

## London and the Miners' Strikes of the Twentieth Century

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In preparing this lecture, I was reminded of that warning to all governments of the twentieth century: there are two bodies you take on at your peril, the Brigade of Guards and the Miners' Union. I am often asked in the House of Commons by Conservative Members, when they see my red and black Aberavon RFC Wizards tie, 'I didn't know you were in the Guards?' What would they do if I also wore my father's South Wales Miners' Saltley Gates 1972 commemoration badge? Give me a wide berth, I guess.

Forty years ago, my wife and I, and our one-month-old daughter Hannah, were in the Hayward Gallery next to the Royal Festival Hall to see the Arts Council Exhibition entitled 'Art in Revolution'. One of the volunteer attendants, a Cockney in his late 80s, told us he had been to Wales only once, to a place called Tonypany in 1910 or 1911. He had been one of Churchill's troops.

We were living in London, in 'Welsh' Ealing, because I was working at the TUC. I was still there a year later during the memorable and indeed successful Miners' Strike of 1972. I was witness in a small way to those historic events both nationally and locally in Ealing and the South Wales valleys.

I begin in this very personal way, because as a contemporary historian – albeit somewhat lapsed nowadays – and as a politician, I believe that the personal is the political. I want to share some of my own memories, and what oral historians call received memories. The received memories relate a great deal to my late father, Dai Francis, who was the general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers in South Wales between 1963 and 1976, and founding chair of the Wales TUC in 1975.

His working life began and ended with the starkly contrasting great strikes of the 1920s and the 1970s. He had an overwhelming sense that the latter were a vindication of the former. When he was born one hundred years ago this year, there were nearly one million miners in Britain, a quarter of them in south Wales. When he retired in 1976, there were still a quarter of a million in Britain. Now there are barely ten thousand, and less than a thousand in south Wales.

London figures in the drama of the great miners' strikes and lockouts of the last century because it was the seat of political power, and for the first half of the century, it was the seat of *imperial* power.

Even though the coal industry appeared decentralized at least in terms of ownership, and in a geographical and cultural sense, real political power was centralized here in London, in Westminster and Whitehall, and to an extent at the TUC and through the main national political parties. And the enlightened Welsh miners' leaders who came to lead the British miners during crucial periods in the last century knew that too. Frank Hodges (1918–24) and Arthur Cook (1924–31), and Arthur Horner (1946–58) and Will Paynter (1959–68), knew the importance of being near the seat of power, by ensuring that the union's headquarters were here in London.

By striking contrast, in its hour of greatest need, the NUM was led into oblivion by Arthur Scargill when he removed the union headquarters to Yorkshire on the eve of the last great strike of 1984–85. I will say more on that later.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst Cardiff was the greatest coal metropolis in the world in the early decades of the twentieth century, it was always acknowledged that it was to London we had to turn to resolve the great problems of the industry and our mining communities: working conditions, wages, health, education, and even the ownership of the industry. Negotiations with employers, with Government, lobbying of Parliament and the passing of legislation, and solidarity from other unions, was all to be sought here in London.

Cardiff in that sense was not at all important. A strange illustration of this was my father who came to London as a child in 1924 to the Great Wembley Exhibition but never went to Cardiff until his wedding day in 1936.

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To begin at the beginning, for our mining communities in the anthracite coalfield of south-west Wales, the riotous 'Ammanford' Strike of 1925 seemed historically to loom larger than even 1926.

Fifty-nine miners were imprisoned. The released prisoners and their families participated in London rallies, and there were representations to the Home Office for early release led by the TUC. At a protest rally in March 1926 in the Royal Albert Hall, over 10,000 people assembled and heard Tom Dafen Williams, a recently released Ammanford prisoner address them. The previous month a petition of 300,000 signatures was presented to Parliament for the release of these imprisoned anthracite miners.<sup>2</sup>

But the whole decade for the miners indeed the whole British trade union movement was dominated by the 1926 General Strike and the seven month Miners' Lockout. There had been major strikes and lockouts earlier in the century which had national significance in the 1910–11 Cambrian Lockout and Tonypany riots, the 1912 National Minimum Wages Strike, the 1915 South Wales Strike which threatened the war effort – and Lloyd George and Minister of Munitions for once came down to Cardiff to settle the dispute. And then there was the threat of a national strike to nationalize the industry in 1919 and the bitter three-month National Lockout of 1921.

But none of these conflicts compared with 1926. As if to illustrate the plight of Wales and its mining communities, Dewi Emrys, the Crown Bard at the 1926 Swansea National Eisteddfod pawned his crown – it was found in a London pawn shop.

