinguished, and it is clear that he has won his considerable influence in the NUM by dint of extraordinary efforts.

All the more surprising, then, is his decision to *oppose* the idea of workers' control, or, in the case of the pits, miners' self-government. Joe Gormley has, as Peter Heathfield has pointed out in the NUM newspaper *The Miner*, given his support to the *idea* of workers' control, involving at least 51 per cent of miners' nominees on the boards of their industry. But Joe Gormley believes that "no government would ever grant this demand", so that he thinks it impractical to press it. Arthur Scargill takes one step further than Joe Gormley, saying* that such a reform would be worse than impractical, because it would, in any case, be undesirable. Normally, Joe is seen as a man well towards the Right, whilst Arthur is usually seen as a strong left-winger. On this key issue, however, we find the two extremes joined together, united against any move either to increase the amount of power that the mineworker can exercise over his job or to limit the authority of his employer.

Not only does Arthur Scargill seem, on this issue, to have joined forces with Joe Gormley, but in his article, he distorts the history of the miners' union to accuse our forbears of having done the same thing.

"Former leaders", he says, "like A.J. Cook and Mabon in South Wales, argued for workers' control in a pamphlet called *The Miners' Next Step*." Actually, neither of these men had anything to do with producing this pamphlet, which was in fact written by Noah Ablett, Will Hay and W.H. Mainwaring. A.J. Cook was away at Labour College, although he would undoubtedly have strongly supported the arguments of the pamphlet if he had been asked. As for Mabon, he was a member of the very Conciliation Board which the pamphlet was written to attack, and was the arch-enemy of everything its authors stood for. Arthur is allowing

*in an important article in *The Miner*, November/December 1977.

his own unlikely alliance with Joe Gormley on this matter to reshape his view of what happened in history: the truth is that Cook, Ablett and others fought Mabon through every inch of the South Wales coalfield, and finally they won, on a platform of workers' control *versus* conciliation.

To mix up ideas of workers' control with "participation" is to sow very serious confusion. Workers' control is the wresting of greater or lesser degrees of power from one-sided management dictatorship. In the words of pioneers like Tom Mann, it grows from battles for trade union recognition through all kinds of struggles to impose workers' rights to determine pay, conditions, hours, benefits, terms of employment, up to the point where "we can gain complete control of everything". In modern language, this ultimate goal is called self-management. Neither this, nor control, has anything to do with "participation" of the kind Arthur Scargill is attacking, which tries to involve workers' representatives in carrying the can for unpopular decisions, while denying them any real powers whatever. Ablett, Hay, Mainwaring and A.J. Cook all understood this, and put forward a programme for the mineworkers beside which Arthur's article reads like an appeal from the Primrose League.

Today, the advocates of workers' control are, once again, precisely the people who oppose the kind of "participation" which Arthur attacks in his article. In his dramatic and well-chosen example of the working of a committee on absenteeism in Yorkshire, we see a perfect example of what is wrong with "participation".

"The National Coal Board, a number of years ago, introduced the Consultative Machinery – its aim, according to its architects, was to involve miners at all levels in what was taking place in the coal mining industry and to listen to their views in the hope that they could contribute towards the success of the industry.

I am quite sure that every person who has any knowledge of the Consultative Machinery will agree with me that its main function has, in fact, been as a vehicle for 'pushing' the decisions and views of senior management in the coal mining industry.

At local level, its main function has been the analysis of production targets, output figures and absenteeism in the industry and it is with this latter that we can see most vividly the conflict of interest which comes about with worker participation.

A number of years ago, the Consultative Committees at colliery level introduced an Absentee Committee to analyse the reasons why men were not attending for work, to interview them and, if necessary, take disciplinary action including dismissal where the Absentee Committee thought it warranted.

I can remember quite well an example of how this worked at a colliery in the Barnsley Area a few years ago.

The members who comprise the Absentee Committee began to look at the statistics and forgot they were representing human beings. They were, in spite of themselves, more concerned with the fact that 20 per cent of the men had been absent over a certain period time rather than assessing, as Trade Union representatives, why these men had been off work.

