# *INDUSTRIAL POLITICS IN 1919: THE STRUGGLE FOR THE MINERS' CHARTER*

'A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Ph.D. in the faculty of Economics and Social Sciences.'

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Contents

## *ABSTRACT*

This thesis offers an alternative analysis to the existing literature on the politics of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) during the period of the Sankey Commission. It examines the development of radical mobilisations in a range of coalfields in the early months of 1919, and once again following the publication of the Reports of the Sankey Commission. These are complemented by an investigation of the politics of the official Yorkshire Miners' Association strike in July-August. Analysis of local radical movements in the various coalfields is linked to an examination of the decision making process within the formal institutions of the MFGB. Particular attention is paid to the decision to cooperate with the Sankey Commission and accept the Interim Report, and to the considerations which moulded official MFGB strategy between June and August 1919 - that is, from the publication of the Final Report to Lloyd George's definitive rejection of nationalisation.

The political debates within the MFGB are located within the context of the discussions which were taking place within the wider labour movement as to whether social advance would come through Parliament, or through the direct action of the trade unions. The consideration of the politics of the MFGB raises significant questions about dominant assumptions and images within labour historiography. In particular, the argument is constructed around a belief that suppressed alternatives are worthy of investigation, and that the actual pattern of development should not simply be characterised as "normal".

## DECLARATION:

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in suppport of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other University or any other Institute of learning.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| ASLE&F | Amalgamated Society of Locomotivemen, Enginemen and Firemen |
| BSP | British Socialist Party |
| CLC | Central Labour College |
| CIC | Coal Industry Commission (1919) |
| CWC | Clyde Workers' Committee |
| DLB | Dictionary of Labour Biography |
| DMA | Derbyshire Miners' Association |
| FK&CMA | Fife, Kinross, and Clackmannan Miners' Association |
| FMRC | Fife Miners Reform Committee |
| ILP | Independent Labour Party |
| ISEL | Industrial Syndicalist Education League |
| IWW | Industrial Workers of the World |
| IUC | Industrial Unrest Committee |
| JDC | Joint Demobilisation Committee |
| JSDC | Joint Standing Disputes Committee |
| L&CMF | Lancashire and Cheshire Miners' Federation |
| LMRC | Lanarkshire Miners' Reform Committee |
| LMU | Lanarkshire Miners' Union |
| MAGB | Mining Association of Great Britain |
| MFGB | Miners' Federation of Great Britain |
| MFGB EC | Miners' Federation of Great Britain, Executive Committee |
| MRC | Miners' Reform Committee |
| MSWCOA | Monmouthshire and South Wales Coal Owners' Association |
| NER | North-Eastern Railway |

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|---|---|
| NIC | National Industrial Conference |
| NLS | National Library of Scotland |
| NMA | Nottinghamshire Miners' Association |
| NUPPO | National Union of Police and Prison Officers |
| NUR | National Union of Railwaymen |
| NUSMW | National Union of Scottish Mine Workers |
| PLP | Parliamentary Labour Party |
| PRO | Public Records Office |
| RILU | Red International of Labour Unions |
| SLP | Socialist Labour Party |
| SWMF | South Wales Miners' Federation |
| SWML | South Wales Miners' Library |
| SWSS | South Wales Socialist Society |
| SYCOA | South Yorkshire Coal Owners' Association |
| TMNS | The Miners' Next Step |
| TUC | Trade Union Congress |
| URC | Unofficial Reform Committee |
| WEWNC | War Emergency: Workers' National Committee |
| WYCOA | West Yorkshire Coal Owners Association |
| YMA | Yorkshire Miners' Association |

## *INTRODUCTION*

> But the diversity of possible itineraries does demonstrate that eventual results cannot be predicted at the outset. Each step proceeds for cause, but no finale can be specified at the start, and none would ever occur a second time in the same way, because any pathway proceeds through thousands of improbable stages. Alter any early event, ever so slightly and without apparent importance at the time, and evolution cascades into a radically different channel.[1]

The years 1919-21 were the formative ones for the entire inter-war epoch. The general strike of 1926 was in many respects a distant echo of the earlier militancy, and its defeat arguably did little more than compound that which had followed Black Friday. Indeed, of the immediate post-war years it has been 1921 which has been singled out for most attention. The defeat of the miners which took place then did much to consolidate the idea that relief for the working class, let alone salvation, could only come through electing the Labour Party to office. It was, therefore, a crucial episode in shaping the contours of British politics for years to come, and it is right that the histories of the period should reflect this. However, the focus on the defeat of 1921 and the political orthodoxies to which it gave rise becomes a cause for concern when it serves to pass over or obscure the buoyant militancy of an earlier period, and the radical alternatives which had accompanied it. This thesis is an attempt to redress a perceptible historiographical imbalance; by shifting the focus back to the year 1919, the high-water mark of the neo-syndicalist idea of "direct action", it hopes to provide a new perspective on the post-war years, and to excavate labour's challenge from beneath the burial mound of 1921.[2]

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1 Stephen Jay Gould, Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History (Penguin, 1989), p.51.

2 In 1979 Chris Wrigley published a monograph which invited historians to pay more attention to the "critical year" of

This search was undertaken with a belief that history is a process which, at certain critical moments, has a potentiality to unfold in a variety of radically different ways. To understand history as it actually happened, we also need to investigate feasible alternative outcomes, and make informed suggestions as to why these did not occur. Similarly, the explanation of why certain movements, mobilisations or schools of thought were successful in the past involves an explanation of why their competitors were not, particularly if that competition was keenly felt. Unless space is allowed for history's lost causes, it is all too easy for historical study to become over-simplified and teleological, for winners to become forever winners, and losers forever losers. History then unfolds behind us, and will continue to do so in front of us, unchanging within certain clearly defined boundaries.

This thesis is an argument against foregone conclusions. It was inspired by a belief that in 1919 there was a conjuncture of factors which rendered the situation profoundly unpredictable, and pregnant with possible outcomes. To contemporaries who felt themselves to be standing at the threshold of a new society the defeats of the future were barely

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1919, but it has remained curiously under-researched; Chris Wrigley, 1919: The Critical Year (West Midlands Society for the Study of Labour History, 1979). In his commentary The Labour Movement in Britain (Faber & Faber, 1988), John Saville also highlights the importance of 1919, but does so on the basis of the existing literature, with no additional research. Ralph Miliband's Parliamentary Socialism (New York, 1964), a study sympathetic to the idea of direct action as a radical alternative, places insufficient emphasis on the importance of 1919. His focus on the leadership within the labour movement limits his ability to say much about direct action in 1919 once the miners accept the Sankey Commission. More attention is paid to the Council of Action and the Russian issue in 1920, by which time direct action has been largely stripped of the insurgent qualities which it had displayed in the earlier year.

conceivable. If anything it was the old order which seemed to be crumbling as the revolutionary process unfolded across eastern and central Europe. In Britain, the Herald welcomed the new year with unbounded optimism:

> It is the simple and dazzling fact that 1919 can be, and must be, the beginning of a veritable New Order, a radiant point of time to which our children's children will look back as a Renaissance, a resurrection, decisively marking workers' passing out of slavery to freedom, their progression from death in life, to intensive cultivation on all planes of the Commonwealth.[3]

It is significant that Lansbury could pen these words in the week in which it became known that the December 1918 general election had resulted in government by "a coalition of capitalists and landlords."[4] His optimism was rooted in the belief that after the trials of war the working class was in no mood to be constrained by constitutional or parliamentary timetables. If the reconstruction of society which the slogan "homes fit for heroes" promised was not rapidly undertaken from above, then it would be undertaken from below, by direct action. The smell of revolt was in the air; blown over from Eastern and Central Europe, it mingled with the domestic unrest to produce an atmosphere of insurgency, and to generate an intense discussion as to whether 1919 would be to Britain what 1917 had been to Russia. Of course, in the event there was no British revolution; its rulers were afforded a degree of flexibility by victory in the war, a flexibility which the Kaiser, for one, was denied. Lenin's definition of what constitutes a revolutionary

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3 The Herald, 4 January 1919. During the war, Lansbury was only able to sustain his newspaper on a weekly basis, and it did not revert to daily publication until 30 March 1919.

4 ibid.

situation was not met; the ruling class was able to continue ruling in the old way, and the working class continued to tolerate being ruled.

However, it is not enough to simply dismiss the question of revolution out of hand. Perhaps in hindsight Basil Thompson's reports to the Cabinet can appear hysterical, but he was not alone in his panic. Care should be taken that hindsight does not lead to the distortion of certain historical realities. The eventual shape of the post-war order, in Europe and in Britain, was impossible to predict in 1919, especially in the first half of the year, and revolution was most definitely an item on the political agenda. Beatrice Webb pondered the question again and again in her diaries. As 1918 drew to a close she wrote:

> The Bolsheviks grin at us from a ruined Russia, and their creed, like the plague of influenza, seems to be spreading westwards from one country to another...Will western civilization flare up in the flames of an anarchic revolution? Individuals brood over these questions and wonder what will have happened this time next year.[5]

Webb welcomed the armistice with considerable misgivings:

> Peace!...Thrones are everywhere crashing and the men of property everywhere secretly trembling...How soon will the tide of revolution catch up with the tide of victory? That is a question which is exercising Whitehall and Buckingham Palace, and which is causing anxiety even among the more thoughtful democrats. Will it be six months or a year?[6]

In July 1919 Edward Grey confessed his belief that "we shall see a world revolution comparable with the break up of the Roman Empire", while Arthur Henderson identified "the great tide of revolutionary feeling [which] is rising in every country" as "the outstanding fact of world politics at the present time."[7]

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5 Margaret Cole (ed), Beatrice Webb's Diaries, 1912-24 (Longmans, 1952), p.134, 4 November 1918.
6 ibid., p.136, 11 November 1918.
7 ibid., p.164, 1 July 1919.
Arthur Henderson, The Aims of Labour (London, 1918),

A compilation of all such writings and speeches in 1919 would fill several volumes; there is scarcely a newspaper or journal which does not at some stage consider the possibility of revolution, and the issue was often discussed at trade union meetings and in government circles. Often the spectre was raised as a red scare, by guardians of constitutionality in the labour movement and the government, but equally often there was no ulterior motive. This thesis is not an attempt to salvage a lost British revolution; nor does it indulge in discussions of semi-revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situations as such, for these terms are hazy and, it seems, inescapably arbitrary. However, it does recognise that contemporaries felt the situation held revolutionary potential, and that this coloured their thoughts and actions in 1919. The fact that their hopes and fears were proved wrong is in this sense secondary; what is being argued for is a recognition that these were themselves a part of the historical equation. Unless the issue of revolution in 1919 is taken seriously in this way, as it was taken seriously by those who participated in key events, then the historian is likely to adopt a patronising tone, and miss much that is significant about that tumultuous year.

It seems to me that by setting fire to the straw person of the lost British revolution (usually using Basil Thompson's reports to fan the flames), historians have served to obscure important radical mobilisations of workers in 1919, and the political debates to which they gave rise. K.O.Morgan's Consensus and Disunity is a good case in point. He dismisses Thompson's reports as groundless, and in the next breath

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pp.74-5.

dismisses the radical historians of the 1960s who took them seriously.[8] The upshot is that the militant workers who were the subjects of those reports hardly feature in his account of the period. Almost automatically, the focus for research becomes the higher echelons of society's pyramid, with little detail about what was going on down below. When the working class does make an appearance, it tends to be in the shape of its more "reasonable" political representatives and trade union officers, who do not always accurately reflect the opinions and values of those they claim to speak for.

The point is not to devalue the worth of such scholarship; the politics of the Coalition government form an integral part of our understanding of the immediate post-war period, and anyone seeking to study it must acknowledge the debt they owe to the research that has been done in this area.[9] The point is simply that there is a gap in the historiography; political and industrial histories which focus on national leaders and institutions can only tell us so much about what was happening in society. To complement these it is necessary to begin to dig deeper, to investigate strata which have so far remained hidden.

These are the general views and considerations which prompted me to look again at the immediate post-war period, to fix my gaze on 1919 in

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8 K.O.Morgan, Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918-22 (Oxford, 1979), pp.52-3. (Hereafter cited as K.O.Morgan, (1979) ).

9 Apart from Morgan see for example Chris Wrigley, Lloyd George and the Challenge of Labour: The Post-War Coalition, 1918-22 (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990); Keith Middlemas, Politics in Industrial Society: The Experience of the British System Since 1911 (Andre Deutsch, 1979), (Hereafter cited respectively as C.Wrigley, (1990), and K.Middlemas, (1979); Sheila Armitage, The Politics of Decontrol of Industry: Britain and the United States (LSE Research Monographs 4, 1969).

particular, and to direct my research towards the industrial unrest and the political ideas which accompanied it. The intense debate which took place within the labour movement as to whether socialism would come about through parliament or through the direct industrial action of workers provides the thematic context for an alternative analysis of the politics of the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) in the period of the Sankey Commission. There were several reasons for choosing to focus upon the miners. After a period of initial research it became clear that an in depth study of one occupational group would provide the firmest basis for the exploration of wider political themes; to have looked at the working class as a whole would have involved an inevitable loss of necessary detail. Painted in broad strokes, the picture can become impressionistic, and lead us to embrace general assumptions all too easily. Fine detail and a fairly microscopic approach, on the other hand, allows us to go more confidently from the specific to the general.

With this in mind, the miners seemed the obvious choice; one million strong, and widely seen as in the van of the "direct action movement", they were at the heart of the debate over the direction in which labour should go. The object of study is their post-war programme for hours, wages, and nationalisation with joint control, and the developments that led to the historic compromise of the Sankey Commission. Unlike previous studies, the methodological emphasis is upon developments at a regional or district level. Using a variety of sources, most notably union records and local newspapers, a series of radical mobilisations of miners has been discovered, chronicled and analysed. This has allowed a reinterpretation of the crucial decisions which were taken at the top by government ministers and miners' leaders, and a re-evaluation of the Sankey Commission. Its eventual success as a compromise which marked a

turning point in the class struggle in 1919 was not a foregone conclusion - there were considerable forces pitted against it, and the entire conciliation process was a great deal more precarious than has hitherto been assumed.

The thesis begins by investigating the origins of the Miners' Charter, and situating it within its political context. Particular emphasis is given to the importance of the South Wales miners' strike of 1915, a strike which radically changed the industrial environment within which the MFGB operated. The actual campaign for the Miners' Charter can be divided into two stages; the first began in earnest on 14th January 1919 at the Southport Conference of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB), and ended with the acceptance of the Interim Sankey Report. The second stage ended with Lloyd George's definitive rejection of nationalisation in August 1919. The thesis reflects this chronological division in its two parts. The central core of both parts consists of studies of four areas of the British coalfield, Fife and Lanarkshire, Nottinghamshire, South Wales and Yorkshire. In Chapter Eight other coalfields which were affected by the unrest of the summer make cameo appearances, in support of a fresh analysis of the nationalisation controversy. The areas which are studied were selected first and foremost because they were the ones where direct action action was most widespread. Fortunately, they represent a wide variety of coalfields and district organisations, differing in size, geographical and geological formation, and in their political and industrial traditions.

This selection has involved two ommissions however. Firstly, the strike movements in North and South Staffordshire and in Kent have been excluded, to allow for a level of detail in the area studies which would

otherwise have been impossible. Secondly, and more importantly, the north-east areas of Durham and Northumberland have been left out. The reason for this is simply one of a lack of sources; both areas remained relatively quiet throughout the year, and so neither local newspapers nor union records tell us much about what was going on in the lodges and collieries in those few crucial months in which the events dealt with in this study took place. As areas which were (almost) unaffected by the unrest, their inclusion would have provided a useful basis for comparison with the more militant centres. The gap which they leave is regrettable and frustrating, but not decisive, thanks to the variety of experience which the selected areas represent. In particular, the account of the official strike in the Yorkshire coalfield in July/August provides an interesting contrast to the unofficial strikes in the other areas.

In the concluding chapter, there is an analysis of the decline of the direct action phenomenon in mining, and various suggestions are made about the impact that this had upon the politics of the labour movement as a whole. Some of these relate to the themes outlined in the opening section of this introduction. In particular, the emphasis is on the integration of dissent within the Labour Party, and the fact that this integration involved the suppression or marginalisation of other movements. The gradualism and electoralism of the Labour Party did become hegemonic within the labour movement, but to borrow an idea from Stephen Jay Gould, this thesis rejects the iconography of a ladder of progress from Keir Hardie to the 1945 Labour government. Of course, this evolutionary pattern is traceable, but there were other possibilities. That they were unsuccessful is no reason to ignore them, or write them out of history.

# PART ONE

## Chapter One

## *POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IN 1919*

> We are either constitutionalists or we are not constitutionalists. If we are constitutionalists, if we believe in the efficacy of the political weapon (and we do, or why do we have a Labour Party?), then it is both unwise and undemocratic because we fail to get a majority at the polls to turn around and demand that we should substitute industrial action.[1]

> The trade union weapon is the only weapon to contend with the new government.[2]

### *(i) The impact of the war on the labour movement and the working class.*

The First World War dramatically altered the position of the working class in British society. Both on the Western Front, and at home, it was workers who bore the brunt of the war effort. This simple fact meant that long before the war had ended the question of labour and its place in society became, in a way it had never quite been before, the key question in domestic politics. The "war of production", as government ministers often referred to it, had highlighted the importance of the working class in the British economy and society; it had, according to W.Basil Worsfold, a contemporary writer on social politics, been "a revelation of the value of the manual workers to the state."[3] This elevation of the status of the working class had been accompanied, and reinforced, by a tremendous growth in trade unionism. From approximately

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1 J.McGurk, L&CMF official, Chairman's address to Labour Party Annual Conference, 1919; Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.44.
2 S.O.Davies, Dowlais SWMF Agent, speaking in Merthyr, New Year's Day, 1919; Merthyr Pioneer, 4 January 1919.
3 Cited in Arthur Marwick, War and Social Change in the Twentieth Century (London: Macmillan, 1974), p.7

4 million in 1914, the number of organised workers had climbed to 6.5 million in 1918, and would continue upwards to almost 8 million by the end of 1919, a figure corresponding to a union density of almost 50%.[4] This growth gave a massive injection of power to the trade union movement, which demanded, and received, a new approach to industrial relations from employers and the government.[5] One index of this was the huge extension of national pay bargaining, incorporating an extra 4.5 million workers, a figure representing at least one-third of the total employed workforce.[6] Another was the incorporation of labour leaders into the bureaucracy of the wartime state. To ensure the co-operation of the workers in continuous production, trade union officials were involved in a myriad of committees, consultations and enquiries, in influential offices off the corridors of power. For the same reason, Lloyd George in December 1916 summonsed Labour Party leaders to a meeting, offered them the nationalisation (in some form) of mines, railways and shipping, and gave four of them seats in the Coalition. A grateful and surprised J.R.Clynes commented, "Labour has been curiously elevated by the demands of war."[7]

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4 Department of Employment, British Labour Statistics: Historical Abstract 1886-1968, (HMSO, 1971), p.395, Table 196.

5 The implications of this have been debated by, amongst others, Reid, McLean and Hinton; See Alastair Reid, "Glasgow Socialism", Social History Vol.11, 1986; Alastair Reid, "Dilution, Trade Unionism and the State in Britain during World War One", in S.Tolliday and J.Zeitlin (eds), Shopfloor Bargaining and the State (Cambridge University Press, 1985); Iain McLean, The Legend of Red Clydeside (Edinburgh, 1983), Part One; James Hinton, The First Shop Stewards Movement (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973).

6 H.A.Clegg, A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889, Vol.2 (Oxford, 1985), pp.163-8.

7 James Cronin, Labour and Society in Britain, 1918-79 (London: Batsford, 1984), p.21. (Herafter cited as J.Cronin, (1984) ).

The accession of labour leaders to positions of power and responsiblity gave a much needed boost to the Labour Party's image as a potential party of government. This leap forward in political credibility was further encouraged by wartime developments in the state's relationship to industry and society. The demands of war found laissez-faire orthodoxy, already being questioned prior to 1914, utterly wanting. Albeit in a piecemeal and haphazard manner, the state came to intervene in almost every sphere of national life. By the war's end the government had total responsibility for all land and sea transport, and controlled production in mines and quarries. It directly owned over 250 National Factories, and supervised operations in 20,000 more. Food and raw materials were purchased and rationed by the state, which also decided what crops should be grown and how the land should be utilised. There were also import-export controls, the regulation of capital and securities, and controls over the mobility, working conditions and wages of labour.[8]

The creation of a state controlled economy in Britain presented the Labour Party with a tremendous opportunity; war-time state capitalism had provided a blueprint for post-war state socialism. The ILP's newspaper the Labour Leader quoted enthusiastically a speech by Churchill in which he said:

> I have not been quite convinced by my experience at the Ministry of Munitions that socialism is possible, but I have been very nearly convinced. I am bound to say I consider, on the whole, the achievements of the Ministry of Munitions constitute the greatest argument for state socialism that has ever been produced.[9]

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8 Susan Armitage, op.cit., pp.1-3; R.H.Tawney, "The Abolition of Economic Controls, 1918-21", Economic History Review, Vol.xiii, 1943, pp.2-7.
9 Labour Leader, 30 January 1919.

Nonetheless, the controlled economy had been established without any ideological conversion to it by the government, whose policy remained rapid decontrol as soon as the war was over. Labour and the New Social Order was the Labour Party's bid to nail its ideological colours to the mast of war-time collectivism. The positive aspects of the war experience could, so the argument went, be harnessed to provide progressive social change without the dangers of social upheaval.[10]

Bernard Waites' study A Class Society at War emphasised that the war, whilst in general strengthening labour's position in society, produced different and contradictory conclusions as to how that power should be exercised, based on the different war-time experiences of leaders and led within the labour movement.[11] For Arthur Henderson the war, by enhancing the role of Trade Unions in ensuring social stability, had conciliatory consequences for capital and labour. Reconstruction would come about, he believed, because of "the new democratic consciousness" which the war had produced in all classes. "During the war", he wrote, "we have learnt the meaning of co-operation for common ends. The lesson holds good for the politics of tomorrow."[12]

However, for many industrial militants the war produced entirely different conclusions to those drawn by Henderson. By 1917 "war weariness" was chipping away at the patriotism which had kept workers' grievances in check, and whereas in 1916 only 276,000 workers had been

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10 R.H.Tawney, op.cit., p.2.
J.M.Winter, Socialism and the Challenge of War: Ideas and Politics in Britain, 1912-18 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pages 6, 58 & 221.

11 Bernard Waites, A Class Society at War (New York, 1987), pp.41-2.

12 Arthur Henderson, The Aims of Labour (London: Headley Bros., 1918), pages 20 & 77.

involved in a strike, in 1917 the figure had jumped to 872,000.[13] The reports of the Industrial Unrest Commissioners showed that important groups of workers had anything but a positive view of government intervention. Nor were they taken by the new "democratic consiousness" of the times. Rather, the reports revealed that workers were very often highly concerned that the Munitions of War Act, the Military Service Act and the Defence of the Realm Act, with their restrictions on the liberty and mobility of workers, were the advanced draft of a "Servile State". Furthermore, there was widespread anger at the "profiteering, exploiting and plundering" which employers were indulging in.[14] Taken together, the Reports leave no doubt that there was considerable anger at both government and employers about the unequal burden of sacrifice which the working class was being forced to bear. The Co-operative News, not prone to political outbursts, wrote of:

> Conscription at a shilling a day for the private soldier, excess profits for the manufacturer and dealer. Suppression for the workers' papers, license for the Harmonsworth Press; tall prices for producers, queues for consumers. Imprisonment for strikers, autocracy for a War Cabinet of three.[15]

Below the ranks of the Labour and trade union leaders then, the war very often did not encourage consensus politics. As Hinton has commented:

> Important sections of the workers experienced wartime state intervention not as liberating, but as repressive. They saw in the wartime state not an actual or potential ally, but an agency used by the employers to reinforce their class power."[16]

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13 British Labour Statistics, op.cit., p.396, Table 197.

14 Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest, No.3 Division, Report of the Commissioners for the Yorkshire and East Midlands Area 1917, PRO CAB 24/23 Cd.8664, pp.50-52.
Summary of the Reports of the Commission, 1917-18 (PRO CAB 24/23 Cd.9085) passim.

15 Co-operative News, 26 May 1917, cited in B.Waites, op.cit., p.70.

16 James Hinton, Labour and Socialism (London: Wheatsheaf,

The association of labour leaders with this state of affairs was causing serious tensions within many unions by 1917, a development once again highlighted in the district reports of the Industrial Unrest Commissioners. John Hill, in his Presidential address to the TUC in September 1917 drew attention to their findings that: "Trade union officials are distrusted...In their [the union members'] opinion we had either fallen asleep at our posts, or we have sold their birthright for a mess of pottage."[17]

As a consequence, much of the industrial unrest which occurred from 1917 onwards was unofficial in its nature, directed not only against the government and employers, but against the trade union leaders. It was in this context that rank and file committees were established or further developed in several major industries, most notably in engineering, the railways and mining. (As we shall see, Robert Smillie's refusal to sign the Treasury Agreement did not innoculate the MFGB against this development.) With union executives just "so many bureaus for the interpretation of government orders, mere annexes of the Ministry of Munitions"[18], these rank and file committees gained considerable influence. Drawing on the syndicalism of the pre-war labour unrest, they sought to place an entirely different interpretation on the working class experience of the war from that of the Labour Party. They were largely responsible for popularising the notions of "direct action" and "workers control", political concepts which reflected both the potential industrial power of the trade unions which the war had revealed, and the suspicion of state control. With men like Henderson and Webb in mind, the Scottish Workers' Committees wrote:

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1983), p.104. (Hereafter cited as J.Hinton, (1983) ).
17 H.A.Clegg, op.cit., p.174.
18 The Herald, 22 February 1919.

> To obtain the support of the worker, this middle class State Capitalist element adopts the language of socialism and dupes the workers with the catch phrases of popular rebellion. They stake their all on the capital of Parliament not, be it observed, to destroy that political engine of class rule, but to use it "in the interests of Labour." *But it cannot be used in the interests of Labour.* "He owns my life who owns the means whereby I live", and until the worker owns the *means of life* he will be a slave. *Direct Action* alone can give him control of the means of life and the entire economic forces of the country.[19]

The war had, therefore, been a watershed in the development of both the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary lefts, with each able to point to encouraging developments which supported their own particular programme or strategy. In different ways, it seemed that the war had transformed their respective projects from idealistic dreams to realisable goals. But what of the mass of the working class population? The development of political programmes is easier to trace than developments in general class attitudes, but significant changes are nonetheless discernible.

In the first place, there seems to have been a heightened sense of self-awareness in the working class. In part, this was a consequence of certain structural changes, such as the narrowing of the gap between the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled.[20] However, the war had also caused subjective changes in the way workers viewed themselves in relation to other classes in society. "Rob Roy", writing in the Glasgow socialist paper Forward, observed elements of a new post-war psychological outlook:

> For one thing they have a better conceit of themselves, that has been knocked into their heads from high quarters. (This was "an engineers' war", a "war won by women" etc) For another, they have a good deal less conceit of at least large sections of the ...high

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19 W.Gallacher and J.R.Campbell, Direct Action (Scottish Workers' Committee Pamphlet No.1., 1919), p.2.

20 These changes are outlined by James Cronin, (1984), p.22, and by Bernard Waites, op.cit., pp.24-27.

> quarters. The part played by landlords and profiteers in winning the war or exploiting those left at home needs no special revelation.[21]

Both Waites and Cronin have studied contemporary accounts which focussed on what was described as "the awakening" of the working class, and they too found this new sense of the competence and ability of workers, and an accompanying weakening of deference towards the rich and powerful.[22] In this context, it was a short step from "self-awareness" to "self-assertiveness".[23] War had, in Cronin's words, "awakened the worker to his tremendous power" and the armistice found "a working people optimistic and quite confident of their own potential."[24] Waites has detected a strong shift during the war years in "the language and reference of class", in which capital was depicted as "immoral and predatory", and in which class conflict became the dominant motif.[25] He then cites a government report which identified "Three ideas now dominating the mass". These were: 1) The more the working class produce the more the idle rich will waste; 2) A man can't work his best in a system run for private profit; 3) Capitalists weren't in a position to lecture labour on restricting production. Whilst Waites rejects any suggestion that the British working class reaached a revolutionary level of consciousness in 1919, he makes the reasonable suggestion that sentiments such as these represented "elements of an at least proto-revolutionary consiousness."[26] The Times detected similar elements in the industrial unrest of the first few months of 1919:

> This unrest and restlessness of workers really means that an industrial population has made up its mind that

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21 Forward, 1 February 1919.
22 J.Cronin, (1984), pp.22-31.
B.Waites, op.cit., passim.
23 B.Waites, ibid., p.45.
24 J.Cronin, (1984), pages 26 & 30.
25 B.Waites, op.cit., pages 68, & 61-2.
26 ibid., p.221.

> for the future, no matter what the national need may be, it will not be disciplined, managed, or controlled by an authority, a private employer or a State department, which it does not choose by its own unfettered will to recognise as fit and suitable and whose dictates it does not consider sound and reasonable.[27]

Greatly raised expectations were a corollary of the elevated status and power of the trade unions at the war's end. Jimmy Thomas told the National Industrial Conference convened by Lloyd George in February that: "The workers have set their faces towards some order of society which will improve their lives and conditions in accord with the new valuation they set upon themselves"[28] Cronin has described the explosion of aspirations at the war's end as "a novel and expanded sense of what was due to workers and what they were morally justified in demanding."[29] Contemporary observers described the raised horizons of workers as embracing notions of liberty and emancipation. The Herald noted that "the idea of freedom is stirring in the land."[30] George Dewar, in an article entitled "The Great Home Problem of 1919" which examined the mood of workers in the north of England, wrote:

> There is an extraordinary ferment throughout the packed industrial districts, which is not exactly like any previous phenomenon of the same character. The people believe they are nearing the portals of a new world which the war and events in Eastern Europe have forced ajar for them.[31]

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27 The Times, 29 April 1919.
28 Cited in Robert Williams, The New Labour Outlook (London: New Era Series, 1921), p.112.
29 James Cronin, Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p.114.
30 The Herald, 22 February 1919.
31 George A.B.Dewar, "The Great Home Problem of 1919", The Nineteenth Century and After, Vol.85, February 1919, p.206.

Again, although it is not possible to talk of a revolutionary mood comparable with Russia, Germany or Hungary, nonetheless the atmosphere in Europe did not leave British workers unaffected. Concerned politicians often located the domestic unrest as tangential to the wider European upheavals. Lloyd George, for example, told the Peace Conference that Europe was "filled with the spirit of revolution." He continued: "The whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the masses of the population from one end of Europe to the other."[32]

Moving along to look at what the concrete demands of workers were in the immediate post-war period, one is struck first of all by the volume of calls for shorter hours and higher wages. At first glance this might suggest an economism at odds with the mood of idealism described above. However, a closer look at the nature of these demands shows that they were consistent with, and indeed an integral part of, the desire for thoroughgoing change in society. In the first place, they were the demands of an entire class, not just sections of it, and were justified as compensation for the years of overtime, inflation and profiteering. Increased leisure time, and the resources with which to enjoy it, was a commonly held aim. Furthermore, these demands were a political response to demobilisation. Shorter hours in particular, described by Robert Williams as "The Genesis of the Book of Emancipation"[33], were designed to prevent the employers from capitalisng on the return of four million soldiers to create a pool of unemployed labour with which to undo the new

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32 R.P.Arnot, South Wales Miners: A History of the South Wales Miners' Federation, Vol.2, 1914-1926 (Cardiff, 1975), p.160. (Hereafter, R.P.Arnot, South Wales Miners)

33 Merthyr Pioneer, 3 January 1919; the Pioneer was a socialist newspaper which Hardie had been involved with. Whilst it was not owned by the ILP, it had close links with it.

found strength of the trade union movement.[34] The demand for shorter hours was essentially the cutting edge of the struggle between capital and labour over the shape of post-war reconstruction in Britain. This is what Robert Williams meant when he wrote:

> The demobilisation of the Armed Forces, the introduction of a shorter working week, and the general and comprehensive solution of all industrial and economic problems arising out of the end of the war are essentially political matters, not necessarily Parliamentary matters, but matters of political import.[35]

There was a widespread recognition that the militancy over hours and wages was just one aspect of a higher and broader collective working class aspiration. Lloyd George said that "All signs go to show that the striving is as much for social and political changes as for increases in wages."[36] In his survey of contemporary writings on the subject, Cronin finds that:

> workers were interested in more than wages, that their list of grievances had been extended and linked to a thoroughgoing critique of society, and that their political beliefs had come to colour their attitude to work itself.[37]

The last point made here is a reference to the demand for workers' control, which was often linked to the demand for nationalisation, and was the upshot of wartime fears of the "Servile State". During the war, the Guild Socialist G.D.H.Cole wrote that "The State and the municipality as employers have turned out not to differ essentially from the private capitalist", and that therefore democratic control of the workplace had

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34 See H.A.Clegg, op.cit., p.211 for the general agitation for shorter hours from the late summer of 1918.
35 The Herald, 8 February 1919. The issues surrounding demobilisation are dealt with in more depth in subsequent chapters on the campaign for the Miners' Charter.
36 Cited in J.T.Murphy, Preparing for Power (Pluto Press, 1972), p.172.
37 J.Cronin, (1984), p.24.

to be an integral part of the demand for nationalisation. By 1919 he could write that: "as far as the Labour movement is concerned the internal battle for the idea of workers' control has been fought and won."[38] Ramsay MacDonald concurred that: "At the end of the war, the control of the workshop by labour is as important as the control of Parliament by Labour."[39] The Labour side's report to the National Industrial Conference emphasised:

> the growing determination of labour to challenge the whole existing structure of capitalist industry... Labour is too strong to remain within the bounds of the old industrial system and its unsatisfied demand for the reorganisation of industry on democratic lines is not only the most important but also a constantly growing source of unrest.[40]

Quite what was meant by workers' control varied considerably between workers' committees, Guild Socialists, advocates of Whitleyism, or state socialists, as we shall see when we look at the campaign for this aspect of the Miners' Charter, but the fact that they all embraced it in some form or other indicates its popularity in the labour movement. George Dewar reckoned that "a great mass of the workers" were animated by the demand.[41]

Clearly then, the experience of the war had profound and radicalising consequences for millions of workers, who, with the armistice, demanded a fundamental change to their position in society, commensurate with the sacrifices which they had endured, and the revelation of their indispensability to the economy and to society. Some of these aspirations were idealistic, formless, almost metaphysical expressions of the changed

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38 Cited in B.Pribicevic, The Shop Stewards Movement and Workers' Control, 1910-22 (London: Blackwell, 1959), p.160.
39 Forward 1 February 1919.
40 Cited in R.Williams, op.cit., p.119.
41 G.Dewar, op.cit., pp.207-8. See Chapters Five and Seven below for more on workers' control.

post-war psychology. Uncovering this element of the mood and atmosphere of 1919, and rescuing it from obscuration by the later defeat of 1921, is of fundamental importance if we are to understand the full significance of this tumultuous year. And it is also important to attempt to collate and assess the actual concrete demands raised by the trade union movement. We have looked at the most prominent of these, but to round off this introductory section it is perhaps useful to note the ten-point programme which, six weeks into the new year, the Herald felt summed up the programme of labour: 1)No conscription 2)Discharge not demobilisation 3)Full maintenance for all unemployed 4)A 40 hour week with no loss of earnings 5)Nationalisation, with workers' control, of mines, rail and transport 6)Full recognition of all trade unions, including those in the armed forces and the police 7)Fulfilment of all government pledges for restoration of trade union rights 8)Amnesty to all political and military prisoners 9)No further use of the military in industrial disputes 10)Hands off Russia.[42]

### *(ii) The General Election of December 1918 and the Direct Action controversy*

The obvious question which animated the labour movement at the war's end was how workers' aspirations were to be realised. In essence there were two strategies on offer. On the one hand there was the revamped state socialist project of Webb and Henderson's new model Labour Party. On the other there was the proposal to employ the industrial muscle of the working class, summed up in the term "direct action".

Direct action, both as a descriptive term and a political concept, had its modern roots in the syndicalist-influenced labour unrest of 1910-14.

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42 The Herald, 8 February 1919.

Lenin explained the rise of syndicalism in western Europe as "a direct and inevitable result of opportunism, reformism and parliamentary cretinism"[43] , and it was sentiments like these which drove Tom Mann to set up the Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL) in 1910. "Labour MPs", he wrote in the first issue of the Industrial Syndicalist:

> seem to have constituted themselves apologists for existing society, showing a degree of studied respect for bourgeois conditions, and a toleration of bourgeois methods, that destroys the probability of their doing any real work of a revolutionary character.[44]

Mann turned instead to the trade union movement, advocating the amalgamation of sectional unions into industrial ones, and the adoption of an aggressive "direct action" policy.[45] He rejected the SLP's strategy of building new revolutionary trade unions, choosing instead to work within the existing organisations, and, in the context of the Great Unrest, his syndicalist ideas gained considerable influence.[46]

The lack of enthusiasm for parliamentary politics inside the working class in these years before the war was such that G.D.H.Cole could write in 1913: "To attack the Parliamentary Labour Party nowadays may look rather like flogging a dead horse."[47] In many respects, as has already been suggested, the war experience had done nothing to undermine this scepticism, and, as one ILP member in South Wales observed, the war had not encouraged a belief in gradualism but rather had:

> made the average man of the working class very anxious to have a quick solution of the difficulties of the

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43 V.I.Lenin, Collected Works, Volume 13 (Moscow, 1962), p.166.
44 Industrial Syndicalist, July 1910.
45 See for example ibid., September & December 1910.
46 Bob Holton, British Syndicalism, 1900-14: Myths and Realities (London: Pluto, 1976), *passim*.
Martyn Ives, "Understanding the Workers' Revolt of 1911", (Unpublished Graduate Thesis, Manchester University 1986), *passim*.
47 J.M.Winter, op.cit., p.103.

> time. As a consequence the socialist movement had a growing disposition to believe in cataclysm. The war had imported military terms into the nomenclature of the class struggle.[48]

Ramsay MacDonald similarly noted, in January 1919, that "the ruling classes have taught the appeal to force, and the workers are appealing to industrial force."[49] Again, George Dewar writing in 1919 reminded his readers:

> Always bear this in mind: the workers during the last four years have secured various benefits or concessions not through Parliament, they have secured them through outside pressure and demonstration. And they know it.[50]

This was, as we shall see later in this chapter, true of no section of workers more than the miners. Leo Chiozza-Money, soon to represent the miners on the Sankey Commission, lamented that:

> the economic history of the war simply teems with illustrations of the unfortunate fact that only through strikes...has any measure of justice been obtained by those engaged in making fortunes for the profiteers.[51]

At this historical juncture there could be no guarantee of the Labour Party's future hegemony inside the labour movement. This ascendant trajectory is clearer in hindsight than it was to contemporaries who stood at the end of the syndicalist decade. A note of caution should be sounded against retrospective complacency on this point. Jay Winter, for example, in his otherwise useful study of the evolution of socialist thought within the Labour Party, sometimes overlooks the robust challenge of the extra-parliamentary left. At one point, Winter himself quotes the Fabian Clifford Sharp to convey a sense of the parental concern which some had for their political infant. In the wake of the national miners' strike of 1912 Sharp wrote to the Webbs:

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48 Merthyr Pioneer, 6 March 1920.
49 Labour Leader, 30 January 1919.
50 G.A.B.Dewar, op.cit., pp.201-2.
51 Labour Leader, 9 January 1919.

> Within a week, the Miners' Federation has converted Parliament and the nation to accept a legislative measure for which they would have had to fight ten years if they had relied solely on political action through the Labour Party. It may be that the political socialist movement will be swallowed up in a movement much more vague philosophically, but much more concrete practically, on the lines of industrial unionism. On the other hand it may be that in ten years time socialism will be the dominant force in the country.52

The war had done nothing to remove this uncertainty; in fact, arguably, it had compounded it. Yet Winter writes:

> Not only did the attitude of the Labour leadership to socialism change during the war; so too did the attitude of socialists to the Labour Party. By 1918, the tactical dispute in Britain had been decided for all but a handful of revolutionaries who eventually formed the Communist Party. It became then [in 1918], as it is today, the major institutional focus for socialist political activity.53

Winter is wrong to pose things in this way. The war might have confirmed Webb's brand of socialism as the political creed of the Labour Party leadership, but that was not the same thing as confirming it for the many socialists whose trade unions were the major focus of activity. At the war's end, the Labour Party leadership still felt vulnerable to the continuing challenge of a radical tradition which it would be anachronistic to label communist. 1919 was the key date, and syndicalism was the threat.

The contrast between the parliamentary weakness and industrial strength of labour's forces was widely discussed in labour circles in the year or

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52 J.M.Winter, op.cit., p.29.

53 ibid., p.6. For another example, see K.O.Morgan, "Socialism and Syndicalism: The Welsh Miners' Debate, 1912", Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 1975, 30, pp.22-37; for Morgan, the debate was effectively over by 1918: "Like Mainwaring, the Welsh miners generally opted for the orthodox view after 1918 - a crusade for a socialist society through the Labour Party." See also my comments on Morgan and Stead in Chapter 5 below.

so after the war. Robert Williams, for example, scathingly observed that the PLP's only legislative success had been to reduce tax on tea by twopence in the pound:

> Industrial action, on the other hand, has made it possible for the organised workers to obtain the necessary purchasing power with which to buy tea, and now and then to add sugar and milk.[54]

In this period, before Labour had proved itself capable of gaining office, some of the ideas gathered together under the umbrella of direct action could hold more immediate relevance to workers. As Ramsay MacDonald admitted in his book Parliament and Revolution (1919): "To the man who responds day by day to the call of the factory whistle, Parliament too often appears to be an ineffective thing."[55] In his book entitled Direct Action (1920), William Mellor, industrial editor of the Daily Herald, put a different slant on the same observation when he asserted that: "The road to freedom lies not through the polling booth but through the workshop gates."[56] George Dewar was of the opinion that:"there is all over the country a great number of working men in mines, factories and shipyards, who distrust the parliamentary method.[57] He went on to explain that this distrust lay in the remoteness of Parliament:

> Anyhow, the average working "hand" in the chief centres of industrial ferment today cannot visualise a solid body of 350 Labour MP,s trooping into the "Aye" lobby in the third reading of a bill, say, to conscript the wealth of the country, or to nationalise the essential industries...The parliamentary system is too far from his ken to be implicitly relied on...What relation to his daily life in the pit shaft, by the blast furnace, or at the cogging mill, can a three line whip or a full dress debate have? That doubt is understandable.[58]

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54 R.Williams, op.cit., p.142.
55 Ramsay MacDonald, Parliament and Revolution (Manchester, 1919), p.56.
56 William Mellor, Direct Action (London: New Era Series, 1920), p.51.
57 G.A.B.Dewar, op.cit., p.210.
58 ibid., p.211.

Labour Party leaders obviously had a problem. "Even before the war", Ramsay MacDonald wrote, "impatience was being shown with Parliament...as the means of expressing the popular will."[59] Since then the situation had deteriorated further. Now the Labour Party was faced with the question of:

> how to restore reality to politics, how to make Parliament as real to the people as it was to the landlords when it was enabling them to enclose the commons and keep up rents, and as it was to the capitalists when it gave them Free Trade and Peace, Retrenchment and Reform. [60]

This was no simple matter in the heady atmosphere of Europe in 1919 when revolutions were sweeping away tyrannies and mass strikes were shaking governments. "The belief in the Parliamentary road", Henderson confessed, "appears old fashioned."[61] Direct action, by comparison, could appear modern and dynamic, especially when bracketed with revolutionary developments in Europe, as it often was. Again Henderson, speaking on the causes of world-wide unrest in 1919 warned his listeners:

> Do not make the mistake of thinking that the Soviet theory of government is a Russian invention which has no attraction for the workpeople of other countries. It has captured the imagination of a much greater number of people than is commonly realised. The Soviet theory and the theory of direct action were of immense significance. They meant that huge masses of people had begun to lose faith in the Parliamentary system and the ordinary machinery of representative government.[62]

The low esteem of Parliament was a serious concern for the Labour Party, especially given the impatient clamour for social change. In his 1918 booklet The Aims of Labour, Henderson had warned of the threat from direct action should the Labour Party after the war "by its own weakness,

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59 Ramsay MacDonald, op.cit., p.1.
60 ibid., p.67.
61 South Wales News, 14 July 1919.
62 Llais Llafur, 20 September 1919.

or the stubborn resistance of other parties and classes, (be) unable to fulfil the expectations of its followers."[63] Much, therefore, hung on the outcome of the December 1918 general election. The reconstructed Labour Party, armed with constituency parties, individual membership and Clause Four, hoped to make large gains amongst the twelve million or so new voters eligible under the Representation of the People Act.[64] Whilst in normal conditions therefore, Labour might have found more cause for celebration in the drastic decline of the Asquithian Liberals, its own performance was not good enough to exorcise anxieties of the threat of direct action. Although it had done well to field 363 candidates, only fifty-seven of these were returned, a figure merely 17 in excess of the performance of December 1910.[65] The Labour Leader warned the PLP of the likely consequences of any failiure to make the most of its new found position as the main opposition party:

> If they fail to take full advantage of that opportunity, they may destroy the political labour movement in this country. They will drive the trade unionists from political action, in despair of its futility as illustrated by the Parliamentary Labour Party, and they will give an irresistible impetus to the most extreme forms of industrial action.[66]

Unfortunately for the PLP, the problem of quantity was compounded by the calibre and political character of its members. In the jingoistic atmosphere in which the election took place, only three ILP candidates were elected. With Keir Hardie dead, and Henderson, Snowden and MacDonald defeated, the Party was deprived of its most effective performers. Fifty

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63 A.Henderson, op.cit., p.61.
64 Labour Party National Executive Committee [NEC] Minutes, Box iv, 1918, General Election: Report to Organisation Sub-Committee.
65 H.A.Clegg, op.cit., p.237. Shortly after the election, four other MPs took the Labour whip, bringing the total to 61.
66 Labour Leader, 2 January 1919.

of the MPs were trade union candidates, almost half of these miners, whom Beatrice Webb judged to be: "for general political purposes dead stuff." Of Adamson, the Fife miners' leader elected PLP Chairman, she wrote: "He fumbles in political life as we should fumble with a pickaxe in the dark recesses of a mine, and gets about the same output as we should do."[67] After a lack-lustre opening Parliamentary session, Adamson rose "with a considerable amount of fear and trembling" to face the Labour Party's 1919 Annual Conference.[68] Delegates were angry that the burning issues of allied intervention in Russia and the continuation of conscription had not even been raised, and that the PLP "was not acting as the leader of working class opinion in the House of Commons."[69] A Glasgow delegate pointed out "the inability of the Party to do anything on the question of the Glasgow strike and the use of the military on that occasion."[70]

In a situation where labour was weak in Parliament yet strong in industry, the centre of gravity passed decisively from the Labour Party to the trade unions. People now began to talk of a "direct action movement". William Mellor wrote that:

> Without a philosophy, without a coherent aim, ill -coordinated and frowned upon by constitutionalists, the movement for direct action is growing...The workers are instinctively turning to direct action, and this instinct will triumph over the old traditions and constitutional ways.[71]

But what did people understand by the "direct action movement"? In 1919 there was no organisational structure to affiliate to, no identifiable leadership, no equivalent even of the pre-war ISEL. What we find in

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67 Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie (eds), Beatrice Webb's Diaries, Vol.3, 1905-24 (London: Virago, 1984), pages 329 & 331.
68 Labour Party Annual Conference Report, p.130.
69 ibid., pp.148-151.
70 ibid., p.129.
71 W.Mellor, op.cit., p.139.

contemporary speeches and writings on the subject is that not only did opinions on direct action vary widely, but so too did definitions of what the term meant.

William Mellor's book provides us with a useful point of entry into the debate. He begins suggesting that: "Direct action can, in a general way, be defined as the use of some form of economic power for the securing of ends desired by those who posess that power."[72] In other words, either a straightforward strike or lockout over wages could qualify. Gerald Gould, an associate of Mellor's at the Daily Herald, defined it in his book The Coming Revolution in Britain (1920) as action "for political purposes", and cited as examples strikes to enforce nationalisation or the removal of troops from Russia, a definition which later authors like Coates and Miiband have agreed with.[73] Henderson understood direct action to be "anti-Parliamentary", but as Hinton has rightly stressed: "it was by no means confined to those who rejected Parliamentary action altogether. Even within the syndicalist movement few...were dogmatic in their hostility to parliamentary politics."[74] Many ILPers, for example, could balance a continuing faith in electoral politics with approval for direct action over certain issues. The Merthyr Pioneer's editor too saw a connection between direct action and parliament, describing it as: "the entry of the organised trade unionists into political life, armed with the industrial weapon of the strike, and determined on its use for the

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72 ibid., p.15.
73 Gerald Gould, The Coming Revolution in Great Britain (London: Collins, 1920), p.7
Ken Coates and Tony Topham, The History of the Transport and General Workers Union, Vol.1 (Oxford, 1991), p.713.
Ralph Miliband, op.cit., Chapter 3.
74 J.Hinton, (1983), p.93.

purposes of class-biased legislation."[75] Herbert Booth, agent for the Forest of Dean miners told them:

> He did not personally look for the emancipation of the workers from sending Labour men to Parliament, but rather from the combined and united efforts of the workers through their trade union organisations, by which means they could compel Parliament to legislate in accordance with their wishes.[76]

Sexton, a bitter opponent of direct action of any kind, told the House of Commons that in his view there were two distinct types of direct actionist:

> There is the whole-hogger; he who believes in the abolition of Parliament entirely, and the substitution of an Industrial Union of Workers, taking the control of industry. Then there is the Red Actionist, who would combine political with direct action, and would use the weapon of direct action in order to compel Parliament to hurry up and concede its demands.[77]

However, George Lansbury, whose Daily Herald was more responsible than anything else for popularising the slogan of direct action in 1919, didn't fit comfortably into either of these categories.[78] The Daily Herald's popularity was shown by a demonstration to raise money and support for the paper in March 1919 when, despite snow and freezing temperatures, over 100,000 marched to Hyde Park. The paper had begun its life as a strike sheet before the war, and in 1919 it was being funded by a combination of readers' workplace collections and, for the first time, by a number of union executives. Its daily circulation in 1919 was around 300,000, and its influence was such that at the 1919 TUC conference, Clynes accused it of trying to determine the policy of the entire labour movement.[79] In the early months of 1919 it championed the idea that the

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75 Merthyr Pioneer, 2 August 1919.
76 South Wales News, 6 May 1919.
77 Vol.119 HC Deb. 5s, c.1238.
78 The Daily Herald became a weekly during the war, and reverted to a daily in March 1919.
79 Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1920, p.175.

industrial power of workers, exercised through a general strike, held the key to the transformation of society at the war's end. Although it remained vague on details, it felt that direct action, if properly coordinated, could achieve "peaceful revolution". However, there is no evidence to suggest that Lansbury ever entirely turned his back on the parliamentary road in this period. Rather, he seems to have just ignored it for a time.[80]

To the left of Lansbury stood the revolutionary syndicalists and industrial unionists who were the prime movers behind the rank and file organisations in industry. Although the particulars of their strategies varied, and there were nuances between the positions of pure syndicalists and industrial unionists, their perspectives were inherited from those outlined by the ISEL, in which the workers' industrial organisations would provide not only the means for overthrowing capitalism (whether by the general strike or encroaching control) but also the basis for the organisation of the post-capitalist economy and society.[81]

Direct action thus evades easy definition; it was, in a sense, all things to all people. Miliband has stressed his view that: "the issue was not revolution and socialism, but direct industrial action for limited and specific purposes."[82] Direct action as a sort of 'do-it-yourself' reformism does capture an important aspect of reality, especially when one focusses, as Miliband largely does, on the Council of Action in 1920, but in 1919 many saw the "direct action movement" as posessing a more

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TUC Annual Conference Report 1919, p.227.

80 Any edition of the Herald or Daily Herald in the early months of 1919 contain these ideas.

81 Ken Coates and Tony Topham (eds), Workers' Control (London: Panther, 1970), pp.1-138.

82 R.Miliband, op.cit., p.66.

insurrectionary quality. Certainly the language and rhetoric of direct action was littered with revolutionary imagery. In part, and Miliband makes this point himself, this association of direct action and revolution was made by its opponents in the labour movement, to ward people away from it.[83] Henderson, for example, appealed for a vote for Labour in 1918 on the grounds that it was the only guarantee against direct action and the "horror" of revolution, "of barricades in the street and blood in the gutters."[84] "Direct action" and "Bolshevism" were often used interchangeably at this time. Lloyd George, for example, said that: "Direct Action is...Bolshevism pure and simple."[85] T.Shaw of the weavers' union told the TUC conference in 1919 that Lenin was "an apostle of direct action for political purposes", and that the aim of the direct action movement was to establish soviets in Britain.[86]

However, as we have shown, there were others who embraced direct action precisely as the vehicle for revolution. Many in the rank and file committees described themselves as "Britain's Bolsheviks", and they were not, as we shall see in the case of mining, without influence in 1919. Their visible presence meant that direct action was sometimes understood to be a specifically unofficial phenomenon; both Smillie and Brace of the MFGB EC defined it as such on various occassions.[87] In addition to these there were a much larger number, best represented by the Daily Herald, who had a hazy notion of what they meant by revolution, but who felt that the changes in society which direct action could make were of a sufficient scale to deserve the term "revolutionary". "Trade unionism is

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83 ibid., p.69.
84 Henderson, op.cit., pages 57 & 61.
85 Western Mail, 11 July 1919.
86 TUC Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.290.
87 Vol 112, HC Deb 5s, c.337.
Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.118.

defensive in purpose", wrote William Mellor, "direct action, by implication is both offensive and revolutionary."[88]

The debate in the labour movement about direct action at the war's end did not take place in the abstract. 1919 had amongst the highest level of strikes that Britain had ever seen, with 34,969,000 days lost, an average of about 100,000 workers on strike every day.[89] A number of features marked out the unrest. In the first place, the majority of strikes were concentrated in two waves, from January to March, and from July to August. As Wrigley has written: "The key feature of the industrial unrest...was the conjunction of so many challenges in a very short period."[90] Secondly, although the strikes were uncoordinated, they more often than not shared the same sorts of demands as to hours and wages, thus raising the possibility of a united front of trade unions against the government. Thirdly, many of the strikes were unofficial, a fact which contributed to the atmsophere of insurgency and caused the government serious problems in devising a strategy to deal with the unrest. Tom Jones wrote to Lloyd George in Paris that:

> Much of the present difficulty springs from the mutiny of the rank and file against the old established leaders (who) no longer represent the more active and agitating minds in the labour movement.[91]

Churchill complained that: "The curse of trade unionism is that there is not enough of it, and it was not highly enough developed to make its branch secretaries fall into line with the head office." He added: "With a powerful Trade Union, either peace or war could be made."[92] Fourthly,

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88 Mellor. op.cit., p.79.
89 British Labour Statistics, Table 197, p.396.
90 Chris Wrigley, (1990), p.112.
91 Keith Middlemas (ed), Tom Jones' Whitehall Diary, Vol.1, 1916-25 (Oxford University Press, 1969), 8 February 1919, p.73.
92 Cited in J.Cronin, (1984), p.21.
The Parliamentary Committe of the TUC issued a circular

the restructuring of industrial relations during the war meant that in many cases, especially with the larger and more powerful unions, strikes were directed against the government as much as against the employers, thus guaranteeing a politicisation of the unrest.

Taken together, these features meant that the unrest could appear not as a series of disconnected and sectional strikes, but as a (albeit ill-coordinated) revolt. The Worker, at the height of the first wave of unrest, wrote that:

> There have always been discontented workers who think of a different type of society. But the present discontent differs from much past discontent in the numbers, the social importance and the potential power of the discontented. There were never so many men in open revolt against the conditions imposed upon them by the existing system of society as there is today.[93]

The dangerous social implications of the strike wave were made worse (or better, depending upon where one stood) by the serious unrest in the armed forces, caused by slow demobilisation. The very first Cabinet meeting of 1919 was interrupted by 1500 soldiers who had marched to Downing Street and were demanding an audience with Lloyd George.[94] On January 3rd a mutiny broke out amongst soldiers stationed at Folkestone and spread in a flash to another dozen camps. The Herald described the scene:

> At Folkestone, ten thousand soldiers marched through the town, held a mass meeting at which they formed a soldiers' union, elected 140 men to act as clerks, took over the Demobilisation Department, and in one day issued all the necessary pass papers, ration books and railway warrants for the whole camp. By Sunday the camp was clear.[95]

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warning against unofficial strikes in February, to little effect; TUC Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.97.

93 The Worker, 15 March 1919.

94 W.C.(514), 8 January 1919, CAB 23/9.

95 The Herald, 11 January 1919.

It was, as the Herald eagerly pointed out, an object lesson in the "direct action method." Two weeks later, General Childs told the Cabinet that whereas previously: "we had a well disciplined and ignorant army...now we have an army educated and ill-disciplined."[96] Anxieties about the state's ability to suppress unrest led the War Office to circulate a questionnaire to all Army Commanders as to the suitability of their troops to such a task, a document spectacularly leaked by the Daily Herald in May.[97] The situation was compounded by serious unrest in the police force, where the National Union of Police and Prison Officers was threatening to strike for recognition.[98]

These features of the unrest informed and coloured the debate on direct action inside the labour movement at every stage, a debate which increased in intensity as the curve of industrial action peaked in February/March and again in July/August. The forums at which the arguments over direct action were aired most fully were the Labour Party and TUC conferences of 1919, which were dominated by the issue. Although the main debates here revolved around resolutions concerning the use of direct action for the specific purpose of forcing the government to abandon its intervention in the war against the Bolsheviks, the arguments are equally applicable to the question of direct action over domestic questions in general. As Smillie said at the TUC:

> My own feeling in the matter is that many of those who have spoken against direct action this week are as anxious to avoid direct action upon purely trade union questions as upon political matters. It is direct action of which they are afraid, and not the particular

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96 W.C.(522), 30 January 1919, CAB 23/9; For the fullest account of the unrest in the armed forces see A.Rothstein, The Soldiers' Strikes of 1919 (London: Macmillan, 1980).
97 Daily Herald, 13 May 1919.
98 See Chris Wrigley, (1990), pp.53-79.

class of question upon which direct action is taken.[99]

This fear that Smillie referred to flowed from a number of sources. In the first place, there was a deep anxiety that a general strike in the conditions of 1919 could escape the control of the trade union leaders, with dangerous consequences. Clynes told the TUC that in his opinion, a strike of millions of workers of even limited duration and aims would quickly escalate out of control with alarming cosequences:

> It is far easier to get your men out than to get them back...You cannot bring millions of men out to begin a great struggle like this without anticipating a condition of civil war. Your government would not be standing idly by.[100]

Clynes found an echo within the leadership of the Miners' Federation. Hartshorn, for example, warned that in the event of a Triple Alliance strike, whether over mines nationalisation or the Russian question, "within a week or ten days revolutionary conditions will have developed in this country to an extent that nobody will be able to control the situation."[101] Of course, as has been mentioned already, some labour leaders played up the threat of revolution and civil war in order to prevent direct action from taking place; however, it is worth making the simple point that for this tactic to be at all effective, the threat had to be credible. Clynes was not met with derision by TUC delegates, and why should he have been? Nothing in his argument seemed beyond the limits of the possible.

Similarly, when Stuart-Bunning was forced to explain the Parliamentary Committee's refusal to convene a labour conference in the spring for the

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99 TUC Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.336.
100 ibid., p.338.
101 Rhondda Leader, 23 August 1919.

purposes of discussing direct action over Russia, he outlined what the alternatives had been. If the conference had rejected a proposal to ballot union members, or such a ballot had been lost, "it would have been a miserable and tragic fiasco." But this was not the worst possible outcome: "But it might have succeeded! The national strike might have been declared! What then?" The government, he said, must have fought:

> If the government fought it meant revolution! The project therefore resolved itself into a desperate gamble with the lives of men, women and children...The Parliamentary Committee might well hesitate to call a Congress.[102]

Again, it is not possible to be sure whether this was a genuinely held fear or a convenient alibi, but the very fact that the point is debatable is telling enough. Aside from, but related to, this worst case scenario of civil war and revolution, two other concerns underpinned the moderate labour leaders' objections to direct action. One was, quite simply, the possibility of defeat in a large-scale conflict with the government. Trade union leaders in particular were worried about the possible implications for their carefully developed and nurtured organisations. William Brace MP, the SWMF President, admitted to delegates at the Labour Party conference in 1919 that:

> He was afraid, seriously afraid, that if they used the industrial weapon because they could not have their own way politically, they would smash their Trade Unions which were the foundation not only of their industrial but their political power.[103]

J.H.Thomas too was worried that "if we lose there may easily be a period of reaction and oppression for many years to come."[104] On the other hand, there was an equal concern lest direct action should result in victory

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102 TUC Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.52.
103 Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.121.
104 Vol.112, HC Deb 5s, c.1492.

over the government. Arthur Henderson conceded Robert Williams' claim that the Triple Alliance "might make and unmake governments and terminate dynasties" but he argued forcefully that "success under [the present] conditions may be secured at too high a price." Not only, he explained, would victory encourage unofficial action and a further breakdown of trade union discipline, but it would also have dangerous constitutional implications.[105] Jimmy Thomas put the same point in the House of Commons:

> However strong the trade union movement may be - and it is strong - however powerful the trade union movement is - and it is powerful - it is not stronger, more powerful or more important than the state as a whole. In other words, whilst we must be prepared to fight and defend our rights as trade unionists and workers, we can only defend those rights when they are consistent with...our position as citizens of the state as a whole.[106]

For men like Henderson, Thomas and Clynes, direct action was anathema because it cut directly across the Labour Party's strategy and ethos. Sexton complained of the direct actionists that they fashioned their version of democracy on "the mob", which was "a bigger tyrant and a greater despot than the capitalist system."[107] Clynes agreed, asserting that:

> direct action is a blow at democracy...The will of the people finds enduring and beneficial expression only when that will seeks social change by reasonable and calculated instalments, and not by any violent act of revolution.[108]

It was the particular role of the Labour Party to give expression to the will of the people as explained here, through the constitutional means of the ballot box and Parliamentary legislation. To give ground to the idea that social change might come about via the organised industrial power of

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105 South Wales News, 14 July 1919.
106 Vol.112, HC Deb 5s, c.339.
107 Vol.112, HC Deb 5s, c.362.
108 Merthyr Pioneer, 17 August 1919.

workers would be to undermine the very constitutional foundations upon which the Labour Party rested. Jimmy Thomas put it bluntly:

> The question as to whether we are to use the industrial weapon as distinct from the political weapon raises in acute form the issue, that if that is going to be Labour's policy in the future we may as well abolish the Labour Party and the whole political machinery at once. Do not let us humbug or play with the thing; let us be quite frank and say, "In our judgement, we have found a new and more effective weapon, and a surer weapon." But do not let us delude ourselves by saying we want to run both together. The two things are absolutely irreconcilable, and cannot be run together in that sense.[109]

George Lansbury, writing in the Herald could not conceal the exasperation he felt with this sort of dogmatic constitutional reformism. In early February he wrote:

> Do none of these Parliamentarians, these preachers of constitutional methods, these finger-shaking pundits, realise that the old world is breaking up under their feet, that a new spirit is moving on the face of the waters, that a new spring is in the air? It is not too much to say that the constitutional method is on its last trial and the sands are running out.[110]

There were some leading figures in the labour movement who found themselves agreeing with Lansbury. Both Smillie and Williams of the Triple Alliance at various times advocated the use of direct action precisely because, they argued, unless the leaders went some of the way with the rank and file militants, they would lose control of the movement. In February, Williams was calling for a National Convention of labour's forces to draw up a programme of demands and initiate action from above in order "to prevent unofficial strikes, to avoid the growth of anti-officialism amongst the best of our men and women...We must lead or simply be brushed aside."[111] Smillie made the same point when he

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109 TUC Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.113.
110 The Herald, 8 February 1919.
111 ibid.

proposed to the Labour Party conference that it endorse direct action as a legitimate strategy:

> It would be safer for the Labour movement of this country to meet with the Trade Union movement, and calmly and constitutionally discuss the question and decide upon action, than wait until a revolution breaks out in some other part of the country which might sweep from one end to the other.[112]

The right within the trade union leadership protested that the atmosphere of "unofficialism" was precisely why direct action was too risky a gamble to take. The fear was that once underway, a large-scale strike would develop a momentum of its own, and that this would favour the militants in the rank and file groups. William Brace warned: "Starting a war is easy; stopping it once it has started is an entirely different matter."[113] Sexton railed about "letting mad dogs loose"; he told the Labour Party Conference:

> They were letting loose an element that was rife today in the Trade Union movement, that would take every advantage of the confusion, and make it impossible for them [the union officials] to exercise any controlling power. They were letting loose an element they could not control..."[114]

Of the Labour Party leaders, Ramsay MacDonald was most alive to the possible dangers inherent in the uncompromising attitude of Clynes, Henderson and Thomas. Even though he had been an implaccable opponent of syndicalism during the 1910-14 unrest, he now felt that the Labour Party was in danger of being left behind by "the new ideas [which] have sprung up regarding the relations between political and industrial action, new theories of the state...[and] new philosophies of mass action..."[115]

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112 Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.119.
113 Rhondda Leader, 22 March 1919.
114 Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.119.
115 R.MacDonald, op.cit., p.2.

MacDonald sought to legitimise direct action in constitutional terms; pointing to the manner in which the election had been conducted by Lloyd George, and the subsequent broken promises of the government, MacDonald held that Parliament had forfeited all "moral authority."[116] Whilst direct action which aimed at overthrowing the state was incompatible with British socialism, he argued:

> it is no mean weapon against a Parliament elected by fraud...There must be means found for challenging the abuse of its power by such a Parliament, and "direct action" is one of them.[117]

MacDonald, like Clynes and co., believed that there was a danger that direct action could escape the control of responsible leaders and summon up a revolutionary situation. However, his greater fear was that if Labour and trade union leaders took up a position of simple hostility to the notion of direct action then the initiative would pass to the militants in the rank and file committees. "Above all", he wrote, "we must keep in touch with the industrial movement", and so retain an influence over what he called "the active spirits" who were behind the unrest.[118] Labour politics were in a state of flux in 1919; they had not yet settled down into the now long familiar pattern of a virtually unrivalled Labour Party hegemony. Far from it, for in the wake of the December 1918 general election, the project of gradual social change via Parliament and the state could appear almost irrelevant to a working class conscious of its own industrial power.

Direct action posed a threat to Labour and trade union leaders in 1919 in a variety of ways. There was the fear that a general strike even for

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116 Forward, 4 January 1919.
117 Socialist Review, vol.16, no.88, January to March 1919, p.18
118 Labour Leader, 2 January 1919.

limited goals might spin out of control and develop into a revolutionary situation. There was the fear that defeat could lead to the overnight loss of painstaking organisational gains made over the course of several decades. Even those in the leadership who advocated direct action often did so in order to be able to better control the movement and prevent it from falling into the hands of less responsible elements. The challenge posed by the industrial unrest was, therefore, a complex and multifarious one; anyone searching for a simple division inside labour politics around the question of reform or revolution will miss much of the real essence of the political significance of direct action in 1919. Whilst the issue was sometimes posed in these terms, the broad spectrum of ideas assembled under the banner of direct action meant that very often this dichotomy was blurred, distorted, or simply overlooked.

The debate in 1919 was not, in the main, concerned with the question of "reform or revolution?" but rather of "Direct Action or Parliament?", which is not necessarily the same thing. But whatever interpretation one put on direct action, whether 'do-it-yourself' reformism or the revolutionary general strike, the notion that the collective self-activity of workers held the key to economic and social change struck at the heart of the Labour Party's political philosophy. "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear" MacDonald wrote in 1919, meaning that the working class was incapable of accomplishing the socialist transformation of its own volition.[119] Direct action might have a place in rescuing the constitution from the clutches of Lloyd Georgian tyranny, but the long-term future still lay in patient educational and propaganda work so that one day Labour representatives could secure *for* the workers that which they could not secure for themselves.

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119 Ramsay MacDonald, op.cit., p.65.

The turn towards direct action thus caused a serious and protracted debate within the labour movement, one which touched the campaign for the Miners' Charter at every turn. In the prevailing industrial unrest, a national miners' strike would be no ordinary affair; rather, it would pose a threat to British capitalism, its social order, and the political system which underpinned them. As such, it was percieved as a serious danger not just by members of the government, but by labour leaders concerned to protect their own socialist project, to be pursued via Parliament and the state.

Conversely, it was looked forward to by direct actionists, eager to capitalise on their strong industrial position. In March 1919 the Herald wrote (not quite accurately given the attitudes of Clynes, Henderson, Thomas et al.) that: "The whole Labour movement looks to the miners to hew out of the capitalist system a platform from which it can make a great leap forward."[120] Revolutionaries like John Maclean went further. For him, and for a relatively small but influential group within the MFGB, a miners strike over hours and wages might, in the context of mass demobilisation, pull in millions of workers from other industries with potentially revolutionary results:

> All revolutions have started on seemingly trivial economic and political issues. Ours is to direct the workers to the goal by pushing forward the miners' programme and backing up our "black brigade."[121]

Of course, what the actual outcome of such a strike would have been had it taken place is a matter of conjecture and debate. The point is, rather, that for contemporaries involved, the stakes were high and the situation unpredictable. Unless one understands this, and the political

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120 The Herald, 22 March 1919.
121 The Call, 23 January 1919.

controversy to which this gave rise, one can understand little of the significance of the year 1919, nor the miners' place within it.

# Chapter Two

## *THE MINERS' FEDERATION OF GREAT BRITAIN: BUREAUCRATIC REFORMISTS, MILITANT MINERS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MINERS' CHARTER*

> The coal miners, above all other classes of workers, have the power to bring about a general strike...Today in 1919, we say the destiny of the nation is in the hands of the workers, particularly the coal miners. How will they shape that destiny?[1]

In common with the rest of the labour movement, the MFGB was profoundly affected by the war, emerging from it with a new leadership structure, new perspectives and new priorities. However, and again this is true of the labour movement in general, it is not possible to talk of one singular, universal experience of war within the MFGB. In the first place there was considerable regional variation; the need for increased output, and for ever more volunteers and conscripts, affected the rhythyms of work and life in the coalfield communities to different degrees. Even within coalfields there were divergent local experiences; in South Wales, for example, the commotion of war was greater in the densely populated steam coal areas like the Rhondda, which were vital social and economic zones for the war effort, than in, say, the more outlying and scattered anthracite producing areas.

Secondly, and more importantly for our immediate purposes, there was a sharp differentiation between the wartime experiences of leaders and led within the MFGB. The outlook of those who spent the war in union headquarters, on conscription platforms, or closeted in conferences and committees at Whitehall, was changed in a different way to those who spent it at the front or at the coalface. Both groups were in the thick

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1 Solidarity, February 1919 (The organ of the National Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee Movement)

of things, but in highly contrasting ways, and these different experiences produced different sets of goals, and different methods and strategies for achieving them.

Alan Campbell, in tracing the development of consciousness amongst Scottish miners between the 1870s and 1920s, identified from 1911/12 onwards two "ideal typical orientations to union activity", namely the "bureaucratic reformist" and the "militant miner".[2] Although, as Campbell himself readily admits, these can at best be only "a skeletal summary of the components of the miners' consciousness", they nonetheless help to capture in broad outline an important aspect of the reality of the politics of mining unionism in our period, and their employment will benefit the discussion which follows.[3] In the following section we will look at how the experience of the war had by 1919 shaped the outlook of both bureaucratic reformist and militant miner, and how the Southport programme drawn up in January of that year, known as the Miners' Charter, was in fact an uneasy amalgam of their different perspectives for post-war change.

### *(i) Post-war perspectives of the bureaucratic reformist leadership*

The immediately striking thing about the MFGB in this period was its size. By the end of the war it was organising about one million men, making it by far the largest trade union in Britain, a fact which reflected the industrial predominance of coal. Indeed, witnesses to the

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2 Alan Campbell, "From Independent Collier to Militant Miner: tradition and change in the trade union consciousness of the Scottish miners, 1874-1929", Scottish Labour History Society Journal no.24, 1989, pp.8-23.
3 ibid., p.9.

Sankey Commission in 1919 estimated that something like one in eight of the population either lived in, or had come from a mining community.[4]

Although not particularly successful in terms of material gains, the 1912 strike over a minimum wage had seen the MFGB come of age as a national union capable of forging a single unit out of its nineteen affiliated district organisations. However, the process of integration and centralisation was far from complete, and much of the power structure of the MFGB continued to lie in these district unions, which controlled their own funds (contributing relatively small sums to the parent body), and had their own leadership structures and constitutional arrangements. Regional autonomy was complicated by a high degree of regional diversity; the weight which the giant South Wales Miners' Federation with its 200,000 members carried inside the MFGB dwarfed the comparatively miniscule Forest of Dean or Kent associations, with their 5,000 and 1,500 members respectively.[5] Mining conditions varied widely from region to region; the high, wide seams of south Yorkshire and the north-east Midlands bore little resemblance to the heavily faulted seams of the South Wales coalfield, or the "rat-holes" around Accrington in north-east Lancashire. Working conditions, hours and wage levels changed from coalfield to coalfield, and collective bargaining reflected this, being carried on as it was not at national level, but at five regional conciliation boards. Furthermore, local conditions and traditions fostered considerable variation in the political character of union politics from district to district. Nottinghamshire's reputation for

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4 Coal Industry Commission, 1919, vol.ii, Reports and Minutes of Evidence on the Second Stage of the Inquiry, p.479. (Hereafter cited as CIC, 1919, vol.ii)
5 MFGB 1919.

conservatism and moderation contrasted sharply with South Wales' militant image for example.

Nor does this complete the picture of diversity and differentiation. Within individual coalfields, size of colliery, type of seam, character of ownership and management, and residential patterns varied considerably, and produced a range of political and industrial characteristics; areas with reputations for militancy and moderacy could lie side by side within the same district. And still further disaggregation is possible. Even within the same colliery miners might face widely differing conditions. At one part of a seam the coal might give itself up fairly easily, allowing a decent wage to be earned, whilst at another the collier might be working in water under a three foot high roof. Each district, each colliery had its own maze of price lists, bonuses and working practices for each of the numerous grades of men and boys involved in getting out the coal.

The governing structures of the MFGB were designed to incorporate or accomodate this multi-layered diversity. The Executive Committee (EC) was comprised of full-time officials of the affiliated unions, elected by the MFGB Annual Conference. Some areas like South Wales or Durham might have two or three representatives on the EC at any one time, whilst the smaller unions might be lucky to have one. Whenever a major issue arose, the MFGB EC would summon a delegate conference, so that the opinions of the various districts could be expressed and a national policy acceptable to all (or most) could be hammered out. Again, before taking action or making settlements, it was usual for national ballots to be taken. This regular recourse to conferences and ballots has led some to over-estimate

the degree of democracy inside the MFGB.[6] Diversity and parochialism within the Federation did help to militate against an overly rigid top-down approach, but it is important to stress that both the EC and the delegate conferences were dominated by officials from the district unions. There were rank and file delegates present at conferences, but their voices were seldom heard from the floor, and their opinions were often drowned out when delegations cast their votes en bloc. Furthermore, the lower grades of mine-workers were under-represented within the union, both at a local and national level; the colliers were top-dog in the pit and in the lodge, while the surface workers, for example, had a constant struggle to make themselves heard.[7]

By 1919 the MFGB was well into what might be called its second phase. The Lib-Lab era had passed, and the likes of Pickard, Cowey, Edwards, Mabon and Ashton, who had led the Federation since its foundation in 1889, had all departed. Since 1909 the MFGB had been affiliated to the Labour Party, and in the course of the subsequent decade it was the solid Labour figures of Smillie, Herbert Smith and Frank Hodges who rose to prominence. However, there were important legacies from the formative Lib-Lab period which continued to influence the MFGB. In the first place, there were continuities in terms of leading personnel. The fact that Thomas Ashton was only replaced as Secretary by Hodges in January 1919, shows the proximity of the by-gone era. Other Lib-Labs survived into the 1920s, ensuring a degree of overlap between the MFGB's stages of

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6 See for example H.A.Clegg, op.cit., pages 177 & 279, and R.G.Neville, "The Yorkshire Miners 1881-1926: A study in labour and social history", (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Leeds, 1974), pp.532-3. (Hereafter cited as Neville, Thesis.) R.P.Arnot also tends to play up the democratic qualities of the MFGB; Arnot, The Miners Years of Struggle, (London: Unwin, 1953) passim. (Hereafter cited as R.P.Arnot, The Miners)

7 MFGB Records, 1918-1920.

development. In the 1918-20 period, Cann, Buckley, Bunfield, Straker and Brace, who had been there at or near the MFGB's inception, were all still serving on the EC. Now into their sixties, they had made the conversion to Labour from Liberalism, but many of their views about the conduct of industrial and political affairs had remained unchanged. Furthermore, these men did not exhaust the list of old Lib-Labs who continued to hold considerable power within the Federation, as we shall see when we look at the leaderships in Nottinghamshire and South Wales, and to a lesser extent Scotland and Yorkshire.

In an interview conducted by Hywell Francis in 1973, R.P.Arnot gave an excellent insight into the nature of these men who still formed an important part of the national leadership. Arnot recalled how he had approached Smillie at the end of a MFGB EC meeting in 1917, seeking the Federation's help in a campaign to stop the imprisonment of Bertrand Russell for his anti-war views. Smillie told him to open the door into the room where the EC members were still chatting to each other. "Cake through and look at them", he said. When Arnot did, he was instantly struck by the "collection of fossils" which confronted him: "A more venerable set of portent, grave and reverend seniors you never saw." Smillie pointed out Sam Finney, the ageing leader of the Midlands Federation, as an example. When Bertrand Russell's case had been raised he had simply said "Folks are no' put in prison unless they have done something wrong."[8]

The majority of EC members in this period were Labour in politics, but were typical moderate trade union leaders of the pre-1914 generation, by

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8 Interview with R.P.Arnot, 6 March 1973, South Wales Miners' Library, SWML, RPA/53/8-9.

now mostly in their fifties or even sixties. Of the 1918-19 EC, Cape, Sutton, Hall, Finney, Roebuck and Hoskin were all much of a type. The remainder of the EC members, whilst not slipping neatly into either of the two categories outlined above, nonetheless did not particularly stand out. Vernon Hartshorn at 47 years was of a slightly younger generation, more dynamic and politically ambitious, but hardly less moderate. George Barker and James Winstone, like Hartshorn from South Wales, were slightly to the left of the main group, but there was no-one of the likes of A.J.Cook or Arthur Horner in the leadership; the syndicalists and future communists were very much present in the MFGB at the war's end, but had yet to break through into its leadership either at a local level - with the exception of South Wales - or at a national level.[9]

The dominant figures in the national leadership were Robert Smillie (President), Frank Hodges (Secretary) and Herbert Smith (vice-President).[10] Hodges, who was still only 33 in 1919, was the rising star of the younger generation of South Wales militants who had been associated with the Unofficial Reform Committee before the war. He had long since parted company with the syndicalists, and had only secured the SWMF nomination for Secretary as the moderate candidate against Noah Ablett. However, his youthfulness, his syndicalist past, and his current espousal of guild socialism meant that Hodges was still seen very much as a dynamic man of the left. R.P.Arnot remembered how "it was an immense change" when someone as "modern" as Hodges burst onto the scene. Not only

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9 Joyce Bellamy and John Saville, Dictionary of Labour Biography, vol.1 (London: Macmillan, 1972), vol.2 (1974), vol.3 (1976), vol.4, (1977). (Hereafter cited as DLB, and volume no.) Biographical details of leading figures in the areas under study in this thesis have also been gleaned from other sources, notably local newspapers, and are included in the relevant chapters.