We often wrongly attribute to the miners' strike of 1984–85 some belated

1 For general accounts of the history of British mining unionism, see the four volume official histories by Robin Page Arnot, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain*, 4 vols (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949, 1953, and 1979). For the history of the miners of South Wales see Hywel Francis and Dai Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980).

2 Hywel Francis, 'The Anthracite Strike and the Disturbances of 1925', *Llafur*, 1.2 (1973), 15–28.

feminist awakening in the coalfields. On the contrary, a cursory study of 1926 would reveal not only women organizing the food kitchens – obviously a natural extension of their domestic role – but also leading riots and demonstrations across the coalfields to stem the tide back to work.<sup>3</sup>

In a remarkable study entitled *Women and the Miners' Lockout*, Marion Phillips, the Chief Woman Officer of the Labour party, described women's political role through the Women's Committee for the Relief of the Miners and Children.<sup>4</sup> Whilst campaigning occurred throughout the country and indeed internationally, the centre of activity was London with frequent visits of Welsh male voice choirs from the valleys – a kind of early version of the 1000 voices! In one weekend miners' choirs raised £250, ranging from a £70 collection in Letchworth Village Hall to an audience of very poor people at St George's Hall in the Old Kent Road, where Miss Ellen Wilkinson collected £10.

Walter Peacock, Secretary to the Duchy of Cornwall, sent £10 from the Prince of Wales. In his letter he said, 'HRH necessarily cannot take sides in any dispute; but we all owe a debt to the miners in the past, and everyone feels sympathy for their wives and children in their hour of distress.' Marion Phillips recalled that Welsh choirs went abroad. One went to Russia, the Blaina Cymric Choir sang at factories, public meetings and concert halls. Miners' wives accompanied choirs to London as the main speakers, relating their personal experiences. At one women's meeting in the Kingsway Hall, chaired by Margaret Bondfield, the actress Sybil Thorndike spoke alongside five miners' wives.<sup>5</sup>

These wider social and cultural dimensions were to be repeated six decades later, particularly in London. Despite defeat, despite a sense of betrayal, despite everything, London was a very special place for miners. It might have had an alien government, but it was a place of sustenance, a place to seek work, a place of solidarity, and dare we say it, it was a place of at least occasional pleasure and enjoyment, it was a kind of second home (without the scrutiny of chapel deacons), with so many expatriate Welsh there with a helping hand, as we found again when we came two generations later.

We knew our way around, maybe through families removed there during the Depression, or because of Twickenham. 'Follow me boys,' said one miner lobbying the NUM leadership in 1981, 'I know the way to Soho.' And in 1984, Long Tom Jones, a retired miner, wanted to fundraise in London because 'these Bohemian feminists in Belgravia appreciate the good intellectual conversation of Welsh miners', as he put it.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Hywel Francis, 'South Wales', in *The General Strike, 1926*, ed. by J. Skelley (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), pp. 232–59.

4 Marion Phillips, *Women and the Miners' Lockout: The Story of the Women's Committee for the Relief of the Miners' Wives and Children* (Oxford University: The Labour Publishing Company, 1927).

5 Ibid.

6 Personal recollections.

By the time the 1972 National Miners' Strike occurred, I had already been working for the TUC for nearly a year. Mair and I helped organize the billeting of Kent miners across the city. Mair went with our daughter Hannah to provide food for the pickets at West Drayton power station.

I was privileged to hear the miners' leader, Lawrence Daly, address the closed session of the General Council of the TUC. In that quiet, cultured, lilting voice, he made two modest requests: do not cross our picket lines, and please organize a transport workers' conference.

On the first day of the strike, with other TUC staff, I went up to the headquarters of the union in Euston Road. The building was being run by Kent miners and Lawrence was around the corner in his favourite pub. The strike was running itself out in the coalfields. Lawrence had sent out a circular to all NUM branches. The tone was simple: no violence, only peaceful picketing, behave as ambassadors of your communities.<sup>7</sup>

I was at home in Cardiff one weekend, early on in the strike. Activists from the rail unions came to see my father on a Sunday morning and told him where to place pickets to stop all coal movements. Within days, there were no coal movements at all across Britain.

Every week my father stayed with us in our small flat in Ealing. He slept on the 'studio couch', and did interviews for BBC Radio Wales on the progress of the strike, early in the morning on our neighbour's telephone.