When a man advanced an excuse that he had been off work because his wife had been taken ill, or that his children had been taken into hospital, the Committee looked sceptically at the case. They became, in spite of their determination not to, 'management orientated'.

They started to take decisions which were completely out of character with the accepted role of Trade Union representatives. What followed was to show the conflict of interest more clearly than any academic could ever explain.

The man who had been dismissed took his case to the local NUM and asked them to represent him in an attempt to persuade the management to withdraw the notice of dismissal. It should be remembered, of course, that the Union Branch in question had already participated in the decision to dismiss the man concerned and this placed the Miners' Union Branch in an impossible position.

He then took his case to the Branch Meeting and the Branch members overwhelmingly supported his case.

The situation was now bordering on the bizarre, i.e. the representatives of the Union having participated in the decision to dismiss the man had then taken a decision that they could not represent him in negotiations with management because they had been part of the management decision to dismiss.

In effect, the rank and file at the pit were challenging not only the NCB at coal level, but also the NUM at local level. The men at the colliery threatened strike action and the result was that management had a rethink about the case and the man was reinstated and, according to my latest information, is still employed at the colliery some 10 years later."

Quite rightly, Arthur Scargill goes on to insist

"A Union in this situation is completely impotent and can do nothing except watch the rank and file pressurise management and, in effect, the Union to rethink *their* decision.

This has the effect of weakening the Union and discrediting the

leadership in the eyes of the miners. It also weakens the Union's ability to negotiate effectively with the management because miners begin to distrust a leadership who are prepared to participate in dismissing a member of the Union when this is clearly a management function and a management decision which can, and should, be challenged by the Union as the representatives of the membership."

Yet does this analysis go deep enough? We may easily agree that unions must keep their lines clearly drawn, and refuse to take part in initiatives against the interests of their members. What happened in this case (and what still happens in thousands like it) was that management were happy to give away the wretchedly unpopular job of enforcing certain disciplinary rules. Anyone who played the game according to those rules was sooner or later bound to get caught in the mess which Arthur perfectly accurately describes. Several obvious questions must be asked, however, before we agree to leave the matter where Arthur asks us to leave it.

First, in this case, could the NUM have brought in a different scheme in which, instead of enforcing someone else's rules, they might have drawn up and enforced their own? I think they could: the dockers achieved this years ago, with the creation of the National Dock Labour Board, in which, since the second world war, dockworkers themselves have learnt how to maintain watertight control over all hiring and firing. I would remind Arthur that things in the NCB were, during this whole period, very much worse than he shows them to have been: while his Barnsley committee-men were tripped up and involved in "trying" absentees at the local level, Lord Robens was actually cutting the *national* mining labour force in half. By contrast, before the Port Employers could reduce dock labour quotas by a single man, they had to fight against the strictest workers' controls embodied in the local Dock Labour Boards, and after a bitter struggle they were forced to accept that only volunteers would leave the industry, and then to pay out heavy compensation which has up to now far exceeded any benefits awarded to "redundant" miners. Only voluntary severance is allowed on the docks, and today a docker who accepts it may expect up to £7,000 in compensation, quite apart from pension rights.

What Arthur does in this case is to drop the baby out with the bathwater. Do we want miners' representatives to become

management accomplices in the prosecution of disciplinary cases? No, certainly not. Do we, instead, want the NUM to exercise full and complete control over hiring and firing? Yes, of course we do. That will not amount to industrial democracy, but it *will* be a good step forward in a long march.

Second, when Arthur's Barnsley colleagues behaved in a manner of which their workmates rightly disapproved, why were they not instantly dismissed, or, to use a more appropriate word, recalled, by those who had elected them? The answer, of course, is that in a "participation" scheme electors have no right to recall their representatives, while in any "control" scheme worth the name, they *would* have such a right.

Thirdly, if, as Arthur implies, mineworkers should withdraw from this kind of subordinate participation, what should they put in its place? If he answers "nothing", then this means giving back to the management the unhindered right to sack whoever they want to sack. If, on the other hand, we wish to impose an employees' veto on unjust dismissals, or better (like the dockers) on *any* and *all* dismissals, then we are arguing for a classic form of workers' control.