10 See Chapter Nine below for a discussion of Herbert Smith.

was he a socialist, he was "exceptionally clever, able and accomplished." He was cosmopolitan and dashing: "He could very rapidly pick up every subject, he was right in the forefront of whatever was being discussed politically in the country and whatever was the latest fashion." He was, according to Arnot, unquestionably the most talented man of his generation of trade union leaders: "He was the ablest, he was a brilliant speaker. He was a born Queen's Counsel." It was obvious that Hodges' career still had far to go. Feted by other labour leaders who were "stunned" by his performance on the Sankey Commission, "he was told there was no stage he might not reach", and Arnot personally believed that even at this point in time, Hodges "was quite convinced...that he would be the next Prime Minister." Although nobody in 1919 could predict Hodges future fall from grace, his obvious ambition and careerism caused those who knew him in South Wales to raise question marks over his left-wing credentials.[11]

Even the brilliant Hodges stood in the shadow of Robert Smillie however. At 62 years old in 1919, his socialist pedigree was unmatched among trade union leaders. Working alongside Keir Hardie, he had been a pioneer of both mining trade unionism and socialist politics in Scotland from 1880 onwards, and was a founder member of both the Lanarkshire Miners' Union (LMU) and the ILP. Following the death of Enoch Edwards in 1912, he had taken over as President of the MFGB, but he had already effectively been in-situ during the six week long strike earlier that year. During the war he enhanced his reputation by refusing either to sign the Treasury Agreement or to become Food Controller in the Coalition Government. His anti-militarist ILP position on the war was tinged with a pacifism which enraged patriots but endeared him to the left. He was, along with Sidney

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11 Interview with R.P.Arnot, op.cit., pp.9-10.

Webb, the key figure in the War Emergency Workers' National Committee (WEWNC) which enabled Labour to survive the war politically, and he chaired the famous Leeds Convention in 1917. When Robert Williams told that gathering that the government had "taken your own leaders from your ranks and used them against you", a voice rang out "Not Smillie!"[12]

By 1919 Smillie was a legendary figure in the labour movement. Probably the key element in his popularity was the fact that he seemed to have held on to his integrity despite his accession to the upper circles of the labour bureaucracy; the fact that he still lived in a miners' row in Lanarkshire, was an important part of the Smillie mythology. His commitment to the cause of labour was unquestionable. The Western Mail's labour correspondent wrote of him:

> There is of course no living man who desires more ardently the radical improvement of the people; no man who, with much ability, strives more greatly for it; no leader who can possibly match him in influence and power.[13]

The Nottinghamshire Guardian similarly observed that:

> Other men have the shadow of power - the ability to pass resolutions and to issue orders through trade unions. Mr.Smillie has the substance. He can command the devotion of his followers. He is trusted. His word is law...he has achieved in the labour world the sign mark of popularity and respect - he has ceased to be "Mr.Robert Smillie" and has become "Bob Smillie" to a million men.[14]

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12 J.Bellamy and J. Saville, DLB vol.3 (1976), pp.165 -173.
J.M.Winter, op.cit., chapter 7.
Robert Williams, op.cit., p.83.

13 Western Mail, 1 April 1919. It should be noted however that this appraisal of Smillie came after he had exerted his influence to have the Sankey Commission accepted by the MFGB, an act which endeared him to a press which had previously been overwhelmingly hostile to him.

14 Nottinghamshire Guardian, 16 August 1919.

However, as well as being heralded as a leader of integrity and principle, Smillie was often portrayed as an uncompromising militant at this time. John Maclean, who held no brief for timdity and caution amongst labour leaders spoke of his "greatness and grandeur" calling him "the mightiest fighter the workers of Scotland had ever had."[15] Robert Williams asked: "What working class leader could be more indicative of the spirit of proletarian revolt than Smillie?"[16] Smillie was himself more circumspect about his militant image, describing himself as "an evolutionary revolutionist" defined as one who wanted to see dramatic changes in the way industry was run, but who did "not desire to see an armed or bloody revolution in this country."[17] In reality, Smillie was a pragmatist, quite capable of displaying caution and restraint in both industrial and political affairs. His success as a labour leader was due in no small measure to the fact that he had never allowed his socialist beliefs to prevent him from constructing working relationships with those on his political right. Both in his early days in the LMU and National Union of Scottish Mineworkers (NUSMW), and as President of the MFGB, he had worked closely with Lib-Labs and Labour right-wingers, and had, where necessary, made compromises. The war was a good case in point. Both as President of the MFGB and as Chairman of the WEWNC, he had held together uneasy alliances of jingoists and anti-militarists, concentrating not on doctrinal disputes, but on practical measures to defend the material conditions of the miners and the working class.[18] It was his skill as a broker between left and right, militants and moderates, which enabled him to simultaneously retain the confidence of people from opposite sides of

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15 The Call, 9 August 1917.
16 The Herald, 1 February 1919.
17 TUC Annual Conference, 1919, p.336.
18 J.M.Winter, op.cit., Chapter 7.
R.P.Arnot, A History of the Scottish Miners (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955), Chapters 4-7. (Hereafter cited as R.P.Arnot, Scottish Miners)

the political spectrum within the labour movement. As R.P.Arnot has perceptively written:

> And if in mining matters of acute controversy he often seemed to adopt a cautious attitude and on occasion to hold a balance between left and right, this brought him no Laodicean reproach, but an increased influence as one to whom each side looked for aid against its opponents.[19]

Although he was on the left of the MFGB leadership in 1919, with obvious differences between himself and those like Finney, Bunfield and Cape, he nonetheless retained much in common with his colleagues. He did not stand aloof from the rest of the EC, but was very much a part of it, operating within parameters which were deemed mutually acceptable. He was, like all the EC members, a bureaucratic reformist, in the sense that they "all shared an ideological commitment to political reformism...coupled with a bureaucratic trade union practice."[20] The pursuit of political reform through parliamentary legislation had always been a central plank of mining trade unionism as far back as the middle of the nineteenth century. The Miners' National Union, for example, was founded in 1863 expressly "for the purpose of gaining legislative change."[21]

Parliament featured more prominently in mining politics than was the case with any other occupational group. Partly this was due to the size and importance of the industry to the British economy. As such, Parliament had always been prepared to devote considerable time and attention to mining affairs, even in the classical age of laissez-faire. Royal Commissions and Select Committees on mining resulted in landmark pieces of legislation in 1872, 1887 and 1911, which laid down regulations and

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19 R.P.Arnot, The Miners, pp.126-7.
20 A.Campbell, op.cit., pp.9-10.
21 R.P.Arnot, The Miners, p.43.

guidelines for the operation of the industry. Apart from helping to improve the appalling safety record of the industry, the granting of the right of miners to elect and pay for their own checkweighers was instrumental in the creation of modern mining trade unionism.[22]

Prior to the third Reform Act of 1884-5, the miners' unions had sought to influence business at Westminster with lobbying and petitioning. With the enfranchisement of large numbers of miners however, they were now in a position to elect a considerable number of MPs directly, in those constituencies where miners dominated the electorate.[23] The great engineering lock-out of 1897-8, and the backlash against trade unions in the courts around the turn of the century further convinced the fledgling MFGB that major change in industry would come about by Parliamentary rather than direct industrial methods. The Act of 1908 which reduced the colliers' hours to eight per day was claimed as a major vindication of this strategy. Even though it had taken twenty years of agitation to achieve, it had nonetheless had the inestimable advantage, from the leadership's vantage point, of avoiding the risks to union organisation which industrial action entailed. In this respect, Smillie's experience of union-building in Lanarkshire had made him as fervent an advocate of the benefits of Parliamentary legislation as any other miners' leader. He and his socialist colleagues had had enormous difficulties in establishing permanent union organisation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Scottish mining unionism, and Lanarkshire's in particular, had "been characterised...by a succession of short-lived

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22 ibid., pp.43-50.
23 Roy Gregory, The Miners in British Politics 1906-1914 (Oxford University Press, 1968), p.16.
Miners were in a better position than most groups of workers to elect their own MPs because of their concentration in certain constituencies.

federations of local unions established on the cyclical upswing of the coal market" which "were then destroyed during strikes to resist wage reductions when the market declined."[24] As Gregory has pointed out:

> To the early socialists this state of affairs was both a challenge and a stimulus: finding themselves at the head of unstable and ineffective local unions they turned all the more readily to political action to offset their industrial weakness.[25]

Smillie was from 1912 one of the key architects of a continuing MFGB strategy which sought progress through a judicious combination of industrial and Parliamentary means. When recourse was made to a national strike on the sole occasion of the 1912 minimum wage dispute, meticulous care was taken to make sure that it remained under the tight control of the leadership, and it was called off when Parliament conceded the principle (though not the detail) of a minimum wage.[26] In the wake of the strike it was business as usual, with the Federation pressing for a range of legislative enactments, from a scheme to provide comprehensive workmen's compensation, to the nationalisation of the coal industry.[27] In addition, the aim of the MFGB leadership was to continue to nurture and develop union organisation - in particular, to increase the Federation's cohesiveness and degree of centralisation, and win the right to represent all miners in collective bargaining at the national level.

National wage bargaining and nationalisation both seemed to be a long way off in 1914. Indeed, state ownership had been discussed at MFGB conferences as far back as 1894, and by now the annual resolutions in its

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24 A.Campbell, op.cit., p.11.
25 R.Gregory, op.cit., p.90.
26 R.P.Arnot, Scottish Miners, Chapter 6.
27 The first nationalisation Bill was drafted by the MFGB in 1913.

favour had come to take on the aspect of ritualised gestures.[28] However, the war intervened dramatically to change the political and economic landscape in which the MFGB was operating. Above all, it highlighted "the immense strategic importance of coalmining in the economy."[29] Coal was vital not just to domestic industrial production, including munitions, but for shipping and foreign exchange. In 1915 Lloyd George, then Minister of Munitions in Asquith's government, said:

> In peace and in war King Coal is the paramount lord of industry...It is our real international coinage. When we buy goods, food and raw materials abroad, we pay not in gold but in coal...we cannot do without coal.[30]

Pronouncements of this sort from government Ministers left the miners in no doubt as to their indispensability to the war effort. This was doubtless a source of pride, but when set against rapidly falling real wages and very high profits, it could also cause irritation and anger. It only took a slight ebbing of the initial high tide of patriotic fervour for industrial unrest to creep back into the coalfields, threatening the continuous production upon which the war economy rested. In the interests of stabilising industrial relations and (to a lesser extent) rationalising production, one of the first acts of the Lloyd George government in December 1916 was to introduce state control of the mining industry. Responsibility for the industry rested with a newly created Coal Controller's Department within the Board of Trade, headed by Sir Guy Calthrop.

Although initially anxious that state control had been introduced to supress rather than appease industrial unrest and discontent, it soon

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28 M.W.Kirby, The British Coalmining Industry, 1870-1946: A Political and Economic History (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp.31-2.
29 ibid., p.24.
30 S.Armitage, op.cit., p.103.

became clear to the MFGB leadership that the benefits far outweighed any possible disadvantages. In the first place, Lloyd George promised Smillie that the Munitions Act would not be applied to the mining industry, and furthermore suggested, as we have seen, that state control might well be the first step towards full nationalisation. In the meantime, the central plank of state control, which was the creation of a profits pool funded by a percentage of the owners' "excess profits", represented an enormous advance for the union. Although its primary function was to subsidise those collieries which might otherwise have gone out of production, its corollary was to destroy the owners' claim that national wage bargaining was impossible due to regional variations in productivity and profitability. For the first time in its history the MFGB was able to make claims for, and receive, national wage rises. Furthermore, on both occassions in 1917 and 1918, these applications were made directly to the Cabinet, the government thereby bestowing full recognition upon the MFGB for the first time. The centralising effects of national bargaining led the MFGB to restructure its leadership in the last year of the war, and Smillie and Hodges were elected as the union's first full-time national officers.[31]

As the war drew to a close, the retention of state control became the absolutely top priority of the MFGB EC, both in terms of making national bargaining a permanent feature of the industry, and of keeping alive the prospect of nationalisation. It was this which dominated the discussions at the MFGB Annual Conference in 1918. As James Winstone said, in moving the resolution on nationalisation from South Wales: "The time has arrived...now is the time and this is the place."[32] However, it is

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31 MFGB Special Conference, 14-16 January 1919, pp.6-8.
32 MFGB Annual Conference, 9-12 July 1918, p.44.

important to stress that it was the war, rather than any significant change in strategy by the MFGB leadership, which had put these long-term goals onto the immediate agenda for the first time. It was as if the natural process of evolution had simply been speeded up. As Hodges said: "The war has so changed the position that what might have taken place in a period of ten or fifteen years is now possible within a comparatively short period."[33]

Indeed, there was no serious discussion at this conference about strategy, and although direct action was not explicitly precluded as an option, neither was it put forward. Furthermore, the resolution on nationalisation (and several others besides) was, in keeping with tradition, aimed at parliamentary legislation, and "co-operating with the national Labour Party to ensure the passage of a new Bill into law."[34] Shortly before the general election of 1918, Hodges spoke of the prospects for the realisation of the MFGB's demands:

> To accomplish this tremendous task without social disorder, the Miners' Federation hopes to have its strength accurately reflected in Parliament. It is possible that the Miners' Federation could accomplish this by a great National Strike. But it is in the interests of the nation that it should be accomplished without a strike. National stability is essential in the years following the declaration of peace. The trade unions, acting through Parliament, can alone accomplish this in anything like order.[35]

The war had moved the goalposts to a more favourable position for the MFGB, but had done nothing to disabuse the bureaucratic reformist leadership of the risks inherent in national industrial action. Direct action was not discounted by the EC in the run up to the campaign for the Miners' Charter, but Parliamentary and electoral politics continued to

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33 ibid., p.117.
34 ibid., p.53.
35 Merthyr Pioneer, 14 December 1918.

form an important part of its strategic orientation, even after the dissapointment of the December elections. Below them, however, amongst the rank and file there were influential groups for whom direct action represented the only road to success.

*(ii) Post-war perspectives of the militant miner*

In his use of the term, Alan Campbell defines the ideal typical "militant miner" as one who believed in the socialist revolution, involving the socialisation of the mines, and who was a member of the Communist Party.[36] This is appropriate for the 1920's, but not for our brief post-war epoch before the formation of the Communist Party, and so the term requires re-definition. For our purposes the militant miner as an ideal type in opposition to the bureaucratic reformist first appeared in South Wales in 1910-11, and was a syndicalist rather than a communist. A note of warning should be sounded here however, for whilst the label of communist calls forth a fairly clear set of principles and beliefs by which we can recognise Campbell's militant miner, the label of syndicalist describes a much broader and more heterogeneous group.

What, for the purposes of ease, we shall describe as the "syndicalist" current in the coalfields in fact contained considerable ideological diversity. Militant miners in our period might describe themselves as syndicalists, revolutionary syndicalists, industrial unionists, industrial socialists, or other variations thereof, a fact which points up the cross-pollination which took place between the different strands

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36 A.Campbell, op.cit., Figure 1, p.23.

of the left at this time.[37] Whereas simon-pure revolutionary syndicalists rejected political action entirely, many who saw themselves as being within the syndicalist fold did not. Industrial unionists, for example, were prepared to accept some measure of auxiliary political (meaning Parliamentary) activity. Others might vote Labour at elections but play no organised role in party politics, while still others might find no contradiction between holding syndicalist-type ideas and being in the ILP. As one student of mining syndicalism has written:

> Individuals could selectively subscribe to more than one set of principles, agreeing or disagreeing with whatever aspect suited or failed to fit in with their particular views and creating, in effect, their own personal composite ideology...Given this openness, or more perjoratively, this inconsistency, the difficulty of applying hard and fast labels becomes apparent.[38]

Campbell puts forward the Scottish miners' leader and communist Willie Allan as typifying his militant miner, but for our period it was unquestionably Noah Ablett. One of the founders of the Unofficial Reform Committee (URC) in South Wales in 1911, he was the dominant figure amongst the militants throughout the rest of the decade, and although he was a full-time Agent in 1919, he remained a leading exponent of the ideas encapsulated in The Miners' Next Step.[39] His own political make-up reflected the ideological inconsistencies of the militant miner which he represented. At the 1912 TUC conference, he described himself as a syndicalist, but one who didn't rule out working class political action. However, only the week before he had written to the Rhondda Socialist saying that people should view him not as a syndicalist but as an

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37 D.K.Davies, "The Influence of Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism in the South Wales Coalfield, 1898-1921: A Study in Ideology and Practice" (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff, 1991), pp.4-28. (Hereafter, D.K.Davies, Thesis)
38 ibid., p.28.
39 See Chapter Five below.

industrial unionist.[40] In line with The Miners' Next Step, he placed a low value on electoral activity, but he was not averse to supporting Labour candidates at election time.[41] On the other hand, he did not see political action as meaning only electoral activity, and was a fervent advocate of working class education, and pioneer of the Plebs League and Central Labour College (CLC) classes which so influenced his generation of militants.[42]

In this period, before the appearance of the Communist Party hardened the ideological diversity within the syndicalist camp into a doctrinal division over reform or revolution, Ablett's eclecticism captures the essence of the militant miner. Whilst he might hold elements of reformism in his political consciousness, the militant miner's main orientation was, like Ablett's, firmly towards his trade union and direct action as the means to social and economic transformation. This belief that the main thrust towards socialism would be provided from below, by the collective power of workers exercised through their industrial organisations rather than through the ballot box, was the hallmark of the militant miner in 1919, and of the rank and file movement to which he belonged.

The rank and file movement first emerged in South Wales at the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century.[43] The South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF) had been a slow starter in mining trade unionism, only having been formed in 1898, and had a reputation for moderation within

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40 D.K.Davies, Thesis, pages 30, and 64-5.
41 Interview with D,J,Davies, 3 November 1972, SWML, DJD/16/6.
42 David Egan, "Noah Ablett, 1883-1935", Llafur vol.4, no.3, pp.19-28.
43 See Chapter Five below for more on the URC in South Wales.

the MFGB for the first decade of its existence. However, from around 1907, industrial relations began to deteriorate as the owners sought to compensate for declining productivity by holding down labour costs.[44] Lib-Lab leaders who had successfully established the SWMF in extremely difficult conditions, and often with recourse to quite militant action, had by now become conservative and set in their ways, and were clinging tenaciously to collective bargaining methods and mechanisms which were ill-suited to the changing conditions in the coalfield. Between 1903 and 1910 for example, the Conciliation Board failed to settle 231 out of the 391 disputes referred to it, and as the end of the decade drew nearer increasing numbers of these unresolved disputes ended in lock-outs or strikes.[45]

Matters came to a head when there was a lock-out at the Naval Colliery of the Cambrian Combine group of collieries in the Rhondda in September 1910. The long and bitter struggle over payment for abnormal places which followed has been amply documented elsewhere[46], but the experience marked a watershed in mining trade unionism in South Wales and beyond. When the miners were eventually forced back to work by the leaders of the SWMF and MFGB in June 1911 on terms which had been rejected in October 1910, the hiatus which had emerged during the strike between rank and file militants and moderate officials hardened and became permanent.

In the last months of the Cambrian Combine strike, rank and file militants had been pushing for escalation to a national strike for the

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44 L.J.Williams, "The Road to Tonypandy", Llafur vol.1, no.2, 1973, pp.46-50.
45 M.G.Woodhouse, "Rank and File Movements among the Miners of South Wales, 1910-26" (Unpublished PhD. Thesis, Oxford University, 1969) pp.4-9. (Hereafter cited as M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis)
46 See ibid., pp.44-63.

minimum wage. However, the experience of the officials' behaviour in trying to sell the dispute out had convinced them that for a minimum wage campaign to be successful, it would have to come from outside the official machinery. In the second half of 1911 they held an ongoing discussion about how to sharpen their activity and increase their effectiveness in the light of the previous year's experience. The upshot was the creation of the URC at the end of 1911, and the publication of its ideas and programme in The Miners' Next Step.[47]

Woodhouse describes the make-up of the URC at its formation:

> As it came into being at the end of 1911 the URC therefore represented a hardcore of unofficial leaders in the Rhondda and their immediate supporters in the Plebs League and on the Cambrian Combine Committee, together with the extended network of contacts throughout the coalfield who had been associated in one way or another with the drafting of The Miners' Next Step or who sympathised with the general aims of the URC. The organisation of the URC was consequently of the loosest form. W.H.Mainwaring kept a book of about two hundred addresses of contacts in South Wales and in the MFGB generally, and it was through these that The Miners' Next Step was distributed and the particular policies of the URC on specific issues taken into the lodges.[48]

The starting point of The Miners' Next Step was its attack on what it called "the Conciliation Policy" for its failiure to secure acceptable wage levels, and for preventing effective trade unionism through its " "tying up" and "Delay" character."[49] Furthermore, because of its need for full time proffessional union negotiators, the Conciliation policy created a caste of leaders who stood aloof from and above the miners, and who "become "gentlemen", they become MPs, and have considerable social

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47 ibid., pp.72-6.
48 ibid., p.76.
49 "The Miners' Next Step", in Ken Coates (ed), Democracy in the Mines (Nottingham, 1974), p.18. (Hereafter cited as TMNS).

prestige because of this power."[50] The result was that: "The leader has an interest - a vested interest - in stopping progress" by maintaining the status quo , and limiting the degree of control exercised by the rank and file, both within the union and at the coalface.[51] The opening section of The Miners' Next Step had much in common with Robert Michels' attempted theorisation of the problems inherent in stable, permanent working class organisations; the inevitability of the development of oligarchical leadership with distinctive interests from those of the rank and file, its infusion with bourgeois modes of thought and behaviour, the necessarily corrupting nature of power - all these were major themes.[52]

In language which owed much to the influence of Tom Mann's Industrial Syndicalist, the basic remedy offered by The Miners' Next Step was the transformation of the union into an industrial organisation which, "recognising the war of interest between workers and employers, is constructed on fighting lines, allowing for a rapid and simultaneous stoppage of wheels throughout the mining industry."[53] In the first place this would be achieved by a change in policy; the adoption of the demand for a minimum wage was vital, as it made conciliation unnecessary and clarified the battle lines: "A man either receives the minimum or he does not. There is nothing to conciliate or negotiate upon."[54] Secondly, the pamphlet argued for sweeping constitutional changes to the SWMF. A process of democratic centralisation would overcome institutionalised sectionalism and bureaucratic domination by abolishing the districts and placing control of the organisation in the hands of the rank and file.

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50 ibid.
51 ibid., p.19.
52 David Gilbert, Class, Community and Collective Action: Social Change in Two British Coalfields, 1850-1926 (Oxford, 1992), pp.78-9.
53 TMNS, p.23.
54 ibid., p.24.

The principles of the proposed constitution were that: "The Lodges have supreme control", "The Executive becomes unofficial", and the "Agents or organisers become the servants of the men."[55]

Armed with "a militant aggressive policy" the union would be characterised by enhanced solidarity, and by the far greater involvement of the rank and file in running their own affairs.[56] Great emphasis was placed on the educational and confidence-building aspects of struggle, even for immediate and limited goals:

> Every fight for, and victory won by the men will inevitably assist them in arriving at a clearer conception of the resposibilities and duties before them. It will also assist them to see that so long as shareholders are permitted to continue their ownership, or the State administers on behalf of the shareholders, slavery and oppression are bound to be the rule in industry. And with this realisation, the age-long oppression of Labour will draw to its end.[57]

As this suggests, The Miners' Next Step rejected the nationalisation proposals of state socialists as bureaucratic and autocratic. Its objective was industrial democracy:

> Every industry thoroughly organised, in the first place, to fight, to gain control of, and then to administer that industry...This would mean real democracy in rel life, making for real manhood and womanhood. Any other form of democracy is a delusion and a snare.[58]

Once again, the route to control lay in the engagement of the miners in struggle with the owners. The pamphlet suggests that this would not, initially, take the form of a full frontal assault on the direct question of ownership. Rather, it envisaged a series of lesser and partial struggles over wages and conditions which would, by simultaneously eating

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55 ibid., pp.22-26.
56 ibid., pp.28-9.
57 ibid., p.30.
58 ibid.

into the profits of the owners and increasing the fighting ability, spirit and confidence of the miners, lead incrementally to workers' control. The second point here, namely the role of strikes in preparing the rank and file morally and politically for the socialisation of the mines, is an important and much overlooked underlying theme of The Miners' Next Step. The influence of DeLeon has often been commented upon, but this emphasis on the importance of industrial action (collective restriction of output as well as strikes) in developing the consciousness of workers goes right back to Marx. Commenting in 1853 on wage strikes in Lancashire, he wrote that he was:

> convinced that the alternative rise and fall of wages, and the continual conflicts between masters and men resulting therefrom, are, in the present organisation of industry, the indispensable means of holding up the spirit of the labouring classes, of combining them into one great association against the encroachment of the ruling class...[59]

Without these economistic strikes, he wrote:

> the working classes...would be a heart-broken, a weak-minded, a worn-out unresisting mass, whose self-emancipation would prove as impossible as that of the slaves of Ancient Greece and Rome.[60]

At the risk of repetition, The Miners' Next Step shared this view of the value of partial struggles for the consciousness of the participants. Where it parted company from Marx was that it saw no role for a political party of the working class to assist this process, and direct the development of consciousness to a revolutionary level. For the South Wales syndicalists, this was superfluous to requirements; there was a strong attitude that militant industrial action would carry all before it, and would overcome any political obstacles in its path. This then was

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59 Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol.12 (London, 1975), p.169.
60 ibid.

the method of the militant miners who established the rank and file movement in the coal industry; by transforming the union organisation, and investing it with a fighting spirit, one could transform both the miners themselves, and the industry and society in which they worked and lived.

URC members set out to carry their message beyond South Wales, sending "missionaries" to other coalfields to explain the ideas and strategy of The Miners' Next Step, and to urge lodges to take up the campaign for the minimum wage.[61] Whilst it would not be quite accurate to say that the URC's efforts led directly to the national strike of 1912, one can nonetheless trace its origins back to the unofficial agitation which began in the Cambrian Combine strike. This was the limit of the URC's pre-war success however. Efforts at establishing Reform Committees were made in Scotland and the north-east at this time, but they came to nothing, and in South Wales the advent of war led to the collapse of the URC.[62]

The crisis of the URC was due in part to its organisational looseness, but was mainly a function of its political heterogeneity. In "normal" conditions political differences amongst URC supporters could be glossed over or avoided by a syndicalist concentration on union reform. However, the war demanded a political response, and the organisation was unable to accomodate the polarisation which ensued. Whilst some like W.F.Hay took up an unwavering opposition to the war, other militants like C.B.Stanton could flip over into an ultra-patriotic stance, making joint activity on

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61 M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, p.73.
62 Branco Pribicevic, "The Demand for Workers' Control in the Railway, Coalmining and Engineering Industries, 1910-22" (D.Phil Thesis, Oxford University, 1957), pp.302-3. (Hereafter cited as Pribicevic, Thesis).

industrial questions an impossibility. Whilst the URC's collapse was temporary in nature, it nonetheless signposted the fragility of the unofficial movement at moments of political crisis, and exposed the weak flank of the syndicalist approach. In theory "politics" could be ignored or at least subordinated to straightforwardly industrial issues. In practice, at certain points political questions were unavoidable and intervened to disrupt the industrial strategy of the reform movement. These political fault lines would again come into play at crucial moments in the campaign for the Miners' Charter in 1919.

Nonetheless, the demise of coalfield-wide organisation did not prevent the continued activity of groups of militants at lodge level, and these played a crucial role in the South Wales strike of July 1915. This was without a doubt the key episode in the mining industry during the war, shaping the contours of national industrial relations between miners, owners and government up to the end of hostilities and beyond. In fact, the strike can be seen as the opening act in the power struggle between the MFGB and the government which culminated in the crises of decontrol in 1920 and the lock-out of the following year. For this reason, the strike ranks equal in importance to the wartime strikes in engineering, and yet curiously it has been almost completely overlooked by historians.[63] It is tempting, therefore, to include a full account of the strike here, but this would mean straying too far from the present

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63 Apart from a brief article by an economist shortly after the strike, there is only one (highly flawed) article in print which deals with the events of July 1915;
G.R.Carter, "The Coal Strike In South Wales", The Economic Journal, no.25, 1915.
Anthony Mor O'Brien, "Patriotism on Trial: The Strike of the South Wales Miners, July 1915", Welsh History Review, vol.12, 1984-5, pp.76-104.

narrative, and so we must confine our discussion of it to those areas which shed light on the campaign for the Miners' Charter in 1919.[64]

As we have seen, the outcome of the 1915 strike was government control of the industry, a development which transformed, from the MFGB EC's point of view, national wage bargaining and nationalisation from heady ambitions to realisable goals. However, this bald statement of fact does not capture the full significance of the nature of the strike and its victory, and the implications these had for the different perspectives of bureaucratic reformist and militant miner in 1919. In the first place it is undoubtedly the case that whilst the MFGB leaders derived an enormous strategic advantage from the strike, had it been left up to them there would not have been one. Much has been made of the MFGB's refusal, in contrast to other unions, to comply with the Treasury Agreement or the Munitions Act, described by Smillie as the "Workers' Slavery Act."[65] However, it is important not to mistake a determination to maintain a degree of independence from government regulation for a qualitatively different attitude to the question of what constituted acceptable and responsible behaviour for a great trade union in a national crisis. The refusal of the MFGB to submit to government compulsion should not be interpreted in such a way as to conclude that it stood outside of the patriotic consensus which had been established between government and unions, for whilst there were important nuances in its war-time strategy, its attitude was never oppositional.

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64 For a full account of the strike, see Martyn Ives, "The Double-Edged Sword: The Politics of Patriotism in the South Wales Miners Strike of July 1915", Llafur, 1995, (Forthcoming)

65 The Herald, 26 June 1915.

The position of the MFGB was demonstrated in the course of a series of meetings which took place between Smillie and Lloyd George, then Minister of Munitions, in the early summer of 1915, at which they discussed an arrangement whereby the miners could be excluded from the Munitions of War Act. Smillie's attitude, and that of the MFGB Executive, whilst implacably opposed to any incorporation into an Act which gave the government powers of compulsion over the miners, was simultaneously well disposed to delivering voluntarily that which Lloyd George sought from the Act - namely a sustained and if possible increased output of coal to feed Britain's war economy, and the avoidance of strikes and absenteeism. Smillie stated publicly that the union was willing "to do everything within reason to secure a continuous, steady, and if possible an enlarged output of coal."[66]

Under Smillie's guidance, the MFGB leadership's strategy can be summed up as an attempt to balance a dual commitment to trade unionism and patriotism, or to notions of class and nation, and to assert their reciprocity. In terms of resisting government compulsion, this formula achieved a measure of success. Beyond this point, however, the reconcilability of these two essentially contradictory commitments proved evasive. In practice, the felt need to serve the nation placed severe constraints upon the leadership's ability to sanction industrial action and precluded the adoption of a belligerent stance over the pressing question of wages. Consequently, in April 1915 the MFGB conference decided to shelve its current demand for a national wage increase, which was being seriously targeted for the first time, and shortly afterwards the EC instructed affiliated unions to pursue a claim for a 20% rise via

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66 The Times, 26 June 1915.

the district Conciliation Boards.[67] Although acceptable rises were negotiated in most cases, this could not conceal what had been a major climbdown by the MFGB leadership, which had aborted its planned drive for national wage bargaining. Furthermore, the decision to pursue district increases had involved abandoning the miners in South Wales, where the owners were clearly not going to make any reasonable settlement.[68] At this stage of the war then, the MFGB was far from having things its own way in industrial relations. The Herald expressed the disappointment of the left: "There is little doubt that the miners have been defeated by the coalowners and the government."[69]

The SWMF leaders' approach to war-time trade unionism chimed with that of Smillie. Vernon Hartshorn position was that strikes were to be avoided as long as the war lasted, but "the industrial truce meant the status quo in industry, not the prostration of labour before capital."[70] However, as the national leadership had found, it was easier to balance a commitment to their members and to the national interest in theory than in practice. By 1915 the South Wales coal trade was booming; the steam coal from the Central Valleys was the best in the world, and was the sole source of fuel for not only the British, but for the French and Mediterranean Fleets as well. The precious nature of South Wales' steam coal drove its price through the roof, resulting in huge profits for the owners.[71]

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67 MFGB Conference, 21-23 April 1915.
68 Western Mail, 20 April 1915.
69 The Herald, 1 May 1915
70 M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, p.116.
71 Report of the Departmental Committee appointed to inquire into the conditions prevailing in the coal industry due to the war. Cd.8009 xxxviii, Part Two, Minutes of Evidence, p.123; Prior to the war, the average price of good steam coal was anywhere between 9s11d and 18s 1d per ton. By 1915 even a bulk buyer like the Admiralty was paying 25s per ton, and the steam coal left over for sale on the market was fetching massively inflated prices.

However, with an eye to renewed competition with the growing American steam coal industry at the end of the war, the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coal Owners' Association (M&SWCOA) would only offer the SWMF a 10% increase on the 1879 standard rate, which had been rendered utterly obsolete by the inflated price of coal. In a nutshell, the owners' offer excluded the miners from any share in the wartime bonanza in the South Wales coal trade.[72] The SWMF leadership appealed to Walter Runciman at the Board of Trade to intervene and force the owners to make an acceptable offer, but to no avail.[73] By July 1915 it was becoming abundantly clear that the alternative to strike action was indeed prostration before capital.

As a confrontation loomed, the government and the press sought to present the dispute as a test of the miners' patriotism. The Western Mail, for example, carried a cartoon of a miner dressed in a German military uniform holding a gun marked "strike" to the head of the First Lord of the Admiralty.[74] On July 14th, following the announcement by a SWMF conference of its intention to strike on the 15th, the government upped the stakes by proclaiming the coalfield under the penal section of the Munitions Act. This meant that any strike would be illegal, and a Munitions Court was set up to prosecute miners who defied the ban. Copies of the Proclamation were posted at every pit-head.[75] The government's decision was greeted almost entirely favourably by the press: "To capitulate to such brazen intimidation would not only be a calamity, but a crime..." announced the Morning Post, for whom: "The only possible

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72 G.R.Carter, op.cit., p.457.
The Herald, 22 May 1915.
73 Western Mail, 28 June 1915 & 13 July 1915.
74 Western Mail, 14 July 1915.
75 The Times, 14 & 16 July 1915.
Western Mail, 14 July 1915.

course is to confront the unconscionable conspiracy against the common weal and to break it...An end to feeble trucking."[76] The Times agreed:

> The Government could have done no less than they have, if they are to govern at all. Any other answer to the decision of the delegates at the Cardiff Conference on Monday would have amounted to abdication. The decision was a flat defiance, not of the coalowners, but of the Government.[77]

What had been a local dispute over a district wage agreement had now become a "test of government", a confrontation over the right of the state to compel workers in wartime.[78] This was not simply the point of view of the press; the government too saw the conflict in this way. When Lloyd George was dispatched to Cardiff, his instructions from the Cabinet should the miners fail to respond to his appeals were clear:

> The Government would at once take all the necessary measures to paralyse the strike, by preventing meetings, speeches, and the receipt of strike pay...inciters to a continuance of the strike or to the obstruction of measures taken by the Government, would be prosecuted and punished, and the question would be seriously considered of strengthening the law by making such offences treasonable as acts of aiding and abetting the enemies of the King.[79]

The Government hoped that by defining strike action as treasonable behaviour, and using the coercive powers of the state in the name of the "national interest", it would be able to induce a change of heart in the SWMF. As far as the union leadership was concerned it was successful. Sensitive to accusations of disloyalty, and concerned to respect the rule of law, the EC majority tried to persuade the delegate conference on July 12th to abandon plans for a strike.[80] Although they were defeated by a

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76 Morning Post, 14 July 1915.
77 The Times, 14 July 1915.
78 ibid.
79 CAB 41/36/34, 19 July 1915.
80 SWMF Conference, 12 July 1915.

large majority, and instructed by the conference to call a strike on July 15th, only three of over twenty SWMF EC members were prepared to stand by the membership.[81] The majority travelled to London in defiance of the conference's instructions, to tell Runciman that "the EC as a body were prepared to render the Government any assistance they could in the direction of bringing about a termination of the strike."[82]

Despite the bombardment from the government, the press, and their own leaders, the rank and file, "rejecting all reiterated appeals to patriotism", stuck to the decision of the delegate conference. On July 15th all 200,000 South Wales miners defied the Proclamation and struck work for a new wage agreement. It is important to stress that this was not an indication of any particular disloyalty or lack of patriotism on their part. In fact, in common with their counterparts in other coalfields, South Wales miners volunteered in huge numbers for the armed forces, and those who remained behind cut down their levels of drinking and absenteeism, and willingly worked overtime to sustain the war effort.[83] In the rush to the colours, the pre-war militancy of the coalfield appeared to have been completely emasculated.

The patriotic feeling which was so essential in lubricating the wheels of the wartime industrial truce in mining had been consciously encouraged by the government in all the coalfields, but nowhere more so than in South Wales, which was of such high strategic importance to the war effort.

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81 South Wales News, 15 July 1915; The three in question were Barker, Hodges and Ablett.
82 Western Mail, 17 July 1915.
83 Report of the Departmental Committee, Part One, First General Report, May 1915, Cd.7939 xxvii, pp.6-18.
Second General Report, Cd.8147 xxxvii, pp.1-2.
Cd.8009 xxxviii, Part Two, Minutes of Evidence, p.121.

A.Clement Edwards, Liberal MP for East Glamorgan, carried a typical message. Shortly before the strike he told his constituents:

> The coal you get is the lifeblood of our Fleet. It has enabled our Navy to keep the enemy cruisers to distant seas. It has enabled troops to be brought from the uttermost ends of the earth. It has enabled us to send our fighting forces with munitions and equipment by hundreds of thousands to the shores of France and to the Dardenelles with swiftness and safety...In a word, the coal you get has been the salvation of our national strength.[84]

As Runciman's Departmental Committee had shown, the miners had everywhere tended to respond positively to patriotic appeals of this kind, allowing the industrial truce to function relatively smoothly. However, from the miners' point of view, this unwritten truce contained a major clause which insisted upon a genuine "mutuality of sacrifice" between owners and men.[85] George Barker said that when convinced of the national need, the Welsh miner "would go down the pit in just (the same spirit) as if he were putting on his uniform."[86] However, with the rejection of their wage claim, and in the face of flagrant "profiteering" by the owners, appeals to patriotism ceased to operate as an effective constraint upon the miners. In fact, they could become a catalyst to action.

In the first place, the voluminous praise of the South Wales miners for their part in the war effort had left them in no doubt as to their potential industrial strength should they choose to exercise it. Secondly, patriotism as an ideology did not exclude class-based interpretations. The miners were able to reject accusations of disloyalty precisely because of this fact; they had their own particular interpretation of what constituted patriotic behaviour. Noah Ablett

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84 The Times, 15 July 1915.
85 The phrase is Asquith's; The Times, 21 April 1915.
86 Cd.8009 xxxviii, p.211.

characteristically encapsulated this in one phrase when he said: "We are emphatically not pro-German, but we are working class."[87] An "experienced miner" explained their attitude to the owners and the government in an interview with the South Wales News:

> They allowed matters to drift until it was too late. They counted upon our patriotism and thought we would not dare come out in time of war. Now we are out they call us traitors and such-like names. They are the traitors, for they have driven loyal subjects to revolt. We have a duty to perform to the 50,000 miners who have gone out to the front - my two dear boys among them. We must see to it that the conditions upon which they will return to work after the war is over is at least as good as they were before they went away. If we colliers don't perform that duty we will be traitors to our sons and brothers.[88]

Defence of pay, living standards and working conditions won in past struggles was in fact seen as a patriotic duty of equal importance as the maintenance of coal production. As far as the miners were concerned, by their profiteering the owners had broken the conditions upon which the industrial truce had been founded, and this released them from their patriotic obligation not to strike. Furthermore, in this situation it was possible for the miners not simply to fend off accusations of treason, but to level the same charge at the owners, and for backing them up, the government too. A Times correspondent who spent much time amongst the Rhondda miners during the strike noted that there was a widespread belief that "the Government are only the tools of the hated capitalist."[89]

Just as the government's efforts to brand the South Wales miners as traitors backfired, so too did its attempt to coerce them under the

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87 The Herald, 24 July 1915.
88 South Wales News, 19 July 1915; (This newspaper is usually known as the South Wales Daily News, but the "Daily" was dropped in this period.)
89 The Times, 16 July 1915.

Munitions Act. In the mining communities of South Wales there was a strong tradition of coveting liberty, and pride in the status of being "free men".[90] The relatively recent experience of police and army intervention in the Cambrian Combine strike of 1910-11 had been deeply resented by the mining communities, and stiffened their hatred of State repression. Ironically, it was this very hatred which helps to explain the enthusiasm of the South Wales miners for enlistment in 1914, for the war was perceived as being fought for liberty and against "Prussianism" and tyranny.

The government's action in proclaiming the coalfield was an affront to the miners' traditions and values, and served to strengthen rather than weaken their resolve. The Merthyr Pioneer gave voice to the miners' concerns, describing the Munitions Act as "the most sinister piece of legislation enacted during the last fifty years of this country", as it "makes bondsmen of freemen."[91] This was a constant theme in speeches at mass meetings during the strike. James Winstone said: "The Government does not understand the psychology of the South Wales miner. They may destroy him, but they will never coerce him."[92]

There was a strong conviction that to submit to the government now would be to lose far more than a wage agreement; it would mean a return to a form of serfdom. Frank Hodges, at this time Agent for the Garw district, said: "Above all the Welshman considers that he is a free man, and that he would be enslaved if he worked under the Act."[93] Ablett felt that to give in "would be to set back the position of the workers for a

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90 Merthyr Pioneer, 31 July 1915.
91 ibid.
92 Western Mail, 14 July 1915.
93 Western Mail, 17 July 1915.

century."[94] In a speech to the SWMF conference on July 15th, Idris Davies encapsulated all the issues in one simple sentence when he told delegates:"If you are going to work, you are going to work in a worse state of slavery than our boys are fighting to relieve."[95]

Once the miners had resolved to defy the government there was literally nothing it could do to coerce them. As the New Statesman pointed out: "The government may set up a Munitions Court and inflict fines, but it will not be possible to recover the money, and you cannot imprison whole towns."[96] As for the rumours that the government was considering sending in troops to force the miners to work, the answer was given by a miner from the mid-Rhondda: "What can the Government do? They may take us to the tub and put a shovel in our hands, but they cannot make us load." The Times' correspondent noted that: "This assumption of the impotence of the Government is almost universal among the men."[97]

The South Wales miners had thus proved themselves to be invulnerable to the government's tactics in the dispute. Within hours of Lloyd George's arrival in Cardiff on the evening of Monday July 19th he recognised the hopelessness of the situation. The priority was no longer one of inflicting defeat upon the miners, but of extracting the government from the quagmire into which it had waded. By July 20th a proposed deal had been drawn up, which was accepted by a SWMF Conference the following day. Much was made in the press about the "genius" of Lloyd George in settling the dispute, but these could scarcely conceal the fact that the entire episode had been acutely embarassing for the government, nor that the

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94 ibid.
95 Merthyr Pioneer, 17 July 1915.
96 New Statesman, 17 July 1915.
97 The Times, 16 July 1915.

deal struck represented a complete climbdown on its behalf. The New Statesman commented sardonically on Lloyd George's volte-face:

> This week, the miners having destroyed his Act by treating it with the contempt it deserved, he has secured peace by going down to Cardiff, and with the greatest possible eclat, giving way to the strikers on practically every point.[98]

The precise details of the settlement are unimportant here, suffice it to say that the miners won a 50% increase on the 1879 standard, as compared with the 10% they had been offered, and that the award was only applicable to members of the SWMF. The Merthyr Pioneer called it quite simply: "the best working agreement that has ever been obtained in the coalfield."[99] W.H.Mainwaring, still a leading militant, wrote: "The miners have not received all they demanded, but taken as a whole, and considering the opposition, it must rank as one of the greatest victories in the history of trade unionism."[100]

The strike of July 1915 represented a major turning point in mining politics during the war, both in terms of the relations between the government and the MFGB, and with regards to the internal politics of the MFGB itself. As such, the strike formed a crucial element in the contextual framework within which the Miners' Charter was first developed, and later fought for. Above all, and ironically enough, the strike's victory not only gave rise to government control, and hence to the perspectives of the MFGB leadership for post-war reconstruction in the industry, but was simultaneously an important reference point for the very different perspectives of the militant miner.

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98 New Statesman, 24 July 1915.
99 Merthyr Pioneer, 31 July 1915.
100 The Plebs Magazine, vol.7, no.7, August 1915.

In the first place, the strike sheds new light on the commonplace view, best summed up by Susan Armitage, that:

> Nothing during the war seriously disturbed the miners' conviction that they held a right to make a special claim on their own behalf and to have it accepted. It was just a question of applying enough pressure and the government would give in.[101]

This point is valid enough, but that this is the case is only so because of the government's humiliation in July 1915. Prior to this the situation had, as we have seen, been very different, and had the South Wales miners not rejected the policy of the SWMF and MFGB leaderships, there is no reason to suppose any significant change in government policy would have taken place. Only after the strike did the power relations between government and MFGB decisively shift in the latter's favour. That government control was established on terms favourable to the MFGB, and was followed by a policy of almost ritual concessions until the war's end, was attributable above all to the fact that rank and file miners had defied their leaders and taken direct action.

Secondly, this fact was not lost upon the militants who had led the strike. Detailed information on the activities of ex-URC militants during the strike is hard to come by, but what there is strongly suggests that they were responsible for launching and sustaining the action in the face of opposition from all-comers. Although there was no formal unofficial organisation in operation, the militants were sufficiently well co-ordinated to ensure that they could carry a majority of lodge delegates at the key SWMF conferences up to and during the strike.[102] At a meeting in October 1915 chaired by Ablett, speakers proclaimed the strike as a

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101 S.Armitage, op.cit., p.114.
102 G.R.Carter, op.cit., p.460.

victory for direct action and the anti-political policy of the pre-war URC. Hodges said:

> The miners in South Wales had learnt to discard the politicians and Parliament and to place their whole reliance upon their own Federation. Recent events had shown that they were wise in that decision for, despite the politicians, Parliament and the press, they had secured benefits that were undreamt of years ago. The SWMF was the pioneer trade union in initiating several movements that would eventually work the downfall of the capitalist system.[103]

Thirdly, it was of great significance that the strike represented not just an economic, but a political victory against the government and state. We have seen how in one respect the intervention in industry during the war had encouraged the state socialist project. However, the government's attempt to coerce the miners in July 1915 had alerted many to the negative aspects of state intervention. Page Arnot's assessment of the impact of the Proclamation of the coalfield was that the miners:

> were furious, and in their fury more and more began to think that those in the valleys who said the government and the state was just an executive organ of the capitalist class had the truth of it.[104]

The introduction of conscription for miners in 1917 compounded fears of a 'Servile State' which, far from posessing emancipatory potential for the working class, could take on Leviathan-like characteristics. This oppressive aspect of the war-time state generated alarm amongst quite widespread numbers of miners, giving the syndicalists a constituency in which their ideas could take root.[105]

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103 Llais Llafur, 9 October 1915.
104 R.P.Arnot, South Wales Miners, p.71.
105 Although ultimately unsuccessful, the URC mounted a campaign against conscription in South Wales, forcing the issue to a ballot in which they received a respectable 28,903 votes for strike action. See SWMF Records, 1915.

The point here is not that government intervention during the war led to a wholesale rejection of state socialist ideas amongst the rank and file of the MFGB. Far from it, for the beneficial aspects of control provided powerful arguments for the possibilities which lay in this direction. What is important to grasp, rather, is firstly that the state only began to respond positively to the MFGB *after* direct action had been taken by an important section of its membership. Even those miners, probably a majority of the total, who retained faith in progress via state intervention in 1919 were aware of this. And secondly, the fact that the wartime state had presented itself as a Janus-faced creature, capable of both benign and malign actions, gave rise simultaneously to both the reforming perspectives of the MFGB leadership outlined in the first part of this chapter, and to the militant miners' conviction that the only way forward lay with direct action and workers' control.

The 1915 strike was a signal reminder that beneath the veil of wartime unity and cooperation between classes, the antagonistic relationship between labour and capital was still alive. Because of their self-assumed role as guardians of industrial peace in the national interest, union officials had been shown to be markedly less willing than their members to resort to strike action. Furthermore, whilst the well of patriotism had certainly not run dry, it had undergone some evaporation as a result of the whole episode. This combination of factors created a space which allowed the re-emergence of an unofficial leadership inside the SWMF, and laid the seeds for the re-germination of the URC when "war weariness" became acute in 1917-18.

The Miners' Charter was the programme around which the unofficial movement regrouped in the closing stages of the war. In its demands was reflected both a continuation of the method laid down in The Miners' Next Step, and the confidence and ebullience which the 1915 victory had inculcated amongst the militants. The demand for a minimum wage was replaced by a series of demands designed to seize the initiative in the face of imminent demobilisation, and prevent an employers' counter-offensive by ensuring ex-soldiers were re-absorbed into the industry on the miners' terms.

The centrepiece of these was for a massive reduction in hours for all grades of mineworkers, to a five day, thirty hour week. The Charter envisaged no loss of earnings to compensate - rather it staked a claim for the abolition of piece-rates, to be replaced by a £1 daywage, with payment on the basis of six shifts for every five worked. The Charter also included subsidiary demands for full rates of wages to be paid to discharged servicemen, and to miners injured at work. In line with The Miners' Next Step, these demands, bold as they were, were only the means to a greater end. For URC members the hope was that the fight for these reforms would culminate in the miners taking over the collieries and running them for themselves.[106]

The Charter, which first appeared in print in the Merthyr Pioneer in 1918, was added to in the summer of 1919 with the publication of Industrial Democracy for the Miners. Written by W.F.Hay, a co-author of The Miners' Next Step, its confident tone reflected the mood and

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106 Merthyr Pioneer, 3 August 1918, "Manifesto of the Unofficial Reform Committee of the South Wales Miners."

aspirations of the militants in the immediate post-war period. "Nationalisation", it predicted:

> is obviously bound to come almost immediately. As scientific socialists we know that nationalisation or state capitalism, the last permutation of which capitalism is capable, is bound to be short-lived. It is therefore all the more important that we should force our demand for democratic control upon the capitalist state when nationalising any industry.[107]

Industrial Democracy for Miners represented not so much a theoretical development of The Miners' Next Step as a practical supplement to it, giving a detailed blueprint of exactly how workers' control could operate.

The years 1917 and 1918 saw a rejuvenation of militants in South Wales and beyond, and by the war's end there were rank and file movements in several important coalfields. Within days of the armistice these were putting pressure on their district and national leaders to adopt the demands encapsulated in the Miners' Charter, and to start the fight for a new order in the mining industry.

*(iii) From Southport to Sankey*

During three days of debate at the Special Conference in Southport between January 14th-16th the MFGB finalised the details of its post-war programme which had been in the process of formulation since the previous years' Annual Conference. The official Miners' Charter consisted of an indivisible package of demands for a six hour day, a 30% wage increase, maintenance on full rates of pay for unemployed soldier-miners and for those injured at work, and nationalisation with joint control. These

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107 W.F.Hay, Industrial Democracy for Miners, reprinted in K.Coates (1974), p.105.

demands fell well short of the package which the rank and file movement was advocating. In particular, the demands for wages and hours were seen as unsatisfactory. With regards to hours, the MFGB's proposals were for a six hour day from bank to bank (meaning in practice, with travel time underground added, a seven hour day) over six days, in effect making for a forty-two hour week. The 30% wage rise also left the militants dissatisfied, as it would favour the better-off grades of mineworkers and leave the piece-rate system in tact.[108]

Despite this, the Miners' Charter as amended was still an audacious programme of demands which, like the unofficial version, was designed to stop demobilisation from preventing the MFGB being able to take advantage of its enhanced power, and which would, if successful, amount to the most far reaching changes the industry had ever seen. In fact, the demands contained in the Charter owed much to the influence of the unofficial movement, and represented a compromise between militants and moderates within the MFGB. That the miners were set to be a major force in post-war politics was universally accepted by union members; what was at issue was how this force should be exercised, and to what ends. The struggle over this question between the official and unofficial leaderships was the central feature of the campaign for the Charter. One should not think of this campaign as a straightforward one in which the outcome of national conferences and negotiations was passively awaited by the membership. Rather, at every stage it was characterised by an internal conflict which on several occassions threatened to divert the union from the course set for it by the Executive. Neither should the large vote for acceptance of the Sankey Commission's Interim Report and the eventual collapse of the Charter into the Mines for the Nation fiasco be taken as evidence of a

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108 MFGB Special Conference, 14-16 January 1919, passim.

disinterested or unmilitant rank and file. On the contrary, from January until the end of the Yorkshire strike in mid-August, there were a series of rank and file revolts against the drift towards conciliation and compromise which was taking place nationally. The most important of these will provide the focus for much of the rest of this study, but before moving on to look at those which took place in the campaign's first phase, it is necessary to include a brief survey of national events. This is for the purpose of providing the reader with a political and chronological framework within which to locate and understand the accounts of district-level strikes which follow.

In line with the analysis of the MFGB and its leadership in section (i) of this chapter, it is a contention of this thesis that that Smillie and his colleagues on the EC, whilst being genuinely committed to securing unprecedented reforms in the industry, were keen that this should be achieved without recourse to a national strike. The lack of detailed EC minutes, and the dissapointingly thin autobiographies of both Smillie and Hodges[109], make it impossible to say with any precision how private discussions on this matter proceeded amongst the leadership. However, whilst it seems unlikely that the majority of the EC went so far as to discount such a policy from the start, minutes of MFGB conferences, and of negotiations with the government, strongly suggest that avoidance of a strike, if at all possible, was a central concern of the EC throughout. This is no conspiracy theory; the EC's policy was not worked out in advance but rather evolved along with events. Nonetheless, from the initial Southport Conference of January onwards, it was motivated as much

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109 Robert Smillie, My Life for Labour (London: Mills and Boon, 1924); Frank Hodges, My Adventures as a Labour Leader (London: George Newnes, n.d.).

by the desire to avoid a confrontation with the government as it was to fulfill the wishes of its members.

The caution of the EC was demonstrated by its successful attempt to "whittle down" the union's demands to a level where negotiations would at least be possible.[110] The restriction of the wage claim to 30% in face of stiff opposition from Scotland, Lancashire, South Wales and Notts, and the adoption of the six hour demand in a form which could be presented as being for seven hours, were the key areas in this regard.[111] When Robert Horne, the Minister of Labour, informed the EC on February 10th of the Government's offer of 1s a day and a Commission to inquire into all aspects of the Miners' Charter, Smillie was dismissive: "The replies of the Government have not come within measurable distance of the claims we have put forward."[112]

Nonetheless, at the subsequent MFGB Conference on February 12th and 13th, the EC proposed a ballot of the membership on a national strike, but argued vehemently against carrying a recommendation in favour, out of concern for the effect this would have on public opinion. Smillie also hinted that the EC might have been better disposed towards the offer of a Commission "if the Government had met us decently", meaning if it had been made clear that more than 1s a day would have been conceded. On top

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110 MFGB Special Conference, 12-13 February 1919, p.10. The phrase is Smillie's.

111 MFGB Special Conference, 14-16 January 1919, pp.73-99 for debate on wage claim. Scotland and Lancashire wanted 50%, whilst South Wales and Notts were for a large flat rate increase.
MFGB, Conference between the Government and the MFGB Executive, 31 January 1919, p.3; Smillie was not exagerrating when he told Robert Horne that: "It required all the influence of the Executive to reduce our claim to the point at which it was put as a claim."

112 MFGB, Conference between the Government and the MFGB Executive, 10 February 1919, p.9.

of this, he made it clear to delegates that he didn't want the miners to ballot "on the understanding that the Triple Alliance is coming out. I want them to ballot with the full knowledge that they may have to fight alone."[113]

Delegates overturned the EC however, and the Conference issued a strong recommendation for a strike vote. The ballot result, announced on February 25th, showed a large majority in favour, and notices were lodged to expire across the country on March 15th.[114] Meanwhile, Lloyd George had returned to London from the Paris Peace Conference to deal with the labour unrest which was at this stage assuming crisis proportions. On Friday, February 21st he invited the MFGB leaders to Downing Street, where he made a revamped offer of a Commission of Inquiry. His proposal was that three miners' representatives should participate in a Commission to be established by special Act of Parliament, with powers to compel witnesses to attend and give evidence. At this stage he envisaged that the Commission would present an interim report on hours and wages by March 31st, and that this would be followed by an extended period in which it would investigate the issue of nationalisation.[115]

Lloyd George also took the opportunity of giving the EC a graphic description of the alternative to acceptance. The 1912 strike had been serious enough, but had taken place during "a prolonged period of peace and prosperity." Should there be a strike now, it would take place:

> when the nation is burdened and crippled with the gigantic cost of this great war, when its industries are practically at a standstill, when not merely a

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113 MFGB Special Conference, 12-13 February 1919, pp.19-22.
114 MFGB Special Conference, 26-27 February 1919, p.5. The figures were 615,164 to 105,082.
115 MFGB, Conference between the Prime Minister and the Executive, 21 February 1919, pp.17-18.

> strike, but the prospect of a strike is stoppong business, and arresting the free start of industry, when unemployment is on the increase.[116]

Furthermore, he was explicit in his estimation that such a strike would quickly assume the character of a struggle over state power:

> But there is another reason which makes it even more serious. Then it was a conflict between mineowners and miners. Now the Government are directly responsible for this industry...The responsiblity will be the responsibility of the Government, and if there is a conflict, it will not be a conflict between mineowners and miners, it will be a conflict between one industry and the whole of the State. I cannot conceive of anything graver than that. The State could not surrender, if it began, without abdicating its functions. It is not a question of this Government or that Government but of Government - every Government... All industry would come to a standstill and come to a standstill soon. But does anyone imagine that would be the end of the conflict? It would be the beginning and not the end of it. The Government must face that, and the country must face it, and the miners must face it - we must all face it.[117]

Lloyd George backed this up with a scarcely veiled threat, repeated in the House of Commons the following week, that in the event of a strike the Government would use its power to control rations and starve the miners into submission, a threat which reflected the government's behind-the-scenes preparations.[118]

According to Nye Bevan, Smillie later told him that: "From that moment on we were beaten and we knew we were."[119] Opinions differ on whether or not this was in reality the decisive moment at which the EC abandoned any plans for a strike. We will return again to this question in the light of

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116 ibid., p.4.
117 ibid., pp.4-5.
118 ibid., p.5.
112 HC Deb 5s, 24 February 1919, c.1449.
Ralph Desmerais, "Lloyd George and the Development of the British Government's Strike-Breaking Organisation", International Review of Social History, 1975, pp.1-15.
119 Aneurin Bevan, In Place of Fear (London: Heinemann, 1952), p.21.

the district studies which follow. For the moment we simply suggest that it was Smillie's own words and actions which had encouraged Lloyd George that he was looking for a way out of the looming confrontation, and that it was worthwhile making the offer of a Commission once more. Moreover, they provided the cue for the tactical way in which Lloyd George pitched the offer.

Smillie had been careful not to rule out the possibility of a national strike up to this point, and at times he had candidly expressed the opinion that it was the likeliest outcome.[120] However, he had also made it abundantly clear that he did not relish the prospect. In his opening statement of the campaign for the Charter, he confessed that "the days that are to come...I fear are to be dark days."[121] His anxiety about a national strike rested on two grounds. Firstly, there was the usual concern of the bureaucratic reformist leadership, magnified in the conditions of unrest and rank and file militancy, that strikes were relatively simple to intiate, but more difficult to bring to a successfully controlled conclusion. He told delegates at the Special MFGB Conference on February 12th-13th:

> Nobody knows better than we do, we, who have been in this thing year after year, who have come through strikes locally and nationally - nobody knows better than we do the grave responsibility that rests on all the men in this room today. We know how necessary it is to think out not merely the beginning of what is to take place, if it takes place, but the end of it.[122]

Secondly, on several occasions Smillie had expressed his concern to avoid the disruption of industry. He spoke of the miners' moral duty as "honest citizens of the State" to exercise their industrial power with

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120 MFGB Special Conference, 14-16 January 1919, p.60.
121 ibid., p.13.
122 MFGB Special Conference, 12-13 February 1919, p.11.

responsibility and restraint: "I would not be a party" he told Lloyd George, "and no member of this Executive would be a party, to taking the nation by the throat and saying, "The time has now come when we are sufficiently strong to enforce our claims.""[123] Again, prior to the meeting with Lloyd George he told MFGB delegates:

> Personally, I sincerely trust that at this late hour we may get a settlement of our claims without the necessity of a strike. I have no desire...to hold up the industries of this country merely for the fun of it, or to prove our strength. I would rather cut off my right hand than take any step to injure our fellow workers or the general industries of the country.[124]

The EC was apparently divided over how to respond to Loyd George's offer, and, in private, EC members confided that they thought the MFGB Conference which met on 26-27 February would simply re-affirm the original demands and finalise details of the strike.[125] However, both Smillie and Hodges threw their weight behind acceptance of the offer, providing that the MFGB were allowed to nominate half the Commission. Over the previos days Lloyd George had agreed to shorten the time-scale of the proposed Commission's preliminary hearings, which would now have to be completed by March 20th. Smillie stressed that participation would not mean "to give up your powers to fight if you fail to gain your ends", merely to delay a strike by a week or so.[126] Hodges went further, suggesting that the delay would "bring us in harmony with the Triple Alliance" and make a combined general strike if anything more likely should the Commission fail the miners.[127] Despite these assurances, before the vote was taken Smillie made an impassioned appeal to the

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123 MFGB, Conference between the Prime Minister and the MFGB Executive, 21 February 1919, p.7
124 MFGB Special Conference, 12-13 February 1919, p.47.
125 Western Mail, 27 February 1919.
126 MFGB Special Conference, 26-27 February 1919, p.16.
127 ibid., p.48.

delegates to seize the opportunity of diverting the union from its collision course:

> Is it a fact that any man in this room wishes to have a fight with the Government or the country solely for the purpose of proving our strength? Not one of us wish that. If we get into a fight, it must be to secure improvements for our people, and if we can get these improvements without a fight, then in God's name, do we want a fight if we can secure them without? Do we want to impose misery on the nation?[128]

The intervention of Smillie and Hodges managed to swing the conference around to taking part in the Commission, when for much of the debate this had seemed the less likely outcome. By insisting on a card vote, they managed to present an image of unanimity, when in fact large numbers of delegates had been opposed to participation on the grounds that it was tantamount to accepting binding arbitration.[129]

Subsequent developments at the national level are familiar. The Sankey Commission sat in its first stage from March 3rd to 20th. The majority report, signed by the miners' nominees, was passed over by the government, but it agreed to implement the report signed by Justice Sankey and the three non-mining industrialists which recommended a seven hour day for underground workers (with a possible reduction to six after July 1921), a forty six and a half hour week for surface workers, and a flat rate 2s increase per shift for all grades. Furthermore, it held out the hope that in its second stage nationalisation might be conceded as "the present system of ownership...stands condemned."[130] Following MFGB Conferences on March 21st and 26th, between which the EC conducted fruitless negotiations with the Government in an attempt to secure further improvements to the Sankey Report, the membership was balloted

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128 ibid., p.49.
129 ibid., see for example the contributions of S.O.Davies, J.Potts and Herbert Booth, pages 30, 33 & 41.
130 CIC 1919, vol.i, p.viii.

with a strong recommendation for acceptance, to which it complied with a huge majority of 693,084 to 76,992.[131]

To proceed further at this stage would be to rush on too far ahead. Only a few weeks earlier a national strike, perhaps of the whole Triple Alliance, had seemed highly likely, for the drift towrds compromise at the top of the MFGB was not matched at the bottom. All along the line, pressure had been exerted by large sections of the rank and file to "get to business" with the government and launch the strike.[132] It was a regular feature of all the MFGB Conferences discussed above to see right wing or moderate union leaders pushed into awkwardly militant poses by pressure from below in their respective districts. Men like Tom Greenall, James Brown, George Spencer and Vernon Hartshorn all came into conflict with the EC at various points. Such was the strength of feeling in some areas that at the conference of February 12-13th delegates from South Wales and from Nottinghamshire (including Frank Varley, a leading official) had attempted to put a resolution, ruled out by Smillie, to dispense with a ballot and call an immediate strike.[133] At each conference delegates took the floor to express their concern that unless the MFGB EC stopped its hesitation and delay, it would be impossible to, in the words of the Scottish leader James Brown, "restrain the men from taking personal action."[134] When the EC had urged participation in the Commission, militants amongst the delegates predicted "trouble with the unofficial rank and file movement..."[135] Noah Ablett spelled out the situation as he saw it:

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131 MFGB EC Meeting, 15-16 April 1919, p.2.
132 MFGB Special Conference, 26 February 1919, p.15; see the contribution of the rank and file delegate, A.Jones from South Wales.
133 MFGB Special Conference, 12-13 February 1919, pp.23-24.
134 MFGB Special Conference, 14-16 January 1919, p.90.
135 MFGB Special Conference, 26-27 February 1919, p.21.

> There has been a great clamour from every section, and it may be considered necessary to appease the Government of public opinion, but in my opinion it is infinitely more important to appease our own men. We have come to the parting of the ways in the trade union movement. We shall be up against unofficial strikes if we are not going to take a lead, and not alter at all but endeavour to enforce our demands; if not, we shall have trouble in the coalfields, and, in my opinion, there will be justification.[136]

Dominated as they were by agents and officials, the MFGB conferences were at one remove from this "trouble in the coalfields", which had in fact been underway since New Year's Day. More than one in five of all strike days across all industries in 1919 were accounted for by mining, despite the fact that there was no national strike.[137] Between January and March alone there were, according to the Board of Trade, 54 serious disputes in mining, involving almost half a million miners for an aggregate of over two million working days.[138] Research for this study has shown that even these figures do not capture the full extent of the remarkable wave of militancy which swept many districts of the MFGB during 1919. Right up until August this kept alive the possibility of a different outcome to the campaign for the Miners' Charter than the one which the EC was seeking. In fact, without a focus on the (mainly) unofficial strikes which took place in most districts during these months, little of the significance of the events of 1919 can be appreciated. It is to a selection of these that we now turn our attention.

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136 ibid., p.19.
137 British Labour Statistics, Table 197, p.396.
138 Board of Trade, The Labour Gazette, January to April 1919.

# Chapter Three

## *FIFE AND LANARKSHIRE*

> Ironically enough, in a month or so thousands of men who had voted in Lanarkshire constituencies for Lloyd George were either actively engaged in, or looking with more than benevolent neutrality upon, a tumultuous, unofficial strike having ill-concealed revolutionary objectives.[1]

The counties of Lanarkshire and Fife, which stretched from west to east across the "waist" of central Scotland, were the most important areas of the Scottish coalfield in 1919, employing about 55,000 and 23,000 miners respectively.[2] The workforces of these counties were organised in their own distinct county unions, which, although affiliated to the NUSMW, retained a high degree of autonomy, with their own leadership structures, rules, and funds. They also had their own distinctive political and industrial traditions, reflecting the different economic, geographical and social configurations of each area. The aim of the opening section of this chapter is to explore briefly the characteristics of mining trade unionism in each county, in particular those factors which had, by the war's end, encouraged the creation of revolutionary-led rank and file committees of considerable size and influence. Before January 1919 was out, these committees would make a spectacular bid for the leadership of the Fife and Lanarkshire miners, by advocating joint action with the rejuvenated Clyde Workers' Committee in a general strike of the industrial workers of central Scotland for shorter hours. The Forty Hours strike, as it became known, has ever since been the subject of considerable historical research and controversy. However, the debate has

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1 J.D.MacDougall, "The Scottish Coalminer", Nineteenth Century and After, December 1927, p.771.
2 Alan Campbell, op.cit., p.10.
Barry Supple, The History of the British Coal Industry, vol.4, 1913-1946 (Oxford 1987), p.23.

revolved almost exclusively upon the Clyde engineers' part in the struggle, whilst that of the miners has been largely overlooked.[3]

This chapter does not seek to give yet another account of the Forty Hours strike. Rather, it provides a detailed account of the highly volatile and militant unofficial strike of Lanarkshire and Fife miners which was an integral part of the wider movement. As such, it forms a fresh vantage point from which to view one of the most notorious episodes in the twentieth century history of the British working class, and from which to assess the post-war strategies of the Scottish revolutionaries who sought to direct the movement. Although the attempt to overcome occupational sectionalism and bureaucratic domination ultimately met with only short-lived success, the miners' involvement was highly significant. In the first place, it shows that the movement for shorter hours in central Scotland was wider than has previously been acknowledged - the strike genuinely deserved the prefix "general". Secondly, it tends to back up John Foster's argument against revisionist historians like Alastair Reid that the movement for shorter hours was "openly political", designed to prevent a shift in the balance of class forces from labour to capital in the aftermath of the war and keep alive the prospects of socialist reconstruction.[4] Finally, the episode was a dramatic indication, only two weeks after the MFGB's Southport conference, of both the extremely impatient mood in the coalfield, and of the potential for class conflict inherent in the demobilistion crisis.

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3 Alan Campbell, op.cit., is the only historian who has paid any attention to the miners of Fife and Lanarkshire in January 1919. The strike features as an important episode in an overarching account of the shifts in consciousness of Scottish miners in this period.

4 John Foster, "Strike action and working class politics on Clydeside, 1914-1919", International Review of Social History, xxxv, 1990-91, p.53.

*(i) The formation and growth of the Reform Committees*

The road to permanent, stable, coalfield-wide union organisation in Scotland had been a particularly long and arduous one. For much of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, such organisation as there was, was in the main localised and ephemeral, with amalgamation or federation into county and national unions proving extremely difficult to accomplish. An attempt to form a Scottish Miners' National Federation in 1886 floundered within a year, and although the Scottish Miners' Federation established in 1894 proved to be more durable, it was an extremely loose organisation; by the end of the decade its membership still represented less than one-fifth of all underground workers.[5]

It was the elusiveness of effective union organisation in the largest county - Lanarkshire - which was the key weakness of Scottish mining trade unionism in this formative period.[6] The barriers to unionisation in Lanarkshire, which formed the western part of the west-central coalfield, were manifold; the small scale of the majority of mining concerns helped to foster the collaborative and self-help tendencies which existed within the tradition of the independent collier right into the twentieth century[7]; aggressive employers habitually sought to take advantage of economic downturns to attack the nascent unions which had been formed on the back of the previous upturn, and were often successful in turning strike defeats into routs.[8] Probably the most serious obstacle was the ethnic and religious division within the workforce. The period in which

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5 Robin Page Arnot, Scottish Miners, chapters 4 & 5.
6 ibid., p.91.
7 Alan Campbell, op.cit., pages 10 & 16.
8 R.P.Arnot, Scottish Miners, chapters 4 & 5.

the west-central coalfield underwent its greatest expansion had coincided with the peak years of Irish immigration, and sectarian conflict had been a persistent feature of coalfield life ever since. On occasions, this was expressed in outbreaks of violence, but even in normal times, at pit head meetings in Lanarkshire it was not unusual to see miners assembled into two groups, with the "Billies" (protestants) standing remote from the "Dans" (catholics).[9]

With union organisation so weak, and with most of the mining workforce hostile to Home Rule, there was little or no incentive for Liberal Associations to accommodate miners' candidates at elections. The ethnic and religious divisions in the workforce thus impeded the development of a strong Lib-Lab tradition in Scottish mining unionism.[10] When, in the wake of what has been called "the crisis of the independent collier"[11], it became clear that labour aristocratic policies of enforcing apprenticeships and restriction of output were no longer practical, it fell largely to ILP socialists to shoulder the responsibility of devising a workable strategy for trade union development. So it was that in Lanarkshire, the trajectory of union formation differed from other mining areas in Britain, largely skipping the stage of Lib-Labism. Bob Smillie and Keir Hardie were to Scottish mining unionism what Mabon and Pickard had been to South Wales and Yorkshire. The key figures in the eventual establishment of a genuine county union, the Lanarkshire Miners' Union

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9 Alan Campbell, The Communist Party in the Scots Coalfields in the Interwar Period, (Unpublished Paper delivered to the "Opening the Books" Conference at the University of Manchester, 31 January 1994), p.3. (Hereafter - Alan Campbell, Unpublished Paper)

10 Roy Gregory, op.cit., pp.90-95.

11 Fred Reid, "Alexander MacDonald and the crisis of the independent colllier, 1872-4", pp.156-176, in Royden Harrison (ed) Independent Collier: The coal miner as archetypal proletarian reconsidered (London: Harvester, 1978).

[LMU] in 1896, were socialists, and they remained in control in our period. When Smillie resigned his position at the head of the LMU at the beginning of 1919 to take up his full-time post as MFGB President, the gap he left behind was filled by a troika of veteran ILPers, James Tonner (President), James Welsh (vice-President), and Duncan Graham (General Secretary).[12]

In one sense therefore, from a position of relative backwardness, Scottish mining unionism, once established, leapt into the political van of the MFGB. Indeed, it was from Scotland that the first explicitly socialist resolutions, on social ownership of the means of production, were first put forward at an MFGB conference, at Leicester in 1897.[13] However, the absence of Lib-Labs from the key positions in the leadership of the LMU did not necessarily translate into militant industrial policies. In fact, experience of union fragility in the industrial conflicts of the late nineteenth century had engendered a highly cautious approach to industrial action, and nurtured a fairly conservative and bureaucratic outlook. By the war's end the LMU Executive and Council were dominated by men whom J.D.MacDougall described as "the baldheads - respected church elders, JPs and County Councillors".[14] The ILP membership of Tonner, Graham and Welsh scarcely concealed their growing moderation, highlighted by an article penned by Welsh for the January 1918 edition of the Socialist Review, in which he denounced the "wild cries" of the militants in the coalfield, and called for a "soberer

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12 National Library of Scotland (NLS), PDL 31/2, Lanarkshire Miners' County Union, Minutes of Council Meetings, 1919. See William Knox, Scottish Labour Leaders (Edinburgh, 1984) pp. 177-8 & 271-3 for entries on Duncan Graham and James Welsh.

13 R.P.Arnot, Scottish Miners, p.93.

14 J.D.MacDougall, "The Scottish Coalminer", p.763, The Nineteenth Century and After, December 1927.

outlook". His rightward trajectory continued in the 1920s; a part-time novelist, his work The Moorlocks (1924) was a thinly-veiled attack on the Minority Movement, and he sided with Adamson in the internal strife of 1927-8.[15] Although he still retained a relatively good reputation with the militants, Duncan Graham too was in the process of moving to the right. Entrenched in the bureaucracy since its inception, he became increasingly remote from the rank and file after his election as MP for Hamilton in December 1918, and he too ended up supporting Adamson in the 1920s.[16]

Antagonism between officials and rank and file was already becoming a feature of LMU affairs before the war, and was underpinned by the structural decline of the coalfield. In 1913, Lanarkshire's output accounted for just over half of Scotland's total, but the underlying trend was downwards.[17] With some of its most accessible coal reserves already exhausted, since the beginning of the century it had been increasingly dependent on thin seams.[18] In an attempt to boost productivity, owners had been introducing cutting machinery, and by 1920 one third of Scottish output was being mechanically extracted, compared with only 6.8% in northern England.[19] For the workforce, the introduction of machines meant "deskilling, intensification of labour and closer supervision." Furthermore, the high level of investment created pressure to keep unit costs low, leading to long hours and depressed wages. However, as Campbell points out:

> a further corollary of intensively mechanised cutting and conveying was the physical concentration of different grades of underground workers in closely

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15 W.Knox, op.cit., p.272.
16 DLB vol.1, pp.133-134.
17 Barry Supple, op.cit., p.23.
18 Alan Campbell, Unpublished Paper, p.2.
19 J.D.MacDougall, op.cit., p.763.

supervised work units which generated common grievances.[20]

In these conditions, the more militant and anti-collaborative currents within the tradition of the independent collier could find expression, and there developed a pattern of regular lightning strikes, a form of resistance which could not easily be controlled by the union centre.[21] These laid the basis for Lanarkshire becoming one of the most strike-prone coalfields in Britain, matching and even in some years outstripping South Wales for militancy.[22] This put considerable strain on the relationship between the officials and the membership. The first organised expression of rank and file discontent with the bureaucracy came in 1912, in the wake of the unsatisfactory conclusion to the national minimum wage strike. Official caution now gave rise to widespread grumblings about the democratic limitations of a union constitution "which seemed to be designed to afford ordinary members a merely nominal share in the control of the Association." Particular criticism was levelled at the method by which officials were elected; rather than there being a ballot vote of the membership, they were appointed by Pit Committees, which themselves were apparently "appointed in a far from satisfactory way."[23] In August 1912, anti-bureaucratic sentiment gave rise to a "Miners' Indignation and Reform Committee" which held a demonstration in Hamilton, addressed by W.F.Hay. A central demand of the South Wales Unofficial Reform Committee - that all agents and officials should be subject to periodic re-election and be barred from

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20 Alan Campbell, Unpublished Paper, p.2.
21 J.D.MacDougall, op.cit., pp.764-5. MacDougall describes a "rebellious, independent and stubborn spirit...intolerant of the well-meaning efforts of the leaders to attain whatever justice could be got by methods of diplomacy and conciliation."
22 Alan Campbell, Unpublished Paper, pp.2-3.
23 Plebs Magazine, vol.ix, October 1917, no.9.

holding Executive positions - was carried by the meeting.[24] Also in this period an attempt was made by George Harvey, a founder member of the Plebs League and Socialist Labour Party activist, to establish an alternative "Northern Counties Mining Industrial Union" in the north-east and Scotland.[25] Neither of these organisations were able to sink roots at this stage, but the intra-union tension which they signalled remained, and would be sharpened further in the latter stages of the war.