The Wales-England game at Twickenham in 1972 had a special quality. A striking miner, Dai Morris of Tower, was on the victorious Welsh side. My father was convinced that it was divine intervention on behalf of the Welsh miners.

Many years later, just weeks before my father died in 1981, he had a lift into the Wales-England game at the National Stadium with the Mayor of Rhymney. As he got out of the mayoral car, who should be getting out of the nearby car of Alun Priday, secretary of Cardiff Rugby Club, but former prime minister, Edward Heath. My father introduced himself, explaining that they last met in Downing Street during the miners' strike of 1972. My father simply said, 'We beat you then in 1972, we beat you last week [Margaret Thatcher had done her now forgotten u-turn on pit closures], and we'll beat you again today!'

We get a flavour of those times too when we read the evidence of the Wilberforce Inquiry which came down on the side of the miners. Take one witness from south Wales:

My name is Alan Carter, I am thirty-three years old; I am married with four children. I work in Mardy Colliery in the Rhondda Valley in South Wales. I am a surface Grade 2 worker doing jobs which include driving a diesel loco, a Coles crane, and a sixteen-cubic-yard Euclid lorry. I have a basic wage of £18 per week, and my take-home pay is less than £17 for a wife and four children. My earnings are so low that I qualify for family supplement which include free

7 For an evocative account of the role of the Kent miners in the 1972 miners' strike see Malcolm Pitt, *The World on Our Backs: Kent Miners and the 1972 Miners' Strike* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979).

milk, school milk for my children, and welfare foods for the baby ... There are people working at Baglan Bay with exactly the same lorries earning anything from £30 to £35 per week.<sup>8</sup>

But my abiding memory of 1972 were the power cuts, particularly looking across the west London night sky at six o'clock in the evening, lights in the high-rise flats extinguished to the south, and simultaneously relit to the north, thanks to the benign power of the miners, which also accidentally re-kindled a mass market in candles and invented 'boil-in-the-bag' food for pubs and restaurants. For my father and mother, it was sweet revenge for the indignity and long nightmare of 1926 and its bitter aftermath.

Two years later, the miners inadvertently brought down the Conservative government because Prime Minister Edward Heath mistakenly asked the fateful question: 'Who runs the country?' No doubt my father and the other miners' leaders enjoyed their tea (my father did not drink beer) and sandwiches at Number 10. 1974, he said, was 'a picnic' compared with 1972. I remember well the new Employment Secretary, Michael Foot, conceding the miners' demands, wearing the South Wales Miners' 1972 Sattley Gates badge.

Ten years later, it was another story. Different times, different leaders, different strategies, and very different governments. It was revenge of another kind. Suffice to say, for me, London played an even bigger part in the miners' struggle, and not unlike the solidarity of 1926.<sup>9</sup> By then, I was teaching and organizing day-release and evening classes for Swansea University, mainly in valley communities. I became chair of the Neath, Dulais, and Swansea Valley Miners' Support Group, and eventually I chaired the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities.

1984–85 had many echoes of 1926, not least because both were lengthy disputes, and not least because we looked to London for both solidarity and a resolution of the dispute. Unlike 1972 and 1974, disunity was a defining factor of the struggle.

As in 1926, the best organized and most politically conscious coalfield was south Wales. By early summer, it was picketing power stations, ports, and steelworkers across two-thirds of the landmass of Britain. This was deemed illegal, and the courts sequestered the south Wales NUM funds.

To sustain the strike, fundraising for food distribution was essential. Arthur Scargill allegedly divided up the world: he had given his favourite coalfields, Yorkshire and Kent, the whole of North America, and also London. South Wales was given Ireland! We decided in the Neath, Dulais, and Swansea Valley Miners' Support Group – later followed by other groups – to go into London, under the radar. We avoided union head offices, contacted local branches, often using our London Welsh connections. My cousin, David Henry Williams, was a reader at *The Times* in Fleet Street. He gave his contacts there and elsewhere so that Sogat and NGA chapels adopted whole villages, particularly at Christmas time.

Our first London donations came from ethnic minority communities led by

8 *A Special Case? Social Justice and the Miners*, ed. by John Hughes and Roy Moore (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 88.

9 Hywel Francis, *History on Our Side: Wales and the 1984–85 Miners' Strike* (Ferry-side: Iconau, 2009).

black groups in Broadwater Farm, and Greek and Turkish-Cypriot groups. A young gay man from Nantgarw – living in London for more space, as he called it – started a collection. Ali Thomas, a striking Blaenant miner, was sent up to receive a cheque at a gay pub in London. The resulting photo in *Gay News*, with Ali in a warm embrace, led to the creation of the London Gays and Lesbian Miners' Support Group, and phenomenally successful fundraising concerts by Jimmy Summerville and the Communards, and later, the Flying Pickets, Billy Bragg, and Elvis Costello.