Fourthly, if, as I suspect he may, Arthur agrees that workers can, in principle, win the right to control hiring and firing, then why must they draw the line there? Why shouldn't they then move on, to stake out a bigger claim? By what magic can workers who have already won one right be constrained from demanding another?

Looked at from these points of view, Arthur's example of the pitfalls of participation gives us a rather cogent set of arguments for workers' control, and for the all-round democratisation of the mining industry. Yet far from pressing this case, Arthur actually goes on to argue *against* struggling for mineworkers' representation on the NCB. In this matter, he disagrees not only with Labour policy, but also with communist policy, for the nationalised industries. The communists, who have rejected the Bullock Report, have expressed their full support for adequate workers' trade union representation on nationalised boards. "Quite wrong" says Arthur: "capitalism, by its very nature, produces contradictions which cannot be resolved until and unless we change the system of society."

But *how* can we change that system? If we can't democratise the nationalised industries, then they will remain authoritarian state capitalist enterprises. Why should anyone wish to swap a private capitalist boss for the state variety? If we cannot *prove* the superiority of nationalisation in practical democratic experiments, how can we persuade workers to support its extension? Perhaps, as it seems, Arthur is really telling us that we can't think of winning this battle, and must make a revolution before we start worrying about workers' control. The trouble with this view is that, until workers *want* workers' control and industrial democracy, they won't even vote for change, leave alone rebel for it. The most powerful argument for change is to show that it works.

Of course, Arthur is quite right to oppose such schemes as the British Steel experiment which appointed a few random work people to operate as so-called 'workers directors' without any real powers or influence. The workers' control movement condemned this scheme years ago, as a spoof, put up to distract attention from the steelworkers' own real and very detailed plans for genuine democracy. In Europe, likewise, most "participation" is quite as empty as Arthur says it is. He could have found stronger evidence of this than he gives in the literature of the IWC (Institute for Workers' Control) which has frequently criticized German co-determination, and which has translated the valuable comments of German trade unionists on its shortcomings. But, strangely, Arthur fails to mention the only European example that is undoubtedly genuine, which is the one in operation in Yugoslavia. If this debate is to become a proper one, going to the root of the matter, Arthur should tell us what he finds wrong with the Yugoslav system of self-management, or he should tell us why it wouldn't or shouldn't work in British mines. Does he think British miners are more stupid than Yugoslav ones? Why doesn't he support our proposal that the NUM send an official study-delegation to look at the pits in that country and report back? After all, NUM teams have visited many other countries, in almost every continent, but Yugoslavia is the one country in the world where self-management has got a really strong hold.

As for us in the IWC, we can have our doubts about this

and that element of the Yugoslavian organisation, but we feel sure that 99 per cent of British miners would warmly welcome a similar experiment over here, if only they possessed the information necessary to allow them to form a judgement on the matter.

Perhaps, though, the British miners are unwilling to think about self-management and are really more conservative than they seem? Even if this is true, and I profoundly doubt it, there is no conceivable reason not to sharpen up a whole arsenal of simple trade union controls far beyond the point the NUM has currently reached. Other unions, belatedly, have learnt and benefited from advances made by the miners in the fields of direct workers' control over safety and health. I notice that Arthur does not disapprove of the extension of workers' powers in the safety field: assuredly other unions in the TUC, outside the NUM, owe much to the miners' example in blazing the path to safer working through rank-and-file representation. But have the miners nothing at all to learn from these same other unions? I read recently that the NCB had been experimenting, even in Yorkshire, with "cowboy" productivity deals. Couldn't the NUM derive benefit from applying an elementary workers' control like the Engineers' insistence on the "status quo", which forbids unilateral management imposed changes, ensuring that all proposed alterations in working methods are discussed with the unions *before* they are implemented? Workers' Control is growing, fast, in the struggles of unions in every major industry. It has still a long way to go, but it will get there much quicker if the miners, and Arthur Scargill, agree to join in.

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