The Fife coalfield stretched along the coast and its hinterland to the north of the Firth of Forth, from Clackmannan in the west to Leven in the east. Conditions for union growth were more favourable here than in Lanarkshire in the nineteenth century. In part this was because the later development of the coalfield meant that it was still being expanded up to and beyond the turn of the century, and partly because, with Irish catholics forming a much smaller minority of the population, the workforce was relatively free of the ethnic and religious divisions which were hampering union organisers in west-central Scotland. These factors allowed the establishment of a different tradition of industrial relations. The Fife and Kinross Miners' Association, established in 1870, was to all intents and purposes the only really established union in Scotland for much of the 1880s and 1890s. Whilst in other areas fledgling unions were being torn apart by hostile employers, in Fife stable conciliation machinery was being established. As a consequence, Fife was far less prone to militancy than was Lanarkshire before the First World War.[26]

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24 Campbell, op.cit., pp.12-13.
25 Branco Pribicevic, Thesis, pp.302-303.
26 R.P.Arnot, Scottish Miners, pp.70-74.
Alan Campbell, Unpublished Paper, pp.2-4.

However, in common with Lanarkshire, mechanisation had a detrimental effect on labour relations, and additional pressure on unit costs was generated by the coalfield's reliance on the increasingly competitive export market.[27] In the second decade of the twentieth century, these economic factors began to undermine the conciliatory policies of the Fife union leaders, who were, in contrast to the rest of Scotland, Lib-Labs. When the "ultra-respectable"[28] John Weir died in 1908, William Adamson took over the reconstituted Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan Miners' Association [FK&CMA] as General Secretary, a post he retained in 1919 despite his accession to the Chairmanship of the PLP. Adamson, who had been elected as Labour MP for West Fife in December 1910 without any perceptible alteration of his Liberal politics, was by far the dominant figure in the FK&CMA, which he viewed as something akin to a personal fiefdom. Approaching his sixties at the end of the war, he was in many ways an anachronistic figure; his commitments to Baptism, temperance, and self-improvement were undiminished in the changed social and political conditions of the 1920s. So too was his commitment to conciliation and arbitration in industrial matters, and his outright hostility to strikes, which often pushed him closer to the owners than to his own membership. A letter from Charles Callow, a senior official in the Fife Coal Company, to Adamson in December 1918, which assumes that the latter can be relied upon to help prevent a strike, is ample testimony to his collaborationist tendencies.[29]

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27 Stuart Macintyre, Little Moscows (London: Croom Helm, 1980) p.53.
28 R.P.Arnot, Scottish Miners, p.74.
29 National Library of Scotland (NLS), Acc.4311, item 250. For biographical details see W.Knox, op.cit., pp.58-61, and DLB vol.7 (London and Basingstoke 1984), pp.4-6.

Abe Moffat, a young revolutionary in Fife in our period, remembers this view of Adamson as a collaborator as being widely held:

> He was very, very close with the coaloawners, socially and otherwise. That was the main thing which the miners didn't like about Adamson-his very close association with the coalowners and particularly with the Reids of the Fife Coal Company. He was always against strike action, always against progress."[30]

As Stuart Macintyre has written, Adamson's "supine approach was overtaken by the rapid tempo of change in the mining industry in Fife", and the growing militancy of sections of the rank and file increasingly led to conflict within the FK&CMA.[31] However, despite the growing criticisms of his leadership, Adamson continued to use his position to block attempts to introduce a more combative policy in the union. He was assisted in this by the fact that he continued to find a base of support amongst the more conservative miners in the older and smaller pits which were scattered through the rural settlements to the west of Dunfermline, and around the coastal villages in the most eastern part of the coalfield. The more militant miners were to be found in the central area of the coalfield, in the large and modern pits around Dunfermline, Cowdenbeath, Lochgelly and Bowhill. The miners in these pits constituted the majority of the workforce in Fife, but the peculiarities of the union constitution prevented them from making their weight fully felt inside the FK&CMA.

Their first difficulty was that the branches were based upon place of residence rather than at the colliery, thus weakening workplace-level organisation. The second was that each of the fifty-four branches, regardless of size, had an equal vote at the Executive Board of the

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30 Abe Moffat, "The Fife Miners and the United Mineworkers of Scotland", Transcript of an interview by Paul Long, 18 January 1974, in Scottish Labour History Society Journal, no.17, 1982, p.13.
31 Macintyre, op.cit., pp.52-53.

union. This favoured the smaller branches, some of which had only a few dozen members, against the larger, more militant ones where sometimes there were as many as one to two thousand. It was often the case that when larger branches sought official approval for industrial action, this was blocked on the Executive Board by the combined vote of the smaller ones. With the help of the union constitution, and of men like Joe Westwood, agent and henchman, Adamson was able to maintain his grip on the union machine. For this reason, the fight for more militant policies in the union was tied up with demands for changes to the constitution. In particular there was the demand for the branch financial vote on the Executive board, a method which would give the greatest say to branches with the most dues-paying members. Adamson fiercely resisted such changes, resorting to increasingly authoritarian methods to hold on to his position, and this resulted in the later clashes with communist miners. These well documented splits and breakaways which dogged Fife mining unionism in the 1920s had their roots in the developments of the previous decade, which came to a head in January 1919.[32]

Rank and file and leadership alike had been keen supporters of the war in its early stages, with something like a quarter of all Scottish miners joining up by August 1915, but as the war dragged on there was a clear waning of enthusiasm. On the other hand, the commitment of most officials to the war effort remained unqualified, and they were willing participants in the four colliery recruiting courts in Scotland which enforced the new conscription regulations from the summer of 1917, when exemption was removed from younger miners. This behaviour conflicted with the growing opposition amongst the miners to the effects of the war, and

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32 ibid.
Ian MacDougall, (ed) Militant Miners (Polygon, 1981), pp19-20.

the disproportionate burden of sacrifice which fell upon the working class. By August 1917 the cost of living had soared to stand at 80% above its pre-war level, whilst Scottish miners' wages had risen by only 43%. Serious shortages of basic foodstuffs like butter, cheese and sugar compounded the discontent. Meanwhile, the pacifist Forward was busy exposing the huge scale of "profiteering" by merchants and shipping companies.[33]

The fact that the officials of the NUSMW and the county unions were in favour of a patriotic truce with owners and government for the duration of the war meant that such grievances found no easy rectification via official union structures. In Lanarkshire in the summer of 1917 there came the first moves to reconstitute the rank and file committee which had made a brief appearance before the war. The main centres of such activity were in the large pits around Blantyre, situated on the south-eastern edge of Glasgow's urban sprawl in the central Clyde valley, and in Coalburn further south. In Blantyre these militants were successful in persuading the District Committee to call a one day strike against profiteering and inadequate food rations, which involved about 2,000 miners in twelve pits.[34] In June, a prominent member of the Blantyre Reform Committee who was a delegate to the LMU Council, successfully proposed a resolution for a county-wide one day strike over the same demands, and on August 2nd, all 50,000 Lanarkshire miners struck, with thirteen seperate demonstrations calling on the Government to put an end to profiteering. John Maclean was highly encouraged by this action, seeing it as:

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33 Alan Campbell, op.cit., p.13.
J.D.MacDougall, op.cit., pages 766 & 771.
The Call, September 1917.
34 J.D.MacDougall, op.cit., p.768.

> certainly the most important ..in the whole history of the working class in Scotland. It easily transcends the spontaneous strike on the Clyde that forced the Government to give us the House Letting Act.[35]

For Maclean, the significance of the strike was that although it was not directly against the war itself, it contained the seeds of such a movement. In the wake of the strike, in the Coalburn and Blantyre districts the Reform committees were successful in organising very large mass meetings which declared their opposition to the extension of conscription with the threat of further strikes, and demanded immediate peace on the lines laid down by the February regime in Russia.[36]

In the last week of August, members of the various local rank and file committees came together in Hamilton and established the Lanarkshire Miners' Reform Committee (LMRC). About one hundred miners were in attendance, mostly in an individual capacity, although there were delegates from branches in Coalburn and Blantyre. The LMRC's policy was borrowed from The Miners' Next Step; the ultimate aim was the direct control of the mines by the miners, and this was to be achieved via the transformation of the union, whose strategy "should be based on the principle of the class struggle." To this end the Conciliation Board would be abolished, agents and officials would be elected annually by ballot vote of the membership, and a lay executive would be established. 50,000 copies of the LMRC's manifesto were printed and distributed throughout the coalfield, and plans were made for an ambitious education programme for the coming winter.[37]

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35 The Call, 9 August 1917.
36 ibid., 23 August 1917.
37 ibid., 6 September 1917.

The LMRC consolidated and grew over the coming months. Although it was unable to prevent an extension of conscription, it was in the forefront of a successful campaign to oust the ultra-patriotic Secretary of the LMU, David Gilmour, from office for taking up a Government post on the Labour Advisory Board. The growing hostility to the war was also shown by a ballot which declared that Lanarkshire miners were in favour of peace by negotiation by 18,767 to 8249.[38] Campaigns such as these attracted further support to the LMRC, which by April 1918 could claim the direct affiliation of twenty four union branches, and, according to MacDougall, "its connexions (sic) extended to active minorities in the remaining hundred branches, and it acquired enormous influence amongst the mass of ordinary union members."[39]

The war-weariness and anti-war sentiment which swept Lanarkshire from 1917, and which led to the formation of a rank and file movement there, did not leave Fife untouched. By October 1917, a Fife Miners' Reform Committee had also been established, centred on the new mining town of Bowhill. In the spring of 1918 Fife too experienced an upswing of militancy, with a number of unofficial strikes at Low Valleyfield, Kelty and Bowhill, in which FMRC members played leading roles. In June 1918, through selling literature and collecting money, the FMRC was able to organise a county-wide tour by James MacDougall, John Mclean's close associate, which took in a score of towns and villages. This led to Bowhill Branch, amongst others, with its 1,500 members affiliating.[40]

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38 J.D.Macdougall, op.cit., p.770.
39 ibid., pp.768-9.
40 ibid., p.769.
The Call, 15 August 1918.
I. MacDougall, op.cit., pp.19-22.

By the end of the war therefore, there were vibrant Reform Committees active in large numbers of pits in both Fife and Lanarkshire, with county structures which had enabled them to mount propaganda campaigns on a coalfield-wide basis, and occasionally to lead industrial action. The armistice presented these rank and file movements with new possibilities to further grow and influence union politics. The gap which existed between the economic and social aspirations of the membership, and the bitter conditions which confronted all those who had endured the war, whether on the home or continental front, helped to swell the ranks of the activists and bring simmering antipathy to the boil. The personal experience of Abe Moffat, later to become a Communist miners' leader, was not untypical:

> Well, it was really after the First World War when I became active in the trade union movement. Like many other men I was fighting for my King and country, and we were told then that we were fighing to make this country fit for heroes to live in, but we discovered after the war that we had to be heroes to live in it! And that obviously changed my mind.[41]

The housing conditions of the miners in Fife and Lanarkshire were appalling, characterised by dreary and poor quality miners' rows, in which overcrowding and insanitary conditions generated high levels of illness. In the middle ward of Lanarkshire, for example, 35,000 miners and their families lived in 17,000 houses. In Lanarkshire as a whole, out of the 188,531 children born between 1891 and 1910, a staggering 22,279 died before reaching twelve months of age. This squalor was soon to be made notorious by the testimony of NUSMW vice-President, John Robertson, to the Sankey Commission.[42] Conditions in many of Scotland's mines were

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41 Paul Long, op.cit., p.7.
42 CIC 1919, vol.i, pp.345-354.
See S.Macintyre, op.cit., p.50 for housing conditions in Fife.

equally abysmal, and in 1919 alone, 180 miners were killed and 11,075 injured.[43] The work and residential conditions of the miners were grist to the mill for the agitators of the reform committees. The contrast between the promises of Lloyd George and the realities of life lent the discussions about social change an intensity and an urgency which militated against the smooth functioning of traditional collective bargaining practices, exacerbating the existing tension between an impatient rank and file and a bureaucracy bent on maintaining union constitutionality. Encouraged by the reform committees, there was a dramatic leap in union activity at the end of the war. James MacDougall recalled that: "It was a veritable revival. The members commenced to attend the branch meetings as they had never done before.[44]

Miners manifested a high degree of solidarity and militancy. On Saturday 11 January, for example, 2,000 miners in Holytown, Lanarkshire, went out on unofficial strike against the eviction from a colliery house of Willie Hughes, a mine manager who had been victimised for his association with the LMRC. By Monday morning the Bellshill, Viewpark and Rosehall collieries were out, and soon 10,000 miners were involved. That the ideas of the reform committees were gaining wider curreny is evinced by the fact that John Robertson, in the course of trying to persuade the men back to work at a large mass meeting, referred twice to the "talk of revolution" amongst the men, and pleaded for constitutional action. To keep abreast of the strikers he had to threaten, to loud cheers, to call out every miner in Britain over the Hughes eviction.[45]

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43 South Wales Coalfield Archive, SWMF Statistical Department, E242.
44 J.D.MacDougall, op.cit., p.768.
45 Bellshill Speaker, 17 January 1919.

Robertson himself drew attention to the shift in mood which had taken place amongst the rank and file in a speech to the NUSMW annual conference in 1919:

> In past years there were often complaints about the apathy and indifference of the rank and file. He would be a bold man who would accuse the rank and file of apathy and indifference at the present time. Never before in their history was such a keen interest taken in the work of the Union by their members. Social and industrial questions occupied their attention to a greater extent than ever before. Every progessive leader welcomes this change, welcomes the push they are getting from the rank and file. The command to the leaders was either"get on or get out". There was a tendency, with the better organisation and increased activity, for the members to take precipitate action.[46]

The industrial militancy of the immediate post-war period was accompanied by a radical swing to the political left; indeed, political radicalism and industrial militancy seemed to feed off each other. John MacArthur, later to become one of the official leaders of the breakaway Reform Union in Fife, was a leading activist and revolutionary in the FMRC in the eastern part of the coalfield in 1919. In his memoirs he leaves us a vivid picture of the politically turbulent atmosphere in which the young reform committees were operating:

> The Great War and the first year or two after it was a period of trade union and political ferment for me, just as it was for so many other workers in Britain. There was our local activity in Fife. There was the Clydeside shop steward's agitation and the rent strike, the Irish revolt, the impact of the Russian Revolution, the crushing of the Spartacist's revolt in Germany and the killing of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg , the returning soldiers, the serious discussions as to whether workers could achieve their emancipation by parliamentary or anti-parliamentary means. These things led to tremendous fervour among the militants with whom I was associated, but also among the workers as a whole.[47]

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46 NLS, PDL 45, NUSMW, Proceedings of Annual Conference, 13 August 1919.

47 Ian MacDougall, op.cit., p.17.

In this situation political discussion took on a new vitality, shaking off much of the sterile abstraction which had plagued the left in the past. Although there was no strong political organisation in east Fife at the time, Levenshorehead saw meetings every Saturday and Sunday night at which speakers from all sorts of different traditions spoke to large audiences. The radicalism of the Fife mining areas in these months is captured by MacArthur in his recollection of a debate between Jack Leckie, an enigmatic revolutionary, and Tom Kennedy, MP for Kirkcaldy from 1921 and on the right of the Labour Party, on the question of reform or revolution. The meeting took place in Buckhaven's biggest hall, and was packed to overflowing.

> Leckie rolled up his sleeves, and pranced up and down the whole length of the platform, shouting what had Kennedy's pals in Germany done to his pals Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht? He said he knew what he would like to do - and put his fist under Kennedy's nose.[48]

Leckie won the debate overwhelmingly on a show of hands.

Enthusiasm for the Russian and German revolutions helped to encourage interest in the idea of direct industrial action amongst the militants. There was no shortage of syndicalist literature in the coalfields, in particular, pamphlets by Daniel DeLeon the American industrial unionist, and George Harvey's shilling book Industrial Unionism and the Mining Industry were widely circulated.[49] However, the most important figures in both spreading the reform committees and imbuing them with a political content, were the revolutionaries John Maclean and James MacDougall.[50] Maclean had been campaigning amongst Lanarkshire miners for resistance to

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48 ibid., p.23.
49 The Call, 15 August 1918; 150 copies of Harvey's book were sold on James MacDougall's tour in Fife.
50 Alan Campbell emphasises this point, op.cit., p.14.

conscription and the war since early 1916, and MacDougall, who worked at the pit-head at Blantyre after his release from prison in 1917, was instrumental in building the reform committee there.[51] Maclean was in favour of industrial unionism as well as Marxist political action, and in the reform committees he saw the possibility of a successful marriage of these two components of his theory of the class struggle. The Scottish Labour College classes which he and MacDougall ran in the mining communities in Lanarkshire, and to a lesser extent in Fife, gave a practical grounding in Marxism to a whole generation of young activists, several of whom became communists and leading figures in mining trade unions in the 1920s and 1930s.[52] Furthermore, by bringing activists together, the classes acted as nuclei for the emergent reform committees from 1917 onwards.[53] Maclean's influence amongst the militant miners was exemplified by the fact that he was named as official spokesperson of the reform comittee movement in January 1919, a position which he declared himself to be as proud of as his appointment as Glasgow's revolutionary Consul to the Bolshevik Government.[54]

It is only recently that the importance of the relationship between Maclean and the militant miners of Fife and Lanarkshire has been highlighted.[55] What requires further illumination is how Maclean's

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51 J.D.MacDougall, op.cit., p.767.
The Call, 9 August 1917.
52 J.D.MacDougall, ibid., p.775.
Joan Smith and Harry McShane, No Mean Fighter (London: Pluto, 1978), p.113. Among Maclean's students were Willie Allan, who became the Secretary of the breakaway United Mineworkers of Scotland, John Bird and Jock MacArthur.
53 The Plebs Magazine, vol.ix, December 1911, no.11. There were already seventeen classes underway in Fife and Lanarkshire by the end of 1917, all of them in towns and villages where there was a reform committee presence.
54 The Call, 23 January 1919.
55 Alan Campbell makes this very point, op.cit., p.14.
see also David Howell, A Lost Left: three studies in socialism and nationalism (Manchester, 1986) and

influence amongst the miners helped to pave the way for their involvement in the January 1919 movement for shorter hours in Scotland. In the first place, both the FMRC and the LMRC had established links with the Clyde Workers' Committee in 1918, when they were active in the campaign to free John Maclean from prison and subsequently in his campaign running up to the General Election in December. It had taken delegations to demonstrations in Glasgow to demand Maclean's release, and to celebrate the victory when it came. MacArthur describes the experience.

> It gave us a great feeling of taking part in a big movement; the whole agitation was on a much bigger scale than anything we had experienced in the mining villages and small towns of Fife.[56]

These developments gave the activists a feeling that they were part of a wider working class movement. The connections made during 1918 meant that when the agitation developed for the Forty Hours strike in Glasgow the MRC members in the pit villages as remote as Wemyss and Leven in east Fife could be involved on some level from the start. In Lanarkshire, the connections were even closer, as most of the mining centres were located on the fringes of Glasgow's sprawling urban conurbation, where miners rubbed shoulders with workers from other industries.

A second important factor was Maclean's perspectives for the post-war class struggle. As an internationalist his priority was to prevent the crushing of the Russian Revolution, which was the key to the developing world revolution. Those who were advocating a general strike over this issue were "too idealistic" as "the workers are not generally of our way of thinking, and so are unable to see that their material interests are bound up with Bolshevist stability in Russia." The burning question for

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B.J.Ripley and J.McHugh, John Maclean (Manchester, 1989).

56 Ian MacDougall, op.cit., p.21.

Maclean was "how to start the fight (and) get the mass on the move." The crisis precipitated by demobiisation provided the key to the situation:

> The demobilisation has already created a menacing unemployment problem. We can get the support of the unemployed if we can suggest a means whereby they can get a living. The only possible solution is a drastic reduction of hours per week. This reduction will appeal to the employed if they are assured of at least a pre-war standard of living. Here we have the economic issue that can unify the workers in the war against capitalism.[57]

For Maclean, the Miners' Charter was the key to the post-war situation in Britain. In the context of mass demobilisation, a national miners' strike for shorter hours would have the potential to pull in millions of workers from other industries, and could provide the basis for control of production through workshop committees. Maclean was not alone amongst the Clyde revolutionaries in looking to the miners to play a vanguard role. Harry McShane's memoirs recall the delight with which the revolutionaries in the CWC greeted the formation of the reform committees, and it was clearly the case that the CWC itself adopted the demand for the thirty hour week because this was the demand of the unofficial Miners' Charter.[58] In the week before the strike on the Clyde commenced, the CWC's paper The Worker was still pushing for the demand to be reduced from forty to thirty hours in order to stay in line with the miners:

> If we are to have that liberty which our brothers fought for and which we have sweated for during the past four years we must line up with the miners. Our demand and theirs must be the same, and we must stand shoulder to shoulder if we are to win.[59]

Maclean himself was in favour of delaying the strike on the Clyde until March in order to wait for what he felt was the inevitable national miners' strike. However, once it became clear that there was no stopping

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57 The Call, 23 January 1919.
58 J.Smith and H.McShane, op.cit., p.109.
59 The Worker, 25 January 1919.

it he gave it his full encouragement, commenting that "historical events never start and shape themselves as we plan them."[60]

The Clyde Workers Committee and the reform committees were unwilling to be constrained by Maclean's preferred timetable. In the first place, the pressure of demobilisation on the Clyde was more intense than anywhere else in Britain. As we have seen, housing was almost unbearably overcrowded even before the war, but as a major munitions-producing centre, thousands of additional workers had crammed into the area since 1914. With countless thousands now returning from France:

> more and still more men and women find themselves on the street, and as a result we shall see a decline in wages with ever increasing unemployment, unless we are prepared to regulate the hours of work to meet the situation.[61]

As impatience mounted amongst the militants in Scotland, news came through of the general strike across the Irish sea in Belfast. When the CWC met in conference on Saturday 25 January to finalise its plans for the strike which would commence on the following Monday, the LMRC was well represented, reflecting its determination that the miners should not remain aloof from a movement which its own programme had done much to influence. Meanwhile, the FMRC was already leading an unofficial county-wide strike in Fife.

*(ii) The Reform Committees lead a mass movement: The January strikes*

The strike wave of January 1919 had its immediate roots in a long standing grievance of surface workers in Fife. In April 1918 a committee

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60 The Call, 30 January 1919.
61 The Worker, 25 January 1919.

of the surface workers drew up a list of demands for an eight hour day, a wage increase, and extra payment for overtime. All branches of the union endorsed the claim, as did the Executive Board, but negotiations got nowhere and no steps were taken by the leadership to break the logjam. By September the surface workers, impatient at official inaction, began to lodge notices unofficially.[62]

At this stage the MFGB intervened and persuaded the Scottish union to accept a deal they had agreed with the Coal Controller, which involved a 49 hour week, exclusive of mealtimes. The surface workers gave their qualified consent. Their condition was that the owners allow them to work the shift from 6am to 3pm so as to finish at the same time as the rest of the miners. The owners however insisted that tradesmen and mechanics must remain behind to sharpen tools, repair machinery etc, which meant a 7.30am to 4.30 pm shift.[63]

Adamson predictably persisted with negotiations despite it being clear that the owners were not going to budge. In the first half of January 1919, he tried to reopen a channel to the Coal Controller who pushed him back to local negotiating machinery. On January 20th the matter was discussed at the Fife Conciliation Board, but it came to nothing.[64] Adamson clearly wanted to avoid action of any kind, and according to The Worker at mass meetings he had "put the case for the colliery companies brilliantly."[65] By this time the surface workers had been in dispute for almost ten months and their patience had been exhausted. A FMRC member wrote:

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62 NUSMW Minutes of Executive Meeting, 12 September 1918.
63 West Fife Echo, 29 January 1919.
64 Dunfermline Journal, 25 January 1919.
65 The Worker, 8 February 1919.

> Since April 1918 the surface workers' dispute has been "put forward", "negotiated", "conciliated", "remitted to executives", "remitted to districts", "postponed for a fortnight", "postponed for another fortnight", and then "just for two days".[66]

On January 22nd the surface workers in the Cowdenbeath district held a mass meeting and voted for an indefinite strike to begin the following morning. Significantly, the decision to strike was not simply due to a desire to knock off at 3.00pm; it was, as Bob Selkirk explained, equally "to force the Companies to employ demobilised men" to do the extra work which they were insisting upon.[67] This was the opportunity for the FMRC to fill the vacuum left by the officials and push itself forward as a genuine alternative leadership. On Thursday 23rd it organised a mass meeting of all grades in Cowdenbeath Public Park, which voted unanimously to strike in support of the surfacemen.[68] That evening, the FMRC organised similar mass meetings at Lochgelly, Glencraig and Bowhill which also voted to come out. From Blairhill colliery in west Fife to Bowhill in the east, a stretch of nearly twenty miles, every pit came out. The next day the strike was spread to the eastern-most parts of the coalfield, to Wemyss and Buckhaven, by a combination of unofficial mass meetings and picketing, all organised by the FMRC. Robertson and Adamson convened meetings at Bowhill, Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly in an attempt to head off the strike, but to no avail. By Friday night 20,000 were out on unofficial strike.[69]

The FMRC found itself at the head of a mass movement which encompassed practically all of the Fifeshire miners. That it had achieved this was

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66 ibid.
67 ibid.
68 Glasgow Daily Record, 24 January 1919.
69 ibid., 25 January 1919.
West Fife Echo, 29 January 1919.
Leven Advertiser, 30 January 1919.

due to three main factors. Firstly, it had shown itself to be flexible enough to respond quickly to the mood of the miners. Over the previous weeks the committee had been pushing for action over its version of what had by now become the MFGB's official charter; a six hour day, a five day week, and a £1 per day minimum wage. One such meeting had taken place at the Gothenburg Hall in Kelty on Sunday 12th January, addressed by Robert Lamb of Gallatown and Charles Tuke of Blairhill.[70] Whilst it had attracted considerable interest with their programme, it had been unable to translate this into action. FMRC members were quick to sense, however, that the mass of the miners would support the lesser demands of the surface workers, and moved to agitate around this issue.

Secondly, and quite simply, they were prepared to act in a decisive manner. Unencumbered by the responsibilities of running the official union machine (the FMRC appears to have had no members on the FK&CMA Council), and committed as they were to direct action, they called for immediate and indefinite strikes in support of the surfaceworkers, where the officials had temporised and called for talks and more talks. And thirdly, they proved to have a network of militants sufficient for the task. The work which the committee had done in leading protests against price rises, food shortages and conscription during the war, and the meetings and literature sales they had organised, meant that when faced with an opportunity, they had the resources to be able to make the transition from propaganda to a directly agitational mode of operation.

Its ability to lead concerted action against the officials had brought the Miners Reform Committee considerable respect, and it sought to capitalise on this, and on the momentum already building up in the

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70 West Fife Echo, 15 January 1919.

strike. Over the weekend of January 25th/26th, the FMRC achieved a dramatic escalation; at packed meetings in Cowdenbeath, Lochgelly, Glencraig and Bowhill, its activists won over the miners by overwhelming majorities to fight for its unofficial programme. Thus, even before the general strike had commenced on the Clyde, the Fife miners were already out for a thirty hour week and a £5 weekly wage. On Tuesday, 10,000 marched behind the FMRC's banner from Glencraig, Bowhill, Lochgelly, Lochore, and Cowdenbeath, and unanimously declared for the new demands to be added to those of the surface workers. According to the editor of the West Fife Echo, these developments were enough to "take one's breath away."[71]

In the absence of any convenient local dispute in Lanarkshire, the LMRC adopted a more direct approach. On Friday January 24th, in what was apparently his first full public speech since his release from Peterhead, John Maclean addressed a large meeting of miners organised by the reform committee in the Motherwell town hall. In "an impassioned address" Maclean explained the demands of the reform committee, and called on the Lanarkshire miners to strike. "He looked to the miners of Lanarkshire to come out with the men on the Clyde, and show the absolute solidarity of the working class."[72] On Monday morning, in areas where the LMRC's support was strongest, miners struck in support of the Forty Hours strike which began that day. On the following day a one day strike called by the LMRC, again in solidarity with the Glasgow workers received more widespread support. This was then extended into an indefinite strike for

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71 ibid., 5 February 1919.
The Worker, 8 & 15 February 1919.
Fife Free Press, 1 February 1919.
72 Motherwell Times, 31 January 1919.

the reform committees' demands by means of mass meetings and pickets over the following days.[73]

In the space of less than a week, the MRC had been able to transform what had seemed a sectional strike of surface workers into one of all miners in Fife and Lanarkshire over hours and wages, and moreover hook it up with the Forty hours strike in Glasgow. Although the formal demands of the Fife surface workers, the Glasgow engineers, and those of the MRC all differed from each other, they were underpinned by the same motive, namely, resistance to the adverse effects of demobilisation, and it was this which allowed the sectionalism to be overcome.

Association with the Clydeside revolutionaries brought not only the political authority of Maclean. The success of the reform committees in commanding a mass following in January was contingent upon their ability to convince the miners that to begin the fight over hours and wages without the rest of the MFGB was not simply a heroic gesture. By linking their campaign with that of the workers in other areas and industries of Scotland, they could hold out the possibility of success before it could be known whether the strike would generalise within the ranks of the MFGB. This undoubtedly must have helped to overcome any hesitancy which miners may have felt about a strike in defiance of their district and national officials. To miners in Lumphinnans or Blantyre, winning solidarity from miners in Bolton or Mountain Ash in the face of official adversity might have seemed beyond their means. But in Scotland in January 1919 there was a mass movement on their doorstep. Combined, the Forty Hours strike and the miners strike presented a powerful base from

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73 ibid.
The Worker, 8 February 1919.

which a strike over hours and wages could plausibly be spread to the rest of Britain.

These links were vital in enabling the MRC to overcome the credibility gap which might otherwise have existed; they gave their militant policies a pragmatic flavour, making them attractive enough to elicit an active response from miners way beyond the ranks of their immediate supporters. In Fife, which was geographically remote from the focus of action in Scotland, contact with striking engineers was particularly important, and the FMRC arranged meetings with speakers from the Forth and Clyde. On January 29th, strike leaders from these two areas received "tumultuous cheering"from a crowd reported as 20,000 when one said, "Then we in Edinburgh and Glasgow may take it that you will stand with us until all our demands are conceeded."[74] In Lanarkshire, especially in the north of the coalfield, the connection with a mass strike movement was a tangible, physical one. In Cambuslang for example, which lay on the south-eastern edge of Glasgow, 10,000 workers from several industries were out on strike by Wednesday, January 29th, generating the feeling of an "industrial uprising"in the town.[75] In these multi-industry towns of the central Clyde valley, strike meetings tended to be non-sectional affairs, and were important in creating an atmosphere of unity amongst workers from different occupations.[76]

Involvement in a wider working class movement helped to generate an exceptional militancy amongst the miners, particularly in Lanarkshire, and the strike took on the character of a rebellion, described by one

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74 Fifeshire Advertiser, 1 February 1919.
75 Lanarkshire and Hamilton Herald, 1 February 1919.
76 ibid., Meetings were often explicitly billed as "A Mass Meeting For All Workers In Lanarkshire".

local paper as "an orgy of unofficialism."[77] With good reason, Alan Campbell has likened its scenes to those in Zola's Germinal.[78] James MacDougall later recalled:

> Notwithstanding some intimidation, the movement was a genuine ebullition of the masses. Men might be reluctant to come out against the official mandate of the union, but once out they were swept entirely off their feet by the emotional current around them. It was not really an ordinary strike. It was a religious ecstasy - the joyful rush of the pent-up discontents of the war years to find a vent. Staid men did unheard of things, took extraordinary risks, because they were in the grip of the idea. Fanatical orators tore themselves to shreds addressing tense audiences, assembled in packed halls or massed in public parks, from early morning till late at night. Unpaid pickets marched by night many a rough stage in order to stop distant collieries early in the morning. The [Reform] Committee was in permanent session at Blantyre...[79]

One of the most notorious episodes of the strike took place on the night of Thursday January 30th in response to the decision of the Bellshill branches to return to work on the Friday. Between five and six hundred pickets marched from Tollcross and Blantyre to prevent a return to work. At the Hamilton Palace colliery, which lay en route, several hundred pickets broke into the lamp cabin and destroyed all the lamps to prevent anyone who might evade the picket line from descending the pit. They then broke into the colliery offices, smashed windows and doors, ransacked filing cabinets, and tried to break open the safe. A policeman who intervened was assaulted, receiving three head wounds. A group of firemen waiting at the pithead for the cage, were threatened with attack by the crowd, which also threatened to set fire to the winding gear, and the firemen retreated and went home. The crowd then moved on to Bellshill

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77 The Mail for Kirkcaldy, Central and West Fife, 11 February 1919.
78 Alan Campbell, op.cit., p.15.
79 J.D.MacDougall, op.cit., p.772.

Cross, where there was a clash, with "a strong contingent of police who met them with the baton."[80]

This incident points to some of the main features which marked out the strike. In the first place, there was the use of flying mass pickets. Unable to spread the action through the official channels of the unions in either Fife or Lanarkshire, the reform committees sought to actively involve the largest possible numbers of miners in the strike, and "the mob" made regular appearances in the local press. Secondly, it seems that a section of miners were prepared to use violence, or the threat of violence, to achieve their ends. The reported incidence of violence and intimidation was very high, and Lanarkshire newspapers in particular contained numerous stories of "armed pickets" carrying "sticks, bottles and knuckle dusters". In Cambuslang, following two days of only partially successful picketing, some miners apparently took to carrying firearms, and so closed down every colliery in the district.[81]

A note of caution should be sounded here, as press reporting of violence has often been exagerated or manufactured during large industrial disputes. However, there is reason to believe that there was a violent edge to the strikes. In the first place, press accounts of particular incidents were varied enough to suggest that at least some of the reported incidents were authentic.[82] Secondly, Alan Campbell has drawn attention to the existence of a violent sub-culture in this period, particularly in Lanarkshire, pointing to the proliferation of youth

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80 Bellshill Speaker and North-East Lanarkshire Gazette, 31 January 1919, and 14 February 1919.

81 See for example Lanarkshire and Hamilton Herald, 1 February 1919, and Glasgow Daily Record, 1 February 1919.

82 i.e., the reports were obviously not simply gleaned from a press agency, or any other single source.

street gangs, and to the militant republicanism of many Lanarkshire miners of Irish descent. Apparently, explosives and detonators from the mines often found their way to the Irish Republican Army around this time.[83] Harry McShane's memoirs mention this too, and the fact that "a surprising number of men had brought back weapons from the war" and that some carried them on the unemployed demonstrations in the early twenties, again lends credibility to reports of the use of firearms in January 1919.[84] The events of the night of January 30th in Lanarkshire suggest that it was the younger miners who were the most likely to use violence. Nine miners were arrested in connection with the incidents at Hamilton Palace and Blantyre Cross, and charged with forming part of a riotous mob. Of these nine, all but one "were very youthful in appearance, two of them seeming to be mere boys." Indeed, upon their conviction, the jury recommended six of them for leniency because of their young age.[85]

Awake to the fact that the strikes represented an explicit challenge to their own authority, the officials set their shoulders to the wheel and worked to undermine them. The NUSMW Executive issued the first of several statements on January 27th, which expressed their decision to "entirely disassociate themselves from the present erratic strike movement, and recommend the miners of Scotland to continue at work, pending the reply of the Government." They urged the miners to cross the picket lines and said that there would be no strike pay.[86]

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83 Alan Campbell, op.cit., p.17.
Alan Campbell, Unpublished Paper, p.9.
84 J.Smith and H.McShane, op.cit., p.111.
85 See the report of the trial in the Bellshill Speaker, 3 May 1919.
86 NUSMW Executive Meeting, 27 January 1919.

However, the hiatus which had existed between officials and rank and file in Fife and Lanarkshire from 1917 onwards had been considerably widened in both counties on the eve of the strike. In Lanarkshire, Manus Duddy of Blantyre told the Executive members that "he did not think [they] realised that the members were crying out for a long time back against the methods and inattention of the agents and Executive to the members." In his opinion, it was the feeling of alienation from the union which had led the majority of the members to vote against a proposed increase in subscriptions shortly before the strike. Typically, the Executive had simply ignored the ballot result and increased the rates regardless.[87] Similarly, in Fife, Adamson was increasingly willing to disregard the wishes of the members in order to maintain his hold on the FK&CMA. In December 1918, he had attempted to block the election of John O'Neill as delegate of the Buckhaven branch to the monthly conference of the union. O'Neill, a member of the FMRC, had defeated James Neilson, an old Adamson supporter.[88]

The reform committees had responded to these autocratic abuses of power by campaigning for the removal from office of the incumbents. In Lanarkshire, the LMRC had "for months on end...demanded the scalp of every miners' agent attached to the LMU."[89] At the Motherwell town hall meeting on January 24, Maclean had warned that:

> whilst they did not wish to dismiss a single official of the unions...if any of them did stand in the way of the policy they were fighting for, then they would have to go. A mere handful of men could not be permitted to hold back the aspirations of a million.[90]

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87 LMU Council Meeting Minutes, 10 February 1919.
88 Ian MacDougall, op.cit., p.26.
89 Lanarkshire and Hamilton Herald, 5 February 1919.
90 Motherwell Times, 31 January 1919.

This campaign found a resonance amongst the miners, and as a consequence the strike was more anti-official than unofficial. Aside from the odd skirmish between police and pickets, the major clashes of the strike were, in contrast to Glasgow, not between the workers and the state, but between the miners and their union leaders. As one FK&CMA Executive member admitted, "the present strike was headed by men who thought the leaders did not die quick enough. They wanted to fill the leaders shoes."[91] The efforts of Joe Westwood and Wullie Adamson to engineer a return to work led to direct confrontation with the FMRC. When at one meeting a reform committee member leapt to the platform to answer a speech by Westwood, the latter became so enraged that, in the middle of a mass meeting, he threw off his coat for a fight.[92] At another Fife meeting, Charles Muir, an Executive member from Bowhill, threatened to bring in the troops against his own members in his capacity as magistrate if the picketing did not stop.[93]

In Fife the officials enforced a ballot, solely over the issue of the surface workers' hours, which resulted in a slim majority of 724 for a return to work. We will return to the details of this controversial ballot below, but it is interesting to note that constitutional union procedures by now were held in such low esteem by the advanced section of the membership that a large crowd from all over central Fife, estimated at between 10,000 and 15,000, gathered in Dunfermline public park, voted to ignore the ballot and continue the strike over the reform committees' demands. They then elected twelve delegates and marched to the union headquarters to confront the officials. Sam Hynds, the Treasurer of the

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91 Leven Advertiser and Wemyss Gazette, 30 January 1919.
92 The Worker, 15 February 1919.
93 ibid.

FK&CMA (who was to die two weeks later), addressed the crowd and "was received with derisive cheering and the singing of the Red Flag."[94]

Anti-official feeling ran even higher in Lanarkshire. Patrick Powers, a prominent official from Bellshill, was assaulted as an argument with a striker turned violent. Powers sustained a fractured skull and was taken to Glasgow Royal Infirmary in a critical condition.[95] This was an individual example of the bitterness and hostility towards the officials which erupted into open rebellion in Lanarkshire during the week of the strikes. On Wednesday 29th a demonstration of miners from Cambuslang, Blantyre, Burnbank, and Shettleston marched to the union's headquarters in Hamilton. Newspaper reports estimated the size of the crowd as anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000. The demonstration elected delegates to seek an audience with the agents inside, in order to press them to make the strike official. Before long the miners became impatient that their delegates were being kept waiting, and they broke into the building and occupied it. In the process, the building was partially ransacked. Telephone wires were cut, glass was broken, pot plants were destroyed, and union documents and correspondence was hurled into the crowds in the street below. William Small, the Assistant General Secretary, and Hugh Gallacher, miners' agent, came under intense pressure and were apparently manhandled and threatened with a revolver when they refused the insurgents' request to hand over the keys to the office safe.

Whatever precisely occured in the miners' offices is unclear, but by the time the demonstration left, Small had agreed to send telegrams to all LMU branches declaring the next day's strike official, and to convene a

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94 Dunfermline Press, 1 February 1919.
95 Bellshill Speaker, 31 January 1919.

conference between the LMU Executive and the LMRC. Once the crowd had dispersed however, Small reversed his decision. The MRC responded by arriving for its meeting with the officials the following day with another huge demonstration in tow. Once again the offices were occupied, and the Executive was forced to meet with the reform committee leaders. The meeting lasted for two and a half hours. The upshot was that the strike was to continue. Friday was to be an official strike day, and the Executive agreed to convene a delegate meeting of the LMU on the Friday to decide whether or not the strike would continue indefinitely on an official footing. In the meantime it was agreed by the officials that picketing expenses would be reimbursed by the union. These terms were interpreted by the crowd to mean official recognition of the strike, and were received with cheers of "It's a victory."[96]

The delegate meeting never took place however. In face of the miners' mutinous behaviour the officials decided to secure the Hamilton offices, cancel the meeting, and literally flee the coalfield. They held an emergency meeting as far away as Edinburgh, presumably feeling that Glasgow was not out of the LMRC's reach:

> to consider the situation in the county of Lanarkshire brought about by the attempts of outsiders to force an unofficial strike, and which made it impossible to hold a conference of the delegates at the union offices without the risk of intimidation and violence.[97]

The elemental anger and militancy of the stikers had been harnessed by the MRC and culminated in a semi-insurrection against the officials. During the occupations , a red flag was hoisted above the union building

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96 Glasgow Daily Record, 31 January & 3 February 1919.
Glasgow Weekly Mail and Record, 8 February 1919.
The Worker, 8 February 1919.
Bellshill Speaker, 31 January 1919.
97 Bellshill Speaker, 7 February 1919.

as a symbol of the MRC and its policies, and rumours spread around the coalfield that the revolutionaries had "captured the offices and dismissed the officials."[98] As it turned out the strike was in fact approaching its final phase. But for a few days the reform committees had become the *de facto* leadership in Fife and Lanarkshire, and had declared war on the officials, going beyond the limits of ginger-group activities, and briefly threatening, particularly in Lanarkshire, to take control of the union.

*(iii) The strikes collapse*

On Wednesday February 5th, two weeks after the surfaceworkers in the Cowdenbeath and Lumphinnans area of central Fife had come out on strike, the last of the "young hot-heads" from the same region returned to work. The bulk of the miners in both Fife and Lanarkshire had gone back in dribs and drabs over the previous three days. Clearly, the reform committees had experienced a serious reversal in their fortunes, and the question which must be addressed is how, and to what extent, had the officials regained control?

In the first place there were purely local factors. The battle for influence over the membership had ebbed and flowed for the whole period of the strike, and whilst the reform committees had held the upper hand for a time, there were crucial gaps in their battlements which the officials sought to exploit. In Fife the mechanism for this was the ballot which took place on Monday, January 27th. Although it was clear that the main demands of the strike had changed over the weekend, the

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98 LMU Council Meeting, 10 February 1919.
Bellshill Speaker, 31 January 1919.

FK&CMA Executive decided to ballot solely over the issue of the surfacemen's shift times. On this issue the Executive just won a majority for a return to work, by 6,969 to 6,245.[99] The FMRC was furious about this, pointing out that only 50% of the membership had voted, and claiming that this was due to a spontaneous boycott of the ballot as it did not contain the general demands for the six hour day and the minimum wage.[100] There may be some truth in this, but it does not alter the fact that in some areas, the FMRC was able to influence the ballot result decisively. In the storm centre of the strike, the area around Cowdenbeath, Lumphinnans and Raith, where the FMRC was best implanted, there was a large majority in favour of continuing the strike.[101] When Adamson and Robertson had addressed mass meetings in this area on the previous Friday evening, in an attempt to head off the growing strike, they were defied at each one, and large majorities were shown in favour of continuing the action. Again, as we saw above, on January 29th, the day the ballot result was announced, the FMRC was able to pull a very large protest demonstration in Dunfermline, which had travelled from Lochore and Cowdenbeath.

Conversely, in other areas the roots of the FMRC did not run so deep, and here the officials were able to drum up support. In Clackmannan, and in the extreme east and west of Fife there was a large majority for the officials. As early as Sunday 26th, Sam Hynds, John Robertson and Joe Westwood addressed miners from Leven, Methil and Kirkcaldy in Bayview Park, and persuaded them to return to work the next day. A sole member of

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99 The Worker, 15 February 1919.
100 Fifeshire Advertiser, 1 February 1919.
101 Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly Times and Advertiser, 29 January 1919.

the MRC leapt to the platform and attempted to argue with the crowd, but the cart was simply pulled away.[102]

A pattern developed whereby officials were able to secure a return to work in certain areas, and the reform committee would attempt to counter this with picketing the following morning. Where they were able to mount large pickets they achieved successes. This was not necessarily due to physical intimidation. For example, big pickets at collieries in Kilsyth on January 30th kept most miners out here. Committee members organised a mass meeting there that evening and won these men, most of whom we can fairly safely assume had voted to return to work in the ballot, to stay out for their full programme.[103] But the limitations of the FMRC network, the weaknesses in its organisation, caused it increasing problems. Whilst it could keep certain areas out on Thursday and Friday following the ballot result, others went back without any hindrance. So on January 30th, whilst most miners in west Fife were still out, at Lochgelly, only one mile up the road from Lumphinnans all pits went back. The militants at Lumphinnans had their hands full keeping their own pits out, and were unable to picket anywhere else.[104]

The FMRC attempted an honest account of its organisational weaknesses in its post-mortem of the strike in The Worker. Before the ballot had been taken, the officials had:

> made ample use of the facilities afforded them by having the finance of the union at their back, and they broke the back of the strike in east Fife, by organising meetings in those districts which the strikers had been unable to reach.[105]

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102 Leven Advertiser and Wemyss Gazette, 30 January 1919.
Fife Free Press, 1 February 1919.
103 Glasgow Daily Record, 3 February 1919.
104 Fife Free Press, 1 February 1919.
105 The Worker, 8 & 15 February 1919.

Here they managed to persuade the majority that the issue in question was that of the surface workers alone, and that it could be settled without a strike.

In Lanarkshire the reform committee's support had a more even spread. Nonetheless, there were weak areas as we know, like Bellshill for example, and the picture which emerges from piecing the various accounts together suggests that the support for the LMRC varied between areas. (This corresponds to the spread of the Communist Party in the 1920s. In both Fife and Lanarkshire, its strongholds were in the biggest pits, with a markedly narrower base of support in smaller ones.[106]

The precise circumstances in which the strike ended in Lanarkshire is unclear, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the riotous behaviour at union headquarters in Hamilton, whilst spectacular, and successful in the short term, in the final analysis contributed to the erosion of its support. The marches on January 30th and 31st were designed to pressurise the officials into backing the action. Assuming that physical violence, both threatened and actual, was used against the officials, and reports of it are numerous enough to suggest that it was, then this was a serious mistake, for it allowed the officials to drive a wedge between the core of the LMRC, and its softer support.

This may well not have been directly the fault of the reform committee members as it seems likely that during the first occupation of the miner's offices at least, events escaped their control. A large and unruly younger element of the type involved in the Hamilton Palace Colliery disturbances, was present. Nevertheless, when James Tonner spoke

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106 Alan Campbell, Unpublished Paper, pp.1-12.

of "disgraceful incidents ..that had sullied the good name of our movement" at the first LMU Council meeting after the strike, he had the agreement of many delegates who were not altogether opposed to the strike.[107] When John Robertson related to a mass meeting at Hamilton Palace Colliery on 2nd February how officials had been held at gunpoint, the meeting "vented its indignation in cries of 'shame'", unanimously voted to arm themselves the next morning in order to get through any pickets which might be in place, and passed a resolution of thanks to Robertson for his conduct in the strike.[108]

Hamilton Palace Colliery was one of the weak points of the LMRC, and so a better indication of the impact which the alleged violence had is given in the form of a speech made by Charles Robertson in Motherwell town hall on the evening of Friday 31st. Charles Robertson, an LMU Executive member, was the Secretary of Motherwell Trades Council and had been invited to speak at the meeting on behalf of the miners. Given that the platform was made up of members of the Glasgow 40 Hours strike committee, and that the meeting was intended as a rally to raise the level of support for the strikes, it must be assumed that Robertson was expected to make a pro-strike speech. It ought to be noted too that this meeting was in an angry mood, as the George Square riot had taken place earlier that day, and many of the audience and platform had been involved. Robertson however concentrated his attack on the events which had taken place at the LMU headquarters.

> The speakers had been telling them of the bludgeoning of the police. But what had some of these unofficial bodies done in Hamilton the previous night? Why, one of the executive of the miners had been threatened with a revolver, and the acting Secretary had been seized by the throat and made to write out letters at their

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107 LMU Council Meeting Minutes, 10 February 1919.
108 Glasgow Daily Record, 3 February 1919.

> dictation. They were condemning the police for batoning, but here were men bludgeoning their own brothers![109]

There is a suggestion that some of the LMRC leaders shared this view. Griffin's article in The Worker, on February 15th says that the "outburst of the rank and file" was "perhaps too strongly expressed". It is difficult to tell, but this might have lain behind the decision of at least some of the MRC to call off the strike on the weekend of February 1st and 2nd.[110]

Whatever the precise details of the episode were, the reform committees suffered a haemorrage of support as a result. Whilst to some miners the officials were strike breakers and thus warranted harsh treatment, to others they were still members of the union, and prominent ones at that, and those who had used or threatened violence had transgressed basic laws of union loyalty. This provided a rallying point for the proponents of constitutionalism who had been marginalised by the LMRC over the previous days, and was thus an important factor in the collapse of the strike.

The greater resources of the official machine, the organisational weakness of the reform committees, and the disturbances in Hamilton were all contributory factors to the collapse of the strike, and the failure of the militants and revolutionaries to sustain a conviction amongst the mass of miners in Fife and Lanarkshire that their strategy could succeed. The weakening of the strike in engineering in the aftermath of the George Square riot on Friday 31st must also have played a part. Amongst both miners and engineers, enthusiasm for the strike began to wane almost

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109 Lanarkshire and Hamilton Herald, 1 February 1919.
110 ibid., 5 February 1919. Manus Duddy and a Mr.Ferguson, both members of the reform committee in the Blantyre district both recommended a return to work.

simultaneously, and both sections of workers returned to work within a few days of each other.

Above all, the strike collapsed because it did not spread to the rest of Britain. Unable to go forward, it could only go back. As MacDougall wrote in The Call: "The general strike cannot last very long. That is its very nature. Either the strike will rapidly extend over the whole of Britain or it must be terminated."[111]

Although the strike had failed to trigger a response from workers south of the border, Scottish revolutionaries remained far from despondent, preferring to see it as part of the unfolding international class struggle.[112] Reform committee leaders shared this optimism. From Fife, J.P.Payne wrote:

> Work has now been resumed, but, for all that, to class conscious rebels the strike has not been in vain, for the reform movement, which is really a revolutionary movement, has received an impetus which, with the assistance of the gravediggers, will yet sweep officialdom and reactionaries, who are its mainstay, out of existence. The Reform movement is quickly gathering in the rising generation, which demonstrated a real rebel spirit during the strike - although beaten by the fogies of the coffin club school.[113]

For Bob Selkirk, it was confirmation that the miners had learned from the national strike of 1912, when long drawn-out negotiations had allowed the owners to build up substantial stocks, and he felt that the strike in Fife and Lanarkshire would soon be repeated nationally. The militancy of the strike encouraged him to believe that as the struggle for the Miners' Charter went on, their own programme would come to the fore:

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111 The Call, 6 February 1919.
112 The Worker, 8 February 1919.
113 ibid., 15 February 1919.

> The demonstrations and mass meetings of this strike have shown conclusively that the national strike of the near future, if it lasts over a week, will finish by the miners taking over the pits and working them for themselves.[114]

In fact, as time would show, the high point of the class struggle in Scotland had already passed, and neither the engineers nor the miners of the region played any significant active part during the rest of 1919. The reform committees in Fife and Lanarkshire had failed in their joint bid with the engineers to act as a catalyst for a general strike over hours, and, so it turned out, as a consequence they surrendered the ability to influence the course taken by the MFGB during the period of the Sankey Commission. The sequel to the events in Fife and Lanarkshire was not a national miners' strike, but the intra-union strife of the 1920s. Perhaps John Maclean had been right about the premature timing of the general strike on the Clyde. On the other hand, as our other case studies show, in the mining industry at least, there was a basis for believing that the possibility of a generalisation of the struggle over demobilisation and hours did exist.

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114 ibid., 8 February 1919.

# Chapter Four

## *Nottinghamshire*

> There was a large, brilliant evening star in the early twilight, and underfoot the earth was half frozen. It was Christmas Eve. Also the war was over, and there was a sense of relief that was almost a new menace. A man felt the violence released now into the general air. Also there had been another wrangle among the men on the pit bank that evening.[1]

In his study of the Dukeries, Robert J. Waller pointed out that the Notts coalfield "is often described as if it were a single, homogenous unit, moderate in politics, and inclined to Spencerism and the butty system."[2] In this chapter we will be looking at a coalfield that defies this stereotyping. Nonetheless, prior to 1919, before "Spencerism" had entered the vocabulary of mining unionism, Nottinghamshire had earned a deserved reputation for moderation in industrial affairs. Alan Griffin, the official historian of the Nottinghamshire Miners' Association (NMA) described the situation at the outbreak of war:

> By 1914, the Association had settled down into a humdrum existence. Membership was expanding gradually as the labour force grew, funds were steadily accumulating and relations with the employers were good.[3]

The NMA leadership was very moderate, pursuing long-established modes of conciliation, and was prepared to follow the larger districts in the MFGB

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1 D.H.Lawrence, Aaron's Rod (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.5. (Originally published in 1922.)

2 Robert J. Waller, The Dukeries Transformed. The Social and Political Development of a Twentieth Century Coalfield (Oxford, 1983), p.291.
For a recent sudy which uncovers the social, industrial and political complexities of the Nottinghamshire coalfield, and especially Hucknall, see David Gilbert, op.cit., Chapters 5 & 6.

3 Alan Griffin, The Miners of Nottinghamshire: A History of the Nottinghamshire Miners' Association 1914 -1944, vol.2 (London, Allen and Unwin, 1962), p.17.

only when they did not stray too far to the left.[4] Nottinghamshire was emphatically not amongst the coalfields where trouble was anticipated at the war's end. And yet 1919 saw events take a sharp turn in the county, which became a key centre of militancy in the MFGB. It was one of the areas where an unofficial leadership emerged which was able to lead mass action in defiance of both local and national officials. In fact, Notts miners struck in January, March and July, the three periods in which the strategy of the MFGB was most vulnerable.[5] On all three occasions, miners followed the unofficial group within the NMA, an alliance of ILPers, syndicalists, and revolutionaries, who found common cause in the creed of direct action. As a paradigm of moderation prior to 1919, and collaborationism in 1921, 1926 and beyond, the experience of the Notts coalfield in our period thus provides an important comparison to what are conventionally seen as more "advanced" areas.

*(i) Striking against the butty system*

On the surface, the NMA which went into the war in 1914 emerged unchanged in 1918. The same moderate leadership remained in place. J. G. Hancock, Charles Bunfield and William Carter, Agent, Secretary and Assistant Secretary respectively, were Liberals in their political outlook, although the latter two had eventually reconciled themselves to affiliation to the Labour Party. Hancock had been a founder member of the NMA in 1881, and Carter and Bunfield had begun their rise through the organisation's ranks in the 1890s. All three men favoured conciliation and cooperation with the owners, J.G. Hancock having particularly close

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4 See ibid., especially Chapters 7 - 12.
5 The unrest which affected Notts in July will be dealt with in Chapter Eight below

relations with them. William Carter "hated and detested strikes."[6] George Spencer and Frank Varley were the younger officials, aged 46 and 34 respectively. Spencer had been elected President in 1912, and had become a full time agent in 1918, when Varley had taken over the Presidency. Although Spencer had joined the ILP in 1900, he had supported the war without question, and both he and Varley were well within the mainstream of Labour's political thought. Spencer had been a lay preacher with the Wesleyan Methodists until his mid 20s, and although he was by now an agnostic, he retained a conservative outlook on social issues. Speaking at the Workers Educational Association in Notts, he said that in his view the greatest contemporary danger to the state was "the decline of family life and the secularisation of marriage." In addition to these five, there was a treasurer, L. Spencer, and a subscriptions collector, which made up the full compliment of seven staff.[7]

George Spencer, Carter, and Hancock were all MPs, representing Broxtowe, Mansfield, and Mid Derbyshire. Hancock however, unlike the other two, was a Liberal MP. "A Gladstonian Liberal in politics, a methodist by religion, and an active temperance worker", he had been unable to make the transition to Labour.[8] When he stood in the Mid-Derbyshire by-election in 1909, the MFGB had just affiliated to the Labour Party, and although he stood as a Labour candidate, he employed the Liberal election agent, was vigorously supported by Sir Arthur Markham, the coal owner Liberal MP for Mansfield, and ignored the Labour Party. Upon his election he "assured the Mid-Derbyshire Liberal Association that his personal

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6 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 21 February 1919.
7 DLB Vol.1 (1972), pp.304-307, and Vol.2 (1974), pp.159-160, and 371-372.
Griffin, The Miners of Nottinghamshire, vol.1 (Mansfield, 1955), and Griffin op.cit., Vol. 2.
Nottingham Evening News, 24 May 1919.
8 DLB Vol. 2, p.160.

views remained Liberal." He had the Labour whip withdrawn from him in 1914, and continued as a Liberal MP, holding the seat until 1923.[9]

Despite this political controversiality, Hancock still enjoyed the support of the NMA in 1914.[10] Griffin argues that between 1914 and 1918, the impact of the war had been to complete the transformation of the NMA's loyalty from Liberalism to Labour, so that at the end of the war, Hancock presented an anachronistic and isolated figure. Certainly, he was soon to become so, but it is important not to telescope events.[11] Hancock's politics were in retreat inside the NMA at the war's close, but he still maintained a base of support. Nottinghamshire had enjoyed better industrial relations than most areas in the first two decades of the century. It produced for a buoyant domestic market, and thus escaped the pressure of international competition which heightened the antagonism between capital and labour in the South Wales coalfield, for example. Geological conditions allowed relatively easy access to good seams in most parts of the county, and in the Leen Valley, the Top Hard seam was the most profitable in the country, giving the miners who worked there a prosperity unknown in other areas.[12] These factors allowed the institutionalisation of stable collective bargaining and conciliation procedures, and fairly close cooperation with the owners, the type of trade unionism favoured by Hancock.

The other major factor underpinning Hancock's position inside the NMA was the continuation of the butty system. Prior to the 1880s the butty system had been the main barrier to the establishment of permanent union

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9 ibid.
10 ibid.
11 Griffin, op.cit., Vol.2, pages 55 & 38.
12 ibid., Vol. 2, p.18.

organisation. At the time of the 1844 Notts strike the butty, who was paid by the ton, drove his daymen to produce higher output and thus increase his own wages, making him as much an employer as a workman. Thus when the miners struck in 1844, they were striking as much against the butties as the coalowners. Griffin shows how by the 1880's, changed economic and social conditions had prepared the ground for the successful rooting of trade union organisation. The most important transformation was the partial withering of the butty system:

> The butty was now far more of a workman and less of an employer than formerly. Indeed, most of the leading spirits of the 1881 union were themselves butties, (or checkweighmen who had risen from the ranks of the butties.)[13]

A process of differentiation had taken place within the ranks of the butties themselves, brought on largely by the increasing size of colliery concerns, and the employment by the companies of specialist managers, who at least partially displaced them. The system therefore operated in an uneven fashion by the war's end; whilst in some places the butties had sunk nearer to the level of the ordinary collier, in others they remained relatively rich and powerful, forming a natural constituency for what Griffin has called Hancock's "outmoded philosophy".[14] Although no longer "the master" in the same way as previously, the butty was still the contractor directly responsible to the management for the proper working of his stall, and the good conduct of the daymen employed therein. The daymen were the actual coalgetters, and they got paid a set day-wage by the butty, who was paid by the ton.[15]

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13 ibid., Vol.1, pp.175-176
14 ibid., vol.2, p.57.
15 Nottingham Evening News, 2 January 1919; this is taken from a description of the operation of the butty system at Radford, a medium sized pit.

They were thus divided from the ordinary collier by supervisory duties, and by income. At Radford collliery, in a good stall, a butty could reportedly make - in an extreme case - as much as £12 or £14 per week in 1919, more than double the average wages of the ordinary face-worker.[16] An NMA delegate told a Triple Alliance Conference in 1920 that his brother, a butty, "recently spent three days at York races, and returned home last Friday in time to pay his men and to pick up over £12 for the week."[17] Furthermore, in many pits the butties "kept the gaffer sweet" by offering bribes.[18] At Huthwaite and New Hucknall for example, the men complained about the operation of the "market system", i.e. the buying of the best stalls by the butties who were prepared to pay the highest prices. This allowed the Company to pick and choose men, and put them out of the normal places and into the abnormal, and vice - versa.[19] At a Mansfield Market Place meeting on 1st January 1919, the butty system was described as "the monstrous practice of one worker making a profit out of the other." The language used to describe the butties is revealing; they were referred to as men who "had been bosses so long that they did not like the idea of being supplanted."[20]

The continuation of the butty system was not only significant in the sense that it undermined unity and established hierarchies within the ranks of the miners in the pits, it meant that due to the way in which the NMA was organised, these hierarchies were replicated within the union machine itself. In Notts, as in other areas of the MFGB, checkweighmen and checkweigh committees had played a great part in the establishment of

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16 ibid.
17 Quoted in Griffin, op.cit., Vol 2, p.55.
18 ibid., p.54.
19 Nottinghamshire Free Press and Derbyshire Chronicle, 10 January 1919. (Hereafter Nottinghamshire Free Press).
20 ibid., 17 January 1919.

permanent union organisation. Their independence from the colliery companies meant that they were able to extend their role in the pits beyond the simple one of "taking account of the weighing of the coals" as specified in the Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1860.[21] In our period, the checkweighmen continued to play a prominent part in the union's affairs, both at branch level as branch officers, and at district level as delegates to the NMA Council. However, in Notts the checkweighmen were employed not by the miners as a whole, but by the butties, and where the powerful butties predominated, checkweighmen were answerable to them first and foremost.[22] Even where the gap between butty and dayman was at its narrowest, the checkweighmen were still threatened by the agitation for the replacement of the butty system by the universal daywage which developed from mid-1918. For, were this agitation to be successful, the checkweighers would no longer be needed, and they would be returned to the pit from the relative comfort and security of the checkweigh machine.

The butty system thus had a considerable impact upon the politics of the NMA. The partial withering of the system, and the general growth of suport for Labour meant that younger men like Spencer and Varley were becoming increasingly important inside the union, but Hancock was not as isolated as Griffin has suggested. The butty-checkweighman-union connection meant that there was still a considerable base of support for Hancock's Lib-Labism within the union machine itself. In fact in 1915 Hancock had come close to disaffiliating the NMA from the MFGB's

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21 Griffin, op.cit., vol.1, p.11.
22 ibid., vol.2, p.54.
Ned Cowey, a Yorkshire delegate at the 1898 conference of the MFGB said: "In Nottinghamshire they had what was called the butty system, which was a sweating system...The system was bad, as it put the appointment of checkweighers in the hands of a few men, and he was bound to do whatever these butty men told him to do." Cited in ibid., vol.1, p.138.

political fund in retaliation for having had the Labour whip withdrawn from him. His scheme was defeated in a coalfield ballot, but it was significant that he had persuaded Spencer to campaign in his support.[23] At the war's end his position in the union was still relatively secure, as shown by the fact that he and Spencer were nominated by the NMA as rivals to Smillie and Hodges for the posts of President and Secretary of the MFGB in 1918.24 Furthermore, he successfully resisted a move to force his resignation following his Liberal candidature at the 1918 general election; that he was able to do so was due to the fact that Labourites on the NMA Council, including some prominent left-wingers like Ben Smith, closed ranks to protect him.[25] Although figures like Varley and Spencer came from a different political tradition to Hancock, they chose not to disrupt the status quo within the NMA, and defended the power structure of which they were a part.

The main opposition to Hancock and the Lib-Lab old guard came from a group of rank and file socialists led by Herbert Booth.[26] Booth campaigned vigorously around the county, addressing meetings, and issuing 30,000 leaflets calling for a rejection of Hancock's scheme. Out of this campaign there evolved a rank and file committee "of keen socialists, who had attended classes at which he was the tutor."[27] After its success it became a permanent committee, and campaigned for various improvements in

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23 NMA Council Meeting, 30 January 1915.
24 MFGB Special Conference, 14-16 January 1919, pp.6-7.
25 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 10 January 1919.
26 Griffin, op.cit., Vol. 2., pages 22, 39, 40, 143, 276. Booth was out of the county from 1918-1922 during which time he was agent for the Forest of Dean miners. When he returned to Notts he became active in the Minority Movement, opposed Spencer's Industrial Union, and eventually was to become agent for the reunited Nottinghamshire Miners Federated Union in 1937. In 1915, he was a member of the ILP, and had just returned from a year of study at the Central Labour College in London.
27 ibid., p. 39.

working conditions, and for a democratisation of the NMA. This committee would provide most of the prominent figures in the unofficial leadership in 1919.

There was another group of militants in Notts, led by Jack Lavin. Lavin had emigrated to San Francisco in 1906, where he became an active member of the SLP and the IWW. He came back to England just before the war, working in the Yorkshire coalfield. In 1915 or 1916, he moved to Notts and got work in Welbeck colliery near Mansfield. Over the next two years he built a "small but influential" group of supporters who formed a branch of the SLP. He died of tuberculosis in 1919, but "his views gained wide acceptance, and his influence lived on after his untimely death."[28] The leading figure in the group after Lavin was Owen Ford, who also worked at Welbeck. The group was referred to by its members and by the press as representatives of the Workers' International Industrial Union, rather than the SLP, reflecting its strategy of industrial unionism.[29] The group was extremely active, issuing literature and leaflets, and holding regular meetings in Mansfield Market Place. In 1919 it was assisted by a full time female organiser who had come over from the American IWW.[30]

Strictly speaking, these two groups never actually merged; differences between them over holding union positions, and whether there was a parliamentary road to socialism meant they retained their separate identities. However, they formed a united front in our period, campaigning together for the unofficial version of the Miners' Charter.

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28 ibid.
29 Nottingham Guardian, 23 July 1919.
Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 15 August 1919.
30 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 8 August 1919.

Newspaper reports refer to only one unofficial group in 1919, variously described as "the unofficial camp", "the unofficial movement", and "the unofficial committee."[31] For the sake of simplicity I have referred to this ad hoc committee as the "unofficial group"; although it was in many respects similar to the Reform Committees in other areas, it never formally constituted itself under that title.

This was the situation then at the end of the war. J.G. Hancock's Liberal politics were being squeezed out by the growing support for the Labour Party inside the NMA, but were not yet finished. They still found a resonance amongst sections of the membership, especially the wealthier butties, and they still exerted a moderating influence upon Spencer and Varley, who chose to work with Hancock peaceably rather than become involved in any attempt to unseat him. This moderate bloc was challenged by an ad hoc unofficial group, which had achieved an important success in 1915, but which had little of a concrete nature to show since then. From the middle of 1918 however, its campaign to replace the butty system with the universal day-wage gathered momentum, and as it did so it revealed the structural antagonism between the NMA and the ordinary miners.[32]

Hancock and his supporters on the NMA Council, reflecting the influence of the more powerful butties, were implacably opposed to the campaign for

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31 Nottingham Guardian, 22 & 27 March 1919.
Nottinghamshire Free Press, 31 January & 28 March 1919.
Mansfield Reporter, 31 January 1919.

32 This antagonism extended to many of the less well-off butties; Evidently the erosion of their traditional rights and priviliges had persuaded them that their welfare would best be provided for by seeking unity with the ordinary collier. In fact, one of the leading figures in the agitation against the butty system in January 1919, Walter Owen, had himself been a butty for some twenty-two years at Mansfield Woodhouse. See Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 3 January 1919.

a universal day-wage, and dragged their heels over initiating any changes to the system as it stood.[33] Eventually, towards the end of 1918 the Council was pressurised into balloting the membership on the possible replacement of the butty system. However, there were four alternatives on offer in the ballot; the continuation of the present system, the present system "with some modification", the all-throw in system (which entailed the equal distribution of a stall's total wage), or the day-wage.[34] Branches complained that resolutions in favour of the day-wage were being ignored, and there was widespread suspicion that the form of the ballot had been purposefully designed to confuse rather than clarify the issue.[35] The local press also carried numerous reports of mass meetings which accused the NMA branches and Council of obstructing the campaign for the day-wage and being "out of sympathy with the rank and file."[36] At a large meeting at the Hucknall Empire:

> there was a debate on whether the representatives on the Council truly interpreted the wishes of the men. It was alleged that there were too many checkweighers amongst the delegates, and as their positions would be precarious by the adoption of day-work, they used their influence for the contract system, though the workers desired the plan of day-working.[37]

The NMA was experiencing a crisis of credibility due to its inability to function as an effective transmitter of the men's grievances. The

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33 Correspondence between Hancock and the manager of the Babbington Coal Company reveals his total opposition to the day-wage; DLB Vol.2, pp.159-161.

34 NMA Minute Book, 1918. The ballot result showed that 3,579 wanted to maintain the present system either untouched or in modified form, whilst 15,776 wanted to scrap it. Of these, 7,499, or 47.5%, voted for the day-wage.

35 Nottingham Evening News, 1 January 1919.

36 Nottingham Guardian, 2 January 1919.
Nottingham Free Press, 10 & 24 January 1919.
Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 14 February 1919.

37 Mansfield Reporter and Sutton-in-Ashfield Times, 31 January 1919. (Hereafter Mansfield Reporter)

continuing power of the more well-off butties within the NMA rendered it unable or unwilling to mount any effective campaign against the butty system. The agitation for the day-wage thus exposed the weakest flank of the union machine, and its near paralysis enabled the unofficial group in Notts to assume the mantle of leadership over this crucial issue.

The pressure for action gathered pace in the last few weeks of 1918.[38] On Friday, December 28th, thousands attended a mass meeting in Mansfield Market Place against the butty system. The main speakers were Tom and Andrew Clarke from Rufford, and Walter Owen from Mansfield Woodhouse. All three were closely associated with the unofficial group in 1919.[39] Walter Owen in particular was to be prominent in all the agitations of 1919, and was probably the leading figure in the unofficial group at this time.

The speakers argued for strike action against the butty system and for the day-wage to take place on New Year's Day. This was followed up by mass meetings at Mansfield, Sutton and Huthwaite on New Year's Eve, where the miners voted for the day-wage system. On the following morning the same decision was taken at pit-head meetings at other collieries.[40] By mid-morning there were strikes at Welbeck, Summit, Mansfield, New Hucknall, Rufford and Sherwood. On the following day the men at Radford came out. While some pits in the southern areas of the coalfield came out, the centre of the movement was in the north, where the unofficial

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38 Nottingham Evening News, 1 January 1919.
39 Andrew Clarke was one of three miners to, uncharacteristically, be awarded a scholarship by the NMA in 1920 to attend the Central Labour College in London. The NMA rarely sponsored miners to attend the CLC because of it's association with syndicalism, preferring the WEA. See Griffin, op. cit., Vol 2, p. 60.
40 Nottingham Evening News, 1 January 1919.

group's influence was strongest, and where the butty system appears to have been the most notorious.[41]

At this stage the strike was completely unofficial. Thousands of strikers attended a mass meeting called by the unofficial group in Mansfield Market Place. The speeches show the importance of breaking the butty system for the unofficial movement, not just as an end in itself but as a means to establishing the unity necessary to fight for more far reaching goals. Walter Owen explained that the fight against the butty system was only the opening shot in what he hoped would become the fight for the unofficial charter. "They wanted a six hour day, and £1 a day, but as yet they were a divided mob."[42] At another meeting a few days later, F.Deakin said that "he stood for smashing economic slavery, and the adoption of the throw in system as a temporary system pending the day-wage being adopted."[43] At Mansfield Market Place, Walter Owen also laid down the unofficial group's demand for a reorganisation of the system of electing NMA officials, so that they would all be elected by ballot, and would have to stand for re-election every three years. This demand was raised again and again in 1919, and was eventually won in part in 1920.[44]

Although the strike did not immediately develop into a fight for the unofficial charter in its entirety, it did have the effect of galvanising the officials into action. Belatedly they scrambled to put themselves at the head of the movement. It was clear that the demand for the day-wage

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41 See speech by GH James at Radford, Nottingham Guardian, 2 January 1919.
42 ibid., 3 January 1919.
Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 3 January 1919.
43 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 10 January 1919.
44 ibid.
Mansfield Reporter, 3 January 1919.
Griffin, op.cit., Vol. 2, p. 40.

had united the ordinary colliers, surface workers, and the less well off butties, and shifted the balance of power in the union away from the wealthier butties and the checkweighmen. The mass meeting at Mansfield voted to send a telegram to the Miners Offices at Basford, requesting an official to come and explain the Council's position at a further mass meeting to be held that afternoon. An emergency Council meeting was convened, which decided that whilst it would support the demand for a day-wage for all, this should be a matter taken up by the Federation as a whole, thus referring it to the MFGB Executive Committee. In the meantime it decided that the all-throw-in system should be adopted immediately in Nottinghamshire.[45]

George Spencer and William Carter went straight from the Council Meeting to the mass meeting at the Victoria Hall, Mansfield, where they succeeded in securing aceptance for their proposals. The compromise position held a dual attraction for the officials and the Council. Firstly it had allowed a practical resolution of the problem As an extension of the contract system it was far more acceptable to the owners than the day-wage, which they feared would result in decreased output and increased labour costs.[46] Had the men stuck to their demand for the day-wage, a prolonged strike would have been very likely. Secondly, the adoption of the all-throw-in system protected the position of the checkweighers. The officials could feel pleased with the outcome. However, it is significant that even though the men voted for their proposals, Spencer and Carter were on the platform at the Victoria Hall only at the behest of the unofficial group. The meeting remained unofficial, and only voted to

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45 NMA Minutes, 1 January 1919.
46 Mansfield Reporter, 3 January 1919. Spencer had been in contact with some colliery managers that morning, canvassing their opinions.

accept the Council's terms after Walter Owen recommended it should do so.[47]

In fact, the butty system was not terminally defeated by this strike. It appears that the Council's decision was not implemented evenly everywhere, and which system was adopted depended on local variables such as the level of organisation at the pit, and the character of the management. At some places, such as Cinder Hill, the men succeeded in achieving a day-wage, whilst at others, like Gedling, it seems that they failed to even operate the all-throw-in system.[48] As the post-war militancy ebbed away, so the butty system resurfaced in Nottinghamshire, although in modified form, not to be finally abolished until the 1950's.[49] Nonetheless, before the 1921 lockout it appears that nearly everywhere the butty system had been displaced, and certainly the miners themselves felt that a great victory had been achieved. C.Dean said at a mass meeting at the King's Palace, Sutton, that "with the smashing of the butty system they were more united than in the past, but other improvements were required." T.Knapton, an NMA delegate not associated with the unofficial group, referred to the scrapping of the butty system as "one of the greatest revolutions that had ever taken place in the mining world. He had been fighting for its abolition for thirty years."[50]

The strike against the butty system was very brief, lasting only one day in most places, and it had not involved the whole coalfield. Nonetheless the episode is of profound importance, helping to shape the events in Nottinghamshire in the rest of the year, in regard to both local issues,

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47 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 3 January 1919.
48 Griffin, op. cit., Vol 2, pp. 54-55, and p. 98.
49 ibid., Vol 1, p.1.
50 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 17 January 1919.
Mansfield Chronicle, 23 January 1919.

and national developments surrounding the Sankey Commission. Despite its later return, the butty system was perceived to have been buried at the time, and by leading the strike against it, the unofficial group had given its prestige an enormous boost. Moreover, although the movement had been an economistic one in its immediate sense, it had challenged the political and organisational implications of the butty system within the NMA. The growth in support for the day-wage revealed a structural antagonism between the rank and file and the NMA machine, because of the continued power of the butties in certain areas, and the preponderance of checkweighers who held union positions (i.e. men whose positions of relative privilege depended upon the continuation of the contract system). Furthermore, accompanying this was a Lib-Lab/butty nexus which, although no longer dominant as it had been in the first three decades of the NMA's existence, still survived and made its presence felt in the shape of men like Hancock, Bunfield and Carter. In addition, the newer generation of leaders were tainted by their association with the old guard; neither Spencer nor Varley were prepared to challenge the vested interests within the NMA's structures over the butty question.

Much had changed since the 1880's, but much remained. The fight against the butty system contained an implicit challenge to a complex series of organisational and political relationships which continued, at least in part, to shape the physiognomy of the NMA. The unofficial group had proved itself to be able to initiate the sort of action which could break the butty system, where men like Spencer and Varley could not. By doing so it gained credibility not simply for its industrial militancy, but also for some of the political ideas which set it apart from more conventional labour leaders. At a very early moment in the post-war

campaign of the MFGB, unofficial leaders had managed to establish an amorphous, though very real, direct action movement in Nottinghamshire.

*(ii) The demobilisation crisis*

Encouraged by this initial success, the unofficial group now began to contemplate the possibility that Notts might provide the catalyst for a national strike over the Miners' Charter. Its scepticism about the union leadership's commitment to such a strike was increased when the NMA officials failed to report back on the Southport Conference until two weeks after it had taken place.[51] A series of unofficial meetings were held around the county in an attempt to maintain the momentum of militancy set up by the butty system strike. At Sutton, unofficial leaders told miners that:

> The Federation said the reduction of hours was a great problem, but if it was left to them, they would not get the reduction for ten years. They ought to strike now, until they get the six hour day, six days for five, and the £1 day."[52]

These unofficial meetings attracted considerable audiences, and in the wake of the butty system strike the unofficial Charter's demands for a flat rate increase helped to galvanise support from the lower paid workers in the mines, such as pit boys, labourers and surface workers, who were traditionally under-represented in both the NMA and MFGB.[53] However, despite successful propaganda the unofficial group was unable to persuade miners to do more than vote for their Charter. Unable to spark immediate action, it decided upon a strategy which combined a continuing

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51 NMA, Adjourned Council Meeting, 28 January 1919.
52 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 17 January 1919.
53 Mansfield Reporter, 31 January 1919.
Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 7 February 1919.

propaganda campaign with an agitation around local issues which had been in the pipeline for the past year. The scrapping of the butty system had been the most prominent of these, but there were also demands for the payment of an acceptable rate for abnormal places, for a main road workers price list, and for the abolition of forks and screens from the pits. We have discussed the butty system, but a word is required here on the other demands.

Nottinghamshire coal owners had always insisted upon the use of forks and screens for the loading of coal into the tubs, as it ensured that only the best quality lump coal came out of the pits. The miners were opposed to this on two grounds. Firstly, it caused a considerable lowering of earnings for the piece worker, as it meant that small coal was left in the pit with the waste. Secondly, the presence of small coal or slack in the waste made "gob" fires much more likely. Shovel filling would have a significant effect on both safety and earnings, and as such had long been a desire of the Notts miners.[54]

The demand for a minimum wage for abnormal places was designed to rectify the anomaly which existed between pits in different parts of the county, in a range between a 7s6d and 8s5d basis. The sense of unfairness in the discrepancy was as strong as that which had driven the Cambrian miners in 1910. Smith said, "If work was worth 8s3d in one end of the county where they could not get out of the way of coal, it was worth it at the other end, where they could not shift for muck." 8s3d was decided upon as the acceptable minimum.[55]

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54 Griffin, op.cit., Vol 2, pages 50 & 98.
55 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 14 & 21 March 1919.