This broadening of the industrial struggle into a community and cultural struggle led to the creation of the South Wales Striking Miners' Choir, which sang frequently in London, and of course in Ireland. Even today there are still thank-you tours to Ireland!

A key feature of the solidarity in London was the role of women who, through trade union groups like Brent NALGO, peace groups like CND, and the gays and lesbians, were the main advocates of the miners' cause. The outstanding speaker in these meetings and rallies was Siân James, from our women's support group, who spoke at the first London Gay Pride March, with the Abernant NUM banner in pride of place at the head of the march. Siân, of course, is now my parliamentary colleague representing Swansea East.

We even launched a London Congress in Support of the Miners in County Hall, with Siân, myself, Ken Livingstone, and Merthyr's Illyd Harrington, 'the best Mayor London never had', as speakers.

Towards the end of the strike, I was asked to give the funeral oration at Hendon Crematorium for Will Paynter, who had died just before Christmas. At the end of the oration, I made reference to his dislike of the 'cult of personality'.<sup>10</sup> These were my words:

... as one young south Wales miner said the day he died, 'Bill Paynter was not a god, and he certainly didn't see himself as one.' As we all know, he was to the last a very humble, self-effacing man.

Kim Howells said after I finished, 'That was a great attack on Scargill!' There was nothing further from my mind.

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I will end not with a strike at all, but with two enduring statements which signify the permanence of the relationship between the miners and London.

The Festival of Britain in 1951 was a celebration of peacetime Britain. For me, it was a twin celebration of a new kind of civilisation which brought coal into public ownership, an industry managed by the NCB on behalf of the people, and its greatest manifestation, the National Health Service, whose architect was a south Wales miner, Aneurin Bevan.

The Festival of Britain's most enduring legacy is, of course, the Royal Festival Hall, at the heart of London's new centre of the arts on the South Bank. It was best

10 For the funeral oration in full see Hywel Francis, 'Tribute to Will Paynter (1903-1984)', *Llafur*, 4.2 (1985), 4-9.

symbolized by the artist Josef Herman, the Polish refugee, who, in living amongst the miners of Ystradgynlais, was commissioned by the Festival Committee to paint the mural, 'The Miner', to represent the new Britain which the miner had sacrificed so much to create.<sup>11</sup>

There was, of course, another Welsh cultural donation to the South Bank many decades later, in the form of my friend Sir Deian Hopkin, the distinguished Vice Chancellor of London South Bank University.

I have tried to relate, recall, explain the many-layered relationships between the miners and London. The poet Idris Davies should have the last word.<sup>12</sup> The one-time Rhymney miner was a school teacher in wartime London. His poem, 'Marx and Heine and Dowlais', says it all about our enduring, mostly happy, relationships:

I used to go to St John's Wood  
 On Saturday evenings in summer  
 To look on London behind the dusty garden trees,  
 And argue pleasantly and bitterly  
 About Marx and Heine, the iron brain and the laughing sword;  
 And the ghosts of Keats would sit in a corner,  
 Smiling slowly behind a summer of wine,  
 Sadly smiling at the fires of the future.  
 And late in the summer night  
 I heard the tall Victorian critics snapping  
 Grim grey fingers at London Transport,  
 And sober, solemn students of James Joyce,  
 Dawdling and hissing into Camden Town.

But now in the winter dusk  
 I go to Dowlais Top  
 And stand by the railway bridge  
 Which joins the bleak brown hills,  
 And gaze at the streets of Dowlais  
 Lop-sided on the steep dark slope,  
 A battered bucket on a broken hill,  
 And see the rigid phrases of Marx  
 Bold and black against the steel-grey west,  
 Riveted along the sullen skies.  
 And as for Heine, I look on the rough  
 Bleak, colourless hills around,  
 Naked and hard as flint,  
 Romance in a rough chemise.

11 Josef Herman's immense contribution to Welsh cultural life is told in several biographies, notably Nini Herman, *Josef Herman: A Working Life* (London: Quartet, 1996). His legacy endures through the artwork of one of his pupils, Cyril Ifold, the Ystradgynlais miner who designed the Ynisedwyn miners' lodge banner and the work of the Josef Herman Art Foundation, which encourages local children to acquire skills in contemporary art.

12 Idris Davies, *Tonypandy and Other Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1945), p. 33.