The main road workers were the timberers, chargemen, haulage men, horse keepers and anyone else involved in the making and maintaining of pit roads and the conveying of coal. Again, their pay depended upon local conditions:

> there had never been an attempt to systematise the pay of main road workers. There was no such thing as a county scale, and at some collieries there was no scale at all, and the men were at the mercy of the manager.[56]

Pressure for action over these issues had been buillding up since the beginning of 1918, when war weariness had renewed the possibility of successful intervention by militants around "bread and butter" issues. By the beginning of May 1918 all three demands had proceeded from the branches to the NMA Council.[57] There they stuck however, with the Council deferring a decision on action again and again. At the end of the year, the Council had still not progressed beyond the discussion stage.[58] The unofficial butty system strike was the result of this prevarication, and, with the other demands still outstanding, its resolution had not removed the antagonism between the rank and file and the NMA. Loyalty to the union leadership would remain in considerable doubt as long as it continued to drag its feet over these issues. This created a state of affairs pregnant with possible consequences for the position of Notts in relation to the national campaign over the Miners' Charter. For Notts miners, as for their counterparts in other areas, the MFGB was a fairly distant organisation, at one remove from day to day affairs in the coalfield. It was almost inevitable that the merits or demerits of the national union would be judged in relation to local conditions, and whether its policy seemed in accord with district priorities. For this

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56 Report of NMA Council Meeting, in Nottingham Evening News, 31 March 1919.
57 NMA Council Meeting, 29 April & 6 May 1919.
58 NMA Minute Book, 1919.

reason, the attitude of the Notts miners to the national campaign for the Charter was profoundly influenced by local factors. Dischord between miners and leaders at district level could, under certain conditions, escalate to dischord between the district and the national union. As the strike over the butty system had suggested, the best hope for the unofficial group to influence events at a national level lay in the potential which existed for it to assume a position of leadership in action over local grievances. It is this interplay between local and national issues, and the way in which the unofficial group related to it, which provides a continuing focus in this chapter.

It was the onset of the local effects of the demobilisation crisis which caused a renewal of militancy in Notts. On 21 January the general manager of the Bolsover Coal Company announced twenty-five redundancies at the Crown Farm colliery in Mansfield to make way for demobbed soldier-miners. In his statement he said that 1,368 men had enlisted from the Company's collieries during the war, and already by January 21st, 340 had returned at Crown Farm alone. Management had decided that there was no way in which the Company could absorb all the demobilised soldier-miners. The only way that these men could hope to get their jobs back would be by displacing the miners who had begun work in the pit since August 1914.[59] A lingering patriotism meant that a large section of the MFGB supported the displacement of the post-1914 men who, they contended, had used the pit as a "bolt-hole" in which to hide from conscription.[60] In Notts too there was considerable support for such a position. In fact, the miners at Crown Farm had themselves demanded that the management take up this stance. In this respect, the Bolsover Company could simply claim that it

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59 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 24 January 1919.
60 MFGB Conference, 14 January 1919, p.39

was acting in accordance with the men's wishes.[61] Significantly however, amongst the twenty-five who were to lose their jobs were several well known militants who had been at the forefront of the agitation against the butty system earlier in January, and a more recent one against fork loading. Moreover, at least one of these was himself a demobbed soldier.[62] The redundancies were an attempt by the Company to exploit the patriotism of the miners, and use demobilisation to weed out militants and weaken the union. It was a counter-offensive by one of the most powerful of the Notts coal companies, designed to reverse the recent trend towards militancy in the coalfield.

For the unofficial group the issue was about far more than the jobs of twenty-five men. Demobilisation lay at the heart of its programme in 1919, which was, *ipso facto*, now under threat. The news came through at a mass meeting in Mansfield Market Place, on the evening of Tuesday, January 21st, which had been called to launch a strike against fork loading in the north of the county. The group immediately decided to drop this, and called instead for an all out strike against the redundancies. It is an indication of how far the unofficial group had extended its base of support in January, that those miners who had only three weeks previously voted for the dismissal of the post-August 1914 men, now supported the strike call, and send out pickets to the rest of the coalfield. The next day, Mansfield, Rufford, Welbeck, Warsop Main, and Silverhill were out. By the end of the week over 20,000 miners were on strike.[63]

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61 Mansfield Reporter, 31 January 1919.
62 ibid, 31 January 1919.
Nottinghamshire Free Press, 24 January 1919.
63 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 24 January 1919.
Frank Varley's speech at MFGB Conference, 12-13 February 1919, p.23.

Frank Varley coordinated the officials' efforts to halt the strike. By Thursday January 23rd he had secured a deal with the Company whereby if the men returned to work, the fourteen days notice would be used to devise new shift patterns at Crown Farm to accommodate the twenty-five, or, failing that, to find them jobs in one of the Company's other pits. Varley addressed mass meetings in Mansfield, Sutton, and Nottingham, but at each one he was unable to convince the men to return to work.[64] The strike had transformed the situation. By meeting the Company's attack head on, the unofficial group had turned a direct threat to the Miners' Charter into an opportunity to win a mass strike in its support; it linked the redundancies to the issue of demobilisation, and via that, to the demands for the 30 hour week and the £1 daywage. A report of a meeting at Forest Town in north east Mansfield explained that Varley had been "able to carry the men with him, until subsequent speakers introduced other questions such as the demand for a six hour day, payment at £1 a day, and so on."[65]

The officials were overwhelmed by the level of support shown for the unofficial leaders. In the Kirkby district on January 22 the latter led a strike of 3,000 miners over the non-payment of the minimum wage for abnormal places, and then won them to join the general movement. On Thursday 23rd, the pits around Sutton and the least militant district, the Leen Valley, were picketed out. Motorised pickets from Mansfield also spread the strike to the Alfreton district, and the jurisdiction of the Derbyshire Miners Association, where around 7,000 came out.[66] At its

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64 Nottingham Evening News, 23 & 24 January 1919.
65 ibid., 24 January 1919.
66 ibid.
Nottingham Guardian, 25 January 1919.
Mansfield Reporter, 31 January 1919.

height, over thirty pits in Notts and Derbyshire were on strike for the unofficial version of the Charter.

On Thursday 23rd January there was a meeting of several thousand in Mansfield's Titchfield Park. Thomas Clarke spoke in favour of an all out strike, saying that "the miners had been chloroformed long enough, and they were now kicking over the traces."[67] The speeches and resolutions here show that the strike was not simply concerned with the local implications of demobilisation. At its most ambitious it was an attempt to short circuit the national negotiation process, which was barely underway, and provide a catalyst for a national strike. Only one week after the formulation of the MFGB programme at Southport, the Notts miners at Titchfield Park passed a resolutiion calling on Smillie to pull out the MFGB on an immediate national strike "for the six hour day, five day week, and a proper living flat rate wage."[68]

The following passage, taken from a report of the same meeting, conveys the impression that this was not an idle resolution. It was serious in its intent, and furthermore, the miners felt that a national strike was within their grasp.

> After this [the above resolution], there was a cry from the crowd for action forthwith, and it was proposed that the Federation should be given forty-eight hours in which to call a national strike. This was passed with acclamation, and it was further resolved that if the Federation did not achieve victory in the time stated, they should call out the Triple Alliance. One man proposed that the Alliance should be given a time limit of seven days, but on its being objected that this would not give sufficient time for so huge a strike to be organised, the period was extended to fourteen days and carried by a great majority.[69]

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67 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 24 January 1919.
68 Mansfield Reporter, 24 January 1919.
69 Nottingham Evening News, 23-1-19.

Another unofficial meeting in Sutton Market Place that afternoon passed an identical resolution.[70] With a total strike of Notts miners fast approaching, on Saturday January 25th the Bolsover Company backed down and agreed to reinstate the twenty-five men in an effort to rescue the situation. The mass meeting called for Saturday morning to discuss the offer was remarkable for its size and militancy, and the several detailed reports of it carried in the local press allow us a fascinating insight into the struggle between official and unofficial leaders in 1919.

The venue was to have been the Mansfield Market Place, but the huge numbers which turned up meant that it had to adjourn to a field outside the town, off the Chesterfield Road. By the time a large contingent which had marched up from Sutton arrived, something in the region of 7,000 - 8,000 miners had gathered together. When one considers that large meetings were held simultaneously at Newstead, Kirkby, and Hucknall, the turn out is even more striking.[71] The officials had come to the meeting to offer the miners the owners' capitulation over the redundancies, and to seek an unconditional return to work. The unofficial group on the other hand, was seeking to maintain support for the wider demands. In what might have been a piece of choreographed symbolism, designed to capture in one powerful image the nature of the battle inside the NMA in 1919, the official and unofficial leaders drew up their drays to face each other, separated by the thousands of miners for whose allegiance they were competing. On the official platform stood Charles Bunfield, Jesse Farmilo (checkweigher and delegate at Sherwood collliery), and several other members of the NMA Council. Bunfield attempted to speak first, but was forced to give way when Owen Ford and Bromley of the SLP

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70 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 24 January 1919.
71 Mansfield Chronicle, 30 January 1919.

began to address the assembly. "They delivered strong speeches which suited the temper of the crowd." They attacked the officials for "too much government from the top", and for failing to understand that the miners would no longer tolerate being "a mere commodity on the labour market." Ford described the strike as "an uprising of the workers" in which "the spirit of revolt was abroad."[72]

Farmilo and Bunfield then spoke, attempting to pull the meeting back in their direction. Farmilo tried to secure a return to work by arguing that the six hour day was being dealt with by the Federation, but was met with heckling. Bunfield then made a speech noteworthy only for its tactical ineptitude, in which he delivered an apologia for the owners. On the question of shovel loading, which was still being widely demanded, he "reminded the men that dirt and bind were not coal." Turning to the Crown Farm dispute he completed his isolation:

> He was glad to know that there had been an organisation to support the twenty-five men who had been given notice. He could not say unjustly given notice because of the fact that the workmen at the Mansfield colliery passed a resolution that the men coming out of the army should return to their old places and now the colliery had carried out the resolution of the workmen.[73]

Unsurprisingly, Bunfield's appeal for a return to both work and constitutional behaviour was howled down.[74]

The tussle betwen official and unofficial leaders continued for over three hours. At one point, in exasperation the official platform proposed a resolution for an immediate strike for the Charter, only to hurriedly withdraw it when a majority voted in favour. Men like Bunfield were

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72 Mansfield Reporter, 31 January 1919.
Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 31 January 1919.
73 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 31 January 1919.
74 Mansfield Reporter, 31 January 1919.

utterly out of touch with the mood of the meeting, which leaned heavily towards the unofficial leaders. At one stage, the officials were left standing almost alone in the field as the whole gathering moved over to listen to the speakers on the unofficial platform.[75] It appears, however, that strategic disagreements within the unofficial group led to its failiure to fully capitalise on the situation. Apparently the SLP faction were in favour of proceeding with an uninterrupted strike for the Charter, whilst in the ILP faction there were some in favour of a temporary return to work, in order to lodge notice of a strike for the Charter to begin on February 11th. The lack of a united strategy from the unofficial platform allowed the officials to regain some sway within the meeting, and they were ultimately able to prevent the continuation of the strike. However, they were only able to do this by proposing themselves that notices be lodged immediately of an all-out strike from February 25th if the Charter hadn't been granted in full by then. The next day, a further four mass meetings held around the county also voted for this position.[76]

The return to work on Monday morning must have been cold comfort for the officials. Forced into a corner by the level of support which the unofficial group was attracting, they had found themselves in the extraordinary position of having to endorse the aims of the unofficial movement, which was at this point undoubtedly in the ascendancy. Arthur Thompson must have been speaking for many miners when he said that:

> The unofficial movement was adopted by him because they must not measure by deeds but by results, and they had done more in the last four weeks than the official movement had done in years.[77]

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75 ibid.
76 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 31 January 1919.
Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 31 January 1919.
77 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 31 January 1919.

As things stood the traditionally moderate Notts coalfield was now the focus of a militant challenge to the cautious approach of the MFGB. Over the course of the next few weeks the Notts officials fought to extricate themselves from the compromising position in which they had become entangled, and prevent the strike from taking place. The seven weeks which followed the Crown Farm strike was the one in which the tension of the post war period reached its apogee. The delicate conciliation process which was underway between the Government and the MFGB was rendered precariously fragile by the situation in Notts. On the two weekends following the settlement of the Crown Farm dispute, nine well attended mass meetings were organised across the county, around the theme of "The Abolition of Mine Slavery", at which demands for action over the unofficial charter were again repeated.[78]

Frank Varley, who of all the district officials retained the closest contact with the rank and file in 1919, had little doubt that the militants were capable of relaunching the action. Not a left-winger, Varley nonetheless moved under pressure to adopt militant positions at MFGB Conferences in these weeks. At the Special Conference on February 12th and 13th, called after the rejection of the Government's initial offer of Commission, he intervened in an argument over whether there should be a recommendation for a strike on the ballot papers which were to be sent out. Varley questioned whether they could afford the time to ballot:

> We have had some wonderful happenings in Notts. We had 20,000 men on strike for four days, arising out of a question which was originally bound up with the demobilisation proposals, and having satisfactorily

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78 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 31 January 1919, & 7 & 14 February 1919.

> settled that matter they drew up a programme. True, it may be said in districts like South Wales and elsewhere that it may be regarded as a mere incident in the march of progress that 20,000 men struck for four days in Notts. We are usually liiked upon as of a more phlegmatic turn of temperament, but it is an ominous sign of the times.

He went on to say that already they were finding it difficult to keep the men at work, and doubted whether they could prevent a strike before March 15th, the proposed date for the expiry of notices.[79]

At the MFGB Conference on February 26th and 27th, at which the offer of the Sankey Commission was accepted, Varley supported the resolution from South Wales which called for a rejection, saying: "We can't go back and tell the men that we've accepted a Commission." Again, at the Conference held on March 21st, the day after the Sankey Report was issued and accepted by the Government, Varley seconded an amendment oposing the Executive's recommendation that the Conference should stand adjourned to allow negotiations to take place to seek further concessions on the report. He urged the delegates to reject the report altogether, and demand that the Government implement the majority report signed by the miners' representatives.[80]

The Notts officials were so concerned by their loss of control that they invited Frank Hodges to Notts to speak to their members. Before a packed Grand Theatre in Mansfield on February 23rd, Varley acknowledged the rupture inside the NMA, admitting that the official leaders recognised that their members "had lost all faith in them". For this reason, they had decided to ask Hodges to address them, and "allay the suspicion that the NMA were out of line with the rest of the Federation." Hodges made no

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79 MFGB Special Conference, 12-13 February 1919, p.23.
80 MFGB Special Conference, 26-27 February 1919 p.21.
MFGB Special Conference, 21 March 1919, p.27.

mention of the offer of the Royal Commission which had been made to the MFGB Executive two days earlier. Instead he stressed the "revolutionary nature" of the union's demands, and promised that he and Smillie would lead a national strike if the Government didn't back down.[81]

Two days later the coalfield was quiet; the strike for the hours and wages demands of the unofficial Charter, scheduled to commence on February 25th, did not take place. However, an unofficial strike did occur about two weeks later, whilst the Sankey Commission was still in session. Although over local issues, it raised the danger that if the Commission's interim report did not concede enough, the unofficial group might be capable of staging a repeat performance, and extend action over local issues until it embraced the Charter. Its track record, the numerous votes in mass meetings across the coalfield for nothing less than a thirty hour week and the £1 daywage, the positions taken up by Varley at MFGB Conferences, and Hodges' visit to Notts all suggest that this was a possibility. Had this occurred, the conciliation process might have been derailed, especially considering the strikes which were simultaneously underway in other areas against acceptance of the Interim Report.[82] In fact the Notts miners returned to work on April 1st, having won their local demands. In the next section we will examine the multiplicity of factors, local and national, which prevented the realisation of this potential, and which allowed the MFGB's strategy to carry the day.

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81 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 28 February 1919.
82 See Chapters Five and Six below.

*(iii) The problem of parochialism*

The strikes over the butty system and the Crown Farm redundancies had revealed what one might call a compound fracturing of the NMA's lines of authority and command, affecting the organisation's ability to fulfil its function as the articulator of struggle at all three levels; the Executive, the Council, and the lodge or branch. These lines only began to be repaired when the organisation made a concerted effort to address itself to the resolution of longstanding local grievances. In the process it also began to challenge the unofficial group in an area in which the latter had been close to establishing sole proprietorial rights.

It was only after the butty system strike that the Council took its first positive move. On January 11th a Special Council Meeting voted to ballot the entire county on removing all forks and screens from the pits, and filling with the shovel without any reduction in the getting price. On January 28th, the Council met again, two days after the conclusion of the strike over demobilisation. This Council meeting was qualitatively different. In the interim period, delegate elections had taken place in the branches, many of which had voted for new personnel.

> This was the first meeting since the periodic delegate elections, and there was present a large number of newer and younger men who have been elected in the places of those who have served their respective districts, in some cases for many years.[83]

Unfortunately it is not possible to establish in detail the changes which took place, but it seems that the hand of the unofficial group lay behind many of them. W.H.Holland complained in a letter to the Mansfield

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83 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 31 January 1919.

Reporter that the "politico-revolutionary element" were to blame for his removal from the Council.[84] Holland was an ex vice- President of the NMA, and a butty. In this period he established an organisation designed to conjure up the resurrection of the butty system, which affiliated to the right wing British Workers League. In 1926 this organisation was to provide George Spencer with a network around which to establish his Industrial Union, as well as a programme; separation from the MFGB, non political unionismn, freedom from strikes, and the reconsolidation of the butty system.[85]

The removal of men like Holland, and their replacement by younger delegates did much to make the new Council more responsive to the the membership. Its first act was to hand in notices for the whole county on Wednesday January 22nd to secure the abolition of fork loading, over which the ballot had revealed a large majority for strike. The Council also included the demands for a minimum wage of 8s3d for abnormal places, a uniform list for main road workers, and payment for the setting of "benk bars", or roof support bars on the coal face.[86]

No ground was made when the two sides met for talks on February 5th, and so they met again in London at the offices of Richard Redmayne.[87] He recommended that the notices should be suspended for a month, during which time all screens and forks would be withdrawn from the pits for a trial run. The month would be used to assess the cost incurred by shovel loading, and to settle the other matters in dispute. A ballot of the branches resulted in a large majority for acceptance of the scheme, and

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84 Mansfield Reporter, 4 April 1919.
85 Griffin, op.cit., Vol 2, pp. 116-117.
86 NMA Council Meeting, 28 January 1919.
87 Redmayne was Chief Inspector of Coal Mines, and Advisor to the Coal Controller.

to suspend notices for a month.[88] Ten days later, Lloyd George made his offer of the Sankey Commission. On February 25th, the day upon which the adjourned strike for the thirty hour week and £1 daywage was due to recommence, work continued normally, without any significant protest. In these weeks the unofficial group was very muted. Whereas in January newspaper reports and union records were full of references to its meetings and activities, at this juncture there is scarcely a mention of it. It appears that the combination of the Council's decision to submit notices for a strike, and the subsequent removal of forks and screens from the pits, combined with the concessions made by the Government to the MFGB in the form of the offer of equal representation on a Royal Commission, had severely restricted the space in which the militant miners could operate.

However, despite the apparent calm which had descended on the coalfield, further trouble was not far away. The NMA Council had agreed to suspend notices until March 10th under Redmayne's scheme. Redmayne however was a key witness at the Sankey Commission, which had been in session since March 3rd, and he had been unable to attend to the matters in dispute in Nottinghamshire. Consequently, he requested another suspension of the notices to allow him more time to fulfill his side of the bargain. The NMA met on March 10th, and voted by 554 to 129 to accede to Redmayne's request, and suspended notices until March 22nd, the date of expiry of the notices in all the coalfields over the MFGB's demands. The resolution continued that even if the national strike was averted, the Notts miners would strike for their own demands. The feeling of the majority on the

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88 NMA Special Council Meeting, 11 February 1919.

Council was that a strike before then would compromise their representatives on the Sankey Commission.[89]

They were mistaken in their calculation that as the men had not struck on February 25th, partly in deference to national developments, neither would they strike now. On 11th March, the NMA officials were confident enough that the members would abide by the decision of the Council that they all travelled to London to see Redmayne.[90] On Wednesday March 12th it became clear that the militancy of January had not dissipated. The Council's decision to suspend notices once again without consulting the membership, shattered the fragile unity which had existed since the Council meeting of January 28th. Once again a gap opened up between the rank and file and the official organisation. Once again the unofficial group proved itself able and willing to fill that gap.

Walk-outs took place at pits in the Sutton and Mansfield districts. On the morning of March 13th, lodge officials from Sutton convened a meeting at the King's Palace Theatre. Hundreds were unable to get in. Those who did were furious at the Council's decision. J. Percival, a Council delegate and local official, stoked the ire of the audience when he announced that there would be no strike pay. The meeting was described as uproarious, and at one point nearly broke up in chaos. Order was only restored when Ben Smith, Arthur Thompson and F. Deakin took the stage and endorsed the action, calling for pickets to pull out all the other pits in Notts, and demanded strike pay.[91]

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89 NMA Council Meeting, 10 March 1919.
90 Nottingham Evening News, 12 March 1919.
91 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 14 March 1919.

By Friday evening the strike had spread to include miners from Kirkby, Stanton Hill and Selston, as well as all the pits in the Sutton and Mansfield areas. On Saturday March 15th a huge meeting took place in Sutton, on the waste ground near the town centre Known as the Lammas, where 5,000 miners "filled the hollow and topped the rubbish heap."[92] Frank Varley spoke, and without condoning the unofficial strike, he avoided outright condemnation. Spencer on the other hand tried to "justify the delegates having their own opinions." Heckling grew louder as he spoke, until "he took off his coat and said he was ready for a battle." His speech was drowned out when he demanded a return to work. The meeting instead passed a resolution to hold branch meetings the next day, and mandate delegates for a Special Council Meeting which it demanded be convened to overturn the decision of the previous Monday. On Sunday March 16th, a similair resolution was passed at an unofficial mass meeting in Mansfield.[93]

Belatedly, the NMA officials tried to rally support by targeting the more moderate branches and inviting them to pass resolutions in support of their handling of the dispute. By now the momentum which the strike had built up was too great for the officials to fight an effective rearguard action, and when the Council met on Tuesday March 18th, it voted to rescind its earlier decision by 469 to 282. The next day the strike was officially on, and 40,000 were out.[94]

The strike was a clear-cut victory for the miners, who returned to work on April 1st, having won all of their demands, except for payment for the

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92 ibid., 21 March 1919.
93 ibid.
Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 21 March 1919.
94 NMA Special Council Meeting, 18 March 1919.

setting of benk bars, which they agreed to refer to the Coal Controller. The 8s3d for abnormal places was conceeded, as was a very favourable price list for the main road workers. Shovel loading was to continue. During the build up to the strike the union had added an additional demand for a basic scale for clerks, and a three-tier grading system was conceeded by the owners. This was the first time that miners and clerical staff had taken joint action in Notts, and one of the reasons that an offer made earlier in the dispute was rejected was that it did not include anything for the clerks, indicating the extent to which the hierarchies and sectionalism that men like Holland had relied upon had broken down inside the pits. The strike had lasted almost three weeks, and the NMA paid out £62,246 in strike pay, the largest in its history at that time.[95]

After the Council had made the strike official, nothing of special note occurred. In the Leen Valley the miners used their leisure time "to go for walks, or exercise their whippets."[96] There were no further clashes between the rank and file and the NMA, as any offer was referred to the members for consideration before the Council made a decision. As Spencer said, "The final arbiters are to be the men themselves. They have shouted so much about mandates and that sort of thing."[97] Given what had gone before, the outstanding feature of the strike was its economism, and its political innocuousness. There are several reasons which explain this.

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95 NMA Accounts, March and April 1919.
Nottingham Evening News, 31 March 1919.
NMA Council Meeting, 31 March 1919.
Nottingham Guardian, 4 April 1919.
96 Nottingham Guardian, 25 March 1919.
97 Mansfield Reporter, 28 March 1919.

The demands of the strike did not lend themselves to easy generalisation, in the way that the two earlier strikes had done. Due to the nature of the butty system, the agitation against it was pregnant with wider issues. The demand for a daywage evolved out of the agitation, allowing the unofficial group to begin to raise its programme. It was an attack on the hierarchies in the pit, and on the Lib-Lab politics which had been sustained by it inside the NMA. The structural vulnerability of the NMA over this issue allowed the URC to lead a campaign which was as much against the anachronisms of the union as against the owners, and in which a rank and file direct actionist current emerged and coalesced. The Crown Farm redundancies exposed the danger of uncontrolled demobilisation to the union, confirming the warnings of the militants that behind the owners' veiled concern for the soldier-miners there lay a hidden agenda of victimisation and union busting. Once on strike, the extension of the demands to include the thirty hour week and £1 day were a logical step.

The demands in the third dispute however were purely economistic, and politically barren in the sense that they did not automatically raise issues which divided the unofficial group from the official union, or a debate over the direction and strategy of the MFGB. This could only come from outside, through the explicit intervention of the unofficial group, and this it did not attempt. In fact at first the reverse was the case, as the strike exhibited a parochialism which, far from challenging, the group actively nurtured. The officials and Council justified their decision to suspend notices on March 10th by arguing that as a constituent member of the MFGB, the national programme must take precedent over the lesser issues which affected Notts. A sectional strike at this stage would be a diversion from the priorities of hours, wages, and nationalisation. Bunfield gave the official line, "However serious

their programme was, the national programme was more serious than local grievances."[98]

The Notts miners however were suspicious that the officials were simply using the national situation to indefinitely delay action over the local demands. "The county programme looked like getting swallowed up in the Federation's programme. That was the reason for the present drastic action."[99] This was an understandable suspicion. However, if the unofficial group had been consistent with its previous *modus operandi*, it would have led action over the local issues, whilst simultaneously attempting to introduce the wider questions contained in its Charter. In fact, they counterposed the two. Arthur Thompson for example welcomed the strike on March 13th in Sutton, "The spirit manifested by the men was a splendid thing. Their case had a priority of right over the Federation's programme." When Bunfield attempted at the same meeting to raise the question of nationalisation, he was heckled with cries of "We don't want to hear about that, this a local programme."[100] The syndicalist emphasis on the primacy of industrial action whatever the issue led the unofficial group to encourage parochial attitudes in Notts. In so doing, however, they deprived themselves of any possibility of changing the basis of the strike when Sankey's report was issued on March 20th. By the time of the ballot on the Report - and thanks largely to the efforts of the unofficial group - the bulk of the Notts miners were enjoying the best pay and conditions ever experienced in the coalfield. The concessions contained within the Report were thus seen by them as another step forward in what had been a highly productive three months of union activity. The militants who advocated rejection of the Report now found

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98 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 14 March 1919.
99 ibid.
100 ibid.

themselves almost utterly isolated, as the Notts miners voted overwhelmingly, by 30,885 to 1,764, for acceptance.[101]

*(iv) Direct action in Nottinghamshire: an assessment*

For the direct actionists of the unofficial group, the hours and wages demands of the Charter were designed as a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves. The spokesmen of the organisation were quite open about this. Owen Ford told the Chesterfield Road mass meeting that:

> He did not want to stop at the 20s per day idea...If you get the six hours and 20s, see what possibilities there will be in the future. You will go on till you get the lot.[102]

It is clearly the case that they felt their ultimate goal of a socialist society lay within their grasp. In a meeting called to discuss the situation in Russia, Goodall said:

> They were in the greatest period of history, and could see the dawn of civilisition...The sermon on the mount must be practised and brought down to earth.[103]

However, interviews with Notts miners in local newspapers about the militancy of 1919 tend to contradict the militants' belief that their workmates were moving towards revolutionary direct action. Many supported what one might call the minimum programme of reforms put forward by the unofficial group rather than the maximum one of revolution, and the massive vote for the Sankey Report would tend to confirm this. Further confirmation is provided by the pattern of struggle in Notts in 1919; the unofficial group's success was contingent upon the inactivity/ obstructiveness of the NMA leadership over local issues. Its influence

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101 Mansfield Reporter, 18 April 1919.
102 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 31 January 1919.
103 Mansfield Reporter, 25 July 1919.

decreased sharply whenever the latter responded in earnest to the grievances of the members.

Should we conclude from this that direct action in Notts was entirely parochial and economistic? If so, then it is hardly appropriate to use the evocative term "direct action" at all, when the more commonplace "strike" will do. The evidence suggests, however, that the question deserves a negative reply. In the first place, where the union leadership did temporise or obstruct (a not uncommon occurrence in industrial affairs, after all), the miners appear to have been enthusiastic in their support for the militants' alternative strategy, one which explicitly generalised from the local to the national. Secondly, many miners seem to have interpreted the Sankey Commission and the Government's acceptance of its Report as a victory for direct action, that is, that it represented a climbdown by the Government in the face of threatened workers' power.

In addition, there is considerable evidence that accompanying the industrial militancy of these months was a process of political radicalisation, in which the conventional division between politics and economics - the cornerstone of the British labour movement's reformism - was at least partially broken down. Union leaders acknowledged a dwindling in support for an electoral strategy. Varley complained that "the men were rapidly losing what faith they had in political action."[104] The Notts County Council elections in March 1919 were "very quiet...It was impossible to get the people generally to take an interest in the contests, and the polls were lamentably low." One cannot be certain as to the reason for the relative lack of interest in the electoral process, but the belief that social change was more likely through industrial

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104 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 24 January 1919.

action is as plausible as any, especially when one considers that at this time, in both Sutton and Mansfield, about half of the working male population were miners.[105]

Trade union leaders themselves clearly perceived that accompanying the industrial militancy there was a political challenge to the Labour Party, and were forced to compete with the idea of direct action. Varley, speaking at an Alfreton Labour Party meeting said:

> They were inseperably bound up with constitutional methods: if not, why did they need a Labour Party? They could not get away from this state of Parliament, and whilst direct action could be justified on industrial questions, he urged the miners to ponder over the grave responsibilities which such action would entail in political questions.[106]

The point is not that the Labour Party ultimately emerged as hegemonic from the post-war upheavals in the labour movement, but rather that it faced a challenge which it had to fight off before this could happen. In addition there is the fact that the unofficial movement had a considerable impact upon the politics of the NMA. Comparison of the Council Minutes in 1919 and those of previous years demonstrate that subsequent to the delegate elections of January 1919 the Council swung significantly to the left. In the course of the year it pressed for the removal of all troops from Russia, the abolition of conscription, and the repeal of the Defence of the Realm Act. It voted to take all means necessary to protect members who had been conscientious objectors. It twice voted to withdraw the NMA's investment in War Stock, despite strong opposition from the Board of Trustees, in protest at Government policy over Russia. It voted for the abolition of income tax for all workers,

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105 The figure for Sutton was 51.5%, and for Mansfield, 44% in 1921, from Robert J. Waller, op. cit., pp 291-292.
106 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 5 July 1919.

and for a coalfield wide strike and demonstration each year on May 1st.[107] There was genuine mass support for action to pull the troops out of Russia. At the MFGB Annual Conference in July, Spencer reported that once again the miners were on the verge of striking, and highlighted intervention in Russia, the economic blockade, and conscription as the major factors behind the unrest. "They are very strong on these three points."[108] When the Yorkshire strike provided the catalyst for unofficial action in Nottinghamshire shortly afterwards, local newspapers reported that these were amongst the demands of the strikers.[109]

None of the above can be taken as evidence that by supporting strikes led by the unofficial group, or voting for its resolutions, miners were demonstrating their agreement with its revolutionary ideas. Nonetheless, the fact that they were prepared to follow men amongst whose ranks were avowed revolutionaries is not without significance, and there is a demonstrative link between industrial militancy and political radicalism which was one of the hallmarks of a genuine direct action movement in Notts.

However there is a problem in proceeding beyond generalities of this sort, and attempting to establish to what extent the unofficial leaders provided political leadership in the struggles of 1919, or characterising the political content of the direct action movement. The problem is not one of unavailibility of sources, but rather the ambiguous and often contradictory political ideas of that leadership.
As we have seen the unofficial group functioned by way of an agreement to engage in joint action around a specific set of interim goals, but beyond

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107 NMA Council Minute Book, 1919.
108 MFGB Minute Book, 1919.
109 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 25 July 1919.

this there was not unanimity. The most coherent and easily identifiable set of ideas was provided by the SLP in the form of industrial unionism. They were tireless propagandists, constantly holding street meetings, and distributing literature. One leaflet in particular, entitled "Get ready for the revolution", led to at least one arrest under DORA in Mansfield, and was discussed in the House of Commons.[110] The main thrust of the SLP's message was that the trade union movement as it stood was incapable of fighting effectively:

> They needed to be organised thoroughly, and until they were they would have their strikes and get what they asked for, but each time they would shortly afterwards be in the same position as before. So long as that went on they were going to be wage slaves for ever.[111]

The answer was a combination of militancy and organisation. Pamphlets like Fifty Points on Industrial Unionism, advocated tactics like the lightning strike, sit-ins and sabotage. The SLP members saw themselves as facilitators of industrial struggle rather than as a political leadership within that struggle. In orthodox syndicalist fashion they consciously spurned political leadership in favour of organisational solutions. Owen Ford said that: "When the workers were organised in the International Industrial Union of Workers they would not be sending telegrams for somebody to lead them."[112]

Undoubtedly the SLP had an influence way beyond its own numbers, but its rejection of leadership placed restrictions on how far this influence could go. The other identifiable grouping amongst the unofficial leadership were those who were associated with Herbert Booth's committee.

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110 Nottingham Guardian, 19 August 1919; Daniel Lazarus was the man arrested.
111 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 5 July 1919.
112 Nottingham Guardian, 23 July 1919.

Of the men whom Griffin names as members of this group during the war, only Jack Smith of Hucknall and Harry Alcock of Rufford are mentioned by the local press in 1919.[113] However, it seems that most of the prominent unofficial leaders were, like Booth, members of the ILP. In the context of a high level of industrial struggle in 1919, they were profoundly influenced by syndicalist and revolutionary ideas. Reports of speeches by Deakin, Norris, and Owen, for example reveal that they attached a great deal of importance to industrial unionism.[114] Indeed most of the speeches made by unofficial leaders at the time are concerned with harnessing the industrial power of the miners, and are shot through with a syndicalist tone. However, although they leaned towards revolutionary ideas, many simultaneously retained a commitment to the Labour Party's political project. Norris was an ILP councillor, and in April 1919 Arthur Thompson, Andrew Clarke and Deakin stood as Labour candidates in the Urban District Council elections in Sutton, as did Ben Smith. Although there was a low poll, Labour did well, with Smith, Deakin and Thompson being elected amongst eight successful candidates. Labour's campaign was described as "the first serious, organised attempt" in local elections in Nottinghamshire, and as "a remarkable success."[115]

Thus although espousing syndicalist ideas and placing great emphasis on industrial struggle, several prominent members of the unofficial group still played an important part in the Notts Labour Party and ILP in 1919. This does not imply opportunism or hypocrisy. What it suggests instead is that the unofficial group was not immune from the political confusion of the left, whose ideas were in a state of flux at this critical historical

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113 Griffin, op.cit., p.39.
114 See Mansfield Reporter, 5 January 1919, for good examples of speeches by Norris and Deakin, and Nottinghamshire Free Press, 11 April 1919 for Owen.
115 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 11 April 1919.

juncture. It was not until the summer of 1920 that the various strands coalesced or fell apart, with the formation of the CPGB and the refusal of the majority of the membership of the ILP to join it. In 1919 the leadership of the unofficial movement in Notts represented a political hybrid; its ideas straddled both reform and revolution. Some were out for "revolution and even bloodshed", whilst others described themselves as peaceful revolutionaries.[116] Some, like those associated with the SLP, were convinced that Parliament was useless, whilst others were unwilling to abandon it entirely. And some held contradictory ideas simultaneously. Henry Hicken, who would later become leader of the Derbyshire miners, described himself as "a revolutionist", and "an industrial unionist", whilst concluding that "80% of the electorate were workers, and they could send to Parliament 100% of their own class, who could alter the present state of things."[117] Walter Owen, who described himself as "a freelance, ready to fight any official in Notts or Derbyshire", often used a revolutionary vernacular in his speeches, speaking of the need to overthrow capitalism etc. Yet he was not a convinced revolutionary. The ill-defined nature of his politics meant he could be swayed by the Sankey Commission, in the aftermath of which he declared, "Industrial life and conditions could be altered only by evolution and not revolution."[118]

The search for a political characterisation of direct action in Notts thus ends with the conclusion that there was no coherent theory underpinning it. One finds instead an ideological diversity bordering on formlessness, semi-developed ideas and contradictions, borne along by the explosive militancy of the coalfield. Hence the amorphous title of

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116 ibid., 17 January 1919.
Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 4 April 1919.
117 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 17 July 1919.
118 ibid., 28 March 1919.

"direct action". Beyond this lowest common denominator the militants themselves could not go.

The organisation of the unofficial group matched its political incoherence. As we have seen, it was divided between the supporters of the SLP and those of the ILP. Although they were often able to sustain an operational cohesion around those immediate goals which they could clearly define, sometimes their differences made themselves felt. There was not, for example, a cohesive intervention in the critical mass meeting in the field off the Chesterfield Road on January 25th, and this allowed the officials to salvage something from the situation when all had seemed lost to it.

The priority of the militant miners was to improve the organisation of the trade union, rather than create a separate rank and file organisation. Although at the extreme end of its political spectrum it had revolutionary goals, the unofficial group was not a revolutionary body. In fact they were, in the tradition of The Miner's Next Step, a ginger group, albeit a very militant one. Norris, for example, said: "It was time that the trade union movement was quickened up and made to represent the rank and file." Goodall "hoped there would be a gingering up of Notts officials to give sanction to the movement" for the unofficial charter. Norris again: "The unofficial movement was out to quicken the pace, and improve the machinery of trade unionism."[119] As such they saw no need for any formal organisation, revolutionary or otherwise. It was enough to formulate a set of demands around which to agitate, keep all the militants in touch with each other, and push for action wherever possible.

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119 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 31 January, 28 March & 4 April 1919.

The militant miners stood at the head of a genuine mass rank and file movement in Notts in 1919. In the first three months of the year alone there were over half a million strike days, either led exclusively by the unofficial group, or heavily influenced by it. There existed a vibrant culture of rank and file-ism, which threw up its own leaders and agenda, which existed outside of the structures of the NMA, and which often eclipsed the latter. Unofficial mass meetings became a new feature of coalfield life, challenging the Executive and the Council for the position of governing body of the miners. Again and again the unofficial leaders were able to pack out the large venues. The Sutton Town Hall, and King's Palace Theatre, the Mansfield Victoria Hall and Grand Theatre, and the Market Places of both towns; these became the debating and organising centres of the movement, often usurping the authority of the Council Chamber at Basford.

It achieved many things. Its victories in terms of local pay and conditions have been dealt with in depth. These helped to win it a mass base of support for its unofficial Charter which seriously challenged the official's strategy. However, we have seen that at the high points of its influence in 1919, the aspirations of the unofficial leaders were almost limitless. They believed that the day of reckoning had arrived, that in the immediate future they would have greatly increased pay and leisure hours, better housing, and control of the mines. In short they felt that the final defeat of coal capitalism was on the immediate agenda. In the sense that this was their ultimate goal in 1919, they failed. The confusion of their political ideas, the organisational flaccidity, and the parochialism, were some of the factors which ensured that they were incapable of fulfilling their most ambitious project.

# Chapter Five

## *South Wales*

> They are proceeding calmly and with restraint. They are not rushing into "Direct Action". They are proceeding cautiously and constitutionally, looking first of all to Parliament to bring about reforms which are desired by the workers.[1]

> The MFGB was going to ask the Prime Minister to put a Bill to Parliament reducing miners' hours from eight to six, and if this didn't happen, a day would be fixed upon which all miners would leave the mine after six hours. (Loud Applause) Do you realise what this means? It means that we are going to challenge the coalowners right to control their own mines and it is going to be done.[2]

### *(i) The heartland of syndicalism*

The predominance of coal in South Wales meant that changes wrought in the industry by the war were more keenly felt by the society as a whole than was the case for any other mining area in Britain. Up until 1914 Liberalism showed a strength and resilience which suggested that its hegemony would remain in-tact for a considerable time to come.[3] In fact the heyday of Liberalism had, in retrospect, already passed in the years either side of the 1906 election victory. Profound changes were taking place in South Wales society. Mass immigration from England into the mining areas was diluting religious evangelism[4], and the rising curve of

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1 Vernon Hartshorn, speaking about the South Wales miners, South Wales News, 18 January 1919.

2 Noah Ablett to Ton Pentre miners, Western Mail, 21 January 1919.

3 K.O.Morgan, "The New Liberalism and the Challenge of Labour. The Welsh Experience, 1885-1929", pp.288-312, Welsh History Review, vol.6, 1973.

4 R. Lewis, "Leaders and Teachers: The Origin and Development of the Workers Education Movement in South Wales, 1906-40" (Unpublished Ph.D.Thesis, Swansea University of Wales, 1980), pp.15-16 (Hereafter Lewis, Thesis); Between 1901 and 1911 there was a 40% increase in the mining workforce, and by the latter date 24% of the adult male, and 19% of the adult female population were non-Welsh immigrants.

industrial conflict was exposing the contradictions in the assumed cross-class community of the Progressive Alliance.

Nonetheless, the latter continued to dominate politics, remaining "the most significant political tradition in South Wales down to 1914."[5] In the three General Elections of 1906 and 1910, Labour could win no more than four seats. Of these, three were held by Mabon, William Brace and John Williams, old school Lib-Lab miners' leaders who, following the 1908 affiliation vote had taken the Labour whip without significantly altering their politics. The fourth, Keir Hardie, held the second seat in the double-barrelled Merthyr Tydfil constituency in these elections (and in the Khaki election of 1900), but he too owed his success to the fact that he was seen as a candidate who stood on the radical wing of the Progressive alliance, and was challenged by the Liberals on only one occasion. The three miners' leaders who stood as socialist candidates for Labour prior to 1914, James Winstone, Vernon Hartshorn and C.B.Stanton, all met with failiure.[6]

The war acted as a yeast upon the mixture of factors which had been eroding the pillars of Liberalism before 1914. In particular, the perceived inequality of sacrifice by mine owners and mine workers, summed up in the charge of "profiteering", elicited an increasingly militant response. The first, and most spectacular episode was the coalfield strike of 1915, but the pit and district level strikes which ocurred with increasing intensity from 1917 onwards were of equal importance in highlighting the class division in South Wales society. It was this which

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5 Peter Stead, "Working Class Leadership in South Wales, 1900-1920", Welsh History Review, 1973 vol.6, pp.329-353.
6 ibid., pp.332-341.
Roy Gregory, op.cit., pp.119-144.

enabled the socialists to shake off what Hartshorn had in 1910 described as "the deadweight of generations of Liberal tradition and prejudice."[7] K.O.Morgan brings us up to date:

> At the conclusion of the First World War, the politics of Wales were on the verge of massive and dramatic changes. The ascendancy of the Liberal Party, the dominant feature of Welsh political history for two generations from the time of the 1868 general election down to the First World War, was to be shattered for ever.

As evidence, Morgan gives the results of the 1922 elections, in which Labour won all fourteen coalfield seats.[8] However, both Morgan, and Stead in a less direct way, whilst convincingly arguing against an interpretation of the development of South Wales politics which sees in the pre-1914 period any proof of an inevitable rise of Labour, have a tendency to accept it as inevitable from 1918. Thus the war is seen as the dividing line in a neat pre-1914 Liberal/post-1918 Labour dichotomy. However, an examination of South Wales society in the immediate post-war period causes question marks to be raised against this schematic view.

A methodological approach in which general elections provide the main evidence for shifts in political opinions has some weaknesses. In the first place, it encourages accounts which tend to play down the significance of the inroads made by the left into the power of the Lib-Labs in the SWMF leadership after the Cambrian Combine defeat in 1911. The left which breached the dam of Lib-Labism in the SWMF contained a strong syndicalist current. As well as the ILPers Barker, Hartshorn and

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7 Peter Stead, op.cit., p.339.
8 K.O.Morgan, "Welsh Politics 1918-39", p.99, in T.Herbert & G.E.Jones (eds), Wales Between the Wars, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1988) In fact, Morgan gives figures for the whole of Wales, in which Labour won 18 out of 36 seats.

Winstone, the SWMF Executive contained by 1912 a number of URC supporters.[9] As there was no general election in the eight years after December 1910, this shift in industrial politics did not have an opportunity to register in electoral terms. A second and more important objection for the purposes of this study is that their electoral focus means that inevitably neither Stead nor Morgan can fully take account of the importance of syndicalism, a philosophy which, in its pure form, eschewed parliamentary action.

It is no accident that of all the coalfields, syndicalist ideas first found a following in South Wales, and the tradition which was established here, from The Miners' Next Step onwards, bore the hallmarks of the coalfield society which produced it. It was the striking physical configuration of that coalfield which instantly set it apart from all others in Britain, and which provided the basis for the unique place occupied by the SWMF in mining trade unionism.[10] In the first place there was its sheer size. Fifty miles long and eighteen miles wide at its broadest point, it stretched from Pontypool in the east to Kidwellty in the west, spanning the whole of West Monmouthshire, most of Glamorgan, the southern part of Breconshire, and the greater part of East Carmarthenshire. Mining was by far the most important industry in South

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9 These were Noah Ablett, Frank Hodges, Ted Gill, Noah Rees and Tom Smith. see Dai Smith, Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales, (Cardiff, 1993), p.74.
DLB, vol.1, pages 37, 51-3, 150-2, 350.
DLB, vol.2, p.1.

10 Several accounts of the South Wales mining industry stress this. For a contemporary account see Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest, No.7 Division, Report of the Commissioners for Wales and Monmouthshire, 1917, (Cd.,8668) *passim*. See also the opening chapter of Hywell Francis and David Smith, The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century (Lawrence and Wishart, 1980). For a recent account, see David Gilbert, op.cit., pp.55-139.

Wales, providing the foundations upon which the transport and metal industries had been built, and within the coalfield area it was, with few exceptions, the only source of employment. By our period it was the most intensely mined area in Britain, with over 200,000 mine-workers and their families crammed into the deep and narrow valleys which had been carved out by the streams and rivers which made their way southwards from the Brecon Beacons.

The supreme position of the mining industry provided the cornerstone for South Wales syndicalism. In the first place, it gave the miners a strong sense of their own industrial power, one which was heavily underscored by the victory over the Government in 1915. Secondly, it seemed to provide an ideal terrain for the class struggle, a point made by the Industrial Unrest Commisioners and reiterated by the Merthyr Pioneer in 1919:

> The class war has manifested itself more strongly in the coalfield (because of) the geographical concentration of the colliery worker into comparatively small and dense communities in the coal areas, and his employment in huge masses, making for a discipline and unity not possible in many industrial occupations.[11]

The rising curve of industrial conflict from around 1907 onwards was also due to the difficult geological conditions of the coalfield, with its uneven seams and frequent faulting. In the labour-intensive mines (there were almost as many repairers as colliers) productivity was low and falling, placing enormous pressure both on the owners to hold down wages, and on the colliers to increase piece rates.[12] The unusually turbulent

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11 Merthyr Pioneer, 28 June 1919.
12 L.J.Williams, "The Road to Tonypandy", in Llafur, vol.1, no.2, 1973.
Noah Ablett, "Wagery in the South Wales Coalfield", Plebs Magazine, Vol.7, no.8, September 1915.

nature of industrial relations in the coalfield provided the syndicalists with a constant wind with which to fill their sails. Furthermore, struggles over the control of the production process were an integral part of industrial conflict. The Cambrian Combine strike was, according to David Egan, at root an act of "resistance to an attempt by owners to seize control over their mines and break the miners' customs and practices."[13] This concern to maintain control over their working places was an important factor in propelling miners to trade unionism:

> Consequently...the SWMF became an institutionalisation of employees' attitudes to work and thereby took the form of organisations which were much more than means of improving wages and conditions of employment.[14]

The poverty of civic life in the valleys, bemoaned by the Industrial Unrest Commissioners as one factor behind the unrest, also pushed the mining communities towards creating their own social institutions and amenities, from the Miners' Institutes and their libraries, to rugby clubs and choral groups.[15] As D.K.Davies has observed, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century:

> The structures of social activity throughout the coalfield had been formed mainly through the communal efforts of the miners themselves rather than being the product of paternalistic influence.[16]

There was, therefore, both at work and in the community "a reliance upon and a growing consciousness of the need for organisations that could be

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13 David Egan, "Noah Ablett", op.cit., p.21.
14 David Egan, "Wales at Work", in Trevor Herbert and Gareth Elwyn Jones (eds), Wales 1880-1914, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1988), p.52.
15 H.Francis and D.Smith, op.cit., pages 1 & 8. Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest, op.cit.
16 D.K.Davies, 'The Influence of Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism in the South Wales Coalfield, 1898-1921: A Study in Ideology and Practice', (Unpublished Ph.D.Thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff, 1991). (Hereafter Davies, Thesis.)

controlled."[17] Paramount amongst these were the local miners' lodges. As Liberalism and Lib-Labism declined so too did the chapel, and in a world increasingly dominated by the SWMF, the local lodge became the dominant social institution. An essay entitled The Miners' Progress, written by a CLC student in 1920, showed why many young militants after the war continued to be attracted to the same characteristics of the SWMF as had Ablett and Co. before them.

> Questions relating to rent, housing accomodation, local profiteering in food, clothing, etc; in short, all the circumstances of the miners' social life in addition to those purely economic and those exclusively pertaining to the mining organisation and industry, are discussed at Lodge meetings, and policies are there framed to meet the given situations...In fact, the local Miners' Lodge...is now a very powerful social organisation in its district.[18]

In this context it did not seem unreasonable to many that their own trade union, the most powerful organisation both at work and in the community and the one closest to the miners' lives, represented the most realistic and readily available mechanism for social advance. Parliament, by contrast, could seem remote and even superfluous. URC activists felt that if they could perfect the organisation of the Federation, and wrestle control of it away from the moderate leaders, then they would have a powerful weapon which could not only defend the miners' conditions, but beat a path towards revolutionary trade unionism. By erasing the word "conciliation" from union vocabulary, they could make incremental inroads into the profits and control of the owners, "so erecting the new society within the lap of the old."[19] As a strategy for social emancipation this

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17 H.Francis and D.Smith, op.cit., p.1.
18 "The Miners' Progress: Five Years in the South Wales Coalfields", by "A Labour College Student", printed as a supplement to the Workers'Dreadnought, 24 April 1920.
19 The quotation is from an article by Ablett in Plebs Magazine, vol.9, no.3, April 1917.
TMNS, pp.16-31. See also discussions of the pamphlet in

was for many more in tune with the realities of coalfield life than the long parliamentary road to distant Westminster. In the first place, it was more practical; as Ablett was always fond of asking, "Why cross the river to fill the bucket when you can fill it this side?"[20] Secondly, in a society in which the social and economic lives of its inhabitants took place in the shadow of the pit-head, the democratisation of the pit was a very compelling goal. Commenting on the Government's post-war promises, Ablett said:

> It was no use using brave words like "liberty", "freedom" and so on, without having their substance, and man must control the means by which he lived before he could have that substance."[21]

This brings us back to the objections raised earlier against Stead and Morgan. Social and industrial conditions in the coalfield gave rise not only to the Labour Party, but to a vibrant strain of home-grown syndicalism. At the end of the war this had, in a mono-industrial society dominated more than ever by the SWMF, both a well-established tradition stretching back to 1910-11, and an immediate vitality which, unless we are careful, can be obscured by the rise of Labour. There is no intention to marginalise Labour here - indeed, the fact that nine Labour M.P.'s were elected in South Wales in the December 1918 general election is demonstrable evidence that its rise had already begun. The point is that this rise was a contested one - there was significant competition from influential activists to the left of the Labour Party who held that progress to a socialist society lay along the path of "Direct Action."

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Francis and Smith, op.cit., Chapter 1; David Egan, "The Unofficial Reform Committee and The Miners' Next Step", Llafur, vol.2, no.3, 1978, pp.64-80; M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, Chapter 2; Dai Smith, op.cit., pp.72-3; David Gilbert, op.cit., pp.78-82.

20 Interview with D.J.Davies, 3 November 1972, SWML, DJD/16/6.

21 Merthyr Pioneer, 20 December 1919.

Peter Stead's own salutary warning to those seeking an inevitable rise of Labour pre-1914 is equally applicable here: "Surely it is a mistake in any period to pick winning sides long before the battle is resolved?"[22] South Wales in 1919 was poised between two epochs. The old world of the Liberals was vanishing fast, but the new world which would take its place had not yet taken shape. Undoubtedly labour, to all intents and purposes miners, would play the key part in determining that shape, but on the threshold of the campaign for the Miners' Charter, there seemed no guarantees that those miners would be constrained by the gradualism of the Labour Party.

### *(ii) The South Wales Miners' Federation: organisation, leadership and politics in 1919*

The SWMF was, as its title suggests "a Federation within a Federation."[23] Mining trade unionism had developed in the form of seperate organisations within rather than across valleys, conforming to the geographical contours of the coalfield, and at the formation of the SWMF in 1898, these district unions had retained a high degree of autonomy. The intervening two decades had done little to change matters, and in our period the Federation was composed of nineteen constituent district organisations, each with its own funds, internal government structures of executives and conferences, and a full-time agent, elected on a permanent basis by ballot vote of the membership. In the larger districts, or where the agent had become an M.P., a full-time sub-agent was also elected. In 1919 eight districts had sub-agents.[24]

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22 P.Stead, op.cit., p.341.
23 H.Jevons, The British Coal Trade (London: Kegan Paul, 1915), p.131.
24 R.P.Arnot, South Wales Miners, Vol.1, 1898-1914, (1967), pp.74-6.

The locus of power within the Federation thus lay to a large extent in the districts. These varied considerably in size and tradition, and the amount of power they wielded varied accordingly. Under the SWMF constitution, each district numbering 3,000 was entitled to elect one representative to its Executive Council, and an additional representative for every 6,000 additional members. Under this arrangement the larger districts had considerably more influence within the governing body of the SWMF than their smaller counterparts. The giant Rhondda No. 1 district, for example, had six representatives on the EC, whilst tiny Blaina had only one. Although it was not an automatic right, the universal tradition was for districts to elect the agent as their SWMF EC representative, and their sub-agent where they were entitled to more than one place. Because of this, the EC was dominated by full time officials. In 1919, of the 37 EC members, 27 were agents or sub-agents, four were full-time officers of the Federation, and only six were lay members, four of these coming from Rhondda No.1. The federal structure of the SWMF constitution therefore entailed the creation of a very large union bureaucracy at the head of the organisation, which concentrated enormous power in its hands both at a district and a federal level.

As a counterweight to this there was an additional governing body in the shape of the SWMF delegate conference. This was, in theory at least, the sovereign body of the Federation, and had the power of decision making upon the more important matters affecting the coalfield, including

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D.K.Davies, Thesis, pp.70-72.
T.Adams, "Working Class Organisation, Industrial Relations and the Labour Unrest, 1914-1921" (Unpublished Ph.D.Thesis, University of Leicester, 1988), pages 283 & 324. (Hereafter T.Adams, Thesis)
SWMF Minutes, 1919-1921.

drawing up demands, sanctioning deals negotiated by the EC, or initiating strike ballots. The delegate conference also had reponsibility for deciding on rule changes, and for electing the President, vice-President, General Secretary and Treasurer, the four full-time Federation officials. According to the constitution, these were to be subject to annual re-election, although the custom was to allow their positions to go unchallenged. In instances where the EC were reluctant to call a delegate conference, it was often the case that the membership could exert pressure via the lodges and districts and force them to do so, and occasionally the bigger districts even threatened to withold funds from the Federation unless the EC complied. Each lodge was permitted to elect two delegates to the SWMF conferences, and given that there were over 350 lodges at this time, these were important events in the coalfield calendar, and opportunities for large numbers of the activists to come together.[25]

Whilst this facet of the constitution allowed a considerable devolution of power to the lodge officials and the rank and file, the union nonetheless remained very top heavy. This, and the "extreme federalism" of the SWMF were, according to the URC, the main barriers which stood in the way of it becoming the vehicle by which workers' control could be achieved.[26] Two concerted efforts were made, in 1912 and 1917, to effect the constitutional remedies advocated by The Miners' Next Step, but these were both unsuccessful.[27] By 1919 therefore, little or no headway had

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25 South Wales Miners' Library (SWML), Interview with Will Coldrick, WC/106/22.
Merthyr Pioneer, 1917-20.
R.Page Arnot, South Wales Miners, vol.2, p.13.
SWMF Minutes, 1919-21.

26 Interview with R.Page Arnot, 6 March 1973, SWML, RPA/53/17.

27 H.Francis and D.Smith, op.cit., pp.16-22.
D.K.Davies, Thesis, pp.70-72.

been made in transforming the character of the SWMF leadership beyond the changes which had been made in the 1911-12 period. Whilst a seachange had then taken place, the gains made by the left were not so sweeping as to prevent the survival of strong currents from the Lib-Lab era. In the first place, Brace, Richards and Onions all survived the onslaught and remained important figures within the SWMF leadership in 1919. Brace had returned to the MFGB EC in 1912, and had remained there ever since, except for three years during the war when he served in Coalition governments. In 1919 he was M.P. for Abertillery in his native West Monmouthshire, and President of the SWMF. Tom Richards' career was also far from over. Whilst he had to wait until 1921 before he was re-elected to the MFGB EC, once there he stayed on it until his death ten years later, serving as vice-President and President. In 1919 he was M.P. for Ebbw Vale, and General Secretary of the SWMF. Alfred Onions was never returned to the MFGB EC, but he had retained his position as Treasurer of the SWMF and he was, from 1918, M.P. for Caerphilly. In 1919 therefore, three out of the four full-time officials of the SWMF were old Lib-Labs, who had been in their posts since the foundation of the Federation in 1898.[28] The other full-time official was James Winstone, who whilst remaining on the left throughout his life, was hardly a young militant in 1919, he too having been a founder member of the SWMF EC.[29] In the 1918 general election he had been defeated at Merthyr by the Coalition Liberal Sir Edgar Jones.

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T.Adams, Thesis, p.307.

28 DLB, vol.1, pp.51-53, 285-287, 259-260. In fact Brace had been vice-President from 1898 to 1912. Richards and Onions were General Secretary and Treasurer respectively throughout their careers from 1898 onwards.

29 ibid., pp.350-351. He had been the first EC member from Tredegar District, and agent for Eastern Valleys District from 1891.

Furthermore, as Dai Smith has emphasised, although the breakthrough of 1911-12 represented "real incursions into power...they were *not* a triumph of the extreme left."[30] Whilst Hartshorn, Barker and Winstone were supporters of the Plebs League, and associated themselves with the mid-Rhondda militants led by Ablett during the Cambrian Combine dispute, their involvement on both these fronts had more to do with a desire to finish off "Mabonism" than any commitment to syndicalist doctrines. Already by 1912, Hartshorn in particular had emphatically declared his opposition to syndicalist aims and methods, and by 1919 he had become one of the leading opponents of the URC. During its agitation against the comb-out in 1918, Hartshorn had launched a strong attack on those Maesteg Lodges who had sent delegates to a URC conference.

> They are a set of nincompoops without the intelligence of a tom-tit...There was no room for such a body in the Federation. It was causing disunity. The unofficial body had to be fought to the death and he was out to fight them.[31]

Whilst Barker and Winstone retained more cordial relations with the militants, neither of them showed any tolerance of unconstitutional trade union action, as their attitude to the unofficial agitation against the Sankey Report would show. K.O.Morgan has written of these ILPers that "almost in spite of themselves they had become symbols of the official processes of collective bargaining, of constitutionalism, (and) social cohesion..."[32]

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30 D.Smith, op.cit., p.74. (Emphasis in the original)
31 Merthyr Pioneer, 3 April 1918.
32 K.O.Morgan, 'The New Liberalism', p.302.
In his desire to highlight the extent to which there was continuity in the SWMF leadership from the Lib-Lab period beyond 1910/11, Morgan overstates the case when he goes on to say they became symbols of the Progressive Alliance. The imperatives of the SWMF leadership after this date were not indentical with those of the Progressive Alliance - indeed, the rise of the left within the union was due above all to a growing recognition that such an alliance was incompatible with effective trade unionism in changed conditions.

Both Dai Smith and Peter Stead also lay considerable stress upon the strong elements of continuity in the values and priorities of the SWMF leadership, despite the personnel changes. According to Smith:

> One sort of leadership did not then replace another sort as a result of this pre-war activity. Old loyalties, the re-grouping of interests, the capacity of older leaders to shift their allegiances all blurred the outcome.[33]

It should be added that the younger leaders displayed the same capacity. Stead defines the situation as one in which older and younger elements merged in the SWMF leadership to create a new industrial consensus. The syndicalists who were from now onwards a regular feature of the EC were a part of this blend, along with the Lib-Labs and ILPers. Although there were tensions and hostilities, their positions as part of the SWMF bureaucracy meant that they operated within the constraints of the new consensus. To its dismay, the URC found that prior involvement in the unofficial movement did not innoculate its members against the moderating influences of trade union office. Already by 1914 they were working well within the parameters of the collective bargaining which The Miners' Next Step had vowed to destroy, co-operating with the EC in demanding higher price lists rather than rejecting them in their entirety and demanding a universal day-wage. This led to a blistering attack on Ablett, Rees and co. by Will Hay and C.L.Gibbons:

> They were pledged to abstain from supporting reactionary policies; they were to keep revolutionary policies and militant programmes to the fore; they were to force the EC to take action along lines laid down by the militant section in the coalfield. Have they done this? Unhesitatingly we answer "No". They have ceased to be revolutionary except in words.[34]

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33 D.Smith, op.cit., p.75.
34 South Wales Worker, 13 June 1914, cited in M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, p.112.

Although in theory the URC rejected all leadership, believing that the power held by leaders inevitably corrupted even the best of them, in practice many of its most able and well-known members ended up as office holders within the Federation.[35] By 1919 in fact, most of the original leaders of the URC were on the EC and moving to the right.[36] In an article entitled "What has become of the Unofficial Reform Committee?" which appeared in the Merthyr Pioneer in July 1918, these men were chastised by Dolling and Watkins of the younger generation of militants:

> Today there are those in the socialist ranks who, having grown respectable and law-abiding, act the part of the puppy dogs of capitalism. These we expect to bark like any capitalist mongrel because we attempt to live up to the faith that is in us. But from you we expect better things.[37]

The contradiction between the theory and practice of the URC flowed from its general strategy which, as a series of articles in the Merthyr Pioneer in the spring and summer of 1918 showed, had remained unchanged since The Miners' Next Step. Dolling and Watkins characterised the URC as:

> a Ginger Group, constantly attempting to galvanise the EC into life, and focussing their efforts in the direction of our programme, using any and every legitimate means that the circumstances seem to justify.[38]

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35 See TMNS, p.21, "All leaders become corrupt, in spite of their own good intentions. No man was ever good enough, or strong enough, to have such power at his disposal, as real leadership implies."
M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, p.147, for how the movement of Plebs Leaguers which eventually established the URC was known as the "No Leader Movement."

36 M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, p.147.

37 Merthyr Pioneer, 13 July 1918.

38 ibid.
At other times, the role which they ascribed to the URC was to "police" or "supervise" the EC members, and "to urge them along when they display tendencies to loiter or impede the progress of the workers; see ibid., 3 August 1918.

The whole emphasis of the URC was thus to work within the existing structures of the SWMF, notably within the lodge and the delegate conferences, in order to pressurise the EC from below, rather than, in the manner of the engineering shop stewards, to develop an alternative leadership structure which could directly compete with it. These different types of rank and file movements reflected the different conditions in which the South Wales miners and the Glasgow engineers operated. The latter were faced with a high degree of sectionalism and craftism, and union branches which were organised on a residential rather than a factory basis, in an urban sprawl where there was no automatic symmetry between these two. In this situation, the shop stewards found that they needed a structure which was based upon the workplace, and entirely independent of the competing official unions.

Conditions in the mining industry of South Wales were very different. Here there was no great division between colliery, lodge, and community, and whilst there was sectionalism between different grades, the vast majority of mineworkers were in the same union. Consequently, there was not the same pressures here to seek independence from the official machine. In fact, it seemed far more realistic and practical to concentrate efforts upon reshaping the SWMF itself from within. Hence the title Unofficial *Reform* Committee, and the centrality of the idea that to transform social and economic conditions in the coalfield one had merely to transform the union which bestrode it.

However, in the face of its failiures to secure significant changes to the SWMF constitution, and given its hostility to leadership per se, the URC was left making extremely vague exhortations to the miners:

The day has gone when workers should wait for rusty

> "leaders" to give a "lead". The day has come when the rank and file should "take the lead" by developing its own initiative.[39]

In this situation, the URC's practical role became the equally hazy one of acting as "the educator and interpreter of the rank and file itself, giving lucidity and sequence to the aspirations of the inchoate mass of workers."[40]

For most of the prominent URC members, this tended to be an ultimately unsatisfactory resolution of the problem of praxis. There was an almost irresistable logic, if control over the EC was the objective, for them to seek election to the EC itself. There was also an additional pressure; these men tended to have passed through the CLC classes and courses, either in London as full-time students, or in the local classes that were run by Plebs Leaguers in the valleys. As a consequence, as well as being experienced trade unionists, they were often amongst the most articulate and well-educated men of their communities. In a society where a Social Darwininst idea of leadership was very strong, they often perfectly fit the requirements. As Edmund Stonelake said, upon his return from the CLC in London "I had greatness thrust upon me." This combination of factors meant that for most that had the chance, the gravitational pull of office was too strong to overcome.

*(iii) The re-emergence of the Unofficial Reform Committee*

The SWMF that emerged from the war then was in many respects identical to the one that went in to it, remaining federal and top-heavy. The inroads which the URC had made into the leadership had in fact turned out to be unwanted defections into the bureaucracy, which had successfully

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39 ibid.
40 Merthyr Pioneer, 13 July 1918.

assimilated militants and moderates in a working partnership. Despite these obvious problems, the syndicalist left remained buoyant in 1919, optimistic that the SWMF could be captured for its purposes. In part, this was due to the one success of the 1917 Rules Conference, when an amendment had been passed which made it an objective of the SWMF to organise all miners in the coalfield "with a view to the complete abolition of capitalism."[41] In 1920 a SWSS supporter at the CLC wrote:

> Probably there is no other powerful union in the country the constitution of which is so revolutionary. And the inclusion of this programme in the rules is by no means mere window dressing. Nearly all the activities of the miners' organisation are influenced by the degree to which they bring the overthrow of capitalism nearer.[42]

This rule change only strengthened the URC's perennial contention that the SWMF's form of organisation was well suited to syndicalist purposes. Will Hay, for example, wrote before the war that the "student of industrial unionism" would find the SWMF "the organisation most nearly approaching his ideal."[43] Apart from the fact that the union organised the vast majority of the workers in the industry, this belief rested upon the existence of structures within the SWMF which allowed the rank and file to exercise some control, namely the lodge meeting and the delegate conference. With a well organised rank and file movement operating through these channels, so the theory went, the federal and bureaucratic distortions of the SWMF could be overcome. The 1915 strike was seen as a resounding vindication of this theory. In the aftermath of the strike, which took place against the almost total opposition of officials and EC, the URC's members and supporters emphasised how, by organising in the lodges, they had been able to capture a majority at the delegate

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41 R.P.Arnot, South Wales Miners, vol.2, p.143.
42 Supplement to the Workers' Dreadnought, 24 April 1920.
43 Cited in D.K.Davies, Thesis, p.46.

conference of July 12th, and launch the strike. By the same means, coupled with the requirement in the constitution for a ballot before any deal could be agreed, the rank and file were able to retain control of the strike and prevent a sell-out.[44] It was this experience which led Noah Rees to claim that: "In no other union is the opinion of the rank and file so fully felt and so quickly exercised and registered in any agitation."[45]

The other ingredient needed for a successful repeat of the 1915 experience was a militant mood amongst the rank and file, and from 1917 onwards there was ample and growing evidence of this. Particularly encouraging for the URC was the fact that the industrial unrest was overwhelmingly unofficial. In his evidence to the IUC, submitted on behalf of the SWMF EC, Frank Hodges wrote that the inequality of sacrifice between the classes in the war effort, and the rising cost of living meant that the average miner:

> was losing his traditional respect for authority, even that of the institution nearest to him, his trade union, which appears incapable of rendering him any real assistance...He is now more readily inclined to enter upon unauthorised strikes both locally, at the seperate collieries, and as a coalfield. It has been with the greatest difficulty that the mens' leaders have restrained their men from showing their resentment by means of a strike.[46]

He concluded with a warning that unless "some real measure of relief" was given, the industrial unrest would increase to a point where "the men will be in open revolt." Hodges had drawn attention to a definite and growing trend in the industrial relations of the coalfield. In its Trade

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44 See report of meeting chaired by Ablett, Llais Llafur, 9 October 1915.
45 Justice, 12 August 1915, cited in T.Adams, Thesis, p.324.
46 Evidence of Frank Hodges on behalf of the South Wales Miners' Federation to the Industrial Unrest Commission, EC Box 7, Edgar L.Chappell Collection, National Library of Wales. (Hereafter NLW)

Report and Review of the Year the Western Mail complained that 1917 was probably "the most troublesome ever experienced in the Welsh coal trade so far as labour questions are concerned", with 61 unofficial strikes between July and November.[47] The situation seriously worsened over the next two years, with the number of recorded wild cat strikes climbing to 174 in 1918, and 242 in 1919, most of which took place between January and August. In 1921, following the defeat in the lock-out, the number plummeted to 25.[48]

The problem was that with the cost of living constantly rising, the Conciliation Board proved too slow and cumbersome, and confidence in its ability to deliver real benefits reached an all-time low.[49] Miners turned in increasing numbers to pit and district level direct action methods to defend their living and working conditions. These were often highly effective - a series of strikes, and mob actions against stores suspected of hoarding food took place at towns and villages in several valleys from the summer of 1917, forcing the Food Controller to increase the supply of meat to South Wales in February 1918.[50] In the summer of 1918, the refusal of the Tredegar Iron and Coal Company to recognise the newly-formed Tredegar Combine prompted "a locally led, and sustained, revolt

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47 Western Mail, 1 January 1918.

48 Monmouthshire and South Wales Coal-Owners Association Records (hereafter MSWCOA), NLW, Record of Stoppages (Without Notice), Prosecutions, Damages and Indemnities, vol.1. The tonnage lost through such strikes was 282,713 in 1918, leaping up to 723,357 in 1919, before, again, falling away dramatically after 1921.
Western Mail, Trade Report and Review of the Year 1919, 1 January 1920.

49 Evidence submitted by miners' organisations to the IUC in South Wales contains more references to the failiure of the Conciliation Board than to any other factor as the major cause of the unrest. NLW, Edgar L.Chappell Collection, Box 7.

50 Western Mail, 25 & 27 August 1917, 14 & 19 January, 6 & 16 February 1918.

that spread, through sympathetic action, to other valleys."[51] At the high-point of the three week strike, 50,000 miners were involved in the unofficial action which forced the Coal Controller to intervene and compel the Company to meet the Combine officials, amongst whose number was, incidentally, the young Nye Bevan. It was, as Smith has noted, another victory "won against all cautious officialdom."[52]

The other most important unofficial agitation of 1918 began amongst the traffic-men in the Afan valley.[53] In the face of the SWMF EC's refusal to call a delegate conference to discuss their long-standing wage demand, an unofficial committee was established here, and in the Anthracite and Western Districts, in the summer of 1918. By November the committee had established itself in Maesteg, Aberdare and Dowlais, and it held an unofficial conference in Porth in order to link up with the URC in the Rhondda and West Monmouthshire valleys.[54] This grade of workers was responsible for a high proportion of the unrest towards the end of 1918 and into 1919, fighting a series of local battles whilst the SWMF leaders were concerning themselves with the developments surrounding the Miners' Charter.[55]

In January and February 1919, as the unrest reached epidemic proportions, the owners representatives repeatedly threatened to make increased use of the courts to curb unofficial strikes, but were persuaded by Brace to allow the SWMF leaders an opportunity to reassert their authority over their members. In his regular column in the Western Mail, he warned the

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51 Dai Smith, op.cit., pp.198-199.
52 ibid.
53 This grade included hauliers, riders, trammers and shacklers, i.e. men engaged in the transport of coal along the roadways in the mines.
54 Merthyr Pioneer, 7 September & 9 November 1918.
55 MSWCOA, NLW, Record of Stoppages etc, vol.1.

miners that unofficial strikes spelled "Death to Trade Unionism", and pleaded with them for a return to disciplined and well-ordered collective bargaining methods.[56] These exhortations had no discernible impact whatsoever, and shortly afterwards Brace told the owners that the men's leaders had run out of ideas, "and think the only course is for the owners to proceed with prosecutions." Significantly, the owners apparently only felt confident to take such action on 14 occasions in 1919, almost all of these occurring in the second half of the year, after the campaign for the Charter had dwindled away. In 1920, as the level of militancy dropped, and the owners began to prepare their counter-offensive, the number rose to 43, reflecting an already changing balance of forces in the coalfield.[57]

The problem for the owners was that in the first half of 1919 the general level of militancy was such that any attempt to use the courts against miners was likely to backfire, and provoke more unrest. The prosecution of six hauliers from Tirydail colliery in the Amman valley in February was a case in point. These were amongst 18 men, some of whom were ex-servicemen, who had stopped work to attend the funeral of a work-mate, Private R.Jones, who had died of wounds sustained in France. The six were fined, and the Anthracite Miners' District Association was informed by the owners' lawyer that, were the miners to agree to a six month period with no unofficial strikes, the penalties would not be enforced. Against the strenuous opposition of the agents, J.D.Morgan and John James, the Tirydail men immediately struck, and over the weekend pulled out all 8,000 Amman valley miners, who then set up a strike committee with one delegate from each of the 21 pits involved. The strike lasted a week, and

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56 Western Mail, 12 February 1919.
57 MSWCOA, NLW, Joint Standing Disputes Committee Resumes, vol.2, (1918-47); see 12 March 1919 for William Brace.

came very close to forcing a walk-out of the whole Anthracite District. Whilst unsuccessful in forcing the owners to withdraw the fines, it was a highly effective warning of the miners' disdain for the legal sanctions of the owners.[58]

It was the industrial unrest, and in particular its unofficial nature, which provided the basis for the re-grouping of the URC from the beginning of 1918, and its subsequent expansion beyond the Rhondda. In relation to this second point it is important to emphasise the geographical spread of the strike wave, which washed to all four corners of the coalfield throughout 1918 and the first seven or eight months of 1919.[59] The Merthyr Pioneer, which was closely associated with the reconsolidation and growth of the URC, carried an article in April 1918 which celebrated the "Renaissance" of the unofficial movement, and attributed it to:

> the growing tendency to break down the barriers of a "constitutionalism" which is fitted only for the maintenance of present-day conditions. [This tendency] does more than spasmodically object to the present. It breaks open the ground in order to lay the foundation of the organisation of the near future.[60]

The URC had, since its inception, trained much of its fire upon the Conciliation Board, and by 1919 events seemed to be carrying the SWMF towards the policy of "open hostility" which The Miners' Next Step had advocated.[61] The spread and scale of the unrest was such that established

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58 Cambria Daily Leader, 3 February 1919.
South Wales News, 4 February 1919.
Llais Llafur, 1, 8, 15, & 22 February 1919.

59 The most serious and lengthy of the strikes in 1919 as a whole took place in the Dowlais, Ebbw Vale, Tredegar, Anthracite, and Eastern Valleys Districts, as well as in the Rhondda. All were unofficial. - see MSWCOA, NLW, Record of Stoppages, etc, vol.1, and JSDC Resumes, vol.2.

60 Merthyr Pioneer, 20 April 1918.

61 TMNS, pp.17-19 & 27.

conciliation procedures were approaching total breakdown, and neither the appeals of union leaders nor the legal sanctions of the owners seemed able to restore them to working order. Significantly, it was during the sittings of the Sankey Commission that conciliation procedures were at their most ineffective, with wild-cat strikes at pit, Combine and District levels reaching an all-time high. At the weekly meeting of the JSDC on April 30th, for example, there were no less than two dozen such strikes on the agenda.[62] We will return to some of these in the context of the campaign for the Miners' Charter.

The unofficial nature of the unrest, the declining authority of the Conciliation Board and, along with it, the SWMF leadership, were encouraging developments for the URC. Some other characteristics of the unrest were equally heartening. For instance, whilst there was an overall decline in the number of strikes over non-unionism due to a government-brokered agreement that all workers should be in a recognised trade union, there was a marked increase in insistence that miners join the SWMF.[63] In 1917, the main sectional threat to industrial unionism in the coalfield, the Enginemen and Stokers Association, had disbanded and joined the Federation, and in 1919 there were strikes at many pits to force members of other small, sectional unions to do the same.[64] In June, 11,000 Rhondda miners struck for a number of days in support, this time, of a demand from the clerks at several collieries that they be recognised as members of the SWMF.[65] Will Picton, interviewed by Francis and Smith

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62 MSWCOA, NLW, JSDC Resumes, vol.2, 30 April 1919.
63 MSWCOA, NLW, Notices to Terminate Contracts and Strikes on the Non-Unionist Question. The agreement referred to lasted from 18 April 1916 until 14 July 1921.
64 T.Adams, Thesis, p.279.
65 South Wales Echo, 19, 21 & 26 June 1919.
MSWCOA Minutes of Special Meeting, 25 June 1919. The clerks got as far as making a draft agreement with the SWMF EC, before the owners undercut the move by

in 1973, singled out 1919 as the year in which they achieved their goal of 100% membership of the Mardy SWMF lodge.[66] Districts reported the highest ever membership levels - in Aberdare, the union was "better organised and united than it had ever been", with over 2,000 new recruits in the first six months of the year.[67]

According to 'The Miners' Progress':

> Some idea of the progress made by the SWMF during the last few years is to be got by noticing the complete disappearance of non-unionism in the industry. At the present moment we can say that practically every man in the industry in South Wales is organised. Moreover, the SWMF embraces, with some few exceptions which must speedily disappear, the whole of these men.[68]

This was, as the author went on to point out, one of the "conditions which are necessarily required for the control of the industry by the miners." As we have seen, struggles over the control of the production process had since the turn of the century been a feature of trade unionism in the South Wales coalfield, and had been an elemental building block in the development of the URC's strategy of encroaching control. Such struggles were so prominent in the unrest at the end of the war as to encourage a belief amongst those associated with the URC that the strategy was becoming a practical reality. 'The Miners' Progress' argued that the degree of control which the miners held in the pits in this period meant that if ever a joint control scheme was introduced, it would only be legalising what in reality already existed. The pit committees attached to each lodge held considerable sway over questions of safety, hireing and firing and working practices, and even reserved the right to demand the removal of inefficient or unpopular managers. So effective was

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recognising the National Union Of Clerks.
66 SWML, Interview with Will Picton, 18 May 1973, W.Pi/3.
67 Aberdare Leader, 19 July 1919.
68 Supplement to the Worker's Dreadnought, 24 April 1920.

this control that, "Victimisation, which was once a very frequent and brutal practice of the coalowners, has been fought and, at least in its naked character, thrown aside."[69]

Writing in the Workers' Dreadnought in March 1919, Frank Phippen made similar observations:

> It is astonishing to think what extent the miners control their industry...In most pits today, if a manager requires overtime labour...he has to consult the Pit Committee and lay all the facts before them. Before any new arrangements in regard to the working of the mines are made, the men must be consulted with a view to having their permission, and if any official is disliked by the workers, steps are taken to effect his removal.[70]

When the South Wales Echo sent a reporter into the valleys to talk to miners about the causes of wild cat strikes in 1919, he was told that "they nip in the bud any tendency on the part of the management to take advantage of the individual workmen"[71], and newspapers and coalfield records are littered with examples of strikes to defend men victimised for refusing to carry out their work instructions. Often these were cases of refusals to work overtime in the interests of getting soldier-miners into the pits.[72]

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69 ibid.
70 Workers Dreadnought, 22 March 1919.
71 South Wales Echo, 24 June 1919.
72 e.g. At Raglan colliery in Garw District, there was a strike over a rider who had refused to carry out management instructions as it involved work which went beyond his lodge's definition of his job as roping, unroping and riding his journey. At Nixon's Navigation collieries at Mountain Ash and Merthyr Vale in the Aberdare and Taff and Cynon Districts, all the men struck for over three weeks when two men were sacked for refusing to unload a tram of rubbish in their working place. At the Lewis Merthyr collieries in the Rhondda, 5,500 struck for over a week over the sacking of a roadman who had refused to return from the face to the main haulage road to do some repairs because he did not want to be subject to the temperature change which this would have involved. See Western Mail, 16 & 28 July, and SWMF Minutes of Council Meeting, 21 July 1919.

These were some of the main features of the industrial context in which the URC nourished old roots and sank fresh ones in the 1918-19 period. However, the unrest was accompanied by a process of political radicalisation within the mining communities which also assisted the URC revival. The unofficial nature of the unrest was, as we have seen, due to the unswerving commitment of the SWMF leadership to the Conciliation Board. This commitment was underscored, until November 1918, by its concern to maintain the support of the Federation for the war effort, both in terms of maintaining production and providing the army with a source from which it could replenish lost fighting stock. The unrest thus confronted, implicitly at first but increasingly explicitly, the political as well as industrial priorities of the leadership, and led large numbers to question the assumptions upon which their support for the war effort had been based.[73] D.D.Evans, interviewed by Francis and Smith in 1972 remembered how:

> the war itself, the shortages and everything else that occurred during the war, the things that took place had a tremendous effect upon the people. It was a period in which now the young men, or people that were prepared to shed old ideas, had opportunities of doing so. There were ideas floating around, ripe around everywhere see...So I would say that the period of the First World War was a great dynamic period of thought in the working class communities.[74]

From 1917/18, this enabled socialists to break out of the far-left ghetto to which the war had confined them, and, for the first time in years, to

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73 There are numerous references to this in the evidence submitted by miners' and other labour organisations to the IUC in 1917. Edmund Stonelake, for example, wrote that "On all sides they see increased profits to the master, increased food prices to the workmen, with no corresponding increase in wages." Edgar L.Chappell Collection, NLW, EC Box 7.

74 SWML, Interview with D.D.Evans, 5 December 1972.

reach a substantial audience. Until this point the URC, though still formally in existence, had in reality been little more than individual groupings of militants operating at lodge level, mainly in the Rhondda. The comb out of miners for the armed forces in the summer of 1917, and its extension in January 1918, provided the issue around which the unofficial movement began to reorganise in earnest. Prior to this, anti-war activity had been confined to the ILP's pacifist campaigning, but now the URC began an attempt to "direct ILP influenced miners away from pacifism and towards industrial action against the war."[75] From hereon in, the Merthyr Pioneer, which had previously carried an ILP pacifist line, gave active support and encouragement to the URC militants, providing them with a much needed mouthpiece in the coalfield. Although they were unable to win enough support to force a strike against conscription, and despite considerable police harrassment, they nonetheless made important organisational gains in these campaigns.[76] In the first quarter of 1918 the Merthyr Pioneer reported that the URC was holding regular meetings and establishing new branches, and two unofficial conferences open to delegates from across the coalfield were held in Cardiff. In April, the URC held its biggest conference, with nearly 200 delegates present. By now it was clear that, apart from the Rhondda, the URC had developed a sizeable base in the Aberdare and Monmouthshire Western valleys, and that there was a real, though smaller, organised URC presence in the Eastern valleys, Garw, East Glamorgan and Ogmore and Gilfach districts.[77] In June The Times wrote that:

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75 M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, p.134.

76 The URC conferences in January and March were both raided by the police, and a number of leading URC members were prosecuted for their anti-war activities. A.J.Cook and George Dolling were imprisoned for three months for arguing that "the only solution to the food problem was a revolution." see Merthyr Pioneer, 5 January, 30 March, 20 April 1918.

77 See Western Mail, 3 April 1918 for report of this

> From nearly every part of the South Wales coalfield evidence is accumulating of a new and almost unprecedented activity on the part of the labour extremists. The extension of the ramifications of the notorious "URC", with its extreme propaganda of industrial unionism and syndicalism, the evidence of new discontent as seen in sporadic strikes...are causing considerable misgivings in the minds of responsible persons.[78]

In addition to this, as we have seen, in the winter of 1918 the trafficmen's unofficial organisation established a network of militants in contact with the URC in the west of the coalfield, in the Afan valley, Anthracite and Western Districts.

The growth and geographical spread of the URC was underpinned by the enormous expansion in the number of CLC classes in the last year of the war. R.Lewis's study of independent working class education in South Wales has shown how important these classes were, arguing that in this period they "created the world view of a whole generation of leaders among the workers of the valleys."[79] Moreover, these classes provided local nuclei for the re-emergent URC. Prior to 1914 "CLC classes came very clearly to function as the local units of the unofficial movement", and this continued to be the case at the end of the war.[80] It is no coincidence that the main areas of strength of the URC in 1919 - The Rhondda, Aberdare and Monmouthshire Western valleys Districts - were also the main areas of the CLC expansion.

There was one further factor which fueled the reorganisation of the URC, and helped to popularise the idea of direct action in South Wales. This

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conference. See also M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, p.144. Otherwise, evidence for the spread of the URC in this period has been gleaned from the Merthyr Pioneer's regular reports.

78 The Times, 10 June 1918.

79 R.Lewis, Thesis, p.282 and passim, esp.pp.207-293.

80 M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, pp.136-138.

was the Russian revolution, or revolutions, both of which had a considerable impact on the political life of the valleys. The February overthrow was universally welcomed by the miners. Nye Bevan told the 1951 Labour Party conference that he remembered miners "rushing to meet each other in the streets with tears streaming down their cheeks, shaking hands and saying 'at last it has happened.'"[81]

Of course, support for a democratic revolution against a foreign tyranny did not make one a revolutionary at home in a parliamentary democracy, as the misgivings of much of the British left to the methods of the October revolution showed. However, in South Wales the Bolshevik revolution was still widely supported, despite hysterical press reports of men buried alive at "musical executions", the "mass slaughter" of clerics, and the "nationalisation of women".[82] At the Rink in Merthyr, meetings about the revolution regularly attracted capacity audiences in 1919. At the end of February, for example, the veteran BSP propagandist Albert Ward, defended the dictatorship of the proletariat to the "loud cheers" of around 3,000 people.[83] A commemoration of the murdered German revolutionaries Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht attracted a similar number.[84] Edward Soermus, a Russian entertainer and Bolshevik, whose performances combined violin recitals with speeches about the revolution, gained celebrity status in the mining communities before his arrest and deportation in February 1919.[85]

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81 Cited in K.Coates and T.Topham, Workers' Control, (Panther Modern Society, 1970), p.95.
82 Cambria Daily Leader, 18 February 1919.
Llais Llafur, 15 March 1919.
South Wales Echo, 17 January 1919.
83 Merthyr Pioneer, 22 February 1919.
84 ibid., 11 January 1919.
85 Soermus was deported to Russia in February 1919, see ibid., 15 February 1919.

The "Hands Off Russia" campaign seems to have attracted wider support here than anywhere else in Britain, and on July 21st 1919, when the rest of the British labour movement was holding protest meetings over intervention, in excess of 50,000 South Wales miners took unofficial strike action for the day. Although the largest contingent came from the mid-Rhondda, they were by no means unsupported, as collieries struck in the Tredegar, Anthracite, Western, Western valleys, Dowlais and Merthyr districts. At Clydach near Swansea, for example, all the collieries came out on strike, and in the evening:

> The Public Hall was densely packed with a most determined and enthusiastic audience, who loudly applauded the revolutionary speeches delivered by the local speakers.[86]

As Francis and Smith have said, enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution, industrial militancy and hatred of conscription, "contributed to an internationalist perspective rooted in the direct and indirect experience of the South Wales miners." In July 1921, this internationalism would lead the SWMF conference to vote for affiliation to the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), "one of the very few instances of a British trade union, of any size, indicating its adherence to "revolutionary" trade unionism..."[87]

Detailed information about the revolution was hard to come by, and many of Lenin's writings were not available in Britain until later in the 1920's, so understanding of the Bolsheviks' politics was hazy at best. The tendency on the left was, therefore, to take from what they knew of the revolution those aspects which seemed to best fit their experience as

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86 ibid., 26 July 1919.
MSWCOA, NLW, Record of Stoppages etc, vol.1, lists all collieries which took strike action.

87 H.Francis and D.Smith, op.cit., pp.29-30. In fact, the resolution at SWMF conference mistakenly referred to the RILU as the Third International.

activists in South Wales. Inevitably, this involved a considerable amount of distortion. Some, for example, understood the soviets as analogous to Urban District Councils.[88]

For the syndicalists, the main attraction of the revolution was the fact that the workplace was the foundation stone of the new political and economic system. In the first place it was felt that if such a society were transported to South Wales, idle coalowners and royalty holders would be relegated to social positions which reflected their parasitic worthlessness. As S.O.Davies told a meeting of miners in December 1918:

> The working class dictatorship of Russia said that the man who did not work in a useful and legitimate manner should be ostracised so far as having any voice in the life of Russia was concerned.[89]

Secondly, and more importantly, the example of the industrial power of workers as the lynchpin both of the destruction of the old system and the construction of the new, struck obvious chords with the syndicalists. W.W.Craik, in his account of the CLC, reckoned that it was this example above all which influenced the post-war CLC students from South Wales.[90] Beyond a doubt it was also responsible for the rekindling of a revolutionary Noah Ablett, who saw the revolution as "the one burning political and industrial question of our day."[91] In early 1919 he told miners at Maesteg:

> I rejoice in Bolshevism. I am proud of it. We can do the same in this country, and now that the war is over, I wish good luck to the German Bolshevist as well. Good luck to any of the working class where the germ of

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88 For example, Albert Ward at the Rink, Merthyr Pioneer, 22 February 1919.
89 ibid., 26 December 1918.
90 W.W.Craik, The Central Labour College 1909-1929, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), p.122.
91 Merthyr Pioneer, 5 July 1919.

Bolshevism reigns.[92]

Ablett felt that the Bolshevik method was so applicable to South Wales that any one who was against it "required a doctor and an operation."[93] It should be emphasised that the Bolshevism which Ablett and the other South Wales syndicalists embraced was a distant cousin of the genuine article. The Merthyr Pioneer's description of it as "a more democratic, more intelligent, more determined trade unionism than we have had in the past", was fairly typical.[94] For Ablett:

> A Bolshevik is a scientific trade unionist - one who has recognised that the method of production today has gone beyond political government and must be based on the new idea of common work. Bolshevism is socialism with working clothes on. Bolshevism is the system of the future, and the scientific development of the working class constitution.[95]

W.H.Mainwaring expanded on this theme. He too was "proud to be a Bolshevik", the meaning of which was:

> that the workers of the country, organised upon the basis of the industries they worked in, should take full control and administration of such industries in the interests of the community.[96]

In 1919, before the formation of the CPGB began to redefine what being a Bolshevik meant, syndicalists were able to claim the Revolution as a vindication of their own ideas, as the successful application of the basic method of The Miner's Next Step on a national, multi-industrial scale. Industrial Democracy for Miners should be seen as an update, or development, of the 1912 pamphlet in the light of the Russian experiment, a bold assertion of what the militancy of the miners could achieve if properly channelled. The Revolution sharply increased the value of

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92 Cited in D.K.Davies, Thesis, p.189.
93 South Wales News, 22 July 1919.
94 Merthyr Pioneer, 16 August 1919.
95 ibid., 28 April 1919.
96 Rhondda Leader, 15 February 1919.

syndicalist coinage, and swelled the authority of the URC, especially when viewed from the vantage point of the industrial unrest with its elements of workers' control.

The nature and extent of the industrial unrest, the growing hostility to the war amongst a considerable section of miners, the expansion of the CLC, the Russian Revolution, and the "ideological ferment"[97] which accompanied all of these, provided the soil in which the URC could sink fresh roots from 1917/18 onwards. These roots sprouted in February 1919 at the height of the industrial unrest to produce the South Wales Socialist Society, which reportedly had branches in every district of the Federation.[98] By the time of its formation, the SWSS activists had already popularised a brand of direct action which had a strong revolutionary syndicalist sub-text, and one which was highly influential amongst the left.

Many ILPers in South Wales found the syndicalist case compelling. At the ILP Divisional Conference in February 1919, an amendment was passed which deemed it "futile" to call on the Government to socialise the means of production, and called instead for the "absolute overthrow of the capitalist system." According to the Pioneer, the speeches for the amendment "espoused industrial unionism", and Morgan Jones of Bargoed protested that it was "the reflex of the fervour of the Continent", warning that the door was being left open "for the introduction of some new, unconstitutional methods into the activities of the ILP."[99] Looking back over 1919, the Pioneer noted how:

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97 Interview with Will Coldrick, 24 September 1973, SWML, WC/106/9.
98 Merthyr Pioneer, 22 February 1919.
99 ibid.

> the intense industrial activity of the past year has ...augmented to a considerable extent the industrial faction of the ILP rank and file, who are drawing inspiration from Russia and the theoretical system underlying the Bolshevik faith and action.[100]

W.Harris, a political organiser for the SWMF whose task was to build up the Labour Party in South Wales, complained in July 1919 that:

> the direct actionists seem to be increasing in leaps and bounds...My greatest difficulty as an organiser is in the districts where the direct actionists are strongest.[101]

The growth of the SWSS, and the popularisation of direct action, was a serious concern for defenders of the status quo in South Wales. In these interstices between two epochs there was considerable anxiety that, given the waning influence of Liberalism and non-conformism, traditional mechanisms of social control might prove incapable of containing unrest within manageable bounds, and that "extremists" might become dangerously influential. Major James, head of Merthyr's Watch Committee, described his town in February 1919 as "the headquarters of one of the most seditious parts of the country, where extremists, Bolsheviks, Pacifists and pro-Germans spoke...almost every Sunday."[102] Around the same time, the Home Office received a report from Captain Lionel Lindsay and the army authorities at Chester which claimed that:

> Ablett and his kind are undoubtedly gaining ground amongst the working classes of South Wales, especially in those districts that have the reputation of being socialistic and "storm centres" of agitation, disputes, and stoppages of work.[103]

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100 ibid., 3 April 1920.
101 South Wales News, 28 July 1919.
102 Western Mail, 11 February 1919.
Merthyr Pioneer, 15 February 1919.
103 Cited in Deian Hopkins, "Patriots and Pacifists in Wales 1914-1918: The Case of Captain Lionel Lindsay and the Reverend T.E.Nicholas", Llafur, Vol.1, no.3, 1974, p.137.

Lindsay concluded that "these centres badly need some counter-propaganda", an opinion shared by Tom Jones.[104] It was with this in mind that Sir Edgar Jones, coalowner and Liberal M.P. for Merthyr, established in January 1919 the Welsh Democracy League. An essentially middle class organisation, representing middle class values and interests, its aim was:

> To counteract the activities of revolutionary bodies and to pursue a vigorous campaign against doctrines and influences with Bolshevik and Syndicalist tendencies.[105]

In particular, it was concerned about "Bolshevik secret classes" (most likely a reference to CLC classes) which were "spreading the gospel of direct action."[106]

C.B.Stanton, who before the war had been a prominent URC member, but had since become an ultra-patriotic M.P. for Merthyr (1915), and Aberdare (1918), believed that propaganda was insufficient means with which to fight the far left. He demonstrated what K.O.Morgan has called his "quasi-fascist" tendencies when he argued in July 1919, during a series of violent clashes in South Wales between supporters of his British Empire Union and supporters of the Russian Revolution, for the creation of a "Patriotic Fighting Brigade", to "put down the terrorism of these people."[107]

Some of those who hankered after a return to the order and values of traditional Welsh society clearly felt embattled in the volatile atmosphere which hung over the valleys at the end of the war, hence the

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104 The Thomas Jones, C.H., Collection, Diary, NLW/Z/1919, p.36.
105 Merthyr Pioneer, 15 February 1919.
106 Western Mail, 28 January 1919.
107 ibid., 22 July 1919.

attempts to mobilise these middle class and right wing working class elements against the left. Others sought refuge in unorthodox spiritualism as a revivalist fervour swept through a number of mining communities in 1919. Newspapers reported "remarkable scenes" at meetings which lasted all day and into the night, and the emotional outpourings at "huge congregations" in Dowlais and Aberdare evoked comparisons with the Evan Roberts revival of 1904-5. Led by Pastor Stephen Jeffreys, himself converted by Roberts, there were frequent reports of congregations preparing themselves for the imminent second coming, of the divine healing of soldiers' wounds, and of other assorted miracles.[108] The revival of 1919, like most of those of the nineteenth century, took place in a period of "acute tension and unrest".[109] Although it did not reach the same level as the 1904-5 revival, there is a sense in which Francis and Smith's explanation of the latter as "the expression of anguish" caused by the "denial of a previous pattern of life" is applicable here.[110] The feverish evangelism which affected parts of the coalfield in 1919 was, perhaps, the last gasp of a rapidly vanishing society, tense and anxious as to what might take its place.

The left, by contrast was optimistic and ebullient, confident that the future lay with labour. The meetings at Merthyr's Rink over the New Year period became, almost automatically, celebrations of the miners' industrial power, and the dissapointing election result seemed hardly to matter at all. James Winstone told a post-election rally:

> We are by no means dismayed. There is a force rising up in this country that all the forces of darkness will

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108 South Wales Echo, 14 march 1919.
Aberdare Leader, 13 & 27 December 1919.
Western Mail, 2 January 1920.

109 Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Revolution (Cardinal, 1973), p.279.

110 H.Francis and D.Smith, op.cit., p.7.

> never stem. This crowd, this coalition crowd of capitalists and landlords and their henchmen will be snuffed out as a bit of snowflake before the sun.[111]

Against the groundswell of industrial militancy and political radicalism, Hartshorn's confident assertion of the hegemony of a gradualist parliamentary strategy, quoted at the head of this chapter, seemed almost hopelessly optimistic. S.O.Davies' opinion that: "The trade union weapon was the only weapon to contend with the new government" seemed much more in tune with the mood in the coalfield.[112] Furthermore, as the showdown over the Miners' Charter approached, there was an anticipation on both left and right that direct action might develop into some kind of revolutionary movement. S.O.Davies told a mass meeting in Merthyr on Christmas Day 1918 that the Russian Revolution was sweeping westwards, and that "this country would be involved in a revolution no less thorough in the immediate future."[113] Tom Mann told the same meeting:

> Coming much more rapidly than I would even have dared to dream ten years ago are events of a drastic industrial and social character, to which the only term that is fittingly applicable is revolution. The revolution is right here. It is coming in this country. Of that I am profoundly convinced. Parliaments remained the same in every country - in the hands of the ruling classes. Trim your lamps, and be ready for the hour when you will be called upon to demonstrate your attitude to Parliament and industry.[114]

For the syndicalist left, at the height of its influence and for the first time boasting a coalfield-wide organisation, the prospects for transforming economic and social life by direct industrial action had never seemed so good. As D.K.Davies has observed:

> Indeed, one interpretation of the whole issue of syndicalism/industrial unionism in the South Wales coalfield might be that the pre-war period witnessed the laying of the theoretical groundwork, while events

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111 Merthyr Pioneer, 4 January 1919.
112 ibid., 4 January 1919.
113 ibid., 26 December 1918.
114 ibid., 26 December 1918.

during and after the war seemed to offer the opportunity to test its validity in practice.[115]

*(iv) Struggles over Sankey*

For that section of the SWMF which saw direct action as the way forward in 1919, and for the SWSS in particular, the challenge was whether the energy of the widespread but often localised wild-cat strikes could be harnessed and directed towards a struggle for the Miners' Charter.

The first major test of strength between the unofficial movement and the SWMF officials over a question which related to the Miners' Charter came in the shape of the demobilisation crisis. This was, as in all districts, of paramount importance in South Wales in the early weeks of 1919, and presented an opportunity for both left and right.[116] On the one hand there was C.B.Stanton and the British Empire Union, who wanted the "cowards and traitors" who had entered the mines after August 1914 to pay the price of the re-absorption of demobilised miners. On the other hand there were the militant socialists whose attitude was that the only solution to the crisis was to fight for a new order in mining society, in particular a six hour day and nationalisation with workers' control.

Both of these positions found a constituency of support within the SWMF. In the Rhymney valley for example, where demobilisation was already causing an acute unemployment problem, the District met on Wednesday January 8th, and voted for the withdrawal of the post-1914 men. Similar

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115 D.K.Davies, Thesis, p.157.
116 SWCA, South Wales Joint Demobilisation Committee (SWJDC) Minutes, 30 January 1919. The total number of South Wales miners who had gone into the armed forces was 67,182 a figure representing almost 30% of the workforce.

votes were recorded at individual pits in other Districts, including some in the mid-Rhondda area.[117] This demand was incorporated into the scheme devised by representatives of the MSWCOA and the SWMF on the Joint Demobilisation Committee (JDC). The other main plank of the scheme allowed for the re-introduction of the double-shift system, which had long been scrapped in most of the coalfield.[118]

There was, however, considerable opposition to the JDC scheme. The left in particular accused the SWMF leaders of collaborating with the owners in scapegoating the post-1914 men for the crisis, encouraging divisions amongst the workforce, and paving the way for the creation of a large pool of unemployed labour which would undermine union organisation. More generally, opposition derived from the fact that acceptance of the scheme clearly meant acceptance of working conditions below those which existed before the war. In particular, there was vehement criticism, on safety grounds, of the suggested re-introduction of the double shift system.[119]

Another major grievance came from ex-soldiers who were being re-employed at lower grades than they had been on before they went to war. Newspapers

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117 South Wales News, 10 January 1919.
118 Western Mail, 21 January 1919.
SWMF Conference, 25 January 1919.
119 The difficult geological conditions in the coalfield, and the dry and fiery nature of the coal, meant that injuries and deaths through falls and explosions were consistently higher in South Wales than elsewhere in Britain. In 1919 alone there were to be 268 deaths and over 25,000 injuries in the coalfield. Safety was therefore a supremely important issue, and a key standard by which any post-war industrial order would be judged. In these terms, double-shifting was anathema, for it did not allow the pit to cool and settle before being worked again, thus increasing the chances of falls and slides; see T.Boyns, "Technical Change and Colliery Explosions in the South Wales Coalfield, c.1870-1914", p.155, Welsh History Review, vol.13, 1986-7.
SWCA, E242, SWMF Statistical Department, Accidents in Coalmines in 1919.

reported many ex-colliers being taken on as labourers earning as much as 10s a shift less than they could as a skilled miner.[120] The case of the Coed Ely colliery at Tonyrefail was typical, and helps to illustrate a common problem. Several categories of miner were, under the agreement in operation, eligible to "go on the coal", where the highest earnings could be made. These were pit-boys who had turned eighteen, returning soldiers who had been either hauliers or colliers, and the hauliers and colliers who had replaced those who had gone off to fight. At a mass meeting on January 19th, many argued that all ex-soldiers over eighteen should have the right to go on the coal. Given the restricted number of jobs, it was impossible for all those who claimed eligibility to do so. The potential that existed here for sectional in-fighting is clear, and the demand to get rid of the post-1914 men was indeed raised. However, given the mood of the coalfield, and the presence of a strong left, the Coed Ely meeting rejected this, and voted instead to scrap the existing agreement, and to adopt the principle of equal rights to all. To make this a workable policy, the meeting demanded the immediate introduction of the six hour day.[121]

The Coed Ely response was part of an increasing trend in the coalfield, as miners sought a solution to the demobilisation crisis in the demands of the Miners' Charter. This trend had been set in motion by the Western Valleys District Council as early as December 16th 1918, when it had called for a special MFGB conference to start the fight for the six hour day.[122] In the context of the demobilisation crisis, the demand for nationalisation with workers' control became a logical corollary of the demand for shorter hours, which, many felt, would not on its own provide

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120 Merthyr Pioneer, 11 January 1919.
121 ibid., 25 January 1919.
122 ibid., 21 December 1918.

a long-term solution. The extensive development of the mines and the opening up of new workings which alone could guarantee real job security for all miners could not be trusted to the owners.[123] It was this combination of shorter hours and nationalisation with workers' control which S.O.Davies had in mind when he told miners that demobilised men "could only be brought back into the coalfield by nothing short of a revolution in the South Wales coalfield."[124]

The JDC was soon complaining that men were refusing to work double-shifts, and were not co-operating in identifying to colliery officials the post-1914 men to whom notices should be given.[125] In many pits miners refused to work overtime, or operated a "stint", to force management to take on more men.[126] By the beginning of January, as unemployment became more acute, and anger grew in the pits as skilled men were forced into labourers jobs, strikes began to take place. On New Year's Day, the Glamorgan Colliery at Llwynypia struck for the day in protest.[127] In some places, strikes took place as owners tried to resist the incipient forms of workers' control by which miners were seeking to get more men into the pits.[128] On Monday 3rd February, 3000 miners at the Llanbradach Colliery in the Rhymney valley, who had earlier voted for the sacking of the post-1914 men, now reversed this decision and struck for the employment of 200

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123 See for example the interview with Walter Lewis, Rhymney Valley agent, in the South Wales News, 2 January 1919.
124 Merthyr Pioneer, 26 December 1918.
125 SWCA, SWJDC Minutes, 30 January 1919.
126 MSWCOA, NLW, Joint Standing Disputes Committee Resumes, 12 March 1919, 3 June 1919, 28 July 1919.
127 Western Mail, 2 January, 1919.
128 In late January, for example, thousands of miners at the Ocean Coal Company's collieries in the Rhondda struck over bonus payments which had been withheld when a ban on overtime had been enforced by the Combine Committee; South Wales News, 22 January 1919.

ex-soldiers with no redundancies. At the Killan Colliery near Swansea, 700 miners also struck.[129]

Unofficial action of this kind at pit and Combine level soon made itself felt at District level, and pressure upon the SWMF leaders to pull out of the JDC's scheme grew. On January 10th, after meetings of all the lodges, the Monmouthshire Western Valleys District Council met and demanded a special SWMF conference by the middle of January to begin the fight for the six hour day, or the whole District would strike. Matters were brought to a head by the miners in S.O.Davies' Dowlais District. There were two main grievances involved in the dispute. Firstly, workers at the washeries of Guest, Keen and Nettlefold's had joined the SWMF but were being refused SWMF surface worker's rates. The most immediate grievance however was the dismissal of nine colliers to make way for returning soldiers. During the week ending January 25th, the Dowlais miners held a mass meeting, at which they insisted upon the reinstatement of the nine colliers as well as the employment of all ex-soldiers. The meeting pointed out to the employers "the extreme state of disrepair" of the collieries, which alone required the employment of a large number of workers, and again, nationalisation with workers' control was demanded as the only long term solution.[130] It was resolved that unless these demands were immediately met there would be a strike. On the following Monday, with the situation unchanged, the whole Dowlais district, numbering about 8,000 miners, struck. Within three days, the owners had given way to all the demands. The Pioneer heaped praise upon S.O.Davies for supporting the unconstitutional action, and reported that:

We have had a short, sharp and incisive fight in the

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129 ibid., 4 February 1919.
130 Merthyr Pioneer, 25 January 1919.
Western Mail, 23 January 1919.

> Dowlais District, in which the miners have won a decisive victory over the Company after a three day strike.[131]

The Dowlais strike forced reluctant officials to convene a special conference of the Federation where they attempted to rescue their policy. However, the militancy in the pits enabled the left to capture the conference, and the JDC scheme was overturned by 1647 to 1098. No altered version of the scheme was advanced in its place. Instead, the vote reflected the growing conviction that the only solution to the crisis lay with the struggle for the Miners' Charter. The mood was one of urgency - demobilisation meant too much was at stake to tolerate protracted negotiations over the Southport Programme, drawn up at the previous week's MFGB conference - and it was resolved to communicate this to the MGHB EC. According to the resolution of the SWMF, the first week in March was when the talking had to stop and the strike had to start.[132] The demobilisation crisis in South Wales was important in two respects; firstly, as in all the coalfields, it threw all the issues facing the miners at the war's end into the sharpest focus, and transformed the Miners' Charter into an immediate challenge. In the second place, the manner in which the JDC's scheme was overturned was paradigmatic of the URC's method. In the opening skirmish of 1919, the unofficial movement had once again, as in 1915, captured the delegate conference and enforced its own policy on the SWMF against the will of the officials.

In the weeks after the SWMF conference of January 25th, nothing occurred to abate the pressure which was building up across the coalfield for an immediate fight for the Miners' Charter. Rather, the problems caused by

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131 Merthyr Pioneer, 1 February 1919.
132 SWMF Special Conference, 25 January 1919.
Western Mail, 27 January 1919.

demobilisation - and the accompanying industrial activity - continued to escalate. The pressure which this generated was visible at the series of MFGB conferences which took place in February and March in the lead up to the Sankey Commission and the issuing of its Interim Report. The South Wales delegation was one of those which overturned the MFGB EC's decision not to recommend a national strike in the ballot, and several delegates later led the opposition from the conference floor against acceptance of the Sankey Commission. Even Hartshorn was initially doubtful about the wisdom of recommending acceptance of the Commission. In the days before the MFGB EC finally decided to do so, he said that:

> This movement of miners had now reached a stage where it was very uncertain whether it was possible to defer the matter for...even one day. The movement sprang from the miners themselves and not from their leaders.[133]

Antagonism between the militant section of the rank and file and the more moderate officials had been sharply increased during this period by the unbending opposition of the latter to the idea of direct action. William Brace and Tom Richards in particular had responded to the victory of the militants at the SWMF conference not by shifting leftwards, but by seeking to mobilise the more moderate elements amongst the miners, and to use their own authority to try and head off what seemed like a headlong rush towards confrontation. The recommendation for a strike in the national ballot, which some had hoped might allay suspicion that the MFGB EC were seeking to avoid a confrontation with the government, was seriously undermined in South Wales by the participation of Brace and Richards in an almost hysterical campaign for a "no" vote by the Western Mail. In the days prior to the ballot on February 19th, the Western Mail was almost entirely given over to articles which prophesied economic and

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133 Western Mail, 22 February 1919.

social ruin in the event of the miners gaining the Charter. In a dramatic breach of customary trade union discipline, Tom Richards, in his capacity as General Secretary, gave a major interview in which he declared:

> Most emphatically I say they should vote against the strike. I consider that the decision of the conference in submitting such grave issues to a ballot without proper time being secured for their consideration to be altogether unwarranted. For this reason I have no hesitation in advising every miner who attaches any importance to my advice to vote against it.[134]

Brace, who as the ex-Lib-Lab President was given a weekly column in the same paper, was not as explicit as Richards, but the tone of this week's column was so opposed to direct action that it carried the title "No Support For A Strike." This allowed the Western Mail to carry a banner headline on the day of the ballot which read "Leaders Oppose Strike", and to add the groundless assertion that "it may be confidently stated that the majority of the members of the Executive Council of the SWMF entertain the same view as the General Secretary."[135]

It is hard to measure the precise impact which this intervention of the two most senior SWMF officials had. On the one hand, it probably goes a long way to explaining why the proportion of miners who voted against a strike policy was considerably higher in South Wales than the national average. An 80% turn-out resulted in a majority of 117,302 to 38,261, a ratio of about three to one, compared to six to one nationally, ten to one in Yorkshire and twelve to one in Notts.[136] This vote provides an important corrective to the tendency to characterise the coalfield as an unproblematic "cockpit of militancy".[137] H.S.Jevons, rightly

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134 ibid., 19 February 1919.
135 ibid.
136 MFGB Result of Ballot on National Strike, 1919.
The small size of the majority has been pointed out by R.P.Arnot, South Wales Miners, vol.2, p.164.
137 G.R.Carter, op.cit., p.455.

differentiated between the militant younger miners, often without family responsibilities, and the older generation of "temperate, industrious and thrifty" miners.[138] Richards and Brace obviously still had a significant bedrock of support in that generation of Lib-Labs from which they themselves came. Also, there were large discrepancies between the Districts. Dowlais for example, where S.O.Davies had led a vigorous campaign, secured an eight to one majority, whilst Blaina and the Eastern valleys, where the more moderate agents James Manning and A.Jenkins presided, only just got the two-thirds majority required.

On the other hand, by breaking ranks at such a critical moment, Brace and Richards simply widened the gap between themselves and all but the more moderate miners. Richards' action in particular was described as "despicable" in a resolution passed by a "monster demonstration" in the upper Rhondda which called for his resignation, a call which was taken up by many lodges and several Districts.[139] The response of the other officials and EC members is highly revealing. Noah Ablett, who, whilst denouncing the actions of the arch-constitutionalist as hypocritical in the extreme, successfully dissuaded a Merthyr mass meeting from demanding his immediate resignation on the rather spurious grounds that he had not been given a chance to defend his motives.[140] William Brace was more straightforward in his defence of Richards and himself. In his Western Mail column he vociferously defended his view of what constituted

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138 H.S.Jevons. op.cit., p.125.
139 NLW, Tom Jones, CH Collection, C5/55 Report no.3189, 4 March 1919, by J.R.Murray.
Western Mail, 25 & 26 February, 1919.
SWMF Council Meeting, 5 April 1919, "Several letters were received protesting against the action of the General Secretary in relation to the ballot for tendering notices and asking that he tender his resignation.
140 Merthyr Pioneer, 2 March 1919.

responsible trade union leadership. Confessing that he knew of "no experience more bitter than to face the anger and dislike of a crowd", he argued that the "young leaders" were "in need of discipline". Brace argued that there should be a division of labour within trade unions:

> The propaganda of more advanced doctrines can properly be left to those within the movement who are not carrying official responsibility. The propagandist and the responsible cautious official are the natural complement of one another in movements like ours. There should be room for both and both are needed.[141]

In the context of "coming future industrial situations of the most harassing character", Brace was fighting for the freedom of enlightened and responsible leaders to interpret what was best for their members. This interpretation of the role of leadership was endorsed by both left and right of the Council in a unanimous resolution in March which rejected calls for Richards' resignation, because "his services...(were) better known to the Council than to the rank and file."[142]

According to this view of leadership, Brace's responsibilities did not change with the ballot majority for direct action. He saw the strike per se as "at best a terrible instrument", the prospective national strike as "a far reaching disaster", and claimed that "it would be a misreading of the miners' desire to conclude that they desire to stop work."[143] At the crucial MFGB conference which discussed the offer of the Sankey Commission, Brace Richards and Onions were in attendance for the first time in 1919. At the two previous conferences, only James Winstone of the full-time officers had been present. The Western Mail reported from the conference that, along with Vernon Hartshorn in his capacity as a MFGB EC member, these men "are...doing their utmost to secure the endorsement by

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141 Western Mail, 19 March 1919, 14 May 1919.
142 SWMF Council Meeting, 17 March 1919.
143 Western Mail, 22 & 25 February 1919.

the conference" of the Government's offer. The presence of these senior officials, according to the Western Mail, was decisive in swinging the Welsh delegation behind the EC's position.[144] Clearly however, the vote within the delegation had been a close run thing, as several South Wales delegates, including Ablett, S.O.Davies and rank and file SWSS members, angrily demanded that the EC act upon the strike mandate. S.O.Davies made their position clear:

> As long as I have a clear mandate, especially from the rank and file of the MFGB, I hold no allegiance to a conference of this kind, nor to the Executive, in submitting a recommendation before us in the face of the clear and definite mandate which the rank and file has given.[145]

At this stage, the militants were unable to initiate action against the Sankey Commission, most miners preferring to await the outcome of the hearings. However, S.O.Davies and the SWSS conspired to lead a highly important strike in Dowlais in this period. The strike was a sequel to the January dispute. Having returned to work with the assurance that the washery workers would be recognised as SWMF members, the owners then reneged on the agreement. The whole Dowlais District again came out unofficially on March 3rd, and the Pioneer reported:

> The story of broken faith on the part of the coalowners is one of the most sordid in recent industrial history. The turning down of the washery workers and the consequent betrayal of their promise to the men by the Conciliation Board raises the issue far above that of a small strike in one District.[146]

The SWSS agitiation around the dispute was designed to focus the long-standing hostility of the miners to the Conciliation Board. A "Conciliation Board Must Go" campaign was mounted, with "missionaries" from Dowlais, and SWSS members, distributing leaflets throughout the

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144 ibid., 28 February 1919.
145 MFGB Conference, 27 February 1919, p.30.
146 Merthyr Pioneer, 8 March 1919.

coalfield calling for a SWMF conference.[147] Noah Ablett cemented his renewed relationship with the unofficial movement by taking an active part in the campaign to use the Dowlais dispute to gather support for a reorganisation of the SWMF on the lines of The Miners' Next Step. On March 14th he told a mass meeting at Merthyr:

> He would take the officials and agents off the Executive except in so far as they acted in an advisory capacity, raise the lodges to the position of governors in the coalfield, meeting in monthly conferences, the agents to carry out instructions and the Executive to function as it should - to execute under command. The Dowlais strike was "starting the business". The miners were coming to a point where they must reshape their organisation.[148]

The Dowlais miners were still on strike when the MFGB conference met on March 21st to discuss whether or not to accept the Interim Sankey Report. The make up of the South Wales delegation was a clear demonstration of the sort of power held by officials and agents which the Dowlais campaign was directed against. Acutely aware of the growing opposition to conciliation of any kind, they packed the delegation at this conference, and the reconvened one on March 26th which took the final decision on the Report. At the first three conferences of the year, there had been only fourteen, fifteen and seventeen officials and Council members present, figures roughly equivalent to the number of rank and file delegates. However, at the two crucial March conferences, the number leapt up to thirty-three and thirty- six respectively, ensuring that the rank and file delegates, several of whom are identifiable as SWSS members, were heavily out-gunned.[149]

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147 ibid., 22 March 1919.
148 ibid.
149 MFGB 1919, Lists of conference delegations.

Having failed to force the SWMF EC into opposing the conciliatory strategy of the MFGB leadership, the SWSS then changed tack and attempted to use the Dowlais strike as a platform from which to launch unofficial strikes against the Sankey Report. On Sunday March 23rd, following the MFGB's provisional acceptance of the Report, the SWSS held meetings in several Districts to drum up support for such a strategy.[150] In their strongholds in the Rhondda, large numbers turned up to vote for action, and on Monday morning many collieries in the Rhondda Fach came out on strike. After pit-head meetings, the Lewis Merthyr pits at Trehafod in the Pontypridd area also struck despite the previous evening having voted "unbounded confidence" in the leaders on the recommendation of the agent, Ben Davies.[151]

Considerable confusion surrounded the strike. The South Wales Echo reported that it was the beginning of an attempt at all out action, whilst the Western Mail saw it as no more than a one day protest stoppage. Concerned agents hurried back to the Rhondda from London, and made "strenuous efforts to get the men to return to work, there being throughout the day a fear that the stoppage might spread to other parts of the coalfield."[152]

At a mass meeting that evening in Porth, Will John and D.Watts Morgan, the Rhondda agents, struggled in a long and heated debate to persuade the men to observe the conference decision, but they voted to stay out at

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150 Workers' Dreadnought, 5 April 1919.
151 Western Mail, 24 & 25 March 1919. The information with which the following account of the strike has been constructed is taken mainly from the Western Mail, the South Wales News, and the South Wales Echo during the week ending 29 March. Where other sources have been used, these will be identified.
152 ibid., 25 March 1919.

least until the reconvened conference on the Wednesday, in order to pressurise the MFGB leaders to reject the Sankey Report. The main protests were that there had been too much secrecy in negotiations, that the concessions won were too vague, and that the delay in starting the strike was playing into the hands of the government. Generally, however, the picture remained confused, as 2,000 men on the late shift at the Naval Colliery in Penygraig and two collieries at Treherbert in the Upper Rhondda voted at pit head meetings to return to work, and the agents reported that the men were calming down.

Tuesday saw a continuation of the strike, which spread within the Rhondda to Clydach Vale where SWSS members, with the help of colleagues from Lewis Merthyr, were able to transform an existing strike over a shortage of timber into one for the Miners' Charter. In the rest of the Rhondda the strike remained patchy, with half a dozen afternoon shifts voting to descend the pits, but by the evening there were still about 20,000 on strike. With the action looking set to continue, the SWMF EC convened an emergency meeting in Cardiff, and passed a resolution which strongly condemned the strikers and called on them to work on day to day contracts until the MFGB's position on the final proposed terms of settlement was known.[153]

Up until the MFGB conference the following day, the strike was largely confined to the powerbase of the SWSS in certain areas of the Rhondda. However, when news of the decision to recommend acceptance of the Report in a ballot came through, the strike took on "alarming dimensions".[154] Inside the Rhondda, over two-thirds of the collieries now joined the

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153 SWMF Special Council Meeting, 25 March 1919.
154 Monmouthshire Evening Post, 27 March 1919.

unofficial action, making the total number of miners out here about 30,000. More ominously for the officials, large numbers of miners outside the Rhondda now began to follow suit. On the evening of March 26th, mass meetings at Abertillery and Crumlin in the Western valleys of Monmouthshire voted to strike for the full Charter. Town criers were cheered as they paraded the streets announcing the decision, and the following morning 17,000 miners came out. Simultaneously in the neighbouring Eastern valleys, 7,000 came out in the Pontypool area, to be joined by a further 4,000 from Varteg and Griffithstown the following morning. The South Wales News reported that SWSS members, (referred to as "the Unofficial Party") from the Rhondda had been in the Monmouthshire valleys since the first evening of the strike, to help their counterparts here to get action off the ground.[155]

In Aberdare, where there were also SWSS bases, undisclosed thousands struck. In the Swansea, Neath and Port Talbot regions of the Anthracite, Western and Afan valley Districts, where the unofficial trafficmen's committee had originated, 10,000 joined the growing strike wave. In Tredegar, Nye Bevan was amongst those members of the Combine Committee which pulled out 6,000 at Risca, Ynysddu and Nine Mile Point. Before the week was out, collieries in the Rhymney valley, East Glamorgan, Merthyr and Ebbw Vale Districts had also joined the movement, which at its peak involved from 75,000 - 85,000 miners, or half the SWMF membership. Only the smallest Districts, Maesteg, Ogmore and Gilfach, Garw and Blaina seem to have remined entirely unaffected.

The action was in many ways erratic and uneven in form, often appearing to explode somewhere before rapidly fizzling out, and then exploding

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155 South Wales News, 28 March 1919.

again somewhere else. In some places miners clearly only intended to come out to make a short protest, whilst in others they voted to strike indefinitely until the Charter was conceded in its entirety. Spontaneity seems to have been an important characteristic of the strike. In some sense it appears to have been an almost cathartic episode, a mechanism for venting the pent up frustration and emotion which had accumulated during the war, and which had been invested in the campaign for the Miners' Charter which now seemed to be coming to a less than satisfactory resolution. However, in taking account of this it is important also to recognise that the SWSS played an important role both in initiating the strike, and giving it a level of coherence and definition which overcame the spontaneity. For a brief moment, the elemental anger and emotion expressed in the strikes became harnessed to a network of activists and once again, as in Scotland and Nottingham, the pattern of sabre rattling, negotiation and compromise had been disrupted.

Having failed to nip the strike in the bud, the SWMF leadership was forced to call a delegate conference for Saturday March 29th, to allow an opportunity for the reconsideration of the MFGB's recommendation that the Sankey Report be accepted. Here was another opportunity for the SWSS to use its support in the rank and file to overturn the leadership. At mass meetings held in all Districts prior to the conference, its members argued that the strike should continue, and that the ballot should be boycotted, in order to undermine the compromise and push the MFGB into a national strike.[156] Unofficial conferences were held in several places on the day or two leading up to the SWMF conference to ensure that the

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156 See for example, the reports of meetings held in the Afan valley (Monmouthshire Evening Post, 27 March 1919), Tredegar (Western Mail, 28 March 1919), and Merthyr (ibid., 29 March 1919).

maximum number of delegates hostile to the MFGB's policy should be selected.[157]

On the day, things went badly for the officials. The three SWMF representatives on the MFGB EC, Hartshorn, Winstone and Barker (despite the misgivings held by the latter two) attempted to persuade the delegates to accept the Sankey Report in the interest of maintaining the unity of the MFGB, but "these arguments seemed to have very little effect on much of the conference which was in no mood to compromise."[158] There then followed a strong challenge from the floor by delegates like Nye Bevan of Tredegar who had been mandated to demand that no ballot should be held in South Wales whatsoever. After a struggle William Brace eventually managed to rule this amendment out of order, but he could do nothing to prevent the conference from voting, by 168 to 102, that the members be "strongly recommended" to vote against the Sankey Report in the ballot.[159]

This was the high-water mark of the unofficial movement in the first stage of the campaign for the Miners' Charter. The MFGB's endorsement of the Sankey Report had succeeded in bringing the simmering suspicion of the rank and file to the boil, and driven large numbers into open identification with the SWSS. At this point the MFGB was in danger of losing control of the most important area in the Federation. In the space of a week the SWSS had managed to initiate a strike which involved over half the SWMF's membership and in so doing had created the atmosphere in which its members and sympathisers could capture a conference majority

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157 South Wales News, 8 April 1919.
158 Western Mail, 1 April 1919.
159 SWMF Special Conference, 29 & 31 March 1919.
Western Mail, 1 April 1919.

against MFGB policy. In the process, the idea of direct action for the original Charter was resurrected at the eleventh hour. For the unofficial leaders much more was at stake than a shilling and an hour, for the great industrial upheaval, the manifestation of working class power in Britain, was slipping away. In the opinion of Frank Phippen, writing in the Workers' Dreadnought, the concessions contained in the Interim Report were "trivial details":

> The Miners' Charter is dissolved in a maze of small points...Unless the rank and file take things into their own hands, the great Triple Alliance will subside as ignominiously as though it were a little union in a half-organised industry.[160]

Once again however, the unofficial movement was able to raise the possibility of an alternative outcome, only to find that at the very moment when a genuine challenge to the official strategy appeared to be gaining momentum, the forces behind it melted away. In overwhelming numbers the South Wales miners ignored the recommendation of the SWMF conference and voted to accept the Interim Report. In a large turn-out the SWSS was swamped, even though it reportedly campaigned hard across the coalfield.161 Every District of the Federation produced a majority for acceptance, and in some collieries there were, remarkably enough, completely unanimous votes.[162] The final result, 142,558 to 19,429 was, according to the Western Mail, a record majority in the history of the SWMF.[163]

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160 Workers' Dreadnought, 29 March 1919.
161 Western Mail, 12 April 1919.
162 South Wales News, 11 April 1919. The collieries in question were at Troedrhiwyair in Tredegar, and at Wernavon and Maesmelyn in the Afan valley.
163 MFGB EC 15 April 1919, p.2.
Western Mail, 12 April 1919.

Given the size of the movement in the final week in March, and the fact that the sovereign body of the Federation had recommended rejection, this was a startling reversal of the coalfield's recent trend towards anti-conciliationism, and a slap in the face for the militants. There is no doubt that prior to the ballot result, many from across the political spectrum considered that the revolutionary predictions of the SWSS and its fellow travellers were not the fantastic siren calls of a deluded left. The South Wales miners had been widely considered to be the shock troops of the direct action movement, who might well play a decisive role in undoing the carefully constructed mediation of the MFGB leadership and drag miners and government onto the battlefield.

The fact that these same miners then abandoned the SWSS in droves, and voted by seven to one for compromise rather than confrontation, requires careful explanation. Perhaps the most important factor, the political rhetoric surrounding the publication of the Interim Report of the Sankey Commission, is discussed in the concluding section to Part One, for it was common to all the coalfields, and contributed a vital element to the political atmosphere in which the events and debates of the Commission's second stage took place. For the moment we shall remain in South Wales, returning to look again at the nature of the alternative leaderships, official and unofficial, on offer in the mining communities, and suggest some explanations as to why the miners decided, when push came to shove, to follow the former and not the latter.

In the first place, the SWSS's ability to compete effectively with the SWMF machine was hampered by its own organisational shortcomings, which had characterised the unofficial movement since its foundation in 1910-11. In fact, it is not strictly accurate to classify the SWSS as a

clearly defined organisation, with recognised rules, aims, constitution and membership. It was not a political party, but rather a network of union activists who could link up with each other when there was occasion to do so.[164] At times of increased industrial activity, local reform committees might take on a more structured form with weekly branch meetings, as happened in parts of the Rhondda and Aberdare valleys from 1918 onwards, but even here the resemblance was closer to the informal CLC discussion groups from which the URC had originated than to the branches of a permanent and stable organisation.[165] In 1920 a SWSS activist named Hewlett would explain to engineers at a Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee Movement conference that they had a misconception of the nature of the miners' unofficial movement:

> I know there is an idea abroad that South Wales is covered by a network of unofficial committees. This is not so. In fact, there is no permanent unofficial organisation in the coalfield. What does happen when it is necessary is that the advanced or rebel element does meet and discuss matters, arrive at decisions, then goes back to their respective pit committees and lodges, put their own views forward, have themm thoroughly discussed, and if their opinions are accepted the delegates to the Councils and conferences are instructed accordingly.[166]

An operational method such as this did not require permanent, self-contained organisational structures, and indeed, it was often the case that such structures as there were lapsed completely. This point was forcefully made by Morgan Jones of Bargoed at the founding conference of the SWSS in February 1919, when he described the "tendency of the unofficial to die periodically for no discernible reason."[167] If the aim

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164 M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, passim.
165 See the regular reports in the Merthyr Pioneer in 1918, e.g., 16 March 1918 for the Aberdare URC, and 9 November 1918 for the Tonyrefail branch in the Rhondda.
166 The Worker, 4 September 1920.
167 Merthyr Pioneer, 22 February 1919.

was, as Dolling and Watkins said, "to galvanise the Executive Council into life" then conversely, when the EC responded, the natural reaction would be to decrease the pressure.[168] The level of rank and file activity was, therefore, to be gauged in inverse proportion to the level of official activity. So, for example, during the negotiations over the minimum wage in 1912 the URC stoped sales of The Miners' Next Step and agitation for union reform lest it disrupt the unity of the Federation, and it "remained in a state of suspended animation" during the national strike.[169]

It seems that in early 1919, acceptance by the MFGB of much of the URC's Charter also induced, if not outright passivity, then at least a certain complacency.[170] The timing of the foundation of the SWSS is a case in point. Although the steady escalation of unofficial activity since 1917 had done enough to make an impact on SWMF and then MFGB policy, no effort was made to consolidate and build upon this by establishing a coalfield-wide organisation until the MFGB was already locked into negotiations with the government. Only a month was to pass before this fledgling organisation had to square up to the combined organisational might of the SWMF and MFGB official structures. To have had any chance of competing with these would have required a coherent and well-rooted independent opposition force capable of acting with cohesion in all areas of the coalfield. The unofficial movement, in the guise of the SWSS, did not allow itself sufficient time to approach this state of affairs before it was called upon to act.

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168 ibid., 13 July 1918.
169 M.G.Woodhouse, Thesis, p.86.
170 ibid., p.151.

Moreover, when the SWSS belatedly woke up to the fact that compromise had become official policy, its "ginger group" status led it to pursue a questionable strategy. The strike which it launched on March 24th was not an attempt to by-pass the officials with independent rank and file action. Rather it was conceived of as a "police" action, designed to stiffen the resolve of the most militant agents and EC members, in the hope that they would stand up to the compromisers led by Brace, Richards, Onions and Hartshorn. "Syndic", writing in the Workers' Dreadnought, saw the strike thus:

> It is plainly seen that there are two elements among the leaders, one vacillating and anxious to compromise, wishing to be regarded as "sane and reasonable", in a word politically-minded men who are affrighted of the wrath of the usual capitalist bogey - the public: and the modern men who know we have to wring any advance on, or even retention of, our present status by our own organised industrial strength. It is to back this latter element, although it will probably incur their condemnation, that this sporadic strike has broken out.[171]

"Syndic" was undoubtedly correct in identifying a split inside the SWMF leadership over the Sankey Report. He was no less correct, however, to suggest that the left officials and agents would oppose the strike. The SWSS's intention was to exploit the split in the leadership, but by steering the rank and file revolt back into the SWMF, it ended up tailing the left-wing of a body of officials and agents whose ultimate loyalty was to the official apparatus of which they were a part. Whenever they perceived this to be threatened from below during the campaign for the Miners' Charter, they tended to close ranks with the rest of officialdom. The Richards' affair had already shown this to be true of even the most militant amongst them. The support of men like Ablett, S.O.Davies, Ted Williams and Noah Rees had been crucial in protecting him when there was

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171 Workers' Dreadnought, 29 March 1919.

a real possibility that he might be forced to resign.[172] The rank and file movement against the Interim Report in March elicited a similar response. Winstone and Barker were prepared to argue against acceptance inside the MFGB EC, but having been defeated there they threw their efforts into halting the strike wave.[173] In fact, not a single member of the EC would go as far as supporting the strike, and the Special SWMF EC meeting on March 25th which condemned it was unanimous.[174] Even those agents most closely identified with the SWSS, Ablett and S.O.Davies, revealed that there was a limit beyond which their rank and file-ism would not go. They too campaigned hard against the strike in their own Districts, and would go no further than endorsing the SWMF conference recommendation to vote against acceptance of the Report in the ballot.[175]

In terms of the SWSS's strategy of making full use of the SWMF constitution to maximise the voice of the rank and file and control the officials, the capturing of the SWMF conference on March 31st should have been a great success. It was, in fact, a pyrrhic victory. In the first place, the conference decision meant that the SWSS abandoned its attempts to continue the strike, participation in which had actively united those who were opposed to a compromise. Once the strike was over, the opposition forces lost this focus, making defeat in the ballot more likely. The sudden loss of momentum can be seen in Merthyr, where Ablett subsequently admitted "such was the spirit of discontent manifested" that he had had "the greatest difficulty" in stopping the strike. At the mass meeting which reluctantly agreed to work on day to day contracts pending

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172 The SWMF EC meeting which decided to drop the matter did so unanimously.
173 Western Mail, 27 March 1919.
Llais Llafur, 5 April 1919.
174 SWMF EC Special Meeting, 25 March 1919.
175 Western Mail, 5 & 12 April 1919.

the ballot result, 3,000 miners had unanimously voted to reject the Sankey Report.[176] Yet the intervening fortnight saw a dramatic change in attitude; although the minority against acceptance was proportionately bigger in Merthyr than in any other district, except for S.O.Davies' Dowlais, they were still out-voted by two to one.[177] In the light of this, the Workers' Dreadnought's explanation of the collapse of rank and file opposition to compromise is a persuasive one. Frank Phippen wrote that:

> After having marched to the top of the hill in sight of victory, the miners were asked to retrace their steps, and this action caused chaos in the ranks, and demobilisation resulted.[178]

When one considers that in the period between the end of the strike and the ballot, the railway and transport workers settled their disputes, and early balloting in other areas of the MFGB had already produced big majorities in favour of the Sankey Report, then the loss of momentum which the strike had provided indeed seems an important factor. Once the sense of forward motion had been lost, the concessions contained in the Sankey Report appeared more attractive. Ablett reckoned that in the run up to the ballot, "a fear ...gained a grip that the back pay promised from January 9th would be lost...in the event of an adverse majority."[179] Most agents played up these fears. Owen Powell from Aberdare said that the gains made in the Sankey Report were

> greater than anything the workmen had ever had before. If we embark on a strike and lose, we lose everything. Take and secure what has been granted and then fight for the rest of our programme again."[180]

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176 ibid., 12 April 1919.
177 ibid., 10 April 1919.
178 Workers' Dreadnought, 26 April 1919.
179 Western Mail, 12 April 1919.
180 ibid., 5 April 1919.

Following the "demobilisation" of the strike, the recommendation of the conference was swamped by a well-orchestrated campaign by the SWMF leadership for acceptance of the Interim Report. Apart from Ablett and S.O.Davies, only Ted Williams of Garw and Arthur Jenkins of the Eastern Valleys held to the conference mandate. The rest threw their energy and resources into preventing South Wales from becoming a rogue area inside the MFGB. There was nothing half-hearted or defensive about this campaign, even though it flew in the face of what was supposedly the sovereign body of the Federation. Council members toured the valleys warning of dire consequences if South Wales went out on a limb, and many of them followed Richards' earlier example and participated in the Western Mail's campaign for acceptance. The Mail carried full lists of all officials, agents, and many checkweighers and lodge secretaries who were recommending a "yes" vote.[181]

In order to appreciate why this campaign achieved such dramatic results, it is vital to understand that the SWMF leaders were, at one and the same time, leaders of the union and of the wider mining community. As Bill Paynter succinctly put it:

> A single union operating in single-industry communities, this was the unique environment which moulded the "Fed" into an exceptional kind of trade union. The branch chairman and secretaries were much more than representatives of miners dealing with problems of wages and conditions of employment...They were village elders to whom the people went with their worries and woes. They were the guides, philosophers and friends to a community as well as the trade union leaders dealing with the pit boss.[182]

The extent to which this was true can be seen in the fact that of the thirty seven SWMF EC members in 1919, seven were MPs, and another

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181 ibid., 5 & 9 April 1919.
182 Cited in Gilbert, op.cit., p.54.

fourteen were JPs.[183] As Roy Jenkins has pointed out with respect to his father, Arthur Jenkins, agents not only ascended vertically through the SWMF:

> but spread their activities horizontally into politics and other forms of public service so that they were very often well known figures with an influence well beyond the members of their union.[184]

By 1919, long before he became an MP, Arthur Jenkins was not only agent for the Eastern Valleys, but was also a district and county councillor for the Labour Party. This "tandem of miners' leader and local politician" also existed below the level of the agents; many a lodge secretary and checkweigher was also a councillor or representative on the local Board of Guardians.[185] Working as they did within the received institutions of South Walian society, these men stood overwhelmingly for incremental social advance. Given the revolutionary tone of much of the political discourse which had accompanied the campaign for the Charter in South Wales, and the widespread rumours of army activity in the area, it should not come as a surprise that leaders of this type threw their weight behind the Sankey compromise.[186] When they chose to override the SWMF Conference decision, they did so not just as union leaders concerned to maintain the unity of the MFGB, but as the representatives and guardians of the whole community.

Under certain conditions the unofficial movement was able to function as an alternative leadership in industrial matters. The delegates to the SWMF conference on March 31st had been elected by relatively small numbers of miners who were, by and large, activists of some description

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183 SWMF Records, 1919.
184 Roy Jenkins, A Life at the Centre (London: Macmillan, 1991), p.10.
185 Dai Smith, op.cit., p.76.
186 Workers' Dreadnought, 29 March 1919.

or other. These were under the sway of the SWSS to a greater extent than most. However, although far from being in a marginal position, the SWSS members collectively did not represent a community leadership in the same way that the official SWMF leadership did. The Miners' Next Step had pointed to ways of combatting a moderate union bureaucracy within the structures of the SWMF, but its syndicalism meant that it provided no critique of the wider political role of that leadership in the community context. Whilst the SWSS could compete with the official SWMF leadership in the environment of the workplace and lodge, when it came to the major political issues which concerned the future of the whole community, it was far less well equipped. When the working men of that community voted in March 1919, they followed the advice not of the syndicalist militants, but of the village and community leaders and elders who promised the security of steady progress without the risks of confrontation. By the time it became clear that much of this promise had been made in vain, the post-war militancy was already on the ebb.

# Chapter 6

## *THE SELLING OF SANKEY*

> I think I need not remind this conference that this is a fateful day in the history of our country.[1]

> There could be no doubt that not only a dangerous, but perhaps the most critical moment in the history of the country has been passed. There is no doubt as to what would have happened if an industrial dispute had taken place.[2]

The acceptance of the Sankey Report by the miners was one of the most important landmarks in British industrial politics in the inter-war years. If not yet quite an irreversible turning point in the fortunes of direct action, it was nonetheless a crucial victory in the MFGB leadership's quest for a post-war settlement without confrontation. Many historians have made the point that acceptance of the Report changed the industrial environment, but a focus upon events at the purely national level has tended to produce accounts which see the Sankey compromise as a relatively straightforward and trouble-free process.[3] The regional studies of militancy in the first quarter of 1919 reveal that the official strategy of the MFGB was far more fragile than has hitherto been recognised. In these coalfields, really-existing direct action movements

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1 Smillie to MFGB delegates at the first conference to discuss the Sankey Report, on March 21st; MFGB Special Conference, 21 March 1919, p.2.

2 Jimmy Thomas, following the decision of the MFGB Conference on March 26th to accept the Sankey Report; The Times, 28 March 1919.

3 See for example H.A.Clegg, op.cit., pp.283, 286-7; K.O.Morgan, (1979), pp.62-64; C.L.Mowat, Britain Between the Wars, 1918-1940 (London: Methuen, 1955), pp.30-36; K.Middlemas, (1979), pp.142-145; R.P.Arnot, The Miners, p.201. R.Miliband, op.cit., pp.66-67 makes the point that the MFGB leaders had difficulty in getting delegates to accept the Sankey Commission, but in his chapter "Parliamentarism versus Direct Action", the whole episode takes up only half a page.

had emerged which challenged the priorities of the union leadership, and made a national strike a much more immediate and threatening possibility.

High expectations generated by government promises of reward for years of sacrifice and restraint had clashed with the high cost and low standard of living to produce unprecedented militancy over local wages and conditions - militancy which conventional collective bargaining procedures proved unable to contain. When the element of demobilisation was introduced to this already volatile mixture, the result was often explosive. The unemployment (or employment on lowly grades) of thousands of ex-soldiers was both a threat to union organisation, and an insult to men who had risked their lives for ungrateful rulers. With "homes fit for heroes" nowhere in sight, sporadic strikes were welded together and given a new direction. Although they remained coalfield rather than national affairs, under the influence of the unofficial pretenders they took on national demands, and represented serious attempts by sizeable sections of the rank and file to force an immediate struggle for the Miners' Charter.

For a variety of reasons, none of these revolts proved sustainable. Organisational shortcomings and ambiguous attitudes to the nature of the trade union bureaucracy, for example, have already been described in relation to the individual areas in question. Another common factor seems to have been the relatively restricted constituencies of support for the unofficial leaderships. It is impossible to be certain, but taking the available evidence from across the three areas under study, it seems highly likely that they had most influence amongst the younger, often single, miners, and amongst those who were activists of some description, even if only so far as they attended lodge meetings. Older miners with

families whose union activity was confined to the passive functions of paying subs and voting in ballots provide an ideal type who were apparently much less likely to follow the impetuous strategies of rank and file rebels, and these provided the officials with an important anchorage in turbulent waters.

However, in seeking out the weaknesses of the challenge from below, primacy must be given to the episodic and localised nature of the militancy. Although in all of the coalfields under study the strikes at some stage threw up common, national demands, they remained parochial affairs. In the first place, the ability of the unofficial leaderships to create and hold together movements for national demands was to a large degree determined and constrained by local factors. In Scotland, for example, the unofficial revolt came very early, its timing decided not autonomously by the Fife and Lanarkshire URCs with an eye to the situation elsewhere in the MFGB, but by workers in the engineering industry on the Clyde. Hopes that a general strike of Scottish workers over demobilisation would provide the catalyst for a movement south of the border did not materialise, and when the engineers' strike collapsed, the miners' collapsed along with it. By the time the unofficial movement in South Wales was at its peak two months later, the movement in Fife and Lanarkshire was in a trough.

In Nottinghamshire, the surge of militancy in the New Year saw the butty system, which had long been the buttress of the moderate leadership, collapse like a pack of cards. A small, poorly organised group of militants attained considerable respect for its part in this victory, and was able for a brief time to fill the vacuum left by the dislocated power-structure in the NMA, leading miners in Notts and Derbyshire in a

strike for the Miners' Charter. However, the election of a more combative and left wing NMA Council which was more prepared to fight over local issues closed down the space in which the militants had operated. The generalisation of demands seen in the strike which originated in the Crown Farm demobilisation crisis was not repeated in the March strike over fork-loading.

The South Wales experience was also local and specific. The relative longevity of the syndicalist tradition in South Wales meant that here the perspectives of the direct actionists, both economic and political, were more ambitious than anywhere else. The word "revolution" was an accepted part of the discourse of industrial politics in South Wales in 1919, and even set the terms of the debate, especially prior to the acceptance of the Interim Report. However, ironically enough, the mono-industrial society which had given rise to revolutionary syndicalism had also produced by far the largest trade union bureaucracy of all the federated areas, and one which was at the same time a community leadership. The mobilisation of this all-pervasive leadership proved too much for the SWSS, and so at the very moment when revolutionary trade unionism appeared most feasible, the SWMF showed itself to be ultimately a force for social stability and gradual change.

Arguably, in terms of the unofficial leaderships' goal of a national strike against the Sankey process, the differences between these regional direct action movements were not decisive. Common demands, especially the one for the six hour day, suggest that there was a basis upon which parochialism might have been overcome. So too did common action. Apart from the South Wales strike, in the days following the MFGB's acceptance of the Sankey Report on March 26th, there were also unofficial strike

movements in several other coalfields. In Derbyshire, "conversations between miners on their way to work, and railwaymen at the Chesterfield stations led to an unofficial strike of about 8,000 miners..." against the MFGB's decision.[4] Further south in the Midlands there was also a significant level of action; in North Staffordshire, Cannock Chase, and South Staffordshire, something in the region of 15,000 miners, "influenced in their decision by the South Wales strike", also struck in protest.[5] So too did between 20-30,000 in the Sheffield area of the South Yorkshire coalfield.[6] Altogether, leaving out the strike which was underway in Nottinghamshire at this point in time, over 100,000 miners were involved in this brief, but threatening, outburst.

Had there been in existence a national organisation linking up the rank and file movements in the various coalfields, then it is possible that the unofficial strikes of late March might have become the beginning of a sustained assault on the compromise agreed by the MFGB. However, according to J.D.MacDougall, no more than "tentative efforts" had been made to establish a National Miners' Reform Committee - "save a few meetings of representatives, nothing came of it."[7] Contact between even the two strongest areas of the Reform Movement, Scotland and South Wales, whilst having been important in terms of popularising The Miners' Next Step, and in rejuvenating the Committees at the war's end, was nonetheless occasional and informal, involving no strategic co-ordination.[8] In March and April 1919, William Paul and John Maclean

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4 J.E.Williams, The Derbyshire Miners (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962), p.618.
5 Staffordshire Sentinel, 27 & 28 March 1919.
Staffordshire Chronicle, 29 March 1919.
Dudley Chronicle, 29 March 1919.
6 Sheffield Independent, 28 March 1919.
7 J.D.MacDougall, op.cit., p.774.
8 ibid., pages 767 & 774.

toured South Wales, "to see if it was possible to link the rebels here with the rebels on the Clyde."[9] However, in May Walton Newbold, a future Communist MP, lamented that:

> In recent industrial troubles what has been conspicuously and regrettably noticeable has been the lack of understanding and cooperation between the workers of one area and those in others. The greatest misapprehensions are to be found in South Wales about events on the Clyde, and on the Clyde about the intensity and purpose of industrial and political tendencies in South Wales.[10]

The unofficial movement was therefore supremely ill-equipped to be able to weld local outbreaks of militancy into a force powerful enough to have a decisive effect upon national developments. Just as it had no national organisation or leadership structures, nor did it have a newspaper or broadsheet. The comparative wealth of information about the SWSS in this period is due only to the support of the Merthyr Pioneer, and this paper carried no information about events elsewhere. In Scotland, The Worker contained occasional articles about the Fife and Lanarkshire URCs, but was to all intents and purposes the organ of the Clydeside shop stewards, whilst the unofficial group in Nottinghamshire was unsupported by any publication. The movements in each area were influenced or supported to varying degrees by revolutionary political groups and parties; the Socialist Labour Party and British Socialist Party in Scotland, the Workers' Socialist Federation in South Wales, and the Industrial Workers of the World in Nottinghamshire, but none of these constituted an effective national force which could bridge the gaps left by the unofficial movement.

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9 Merthyr Pioneer, 26 March 1919.
10 Forward, 10 May 1919.

Prior to the establishment of the Minority Movement in the 1920's it is inaccurate to talk about a national unofficial movement at all. Rather there were a number of separate, area-based movements. The local nature of their activities did not preclude national or even international perspectives in 1919, but their organisational parochialism thwarted their vaunted economic and political aspirations. Attempts to coordinate agitation and action stopped at the coalfield boundaries. Thus, whilst the national leadership was troubled at various times by a number of sizeable loose cannons on the deck of the MFGB, it was able to deal with each in turn, and remain at all times in overall control of the vessel.

At this point we can return briefly to re-evaluate why Smillie and the EC chose to participate in the Sankey Commission rather than act upon the ballot majority. As we have attempted to establish, right from the start of the campaign they had shown strong signs of fighting shy of a confrontation with the government. Two days after the meeting between the EC and Lloyd George, Sidney Webb visited Smillie to encourage him to accept the Prime Minister's offer. Smillie was "depressed with a cold and the feeling of responsibility." He personally was willing to go along with a Commission, but felt that the rank and file "were out for a fight" and would brook no compromise.[11]

Smillie's anxiety was the product of a number of factors which have already been referred to; in common with other union leaders, and especially given his experience of union fragility in Lanarkshire, he was sensitive to the dangers which a full-scale confrontation with the government held for stable organisation. Like Jimmy Thomas he feared that the government's threats to "use all the resources of the State without

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11 Margaret Cole, op.cit., pp.150-151.

the smallest hesitation...to win and to win quickly" might spell defeat for the miners, and signal the beginning of an employers' counter-offensive.[12] At a Triple Alliance conference later in the year he said that:

> There can be no doubt at all in the mind of any unbiased person that the Government were making preparations to crush out any movement initiated by the Transport Workers, by the National Union of Railwaymen, and by the Miners' Federation to ultimately use their trade unions in the interests of the members and that the Government were prepared to meet that by calling out the military to shoot down our people.[13]

Possibly too he was genuinely concerned that a strike would cause hardship to workers in other industries, as R.P.Arnot, who knew him well, believed him to be.[14]

Nye Bevan's suggestion that Smillie and the MFGB EC were at least as nervous about the prospects of victory as of defeat also appears plausible. After all, the size of the original strike vote, and the unprecedented levels of militancy and solidarity on show in coalfields of varying traditions, suggest that victory was a strong possibility had the leadership sanctioned action. Certainly this was the expectation amongst most of the labour movement. Even as late as March 22nd, The Herald felt that the miners would strike, and their victory would establish a beach-head for the rest of the working class.[15] In the same edition Robert Williams anticipated the coming strike: "The sands of the government are fast running out and the hour of capitalist domination has struck. We are on the eve of the Proletarian Revolution."[16]

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12 Bonar Law, 113 HC Deb.5s, c.2348, 20 March 1919.
13 MFGB, Report of Proceedings at a Conference of the Industrial Triple Alliance, July 23 1919, p.8.
14 R.P.Arnot, The South Wales Miners, Vol 2, op.cit., p.166.
15 See Chapter One, p.53.
16 ibid.

Lloyd George was not alone in his estimation that a victory for the MFGB in the conditions of March 1919 would have political consequences way beyond those of a run of the mill industrial dispute. His concern was echoed with increasing urgency by key labour figures as the confrontation loomed closer. The Webbs pondered: "Blockading the miners will be a difficult and dangerous task. The railwaymen and the transport workers might be drawn in; the army might refuse to act. And then?"[17] Macdonald felt that a strike for even fairly limited goals would quickly escalate, it would become "difficult to keep discipline in the attacking army of Labour", and as the country polarised, the government would get reinforcements from the rest of society: "Then both armies and issues will be completely changed, and what was a strike for an apparently definite and comparatively small change in reality becomes a revolution."[18] In a widely reported speech at Watford in the lead up to the anticipated strike of the Triple Alliance, Jimmy Thomas warned:

> Victory for either side may be purchased at too great a price...The next three weeks might determine whether the country, having emerged successfully from a world war, could avoid an industrial dispute which, in its consequences, might be almost as dangerous as defeat by Germany. It was therefore essential that all classes should endeavour to understand the situation, and, without class prejudice or bias, should recognise that they had responsibilities which they could not escape.[19]

Miliband has written of trade union leaders in 1919 that:

> The militancy of their followers did not make them feel stronger: it struck them with apprehension. They held a formidable instrument in their hands. Much of their energy was devoted to persuading their members it should not be used.[20]

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17 Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie (eds), The Diary of Beatrice Webb, vol.3, 1905-24 (Virago, 1984), p.336.
18 R.Macdonald, op.cit., p.77.
19 Labour Leader, 8 March 1919.
20 R.Miliband, op.cit., p.65.

This was as true of the left-winger Smillie as of right-wingers like Thomas. In the political context of the first quarter of 1919, none of the scenarios which might flow from a national strike were appealing to Smillie and his colleagues. Defeat would spell disaster. Victory might signal the beginning of an industrial uprising, something to which none of the MFGB leaders would subscribe. Far from encouraging them, talk of revolution, and of the miners' part in initiating it, served to unnerve them. They looked to keep the militancy of their members in check, if possible, and use it as a bargaining counter to extract concessions, rather than unleash it in an attempt to score a decisive victory against the government. The government responded with the offer of a Commission on terms favourable enough to the MFGB to allow its leaders to sell it to their members, and to retain control of the union. The Sankey Commission was, therefore, the prop for a mutual act of escapology from a conflict which neither the MFGB leadership nor the government wanted.

For the syndicalists, the acceptance of the Sankey Report was a serious defeat. The Miners' Charter to them had never been a negotiable set of seperate demands, but the Magna Carta of the direct action movement. Syd Jones of the SWSS wrote an article in Solidarity entitled "The Miners' Charter in the Torture Chamber" in which he asked:

> Whenever in the history of the class struggle had we clinched the argument so tightly? When was there an appeal which would attract the workers to the banner of freedom? When did our leaders beat the big drums with so much vehemence?

Set against the alternative of a Triple Alliance strike, the procrastination and compromise of the Commission, and the acceptance of the Interim Report by the leaders represented "the shameful betrayal of the working class" and a victory for "the counter-revolution":

> The slaves are asked to fondle their chains, to remain

> and acquiesce in their slavery, and work on for the preservation of their masters' existence and luxurious ease.[21]

However, the size of the ballot majority showed how sidelined such a view was inside the MFGB, as in overwhelming numbers the miners demonstrated their far from grudging approval. Given the importance of the unofficial movements in the campaign for the Miners' Charter up to this point, their sudden loss of influence requires explanation. Organisational parochialism accounts for the failiure to convert local direct action movements into a national one prior to the ballot, but cannot account for the small number of votes against the Report within each area of the Federation.

The most readily available explanation is that the revolutionary perspectives of the unofficial groups were entirely out of step with the bulk of the miners, for whom the goal was not revolution but substantial reform. The marginalisation of the unofficial groups at the end of March suggests that the support which they had received in the first quarter of the year was subject to serious qualifications and limitations. Participation in local direct action movements had been an indication not of revolutionary aspirations or convictions, but was, rather, the temporary transference of loyalty from procrastinating officials to the only other available leadership, in order to further the struggle for reforms. Once these had been secured in the form of the Interim Report, the vast majority of miners switched their allegiance back to the officials, both locally and nationally. The revolutionaries in the direct action movement had been left high and dry, their grandiose plans

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21 Solidarity, April 1919; newspaper of the National Shop Stewards and Workers Committee Movement.

shipwrecked on the rocks of the ordinary miners' mundane economic concerns.[22]

Whilst there are obvious truths contained here, this explanation of why the rank and file challenge melted away in March 1919 leaves out important pieces of the puzzle. With an exclusively national focus it seems eminently feasible, but it does not square quite so easily with the picture that has been uncovered in the coalfields. Undoubtedly, participation in local direct action movements did not necessarily entail identification with revolutionary syndicalism, and yet neither was it suggestive of a narrow and politically disinterested economism. There was beyond a doubt a collective aspiration for some kind of new economic and social order amongst the miners, and a collective instinct that the occasion for its realisation had come, despite the Coalition's Parliamentary dominance. Higher wages and shorter hours were an important, indeed, given demobilisation and inflation, vital part of such an order, but a part nonetheless. The miners' vision of reconstruction, although often inchoate and ill-defined, also incorporated the wider themes of social equality, unfettered democracy, social ownership and workers' control, full employment, international peace, and civil liberties. There were differences about both means and ends, but to the extent that many miners felt their aspirations could only be realised by the use of their industrial power, there was a real identification with direct action as a political philosophy.

The acceptance of the Sankey Commission's Interim Report signalled a weakening of that identification, and the beginning of a collective belief that some route to post-war reconstruction other than direct

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22 Woodhouse, Thesis, p.166 tends to this view.

action had been opened up. The scale of the concessions of the Report itself was an important sweetener. Miners' officials sought ways to light up the report in the most attractive manner. Hartshorn told Maesteg miners:

> The minimum today was 76s9d per week (compared with 29s thirteen years ago) and the hauliers wages had been increased from 25s3d per week to 85s9d today. In regard to hours they had secured a reduction which was equivalent to four months holiday with full pay. They had had £30,000,000 per annum added to their wages during the last few weeks, and a reduction in hours which were equivalent to £13,000,000 more. The profits of the owners declared for the whole country was only £39,000,000. The miners had £4,000,000 more than that, so there was no profit at all for the owners. (Laughter)[23]

Whilst these immediate gains were important in inducing the miners to vote acceptance of the Report, they cannot on their own explain the enthusiasm with which it was embraced. Given the raised horizons of the miners in 1919, it is highly questionable whether 2s and an hour would have been enough, on their own, to allow the leadership to call off the national strike. The key to the success of the Sankey Commission was its presentation by those opposed to direct action as the vehicle by which the wider vision of a reconstructed post-war order could be peacefully - and relatively rapidly - attained. The economic gains of the Interim Report were offered as milestones on the road to this goal, and helped to secure a belief amongst the miners that the Sankey Commission represented a feasible political alternative to direct action. The public presentation of the Sankey Commission by politicians, union leaders and the press - especially the socialist press - was such that by the time it came to the ballot on the Report, only the most hardened sceptic could doubt that it was only the hors d'ouevre before the main feast.

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23 South Wales News, 6 May 1919.

The proceedings of the Sankey Commission themselves went a long way to dispel fears that it was simply a delaying mechanism. This was in large part due to the extremely effective tactics of the miners' Commissioners, who were concerned that the Commission should not be a sterile operation in the amassing of dry statistics, but rather a head to head tussle with the coalowners. This was the first and most important element in the Sankey Commission's success from the point of view of the MFGB leadership. Unlike the National Industrial Conference (NIC), which opened on the same day, the Sankey Commission did not suffer from an image of Whitleyism and class collaboration. In his opening speech to the NIC, Lloyd George appealed for "fair play for all classes" and cooperation between employers and union leaders who should see themselves as "trustees for the whole country."[24] By contrast, the Labour representatives on the Sankey Commission made no attempt to find common ground, and instead adopted an unashamedly partisan approach. Smillie's riposte to owners' complaints about the cost of the miners' demands was typical:

> We say that the landlords and the capitalists will have to do with less wealth produced in future, and the workers will have to receive more.[25]

A well thought out division of labour on the miners' side enabled them to pursue the owners in a pincer movement. Smillie, Hodges and Smith stayed on home ground, and confronted the owners with their extensive knowledge of the mining industry. The Labour intellectuals - Webb, Chiozza-Money and R.H.Tawney - intervened wherever possible to use the information extracted by the miners' officials to broaden the issue beyond wages and

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24 Manchester Guardian, 5 March 1919.
25 CIC 1919, vol.i, p.80; Smillie to A.G.Hobson.

hours, into the realm of public policy and nationalisation. This method of cross-examination was highly successful from the start. The first witness, Arthur Lowes-Dickinson, a chartered accountant with Price Waterhouse and adviser to the Coal Controller, was called upon to produce figures which revealed for the first time the full extent of wartime "profiteering". In the five years up to 1913, average profits after the deduction of royalties had been £13,000,000, a figure which had almost tripled, to £38,000,000, by 1916, and risen still further to £39,000,000 by 1918. Closely questioned for over a day, by Webb and Chiozza-Money in particular, Lowes-Dickinson explained that the large increase in profits was due to wartime price increases which had been necessary to ensure production continued at less profitable collieries. He conceeded during the course of his testimony that theoretically, in a unified industry with all profits pooled, such price increases would not have been necessary.[26]

The inference which Webb and Chiozza-Money sought to draw out was that the owners had taken advantage of the national crisis during the war to line their own pockets. In his Facts from the Coal Commission, Page Arnot wrote of Lowes-Dickinson's evidence that:

> the revelations disclosed by him of the profiteering in coal during the war caused an immediate revulsion of public feeling in favour of the miners and against the coalowners.[27]

The Manchester Guardian, which was not in favour of public ownership, described the evidence as "sensational" and "a striking illustration of the miners' case for nationalisation."[28] The testimony of Richard Redmayne, Chief Inspector of Coal Mines, was also damaging to the

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26 ibid., vol.iii, Appendices 5-11, pp.7-17.
27 R.Page Arnot, Facts From The Coal Commission, (MFGB, 1919, pph.), p.7.
28 Manchester Guardian, 5 March 1919.

owners. Although he was ambiguous about nationalisation, he was hostile to multiple private ownership, which he described as extravagant and wasteful.[29]

Beatrice Webb's description of the Sankey Commission at its half-way stage in her diary was not, despite Sidneys's involvement, unduly biased:

> The ostensible business of the Commission is to examine and report on the miners' claim for a rise in wages and a reduction of hours; but owing to the superior skill of the miners' representatives it has become a state trial of the coal owners and royalty owners conducted on behalf of the producers and consumers of the product, culminating in the question "Why not nationalise the industry.?"[30]

Webb captures here the essence of the miners' success at the Sankey Commission. Acutely aware of the mood in the coalfields, and of the suspicion that the whole episode was a waste of time, they sought to use the critical opening sessions to not only demonstrate the soundness of the argument for nationalisation, but to put the coalowners in the dock. As one observer wrote, their past crimes against the miners "fluttered into the King's Robing Room like the forgotten wives of a bigamist."[31] This was a vital element in the imagery of the Commission. The accusatory tone of the miners' advocates injected a note of class struggle into the proceedings, and it was in this form that the Commission entered the popular consciousness. The Daily News wrote:

> No one who attends its proceedings can help coming away with the impression that it is the mine-owners and not the miners whose case is on trial. So skilfully have Mr.Smillie and his colleagues managed the proceedings that they have become virtually a labour tribunal, before which the coalowners and magnates from other industries have to plead their cause. More than once, especially when Mr.Smillie or Mr.Webb has let himself go, I have been reminded of reports of the

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29 CIC 1919, vol.i, p.214.
30 Margaret Cole (ed.), op.cit., p.152.
31 Arthur Gleason, What the Workers Want: A Study of British Labor (London & New York, 1920), p.39.

proceedings of revolutionary tribunals in France or Russia.[32]

Smillie in particular proved himself to be extremely adept at utilising the exceptional latitude allowed by Justice Sankey in cross-examination, in order to reflect the hatred felt by the miners towards the coalowners, and in so doing he consistently captured the headlines. So, for example, Lowes-Dickinson's careful neutrality was pierced with the question: "Would you prefer to be a miner to a chartered accountant?" Benjamin Talbot, a Sheffield steel magnate, was told that a man of his wealth should be "ashamed" of trying to stop the miners from improving their conditions. Thomas Mottram, Divisional Inspector of Mines for Yorkshire was reminded of a colliery where electrical haulage equipment had only been installed because the fierce temperatures underground were killing pit ponies at the rate of forty a month: "Isn't it remarkable that men and boys should continue to work eight and nine hours a day in conditions under which it is impossible for horses to live?"[33]

Smillie was described as an unconventional Commissioner by many commentators, but his uncompromising directness, his willingness to confront industrialists and civil servants with the harshness of the miners' lives set the tone from the outset, threw the coalowners on the defensive, and guaranteed sensational press coverage. Ramsay MacDonald felt that Smillie had manipulated the proceedings with "genius".[34] His greatest coup was his summoning of titled royalty owners, Lords Durham, Dunraven, Dynevor, Londonderry, Tredegar, Bute and Northumberland. Ways and Means, E.J.Benn's organ of conciliation backed by progressive employers, described the scene:

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32 Cited in ibid., p.48.
33 CIC 1919, vol.i, pages 31, 133 & 107.
34 Forward, 29 March 1919.

> Peer after peer has been made to confess that he is the owner of a fortune by reason of the foresight of an ancestor three or four hundred years ago. Lord Durham, for example, is drawing an income of a thousand a week out of ancient land, most of which was acquired by various means by his ancestors in a long past century. Lord Dunraven is a more interesting case. He is drawing an income from coal secured under common land; the surface appears to belong to the public and the mines to Lord Dunraven.[35]

Smillie questioned the moral and legal ownership of these peers, demanding to see title deeds which they could not produce, and claiming that, just as their ancestors had received property for services rendered in war, so now the miners claimed the same.[36] These sessions were the most dramatic scenes in what was an elaborate piece of political theatre. Forward, the Scottish ILP's paper, wrote that "the story of the origin of Lord Bute's title deeds was making wild revolutionaries of tame grocers."[37] Arthur Gleason, who gives over a whole chapter to the Commission in his impressionistic but occasionally insightful study of British labour in 1919, described the impact outside the Commission:

> The fact that they (the peers) had to come was a moral victory. And the word of it ran through Britain. Smillie was the lord high executioner, the judge, the people's man, and in the name of the people he had issued orders to the privileged class, which they unwillingly but humbly obeyed.[38]

The image of Smillie as tribune of the oppressed was carried widely in the press, particularly on the left. The Daily Herald wrote:

> When he speaks it is as if the inarticulate millions speak through him. He insists not on the profit or loss of high wages, but on the shame of not paying them. He does not argue, he states, and each statement stabs like a swordpoint. He asks no mercy and shows none. I think his eyes have always before them the sordid lives and heartbreaking labour of those men in the dark underground who breathe the foetid air in which horses may

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35 Cited in Gleason, op.cit., p.52.
36 CIC 1919, vol.ii, p.651.
37 Forward, 25 May 1919.
38 Gleason, op.cit., p.49.

not live and men must.[39]

There were very few who would deny that of the protagonists, the miners' side performed by far the better. The combination of Smillie's pugnacious moral humanism and the economic and public policy expertise of Webb, Tawney and Chiozza-Money was too much for the ill-prepared coalowners. Beatrice Webb wrote:

> The other side are absurdly outclassed: the three mine-owners are narrow-minded profit makers with less technical knowledge than the miners' officials, or, at any rate, less power of displaying it, without the remotest inkling of the wider political and economic issues which are always being raised by the miners' advocates.[40]

Again, Webb's observations seem to have been fairly objective. The Times, for example, concluded that:

> There will be no difference of opinion among dispassionate readers on one point, which is that of the three parties concerned the miners came out far the best. Their case was better presented, but it was also a better case than that of the Government or the mine owners. We do not say that the miners' demands are justified in full, but the Coal Controller's department and the mine owners cut a sorry figure.[41]

The left revelled in the triumph of the miners' Commissioners. Forward wrote of the owners being "publicly flayed" before being "carried out feet first."[42] After having watched an industrialist "trampled to the flatness of his own shadow", Arthur Gleason described the witness chair as having taken on "the atmosphere of the electric chair at Sing Sing." Using imagery made popular by the war, Gleason likened the miners' Commissioners to pieces of heavy artillery, with Smillie the 16-inch field gun, Smith the howitzer, Webb the machine gun, and Chiozza-Money

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39 Daily Herald, 15 March 1919.
40 M.Cole, op.cit., p.153.
41 The Times, 18 March 1919.
42 Forward, 24 May 1919.

the snipers' rifle. Witnesses for the owners were "carried away on a stretcher...They had not expected to attend a slaughter."[43]

This survey of contemporary observations on the Sankey Commission has been included in order to uncover something of the atmosphere which surrounded it, and provide a glimpse of the prestige and notoriety which it briefly held inside the labour movement. In the mining areas, entire communities turned out to hear checkweighers, lodge secretaries and senior MFGB officials explain its findings. In South Wales, for example, "vast audiences" were reported to be "spellbound" by accounts of the hearings.[44] The discrepancy between the profits of the owners and the conditions of the miners was not news to the mining communities, but their daily exposure in the national press, their domination of national political life, was a deeply satisfying new departure. The humiliation of the mine owners by Smillie's team was, in and of itself, both a source of pride and a cause for celebration. Protests over housing conditions which had hitherto been largely ignored outside trade union and labour circles were now being echoed by the Chairman of a Commission appointed by a special Act of Parliament and sitting in the House of Lords. In the iconography of the left, a Commission which had been widely scorned as a red herring underwent a dramatic metamorphosis, becoming a sort of modern Trojan Horse from which, behind enemy lines, a bold attack on capitalism had been launched. Smillie's duels with the coalowners were portrayed as a historic showdown between labour and capital. According to the Labour Leader:

> What is really happening in the King's Robing Room is, on a smaller scale, what is happening in Germany at this moment - a struggle between the two conceptions,

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43 Gleason, op.cit., pages 34 & 38.
44 Merthyr Pioneer, 29 March 1919.

"Socialisation" and "Private Enterprise."[45]

Comparison with Germany, where armed workers' councils were fighting a civil war against the Freikorps, was farcical, but this is a typical example of the way in which a heroic mythology was rapidly created around the Commission. Page-Arnot's Facts had a similar tone; here William Straker's evidence on nationalisation becomes "the open expression of the conflict between the opposing principles of autocracy in industry and industrial democracy."[46] Lit in this way, it was as if the Robing Room had become the stage upon which the actual class struggle was being fought - and won - by proxy. The doors to the citadels of power, forever closed to the working class, now seemed to be giving way under the battering ram of the Miners' Charter. The Daily Herald, initially highly sceptical of participation in the Commission, now felt it possible that "the industrial history of England will be changed for ever" by its disclosures.[47] The Labour Leader went further:

> The Revolution is evolving. Labour has already got as far as the King's Robing Room...The rugged figure of Robert Smillie, the miners' intrepid leader, in that gilded setting is symbolical of the day that is yet to dawn - but will dawn - when Labour shall enter its full inheritance.[48]

Surrounded by symbolism of this kind, the Sankey Commission came to represent far more than a run of the mill inquiry. As the original scepticism receeded, the way opened up for those in the MFGB leadership who had initially clung defensively to the Commission as a foil against direct action, to present it as a positive political alternative to it. The actual concessions contained in the Interim Report hardly featured in

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45 Labour Leader, 13 March 1919.
46 R.Page Arnot, Facts, p.37.
47 Daily Herald, 15 March 1919.
48 Labour Leader, 13 March 1919.

Smillie's speech to the MFGB conference on March 21st in which he recommennded acceptance. Rather, Smillie concentrated on the Commission's future potential. He invested it with quasi-legislative powers, and assured delegates that not only would nationalisation and joint control "inevitably follow"[49], but that the Commission would continue to sit over the following year, issuing regular reports which would transform the mining communities. It is worth quoting one particular section of his speech in full, to demonstrate what miners felt they were voting for when they accepted the Interim Report. Referring to Justice Sankey, Smillie said:

> He is anxious; his mission is to improve the miners' standard of life...The Chairman of the Commission, if it continues its sittings, has an idea that it has extraordinary powers. They have the power to make people produce almost anything...The Chairman is anxious, if the Commission sits again, to take up mining social questions one by one, and that we should devote ourselves for a month or two months...in finding out not merely the state of housing, and where they are worst, but in drafting and drawing plans for the building of houses, not on the lines of the present colliery houses, which have been built by the owners, but in the shape of little villages out in the country, where they would have room to breathe, and room for the children to live and breathe fresh air. He is anxious that the Commission should also have some method as to how the money is to be secured, and how the plans of these towns are to be made, and that a beginning should be made at the earliest possible time. He wants Parliament to confer on the Commission the right, having decided a thing, to have the power to enforce it, where enforcement was necessary.[50]

Smillie envisaged that the Commission would continue to sit for a year or more, and identified pit-head baths, transport, and underground safety as other areas in which it would intervene. At the meeting between Government and MFGB representatives on March 25th, when the amendments to the Interim Report which the miners had asked for were turned down, Bonar

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49 MFGB Special Conference, 21 March 1919, p.16.
50 ibid., p.5.

Law sugared the pill by stressing that what Sankey proposed was "certainly something new in Commissions. It really suggests what is in effect executive action." He then went on to promise that the reports which would be issued "on subject after subject" would not be thrown in the wastepaper basket as might happpen in ordinary circumstances, but would, as with the Interim Report, be observed by the Government "in the spirit and the letter".[51] The protests of the delegates from the unofficial movements that Bonar Law was an unscrupulous Tory politician, and that the Report did not "contain one principle whatsoever", were drowned out at the MFGB conferences on March 21st and 26th. The fact that in reality the Sankey Commission, which Smillie now began to refer to as the "Miners' Industrial Commission"[52], was legally only empowered to make recommendations to Parliament was entirely overlooked. W.Whitefield, the aged leader of the Bristol miners, told delegates that "this is the best day in my life and that makes my heart rejoice". For years he had been hoping that:

> the day would come in Britain when in place of waiting years for the House of Commons to pass these things, there would be used a greater power than the House of Commons, and I thank the Almighty that we are going to do it now.[53]

Delegate after delegate, all of them officials, took the floor to echo Whitefield. For John Robertson it was "the greatest leap forward ever taken in connection with the mining industry."[54] James Brown predicted that the miners' Commissioners "will be looked upon as being the founders of the greatest Charter ever gained for the colliery workers as a

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51 Report of Proceedings between the Government and the MFGB, March 25 1919, p.31.
52 MFGB Adjourned Conference, 26 March 1919, p.3.
53 MFGB Special Conference, 21 March 1919, p.8.
54 MFGB Adjourned Conference, 26 March 1919, p.10.

whole."[55] Even Mabon was moved to come briefly out of retirement, to proclaim the Commission as "the greatest industrial victory in history."[56] Presented in the way that it was, few could disagree with Brown that it would be "sheer madness" to turn down such a historic opportunity.[57] Executive members repeatedly stressed that if the miners were to strike and lose, they would lose everything which the Commission promised to bring them.[58] The appeal written by Smillie and Hodges and distributed in the coalfields in the run up to the ballot contained no element of doubt whatsoever:

> The Coal Industry Commission has scarcely commenced its work. Its greatest and most important tasks lie before it. Nationalisation, effective control by the producers whether by hand or brain, economies in production, elimination of waste, maximum economic value of the product for the community, with maximum social amenities for the men who produce the...coal. The choice is between definite and systematic progress and the dangers of social disorder.[59]

Furthermore, it was widely held within the labour movement that the Sankey Commission would act as a precedent for the workers in other major industries. For Beatrice Webb, there would follow "state trials of the organisation of each industry by a court made up half of the prosecuting proletariat, half of the capitalist defendants."[60] Campaigning in the Swansea by-election a few months later, Smillie and Hodges also raised this as a possibility. In Forward, "Rob Roy" wrote "this is not the first time the miners have done the work of social pioneers." The Coal Commission had "thrown Parliament into the shade. People feel that here

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55 ibid., p.18.
56 South Wales News, 9 April 1919.
57 MFGB Adjourned Conference, 26 March 1919, p.18.
58 See for example Smillie's opening speech, ibid., p.3.
59 MFGB Official Statement to the Members, 27 March 1919.
60 M.Cole (ed), op.cit., p.153.

we are at close grips with something big that matters...What is now wanted is a shipping enquiry and a railway enquiry."[61]

It was the glittering packaging of the Sankey Commission, rather than the contents of the Interim Report, which accounts for the dramatic impact which it had on labour movement politics. The sleight of hand achieved by labour and trade union leaders was to portray an inquiry which had in fact saved the state from a confrontation with the miners as the penultimate episode in the class struggle. Up until the end of March, advocates of Parliamentary socialism had suffered from a serious lack of credibility, especially amongst trade union activists. With the labour movement drifting towards direct action, the Sankey Commission provided an anchorage for reformism, rekindling as it did the prospect of change via the institutions of the state. Ramsay MacDonald, who had reluctantly argued that the Labour Party had no choice but to at least tolerate the idea of direct action if it was to avoid a damaging split, now wrote that the lesson of the Sankey Commission was that "we can win...quietly, calmly, by political constitutional methods."[62] MacDonald, Snowden and other leading figures took this message to South Wales, as the stronghold of direct action politics, on May Day 1919. In all cases, the central theme of their speeches was that talk of revolution could now be exorcised from the labour movement; there was no longer any need for it, as, in Tom Richards' words, "the Commission would result in the old order being destroyed."[63]

In this manner, a Parliamentary Commission was invested with revolutionary significance. In fact, the revolutionary vernacular which

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61 Forward, 22 March 1919.
62 ibid., 29 March 1919.
63 South Wales News, 6 May 1919.

had been exclusively associated with the direct action movement in the first quarter of 1919 was now employed by its opponents in connection with the Sankey Commission. In a keynote article in the South Wales News, written at the end of the second stage of the Commission, Vernon Hartshorn claimed that the miners were pioneers, leading the whole working class into an "unexplored realm." In his view, the world revolutionary process set in motion by the October insurrection, took different forms in different countries, according to their political traditions. In autocratic nations like Russia the revolution had been by necessity a violent one:

> But in countries like this, where democratic institutions have long been established, and free discussion has been allowed, the social revolution has taken a form so mild and constitutional in comparison with what is going on in some other countries that to many of the people the changes which are being affected are almost imperceptible. But the world revolution is at work here nonetheless.[64]

According to Hartshorn, the miners had, in the form of the Sankey Commission, unearthed what many direct actionists had denied the existence of, namely a constitutional mechanism by which revolutionary change could take place in Britain. Commenting on the proposals of its second Report, Hartshorn said:

> They go to the very roots of the capitalist system. The recommendations comply with all the forms of constitutional procedure, though they foreshadow a change which is truly revolutionary.[65]

By endowing the Sankey Commission with constitutional powers which it simply didn't have, the MFGB leadership not only secured a huge majority in the ballot, it encouraged the idea that state socialism was a viable option - even without a Parliamentary majority - provided trade union

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64 ibid., 30 June 1919.
65 ibid.

power was responsibly exercised. Obviously, in this respect the Commission's impact was only temporary, vanishing entirely when the Government eventually turned down the recommendation of nationalisation in the second Report. However, in terms of relieving the pressure for a national strike in the first quarter of the year, the image of the Sankey Commission as a kind of industrial parliament had by then already played its part.

It was as a propaganda device that the Sankey Commission had its most long-lasting effect on the politics of the labour movement. Labour clearly felt that in the jingoistic atmosphere of the Decemer 1918 election it had been denied the opportunity of getting its programme across. By March, however, the popularity of the Coalition was already on the slide, and social issues were displacing the Kaiser's neck in the public mind.[66] The stall which the miners set out at the Sankey Commission - from profiteering, through housing and social amenities, to nationalisation - corresponded closely to Labour's New Social Order. The Commission was, therefore, not only an industrial enquiry, it was a highly publicised national forum in which some of Labour's most talented intellectuals could explain its policies in detail and present the case for socialist reconstruction more effectively than the Parliamentary Labour Party had done.

Initially, as we have seen, the MFGB leaders had argued for participation in the Sankey Commission because, in the event of a strike still being

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66 On March 14th, the Liberals beat a Coalition Unionist at the West Leyton by-election. The Times which described the seat as "the safest of the safe" for a Coalitionist, said: "There seems to be no parallel in the history of by-elections for so enormous a turnover of votes, and no government in our time has had such a rebuff so soon after a General Election." The Times, 15 March 1919.

necessary, the miners would be in a stronger position with more of the public on their side. There is no doubt that the Commission had the desired effect upon public opinion. During the second week's sittings, Forward wrote that:

> The steady day by day exposures of capitalism at the Coal Commission continue, and the massed effect upon the public mind has been revolutionary. Nothing approaching it has ever before happened.[67]

Smillie told the MFGB conference on March 21st that had a strike taken place three weeks before, they would have had "the vast majority of the general public - the upper classes and the middle class, and some of our own class against us..." Since then, however, the Commission had "changed absolutely the trend of opinion in the country in our favour." The Fife and Lanarkshire Reform Committees agreed with Smillie. Prior to this conference they had congratulated him for "the masterly way" in which he had used the Commission, ensuring that "a strike now would be well supported."[68] Smillie, however, drew different conclusions from the miners' enhanced popularity:

> We are all anxious to avoid a strike with chaos and anarchy in this country...We have kindled a fire which is not going to go out. We have been able to obtain documents and information of great importance, and in future if we continue to elicit further information of this character, I am sure we shall still further draw public sympathy to our cause, and I believe it will enable us to go forward and raise to a higher altitude than has ever been reached before, the conditions of the workers of this country.[69]

The successful propaganda exercise which the miners had conducted at the Sankey Commission thus led the MFGB leadership directly away from the national strike policy which it had originally been intended to

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67 Forward, 22 March 1919.
68 The Worker, 15 March 1919.
69 MFGB Special Conference, 21 March 1919, pages 3 & 7.

complement. In the first place, according to the EC majority, it had forced the Government into an acceptable compromise, and - if it could be carefully nurtured - there was every possibility that it could do so again. Secondly, it had alerted them, and many of their colleagues in the Labour Party, to the wider electoral significance of the Commission. Concrete evidence of this valuable spin-off could be pointed to in Durham, where, in the County Council elections held during the Commission's first stage, Labour swept into office, holding every seat it had previously held, and gaining twenty-eight additional ones. The Commission's disclosures, and the miners' case for state ownership, had formed the centrepiece of the campaign in Durham, which now became the first County Council ever with an outright Labour majority. This gave a much needed fillip to the electoral strategy of the Labour Party, which had been suffering from a crisis of credibility since the General Election. The Labour Leader wrote that "the extraordinary sweep of Durham County...has not been fully appreciated over the country. It is a great triumph. Labour is supreme."[70] George Lansbury, writing in the Herald, also sensed a shift in the political wind. "This is" he wrote "indeed a revolution."[71]

Up until this point, with the Labour Party impotent in Parliament, the campaign for the Miners' Charter had been seen as the spearhead of the more robust wing of the labour movement, the lead banner in the forward march of direct action. Now however, the popular appeal of the miners' cause in general, and the breakthrough in Durham in particular, encouraged Smillie to begin to seek an open reinterpretation of the MFGB's responsibilities within the labour movement, and a relocation of

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70 Labour Leader, 3 April 1919.
71 Herald, 22 March 1919.

the role of the Miners' Charter in the bid for post-war socialist reconstruction. In effect, he sought to overcome the tendency inherent in the direct action philosophy to view the political wing of the labour movement as impotent, and argued for a joint effort of Labour Party and trade unions:

> We have not been doing merely trade union work, as a matter of fact, the effective work accomplished by the Commission has enabled the Durham miners to sweep the reactionaries from the County Council, practically over the whole of it, and they have set up in Durham, for the first time in its history, government by the people for the people, and have one of their members as the Chairman of that Council. They have swept out the reactionaries. Why? Largely because of the revelation of that Commission, which sent a flame right through the rank and file of our people, and I feel sure that before that time, July 1921, we will not have the reactionary Government which we now have in power. It is a duel movement, the political and trade union side working in hand together...I have great hopes for the future, providing we steadily keep our forces together and get through this crisis.[72]

The political presentation of the miners' involvement in the Sankey Commission was the key to its effectiveness in heading off a national strike. By illustrating the creative potential of a supposedly neutral state, and highlighting the electoral viability of Labour's post-war programme, it helped to restore some much needed credibility to political reformism. In the process, it weakened the appeal of those who argued that the industrial power of the working class represented the only path to socialism.

The change in the political atmosphere undoubtedly had a profound impact on the unofficial movements in the mining industry. The Fife and Lanarkshire URCs had argued at the end of the Commission's first stage

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72 Adjourned MFGB Conference, 26 March 1919, pp.20-21. The date which Smillie refers to here is the date on which nationalisation and the six hour day would be introduced, subject to a review of the performance of the industry.

that the moment had come for them to "justify their existence", and that "failiure to act would have a detrimental effect on all other such organisations."[73] Unable to mount any resistance to the acceptance of the Interim Report, they seem to have fallen into demoralisation, alternately blaming the MFGB leadership and then the rank and file for the collapse of direct action.[74] During the Commission's second stage, The Worker wrote:

> The devilish cunning of the capitalist class in making "concessions" seems likely to ensure them a steady seat in the saddle for a long time to come. How calculated to appeal to the human weakness of the leaders was this proposal of a commission. No risk of jail, no trouble of a strike, no danger of martial law, but such an opportunity of flourishing in the public eye as has never happened before.[75]

The same article then went on to bemoan the political effect which the Commission had had upon the rank and file:

> Headlines of Smillie and the Dukes. Why it makes one feel that the revolution has already been accomplished ...Only a small minority of the miners have been able to withstand the influence of this soporiphic.

The sources for South Wales, which provide a more detailed picture than is the case with any other area, suggest that it was not just the ordinary unaffiliated miners who were seduced by the Sankey Commission. The unofficial movement here, which provided the model for those in other areas, was itself affected by the political realignement which the Commission had caused within the MFGB. The founding conference of the SWSS in February 1919 had clearly shown it to be politically heterogeneous in nature. The Merthyr Pioneer reported that an argument

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73 The Worker, 22 March 1919.
74 For example, Bob Selkirk wrote a hymn to the miners, entitled "The Miners' Beatitudes", which began "Blessed are they who voted for the S(w)ankey Report, for they shall be Swanked." The Worker, 5 April 1919.
75 The Worker, 31 May 1919.

between "political activists and industrial unionists" had turned the proceedings into something of a "bear-garden". Nye Bevan, for example, at this stage heavily influenced by syndicalist ideas, "made a five minute speech which left the impression that the real object of the Unofficial was to smash the ILP." This prompted some of the large number of ILP members present to leap to its defence. Eventually, a compromise was reached, and it was decided that the SWSS should be open "to all who accept the class war theory", a qualification sufficiently vague to allow the participation of syndicalists, industrial unionists, revolutionaries and reformists.

Therefore, although the unofficial movement contained many revolutionaries, it was not in fact a revolutionary organisation. Will Coldrick, who was Secretary of the Eastern Valleys SWSS in 1919, when asked years later whether it had been "exclusively industrial unionist", was most emphatic. "Oh no, anyone who was keen on getting these reforms joined the movement anyhow." He and many others besides were members of the ILP, and "believed strongly in Parliament" while they were active in the SWSS. This involved no contradiction whatsoever as far as they were concerned.[76] As Dai Smith has pointed out:

> The divorce between simon-pure syndicalism and conventional politics has, largely, been a subsequent academic postulate which contemporary practice contradicts at each and every stage.[77]

Doctrinal diversity was a characteristic of the unofficial movement right from the time of the formation of the URC, when ILP branches in the Rhondda had provided one of the networks for individuals interested in syndicalism.[78] The other, the Plebs League and CLC classes, also

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76 SWML, Interview with Will Coldrick, WC/106/8.
77 Dai Smith, ibid., p.201.
78 Woodhouse, Thesis, p.41.

contained a variety of socialist opinion within its ranks. Indeed, in a letter responding to an appeal for ILP/CLC unity towards the end of the war, Will John Edwards, a checkweigher from Aberdare and URC member, said it was wrong to think of the CLC men as anti-political; in fact, he knew of only six in the whole of South Wales.[79]

Throughout its existence, the political heterogeneity of the unofficial movement had, in certain circumstances, been as much of an impediment to concerted action as its organisational looseness was. Where the issue was more or less strictly economic in nature, as for example with the campaign for the minimum wage in 1911-12, political differences could be accomodated without too much difficulty. However, in situations where these differences could not be ignored, profound disorientation could be the result. So, for example, the outbreak of war - which demanded a political response - silenced the URC until the opportunity arose for agitation around immediate economic questions like the rising cost of living.[80] The campaign for the Miners' Charter straddled economics and politics. Whilst SWSS members of different political persuasions could unite over the demands for wages and hours, divisions opened up immediately when it came to the question of nationalisation or workers' control. Furthermore, the politically charged atmosphere in which the campaign took place meant that highly contentious political questions such as direct action or Parliament, and reform or revolution, intruded almost automatically. The debate within the unofficial movement was not brought to an end by the Sankey Commission, but its contours were radically changed by it, presenting as it did the political choices open to the miners in a new light.

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79 Merthyr Pioneer, 15 June 1918.
80 Woodhouse, Thesis, Chapter 3.

Perhaps the most illuminating example of how the Commission affected the left in South Wales is provided by the Merthyr Pioneer, which, whilst being an independent paper, had informal links with both the ILP and the SWSS. In 1919 its columns reflected the political controversies which were exercising the left, in particular a long running debate on whether Parliamentary reform, or direct action represented the best hope for British socialism. Its editorials, especially in the early months of the year, reflected the shift to the left which was taking place amongst activists under the combined influences of foreign revolution and domestic unrest. Although it did not abandon electoral politics, its enthusiasm for it waned, whilst it waxed for direct action and the potential of working class industrial power for political change. At one stage it began to lean towards those who were arguing that the ILP should leave the Labour Party and link up with the emerging Third International.[81]

The Sankey Commission intruded into this debate, occasioning a reflective pause, and providing a vantage point from which the Pioneer reminded itself, as much as its readership, of the continuing possibility of gradual progress. The Commission, which had "rung the knell of capitalism", signalled:

> a transmutation towards the ultimate triumph of socialism inconceivable to the mass of the population a few short years ago. The ultimate is thus brought nearer to achievement by the steady, unrelenting and logical dynamic of evolutionary progress.[82]

This measured, moderate tone was not simply an isolated shift in editorial policy. Rather, it was reflective of a retoration of confidence

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81 Merthyr Pioneer, 12 April 1919.
82 ibid., 28 June 1919.

in reformism amongst the South Wales left. Previously on the defensive, opponents of direct action were now reinvigorated by the renewed prospect of constitutional social and economic advancement which they believed the Commission held out. At the same time, those for whom direct action was not a substitute for, but a supplement to, political action, also naturally took heart.

The size and scale of the unofficial movement in South Wales meant that the political shift which occurred at this time was more marked than elsewhere, but there seems no reason to doubt that it was replicated across the MFGB. The unofficial leadership groups in the coalfields which we have examined contained in 1919 a significant current which saw revolutionary possibilities in direct action by the miners and the Triple Alliance, and which wanted those groups to be the organising force behind such a strategy. However, there was another current, in all probability larger, which saw a more limited role for direct action. The strong ILP influence meant that the unofficial movements were not immune to the enticing prospect of gradual reform which the Sankey Report seemed to offer. By restoring faith in such a prospect, the Sankey Report took the wind out of the unofficial movements' sails, and divided them politically, leaving the revolutionaries amongst their number high and dry, with no effective organisation to pursue their grandiose plans.

For a few months between April and July, the unrest in the coalfields subsided considerably, and the MFGB leadership's control over the union was stronger than it had been since the end of the war. However, nationalisation was still a live issue, and in what John Maclean called "the manoeuvring for position" between Government and MFGB in the period

after the issuing of the second Sankey Report, enthusiasm for the Commission waned sharply, renewing the prospect of direct action.[83]

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83 The Worker, 19 July 1919.

# PART TWO

## *INTRODUCTION: A BACKGROUND SKETCH OF THE SUMMER'S CRISIS*

> The trouble that was fermenting before the war, which broke upon a nation in which another crisis was rapidly germinating, is now coming fast to a head. A tremendous discontent possesses the soul of the people, and a violent passion to set things suddenly aright.[1]

With the acceptance of the first Sankey Report by the MFGB, the situation facing the government eased considerably, and Lloyd George was able to return to Paris to resume his place at the negotiating table. However, such respite was temporary. When he came back to Britain at the beginning of July the Sankey Commission had finished its deliberations over nationalisation, and the country was once more entering a period of profound crisis.

The crisis of the summer was composed of several elements, and the atmosphere was one in which the general optimism which had been generated by the Coalition's promises of a comprehensive peace and reconstruction was rapidly dissipating. The Government admitted that the transition to a peace-time economy was proving problematic. Lloyd George listed the main causes to the Cabinet on August 5th; a burgeoning national debt, falling productivity, loss of credit, and endemic strikes signalled Britain's declining position.[2] Churchill's support for the White armies in the Russian civil war was seen as an act of sordid hypocrisy, undermining the idealistic rhetoric of the Versailles peace treaty. Liberals outside the Government were outraged by the treaty itself. C.P.Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian told Lloyd George that whilst he had "not the least

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1 South Wales Daily Post, 21 July 1919.
2 Keith Middlemas, (1979), p.149.

objection to Coalition in itself", he objected strongly to such "surrenders of principle" as had taken place at Versailles.[3] Such Liberal concern contributed towards increasing tensions within the Coalition, tensions which were raising questions about its durability.

The Government's problems were compounded by renewed social and industrial unrest. Comparisons are difficult to make, but it is hard to think of a more volatile summer in modern British history than that of 1919. The optimism with which the working class had begun the year had not yet been exhausted, but there was a hard edge of bitterness in what Vernon Hartshorn described as "a profound stirring of the masses" which occurred in July and August.[4] The national peace celebrations, which took place over the weekend of 19th/20th July, in many places provided the spark which set light to working class discontent, for to many of the poorest sections of society, the military victory already appeared a pyrrhic one. Half-way through 1919, and the land fit for heroes was as elusive as ever. The cost of living had continued to rise, food was still scarce in some places and of poor quality in many more, there was significant unemployment in some sectors of the economy, and nothing substantial had been achieved in the area of social reform. Furthermore, the government had gone back on one of its main election pledges, to abolish conscription, and was still engaged in military hostilities, against the infant Soviet Union. Taken together these had created a widespread sense of bitterness and betrayal, which erupted in riots across Britain, beginning in spectacular fashion in Luton on Peace Day.

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3 T.Wilson, (Ed.), The Political Diaries of C.P.Scott, 1911-28 (London: Collins, 1970), p.379.
4 South Wales News, 27 September 1919.

Tension in the town had been high since the Discharged Soldiers' and Sailors' Association had announced its withdrawal from the official celebrations in protest at the refusal of the local authorities to allow it the use of Wardown Park for a memorial service. On the day of the celebrations, thousands of workers and soldiers gathered outside the Town Hall, hurling abuse at the Mayor. After some jostling with police, a section of the crowd tried to charge into the building, with the aim of wrecking the Assembly Room where the Peace Banquet was to be held that evening. A full scale riot then developed, with a pitched battle between the crowd and the police continuing well into the night. The latter suffered so many casualties that they were forced to relinquish their defence of the Town Hall steps. The building was then stormed and ransacked, and red flags were flown from windows and balconies, before the whole edifice was torched and destroyed. It was not just the Luton Town Hall which went up in smoke - so too did the image of national unity which the peace celebrations were intended to foster.[5]

In this period there was serious rioting at Greenwich, Coventry, Edinburgh, Swindon, Hull, Wolverhampton and Liverpool, and numerous smaller clashes between crowds and police.[6] Further research would be required to make a confident assessment of the political character of this non-industrial social protest in 1919. There is, unfortunately, no equivalent in British historiography of Ray Evans' fascinating account of Australia's "Red Flag Riots" of the same period, which shows how ex-servicemen's sense of betrayal could find political expression in either left wing or right wing terms.[7] However, the pattern of the rioting which

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5 The Times, 21 & 22 July 1919; Daily Herald, 21 July 1919.
6 Daily Herald, 1, 7 & 23 July 1919; The Times, 23 July 1919.
7 Raymond Evans, Loyalty and Disloyalty: Social Conflict on the Queensland Home Front, 1914-1918 (Sydney: Allen &

took place in Britain in the summer suggests that it was fueled by the same sense of having been deceived and betrayed by those in authority. Often, the disturbances were occasioned by a perceived maltreatment of ex-servicemen, arrest for drunkenness for example, and culminated in an assault by the rioters on the most obvious local symbol of authority, usually the police station or town hall.

Whilst these eruptions on the street went up and down very quickly and posed no real threat to the state, they gave graphic warning of a menacing mood amongst the urban population. At the same time there was in many industries a revival of the militancy of the first quarter of the year, which the Daily Herald saw as "the beginning of the fiercest of struggles between Labour and Capital."[8] All three constituents of the Triple Alliance were gearing up for action. Leaving the miners aside for the moment, the NUR was preparing a new national programme for submission to the Railway Executive Committee, and the Transport Workers Federation were demanding a 10s wage rise.[9] The Bakers' union was in a national dispute over pay, and called strikes in several districts, causing bread to be scarcer than it had been during the war according to some accounts.[10] The aggressive mood amongst the railwaymen was shown when a local strike on the Newcastle to Carlisle section of the North Eastern Railway (NER) against the sacking of a driver who had failed an eyesight test was spread by rank and file strike committees to Leeds and York, involving 10,000 men. This then escalated into an attempt by the

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Unwin, 1987), Chapter 8.
8 Daily Herald, 23 July 1919.
9 ibid.
10 The Times, 13 August 1919; Sheffield Weekly Independent, 9 August 1919.

Vigilance Committees to overthrow the Executive of the NUR and "smash the conciliation board."[11]

An already precarious industrial situation worsened when, on July 31st, a mass meeting of police in London voted to strike imediately against the Police Bill, which outlawed trade unionism in the force. A ballot of NUPPO members held at the end of May had revealed a huge majority in favour of a national strike, by 44,539 to 4,324. PC James Marston, the leading figure in the union, claimed that at least 30,000 would join the strike immediately, and warned the government that any attempt to use coercive measures against them would be met with force by police pickets.[12] The Daily Herald described the Police Bill as "the most definite step made even by our present discredited and bullying government to destroy the organised movement of the workers", and called upon other trade unionists to support the strikers.[13] Early on in the strike there was some evidence of solidarity action, especially amongst railwaymen. In London, ASLEF members at the Nine Elms depot of the London and South Western Railway, and on the City and South London underground struck in suppport of the police, and initial mass meetings in Liverpool, organised by the Vigilance Committees, voted in favour of a general transport workers strike in the city. In London, the Electrical Workers Union threatened to cut off the capital's power supply.[14]

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11 The Yorkshire Post, 19 July 1919; The Leeds Mercury, 19 & 21 July 1919.
12 The Times, 1 August 1919. For the most recent account of the events leading up to the strike, and the strike itself, see C.J.Wrigley, (1990), pp 53-79.
13 Daily Herald, 1 August 1919.
14 The Times, 4-6 August 1919-8-19; Daily Herald, 4 August 1919.

The response amongst police to the strike call was very poor in most places, but in Merseyside, where 65% of the force struck, there was a taste of what might happen in British towns and cities if the elemental anger which had exploded on the streets in Luton and elsewhere fused with industrial struggle. Tom Mann returned to Liverpool and attempted to recreate the sort of movement he had led in 1911, after an *ad hoc* strike committee had called a mass meeting to organise solidarity with the police, at which 6,000 workers and ex-soldiers had had voted for a general strike.[15] With the exception of 400 dockers these attempts were unsuccessful, but serious rioting on the streets of Liverpool and Birkenhead which lasted a week, created a semi-insurrectionary atmosphere on Merseyside. After the rioting of the 2nd/3rd August, which involved prolonged pitched battles between slum dwellers and the army in which one man was shot dead, The Times wrote; "Central Liverpool tonight represents a war zone...there has been fighting and wounds. Soldiers with steel helmets and fixed bayonets patrol the streets."[16] In addition to the 3,000 troops on the streets of Liverpool and Birkenhead, one battleship and two destroyers were positioned in the Mersey, their guns trained on the city.[17]

These scenes of social disorder conjured up images of revolutionary upheaval in the press. The Times ran a headline, "Revolution By Strikes. Plot Financed From Abroad." The Leeds Mercury proclaimed a "Bolshevist Plan To Seize London. Soviet To Be Set Up", while the Sheffield Independent reported that an organisation with Bela Kun at its head lay behind the strikes and riots.[18] Paranoid fantasies in retrospect, the

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15 Daily Herald, 4 August 1919; The Times, 4 August 1919.
16 The Times, 4 August 1919.
17 C.J.Wrigley, (1990) pp.75-76. Daily Herald, 5 August 1919.
18 The Times, 6 August 1919; Leeds Mercury, 11 August 1919;

fact that newspapers could carry such stories is an indication of the near hysteria which the uncertainty and instability of British society was producing in some quarters at this point in 1919.

A further element in the crisis of the summer was the groundswell of opinion inside the working class for the abolition of conscription and the withdrawal of British troops from Russia. Accusations that the government was guilty of betrayal on these issues were widespread, and hard to answer, as "peace and no conscription" had been a central plank of the coalition's electoral campaign in 1918. Socialists had for months been arguing that allied intervention in Russia was nothing but an attack by capiitalism on an infant workers' democracy. The Times reckoned that this had been so effective an agitation "that it has come to be widely accepted by the rank and file of the labour movement" and warned that "the intensity of feeling among the workers on the Russia question must not be underrated."[19] A Cabinet paper reported that "even mild trade unionists are said to be strongly moved" over intervention in Russia,"because they think it is the thin end of the wedge towards making compulsory military service a permanent institution."[20]

Whichever was the major factor, and it was in truth probably a combination of the two, there can be no doubting the sincerity of the demand for action inside the labour movement, as resolutions from working class organisations poured in to Labour Party and TUC headquarters.[21] Both anti-conscription and anti-intervention were elements which fitted

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_ Sheffield Independent, 7 August 1919.
19 The Times, 8 July 1919.
20 Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the U.K., Cabinet Paper GT 7916, 30 April 1919, CAB 24-78-387.
21 Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1919; see in particular Henderson's speech, p.122.

in to a radical liberal political culture which still had a place inside the new model Labour Party, but it was the pressure from the trade unions, particularly the miners, which led the Annual Conference of the Party to pass a resolution instructing the National Executive and the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC to "enforce these demands by the unreserved use of their political and industrial power."[22]

The decision of the conference was seen by some as a dramatic shift to the left by the Labour Party. The South Wales News for example declared:

> The Labour Party yesterday abandoned constitutional methods in favour of revolutionary...It reveals in a sensational way the extent to which organised workers have lost faith in political action.[23]

The Workers' Dreadnought was characteristically bombastic; "A triumph for direct action!" it declared; "A blow for Hungary and Russia! A step towards revolution!"[24] In fact, the resolution typically committed nobody to anything, as Frank Hodges pointed out in his speech.[25] Nonetheless, it received enormous publicity, and fostered the illusion that direct action had conquered the citadels of the labour movement.

This was further encouraged by the decision of a Triple Alliance delegate conference on July 23rd to ballot its constituent unions over direct action "to compel the Government to abolish conscription, to discontinue military intervention in Russia, and military intervention in trade union disputes at home."[26] The Daily Herald was supremely confident."The decision to ballot is a decision to strike, there is no doubt as to the ballot result.", and urged that the Triple Alliance incorporate all of

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22 ibid., p.156.
23 South Wales News, 28 June 1919.
24 Workers' Dreadnought, 5 July 1919.
25 Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1919, p.160.
26 MFGB 1919, Report of Proceedings at a Conference of the Industrial Triple Alliance, 23 July 1919.

labour's urgent demands into the strike, notably the withdrawal of the Police Bill, and the nationalisation of the mines. In a "Manifesto to the Rank and File",Lansbury wrote that:

> The heaviest responsibility in the political history of Britain rests upon the rank and file of the Triple Alliance in the forthcoming ballot. What is really at stake is the whole future of democracy. Are the people to prevail, or are the oligarchs, the militarists and the reactionaries to resume their age-long sway?[27]

There was a general feeling that the struggle over the shape of post war British society was coming to a climax, that a historic turning point was approaching. The apparent shift in attitude at the head of the labour movement, in conjunction with the epidemic of strikes and riots, suggested that the direct actionists were in the driving seat as the crisis came to a head.

Once again, as in the first quarter of the year, the mining industry was at the centre of the renewed unrest. A month-long official strike by the Yorkshire Miners' Association sparked off well-supported rank and file strikes in many other coalfields. These strikes were significant for two reasons. Firstly, they signalled a deep disgruntlement with the practical details of the Interim Report. Secondly, they raised the possibility of a strike over nationalisation; direct action was once again on the agenda, both in the MFGB, and in the wider labour movement.

The controversy over the nationalisation of the mines dominated British politics in the summer of 1919, and was at the epicentre of its crisis. Once again there was widespread speculation about the possibility of mass strikes and revolution. As such, there was more at stake in the

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27 Daily Herald, 24 & 28 July, 6 August 1919.

nationalisation controversy than the question of the ownership of the mines. For the Government, it was seen as a matter of survival; Government ministers themselves canvassed scenarios of being toppled either from within, by rebellious backbenchers, or from without, by labour's massed ranks.[28] For the labour movement, it brought to a head the debate which had been raging all year; the question of whether reconstruction on socialist lines would be pursued by direct action, or by constitutional means was finally pinned down here, and hinged upon the answer which the MFGB would give. That answer would be intimately bound up with the fate of the strike wave which swept across the coalfields in July and August. These months were the decisive ones, in which miners and government manoeuvred for position over nationalisation, and in which the supporters and opponents of direct action within the MFGB vied with each other for ascendancy. The outcome of these tussles was already fairly clear when Lloyd George announced the Government's rejection of nationalisation to the House of Commons on August 18th. It is of the utmost significance that the Yorkshire miners' strike had effectively collapsed only days before.

The issues raised above will be dealt with in Part Two in the following manner. Chapter Seven provides a contextual backdrop to the nationalisation controversy and gives an account of the coal output crisis, which provided the platform from which the Government made its opening moves against the MFGB. Interwoven with these there is an examination of the widening division in the labour movement and the MFGB around the question of direct action. Chapters eight and nine deal in turn with the general unrest in the coalfields, and the Yorkshire strike, to assess the strength of the challenge posed to the Federation

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28 See Chapter Seven, below.

Executive, weigh up the potential which the strike wave had to become a fight over nationalisation, and offer an explanation for why this potential remained unfulfilled. In the concluding chapter we seek to extend and develop this theme, and give an analysis of the demise of the direct action movement, and the victory of those within the MFGB who favoured the Mines for the Nation campaign.

# Chapter Seven

## *PERSPECTIVES ON NATIONALISATION IN THE PERIOD OF MANOEUVRE.*

> "Why should nationalisation produce any change?" -
> "Because men would feel that they had control, or some control over their own energies, and that they were not merely at the will and direction of another being. They would be in a better position than the horse that they have to drive, or the machine that they have to attend. As I have said on a previous occasion, it is that desire that cannot be crushed that is making itself felt in the ranks of labour at the present time, and has given rise to more unrest than anything else."[1]

### *(i) The preparation of the Government's counter-offensive.*

The Coalition was presiding over a society which was sliding into increasing unrest, beset by a plethora of problems to which it appeared to have no solutions, and it projected an image of hesitancy and drift. C.P.Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian and well acquainted with Liberal politicians, both Asquithian and Lloyd Georgian, wrote to his friend, L.T.Hobhouse; "This Government is doomed." The only uncertainty, he felt, was "What is to succeed it?"[2] Central to the government's problems was its delay in coming to a decision on whether or not to nationalise the mines, without doubt the key issue of the summer.

The final reports of the Sankey Commission were completed by 23rd June. There had been four seperate reports issued by the Commissioners. One, signed by five of the six employers, rejected nationalisation outright, and recommended an end to government control and a return to unfettered private ownership with only minor modifications. Sir Arthur Duckham, an

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1 William Straker replying to R.H.Tawney, CIC 1919, vol.iii, p.963.
2 C.P.Scott to L.T.Hobhouse, 3 September 1919, in Trevor Wilson (ed), op.cit., p.377.

engineer who had been employed by the Ministry of Munitions during the war to run munitions factories, declined to sign this report, preferring to submit one of his own. He recommended the unification of the mining industry under private ownership, by the establishment of district trusts, with the miners represented in a minoriity on the Boards of Directors.

The labour representatives submitted their plan for nationalisation with joint control in the form of a Bill to be introduced in Parliament. Under their scheme, a National Mining Council would be established, structurally analogous to the British Army Council, with a Minister of Mines at its head. Half of the members of this Council would be appointed by the MFGB, the other half by the government. This arrangement would then be replicated downwards, on a district and a pit basis. Sir John Sankey's report, whilst its proposed administrative structures differed from the labour representatives' report, and whilst it stopped short of genuine joint control, was nonetheless in favour of full nationalisation. To maximise pressure on the government, the miners' representatives decided to endorse Sankey's proposals, which thus became the Commission's majority report.[3]

The Sankey Commission had been working to a deadline laid down by the government. One month after the final reports had been issued, the government had still made no comment whatsoever upon them, apart from that "the matter remained under consideration."[4] Procrastination over nationalisation worsened the already deteriorating industrial relations

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3 G.D.H.Cole, Labour in the Coal-Mining Industry, 1914-1921, (Oxford, 1923), pp.90-100. (Herafter cited as G.D.H.Cole, Coal-Mining).
4 ibid., p.102.

scene, shrouding the government with suspicion, and causing anger to rise in the pits. On July 22nd, with the Yorkshire miners' strike already underway, and unrest spreading across other coalfields, the Daily Mail wrote that there was still:

> no decision, and no hint of a decision. It is impossible to conclude otherwise than that the Government is greatly to blame for the present situation. They were confronted with a question which demanded a plain "Yes" or "No", and they have allowed matters to drift into a very dangerous position.[5]

The Times also laid the blame for the unrest at the government's door:

> The Government not only fail to declare for or against nationalisation, but, so far as it is known, they have no constructive policy of any kind. One result of their supineness is that the temper is rising.[6]

In private, senior government figures agreed with the thrust of this criticism. After a discussion with Lloyd George about the unrest, Maurice Hankey wrote to Tom Jones: "The settlement of the nationalisation question is the root question of all our trade and labour difficulties."[7]

One way or another the government had to cross this bridge, but both acceptance and rejection of nationalisation involved unpleasant scenarios. The fate of the Ways and Communications Bill, which in its original form left the door ajar to state ownership of the docks, harbours and railways, signalled the extent of Tory opposition to nationalisation in Parliament. A well orchestrated back-bench revolt openly threatened to split the Coalition if it decided to go ahead with such a scheme.[8] A deputation of 150 MPs communicated this message to Lloyd George and Bonar Law on June 30th. Bonar Law reportedly had agreed with them that "nationalisation is an evil", and the government indicated

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5 Daily Mail, 22 July 1919.
6 The Times, 22 July 1919.
7 Hankey to Tom Jones.12 July 1919. Cited in C.J.Wrigley, (1990), p.200.
8 Joynson Hicks, 117 H.C.Deb.5s, c.1026, 2 July 1919.

its willingness to amend the Bill to see it pass through the House of Commons.[9] Even so, over the next week the government was twice defeated in the House, and on the second occasion some commentators felt that it had only survived in office because it had declined to use the whips at the division.[10] By the time the Bill was passed into law, it had been "mutilated by the Government's own supporters, and every reference that seemed to hint at nationalisation was expunged."[11] The Daily Herald commented, "The first great victory of the anti-reconstructionists has been won."[12]

The coalowners had been caught off guard by having to defend their operation of the industry in the public glare of the Sankey Commission. Barry Supple has written that "faced with a new and alarming context for the discussion of their post-war world", they were "stunned and temporarily demoralised."[13] There had been, in the aftermath of the first stage of the Sankey Commission, "an air of profound resignation about the possibility of national ownership", many owners expressing a preference to outright nationalisation, with hopefully generous compensation, to joint control. The Colliery Guardian urged the owners to "Take the Gloves Off", arguing that the debate was about more than the future of just one industry. The Mining Association of Great Britain (MAGB), it said, "merely occupy the front trench" in a battle which, if lost, would mean "England will change hands."[14]

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9 Daily Herald, 1&2 July 1919.
10 Manchester Guardian, 9 July 1919.
11 G.D.H.Cole, Coal-Mining, p.102.
12 Daily Herald, 2 July 1919.
13 Barry Supple, " "No bloody revolutions but for obstinate reactions"? British coalowners in their context, 1919-20." in D.Coleman and P.Mathias, Enterprise and History (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.219.
14 ibid., pp 221-224.

With this sort of encouragement the MAGB regained its composure during the second stage of the Sankey Commission. From the witness box coal owners took up the Colliery Guardian's line, warning that the nationalisation of the mines would, "as a natural consequence, be followed by the nationalisation of all industries,...and consequent ruin to the people."[15] Leading industrialists outside of coal mining came forward to support this view. Sir John McLaren, President of the Leeds Chamber of Commerce, told the Commissioners that in his view, the nationalisation of the mines would trigger an offensive by workers in other major industries:

> Miners would probably get benefits therefrom which would be resented by other workers who would naturally combine to bring about similar results in their trades. It would lead to an enormous increase of bureaucracy until eventually all were working for the state, individual freedom and liberty would be at an end, and conscription of labour would be the result.[16]

In this way, the MAGB began to coordinate the support of its own members and other employers'organisations, notably the Federation of British Industries and the National Association of Chambers of Commerce, in a campaign against the nationalisation of the mines. These organisations lobbied the government, and told Lloyd George that in their opinion nationalisation of the mines would be "the deathblow to individual enterprise."[17] Their main energies were directed towards rallying MPs who represented business interests, and the defeat of the original Ways and Communications Bill was the first fruit of this campaign. Sir Edward Carson wrote to Lord Selborne in late June that previously each section

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15 CIC 1919, Vol.ii, p.1137. Sir Lionel Phillips, Chairman of the Central Mining Company.
16 ibid., p.1054.
17 Daily Herald, 3 July 1919.

of industrialists in the House had only been stirred to activity when its own interests had been threatened:

> I have been impressing upon them that you must get to the bedrock of principle, and unite forces whenever the principle is assailed. I think they have begun to see this - and coalowners, dock trusts, roads, wagon owners are now uniting on the broad question of nationalisation or individual effort.[18]

The Parliamentary Coal Committee, an organisation of coalowner MPs, tapped into this new found unity, circulating a memo calling for steps to be "taken now to protect our great industries against the organised, revolutionary, and predatory forces of direct action, and against the nationalisation of the mines." Three hundred and five MPs signed this memo, and presented it to Lloyd George in mid-July.[19]

On the other hand, the government had, "if", as George Barker observed, "language has any meaning", promised to implement the recommendations of the Sankey Commission.[20] The bete noir of the industrialist class, nationalisation of the mines had become the cause celebre of the labour movement, and through its trade union and political bodies it had bound itself by scores of resolutions to support the MFGB in its quest. If these were any guide, the government in rejecting nationalisation would be taking on not just the miners, but the bulk of the organised working class. It was, at this stage, widely held that this would mean in practise a national strike by the Triple Aliance.[21]

The government was, therefore, caught between a rock and a hard place over nationalisation. To concede it meant to put the brittleness of the

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18 E.Carson to Selborne, 29 June 1919; cited in C.J.Wrigley, (1990), p.191.
19 The Times, 14 July 1919.
20 South Wales News, 30-8-19.
21 See Chapter Nine below.

Coalition under the severest test, and run the risk of having the ceiling pulled in by its own supporters. To refuse it was to invite a confrontation with the most powerful organisation of the working class, with potentially disastrous results. Both scenarios were widely canvassed in the press, in the labour movement, and in government circles, and the considered opinion was that the position was precarious indeed. Robert Munro, the Scottish Secretary, wrote to Lloyd George:

> I greatly fear that to turn down the principle of nationalisation absolutely would inflame working class opinion to a dangerous degree; while on the other hand, to adopt it immediately would not only imperil the Coalition itself but might prove to be a national disaster.[22]

As Maurice Cowling has noted, for the previous eight weeks Robert Horne had been warning that:

> the coming clash between unions and employers was likely to make the political system redundant, and turn the House of Commons into a shadowy organisation, validating decisions made elsewhere.[23]

There was widespread speculation in the press that nationalisation was a fault line which was widening under the feet of the Coalition. Lord Rothermere's Sunday Pictorial argued forcibly that internal tensions were paralysing the government and threatening the country's stability.[24] C.P.Scott, who felt that liberal principles were being sacrificed upon the altar of the Coalition, was also forecasting its downfall:

> The broad fact that emerges from the increasing alarms and stratagems at Westminster is that, while the bulk of the nation is in the mood for great changes, the majority on which the Government rests is not. A period of indecision and uncertainty has set in. It can end only with a new Parliament.[25]

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22 Munro to Lloyd George, 4 August 1919; LG F/1/7/32.
23 K.Middlemas, (1979), p.148.
24 Sunday Pictorial, 24 July 1919.
25 Manchester Guardian, 9 July 1919.

The Daily Herald agreed. "Coalition Crash Coming", predicted its banner headline; "It is divided within itself. It cannot stand."[26]

The public perception that the government's long "consideration" of the Sankey Commission's findings pointed to an absence of a definite policy on nationalisation seems to have been accurate. Government records reveal no clear, preconceived plan of action. Rather, the evidence suggests that it tackled the problem on the hoof, a la Lloyd George, playing for time, and seeking to extricate itself from the difficult situation in which it found itself. The complex and multifarious political views of Lloyd George and his Cabinet colleagues viz a viz nationalisation of the mining industry, and the process by which they decided against it, has been described and debated in depth elsewhere, and is not the focus of this study.[27] However, a few observations are necessary here, in so far as the government's attitude to nationalisation, and the strategy which it adopted in the summer, had an impact upon the internal politics of the MFGB.

The government's attitude to nationalisation in general was neither fixed nor unified. There was no coherent or universally held set of economic codes by which its response could be determined. In ideological terms the government was a hybrid creature, put together at a moment of national emergency, with the successful prosecution of immediate tasks as its pragmatic brief. Whilst the Tory members eschewed nationalisation in theory, in practise they had participated in the greatest ever intervention of the state in the nation's economic life, including state

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26 Daily Herald, 1 July 1919.
27 K.Middlemas, (1979), Ch.5. M.W.Kirby, op.cit., especially pp. 24-45. S.Armitage, op.cit., Ch.4; C.J.Wrigley, (1990), especially Ch.7.

control of the mines, and they had claimed the credit for it. Moreover, on the other side of the Coalition there was, within liberalism, a strand which favoured nationalisation of some sectors of the economy; Lloyd George, after all, had established his liberal credentials in large part by his advocacy of some form of land nationalisation. Winston Churchill had made a speech during the 1918 election campaign in Dundee, in which he had said in good faith that the Coalition intended, in the interest of national efficiency, to nationalise the railways. Although the specific phrase was cut from the finalised version of the Coalition's manifesto (without Churchill's knowledge), Lloyd George and several of his Cabinet colleagues continued to believe that some variant of nationalisation of the railways at least would be economically beneficient.[28] The Ways and Communication Bill, as introduced to the Commons by the Government, testified to this belief. Furthermore, according to Riddell's diary, Lloyd George felt in April 1919 that nationalisation of the mines was inevitable. He told Bonar Law, "It has to come. The state will have to shoulder the burden sooner or later."[29]

Of course, there were important economic considerations which weighed against nationalisation in the government's scales. Middlemas, for example, writes of the concern of Ministers on both sides of the Coalition to preserve business confidence, and of constant Treasury pressure to decontrol for financial reasons.[30] However, the economic record of the Coalition, and the examples cited above, show that as a whole, it was not *in principle* opposed to nationalisation on economic/ideological grounds. The answer to the question why did the

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28 C.J.Wrigley, (1990), p.189.
29 G.A.Riddell, Riddell's Intimate Diary of the Peace Conference and After, 1918-1923 (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933), p.49.
30 K.Middlemas, (1979), pp.135-136.

government reject nationalisation therefore has to be explained primarily in practical political terms, and sought in the prevailing atmosphere of crisis and unrest. The main concerns of the government were the (as it saw them) interconnected questions of its own political survival, and the prevention of a further dangerous escalation of class conflict.

To accept nationalisation, in the prevailing atmosphere, it felt would be to jeopardise these. In the first place there was the threat from the increasingly cohesive and determined campaign against nationalisation amongst industrialists and employers, in particular from its strength in the House of Commons. Free of the constraints of ministerial office, the ideological case against nationalisation had free play amongst MPs with links to business. Even were the Government to survive their wrath however, an unlikely prospect given the experience of the Ways and Communications Bill, there was another, arguably more compelling reason to fight off nationalisation. For were it to be conceeded it would undoubtedly be seen as a victory for direct action. The position of its advocates within the labour movement, already apparently on the rise at the beginning of the summer, would be greatly strengthened. Far from calming the labour unrest, to be seen to give way before the miners was far more likely to result in a sharp escalation of class conflict.

Industrialists had stressed this at the Sankey Commission. Bonar Law had been emphatic about it in March, but it was equally applicable at this point:

> If the miners threatened to strike on the question of nationalisation and the Government gave way, it would mean abandoning the functions of Government by agreeing to a sectional demand in order to prevent a strike.[31]

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31 W.C.(546A) 19 March 1919; CAB 23/15.

The government decided, therefore, that it would have to make a stand and, to use the Colliery Guardian's analogy, attempt to hold the trench of private ownership of the mines. A letter from Winston Churchill to Bonar Law suggests that the government had taken this decision as early as July 5th. He communicated his belief that:

> For practical purposes in the present situation we should say, "We are going to nationalise the railways, but we are not going to nationalise the mines." We only lose by appearing ashamed of what we really are going to do.[32]

It is highly important that Lloyd George was not as brazen as Churchill. At a meeting at Criccieth on July 17th with senior ministers and advisers, he formally decided against nationalisation. However, it was stressed that this was a provisional decision.[33] The full Cabinet did not finally decide the issue until August 7th, and did not make its decision public until August 18th.[34]

To summarise then, the government's rejection of nationalisation was rooted not so much in theoretical or ideological objections, as in conjunctural political factors which flowed from the class struggle in the summer of 1919; on the one hand, the determined opposition to nationalisation from coal owners and industrialists which was expressed politically in the rebellion on the government's back benches; on the other, the likely consequences of giving way before the MFGB under the threat of direct action in the prevailing atmosphere of industrial unrest.

A vital point emerges here with regard to the existing historiography, much of which has been concerned with the question of mines

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32 Cited in C.J.Wrigley, (1990), p.189.
33 ibid., p.200.
34 W.C.(607A & 608A) 7 August 1919; CAB 23-15-174/204.

nationalisation and the Sankey Commission largely because, in Wrigley's words, it is an example of "one of the more controversial episodes in Lloyd George's political career."[35] Consequently, attention has tended to focus upon the personal political attitudes and motives of Lloyd George and his ministers, rather than upon the internal politics of the MFGB.[36] This has tended towards a somewhat one-dimensional account of a conflict in which two sides were engaged, and an implicit assumption that the most important question is why the government decided against nationalisation, and to what extent the episode of the Sankey Commission involved political chicanery on Lloyd Georges' part. These are important issues, but they form only one half of the story. Deciding against nationalisation was one thing, getting away with it was quite another, when faced with the threat of a strike by the MFGB and possibly the Triple Alliance. A methodological shift is required to rectify the historiographical imbalance, away from Coalition politics and Cabinet intrigue, and towards the politics and intrigue of its adversaries in the MFGB and the trade union and labour movement.

When this is done, new questions become prominent, and old ones take on a different aspect. For example, Armitage's concentration upon the Coalition leads her to raise an interesting counter-factual; she suggests that Lloyd George was not indisposed to nationalisation, and that had the MFGB been more conciliatory and less threatening, it might have got considerably more than it did.[37] To stay on the ground of Coalition politics for a moment, given the strength of feeling on the government's back benches against nationalisation, however reasonable the MFGB might

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35 C.J.Wrigley, (1990), p.207.
36 This is true of Middlemas, Armitage, Kirby, and Wrigley, to varying degrees.
37 Armitage, op.cit., p.119 & 128.

have been, anything resembling nationalisation would have been a highly unlikely result; nationalisation was nationalisation, and anathema to a majority of Coalition M.P.'s, however it was pursued or presented. Given this fact, a policy of coercion by direct action seems to have held out a greater hope of success. What is then required is an assessment of the strength of forces ranged behind the banner of direct action within the MFGB, and an explanation of the failiure of these forces, surprising to many at the time, to carry the day within the union.

Obviously, this also requires an assessment of the strength of those forces which were opposed to such a policy. With this shift in focus, Armitage's counter-factual takes on a new relevance, for within the leadership of the MFGB there was a current of opinion which saw political mileage in adopting a tone of appeasement and cooperation in dealing with the government. The ambiguity of the government's ideological position on nationalisation allowed those inside the MFGB and the wider labour movement who found it expedient to do so, to nurture the belief, and as the summer wore on the dim hope, that the majority report of the Sankey Commission might be accepted. The ultimate success of the government in rejecting nationalisation without provoking a strike largely turned upon the outcome of the struggle between these two camps within the MFGB, and yet this aspect of the nationalisation controversy has largely been passed over by historians.

Historians have tended to agree that the Sankey Commission was conceived by the government as a breathing space, allowing it to at least delay a confrontation with the miners, and enabling it to settle other pressing labour problems in the tumultuous first quarter of 1919. They have, however divided on whether there was an *a-priori* intention to ignore the

findings of the Commission if it decided in favour of nationalisation.[38] This is a complex debate, in which well constructed cases have been presented on both sides, and one which continues to exercise historians, with Chris Wrigley being the most recent entrant to the fray. Without detracting from the value of their scholarship, it is possible to suggest that a new note needs to be sounded in the "breathing space" debate. Surely the question which now needs to be asked is not to what extent cynicism was involved in the creation of the Sankey Commission, but that given the Government did decide against nationalisation, how was it able to get away with it so easily? Why did the universally predicted showdown never materialise?

The benefits of such a change in approach become clear when one considers the highly significant fact that whilst, according to the timetable laid down by the government, the breathing space officially ran out on June 22nd when the Sankey Commission issued its final reports, Lloyd George did not announce the rejection of nationalisation until almost two full months later. What occurs in this period of extra- time is crucial to the eventual outcome. Whatever the government's motives regarding nationalisation had been earlier in the year when the offer of a Commission was made, we can be fairly sure that its mind was made up in private by the first week in July, and certain that it was by July 17th, with the meeting at Criccieth. The debate about political chicanery no longer applies here; what is vital now is explaining why Lloyd George did

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38 Armitage, for example, argues that "It is unreasonable to suppose that Lloyd George set up a Commission which he always intended to ignore.", ibid., p.118. Kirby, on the other hand, feels that the make-up of the Commission was designed to ensure there would be no unanimous report, thus giving the Government a convenient get-out clause, op.cit., p.36. Wrigley's own thesis is built upon his opinion that "The two viewpoints are not mutually exclusive.", C.J.Wrigley, (1990), p.207.

not feel confident enough to make this a matter of public policy until August 18th. This was not an arbitrary date chosen at random. Rather it was the earliest point at which the Government felt that the threat posed to it by the MFGB was a manageable one. More specifically, it was only then that it felt that the danger of direct action over nationalisation had really subsided.

What follows is an account of how the situation was transformed in the period between these two dates. This was a period in which the government and the MFGB manoeuvred for position over the issue of nationalisation, and in which supporters and opponents of direct action vied with each other for ascendancy within the MFGB. It begins with the opening shot of the Government's counter-offensive, which came in the shape of a 6s rise in the price of a ton of coal, and ends with the defeat of the Yorkshire miners' strike.

*(ii) Nationalisation and the output crisis*

The Government's counter-offensive consisted of measures designed to reverse the tide of public opinion which had been flowing behind the MFGB since the revelations of the first stage of the Sankey Commission, before announcing its decision on nationalisation. Intermittently, it seems, it put out feelers to test working class reaction with rumours that nationalisation had been rejected. These rumours were so widespread, and so accurate (for eg that the Duckham scheme was the favoured option) that they must have been leaks, controlled or otherwise.[39] The government was

39 G.D.H.Cole, Coal-Mining, p.112. On July 24th & 25th, all major newspapers carried the news that the Government had not only decided against nationalisation, but that, accurately as it turned out, it had plumped for Duckham's report.

extremely concerned about public opinion. The popularity of the miners' cause put limits on the government's ability to manoeuvre. The successful operation of its contingency plans for dealing with a national strike depended on its' ability to at least neutralise a significant section of working class opinion. Middlemas and Wrigley have shown that this had been a prime concern of the Government since the time of the first hearings of the Sankey Commission, but at that stage support for the miners had been so strong that Lloyd George had felt nothing could be gained "by challenging the merits of the miners'case."[40] Now, in July, with a conflict looming once again, Lloyd George warned the Cabinet that "There must be no division in the public mind...If a fight was to come, it must be certain beyond a doubt that the miners were in the wrong."[41]

On July 8th the Cabinet agreed to exploit the poor state of public finances to paint the miners' demands as excessive and damaging to the nation's economic health. The mechanism by which this was to be done was a 6s rise in the price of a ton of coal. Auckland Geddes expressed the hope that, "By administering such drastic medicine we might bring the community to a state of sanity", by turning consumers against the producers of coal.[42] By way of underlining that the blame for this lay with the miners, the price increase, announced in the House of Commons on July 9th, was timed to come into effect on July 15th, the day before the first Sankey Award became operative. In a speech of almost unrelieved

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40 Lloyd George to Bonar Law, 20 March 1919; LG F/30/3/32.
Wrigley, (1990), pp.148, 161-164.
Middlemas, (1979), p.146.

41 W.C.(596A), 21 July 1919; CAB 23-15-136/7.

42 W.C.(589), 8 July 1919; CAB 23-11-14/15.
In the Autumn, the price was reduced, by 10s. Independent accountants showed that there had been no financial justification for the increase, a fact which tends to confirm MFGB suspicions that it had been politically motivated. See Wrigley, (1990), p.197.

gloom, Geddes explained to the House that the price rise was needed to pay for the concessions which had been made to the miners, and emphasised that not only would it harm the consumer, it would damage industry, reduce exports and increase unemployment.[43]

Particular weight was given to falling productivity, in line with instructions from Lloyd George in Criccieth to "rub in the reduction of output".[44] The latest available figures showed that productivity in the mines was plummeting; evidence placed before the Sankey Commission by the Coal Controller suggested that on the basis of the first twenty weeks of the year, average output per miner was only 16.8 tons per month, compared to 19.8 tons in 1913. The total estimated output for 1919 was 230,606,000 tons, compared with 287,412,000 in 1913. This was a drastic decrease, especially given that on average there were between 150,000 and 160,000 more miners working in the pits in the later year.[45]

Geddes' speech, which painted a lurid picture of Britain's economic position, reverberated with the themes of national emergency and patriotic responsiblility which had animated Ministerial rhetoric during the war. In fact, he held that the situation facing the country was directly analogous to it:

> If we were to pass safely through the dark and anxious days which lie ahead, we must be animated by the spirit of patriotism which prevailed during the war. Production was the most urgent need of the hour.[46]

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43 117 H.C.Deb.5s, c.1817, 9 July 1919.
44 Lloyd George to Bonar Law, 14 July 1919; LG F/95/5/16.
45 CIC Vol.iii (A), p.210. The actual output for 1919 was 229.8 m; see Barry Supple, The History of the British Coal Industry, 1913-46, Volume 4 (Oxford, 1987) pp.8-9, Table 1.1.
46 The Times, 15 July 1919.

Lloyd George had spoken in identical terms in a keynote speech in the House of Commons upon his return from Paris ten days earlier, when he had warned that whilst Britain had won the war, it was in danger of losing the peace to its economic competitors:

> There is a tendency to assume that now all will come right without any effort. We have output diminishing and costs of production increasing. That is exactly the opposite rule to the one that leads to prosperity. Let us think together, act together, work together. I beg that we do not demobilise the spirit of patriotism too soon.[47]

Ministers were to warm to this theme in their public statements about the crisis in mining as the summer drew on, particularly in relation to the Yorkshire miners' strike. Rather than attempt to talk down a national crisis, they sought to play it up, and blame it upon the miners, whose selfishness and sloth were threatening the sacrifices which the people had made during the war, undermining the prosperity of both industry and consumer, and ruining the prospects of successful reconstruction. One unnamed Coalition Unionist MP condensed the government's message and its underlying agenda when he commented that the 6s increase was "the first fruits of Sankeyism, which might be a good thing if it saves us from the last fruits of Smillieism."[48]

One final tactical embellishment came during the House of Commons debate on the price rise, in the form of an offer by Bonar Law to the miners MPs sitting opposite, to delay the increase for three months, if in that period the MFGB was prepared to cooperate with the Coal Controller to increase output and agree to a strike moratorium.[49] This was, as the Daily Herald admitted, "a clever move." If the miners refused, they would lay themselves open to further accusations of selfishness and unpatriotic

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47 ibid., 4 July 1919.
48 ibid., 10 July 1919.
49 118 H.C.Deb.5s, c.175-6, 14 July 1919.

behaviour, whilst acceptance would imply an admission that, on some level, they were to blame for low output. Lansbury was impressed. Throughout the proceedings of the Coal Commission the miners had been on the offensive, but: "Mr.Bonar Law's offer in the House has, in effect, put them on the defensive. It will require the greatest care if the position is to be reversed."[50]

There was almost unanimous agreement within the MFGB that the 6s increase, which was announced on the eve of polling in the Swansea East by-election, and Bonar Law's offer, represented a Machiavellian stunt, designed to turn public opinion against the miners, put a stop to the recent run of by-election defeats, and queer the pitch on nationalisation.[51] However, beyond this the consensus within the union would not stretch. The price rise and the offer led to a sharp division in the MFGB, or to be more accurate, it widened and exposed existing divisions over the question of direct action. This drawing up of the battle lines within the Federation occurred on the eve of the fresh wave of industrial unrest which swept the coalfields in the summer, and is vital to an understanding of it.

The grouping most vehemently opposed to direct action within the Federation were the M.P.'s. Whilst these had no particular constitutional powers within the Federation, they were influential, especially as many of them retained positions of leadership within their own district

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50 Daily Herald, 15 July 1919.
51 Swansea East was the fifth by-election of the year, the others being West Derby, Hull, Central Aberdeenshire and West Leyton. The Coalition held on to West Derby, but lost the others to Liberal candidates. Compared to the General Election, the coalition vote in these seats fell by 18,489, whereas that of its opponents rose by 9,407. The Times, 12 & 15 March, 12 April, 1 May 1919.

organisations. Immediately following the debate on the price rise in the Commons, they held a meeting and, upon the urgings of Brace and Hartshorn in particular, voted to recommend acceptance of Bonar Law's offer to the MFGB Annual Conference which opened at Keswick on the following day, July 15th.[52]

In the first instance this was seen as a question of the miners' duty in a national emergency. The spirit of ministerial responsibility and statesmanship was rekindled in William Brace, who toured South Wales in the following weeks appealing to the miners for extra exertion, just as he had done during the war. He told Abertillery miners that:

> At the moment, coal was going to determine the future destiny of the race. If the country would not be given coal they would perish, and be swept as a nation...into broken fragments.[53]

Always, his final appeal was the same; "Men, for God's sake, give the nation the last ounce of coal it is possible to give."[54] For Brace, the output crisis constituted a national crisis first and foremost, and must take precedent over the class struggle. It was, he emphasised, the miners' duty as citizens, "to live up to their citizens' responsibility."[55] At Keswick he asked that that the miners should "consider their obligation to the State, as well as their obligation to themselves."[56]

Vernon Hartshorn, traditionally not so closely associated with the right inside the union, spoke too of "the obligation which devolves upon us to do our part as citizens in this crisis", and called at Keswick for

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52 Westminster Gazette, 15 July 1919.
53 Western Mail, 21 July 1919.
South Wales News, 21 July 1919.
54 South Wales News, 21 July 1919.
55 ibid.
56 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.71.

"hearty co-operation with the Government."[57] Interestingly, Hartshorn had written an article in the South Wales News in June which anticipated a possible large price rise. In this article he explicitly linked the output crisis and the demand for nationalisation. Under private ownership, he lamented, the MFGB had pursued "a sort of educational propaganda and agitation for the purpose of creating an atmosphere in which anything like cordial relations between the workers and the owners would be impossible."[58] Now, however, thanks to the Coal Commission, nationalisation was about to "bring this class struggle to an end..." The result would be that:

> the position of the miner will be immediately and vitally changed...He will cease to be the hireling of a profit-making syndicate. He will become a public servant, charged with public responsibilities and duties, and in honour bound to have scrupulous regard to the fact that the nation depends upon the efficiency and energy of his labour for its welfare and progress.[59]

All this would take place only after nationalisation, but, he argued, it should dictate that here and now the miners see the output crisis "not as a colliery owners' question" (for they were about to be eliminated from the industry), "but as a question which is of vital importance to the nation and to Labour." It was strongly inferred therefore, that the class struggle in the pits should come to an end in advance of nationalisation. The miner must show "a sense of community", and "a sound moral and social

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57 ibid., p.75.

58 The thrust of Hartshorn's article corresponded to his evidence at the Sankey Commission. Output would increase under nationalisation "if all the miners' leaders, instead of preaching class war and class hatred and class antagonism, as they have been doing for the last quarter of a century, if they could only turn on to developing a social conscience and getting the miners to realise that they were working not for profits but for the community." CIC 1919, vol.i, p.366.

59 South Wales News, 21 June 1919.

consciousness" before he could "play his vitally important part in the industrial system manfully and honestly for the sake of the commonweal."[60] The challenge of nationalisation would be whether the miner was fit to assume this responsibility; the output crisis was the miner's chance to prove that he was.

Hartshorn and Brace were resoundingly defeated at Keswick, for reasons which will become clear when we turn our attention to the way in which the output crisis unfolded in the pits. However, the central idea encapsulated in Hartshorn's article were not as marginal in the MFGB as this vote suggests. Far from it, for the case for nationalisation as presented by the labour representatives at the Sankey Commission was based upon the same premise.[61]

The main thrust of this presentation was that nationalisation was, for the miners, not a selfish or sectional demand.[62] As Straker put it, "It has generally been thought that when the miners demand nationalisation ... they are thinking only of their own benefit. Nothing could be further from the truth."[63] Smillie made this point even more forcibly elsewhere when he said that such an accusation was "a black and damnable lie."[64]

In the first place, the charge levelled at private ownership was that it was incompatible with economic efficiency. The chaos of 1500 competing

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60 ibid.
61 Sidney Webb and Sir Leo Chiozza Money both submitted their own schemes, but these differed from that of the MFGB in organisational form rather than theoretical content. See CIC vol ii, pp. 501-544.
62 The following account owes much to the excellent article, "Mines for the Nation or Mines for the Miners?: Alternative Perspectives on Industrial Democracy 1919-21" by M.G.Woodhouse in Llafur, vol 2, no.3, summer 1978.
63 CIC 1919, vol ii, p.322.
64 South Wales News, 23 June 1919.

colliery companies meant that the present system was "extremely inefficient, ... and costly and wasteful, with bad social results."[65] State imposed rationalisation would lead to better management of resources, an increase in the use of machinery, and a co-ordinated system of distribution. All this would take place within a scheme where:

> pit will be compared with pit, district with district, system with system, manager with manager, cost with cost, in such a way that every part will be tested, and neither inefficient men nor unsuitable systems will be retained.[66]

Great emphasis was put on the anticipation that the main benefits of nationalisation, namely cheaper coal and increased output, would be in "the interest of the consumer", which as Chiozza-Money pointed out, was a euphemism for "the interest of the nation."[67]

The MFGB did not seek to hide the fact that the miners would also benefit from nationalisation, in particular in the shape of improved safety.[68] But the hallmark of the scheme was that such class interest, and the wider national interest were not mutually exclusive. In essence, it represented an attempted synthesis of these, based upon "moral and economic laws."[69] Improved conditions of work for the miner, and greater prosperity for the nation, were held to go hand in hand.

Although in his evidence Straker claimed to view the labour unrest as "the present hope of the world",[70] the MFGB's proposals owed little or nothing to the idea of class struggle. Rather, its tone was heavily moral, and owed far more to Fabianism and the ethical socialism of the

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65 Sidney Webb, CIC 1919, vol ii, p.493.
66 William Straker, ibid., p.945.
67 Sir Leo Chiozza Money, p.531.
68 Sidney Webb put much stress on this, ibid., pp. 478-479.
69 William Straker, ibid., p.945.
70 William Straker, ibid., vol i, p.324.

ILP, which rejected class struggle as a mechanism for social advance. Private competition was, in this perspective, not simply inefficient, but "an evil-producing thing." Opponents of nationalisation rested their case upon the essentially "primitive idea" that "life is an antagonism." The MFGB's ethos, by contrast, was that the mark of a civilised outlook was that:

> that which draws men together in co-operative activities makes for progress and human welfare; that which keeps men in a hostile attitude one to another wars against welfare and progress.[71]

In the abstract, there was nothing here that the most ardent revolutionary could disagree with - out of the antagonism of the classes arises the possibility of classlessness. However, in the concrete conditions of 1919, and in the hands of the labour representatives on the Sankey Commission, this essential dialectic vanished, the class struggle stage was removed, and as a consequence of this slippage, the emphasis became one of the need for co-operation and consensus between the classes. As Smillie said at Keswick:

> What we want to do is reconstruction in the interests of the nation... We want higher ideals introduced into life, not only for our own people... We want higher ideals for the so-called upper classes than the mere idea that the be-all and end-all of life is to make fortunes and get honours. It ought to be the be-all and end-all of life to co-operate together for increasing human happiness, and not to become merely rich and outdo your fellows. We are quite prepared to enter into any combination which has that as its ultimate result.[72]

The scheme of the Federation in 1919 has attracted much interest from those who have been concerned to trace the evolution of concepts of

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71 William Straker, ibid., vol ii, p.944-945.
72 MFGB 1919, Annual Conference, p.18.

workers' control within the British working class.[73] The radical aura of the MFGB's proposals is due largely to the incorporation of the idea of workers' control, which had in the previous two decades been most closely associated with the syndicalist and revolutionary elements in the working class. Its lineage can be traced back to the De Leonist ideas imported from the USA by James Connolly, to the syndicalism of Tom Mann's ISEL, the National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement, and the Unofficial Reform Committee in South Wales. It grew out of, and was developed and refined as a concept in the context of, the class struggle; the Great Unrest of 1910-14 produced The Miners' Next Step, the war-time struggles in engineering produced the revolutionary shop stewards movement whose ideas were formalised by J.T.Murphy in The Workers' Committee, and the unrest in the pits in 1919 produced the SWSS's Industrial Democracy for Miners. Common to all these was the notion that control over the workplace was a staging post in the class struggle, a yardstick by which growing class consciousness, confidence and organisation could be measured, and a bastion from which a final assault on capitalism could be mounted. For Connolly it meant "to build up an industrial republic inside the shell of the political state", for Ablett it was an act in "erecting the new society within the lap of the old."[74]

However, in the MFGB's scheme, the notion of workers' control was stripped of any hint of its revolutionary content. In fact, this was emphasised at the Sankey Commission by Hartshorn as a major reason why

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73 Ken Coates and Tony Topham (eds), Workers' Control; Ken Coates, (ed) Democracy in the Mines; Branco Pribicevic, The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control, 1910-22 (Blackwell, 1959).

74 Connolly cited in Coates and Topham (eds), Workers' Control, p.13. David Egan, "Noah Ablett, 1883-1935", Llafur, vol 4, no.3, 1986, p.23.

the MFGB's scheme should be accepted. He was certain, he said, "that unless the demand for State ownership is conceded at the present time, Syndicalism, or if you like, Bolshevism, will take the place of the demand being put forward by the miners." He added, "Now none of us want that."[75] The guild socialism of Straker and Hodges provided the theoretical bridge by which the MFGB took workers' control from the realm of revolution, to its own, mild, reformist one. Here, workers' control, rather than representing a high-water mark in the class struggle, becomes a kind of beatific state, in which even the colliery manager, of whom, Hodges said, "we speak as a friend"[76], will be "purged from the dross of carrying on for profit" and will experience "a sort of psychological exaltation."[77] The primary aim of joint control, in which, as Woodhouse points out, the miners' representatives would be more a part of the management than of the rank and file, is to inculcate into the miner a sense of "social industrial responsibility" without which, according to Money, "you will never get the greatest benefit from your coal."[78]

Joint control would allow the miner "to feel the responsibility which would rest upon him as a citizen, and direct his energies for the common good."[79] The main prize at the end of the rainbow of state ownership thus became the end of the unrest endemic in the pits. Under the MFGB's proposals, there is a metamorphosis of the miner from militant troublemaker to diligent public servant. The demand for nationalisation, whilst arising out of the class struggle in the pits, was, in the MFGB's

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75 CIC 1919, vol i, p.363.
76 Frank Hodges, Nationalisation of the Mines (London: New Era Series, 1920), pp.125-128.
77 Sidney Webb, CIC 1919, vol ii, p.488.
78 Sir Leo Chiozza Money, ibid., p.542.
79 William Straker, ibid., vol i, p.324.

hands, lifted out of its murky and slightly sordid depths, and turned into a "supra-class" issue. This had, as Woodhouse points out:

> profound implications for the actual strategy adopted by the MFGB for achieving nationalisation. If consensus was the hallmark of its approach, this ruled out conflict and the exploitation of the industrial power of the Federation and its allies in the Triple Alliance.[80]

In the context of a Government-proclaimed national emergency, the MFGB leadership was therefore susceptible to the appeal to co-operate in increasing output. In conjunction with this, other political factors came into play to create a strong belief that a policy of persuasion would bear more fruit than one of coercion. The Daily Herald commented on the opening day of the MFGB Annual Conference that:

> It is considered ... that the miners now have an opportunity to improve their tactical position by accepting the Government's offer, and bringing about a substantial increase in the production of coal. If they are able to increase production so as to obviate necessity for any increase in the price of coal, it was suggested that the Government might not be uninfluenced by this fact when they come to take their decision with regard to nationalisation, and that it would remove a solid ground for opposition on the part of large sections of the community."[81]

Prominent amongst the political factors mentioned above was the indeterminate nature of the attitude of Government ministers to the broad principle of nationalisation. This contributed to the survival of the hope in the MFGB leadership (in the face of growing evidence to the contrary), that the Sankey Report might yet be adopted. Lloyd George's lingering radical image remained seductive to some. At Keswick, for instance, several delegates expressed the belief that , on the issues of

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80 M.G.Woodhouse, "Mines for the Nation or Mines for the Miners?", p.98.
81 Daily Herald, 17 July 1919.

intervention in Russia, conscription, and the use of the military in industrial disputes, Lloyd George was "in sympathy with our principles."[82] In apportioning blame for Government militarism at home and abroad, Smillie said:

> It is not Lloyd George. The Government has placed Winston Churchill in his present position to deal with strikes, and it is a question of a struggle between Churchill and Lloyd George...[83]

Lloyd George's radical credentials were felt by some influential figures to extend to the question of nationalisation of the mines. After discussions with him in May, Henderson told Webb that Lloyd George was "extremely anxious for the (Sankey) report to be in our direction", and advised Webb to use his influence to moderate the tone of the MFGB's proposals as far as possible, so as to maximise their acceptibility.[84]

The debate at Keswick on piece rate adjustments under the seven hour day showed that Smillie did not tend to a view of the Government as an implacable foe.[85] He warned delegates against seeing the owners, who were willing to make bigger concessions here than the Government were, as amicable in any way. They were trying "to make us believe that they are our best friends and not the Government." Their ulterior motive was to discredit nationalisation, when in fact, Smillie suggested, "the Government are our best people."[86] Clearly, the MFGB leadership did not see the Government as being beyond persuasion. Furthermore, it believed that in its proposals it had a compelling case that nationalisation was in British capitalism's best interests. It was not unreasonable, they

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82 MFGB 1919, Annual Conference, p.146.
83 ibid., p.146.
84 Henderson to S.Webb, May 17th 1919, Passfield Papers, (ii 4G, 6g, 62a)
85 The piece rate question will be dealt with in detail in next chapter.
86 MFGB 1919, Annual Conference, p.43.

felt, to entertain the possibility that a Government which had jettisoned economic orthodoxy to that end during the war, might now respond positively to the Federation's well-argued economic logic. This weighed against a gloves-off response to the Government's manoeuvrings during the output crisis.

This was reinforced by the political instability of the Coalition and the widespread anticipation that an election was in the offing. Given Lloyd George's proven ability to shift political tack either left or right when the situation demanded, there was a good deal of speculation about which way personalities and parties would line up in such an election. Various permutations of a Lloyd George-led centre party were put forward. The apparent Liberal revival signalled by recent by-elections led some to speculate that he would seek a re-accomodation. Arthur Murray, a Coalition Liberal MP, wrote in late July:

> Lloyd George ... already sees that the Coalition cannot go on for ever and he will have to make up his mind in which direction he is going to swing. I have always felt that he would turn to the Left and endeavour to rush the Liberal situation in the country.[87]

Others saw the possibility of Lloyd George moving further left, and joining forces with Labour, or at least its more moderate elements. This notion, although not credible in retrospect, held considerable currency in the atmosphere of 1919. This was in no small part due to a sensational article in the Evening News in mid-April, which had Lloyd George's hand behind it. Under the headline "A General Election This Year", the correspondent revealed that he had it on good authority that Lloyd George intended to leave the Coalition, and he predicted what the basis of his appeal to the country would be:

> I am tired of these reactionary elements, these vested

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87 Cited in Wrigley, (1990), p.201.

> prejudices. They trim and prune my social programme until the tree of promise looks unlikely to yield fruit in due season. I stick by my programme. I ask you to endorse it. I will choose the men who will carry it out, and that quickly.

The correspondent continued:

> He will make a bid for Labour. He will say that the principle of nationalisation is accepted by him so far as mines and railroads, and possibly shipping, are concerned. Labour (he will say) must join forces with him in order to make a success of nationalisation against the enemies of it.[88]

According to Wrigley, this article was written as a warning to Conservatives not to try and force Lloyd George's hand at the peace talks. Nonetheless, to be effective, and Wrigley suggests that it was, such a threat had to carry credibility. Clearly it did in some Labour circles. In late June the Daily Herald, not especially given to placing faith in Lloyd George's radicalism, wrote on the imminent collapse of the Coalition:

> It is coming. It is very near. Mr. Lloyd George cannot keep his ramshackle Government together any longer. It is probable that, deciding to "chuck" his reactionary friends, he will come round suddenly as the Friend of Labour, and make a "dash for freedom.""

Nationalisation of the mines, the article concluded, would be the cement in this new alliance.[89] In reality nothing was further from Lloyd George's mind in the summer. Firstly, there is no evidence to suggest that he had privately considered an election at all. Secondly, during his stay at Criccieth in July, he made tentative long-term plans for a Centre Party which would be more anti-Labour than anything else, a permanent extension of the Coalition without, perhaps, the Tory right.[90]

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88 Cited in ibid., p.178.
89 Daily Herald, 28 June 1919.
90 Wrigley, (1990), pp.202-204.
T.Wilson, C.P.Scott, pp.205-211.

Nonetheless, in the period of manoeuvre over nationalisation, an approach to Labour was seen as a possibility, and an election on some basis was seen almost as a likelihood. Here, the Labour Party leadership's particular perspective on the Sankey Commission becomes an important factor. On June 3rd, Henderson instructed the Executive Committee's Organisational Sub-Committee to begin urgent preparations for an election which he expected "either at the end of the present year or early in 1920." It was decided to launch a "National Campaign" in July and August, focussing on Labour's peace aims, and "the general items contained in our New Social Order."[91] Given the outcome of the Sankey Commission, and the publicity it had received, the nationalisation of the mines was the obvious hook on which to hang such a campaign. The Labour Party EC sent its congratualations to the MFGB, and recommended a joint venture of the two organisations, in conjunction with the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, in "a public campaign in support of the nationalisation of the mines."[92]

With direct action threatening to dominate the forthcoming Labour Party Conference, Henderson wrote an article in the Daily Herald which explicitly presented the leadership's alternative.

> We are a minority in Parliament, and our weakness in the House of Commons is the measure of our failiure to win the confidence of the masses whose interests we claim to have at heart. It is from this point of view a matter of enormous significance that the conference is confronted with a very real working class achievement in the majority recommendation of the Coal Commission in favour of nationalisation...and recognition of the right of the workers to a share in the industry...In my judgement this will speedily produce a change in the political outlook wholly in favour of our Party. They are calculated to hasten the dissolution of the

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91 Labour Party NEC Minutes, Box 4; EC Organisational Sub-Committee, June 3rd, 1919.

92 Labour Party NEC Minutes, Box 4; EC, 26th June 1919, & Joint meeting of EC and PC of TUC, 9th July 1919.

> unnatural alliance of parties that masquerades at present as a Coalition Government. They provide Labour with a first class issue upon which to base its electoral campaign.[93]

The Sankey Commission was, for Henderson, an asset of unparalleled value for the Labour Party. The victory in the local elections in Durham earlier in the year had been an indication of the Commission's electoral potential. Now direct action threatened to rob the Labour Party of this asset, which represented its one post-war victory, and at a time when an election was looming. If, on the other hand, the Labour Party, MFGB and TUC were to collaborate in a campaign for nationalisation:

> not only shall we achieve a great triumph for the principle of public ownership and democratic control of industry, but we shall begin the propaganda which will convert public opinion to the support of the Labour Party in the coming election, which will not, in my opinion, be long delayed.[94]

This theme was developed by opponents of direct action at the Labour Party Conference. William Brace, for example, advanced the Sankey Commission as a paradigm of the method whereby trade unions could "create the atmosphere which would enable them to elect a Labour Government, and to enable the Labour movement to get control of the machinery of State."[95] Coincidentally enough, there was at this time a series of by - elections in seats which were winnable for Labour, providing it with a felicitous opportunity to demonstrate Henderson's strategy. These by-elections were to be important items in the equation which led to the Mines for the Nation campaign, and will feature in the post-mortem of the summer in the final chapter. Suffice it to say here that these were taken very seriously by the MFGB leadership, and they focussed the debate about public opinion at a crucial juncture.[96]

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93 Daily Herald, 26 June 1919.
94 ibid.
95 Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1919, p.121.
96 These were at Swansea, Bothwell, Widnes, and Pontefract.

There was, therefore, tremendous pressure being applied to the MFGB by the Labour Party not to waste this golden opportunity by resorting to a strike over nationalisation. At one point during the Labour Party conference, in the course of a debate on the merits of direct action in general, Henderson even threatened to split the party "if all affiliated organisations were in favour of direct action." Significantly, this led Robert Smillie to withdraw this particular motion.[97] The resolution on direct action which was passed by the conference applied only to the issue of Government intervention in Russia; on domestic questions such as the nationalisation of the mines, the Labour Party's policy remained geared solely to an electoral approach.

When taken together, the above factors - the nature of the MFGB's nationalisation proposals, the possibility that the Government, or at least Lloyd George, might be persuaded to accept the Sankey Report, the belief that an election was imminent, and pressure from the Labour Party - produced a strong current of opinion within the MFGB, especially amongst the leadership, that what was of overriding importance was to keep the wind of public opinion in its sails. This conviction was expressed most clearly at the Keswick Conference by George Spencer, and its influence could be discerned in many of the debates and resolutions. Spencer, like many who expressed these views actually voted against Brace and Hartshorn, told the delegates that the Sankey Commission had brought them to "within measurable distance" of that which the union and the mining communities had been fighting for for so many years:

> One feels, if we are going to realise the aim and object which we have been out for for such a long time, we have got...to make sure that we have...the strong

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The first two fell just before the Yorkshire strike, the second two just after.

97 Daily Herald, 26 June 1919.

> support of the general community of this country. We cannot afford, as powerful as we are, to run counter to public opinion at this time when public opinion can be easily turned against us.[98]

His argument hinged around the fact that, as he saw it, nationalisation depended on "the complexion of the House of Commons."[99] G.H.Warne, from Northumberland, who felt that Bonar Law's offer was "an insult", nonetheless inclined to Spencer's view of the importance of public opinion:

> We, as a Miners Federation, along with other organisations who are prepared to give us assistance, have got to educate the people of the country, and put into their hands the case we have for the mines being nationalised. If we don't, then I am afraid that the finances at the disposal of these other people, through the medium of the Press and other ways, are going to so prejudice our case in the public mind that we are not going to get nationalisation.[100]

Warne called upon the MFGB to take the earliest opportunity of "launching out a campaign in this country that will educate the people up to nationalisation of the mines." The influence of the Labour Party leadership can be discerned here, in what was, after all, nothing less than the demand for a Mines for the Nation campaign. This was no more than the logical outcome of that which we have been discussing. At this stage it was in a foetal state however, with several obstacles in the way of its full development. The most immediate complication was the class struggle in the pits, which flowed out of, and generated a quite different response to the output crisis, and threatened the embryonic plans of the moderate leaders with miscarriage.

The question of falling output had come before the Sankey Commission, and various explanations were proffered by both sides. There was some degree

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98 MFGB 1919, Annual Conference Report, p.69.
99 ibid.
100 ibid., p.83.

of consensus that a fall in output had been inevitable after the war; "the cream of the colliers" had been recruited into the army, many had been killed, and of those who had returned, many were disabled and unfit for heavy labour, or had simply "not yet got back in their stride." Those who had remained at home to work were tired out after the long pressure to maximise production. Furthermore, the return of the soldiers meant that the mines were overcrowded, with up to four times the usual number of men in one working place.[101]

However, beyond this the two camps divided; the owners accused the miners of deliberately restricting the output, by operating what was called in Scotland a "darg", or in South Wales a "stint". There is no doubt that there was a long tradition of output restriction amongst miners in some areas; by this means coal prices had been kept up in the era of the sliding scale, when prices and wages had been linked.[102] It was also used in the opening up of new seams, during the trial period when the price list was negotiated, so that the piece rate could be maximised, allowing the miner to earn a living without having to over-strain himself. This was still a constant source of conflict in 1919. At Ebbw Vale Collieries, for example, there was a month long strike when the management cut piece rates on a seam where they accused the miners of operating a stint.[103] Output restriction, or "ca'canny", was advocated by the URC as a method

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101 CIC 1919, vol i, p.306; vol ii, p.1162 & 1167.
MFGB Annual Conference 1919, pages 70 & 86.

102 Alan Campbell and Fred Reid, "The Independent Collier in Scotland", Royden Harrison (ed) Independent Collier: the Coalminer as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered, (London: Harvester, 1978), p.64.

103 CIC 1919, vol ii, pp.1100-1101. The manager claimed that proof lay in the fact that output started off very low at the beginning of the week, but picked up considerably at the end.

of struggle, and was an important element in its strategy, outlined in The Miners' Next Step, of profit reduction and encroaching control.[104]

Although it seems likely that in some areas output restriction was still practiced, the miners representatives on the Commission argued, reasonably enough, that this was not nearly as widespread since the sliding scale had been scrapped.[105] In any case, the MFGB vigorously denied such a charge, and demanded a full enquiry into falling output.[106] No such enquiry took place, but the available evidence strongly suggests that it was the owners and managers who were responsible for falling output. To what extent this was a deliberate and co-ordinated policy is unclear, but it was, according to Peter Lee of the Durham Miners' Association:

> public property at all the mines in the country that the management, directly or indirectly, is trying to stop the output of coal. For one purpose only - that they may make it bad for the miners to advocate nationalisation and win through.[107]

Many delegates at Keswick got up to make the same charge, which was summed up by Smillie:

> There is no official or organised movement in this country to lessen output so far as the miners' side is concerned...but there is a strong feeling amongst the miners that output has been lessened either by a deliberate movement on the part of the mine owners, or some of the mine owners, or else the doubt caused by the threatened nationalisation of the mines has induced a carelessness on the part of the management which has seriously affected the output.[108]

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104 TMNS, p.28.
105 CIC 1919, vol ii, p.952.
106 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.67.
107 ibid., p.73.
108 ibid., p.67.

The Coal Controller Evan Jones also believed this, although he had tended to blame the miners in his testimony to the Sankey Commission.109 He told the Cabinet that the owners were likely to "do all in their power" to make the period of control unworkable:

> It was all to their advantage to do this, as the purchase of the mines by the state after the three year probationary period depended on the success of this scheme, and such purchase they wish to hinder in every possible way.[110]

It was uncertain whether the owners were conspiring together, or whether it was just a matter of apathy on their part. Hodges talked of "a growing indifference" on the part of colliery companies; there wasn't "the incentive or the interest on the part of management to get the output there used to be."[111] Richard Redmayne, who incidentally also strongly suggested that the miners were to blame for plunging production, conceded that the owners "might not proceed with the same ardour in the management of their concerns."[112] Miners alleged that "the management do not care whether the output is kept up or not."[113] There were, from the miners, complaints that there was an unwillingness to invest in new equipment or even to maintain the upkeep of the mines. There were complaints of "rotten roads, shortage of rail, and bad tackle" from Nottinghamshire.[114] In Yorkshire, some branches complained of "bad roads, and cannot get along the main roads." Thirty-five complained of, amongst other things, "abnormal places, hard coal, faults, bad haulage, old machinery, too many men, bad organisation and distribution of tubs. "[115]

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109 Jones took over as Coal Controller following the death of Guy Calthrop.
110 WC (589), 8 July 1919; CAB 80-1-180.
111 CIC 1919, vol ii, p.1186.
MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.76.
112 ibid., p.1189.
113 CIC 1919, vol ii, p.1198.
114 H.Hicken, Checkweigher at Williamthorpe Colliery, Nottinghamshire Evening News, 21 July 1919.
115 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.87.

However, there was a fine line between passive indifference and active sabotage, and it is clear that in the ovrewhelming majority of cases, the miner believed the owners guilty of the latter. Lawson, of Durham, for example, felt that the owners actions were "deliberately done to make nationalisation impossible."[116] Peter Lee reported that he had been told by owners that they would not undertake investment with nationalisation on the horizon.[117] Hodges described the situation in Scotland and South Wales as one where "the owners have worked the inferior and more difficult seams, leaving it to happier and freer days when control is gone,...to work those that are easier and more remunerative."[118] The SWMF circulated a questionnare to the lodges, the result of which S.O.Davies said "proves to us absolutely that almost everything conceivable that could operate detrimentally to output has been carried out in South Wales by the owners."[119] It was reported that:

> Matters are being aggravated by the employers, who are quite willing for the men to strike on very small questions, questions which during the war would have been settled without any loss of time. The object is quite clear. The employers are out to decrease the output...[120]

W.Hogg, a delegate from Northumberland, told Conference of "managers absolutely refusing to cooperate with the workmen on the Output Committees, when it was proposed to disciss ways and means to increase the output."[121] From Lancashire too came reports of management stone-walling the L&CMF.[122] In Yorkshire, entire shifts were being sent home on spurious grounds; the slightest fall of dirt, arriving five minutes late

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116 ibid., p.76.
117 ibid., p.72
118 Daily Herald, 12 July 1919.
119 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.77.
120 ibid.
121 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.86.
122 ibid., p.78.

due to a delayed train, or not having lamps ready well in advance of winding were some examples where this occurred.[123] The Branch Secretary at Brierley Colliery in Yorkshire wrote to Smith that the manager had told him that he didn't care about falling output. "It does not matter to him if the pit stops or not. He knows there is a scarcity of tubs, and does not care a d----(sic) if the pit works or not."[124]

This latter complaint, of a shortage of the tubs into which the colliers loaded their coal, was by far the most common. For any manager with a desire to do so, this was an easy and effective way of restricting output, for without the means to continually clear his working place, the collier could not proceed. Like the SWMF, the YMA issued its branches with a questionnare about falling output. This revealed that in 87% of the pits there was a shortage of tubs. At Mitchell Main, they had asked for 1200, but had been issued with only 200. Ken Bacon, the Branch Secretary at Briggs' Pit, said:

> The men are not working five or six hours a shift owing to wanting for empty tubs... A man told me on Sunday they filled three tubs in two days when they ought to fill forty, and the whole sequence is shortage of tubs.[125]

The Brierley Branch Secretary wrote that "we have men at our colliery continually coming back short of tubs. It is a very common thing for them to come out at half-shift time." From Micklefield Main, the Branch wrote regarding the allegations of the owners that the miners were deliberately curtailing production: "We thought the boot was on the other leg, and that it was the owners who were restricting the output by not getting the

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123 Statement issued by H.Smith after YMA Council meeting of 12 July 1919, in Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 14 July 1919.
CIC 1919, vol ii, p.1198.
124 ibid., p.1197.
125 ibid., pp.1195-6.

men plenty of tubs."[126] In Scotland and South Wales, many pits were only working three or four days per week for the same reason.[127] From Lancashire, Greenall reported that the same state of affairs existed there, with "men being down in the mines day after day and week after week, hours there waiting for tubs: plenty of coal to fill, but cannot get the tubs."[128]

The number of complaints, and their angry tone, strongly suggests that there was a systematic attempt by many owners to reduce output. Further proof that this was deliberate was provided, inadvertently, by Redmayne at the Sankey Commission. He denied that there was any special tub shortage, on the grounds that during the war the Coal Controller had been constantly pestered for tubs, but that now the number of requests from managers was "practically nil."[129] The inevitable conclusion, in the light of the volume of reports to the contrary from the miners, was that now, with nationalisation looming, managers were simply choosing not to report tub shortages. That owners and managers were deliberately putting obstacles in the way of production is further borne out by the fact that there were also shortages of tubs and rails at some collieries which belonged to companies which made these in their own iron and steel plants.[130]

Miners were extremely angry that, as Herbert Smith said, "it has gone out to the Press that the miner is a bad man, is robbing poor people, not supplying the coal."[131] The NMA Council issued a statement that:

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126 ibid., pages 1197 & 1199.
127 Daily Herald, 12 July 1919.
128 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.78.
129 CIC 1919, vol ii, p.1186.
130 ibid., p.1101 & 1187. The examples cited were both in South Wales.
131 ibid., p.1198

> It is abominable - in view of the supposed shortage of coal, and all that is being said about the reduction of output - that materials are being studiously kept back, and many waggons withheld.[132]

Miners reckoned that with properly equipped mines they could increase the output by as much as 30-50%. This was not primarily a question of the miners' concern for their public image, although this undoubtedly mattered to them. It was in fact, first and foremost a matter of wages. For miners who were paid by the piece, these long breaks in production often involved a drastic reduction in income. At Barmborough Main, for example, an average of 248 working shifts a week had been lost since January 9th.[133] In Lancashire it was estimated that 90% of the colliers were on the minimum wage, and there were complaints that "the miner is no better off than before the war, with food prices doubled and income tax to pay."[134] Branches here were sending in demands for another 30% wage rise, and in the Bolton area there was an unofficial one day strike against high food prices.[135] Even where miners were able to get an agreement from management to pay a day wage, there was discontent. At Micklefield in Yorkshire, the Branch Secretary wrote that whilst the manager saw this as a satisfactory arrangement, it "does not satisfy me, because between the day's wage and the contract wage, is a difference of 3s6d reduction to me."[136] At the Annual Conference, there were strong protests against "profiteers" who had taken advantage of the Sankey Award by increasing the prices of "practically all uncontrolled goods" in

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132 Mansfield Reporter, 11 July 1919.
133 CIC 1919, vol ii, p.1198.
134 ibid., p.1186.
Wigan Observer, 26-7-19. Letter from a Lancashire miner. Income tax, which had been payable on incomes over £160 before the war was now payable at £130, with a devalued currency.
135 See Chapter 8, p.364.
136 CIC 1919, vol.ii, p.1199.

mining areas, and a resolution was passed calling for a reduction in the price of food and clothes.[137]

Where output restriction was at its worst, and miners were losing large amounts of money, angry protest often gave way to industrial action. In order to maintain their wage levels, increasing numbers of miners found that they were forced to engage in a struggle with management over output. Ironically, the strategy oulined in The Miners Next Step was thus spontaneously turned on its head in the summer of 1919; encroaching control took place overwhelmingly not in the direction of output restriction, but of its maximisation. Thus at Ashington in Northumberland, where it was "quite impossible to take the output away from the mine", the men struck for the first time in nine years. This had forced management to increase the supply of tubs, and output had immediately gone up by 20%.[138] In Lancashire there were walk-outs in protest at the long time which miners were being forced to stand idle in the pits.[139] In Nottinghamshire, South Normanton and Rufford colliers were often working only one or two days per week during June and July. Miners in the coalfield reckoned that with sufficient "trams" they could increase output by up to 50%, and here too there were strikes over this.[140]

At Keswick, S.O.Davies reacted angrily to the accusation that the miners had anything to do with falling output:

> Many of the men present in this Conference...although

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137 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.121.
138 CIC 1919, vol.ii, p.982.
MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.76.
139 CIC 1919, vol ii, p.1186. See, for example the letter from the checkweigher at Pilkington Colliery.
140 Mansfield Reporter, 11 July 1919.
CIC 1919, vol ii, p.1217.

> direct representatives of the miners, have done infinitely more to keep up output in some parts of South Wales than the paid hirelings of the companies."[141]

He gave the example of a strike at one particular colliery which had been successful in forcing the company, which made tubs and rails in its own iron and steel plant, to bring these into the pits. At Nine-Mile Point, men struck because managers "were developing the worst seams...and leaving the best seams until the market conditions became better and the control was lifted."[142] At several collieries there were "safety strikes", where poor management or development was creating life-threatening situations.[143] Rhondda District SWMF threatened strikes unless the owners employ rippers and borers to do the blasting, ripping, and clearing top, rather than have the colliers do these tasks themselves, thereby "allowing (them) to increase the output and at the same time finding employment for the discharged soldiers."[144]

John Potts gave delegates at Keswick an example of what was happening in Yorkshire:

> I was at a colliery a few weeks ago where twenty-two men stopped, because it took two or three men to push an empty tub. I asked for mechanical appliances to be adopted, but the manager refused, absolutely. I threatened to stop that colliery. I went down the mine, and I never saw a mine in all my life better adapted for mechanical appliances than in that mine. The manager said that he was not going to spend any money or do anything in that, as it was impossible, until the question of nationalisation was settled... Ultimately he gave way, and he is now agreeing, through pressure, to put in mechanical contrivances, but it was only through pressure and nothing else."[145]

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141 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.77.
142 CIC 1919, vol ii, p.980.
143 ibid., e.g. at Risca there was a strike because ropes were cutting into rail and timber.
144 Rhondda Leader, 2 August 1919.
145 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.87.

Nationalisation was not an abstract question for the miners, an added extra to the concessions which had been won in the first stage of the Sankey Commission. Nor was it primarily one of the national interest. On the contrary, it was posed extremely sharply, as a question of the miners' very livelihood. So long as the issue remained unresolved, the ability of the miners to earn a decent living was under threat. Not only were they therefore less concerned with the output crisis as a matter of public opinion than were the leaders, they were more open to the idea of responding to the attack on nationalisation by means of direct action, if only in so far as this was already underway in the local skirmishes which were taking place across the coalfields. Furthermore, it was in the very nature of these that they spontaneously raised the issue of control in a concrete form, and one which was a world apart from that which it took in the scheme of the MFGB officials. To maintain acceptable wage levels in these summer months, many miners had no choice but to engage in a struggle with the management on the terrain of control of production. This opened up a radically different perspective on nationalisation to the one encapsulated in the MFGB's proposals. To the miner in the pit waiting for a tub into which to load his coal, the interconnected issues of ouput and nationalisation presented themselves in a very different way than to the well-paid official in union headquarters.

There were, therefore, powerful and conflicting forces at work within the Federation when its Annual Conference opened on July 15th at Keswick. Unfortunately the EC minutes are not detailed enough to tell us anything about the strategies advocated by individual members for winning nationalisation. However, a reading of the Conference proceedings in the light of the above analysis reveals that the leadership was influenced by

the pressure being exerted on it from both directions, and overall, the positions taken up represented an uneasy compromise between the two.

In the first place, as the account of the MFGB's nationalisation proposals has shown, the EC had much in common with the sentiments voiced by Brace and Hartshorn, and appear to have been unsettled by Bonar Law's offer, couched as it was in an appeal for national unity reminiscent of wartime. Consequently, the EC had to admit that it had not taken a position on the offer, Smillie himself studiously avoided making any reference to it in his introduction to the session, and it was left up to George Spencer to raise the subject from the floor. Indeed, prior to the debate The Times' labour correspondent said that "there are indications...that the Executive of the MFGB are not indisposed to accept the offer."[146] Only when the hostility of the majority of the delegates, under pressure themselves from their members, became clear, did the EC come down on the side of rejection.[147] This spelled defeat for Brace and Hartshorn's attempt to rally the moderates to deal a decisive blow against direct action. Aside from these two, only Watts Morgan MP voted for accepting the offer. However, approximately half the delegates who spoke in the discussion had been either for acceptance, or equivocal about turning it down without qualifications, and the final position involved a pledge to the government of "the whole-hearted support of the leaders of the miners" to increase the output if nationalisation was accepted in principle.[148]

By the time of the conference it was already apparent, to all but the hopelessly unsceptical, that the government might be looking for a way

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146 The Times, 16 July 1919.
147 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, pp.65-90.
148 ibid., p.67.

out of nationalisation. Yet once again, Smillie made no reference to this in his address to the delegates, which was carefully constructed so as to steer conference away from making any irrevocable commitment to direct action. To this end:

> Smillie went on the assumption that the Government intended to carry out the recommendations of the Second Report signed by Sankey...there was no question of the Government's intention to nationalise the mines."[149]

He said:

> It is not often that we can be in full agreement with the Government, but we would pledge our word on this occasion that we are in hearty sympathy with them in their desire to carry out the recommendations of the Royal Commission, and that we will give them all the assistance in our power to overcome any unlawful assembly of capitalists that is breaking out in rebellion against the Government in the House of Commons.[150]

The only reference to direct action was contained in this somewhat bizarre pledge. Some saw this as supreme irony on Smillie's part; however, during the discussion this was repeated so often by delegates, and in such a way, that the distinct impression left by the conference report is that it was meant seriously.[151] Perhaps the formulation was cleverly designed to serve both as a sop to the militants, and as a lever for the Government to use against renegade backbenchers if it should so desire. Above all, it was intended to keep the Sankey process alive. Here, any strategic divisions which existed within the EC over direct action were cemented over by a tactical consent that, were the Sankey Commission to be sabotaged, it must be the government, and not the MFGB who should be seen to be responsible. Even though there were clear signs

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149 The Times, 15 July 1919.
150 MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.18.
151 The Times took this view, 15 July 1919.

that the government was trying to wriggle out of its commitments, a pre-emptive response by the MFGB was out of the question.

The tone of the resolution on nationalisation was designed, therefore, to maximise the government's embarrassment were it to reject nationalisation, rather than to coerce it with a straightforward threat of direct action. Whatever misgivings figures in the leadership may have held privately, they had travelled too far along the trail blazed by the Sankey Commission to be diverted from it now, and had little choice, therefore, but to publicly proceed on the basis that they expected the Government to honour its promise and accept the majority Report.[152]

Outside the conference hall, however, disaffection with the Sankey process was growing amongst the rank and file. This had been strong enough to ensure that delegates resisted the attempt, barely concealed within the Trojan horse of Brace's resolution, to abandon direct action once and for all. However, it had not been strong enough, in a conference dominated more by officials than any other in 1919, to do much more than this, and through successful conference management the EC, Smillie and Hodges in particular, had been able to prevent the union from being pushed any further down the road of confrontation. The conflict between those who staked everything upon public opinion, and the direct actionists, had ended in a compromise which left the issue between them undecided. Who would come out on top would be decided in the course of

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152 I believe this explains the following remark by J.Doonan from Scotland: "If we interpret our Chairman's opening address correctly...if we by any decision here today...suggest any doubt exists in our minds that the Government will not abide by that decision [to nationalise], then I feel we are not helping the cause of nationalisation of the mines." MFGB Annual Conference 1919, p.80.

the industrial unrest which had begun even before the delegates left Keswick.

# Chapter Eight

## *A SECOND WAVE OF UNREST*

> There is no fever more infectious than the strike, and no class of men more susceptible than the miners. The country is evidently beginning to enter another cycle of labour ferment.[1]

The EC had been successful at Keswick in defending its policy of maintaining the Federation's engagement in the Sankey process, and resisting the pressures which were pushing towards a premature confrontation with the Government. However, question marks were raised over the durability of this policy in the form of widespread disgruntlement in the collieries over the practical implications of the Sankey Award, which came into effect on Wednesday July 16th, the day upon which the month long Yorkshire strike began. These grievances, in combination with the output crisis and the 6s increase, were responsible for a growing disaffection with the Sankey Commission, and led to a new wave of unrest, which touched every major coalfield and threatened to engulf the Federation. In the week after the conference approximately 200,000 miners went on strike over issues arising from the Sankey Commission in Scotland, the North-East, Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, the Midlands, South Wales and Kent. When the Yorkshire strike is included, the strikes at their peak involved something in the region of 400,000 miners, or about half of the Federation's total membership.

Although outside Yorkshire the strikes were brief affairs, they were extremely important as a component of the general crisis in the mining industry in the period before the Government's final decision on nationalisation. The full impact of the Yorkshire strike can only be

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1 The Times, 22 July 1919.

appreciated in the context of, and in comparison with, these strikes. For practical reasons, and to facilitate comparative study, these strikes are dealt with seperately in this chapter, but in essence they played a supporting role on the same stage as the Yorkshire strike in the nationalisation drama.

The practical implementation of the reduction in hours as specified in the Sankey Award left many grades of workers profoundly dissatisfied. In the first place, miners in many districts had obviously interpreted the Award to mean a universal reduction of one hour for all underground workers. Delegates from Durham, where all hewers had long had the seven hour day, were under no illusions. "How can a misconception arise?" Robson asked. "The Award is not one hour less, but to substitute the word "seven" for "eight" in the Act."[2] That there was a misconception was due to the fact that, Durham aside, in several districts where the miners had been able to secure shorter working shifts than the maximum eight hours specified in the 1908 Act, they had been labouring under the misconception that these local differentials would continue. In Kent, where hewers only worked seven hours and forty minutes, they had expected a reduction to six hours forty; in Yorkshire, miners at double shift pits who worked a seven and a half hour day fully intended to see this come down to six and a half. Even in some districts where a full eight hours were worked Monday to Friday, the issue was complicated by a customary short Saturday shift.[3]

The major problem, and one which affected all areas, was by how far piece rates should be increased to guarantee the continuation of the same

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2 MFGB Annual Conference, 15 July 1919, p.40.
3 ibid., 15 July 1919, pp.29-44, & 17 July 1919, pp.94-110.

earnings after the working day had been reduced. Having reached agreement on this in principle, the Government and MFGB EC had decided, because of local variations in geological conditions and price lists, that the details should be worked out between miners and owners at a district level. Negotiations had been proceeding in all areas, with varying degrees of success, when the Coal Controller, on the instructions of the Cabinet, announced that there would be a 10% ceiling on piece rate adjustments in all coalfields.[4] This figure corresponded to the Interim Report's estimate that national average output of coal would fall by 10% with the shorter working day.[5] The ceiling was later increased to 12%, with the proviso that the national average adjustment did not exceed 10%, after the MFGB had pointed out that in the North-East, no increase would be required.[6]

The Coal Controller's intervention was described by James Winstone as a "bombshell".[7] Latham of the Midlands Federation declared that "it has got to be a bigger man than myself to come into my district and tell us to accept 12%."[8] The miners insisted that the basis for calculating the adjustment should be the loss of hewing time, rather than the projected average fall in national output. The most common figure put forward was 14.3%, or the one-seventh increase necessary to bridge the difference between the eight and the seven hour shifts, but even this was seen as the absolute minimum that the affected members would accept. For those miners who had to walk long distances to their workplace from the pit bottom (three miles was not that uncommon), the reduction of one hour represented a much greater proportion of their hewing time than one-

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4 ibid., 15 July 1919, pp.27-28.
5 CIC 1919, vol.i, 4(a) Interim Report, p.x.
6 MFGB Minutes of a Meeting with Bonar Law, 5 July 1919.
7 MFGB Annual Conference, 15 July 1919, p.36.
8 ibid., p.29. The owners had agreed to 15%.

seventh. Frank Hall and George Spencer calculated on the basis of returns from pits in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire that the average increase needed was at least 16%, and that for some men it was as much as 19%. Similar claims were made by delegates from Yorkshire, Lancashire and South Wales.[9]

Surface workers were also exhibiting serious discontent with the Sankey Award, under the terms of which their hours had only been reduced to 46.5 per week, widening the gap between themselves and the colliers. Smillie reacted angrily at Keswick to threatened strike action by surface workers, saying that colliers had shown self-sacrifice during the war when they had accepted flat-rate increases which benefitted the lower paid workers. In any case, he pointed out, he had warned earlier in the year that:

> we might find it was impossible to fix as short hours for the surface worker as underground worker, because we could not prove the same justification for the above ground man as the below ground man. Our claim all along has been for shorter hours for the miners because of the working conditions underground.[10]

This was, in fact, not true. As some delegates pointed out, the original claim in the Charter was for a six hour day for all workers in and about the mines.[11] It was only in the hands of the EC in negotiations that the basis of the claim had been altered. Nevertheless, it was argued that even in terms of the case for shorter hours as presented by the EC, the surface workers were as deserving as the underground workers. Bailey from the YMA said that:

> our surfacemen, especially screen-men, who are manipulators of coal, are working under equally as

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9 ibid., 17 July 1919 p.97.
10 ibid., 18 July 1919, p.130.
11 ibid., p.131.

> bad conditions as the bottom man. We have boys thirteen years of age who are working on the screens. In some instances the conditions in some of the screening plants are deplorable. There is dust flying about, and the lads suffer more than the men underground.[12]

The EC had held out the hope of further concessions for the surface workers over the previous months, but now with the Award's implementation it was clear that these were not forthcoming, and it looked as if the anger of this grade of workers might spill over into action. The South Wales delegation received telegrams on the last day of the Keswick Conference that this had happened in Monmouthshire. Barker said that "The surfacemen have now, at the last moment, kicked over the traces, and there is a serious difficulty." Ten thousand had come out on strike, "because their relative position to the underground men has been worsened by the Sankey Award."[13]

This was an alarming state of affairs for the EC. To have Yorkshire, the second biggest district affiliated to the Federation, out on strike was bad enough. On top of this, officials from most districts were warning that they could not keep their members at work much longer unless at least 14.3% was quickly secured, and the strike in Monmouthshire possibly signalled the beginnings of a large section of workers who felt excluded and let down by the Sankey Commission. For Smillie and the EC the possibility that the Federation might be "forced into a national fight when there is a penny or twopence one way or the other in dispute" was a matter of tremendous concern.[14] Again and again Smillie interrupted delegates to warn that "Probably the whole existence of this Federation

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12 ibid.
13 ibid., p.128.
14 ibid., 17 July 1919, p.100.

may depend upon our being able to keep together on a question of this kind."[15] During the piece rate debate, he said:

> I would like to say to the Conference that if ever there was a time we required to hold together it is now. I don't want this great Federation to run the risk of wrecking itself on the rocks of what is comparatively a small thing, when this Federation has far bigger national questions than this question.[16]

Smillie's response to the unrest in the coalfields was determined by two interconnected concerns. Firstly, to preserve the organisational integrity and cohesion of the Federation in face of the centrifugal forces which were pulling at its seams; this dictated that local and sectional grievances must be subordinated and held in check in the interests of the national priorities as interpreted by the EC. Secondly, he was eager to keep the prospect of progress through the Sankey Commission alive; this meant that all districts must strictly observe the Sankey Award. To strike against the terms of the Award, which had been accepted by a ballot vote of the members was both "a violation of the principles of this Federation" and "a breach of faith with the Government."[17] It would undermine the credibility of the MFGB as a reliable participant in collective bargaining, and damage its public image. As Smillie argued:

> We cannot face the public in asking the Government and threatening to force the Government to carry out the Sankey Award so far as it gives us any benefits, and in the same breath support men who refuse to carry out the Sankey Award because it does not suit them. The thing would be too ridiculous. We cannot honestly face the country or the men if we do business like that."[18]

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15 ibid., p.109.
16 ibid., 15 July 1919, pp.43-44.
17 ibid., 18 July 1919, p.133.
18 ibid., p.130.

Officials from several districts emphasised similar points, and Hartshorn, with the EC's backing, urged the Conference to pass a declaration calling upon "all surface workers to loyally observe the Award of the Interim Report of Mr. Justice Sankey in accordance with the decision of the ballot vote of the members."[19] Hartshorn also proposed the EC's resolution for piece rate adjustments, which called for a maximum increase of 14.3%. He clarified the EC's position:

> if there is a reduction of one hour per day, then it is intended that we shall not either accept anything less or ask anything more than 14.3%. If the reduction is less than an hour per day, that it shall be in the same proportion. If the reduction is one hour per day on each day, it will be 14.3%. If there is an hour per day on five days and no reduction on the Saturday, there will be five-sixths on that.[20]

Both of these resolutions were carried, but all the signs were that the opposition in the coalfields was greater than it had been on the conference floor, and that had been considerable. The surface workers had received no support whatsoever, and those piece workers who wished to hold on to local customs like the short Saturday shift were likewise disappointed. Greenall predicted that "when the men get to know in Lancashire, they would be out as well with the Yorkshire people", while Barker reckoned they were about to witness "internecine warfare in the Federation."[21] The leadership's insistence on loyalty to the Federation had succeeded in creating little more than a facade of unity. As Latham warned "whilst we may have peace, I am not so sure we shall keep the peace outside among our own men."[22]

As we have seen, Latham's doubts were not unfounded. Anger at the inequities of the Sankey Award was so acute that in some areas outside

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19 ibid., p.133. It was carried nearly unanimously.
20 ibid., 17 July 1919, p.94. Carried 601 to 177.
21 ibid., p.104, and 18 July 1919, p.133.
22 ibid., 17 July 1919, p.106.

Yorkshire, unofficial strikes had already broken out before the issues could be fully debated at Keswick. Over 1,000 Kent miners at Snowdown and Tilmanstone near Dover, and at Chester near Canterbury had been out since the beginning of the week, fearful that they were "going to lose every custom and every little privilege we had previously" under the new working arrangements being demanded by the owners, notably the short Saturday shift.[23] In South Wales, the seven hour day had caused "an epidemic of strikes" in the Afan Valley, parts of the Rhondda, as well as amongst the surface workers of the western valleys of Monmouthshire who were demanding the seven hour day for themselves; at Blackwood, 2,000 miners were the first of many in Britain to strike in protest at the 6s increase in the price of coal.[24]

On Thursday July 17th the strike spread northwards to Staffordshire, Derbyshire, the north-east, and Scotland. In south Staffordshire, the strike was once again started by surface workers who wanted their hours reduced in proportion to the cut which the underground men had been granted. Here the issue of the piece-rate adjustment was further complicated by the continuation of the butty system, and the contractors' unwillingness to pay their drawers for the customary short day on Saturday unless 14.3% was conceded. During the following week the action was spread by roving mass pickets over these issues, until all 15,000 Cannock Chase miners were out, and resulted, as in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire earlier in the year, in the butty system being scrapped.[25] In north-west Staffordshire, the strike started at Audley, according to one

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23 ibid., p.132.
24 Western Mail, 17 July 1919.
South Wales Echo, 18-7-19.
25 Staffordshire Chronicle, 19July 1919.
Staffordshire Sentinel, 24, 25 & 28 July 1919.
Cannock Chase Courier, 26 July & 2 August 1919.

account by young miners who had been working in Yorkshire until the strike started there. Demanding 14.3%, a further cut in hours for surface workers, and the removal of the 6s increase in the price of coal, "mobs of lawless pit lads" pulled out 5,000 miners at nine pits.[26] In Scotland, four pits struck in Dumbartonshire to retain local customs under the seven hour day, and 2,000 struck at Bowhill in Fife for similair reasons, the action spreading slightly over the following days.[27] Even in the normally quiescent north-east coalfield, where the hewers already had a seven hour day, grades like shifters who had worked under the terms of the Eight Hour Act, and surface workers once again, caused strikes of 15,000 in Northumberland, at Ashington, and in South Durham.[28]

The miners' unions in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Lancashire had, after consultation with the membership via the branches, put in for a 14.3% increase in piece rates. Behind the Lancashire delegation's vote against the Executive at Keswick lay profound unrest in the coalfield over the increasing cost of living, with many branches already demanding another 30% rise in wages. In the Burnley area there had been a recent one day unofficial strike in protest at high food prices, probably the work of the local Miners' Reform Committee.[29] Whilst the Derbyshire delegation had been persuaded by Smillie to vote with the MFGB EC at Keswick, this had involved defiance of the specific instructions of the DMA Council to vote for a national strike if no settlement of 14.3% had been reached.[30] Restlessness in these counties, and in Nottinghamshire,

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26 Manchester Guardian, 24 July 1919.
Staffordshire Sentinel, 23 July 1919.
Daily Herald, 24 July 1919.
27 Daily Herald, 18 & 22 July 1919.
28 ibid., 18 & 26 July 1919.
The Times, 22 July 1919.
29 L&CMF Monthly Conference, 28 June 1919, p.10.
Yorkshire Post, 23 July 1919.
30 DMA Special Council Meeting, 12 July 1919.

was considerably sharpened by their proximity to the Yorkshire coalfield, and the contrasting attitude that their officials were taking in comparison to those of the YMA.

The strike in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire was, in the first instance, a direct extension of the Yorkshire strike, spread here not by miners seeking solidarity, but by coal trucks, despatched by the owners for filling in these adjacent counties. As these arrived in the coal yards, from Cresswell in North-East Derbyshire, to Ripley further south, and across to Mansfield in Nottinghamshire, spontaneous walk-outs took place.[31]

Once again, as was the case earlier in the year, Mansfield rapidly became the organisational focus of the movement, its market place the venue for large daily gatherings of miners from both counties. From here on Sunday 20th July, the familiar figures of Owen Wilcox, Price, Ford and Bromley called upon the 3,000 or so miners present to spread the strike at pit-head meetings the next morning. When mass meetings took place the following evening, 20,000 were already on strike.[32] At Mansfield, Walter Owen said, "If Yorkshire were out for justice, Notts and Derbyshire were coming out too", whilst Wilcox "declared that what was fair for Yorkshire was also fair for Notts and Derbyshire, and for that reason they were justified in joining hands."[33] At Chesterfield, Frank Lee the DMA agent appealed for a return to work, but was met with cries of "When the

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31 Derbyshire Times, 26 July 1919.
Nottingham Evening News, 22, 25 & 26 July 1919.
32 Mansfield Reporter, 25 July 1919.
Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 25 July 1919.
Nottingham Evening News, 21 July 1919.
33 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 25 July 1919.
Nottingham Evening News, 22 July 1919.

Yorkshire miners go back."[34] At Sutton, the mass meeting on the Lammas recreation ground was more cautious, voting to send a delegation to the NMA headquarters at Basford, but the following evening a reconvened meeting voted for "a sympathetic strike." Varley said that the delegation had said that as Yorkshire, Derbyshire, and the big pits around Mansfield were out, "they felt they were sort of blacklegging."[35]

The pattern of the strike was similair to the earlier episodes here. The centres of militancy were Mansfield in Nottinghamshire and Chesterfield in Derbyshire, with weak points in the environs of the Leen Valley and Bolsover. Sutton and Clay Cross lay somewhere in the middle, joining the unofficial movement, but remaining relatively moderate. Officials declined invitations to attend the Mansfield Market Place meetings, no doubt recalling the futility of their earlier forays into the unofficial headquarters, preferring instead to concentrate their trouble-shooting amongst the more moderate miners in villages like Heanor, Shipley, Radford, Newstead and Hucknall.[36] When they did venture into the larger centres, they faced hostile audiences, none more so than the one at the YMCA Hall in Mansfield on Wednesday 23rd July, when appeals for patience were howled down with shouts of "We've had too much!", and Varley Spencer and Bunfield were booed off stage. After the meeting, Bunfield commented that "it was useless to place any resolution before the men while they were in their present temper."[37] Even where the officials were able to speak, their resolutions for a return to work were invariably heavily defeated.[38] Once again, the unofficial meetings were, apart from

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34 Mansfield Reporter, 25 July 1919.
35 Nottingham Evening News, 23 July 1919.
Mansfield Reporter, 25 July 1919.
36 Nottingham Evening News, 22 & 23 July 1919.
37 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 25 July 1919.
Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 24 July 1919.
38 eg Chesterfield and Clay Cross mass meetings;

organisational centres, forums for an outpouring of criticism of the "antiquated" rules of the miners' associations, and the "reactionary" nature of their leaders.[39]

At the same time as insisting that "their leaders had got to be more progressive", the unofficial group sought to extend the action from its base in Mansfield, sending "strike agitators...all around the districts."[40] These addressed pit head meetings in a targetted area, and then organised mass meetings where the pit head vote could be confirmed or rejected by all the miners in a particular area. In this manner the strike area was enlarged daily, until by Thursday July 24th, 60,000 miners had joined the movement acrosss the two counties.[41] The following description of mass meetings at this stage of the strike indicates the transference of loyalty which had taken place in the militant centres:

> The strikers have flouted their leaders and have got out of hand. There was evidence of that at Sutton on Tuesday evening and again at Mansfield on Wednesday evening, when officials holding prominent positions in the local and county mining world were either howled at or listened to in chilly silence. They were given fair play after urgent appeals had been made for it, but it was obvious that they were merely tolerated. On the other hand when the unofficial "bosses" got on their legs they were acclaimed as heroes, and their extravaganzas aroused the greatest enthusiasm.42

Although the Lancashire delegation had registered the dissatisfaction of its members by voting with Yorkshire at Keswick, the L&CMF officials, "a

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Nottingham Evening News, 21 July 1919.
Derbyshire Times, 26 July 1919.

39 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 25 July 1919.
Nottingham Evening News, 24 July 1919.

40 W.Owen speaking at a mass meeting in Mansfield's YMCA Hall; Nottinghamshire Guardian, 24 July 1919.
The Times, 24 July 1919.

41 Nottinghamshire Free Press 25 July 1919.
Derbyshire Times, 26 July 1919.

42 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 25 July 1919.

thoroughly sensible, shrewd, straight-forward set of businessmen", had no intention of following the example of their YMA counterparts' defiance of MFGB policy any further than this.[43] As in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, the price paid for unity with the Federation was profound division within their own organisation.

The seriousness of the discontent amongst the membership became apparent on Sunday July 20th, when at a large "Hands off Russia" protest in Wigan, calls for action over the Government's current policy on coal all but eclipsed the planned agenda.[44] The next morning, at Wigan's London and North Western Railway staion, about a thousand miners waiting for trains to carry them to work in the pits which lay to the south-east of the town held an impromptu meeting and decided to strike.[45] During the day, pavement chalkings appeared around the town advertising an unofficial meeting to "compel the leaders to do their duty."[46] This meeting voted to spread the strike across the coalfield, as "they felt instinctively they should be out with the Yorkshiremen."[47]

Wigan became "the storm centre in the Lancashire coalfield" due to the presence here of an active Miners Reform Committee (MRC). The MRC had built up a base here in the latter stages of the war, holding weekly meetings in Wigan Market Place, and had recently been assisted by a John Maclean speaking tour.[48] Their audience had suddenly been greatly

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43 Lancashire Daily Post, 25 July 1919.
44 Wigan Examiner, 26 July 1919.
45 Wigan Observer and District Advertiser, 26 July 1919.
46 Wigan Examiner, 26-7-19.
47 L&CMF Monthly Conference, 26 July 1919; this explanation of the strikers' motives was offered by P.Newhall.
48 Yorkshire Post, 26 July 1919.
J.D.MacDougall, op.cit., p.774.

extended by the Yorkshire strike, and the unwillingness of the L&CMF officials to lead similair action. The Yorkshire Post reported that:

> Thanks to the action of a number of irreconcilables, who style themselves the Miners' Reform Committee, the influence and authority of these officials have been completely flouted, and their efforts to secure peace spurned."[49]

Wigan Market Place was to Lancashire what Mansfield Market Place was to Nottinghamshire. Here, a "daily collection of hotheads" gathered to discuss the progress of the strike and decide on how to extend the action.[50] The Lancashire Daily Post reported that "the leaders of these men, (who) now call themselves the Miners' Reform Committee, revealed their existence in startling fashion", with their ability to involve thousands of miners in picketing designed "to cause a general stoppage."[51] Between two and three thousand men were organised into flying columns hundreds strong each morning, and designated a district for picketing.[52] One observer described the scene:

> The irreconcilables refrained from violence. They began to get busy early yesterday morning, when they assembled in the Market Place. Their leaders impressed upon them the wisdom of being as orderly as possible. Then they fell in like a regiment of soldiers - many of them indeed were ex-service men - and marched with martial tread to the Park Lane and Long Lane collieries of the Garswood Iron and Coal Co., where they persuaded the management to withdraw the men from the pits.[53]

Although extra police were drafted into Lancashire during the trouble, their numbers were insufficient to guarantee protection of plant and equipment, and managers invariably agreed to close the pits.[54] In this

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49 Yorkshire Post, 26 July 1919.
50 ibid.
51 Lancashire Daily Post, 25 July 1919.
52 Leigh, Tyldesley and Atherton Journal, 25 July 1919.
Wigan Examiner, 25 & 26 July 1919.
53 Lancashire Daily Post, 25 July 1919.
54 Leigh Chronicle, 1 August 1919.
Manchester Evening News, 25 July 1919.

manner the strike was spread from Wigan to Burnley, where all the pits, employing about 4,000 men, were closed.[55] On Tuesday, 8,000 Leigh miners joined the strike wave, which on Wednesday rolled on to Bolton and Ashton-in-Makerfield. Newspaper estimates of the numbers on strike varied, but all of them had the figure at over thirty thousand, and when the various accounts of which pits came out are taken together, a figure of 40,000 is probably more accurate.[56]

If anything, the antagonism between the union bureaucracy and the rank and file activists was even greater than in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. The L&CMF officials denounced the flying pickets as "the mob", and "extremists incapable of being satisfied by any concession."[57] Encouraged by press attacks on "the Wigan Dictators" who were causing "terrorism in Lancashire", one "prominent miners'leader" went as far as calling on "the authorities to round up MRC members for the country's good."[58] In the eyes of the officials, the strikes were subversive, disloyal, and not to be tolerated. Clear majorities in favour of action at mass meetings were declared by district agents to have been minorities, or simply over-ruled. This heavy-handed approach enraged the MRC and its supporters, who labelled the officials "the enemy within", and argued for the formation of strike committees "with full powers to carry on the strike to the end, without the aid of the men's union, whose

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55 Manchester Guardian, 23 July 1919.
56 Daily Herald, 25 July 1919.
Burnley News, 26 July 1919.
Manchester Guardian, 29 July 1919.
Bolton Evening News, 25 & 26 July 1919.
Leigh Chronicle, 1 August 1919.
57 L&CMF Monthly Conference, 26 July 1919.
Manchester Guardian, 24 July 1919.
58 Manchester Guardian, 26 July 1919.
Yorkshire Post, 26 July 1919.
Leigh, Tyldesley and Atherton Journal, 25 July 1919.

methods they ought to dish."[59] At one meeting, after a heated exchange with the officials, a resolution was passed to cease contributing to the union funds.[60]

The most immediate and most general cause of such anger in all three counties was the leaderships' refusal to sanction solidarity action with the Yorkshire miners and fight for their own demands relating to the introduction of the seven hour day. It was on this basis that the rank and file groups initially spread the action. However, it quickly became apparent that this issue was in essence the lightning rod for a wider discontent. Bonar Law alluded to this in the House of Commons when he told MPs:

> The information we get today is to this effect. Some of them were opposed to the increase of 6s per ton; some were out because food prices were too high; some because we still have troops in Russia; and some because they wanted the abolition of conscription.[61]

The Daily Herald, commenting on the situation in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, also noted the mixture of political and economic demands which had been thrown into the strike's cauldron. "Some are out over piece rates, some over 6s, other pits have political demands on the subjects of conscription, conscientious objectors, and Russia."[62] The Nottingham Evening News listed as "among the causes of the coal strike now in progress", the 6s increase, the non-introduction of nationalisation, piece work rates under the seven hour day, high food prices, intervention in Russia, conscription, and alleged slackening by

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59 L&CMF Monthly Conference, 26 July 1919.
Bolton Evening News, 22 July 1919.
60 Bolton Evening News, 22 July 1919.
61 118 H.C.Deb.5s, c.1160.
62 Daily Herald, 23 July 1919.

mine managers.[63] The resolution to strike passed by a meeting of Wollaton miners in Nottinghamshire:

> was passed unanimously, condemning the raising of the price of coal by 6s a ton (contrary to the findings of the Sankey Commission), supporting the Miners Federation in demanding 14.3% on piece work rates; demanding withdrawal of the troops from Russia, the total abolition of conscription, and any other indirect kind of compulsory military service."[64]

In all three counties therefore, the strikes displayed a marked tendency to generalise, incorporating wider economic and political demands. The most persistent issue was the Government's use of the output crisis to increase the price of coal and discredit the miners' case for nationalisation. At all of the strike meetings the focus of discussion passed quickly from Yorkshire and the piece rate question, to that of output and the 6s increase, with bitter denunciations of owners and Government. The grievances which had been expressed by many delegates at Keswick were amplified by, and found an outlet in the strike wave. In Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, strikers in Sutton, Chesterfield and Mansfield blamed falling output on "rotten roads, shortage of rails, and bad tackle" and on "lack of initiative and money in the development of the mines."[65] In Lancashire, Burnley miners walked out complaining of a lack of tubs, and in Leigh, strike leaders claimed that 70% of face workers were being forced on to the minimum wage for the same reason. The Manchester Guardian reported that the shortage of tubs, timber and rails was the most acute of all the coalfields:

> Coal is lying in heaps underground which cannot be brought to the surface because there are so few tubs. Rails and sleepers are stacked at the pithead, but are

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63 Nottingham Evening News, 23 July 1919.
64 ibid.
65 Mansfield Reporter, 25 July 1919.
Nottingham Evening News, 21 July 1919.
Nottinghamshire Free Press, 25 July 1919.

> not laid down where they could be used to provide a greater output. The miners, of course, attribute these things to a sort of "ca-canniness" on the part of the employers and the government more as an attempt to prejudice the promise of nationalisation.[66]

At a Leigh strike meeting, the district agent Seth Blackledge endeavoured to secure a return to work on the basis that the MFGB was dealing with the piece rate question. He was interrupted by a miner in the audience who said, "that the 6s per ton had never been mentioned from the platform, and three parts of the men present were not only opposed to 12.5% but to the advance of 6s per ton.(Hear, hear, and applause) The majority of the meeting agreed, and Blackledge was voted down.[67]

Here was the combustible material which fuelled the strike movement and began to extend it beyond its original aims. Almost automatically, it seems, it became not just a matter of fighting over the implications of the first Sankey Report, but for the implementation of the second Report on nationalisation. The frequency with which strike meetings in all areas threw up demands relating to the ownership and control of the industry suggests a spontaneity which was independent of the small groups of activists who had initiated the action, although it was welcomed and encouraged by them. The resolution passed by the mass meeting at Mansfield Market Place on 21st July was typical of many, "That we don't go to work until the 14.3% is conceeded, the whole of the Sankey Award, including nationalisation, is granted and the 6s per ton taken off."[68]

The strike wave was the expression of widespread doubts amongst the rank and file about the effectiveness of the MFGB's strategy, and fears that

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66 Leeds Mercury, 22 July 1919.
Burnley News, 23 July 1919.
Leigh Chronicle and District Advertiser, 25 July 1919.
Manchester Guardian, 15 July 1919.
67 Leigh, Tyldesley and Atherton Journal, 25 July 1919.
68 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 25 July 1919.

enmeshment in a timetable which was being dictated by the Government was resulting in the atrophy of the Miners' Charter. Already, the hours and wages deal encapsulated in the first Sankey Report had fallen well short of the original demands, and was being further eroded by the inexorably rising cost of living, the Government's refusal to sanction adequate piece rate increases, and by the chronically low level of output which was everywhere blamed on the management. This last factor marked a bridgeing point between disgruntlement with the first Sankey Report, and distrust at the Government's intentions regarding the second. Output restriction and the increased price of coal were seen as a pincer movement by owners and Government against nationalisation, to which the MFGB's response appeared dilatory and inapropriate at best, and "reactionary" at worst.[69]

On top of all this the current controversy surrounding the British military support for the white armies of Koltchak and Denikin tended to confirm fears that nationalisation was being entrusted to a Government which was, despite its reconstruction rhetoric, pro-capitalist and anti working class. Partly for this reason, "Hands off Russia" meetings held during the strike often became concerned with the domestic issue of output and nationalisation, whilst strike meetings usually carried resolutions for non-intervention in Soviet Russia.

All of these factors converged to produce considerable anxiety amongst the "advanced" miners that their idea of a post-war social and industrial order, fixed so firmly in their sights at the beginning of the year was in danger of vanishing like a mirage before their eyes. The Daily Herald, which appears to have had a considerable circulation in the strike

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69 L&CMF Monthly Council Meeting, 26-7-19.

affected areas, was arguing that the general crisis of the summer amounted to a crossroads in the post-war struggle between capital and labour.[70] Encouraged by the apparently widening fault lines in the Coalition on the one hand, and the resurgent militancy inside sections of the working class on the other, it mounted a vigorous campaign for the urgent use of direct action by the labour movement. Linking the issues of war in Russia, and nationalisation of the mines at home, it warned that the prospects of reconstruction along socialist lines would otherwise diminish, and be replaced by an oppressive alliance of unfettered private capital and militaristic state.[71]

Anxiety about an impending betrayal pervaded the atmosphere of the strike. I.Eastham, Chairman of the Burnley Trades and Labour Council warned Bonar Law that:

> the same spirit that was imbued in the minds of the workers and the workers' sons when they pushed when they pushed the Germans across the Rhine would be just as operative at home as across the water when the occasion required it.[72]

The bitterness of those who had fought in the war often came to the fore. At Leigh, for example, ex-Lieutenant Goulding said:

> Last Saturday they were celebrating a capitalistic peace as a result of a capitalistic war...There was one law for the rich and one law for the poor. This was the free country which he and five million other mugs went to fight for in 1914.(Applause)"[73]

At Mansfield, Thompson condemned the 6s increase "which hit the poor man who had been to the front", and said:

> The peace celebrations were taking place at the same time as one of the greatest industrial crises in the

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70 Daily Herald, 24 July 1919; all copies of the previous day's paper were sold out in Mansfield by 10am.
71 See for e.g. all the issues of the Daily Herald between 24 & 29 July 1919.
72 Burnley News, 26 July 1919.
73 Leigh Chronicle and District Advertiser, 25 July 1919.

> country. During the war the miners had shown as much sacrifice as anybody, and had been promised that something good should be done for them. He was glad to see that throughout the country the ball was already rolling."[74]

Encouraged by the generalisation inherent in the strike wave, the outbreaks of militancy elsewhere in the working class, the campaign of the Daily Herald, and the Triple Alliance Conference on direct action over Russia, the rank and file leaders clearly felt that they were spearheading a major labour offensive, and were possibly witnessing the beginnings of the long awaited national strike movement. At Mansfield Market Place, where there was "a good deal of revolutionary talk", and at Wigan Market Place where "speeches were made by revolutionaries", they heralded the genesis of mass direct action. At Mansfield, in a speech characterised by "unparliamentary language", Bromley said that:

> if the workers are going to be further burdened with the 6s a ton, the miners were going to kick against it, and when they kicked, the capitalist system would be tottering. To cease to be wage slaves they must own and control that which they produced, and when that was achieved they would have attained the brotherhood of man."[75]

Councillor Alec Norris provides another example:

> They had now reached a revolt of the workers of Britain, which meant to destroy the capitalist system, and to set up an institution wherein they would all work for the common good.[76]

In all areas, officials used an array of arguments to try and sever the alliance between their members and the rank and file groups who were encouraging the action. Striking miners were told that what was happening in Yorkshire was not their concern, that they could not be expected to "crucify themselves on behalf of other sections of the community" over

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74 Nottinghamshire Free Press, 25 July 1919.
75 Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 25 July 1919.
76 Mansfield Reporter, 25 July 1919.

the 6s increase until "the people as a whole developed a political consciousness", and that the Triple Alliance was going to take up this issue, and nationalisation, as well as British military intervention in Russia.[77] These arguments were universally underscored by what was the central message of the district bureauracies, namely that continued unofficial action meant "an end to this Federation", and was "stabbing Smillie and Hodges in the back."[78] Varley told the Mansfield miners, "It came to this - they had to decide whether they belonged to the Federation or not. If Notts could manage things better, they could secede from the Federation and go on their own."[79]

It seems that at this particular juncture of the campaign for the Charter, some were indeed questioning whether continued membership of the Federation was desirable if it undermined their capacity to fight over immediate issues like the local implications of the introduction of the seven hour day. There were complaints of "the unwieldiness of our organisation, through which we were unable to deal quickly", and there were occasional calls at mass meetings for smaller, regionally based break-away unions. At Mansfield Market Place, strike leaders floated the idea of an amalgamation of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Yorkshire. As we shall see, in Yorkshire the defeat of the strike there also occasioned widespread demands for a break-away from the Federation.[80]

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77 These arguments were put forward by Fred Varley, Nottingham Evening News, 22 July 1919;
Seth Blackledge, Leigh Chronicle and District Advertiser, 1 August 1919;
Price, Nottinghamshire Guardian, 25 July 1919.
78 L&CMF Monthly Meeting, 26 July 1919.
79 Nottinghamshire Guardian, 24 July 1919.
80 L&CMF Monthly Meeting, 26 July 1919.
Nottinghamshire Free Press, 25 July 1919.

Consequently, there was much more at stake in the strike wave than a percentage point here or there. In essence, it was a crucial test of the legitimacy of the MFGB leadership, on a national and district level, at a time when the forward momentum of the campaign for the Charter had stalled. Had it failed to deliver a clear victory on this issue, rank and file pretenders were waiting in the wings, advocating the full use of the miners' industrial power, and eager to don the mantle of leadership. Fortunately for Smillie, the Government recognised the importance of maintaining the authority of union executive power, and on July 25th, conceded the Keswick demands on piece rates almost in full. This deal cut the ground away from under the feet of the rank and file groups, who had in their enthusiasm been blinded to the limitations of the strike wave. Following mass meetings in all areas over the weekend of July 26-27th, the miners drifted back to work, and the rank and file rebellion subsided as suddenly as it had appeared.

In Nottinghamshire, the unofficial group was quick to recognise that the piece rate deal had restored the authority of the officials, and its members advocated the return to work, consoling themselves with the thought that "a ballot of the Triple Alliance was to be taken in the next three or four days", and that "the next time they stopped they would stop with the railwaymen and fight for the national ownership of all the means of life."[81]

In Lancashire, however, a hard core of a few thousand young militants refused to accept the inevitable, and made a desperate attempt to keep the strike going by marching from pit to pit, threatening to destroy

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81 Nottinghamshire Guardian, 25 July 1919.
Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 25 July 1919.

winding gear, or throwing tubs down the pit shafts where they found men working. At Diggle's Pit, Westleigh, when banksmen refused to haul the men up, "the gang raided the haulage house and stopped the haulage rope." As soon as underground workers heard of trouble on the surface, they scrambled for the cages, afraid of being stuck below, and so relatively small numbers of miners were able to cause great disruption.[82]

By the time the L&CMF Council met on Saturday 26th July, "the whole coalfield was a seething mass of discontent", with miners who wanted to work threatening to deal with the pickets by physical force.[83] At mass meetings on the Sunday, "It was stated that resentment is so great that many collieries may strike rather than work with the mob leaders."[84] Delegates associated with the unofficial action, like P.Newhall of Garswood Hall, were given a roasting at the Council meeting. Chris Holding, reporting back to his Plank Lane branch, said:

> He could tell them frankly that in the Conference on Saturday at Bolton they had that matter up hot. One man, indeed, who was present got it pretty warm, and he deserved all they said of him.[85]

Once the MFGB had secured the piece rate settlement, support for the rank and file leaders fell away dramatically, and where they tried out of desperation to use coercive tactics to sustain the strike's momentum, they faced a severe backlash from the members. P.Newhall's public ostracism by the L&CMF was a measure of this reaction, and it was in all probability this which encouraged his employers to sack him shortly after

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82 Bolton Evening News, 24 & 25 July 1919.
Manchester Guardian, 26 July 1919.
Manchester Evening News, 25 July 1919.
83 L&CMF Monthly Meeting, 26 July 1919.
Manchester Guardian, 26 July 1919.
84 Daily Herald, 28 July 1919.
85 L&CMF Monthly Meeting, 26 July 1919.
Leigh Chronicle, 1 August 1919.

the strike. Whilst prior to the deal a majority of the strikers had proved relatively impermeable to the officials' accusations that the rank and file leaders and the YMA both were union saboteurs, now they were more receptive. Once again, the bureaucracy's perspective of direct action, that "when they came up against the Government they must be a united army behind their leaders and not go into the fight sectionally", was in the ascendant.[86] The officials hammered home this lesson in the aftermath of the strikes. As Spencer told the Broxtowe miners:

> If there is to be any fighting, if your blood boils for a fight, let the fight be a sensible, well organised, well thought out, well drilled, and a determined fight - not by sections striking here and sections standing there which is doing no good.[87]

Despite its brevity, the strike movement had shown that a direct action offensive was still on the agenda in the summer of 1919. However, its collapse was revealing of the attitude of the bulk of the miners to the rank and file groups on the one hand and to the officials on the other, and the limited (and conditional) nature of the industrial militancy and political radicalism displayed in the strikes. What requires explanation is the obvious contradiction between the general political demands expressed by the strikers, and the fact that the return to work was occasioned by a deal solely concerning piece rates. Baffled commentators attempted to simply explain the strike away as "an unaccountable attack of midsummer madness"[88]. The reality, of course, was far more complex, and the variety of factors which allowed the MFGB leadership to reassert its hegemony will become clear in the light of the Yorkshire strike.

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86 G.Spencer, Nottinghamshire Guardian, 24 July 1919.
87 Nottingham Evening News, 28 July 1919..
88 Manchester Evening News, 28 July 1919.

# Chapter Nine

## *YORKSHIRE*

> Yorkshire had its coat off.(Cheers) Since the Government had interfered with them, they were out to teach the Government a lesson it would remember.[1]

> The Yorkshire miners were on strike on a question which should have been a national one. If the employing classes were to fight them by sections, as in the Yorkshire dispute, it would not be long before the whole country was defeated.[2]

### *(i) Political and industrial traditions of the Yorkshire Miners' Association.*

The importance of the Yorkshire Miners' Association to the national Federation is signified by the prominent roles which its leaders have played in the latter organisation. Herbert Smith was Vice-President in 1919, and was later to rise to the Presidency during the trials of the 1920s. In an earlier period, Ben Pickard had been a key figure in the attempts to establish a national union, and he was President of both the YMA and the MFGB until his death in 1904.[3] It is perhaps more the case than with any other trade union in history, that the political and industrial characteristics of the YMA and its members were given corporeal form in the figures of these two leaders. Ben Pickard was a Lib-Lab; the "iron man of Barnsley"[4], he could be both pragmatic and pugilistic, with his political moderation belying an ability to exhibit

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1 Frickley Branch delegate to mass meeting on 28 July 1919 in the early stages of the strike; Mexborough and Swinton Times, 2 August 1919.
2 W.Carter of Brodsworth branch as defeat approaches; Doncaster Gazette, 15 August 1919.
3 Carolyn Baylies, The History of the Yorkshire Miners, 1881-1918 (London: Routledge, 1993), p.x.
4 David Howell, British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888-1906 (Manchester University Press, 1983), p.18.

considerable industrial aggression. In a period of relative economic stability, growth and prosperity, this particular blend could bring results, and Pickard attracted an uncommon devotion and loyalty from his members. This was an acute problem for the ILP pioneers in the coalfield, one of whom complained that the miners "have only one political belief - and that is a belief in Ben Pickard."[5] Pickard himself saw such loyalty as a pre-requisite for effective trade unionism, and often interpreted dissent as betrayal, a tendency graphically illustrated in his withering assault on Pete Curran and the ILP in the Barnsley by-election of 1897.[6]

Herbert Smith was at the forefront of a new generation of YMA leaders whose political affiliation was to the ILP. He came to prominence following the deaths of Pickard, Cowey, and Frith, the three long-time Lib-Lab officials, which all came in a two-month period between December 1903 and February 1904. Their deaths were attributed by YMA members to the strain of the long-running Denaby-Cadeby dispute, Yorkshire's test of the Taff Vale judgement.[7] Disputes like this, and the one at Hemsworth in 1906, were long and bitter struggles which involved severe hardship for the mining communities, including mass evictions from company houses.[8] These signalled the break-up of the institutionalised industrial relations which had typified Lib-Labism, and the beginning of a new period of harsher industrial conflict, which ultimately spelled its defeat.[9] Smith's election as President in 1906 was the first clear sign of an emerging trend which had become well-established by our period. In

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5 ibid., p.19; Baylies, op.cit., chapter 9.
6 David Rubinstein, "The Independent Labour Party and the Yorkshire Miners - the Barnsley by-election of 1897", International Review of Social History, 1978, pp.102-34. Baylies, op.cit., p.245.
7 Baylies, ibid., chapter 11. Howell, op.cit., p.22.
8 Baylies, op.cit., chapter 12.
9 Howell, op.cit., pp.20-21.

1919, most of the key figures in the YMA leadership were ILPers, and were veterans of the era of Lib-Lab domination. Edward Hough, Vice-President, had been active in Pete Curran's campaign; Alf Smith, Agent, had been the first ILP member on the Normanton Urban District Council in 1906; John Potts, Treasurer, had converted from Liberalism to the ILP during the Hemsworth dispute when he had been the Branch Secretary.[10]

Whilst the ILP's rise to prominence within the YMA marked the changes which had occurred since Pickard's day, there were strong elements of continuity as well. In the first place this could be measured by the continuing influence within the YMA of non-socialists who had been prominent during the Lib-Lab era. Samuel Roebuck, Junior General Secretary and a member of the MFGB EC in 1919, had been a delegate for Darfield Main Branch in 1890.[11] John Hoskin, Financial Secretary, was already Treasurer in 1904, and had built his career upon his book-keeping skills, taking no active part in the political life of the YMA, thus comfortably making the transition from one regime to the other.[12] Fred Hall and John Wadsworth, Agent and General Secretary respectively, had donned the mantle of Lib-Lab leaders following the deaths of Pickard and company. Hall had been MP for Normanton since 1906, as had Wadsworth for Hallamshire. In 1910, following the MFGB's affiliation the previous year, both had been obliged to sign the Labour Party constitution and sever links with their Liberal Associations, but for neither of them did this involve an ideological conversion.[13]

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10 For E.Hough see DLB, vol iii, p.117. For A.Smith see DLB, vol iii, pp.175-6; for J.Potts see DLB, vol ii,, p.311, and Baylies, op.cit., chapter 12.
11 DLB, vol iv, p.152.
12 ibid., p.98.
13 Roy Gregory, op.cit., pp.108-113.

Continuity between the two periods did not end here. Smith, like Pickard, developed a leadership style which embraced both industrial toughness - he was all grit and gristle - and political moderation. Like Pickard, his trade unionism did not flow from his ideological beliefs; rather, his brand of socialism was a pragmatic political expression of his industrial activity as a miners' leader, and subordinate to it. Thus he had joined in the attacks on ILP newcomer John Potts in 1906, when the latter had criticised the candidacies of Lib-Labs Hall and Wadsworth. Smith saw this as damaging to the cohesiveness of the YMA, which was in principle more important than party politics. In the 1920s he was to be renowned for his intolerance of communist critics within the MFGB; new targets for old hostilities, the CPers were to Smith what the ILPers had been to Pickard.

Taylor has explained how the similarity between Pickard the Lib-Lab and Smith the ILPer was not just a matter of "an aggressive, often authoritarian leadership style."[14] The transfer of political allegiance of the YMA, and Smith, from Lib-Lab to Labour was in essence a pragmatic adaptation, designed to maximise industrial effectiveness and political leverage when it became clear that these were no longer possible in association with the Liberals. This represented not so much the triumph of socialism over Lib-Labism, as a synthesis of competing ideologies on the basis of a changed industrial reality, with Herbert Smith as its "visible expression." This synthesis produced a "practical, non-ideological approach to union affairs" best described as labourism.[15] It was as the embodiment of labourism that Herbert Smith commanded such

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14 Andrew Taylor, "'Trailed on the tail of a comet': the Yorkshire Miners and the ILP, 1885-1908", in James, Jowitt and Laybourn (eds), The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party (Halifax, 1992), p.250 and *passim*.

15 ibid., pp.232 & 248-9.

loyalty amongst the Yorkshire miners, for they embraced the same ideals and values, which sprang from shared industrial and community experiences. As Hobsbawm has written, "Amongst the millions of men in caps he was certainly exceptional: but he was exceptional only as a particularly majestic tree in a large forest."[16] This image of Smith is not a historical reconstruction - it was widely recognised at the time. In 1919, during the Yorkshire strike, one observer wrote that "In stature, appearance, and in speech, he completely typifies the men he leads, and in all circumstances he is absolutely a man of the people."[17]

Smith was above all concerned to nurture what Taylor has called "the powerful political culture of the Yorkshire coalfield which stressed the supreme importance of solidarity and loyalty."[18] Like Pickard before him, maintaining organisational cohesion was at the top of Smith's agenda. This, of course, is always and everywhere an important consideration for any union bureaucracy, but in Yorkshire it had always been given a special emphasis. This was largely the result of problems in organising such a large workforce, with such diverse conditions and pressures. At the war's end there were about 200,000 mineworkers in the county, producing over 15% of Britain's total output, a figure exceeding that of the Scottish coalfields.

Whilst the YMA sought to organise all miners into one trade union, the county was effectively divided into two districts, a fact reflected by the existence of two seperate employers' organisations, the West Yorkshire Coalowners' Association (WYCOA), and the South Yorkshire

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16 E.J.Hobsbawm, Worlds of Labour (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1984), p.212.
17 Western Mail, 23-7-19.
18 Taylor, op.cit., p.253.

Coalowners' Association (SYCOA). The YMA itself had grown as a reaction to the weakness of the South and West Yorkshire miners' associations which had existed pre-1881. Conditions in the south and west of the county could hardly have been more different. The West Yorkshire coalfield was the older of the two, and was already well into its long, slow decline. About one third of the county's miners worked here, in small pits belonging to family concerns, characterised by low productivity and out-dated mining methods. The south Yorkshire coalfield by contrast was new and expanding. Centred on the Barnsley seam in the Donacaster area, these pits were deep, large-scale, capital-intensive mines which were amongst the most advanced in the world. The workforce in west Yorkshire lived in old established mining communities, whereas in the south a large proportion were newcomers, attracted into the area from surrounding coalfields and from the countryside by the large-scale investment, and the wages which were amongst the best for mining in the country. In 1905 Doncaster had still been a largely rural area; between 1901 and 1931, its population more than doubled. The miners here were developing a reputation for being more militant than their brothers in west Yorkshire, and would continue to do so beyond our period of study.[19]

Size of membership, variations in conditions, and different patterns of work and community experience were potentially disruptive factors for the YMA. Only South Wales was bigger and more diverse. But here, the development of the SWMF had involved the creation of eighteen seperate districts, each with their own union structures and full-time agent, and each posessing a fairly high degree of autonomy. This arrangement allowed the SWMF to absorb the centrifugal tendencies generated by size and

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19 Baylies, op.cit., chapter 1, especially pp.16-22.
Supple, British Coal Industry, pp.18-28
Neville, Thesis, pp.24-5.

diversity; district agents could respond to their menmbers' local grievances, and even call strikes, without necessarily dragging in the rest of the Federation. This was not the case in Yorkshire, where there was only one agent and seven full-time officials for 127,000 members, compared to twenty-four agents and sub-agents, and twenty-eight full-time officials altogether in South Wales for 160,000 members. Whereas the SWMF had achieved stability and permanence with the aid of an elaborate organisational mechanism, the YMA had had to rely to a greater extent on moral and ideological means, by stressing notions of loyalty, solidarity, and mutual preservation.

Both rank and file and the officials had an acute sense of the importance of unity, of not allowing divisions which could be exploited by the owners; this was important when two sets of coalowners often conspired to set men from one part of the county against the other. The apparatus of the YMA was designed to prevent such divisions; branches which desired to take industrial action had first to request permission to ballot from the Council, and, if granted, had to request permission again to lodge notices once a ballot majority had been secured. In both cases, the Council could not give the go-ahead until all other branches had been consulted.[20] It is of great significance that this careful and lengthy procedure was, with few exceptions, observed by the Yorkshire miners during the course of 1919, and there were hardly any instances of the unofficial strikes which so plagued other areas.[21] This was due above all to the fact that, at the end of the consultative process, the officials tended to comply with the wishes of the membership if they wanted action.

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20 Baylies, op.cit., p.170. The majority required for action was two-thirds of at least three-quarters of the branch members.
21 YMA 1919.

As Baylies says, "The YMA did not indulge in empty threats."[22] That this remained true in 1919 marks out the YMA bureaucracy from others within the Federation, at district and national level, and testifies to the confidence it had in the loyalty of its members. On the whole, the insurgent atmosphere tended to alert officials to the danger that strikes, once set in motion, could easily escape their control.

The membership had a considerable voice in the general affairs of the union. In addition to the YMA Council, on which each branch had a delegate, seventeen of the twenty-four members of the Executive Committee were elected from the rank and file on a panel basis.[23] The membership were also consulted about the make-up of delegations to MFGB conferences, in particular, as to how many officials should go. The potential here for rank and file control of the union must have been the envy of the South Wales URC members, who often complained about the preponderance of officials in conference delegations, and sought to restrict their numbers, but this delegation of authority in the YMA's constitution was never exploited by the members. Tradition meant that the officials were always elected to go by an overwhelming majority, even in the face of the general anti-official feeling that was so widespread in 1919.[24]

The YMA was thus characterised by a powerful consensual ethos, and functioned by means of a type of social contract between leaders and led, under the terms of which mutual loyalty was rewarded with organsisational stability and gradual material progress. This entailed a severe restriction of the space in which a rank and file movement could grow.

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22 Baylies, op.cit., pp.236-7.
23 Neville, Thesis, p.872. There were 17 panels, each consisting of a number of branches.
24 YMA Ordinary Council Meetings, 12 May 1919, and 7 August 1919.

This was true even in the 1920s, when the Miners' Minority Movement failed to gain more than the most tentative of footholds in the coalfield. When rank and file agitation did occur, it tended to take the form of a sporadic insurgency which reflected the temporary breakdown of normally effective channels of communication. The first half of the decade which saw the transition from Lib-Lab to Labour is one example of where this happened, resulting in uncharacteristic criticisms of the leadership and a series of unofficial panel meetings.[25] With the transition completed, these channels were re-opened, and unofficial activity faded away.

The extent to which traditional patterns of loyalty were re-established was illustrated during the war; in 1916 Smith signed voluntary no-strike agreements with both the WYCOA and the SYCOA which survived to the war's end virtually unscathed. In contrast to the industrial unrest which affected some other coalfields in the latter stages of the war, there were only ten collieries affected by strikes between January 1916 and November 1918, and these were relatively minor affairs. Furthermore, these were official strikes - the leaders were flexible enough to break their own agreements when they felt this was justified.[26] The absence of unofficial activity, and the relative tranquility of the coalfield, were reflected in the fact that mining was scarcely mentioned in the report of the Yorkshire division of the 1917 Industrial Unrest Commission.[27]

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25 Taylor, op.cit., p.247.
26 See Baylies, op.cit., p.411 for wartime strike statistics.
27 Commission of Enquiry Into Industrial Unrest, 1917: No.7 Division: Report of the Commissioners for the Yorkshire and East Midlands Area, PRO CAB 24/23 Cd.8664, passim.

The emphasis upon consensus, loyalty and solidarity, underwritten by a consultative constitutional mechanism, were the outcome of a forty year old tradition. Excessive political radicalism and unorthodox industrial strategies were eschewed as incompatible with the pragmatic approach upon which organisational stability and permanence had been built. These traits were not, however, indicative of an underlying pusillaminity. On the contrary, progress had been paid for in the form of often bitterly hard industrial struggles, in which the Yorkshire miners had displayed a fighting spirit which, if not unmatched, was certainly unsurpassed. The political and industrial culture of the YMA informed and shaped the course of events in 1919, both within Yorkshire's borders and beyond, and explains an apparent paradox; in a year which was hallmarked by unofficial insurgency in the industry, Yorkshire, a relative oasis of harmony between officials and rank and file, accounted for the majority of strike days lost. Direct action, viewed by moderate (and not so moderate) officials elsewhere as a radical and even revolutionary challenge to conventional trade unionism, was officially endorsed and put into practice by a YMA bureaucracy not given to political or industrial extremism. The form which this took, especially in July and August, decisively affected both the outcome of the struggle for the Miner's Charter, and the fortunes of the direct action movement itself.

### *(ii) Political moderation and industrial aggression: the social contract in early 1919.*

The social contract between officials and the rank and file, characterised by the familiar blend of political moderation and, when necessary, industrial aggression, survived the strains of the war. This

was put to the test in the early months of 1919, but in contrast to the other areas under study, it was ultimately strengthened by the experience.

Four and a half years of compulsory arbitration had seen the accumulation of a catalogue of grievances which demanded attention as soon as peace broke out. There were serious protests from several districts regarding the supply and quality of food, and at numerous collieries there was unrest and threatened strikes over anachronistic and rickety price lists. These sorts of problems were, in common with everywhere else, exacerbated by the problems associated with demobilisation. Reports came in to the YMA of ex-soldiers being refused work, or being dismissed for protesting at being placed on work which they were physically incapable of doing through disability.[28] Here once again the ingredients were present for chronic industrial unrest at the war's end. In the other areas we have studied, this took the form of a plethora of unofficial strikes as an impatient rank and file clashed with cautious union bureaucracies. In Yorkshire however, official trade union procedures proved remarkably resilient, and industrial relations remained well-ordered, if not trouble-free. So for example, pit level militancy over price lists was canalised through official channels, with all branches following the careful procedures for balloting laid down in the constitution. In the context of the general wage militancy in mining in 1919, it is significant that this lengthy process was observed to the letter. In no instance did it break down and lead to wildcat strikes.29

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28 YMA Ordinary Council Meeting, 7 January 1919;
Barnsley Chronicle, 11 January 1919;
Barnsley Independent, 4 January 1919.
29 YMA 1919.

That this was equally applicable to the question of demobilisation is even more striking, given the divisive impact which it had in other areas. Objectively, the problems presented by the return of the soldier-miners was no less acute in Yorkshire, where proportionately the number which had enlisted or been called up was similar to other coalfields.[30] The difference lay in the manner in which the YMA sought to reincorporate the returning men into the industry. It moved quickly to establish a scheme for coping with demobilisation, and by December 18th 1918, District Demobilisation Committees consisting of five owners representatives and three workers representatives had been established in South and West Yorkshire.[31] What was different about Yorkshire was not the existence of such a scheme, but the fact that it functioned smoothly. This appears to have been in part due to the cooperation of the coal owners' Associations, but more important was the cooperation of the YMA members, who agreed that all men who had become miners during the war should be laid off in rotation to make way for men who had joined the colours.[32] In South Wales, Nottinghamshire, and Fife and Lanarkshire this proved unacceptable, and rank and file militants were able to agitate effectively against any scheme which involved one miner making another redundant. In Yorkshire however, just as there had been no effective opposition to the war or even to the YMA's no-strike agreement, now there was no audible demand for the post-1914 miners to have the right to work in the pits. Whether or not the reform committees campaigned over any of these issues is uncertain, but if they did the impact they had was insufficient to leave any trace in the sources.

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30 Committee into coal production at the end of the war.
31 Neville, Thesis, pp.524-5.
32 MFGB Special Conference, 14-16 January 1919, pp.36-37.

Of the four areas under study then, Yorkshire was unique in that the demobilisation crisis was resolved without the development of a breach between the rank and file and the officials, because of an unchallenged political consensus that ex-soldiers should take precedence in employment where vacancies were restricted. Furthermore, this meant that the pressure for immediate national action to secure the Miners' Charter, in order to reduce hours of work and allow the absorption of excess labour, was not so intense here as it was in those areas where the option of dismissing the post- 1914 men was rejected. This had important national ramifications; at the MFGB conferences in the first quarter of the year, the Yorkshire delegations, second in size only to South Wales, consistently provided the national leadership with a bedrock of support in its strategy of seeking progress at a measured pace through negotiation and compromise. The Yorkshire delegation voted with the MFGB EC at the first three conferences on the critical questions of restricting the wage demand to 30%, giving no recommendation in the strike ballot, and for acceptance of the Sankey Commission.[33]

The strike action which did take place in January again contrasts sharply with the experience elsewhere, in that it demonstrated the responsiveness of the officials to the demands of a section of their membership, and their willingness to sanction industrial action before pressure from below reached a critical point. In this case the pressure was applied by the surface workers who, in Yorkshire as elsewhere, traditionally carried less weight within the unions affiliated to the Federation than the colliers and other underground workers. That an estimated 18,000 surface

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33 MFGB Special Conference, 14-16 January 1919, p.99;
MFGB Special Conference, 12-13 February 1919, p.37;
MFGB Special Conference, 26-27 February 1919, p.53.

workers were not in the YMA reflected this long-standing neglect.[34] The Yorkshire officials had begun to rectify this situation in 1917, by pushing for a reduction of hours to 54 per week, and a wage increase through arbitration.[35] Subsequent to this the YMA submitted another claim for improvements in hours and wages, shorter weekend shifts, overtime at time and a half for weekend work, and home coal on the same basis as underground workers. This was partially superseded in November 1918 when the MFGB successfully negotiated a national deal for surface workers, which reduced their hours to 49 per week.[36]

Implementation of the deal went ahead smoothly in West Yorkshire, but in South Yorkshire the owners refused to agree to the provision for a twenty minute "deadstop" when working would cease to allow "snap" to be taken.[37] Traditionally, the "snap" system differed from pit to pit, ranging from fifteen minutes to half an hour, most often taken in relays to allow continuous winding of coal.[38] Smith said that "if industries could not be worked with a twenty minute stoppage for meals, then something was seriously wrong", and abruptly informed the owners that were it not conceded by January 7th, then the YMA surface workers would down tools at 2.30pm and implement it directly.[39] At the YMA Council meeting held on

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34 Yorkshire Post, 23 January 1919.
Baylies, op.cit., p.432.
35 ibid., pp.422-432 for an account of the YMA's turn towards the surface workers in the latter stages of the war.
Mexborough and Swinton Times, 25 January 1919.
Neville, Thesis, p.525.
36 Neville, Thesis, pp.526-7.
37 Barnsley Chronicle, 25 January 1919. "Snap" was a colloquialism for a light meal.
38 Doncaster Gazette, 17 January 1919.
39 Sheffield Weekly Independent, 25 January 1919;
Joint Committee Meeting of SYCOA and YMA, 23 December 1918.

this date the officials attempted to backpedal, arguing for action to be delayed for a week, but were heavily voted down by the delegates.[40]

At Denaby Main and Cadeby Main the custom had been to call "snap-time" when winding was suspended for whatever reason. In other words, the working rhythm of the pit determined when the men ate, rather than the other way round. This was hardly the mine-workers' idea of reconstruction, and following the YMA Council's decision, the surface workers at these collieries carried out Smith's threat, and stopped work to take their food. On Friday January 10 the management sent them home, along with the underground workers. The following day the men at Bullcroft and Brodsworth followed suit, and were also locked out. During the next week the action spread branch by branch through the Doncaster and then the Barnsley areas, until by the Saturday something approaching 30,000 South Yorkshire miners had been locked out at twenty six collieries.[41]

Although they had favoured further negotiations, the YMA officials did not attempt to stop the branch level militancy, and on January 18th recommended that "direct action" be taken to force a settlement.[42] At a further meeting on Tuesday 21st January, the YMA Council decided unanimously to put this policy into practice on the following day, and to pull out all the pumpsmen and winding-engine men if no deal had been reached.[43] At the end of the afternoon shift, 150,000 miners struck. Less than twenty four hours later, the Coal Controller wired the YMA that he

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40 YMA Ordinary Council Meeting, 7 January 1919. The vote was 125 to 22.
41 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 18 & 25 January 1919; Barnsley Independent, 18 & 25 January 1919.
42 YMA Ordinary Council Meeting, 18 January 1919.
43 YMA Special Council Meeting, 21 January 1919.

agreed to instruct the SYCOA to concede the twenty minute deadstop, even though at a meeting shortly before the strike he had told the miners that he could do no such thing.[44] By Friday the miners had returned to work victorious, and over the following weeks the YMA secured the bulk of its remaining demands regarding the surface workers in negotiations.[45]

The deadstop strike was a dramatic vindication of the social contract; although only a small minority of the membership (YMA surface workers in South Yorkshire) were directly affected, their union colleagues and officials responded to what were seen as their legitimate grievances with a vigorous display of total solidarity. In a manner reminiscent of the South Wales strike of 1915, the Government, in the shape of the Coal Controller, had "capitulated with humiliating promptitude"[46] in the face of the industrial power of the Yorkshire miners, and in the weeks following the strike, surface workers flocked into the union, until by the end of February one newspaper estimated that 97% had become members.[47]

The experience of Yorkshire in this important preliminary phase of 1919 thus contrasts sharply with other districts, where unofficial strikes raised the curtain on a year of rank and file rebelliousness. In Yorkshire however, a brief, official strike announced an uncommon unity between leadership and led. The demand for a twenty minute deadstop might not seem particularly pressing when stood next to the grand themes which illuminated the Miners' Charter, unless, of course, you were often unable to eat properly during a nine hour shift. By refusing to allow these

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44 Barnsley Independent, 25 January 1919.
45 Neville, Thesis, p.530.
46 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 25 January 1919.
47 Doncaster Chronicle, 28 February 1919.

bread and butter concerns of the membership to be eclipsed by national priorities the officials maintained their alliegance, and prevented a space from developing in which unofficial pretenders could agitate successfully.

Nonetheless, the general atmosphere of antipathy towards officials which surrounded trade unionism in 1919 did not leave Yorkshire entirely unscathed; there was an active Miners Reform Committee of indeterminate size, in South Yorkshire at least, which was represented at the London Workers' Committee Conference in London in June.[48] The nature of its intervention in the deadstop strike is illuminating of the problems which it had in 1919. On January 24th and 25th there were mass meetings in Doncaster Market Place, which seem likely to have been called by branches in the Doncaster area where the MRC had some measure of influence. MRC members sought to extend the strike into an indefinite one for the six hour day, and were highly critical of the YMA officials. Geoff Whittles said that:

> In his opinion there were too many officials in connection with their various organisations. What was needed was rank and file settlements, also that when there was trouble the entire machinery should be put in motion, and not one or two pits to come out while the others were working.[49]

Agitation of this sort could strike a chord in districts where the officials were unwilling to take militant industrial action in response to members' local grievances, and provide the Reform Committees with an opportunity to win some support for the idea of immediate direct action over the Miners' Charter. However, in the context of the deadstop strike it was utterly futile; the entire membership (except for the pumpmen and winding-engine men) had been called out on strike, and it had been

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48 Workers' Dreadnought, 21 June 1919.
49 ibid., 24 & 25 January 1919.

consulted, at branch meetings, before the settlement was finally accepted.[50] Far from the dispute driving a wedge between rank and file and officials, it cemented an already amicable relationship, and reinforced the social contract.

Similarly, no success was forthcoming from the attempts which were made, by Bullcroft branch in particular, to secure rule changes along the lines advocated by The Miners' Next Step. One sought to add to the YMA's list of objectives:

> To continually agitate in favour of increasing the minimum wage and shortening the hours of work until we have extracted the whole of the employers' profits.[51]

Another sought to turn the Executive Committee into a rank and file body, where officials would have only an advisory role. Neither of these met with much support from the rest of the YMA delegates however.[52] In light of the above, the claims which were made by a South Yorkshire delegate to the London Workers'Committee Conference regarding the strength of the MRC are surprising. The report states that:

> A miner from South Yorkshire reported that the Workers' Committee movement is making great progress there. In some collieries the workers had as many as eighty members. His branch was prepared to endorse any drastic action.[53]

It is impossible to evaluate whether this claim for the membership of the rank and file committees is exagerated, but if it is not, it merely serves to underline the basic point; even with such a respectable

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50 ibid., 31 January 1919.
51 YMA Ordinary Council Meetings, 26 May 1919, and 31 May 1919. The resolutions were defeated by 129 to 10, and by 2040 to 173 respectively.
52 YMA Ordinary Council Meetings, 26 May 1919, and 31 May 1919. The resolutions were defeated by 129 to 10, and by 2040 to 173 respectively.
53 Workers' Dreadnought, 21 June 1919.

membership, the terrain of the YMA was such that the unofficial movement was unable to mount an effective challenge to the leadership. The only partial exception to this came in late March, when there was a brief unofficial strike of 20,000 to 30,000 miners in the Sheffield area, in protest at the MFGB Conference decision to recommend acceptance of the Sankey Report. Leaflets were distributed in the run-up to the ballot, calling for rejection and "D—— (sic) the consequences."[54] However, the strike quickly fizzled out without having any discernible impact elsewhere in the coalfield. Baylies' general point about examples of unofficial and anti-official activity is germane to the Sheffield strike: "Such incidents are important by their relative rarity in revealing the essential continuity of the broader internal solidarity which characterised the YMA."[55]

The unofficial element simply could not find sufficient space within which to operate and attract support for an alternative strategy in 1919 - it was smothered by the pragmatic, consensual approach of the miners and their leaders. Its difficulty was visible, ironically enough, in the expulsion of J.Walton MP by the YMA Council in May 1919. This was due to his having issued a leaflet calling for a 'no' vote in the original MFGB ballot for a national strike earlier in the year.[56] The Workers' Dreadnought was ecstatic, seeing it as the vital breakthrough;

> It is the wind that foretells the Workers' Revolution, for this decision of the Yorkshire miners means nothing less than that the workers are beginning, at last, to rise up against the bureaucrats who have sold them; the rank and file are at last beginning to manage their own affairs.[57]

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54 Sheffield Independent, 28 & 29 March 1919;
Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 29 March 1919;
Yorkshire Telegraph and Star, 31 July 1919.
55 Baylies, op.cit., p.xi.
56 YMA Ordinary Council Meeting, 12 May 1919.
57 Workers' Dreadnought, 31 May 1919.

This was a complete misunderstanding of Yorkshire mining politics. Walton had transgressed the codes of unity and solidarity upon which the YMA had been built, and anyone who threatened these was seen as potentially destructive and therefore beyond the pale. Crucially, this could apply to the left as well as the right, especially in industrial matters. It is significant that Walton's membership of the National Democratic and Labour Party, whilst distasteful to most Yorkshire miners, was not the reason for his expulsion.

As it was in Walton's case, so it was generally that political matters took second place to industrial ones, and were judged with reference to them. The responsiveness of the officials on industrial questions therefore also closed down what political space there might have been for the revolutionary and syndicalist politics of the unofficial committees in Yorkshire in 1919. This is not to say that the Yorkshire miners were unaffected by the general shift to the left which took place in the working class. That they shared this trajectory is shown by the many branch resolutions sent to the YMA Council during the year; for the abolition of conscription and the withdrawal of troops from Russia; against "the imperialistic document miscalled the Peace Terms as drafted by the aristocratic dictators of the Big Four"; for the boycotting of the peace celebrations. These were just some of the political issues which concerned the Yorkshire miners in 1919.[58] However, just as industrial militancy was channelled through the conduit of the YMA's official structures, so too was political radicalisation. The miners eschewal of unofficial industrial activity set the parameters for this

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58 YMA Ordinary Council Meeting, 7 January 1919;
YMA Adjourned Council Meeting, 17 May 1919;
Ordinary Council Meeting, 26 May 1919.

radicalisation, which took place within the received labourite tradition of the YMA rather than against it. There is no trace in the sources of the enthusiasm for a more revolutionary brand of politics which we have seen in the other areas we have studied. The Yorkshire miners seem to have been content to express their political demands inside their union, and entrust their resolution to the officials.

(iii) The "Fresh-Air Strike"

The strike of Yorkshire miners in the summer of 1919 was described, not a-typically, by a newspaper based in the neighbouring Nottinghamshire coalfield, as "the gravest industrial crisis the country has had to face within living memory."[59] Given what we know about the character of much of the unrest which had already taken place in 1919, this statement seems to make highly exaggerated claims for what was, after all, a peaceful regional dispute over relatively minor adjustments in colliers' piece rates. Put like this, the inversely proportionate weight given by historians to the Yorkshire strike, compared to, for example, the far more physically tumultuous forty hours movement on the Clyde, seems justified. I propose to argue two things in relation to these observations. Firstly, that placed in its proper historical context, that is, as history appeared to be unravelling to those who witnessed it, the Nottinghamshire Evening News' claim was not an unreasonable one. And secondly, that mass pickets and violent clashes with the state's forces are by no means the only criteria by which we can recognise historically important movements of workers. In this sense, what didn't happen in the "uneventful" Yorkshire strike, is as important as what did happen on the Clyde six months before.

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59 Nottingham Evening News, 22 July 1919.

Turning to the "proper historical context" of the Yorkshire strike, one is struck first of all by its timing. Running from mid-July to mid-August, it encapsulated within its time-span all the major events which, taken together, constituted the general crisis which gripped British politics and society in this summer. It was during these four weeks that speculation about the Government's possible downfall was loudest, that the Luton riots and those it spawned took place, that the police struck and chaos ensued on Merseyside, that the strikes of Bakers and North-East Railway workers happened, and that the Triple Alliance decided to ballot on direct action. Its timing alone helps to account for the gravity with which the decision of the Yorkshire miners to strike was received, for it seemed that the infectious fever of industrial militancy had now been contracted again by the miners, and there was no telling how far it might spread.

Labour correspondents were not alone in imagining that this was the beginning of the long awaited showdown between the miners and the state. YMA officials intimated their belief that the unrest, which was coursing through the coalfields in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, the Midlands, Lancashire and South Wales, would force the leaders there to call all their members out.[60] Furthermore, although the MFGB EC had carefully avoided direct action at Keswick, outside the conference hall some leaders, Hodges in particular, were talking up the prospects of a fight with the Government over nationalisation. At the Northumberland Miners' Gala shortly before the Annual Conference he had said:

> They could not shell the capitalists out of their position by resolutions. The time had come to challenge

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60 Interview with an unnamed YMA official, South Wales News, 26 July 1919.

> their position, pitting industrial strength against industrial strength...If they felt their greatest opportunity slipping through their fingers, would they not clench their fist and use it with the greatest possible effect on the enemy?[61]

From Westminster, parliamentary correspondents reported that MPs from all parties "now appear to have made up their minds that we are to have a big coal strike."[62] Another wrote that:

> The view of the lobby last night was that the Yorkshire dispute over time rates will now be kept going to embarass the country, so that at any moment it can be merged into a national dispute. Coalowners in the House, and the business community generally, now expect the miners to declare a national strike and hold that it must come soon. A number of blast furnaces have been blown out already in the expectation of the cutting off of coal supplies.[63]

The strikes in other areas, and the fighting rhetoric of some miners' leaders, meant that the Keswick conference (whose sessions on piece rates and surface workers had in any case been closed to the press) had not dispelled the popular perception that the decisive battle was about to be joined. Certainly such an idea persisted in Government circles. Lloyd George called for an urgent report from the Cabinet Committee on Industrial Unrest. Auckland Geddes was fearful that in the prevailing atmosphere, which was made worse by the unofficial strike on the North-Eastern Railway, the Yorkshire strike "might result in a complete strike of all the miners, and possibly this would be followed by the Triple Alliance coming out."[64] Lloyd George told the Cabinet on 21 July:

> The present situation was practical, and not theoretical, Bolshevism, and must be dealt with a firm hand...The whole of the future of the country might be at stake, and if the Government were beaten and the miners won, it would result in Soviet Government. A similar situation might result to that of the first days of the Revolution in Russia, and although

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61 Daily Herald, 14 July 1919; The Times, 14 July 1919.
62 Manchester Evening News, 22 July 1919.
63 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 18 July 1919.
64 CAB 27-59/IUC, 19 July 1919.

> Parliament might remain, the real Parliament would be at the headquarters of the Miners' Federation in Russell Square.[65]

The strike's relation to the general crisis was not simply one of timing. Rather, it occupied a strategically important location within it. In so far as the anticipated conflict over nationalisation of the mines lay at the heart of the pervading atmosphere of instability, the Yorkshire strike took on a national significance which went way beyond its regional and local status. The Yorkshire strike was to prove to be the decisive industrial conflict in mining in 1919, but not in the way which so many had imagined at its outset. For although it was fought over an issue entirely unconnected with nationalisation, it had by its end wrought a profound impact on the question of ownership of the industry.

Following the MFGB's decision that the practical details of matters arising from the introduction of the seven hour day should be dealt with by the districts, the YMA had entered into negotiations with the two coalowners' associations. Initially the YMA sought a piece rate adjustment of 16.6% to compensate those who had a long way to walk underground before they could begin hewing[66], but subsequently it decided to accept 14.3% "in order to show" the Silverwood branch delegate explained, "that they were not out for the pound of flesh."[67] At first, both sets of owners had agreed to a 14.3% increase, but the WYCOA withdrew the offer on June 27. After further talks it reaffirmed the

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65 WC (596A), 21 July 1919; CAB 23-15-136/7.

66 Barnsley Chronicle, 9 August 1919; According to Smith, 6,000 miners had to walk three miles to and from working places, leaving them only five hours effective hewing time under the seven hour day. According to his calculations, these men needed 25% to avoid a loss of earnings.

67 Rotherham Express, 12 July 1919.

offer, on July 1, and so at this stage the piece rate adjustment issue appeared to have been resolved to the YMA's satisfaction.[68]

The question of the alteration of hours proved more contentious, as the YMA sought to impose its own interpretation of the Sankey Award. Under the Eight Hours Act, the union had successfully established a seven and a half hour day at most double-shift pits, and a short Saturday shift of six and a half hours, and it wanted these local customs to continue under the Seven Hour Act. As a branch official explained,

> What the men had asked for was two hours a day less in the bowels of the earth and they had been granted one on paper, but only half an hour in fact, according to the owners' interpretation.[69]

In South Yorkshire at least, considerable progress was accomplished in negotiations, as the SYCOA agreed to a six hour Saturday, and to a forty-six hour week inclusive of mealtimes for surface workers, rather than the forty-six and a half hours exclusive stipulated in the Sankey Award.[70] In West Yorkshire however, the owners were less willing to make these concessions, and the situation was complicated further by a seperate dispute over winding-enginemen's pay and hours which had remained unresolved since February.[71] On July 12, the YMA Council voted to strike if no settlement had been achieved across the county within three days,

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68 Daily Herald, 5 August 1919;
Barnsley Chronicle, 26 July 1919;
Yorkshire Telegraph and Star, 26 July 1919; The complicated issues raised by the introduction of the seven hour day, the basis upon which piece rate adjustments were calculated, and the course of negotiations leading up to the strike are best explained in the interviews and statements made by Smith and Roebuck contained in these issues. These should be read in conjunction with the debates at MFGB Annual Conference. See also G.D.H.Cole, Coal-Mining, pp.105-107.

69 Rotherham Express, 12 July 1919.

70 MFGB Annual Conference, 17 July 1919, p.101;
ibid., 18 July 1919, p.132.

71 Neville, Thesis, p.552.

but the YMA officials were not committed to precipitate action, rather seeing the strike vote at this stage as a lever with which to extract further concessions in negotiations. Potts explained a few days later, at the MFGB Conference, that at this stage they had been confident that a peaceful solution of the hours question had been within reach.[72]

Between these two dates the Coal Controller made his second, and decisive intervention. Up until this point the YMA had entertained the hope that, with the backing of the SYCOA and the WYCOA, it could persuade Evan Jones to allow the owners to make up the difference between the 12.5% figure that it behove the Government to pay, and 14.3%. However, on July 14 he instructed the owners again that the 12.5% ceiling was in no circumstances to be breached. The SYCOA intimated that as far as it was concerned, it was still amenable to 14.3% should Jones change his mind, but the WYCOA withdrew its offer and talks broke down. The piece rate adjustment had now once again become the major issue in dispute, although the related demands concerning hours remained very much on the table.[73] This was the situation when the YMA Council met on July 15, the day on which notices were set to expire. Smith urged the delegates to confine the strike to West Yorkshire, presumably hoping that there was the prospect of progress in South Yorkshire as long as the reasonable attitude of the SYCOA continued, but he was outvoted by a narrow margin as the Council voted for a county-wide stoppage.[74]

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72 MFGB Annual Conference, 17 July 1919, p.88.
73 Barnsley Chronicle, 15 & 16 July 1919;
Leeds Mercury, 15 & 16 July 1919;
Doncaster Chronicle, 15 & 16 July 1919.
74 YMA Special Council Meeting, 15 July 1919; The vote was 1270 to 1046.

The Council meeting was then adjourned until the following day, so that the members could be consulted at branch meetings. In South Yorkshire there was apparently "some indignation...at the recommendation of Herbert Smith", and "in the spirit of unionism" the branches here voted for solidarity action with their West Yorkshire colleagues, resulting in a much larger majority for a total stoppage at the reconvened Council meeting.[75] Solidarity aside, the Coal Controller's intervention had rendered inappropriate a strike policy which discriminated against only one set of owners. As the WYCOA's Secretary pointed out in a letter to Smith, the dispute was now "entirely between your Association and the Coal Controller."[76] When, at 10pm on Wednesday July 16, all miners on the afternoon shift struck work, they were walking into a conflict not with the owners primarily, but with the Government.

The strike was already being set in motion when the MFGB Annual Conference opened at Keswick on July 15, and the YMA delegation, significantly minus one Herbert Smith, went seeking the support of the national union. However, it was dismayed to discover that the EC's position, whilst at variance with the 12.5% figure, was in essence the same as that of the Coal Controller and the owners when it came to the interpretation of the hour's reduction under the Sankey Award. Alf Smith, recently elected Agent in place of Fred Hall MP, protested that "we were all of opinion that the Sankey Award did mean an hour's reduction". To Smillie's swift rebuttal that "That is not a Federation demand", the Yorkshiremen countered frankly that in that case, "we are trying to get better conditions than the Sankey Award." Smillie highlighted the gravity

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75 Leeds Mercury, 17 July 1919;
YMA Adjourned Council Meeting, 16 July 1919.
Yorkshire Post, 5 August 1919, records the vote as 1881 to 448 in favour of county-wide strike.

76 YMA Special Council Meeting, 15 July 1919.

of Yorkshire's defiance: "Supposing a large district ...say they are not going to accept the decision of the ballot, then that will be the end of all things so far as this Federation is concerned." In desperation, Smillie attempted to instruct the YMA delegates to vote with the EC on the questions of piece rates and surface workers, but they stood their ground. Bailey said:

> We cannot support a resolution of this description, undermining the whole principle for which we are out in Yorkshire at the present moment...We shall have our position given away.77

Under the MFGB's interpretation, the only way in which the YMA could realise the 14.3% was by giving up its local customs and working a longer Saturday shift than had been the case previous to the Sankey Award. Furthermore, it meant losing the favourable terms which had been secured for the surface workers in South Yorkshire. Along with Lancashire and Kent, Yorkshire voted against the MFGB's resolution on piece rates, and it refused to participate in the declaration to the surface workers, which was directed as much against its members as those on strike in Monmouthshire.[78]

During one heated exchange Alf Smith protested that "Yorkshire are fighting not only the owners but the Federation."[79] This was no exaggeration. During the course of the Conference, a gulf had opened up between the YMA and the MFGB EC, one that widened and deepened as the strike wore on. Herbert Smith, as vice-President of the MFGB, was placed in an extremely difficult situation, but he had no qualms about continuing the strike, which was at odds with the spirit of the national union's constitution, if not its letter. On behalf of the YMA he sent a

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77 MFGB Annual Conference, 17 July 1919 pp.96-102.
78 ibid., 18 July 1919, pp.130-132.
79 ibid., 17 July 1919, p.96.

strongly worded missive to the National Executive, warning it "not to interfere with with the Yorkshire position at all" as enough of a "disservice" had been done to its cause at Keswick, and pointing out "that we know our position better locally than the Miners' Federation does."[80] In public, Smith was no less dismissive of the Federation, saying that the Keswick resolution on piece rates "was the first time he had heard of trade unionists voting for a maximum. It was a new school of thought entirely to him." His bottom line, that "the Miners' Federation have nothing whatever to do with the position in Yorkshire" was shared by the YMA membership, and remained unchanged until the end of the strike.[81]

As a senior official of two organisations which had come into direct conflict with one another, Herbert Smith was in an extremely difficult position - that his attitude was so straightforward and unambiguous testified to the solidaristic parochialism characteristic of the YMA. Whilst other district leaderships might criticise the MFGB EC at Keswick, and even in the case of Lancashire and Kent vote against it, only the Yorkshire officials were prepared to side unequivocally with their members in practice. Once again, the YMA's social contract had come into effect, overriding Smith's doubts about the advisability of the strike. As he said:

> Whatever might be my own opinion as to how this dispute should have been manoeuvred, the men have decided the line of policy in a constitutional manner, and I shall follow out that line to the best of my ability.[82]

Ben Turner commented in the Daily Herald after the strike:

> Mr.Smith urged the Yorkshiremen to work. The rank and file (Smith is always willing to consult, and be guided

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80 H.Smith to F.Hodges, YMA 24 July 1919.
81 Barnsley Chronicle, 19 July 1919;
Leeds Mercury, 23 July 1919.
82 Leeds Mercury, 21 July 1919.

> from, the rank and file) insisted upon a complete stoppage. It was done demacratically in every sense of the word. It was a tribute to their loyalty to each other.[83]

Of the two hats on offer to him, Smith had no hesitation in choosing which one to wear; for the duration of the strike, he effectively abandoned his position as Vice-President of the MFGB as inconsistent with the interests, or at least the wishes, of his members.

With any support from the Federation now completely out of the question, the YMA looked to its own resources to bring more pressure to bear on the Government. On 19th July, in line with the decision of the YMA Council earlier in the week, (but again, according to Geddes, against Smith's advice) the pumpmen and winding-enginemen were pulled out, thus opening up the danger of the pits flooding, and taking the total number on strike to 200,000.[84] In doing so, the Yorkshire miners were drawing on the experience of the deadstop strike, when the Coal Controller had caved in within twenty four hours. By using the same tactics, the YMA Council delegates were hoping for a similar result.[85] This time, however, the mood amongst industrialists and Coalition politicians was for the Government to meet the miners head on. Lloyd George told ministers "He was rather inclined to agree that the mine owners were right and that a fight had got to come."[86] From Westminster it was reported that:

> The feeling is actually one of relief that an end will be put to a state of things which has existed for some time. It seems to be recognised that a trial of strength between authority and the extreme section of Labour must come sooner or later, and the general

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83 Daily Herald, 21 August 1919.
84 YMA Special Council Meeting, 16 July 1919; Sheffield Independent, 19 July 1919. CAB 27-59; UC 3, 23 July 1919, "Telephonic Report by Sir Eric Geddes."
85 See the speech of the Manvers Main delegate to his Branch Meeting on January 16th, Mexborough and Swinton Times, 19 July 1919.
86 WC (596A), 21 July 1919; CAB 23-15-136/7.

> tendency is to regard the present time as the best. The suspense, it is argued, has got to be put an end to.[87]

The Board of Trade issued instructions to divert ships carrying coal to home ports, to restrict exports, and for railway companies and local authorities to stockpile as much coal as possible. The Industrial Unrest Committee, which met six times during the strike, feared solidarity action by the railwaymen, and considered putting into effect contingency plans to establish a volunteer transport corps. Horne pushed hard for such a move, but it was rejected by the Committee on the advice of George Roberts who felt that, with a Triple Alliance ballot on direct action impending, such provocative action would undermine "the more moderate leaders (who) were endeavouring to persuade the men to vote against it."[88] However, the Committee did decide to send 2,500 naval ratings in to the coalfield to pump the mines, and that these, and any miners who were prepared to strike-break, should be protected by police and troops. In relation to this Horne said that:

> The number of troops available for protection appeared to him to be altogether inadequate. The docks at Liverpool, Cardiff and Bristol alone would require large military forces. He thought it would prove necessary to bring to this country at once the whole or the greater part of the four Divisions on the Rhine who were stated to be available for this purpose.[89]

In the event, two of these divisions were brought back to Britain, and stationed at Clipstone Camp, from where batallions were sent to Leeds, Pontefract, and Dewsbury.[90]

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87 Manchester Evening News, 22 July 1919.
88 CAB 27-59; IUC Minutes, 19 July and 6 August 1919.
89 ibid., 19 July and 25 July 1919.
90 CAB 27-59; UC 8, 22 July 1919, "Telephonic Report from Sir Eric Geddes."
Wrigley, (1990), p.199.

These behind the scenes preparations were complemented by, and contingent upon, a public relations offensive against the miners. Lloyd George had emphasised to the Cabinet that "if the Government chose the present moment they must be certain that they were on firm ground and had public opinion behind them."[91] The Government presented the decision of the YMA to pull out the pumpmen and winding-enginemen as an act of wanton destruction, and an unacceptable attempt at intimidation. It justified its own intervention in terms similar to the ones it had used throughout the output controversy, that is to say it developed the theme of a national crisis in which the miners were now not only selfish and lazy, but had become dangerous and destructive, a threat to what ministers repeatedly referred to as "the community".

Lloyd George announced the decision to send in the navy in the House of Commons on Monday July 21st. In his speech, he emphasised the threat which the strike posed to the economic health of the nation, by exaggerating the risks of flooding, and underlining Yorkshire's importance to domestic industry as the second largest coalfield. In a situation in which the Government had been proclaiming production to be "the need of the hour", the withdrawal of the pumpmen and engine-men was an act of "sabotage".[92] Some ministers drew analogies with the war to recreate an atmosphere of national emergency and rekindle the patriotic mood of 1918. A "very high up member of the Government" said:

> This is precisely the same thing as done by the Germans in the case of the mines of northern France. Not only did they prevent the French from getting coal, but by destroying the mines as far as possible, they endeavoured to prevent an economic recovery.[93]

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91 WC (596A), 21 July 1919; CAB 23-15-136/7.
92 118 H.C.Deb.5s, c.916-918, 21 July 1919.
93 Leeds Mercury, 22 July 1919.

George Roberts, Food Controller and ex-Labour MP, went as far as suggesting that German agents might be behind the strike as "Germany has planned for just this position."[94] The press was quick to seize upon this theme:

> It is incredible that the Yorkshire miners, in cold blood, should do so deliberate act of terrorisation - what the Germans did as a savage act of warfare in the coal mines of France."[95]

The Leeds Mercury had an almost apocalyptic tone:

> Language is inadequate to convey the gravity of the present situation. Not in the blackest days of the war were we faced with such an appalling prospect. Our very existence as a community is threatened.

If the strike was to continue for long, "the black figure of famine will stalk the land, accompanied by the fell sisters, pestilence and crime."[96] The powerful imagery of a community threatened with destruction by a common enemy was evocative of wartime propaganda, only this time the enemy was an internal one, with the Yorkshire miners cast in the role of the menacing Prussian bully.

Government and press rhetoric played up notions of an implicitly classless community based upon shared values concerning the sanctity of property and legality, which the miners by their actions had shown themselves to be outside of. Their behaviour, The Times suggested, "shows a recklessness and callousness which is literally appalling."[97] Whilst the Yorkshiremen were portrayed, to use a phrase coined by George Roberts as "the forces of disorder", the Government was keen to present itself as the saviour and protector of this "community", to which it appealed for support.[98] Eric Geddes was sent by the Cabinet to coordinate the

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94 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 24 July 1919.
95 Leeds Mercury, 22 July 1919.
96 ibid., 23 July 1919.
97 The Times, 22 July 1919.
98 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 24 July 1919.

Government's rescue mission. His very public brief was neither to mediate nor strike-break, but "to safeguard the vital interests of the general public." [99] Upon arriving at his headquarters in Leeds, Geddes issued the following statement to the press:

> The Government is determined that all the resources of the State, whether of citizens or armed forces of the Crown, shall be used to prevent ruin to the community. It is not to take part in fighting the strike, but to save the life of the nation as far as we can.[100]

Portrayed as being above the sordid infighting between the YMA and the MFGB which had caused the strike, Geddes was dubbed "Minister for the Man-in-the-Street".[101]

Such propaganda notwithstanding, the Government was pursuing a high-risk strategy by sending troops into the midst of the Yorkshire strike. Ever since the army had been deployed on Clydeside at the beginning of the year, the possibility that the military might again be used in industrial disputes had been a cause for agitation throughout the trade union movement. The circular which Churchill had sent round to Army Commanders in the Spring, enquiring as to the suitability of their troops for use in strikes, which had been sensationally published by the Daily Herald, had sent shock waves through the labour movement, and the renewal of the military service acts had served to confirm fears of a militaristic State, both at home and abroad. The YMA Council had been particularly concerned, as the episode had resurrected memories of the strike of 1893, when troops had fired upon a crowd of miners, leaving two dead. This had gone down in the popular memory of the coalfield as the "Featherstone Massacre".[102] Eric Geddes reported from Yorkshire that the owners were

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99 ibid.
100 ibid.
101 Leeds Mercury, 23 July 1919.
102 YMA Ordinary Council Meeting, 10 February 1919; Baylies, op.cit., pp.119-125 for an account of the

afraid that the intervention of the armed forces "would result in the wrecking of the pit machinery and of the villages in the neighbourhood of the pits." He himself felt that the possibility of rioting was increased by the shortage of food in the area which was being caused by a strike of the Co-operative societies in the South Yorkshire coalfield.[103]

The Triple Alliance Conference met to discuss the use of direct action to combat the threat of militarism on the very day that 2-3,000 troops armed with machine guns appeared on the streets of Leeds to protect the 1,500 naval ratings who were ready for deployment in the Yorkshire pits. Although Geddes stressed that this was "by no means an offensive measure"[104], a confrontation seemed all too possible. Hartshorn said: "Nobody can tell what will happen. But if there is a collision between the men of the Fleet, and the miners in Yorkshire, it may be the first spark of civil war."[105] Nottinghamshire miners on strike at Wollaton Colliery agreed; they passed a resolution condemning the use of the troops, "which we consider is heading for civil war."[106] It was also possible, according to Captain Munro of the Admiralty, that with leave long overdue, some of the naval ratings might be susceptible to fraternisation by miners "of an unsettled mind and revolutionary ideas. It was possible that naval ratings might also absorb some of these ideas themselves."[107]

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"Featherstone Massacre".

103 CAB 27-59; UC 6, 10.30 am, 22 July 1919, "The Coal Strike, Telephonic Report by Sir Eric Geddes." ibid., UC 7, 11.50am, 22 July 1919.

104 Leeds Mercury, 24 July 1919.

105 Daily Herald, 22 July 1919.

106 Nottingham Evening News, 23 July 1919.

107 CAB 27-59, IUC Minutes of Meeting, 6 August 1919.

In the event, neither violent conflict nor subversive fraternisation materialised in Yorkshire.[108] By carefully presenting the deployment of the armed forces in a non-coercive manner, as community helpers rather than strike breakers, the Government helped to ensure that what had threatened to become one of the most explosive issues of the post-war period went off like a damp squib. The way was eased for the Government by Herbert Smith, who, whilst bitterly condemning it as "capitalistic...out to defend the employer whether he is right or wrong", instructed his members to "Let them (the naval ratings) severely alone. Do not interfere with them in any way."[109] Fearing a repeat of "the 1893 business at Featherstone", he repeated this instruction again and again throughout the strike. With one eye on the convulsions elsewhere in Britain, he told a Grimethorpe mass meeting "If there is any rioting to be done, let me do it and don't put yourself in that position", while at Sheffield he warned "If we cannot win a strike without rioting, we had better not strike."[110] Whether things would have been much different without Smith's exhortations it is hard to tell, but the most extreme reaction to the arrival of troops was "mild excitement" in Doncaster as a couple of char-a-bancs full of sailors passed through the town.[111] Overall, the troops were received with "an indifferent air."[112]

The outstanding feature of the strike was, in fact, its overwhelmingly passive nature. In Sheffield it was reported that:

> The attitude of the miners to the whole subject is curious. They appear to be really apathetic and

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108 G.D.H.Cole, Coal-Mining, p.108 refers to "isolated attempts to interfere" but I have been unable to find confirmation in any of the sources.
109 Barnsley Chronicle, 23 July 1919.
110 ibid.,
Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 23 July 1919.
111 Doncaster Chronicle, 25 July 1919.
112 Leeds Mercury, 22 July 1919.

> indifferent...They do not, at the moment, seem to worry about anything. They are not holding meetings and not discussing the strike very much.[113]

In the mining villages of West Yorkshire:

> The men on strike were enjoying the calm of a delightful summer evening. Some smoked the pipe of peace serenely at their own doorways; others sauntered along the quiet lanes; and at the street corners little groups passed on the gossip of the day.[114]

In and around Wakefield there was an "almost total absence of violent talk or violent action"[115], whilst the South Yorkshire towns and villages "took on a holiday air."[116] In the Mexborough district there was "little incident and no public discussion"[117], and the Doncaster Gazette reported that:

> The strike, so far as this district is concerned, will go down on record as one of the quietest known. The police express grateful astonishment at the extreme good order which is prevailing.[118]

With only about 250 scabs in the whole county, and given that the miners had decided to follow Smith's advice to leave the naval personnel alone, there were scarcely any disruptions to this tranquil scene. There was occasional picketing at the few pits which were not entirely solid, and the usual allegations of intimidation, but the most violent incident of the whole strike occured at New Monkton Colliery, where a demonstration of women, youths, and children broke some of the lamp room windows, frustrated at their inability to stop pit deputies from going in to work. Perhaps this section of the mining community felt less bound to observe Smith's instructions than the YMA members themselves.[119] In any case,

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113 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 23-7-19.
114 Leeds Mercury, 23 July 1919.
115 Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette, 12 August 1919.
116 Yorkshire Post, 17 July 1919.
117 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 26 July 1919.
118 Doncaster Gazette, 8 August 1919.
Geddes wired the Cabinet with similar news; CAB 27/59.
UC 15. 24 July 1919.
119 Pickets were mounted at Dinnington Main, Rossington

apart from this incident, and a marked increase in petty theft of food as the strike approached its end and money was scarce, the police had nothing to report.[120] There appears to have been only one "collision" between the miners and the state's forces, when a few strikers out walking the lanes in the Barnsley area were told to go home by a police constable. Smith told the press:

> We are not going to tolerate this sort of thing. We are citizens, and so long as we conduct ourselves right, we shall expect proper courtesy from the police or anyone else.[121]

The YMA Council decided to take the matter up with the West Riding County Council. Doubtless this represented a violation of the miners' civil liberties, but it was hardly civil war. When set against earlier fears of violence and upheaval, that this incident merited the special attention of the YMA testifies to the passivity of the dispute.

YMA officials at every level worked throughout the strike to maintain this state of affairs. Herbert Smith packed in as many as twenty mass meetings across the county on weekends, at which he repeated his appeal for calm. YMA Council delegates told their members "to conduct themselves simply as if they were on a general holiday."[122] These appeals were met with a positive response in all areas without exception. "Sport, walking, club frequenting and gardening are practical attractions preferred to the search for the naval men."[123] Many families took advantage of the strike by taking a seaside holiday, and the "younger element", the source of unrest in so many other coalfields, "played an immense amount of

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Main, Wolley and Darnton, see Doncaster Gazette, 8 August 1919, & Leeds Mercury 22-7-19;
For New Monkton's "ugly incident", see the Sheffield Independent, 31 July 1919.

120 Doncaster Gazette, 8 August 1919.
121 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 25 July 1919.
122 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 9 August 1919.
123 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 23 July 1919.

cricket."[124] Once the initial vote to strike had been taken, the active involvement of the rank and file in the strike was over, until one month later they were again called upon to vote on the YMA Council's recommendation to go back to work. In between those dates, they filled their time with leisurely outdoor pursuits, leaving the running of the dispute up to the officials. Looking for a title which might describe the rank and file's experience, the Rotherham Express dubbed it the "Fresh Air Strike".[125]

The MFGB EC secured the national deal on piece rate increases on the tenth day of the Yorkshire strike. Whilst this smoothed the way for agreements in the region of 14.2% to be quickly reached in most of the other districts, it deepened Yorshire's isolation within the Federation. The YMA representatives on the national executive were conspicuously absent from the negotiations with the Government, and from the EC meeting which had been held in preparation. Herbert Smith suffered the ignominy of having to read the newspapers to discover the details of the agreement, on which his only comment was that "I don't know that what the Federation Executive and Government have done affects Yorkshire at all."[126] The formula of an 11.1% increase for a loss of 47 minutes only gave Yorkshire a maximum advance of 12.2%, a figure which the YMA Council regarded as utterly unacceptable, and after referring the question to the branches, it was decided to fight on regardless.[127]

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124 ibid., 24 July 1919;
Rotherham Express, 26 August 1919.
125 Rotherham Express, 9 August 1919.
126 Leeds Mercury, 28 July 1919.
127 YMA Special Council Meeting, 2 August 1919;
Doncaster Gazette, 8 August 1919.

In the wake of the national agreement, the press attacks on the YMA increased in intensity, especially on Herbert Smith, who was accused of keeping the strike going "to emphasise his power and dignity as the head of the Yorkshire Miners' Association", and as a snub to the MFGB.[128] Personal attacks on Smith were ineffective however. The Daily Herald wrote that:

> The most remarkable thing in the whole strike is the loyalty of the 200,000 miners to Herbert Smith. All the men are convinced that their President is voicing their real and legitimate claims, and their confidence in him is unshaken. They will never forgive the attacks upon him, for they know that at this moment his son lies ill as the result of his services with the Army during the war. By making unjustified attacks on Herbert Smith, the press is stiffening the miners' resistance.[129]

Even those papers that were less than sympathetic to the strike or to Smith had to admit that "the personal magnetism of this man is remarkable."[130] Neither the national agreement nor the press could subvert the unity of the YMA. In fact, under siege the union tended to close ranks, and become even more insistent about the legitimacy of its action. Smith said:

> Whatever outsiders may think, Yorkshire will continue this fight because of its justice...The YMA and its members will decide its policy whatever may be the feeling in other counties.[131]

Similarly, in response to press demonology, Tom Smith of Nunnery branch told a Sheffield mass meeting:

> They were told that the strikes were caused by a few unfeeling men called extremists or Bolsheviks. He

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128 Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette, 5 August 1919.
129 Daily Herald, 4 August 1919;
Smith must have been under enormous strain during the strike. In between EC meetings, occasional negotiations and an almost constant tour of the mining communities, he was tending to his son Ernest who had been seriously wounded at Ypres in March 1918. He died shortly after the strike. Daily Herald, 21 August 1919; Barnsley Independent, 13 September 1919.
130 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 19 July 1919.
131 Leeds Mercury, 21 July 1919.

> didn't know whether he was an extremist or Bolshevik, but he did know that when there was a fight to be waged for justice, he was in it if the miners of Yorkshire were in it.[132]

In fact, Smith's support for the strike came not from personal conviction, still less from personal vanity, but rather, as he frankly admitted, because "the members were loyal to the union, and he did not wish to do anything to damage that loyalty."[133] Consequently, he was thoroughly democratic in approach, deferring to the membership at (almost) all times - a point he was not slow to emphasise at strike meetings. He told Manvers Main miners: "When you decide on a line of policy, I will either do as you say, or get out of the movement."[134] At Grimethorpe he said: "You know our policy, which you decided. You had a perfect right to decide that. I am not complaining, and you will decide what is the next step. I am no Kaiser."[135] At no point did Smith attempt to use his personal authority to undermine or curtail the action - his conduct was more that of a mandated representative than a President with any particular power. In fact he reiterated again and again that "this is your strike, not Herbert Smith's, and I want to advise you neither one way or the other."[136] Even at the very end of the strike, when it was clear that he was concerned about the serious hardship which was affecting the mining communities, he was loathe to accelerate the coming capitulation:

> This is your strike, not mine, but we are all in it. Any man does wrong if he leads his men on when they are not being properly housed and fed. Your benefits are my benefits, your downfall my downfall. I am appointed by you and must take my instructions from you and not dictate in return.[137]

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132 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 11 August 1919.
133 Barnsley Chronicle, 9 August 1919.
134 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 19 July 1919.
135 Barnsley Chronicle, 9 August 1919.
136 ibid.,
137 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 19 August 1919.

It is questionable whether Smith would in ordinary circumstances have been so compliant and tolerant of a strike with which he clearly had disagreements, but the unrest in other coalfields had shown what officials could expect when they refused to accomodate the militancy of their members. With Smith and his colleagues unwilling to antagonise the Yorkshiremen, the strike remained absolutely solid, and settled down into a pugnacious stand-off between the YMA and virtually everybody else involved, punctuated only by a few abortive sorties into negotiations. The miners remained quiet but determined whilst depleted coal stocks caused widespread factory closures. Already by the end of July, 89,830 people were on the unemployed register for Yorkshire and the East Midlands area, compared to 38,132 before the strike began.[138] Eric Geddes issued instructions to local authorities in all the major towns in Yorkshire, Lancashire and the East Midlands to "take extreme measures" to preserve coal stocks, which led to restrictions on electricity, gas and water supplies.[139] The Daily Herald said:

> The aspect of the West Riding is an impressive tribute to the power of Labour. Everywhere one passes silent collieries and idle sidings. Tram services are curtailed, towns are in darkness, and factories and works are closed or closing.[140]

Despite its impact on the regional economy, the strike had clearly reached an impasse. With the safety of the pits guaranteed by the navy, the Government was under little pressure to seek an accommodation which

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138 Barnsley Chronicle, 16 August 1919;
Towards the end of the strike, 27,000 were reported to have been thrown out of work in the steel, iron and engineering industries of Sheffield and Leeds, 25,000 in the textile industry in Bradford, and 5,000 in the steel trade of Rotherham, Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 9 & 12 August 1919.

139 ibid., 24 July 1919.

140 Daily Herald, 2 August 1919.

would jeopardise the national piece rate formula.[141] The deadlock was not just one between the YMA and the Government - equally there was one within the YMA itself. Neither the rank and file nor the officials were willing to be the first to break the consensus by which the strike had been launched and sustained. However, as it became increasingly clear that Yorkshire was not going to be able on its own to break down the Government's resolve to tough it out, the demand did begin to be raised to spread the action. Whilst the Oulton and Rothwell miners called for the MFGB to call a national strike, in Doncaster and Bentley meetings passed resolutions calling for the YMA to send "propagandists" to other coalfields, to explain Yorkshire's case, and to call for joint action.[142] This was the only occasion upon which Smith directly opposed a demand raised by the rank and file during the strike. "We are already looked upon as villains. If we go into other counties it will be stated we are trying to cause unrest."[143] Whilst he was prepared to defy MFGB policy and support his members, he was clearly unwilling to see the YMA become the launch-pad for a wider strike movement.

However, had Smith given his approval for delegations to be sent to other areas, it is highly unlikely that they would have met with any success, as the proposed basis for such an appeal was to support the YMA's specific demands for piece rate adjustments etc. By this stage, the national formula had already led to settlements everywhere apart from Lancashire, and whilst surface workers might have been attracted to the possibility of fighting the Sankey Award, the chances of being able to

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141 By the end of the strike, 500 naval ratings had been used at two dozen pits in West Yorkshire, and one dozen in South Yorkshire; Barnsley Chronicle, 16 August 1919.
142 Doncaster Gazette, 8 & 15 August 1919; Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 12 August 1919.
143 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 9 August 1919.

pull in the colliers was slim. Perhaps the only possibility of extending the strike lay in the way in which the rank and file unrest in the neighbouring coalfields had raised demands relating to nationalisation. By now, the first Sankey Report was a dead issue everywhere except Yorkshire, but the questions of output, the 6s, and the government's interminable delay in pronouncing on nationalisation were not. If anything, the MFGB's wait and see policy became less tenable with every day that passed. An alliance between the YMA and the rank and file groups in other districts against the MFGB's policy with regards to both the First and Second Reports was, in theory at least, a possibility. In practice however, such a project never even got onto the drawing board in Yorkshire. Some of the major ingredients which had led to the political generalisation in the strikes in surrounding areas were present in Yorkshire; there was anger over the 6s price rise (the YMA Council had passed a resolution of protest[144]), the output crisis was being acutely felt before the strike - most of the evidence presented to the Sankey Commission about management ca'canny came from here - and furthermore there was a Miners' Reform Committee. There was, despite these factors, not a single instance of nationalisation being raised as a strike demand in Yorkshire, and hence no possibility of an escalation beyond the basic questions of wages and hours.

The missing ingredient was the unofficial dynamic which gave the unrest its radical edge in other areas. In Yorkshire, Smith's willingness to prioritise the demands of his own members over those of the MFGB prevented such an occurrence. There is scarcely a trace of unofficial activity during the strike - no unofficial meetings, no leaflets, no resolutions to the YMA Council, not even heckling of officials at strike

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144 YMA Ordinary Council Meeting, 12 July 1919.

meetings.[145] In the Sheffield area, where the MRC had led a brief strike in March, it was reported that there was "very little evidence of the extremists' influence."[146] Perhaps the fate of the MRC is captured in this cameo appearance at a strike meeting at Bentley where "various questions were asked by members, and one man, who attempted to introduce politics, was shouted down."[147] Once the strike had been forced upon the officials, the active involvement of the rank and file in the strike was over, until one month later they were called upon to vote on the YMA's recommendation to return to work. In between those dates, they filled their time with leisurely outdoor pursuits, leaving responsibility for the running of the dispute with the officials and the YMA Council. At the end of the strike, the Mexborough Times observed that:

> The conduct of the miners as a whole has been exemplary. They have obeyed their leaders' injunction to be peaceable and law abiding to the letter, and they have submitted themselves loyally and steadily in all things to the advice of their leaders.[148]

Official support for militant industrial action was contingent upon it remaining limited to a local strike over economic demands, and as such, eventual defeat was inevitable. Neither the officials nor the rank and file were willing to acknowledge this however, and the srike continued until serious financial hardship made it possible to talk about giving in. As the strike appproached the one month mark there was genuine distress in mining communities. Some supplemented their meagre strike pay by running the risks involved in mining outcrop coal which ran in thin

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145 The only reference to possible organised activity by the MRC is contained in a paragraph in a strike report in the Doncaster Chronicle, 1 August 1919, which mentioned "inflammatory speeches" by ILP propagandists in the Doncaster area. (Occasionally, the press used "ILP" and "MRC" interchangeably.

146 Sheffield Weekly Independent, 26 July 1919.

147 Doncaster Chronicle, 8 August 1919.

148 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 16 August 1919.

seams near the surface in the Barnsley district.[149] In Worksop, miners began to apply to the workhouse for out-relief, whilst in the Doncaster area miners demanded, amidst (unconfirmed) reports of infant deaths through malnutrition, that the Board of Guardians begin an emergency scheme for feeding children.[150] The West Riding Education Committee heard reports from its members of widespread hunger in mining areas, including examples of homes where children had no food whatsoever.[151] Whilst strike pay was insufficient to sustain individual families, it nonetheless represented a huge drain on the YMA's resources. By the end of the strike it had paid out £370,000, which meant "the total liquidation of a fund which it has taken something like a quarter of a century to accumulate."[152]

On Friday 8 August, following the SYCOA's reaffirmation of its willingness to pay 14.3%, the Coal Controller agreed to a meeting with the two owners' associations and the YMA. Frank Hodges was also present, at the invitation of Edgar Jones. However, the meeting proved fruitless for the YMA, as Jones continued to insist on 12.2% as laid down in the national agreement with the MFGB. The following Monday the YMA again held brief talks with both the SYCOA and WYCOA which were, in effect, attempts to secure favourable terms of surrender. The WYCOA was intransigent, refusing to discuss the question of winding-enginemen's pay (the only issue not in the hands of the Coal Controller), until the miners were back at work.[153]

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149 Yorkshire Telegraph and Star, 9 August 1919.
150 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 12 August 1919;
Doncaster Chronicle, 15 August 1919. Such a scheme was put in place in the last few days of the strike.
151 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 9 August 1919.
152 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 13 August 1919.
153 Leeds Mercury, 12 August 1919;
Barnsley Chronicle, 12 August 1919.

On Tuesday 12 August at the YMA Council meeting "the position was outlined as hopeless from the fact that the suppport of the Federation was lacking, and that the funds were approaching exhaustion", and delegates voted by 120 to 36 to recommend the branches to call off the strike.[154] Following branch meetings on the Wednesday, the Council reconvened on Thursday 14 August to find that their recommendation had been accepted. On a card vote an immediate resumption of work was approved by 2,213 to 528.[155] This was delayed in West Yorkshire due to the fact that the YMA had understood that the WYCOA had agreed to make any settlement on winding-enginemen's pay retrospective to the date of resumption, but the owners refused to confirm this in correspondence between Smithson, their Secretary, and Roebuck.[156] When the Coal Controller refused to intervene, the YMA had little choice but to go back to work empty handed. It had been forced to accept a 12.2% piece rate adjustment, no universal hour's reduction, and the 46.5 hour week for surface workers exclusive of mealtimes as laid down in the Sankey Award. It had not even been able to salvage a promise of retrospective payment for winding-enginemen.[157]

The Doncaster Gazette commented on the abandonment of the strike:

> The sudden change of front speaks much for the loyalty of the men to their local officials and to the Council at Barnsley...had the leaders urged a "carry on" policy, there is but little doubt the men would have loyally responded, tightened their belts, and remained out.[158]

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154 Sheffield Weekly Independent, 13 August 1919;
YMA Special Council Meeting, 12 August 1919.
155 YMA Adjourned Council Meeting, 14 August 1919.
156 ibid.
157 ibid.
Leeds Mercury, 14 August 1919.
158 Doncaster Gazette, 15 August 1919.

However, the consensus which had been maintained throughout the dispute showed signs of cracking under the pressure of defeat. Whilst most of the branch meetings held across the county had voted in favour of calling off the action, there was opposition to this in all areas, and at some collieries around Doncaster, Barnsley, Pontefract, and Featherstone, there were majorities for fighting on.[159] The atmosphere at the meetings was one of serious demoralisation at what had obviously been a "ghastly failure".[160] Local newspapers reported that "at all the meetings there was keen disappointment at the suddenness and completeness of the debacle."[161] At Silverwood, the branch delegate "admitted a mistake had been made somewhere, and the miners were humiliated in this matter."[162] In the Sheffield area the opinion was that:

> It has been a great blunder. The men feel it has been a mistake all through...A great majority of the men are astonished and disgusted at the complete somersault that has been effected by the officials at Barnsley.[163]

At some places, one miner explained, the branch meetings were very small because "We've been badly sold...and our men are so disgusted with the whole business that they would not bother about voting or anything else."[164]

The YMA officials did not escape the fall out as miners sought explanations for defeat, and the YMA's tradition of unity was shown to be

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159 Rotherham Express, 26 August 1919;
Mexborough and Swinton Times, 16 August 1919;
Doncaster Gazette, 15 August 1919;
Leeds Mercury, 14 August 1919;
Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 14 August 1919. The branches which voted to continue the strike were Barnburgh, Goldthorpe, Askern, Brodsworth, Bullcroft, Pontefract, and one of the two Featherstone branches.
160 Doncaster Chronicle, 15 August 1919.
161 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 16 August 1919.
162 Rotherham Express, 26 August 1919.
163 Sheffield Weekly News, 16 August 1919.
164 ibid. At Askern, near Doncaster, only 200 out of 1400 voted, and at Bullcroft Main, only 130 out of 2000.

not entirely invulnerable to sectional pressures. One survey of branch meetings had the impression that "the day workers, although they have stood by the piece workers, voted solidly for a return to work."[165] Defeat, and the prolongation of the strike over winding-enginemen's pay, strained the solidarity between miners from different parts of the coalfield. One South Yorkshire miner said:

> I blame the West Yorkshire men. They must have known they could not get the support of the Federation, and without that we could not possibly win. Lots of our men did not want to come out, but they wished to be loyal to the officials, and this is the result.[166]

Although defeat pulled at the bonds which held the YMA together, they withstood the pressure, and the social contract between officials and members survived. Most branches protested bitterly at the return to work, but bowed to the inevitable, and passed votes of confidence in Smith and his colleagues.[167]

The bulk of the recriminations for the defeat was directed at the MFGB. In the last two weeks of the strike, the intensity of feeling against the Federation leadership grew, and with the defeat it reached a crescendo. The Mexborough Times reported on August 9 that "At every mass meeting this week, miners in the audience have said they have been let down by Smillie."[168] In the same part of ther coalfield at the end of the strike:

> The general feeling among the miners...is that they could have won the strike if the Federation had helped them, either covertly or openly, directly or indirectly.[169]

G.Probert, Hickleton Main's delegate, told his members "Without a doubt, the attitude of the Federation had operated powerfully against the

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165 Rotherham Express, 26 August 1919.
166 Sheffield Weekly News, 16 August 1919.
167 Doncaster Chronicle, 22 August 1919;
Leeds Mercury, 16 August 1919.
168 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 9 August 1919.
169 ibid., 16 August 1919.

Yorkshire miners, and had taken away any chance they had of winning the fight." At this meeting, there was "a good deal of angry discussion, directed mainly at the Federation, and some scores of voices called for a breakaway from the Federation."[170] In the Doncaster district, there was "strong feeling against the MFGB for leaving the Yorkshire miners in the cold", and at Bullcroft, "a suggestion at the mass meeting at the end of the strike to break away from the Federation was warmly received among the men."[171] This was a general response: "The present rank and file feeling in Yorkshire is that the YMA should cast off from the Federation and fight its own battles in future."[172] At the end of the strike therefore, a chasm existed between the members of the YMA and the rest of the MFGB. Smith had a job on his hands to maintain the union's affiliation to the national body.

The Yorkshire strike was a watershed in the campaign for the Miners' Charter. If a strike for nationalisation was ever on the agenda, it was in these summer months when almost every other miner was involved in some level of action which contradicted the policy of the Federation Executive. However, the pressures for escalation and political generalisation which were inherent in the situation, and which were exhibited in the rank and file strikes, left Yorkshire totally unaffected. The strike remained stubbornly on the terrain of the First Sankey Report, and showed no interest in the high political plateau of the Second. The total defeat of the strike left the YMA financially weakened, physically drained, and with an acrimonious relationship with the Federation. The priority of the YMA officials in the coming weeks and months was to repair the damage that the strike had caused - to replenish

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170 ibid.
171 Doncaster Chronicle, 1 & 15 August 1919.
172 Mexborough and Swinton Times, 16 August 1919.

depleted funds and patch up relations with the MFGB. At the YMA Council Meetings on 19 August and 3 September, Lloyd George's rejection of nationalisation was not even discussed.[173] In so far as a national strike over the question of ownership remained a theoretical possibility, the YMA was out of the game.

The strike straddled two epochs of industrial conflict in the mines. It began amidst renewed predictions of a national strike, possibly involving the Triple Alliance, of gigantic social upheaval, clashes with troops, and civil war. The strikes in neighbouring coalfields in the early stages of the Yorkshire dispute demonstrated the disdain for authority, the ebullience and volatility which had characterised the unrest of the first quarter of 1919, and heightened the atmosphere of rebellion. However, in the hands of the YMA, direct action was utterly stripped of its image of insurgency. The miners obeyed their leaders' appeal for calm, stayed clear of the armed forces, and had very little involvement in the running of the strike. These basic features - the passivity of the miners, the Government's careful preparations through the IUC, and the hardship and distress which a long strike entailed for the mining communities - resemble more than anything the big confrontations of 1921 and 1926.[174]

The Yorkshire strike was a landmark victory for the Government, as it stopped the rot which had been set in motion by the 1915 South Wales strike. Then, Lloyd George had only needed a few hours in Cardiff to recognise the impotence of the Government's position, and he had promptly

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173 YMA Council Meetings, 19 August and 3 September 1919.

174 Ralph Desmerais, in his study of the Industrial Unrest Committee, sees the Yorkshire strike as "important insofar as it provided a case study for the Government's preparations for the larger strikes to follow." op.cit., p.9.

surrendered. Afterwards he had told Walter Runciman that, whilst regretable, there had been no choice, and added "We shall have to come to grips with them some other time."[175] Between July 1915 and August 1919, the Government was continuously on the defensive, seemingly unable to resist the power of the miners. The Yorkshire strike presented the first opportunity to reverse this trend. At the end of the strike, the Edlington branch delegate told his members that "We have lost a trench, but not the battle."176 In fact, the failure of the strike had set the seal on the fate of nationalisation; in doing so, it is arguable that it marked not only the end of the road for the Miners' Charter, but the beginning of the road that led, eventually, to Black Friday.

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175 Runciman Papers, WR 303, 31 August 1919.
176 Doncaster Gazette, 15 August 1919.

# Chapter Ten

## *THE DEMISE OF DIRECT ACTION AND THE TRIUMPH OF ELECTORALISM*

> On the Clyde, in South Wales, in Lancashire, in various places where you have had an experiment in the working of direct action, has it brought the victory which you expected it would? The Government did not fall, and the great civil authorities were not on their knees in response to the clamour that there was in the streets...Come back to the fountain head, the real source of all civilised government, representative institutions.[1]

In July, Lloyd George had expressed grave unease about the potential social and political implications of the growing unrest, singling out the strikes in mining as the major threat to his government. When barely one month later, on August 18th, he stood up in the House of Commons to announce that nationalisation had been rejected, he could be reasonably confident for the first time that year that direct action would not be the miners' response. This concluding chapter looks at the processes by which this reversal in the fortunes of direct action came about, and makes some suggestions about the political consequences of its demise. In pursuit of an explanation of how it was that the government came out so firmly on top in the nationalisation drama, we shall re-assess the national impact of the strike wave of the summer, and re-evaluate the politics and strategies of both official and unofficial leaderships within the Federation. Particular reference will be made to the Yorkshire strike, both as an alternative paradigm of direct action in 1919 with which to compare the unofficial strikes, and as a strategically crucial defeat for the entire MFGB in which the Federation Executive bore primary responsibility. The chapter, and the thesis, end by setting the

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1 J.R.Clynes, Triple Alliance Conference, July 23rd 1919, pp.41-42, in MFGB, 1919.

denouement of the campaign for the Miners' Charter in its wider context - the decline of direct action within the labour movement as a whole, and the simultaneous strengthening of the electoral politics represented by the Labour Party. The case will be put for a re-evaluation of this period in labour historiography, and for a recognition of the critical place occupied by the year 1919.

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At the Keswick Annual Conference the MFGB EC had made it clear that, whatever its internal differences over using direct action as a last resort, it remained committed to working for a peaceful outcome to the nationalisation question, and that it would brook no action which might upset the apple cart. Its policy came under serious attack from two sources within the Federation during July and August. It came firstly from the Yorkshire miners, who, by refusing to accept that the terms of the first Sankey Report as interpreted by the government and the MFGB EC should apply to them, caused a serious dislocation of the Sankey process. Rank and file groups then sought to widen and deepen the hiatus which the YMA had opened up within the MFGB by agitating for strike action amongst those grades most disaffected by the terms of the Interim Report. This in turn opened up a space within which they could encourage a process of generalisation of the issues involved. In several areas they found a constituency of support for extending the strikes beyond their original aim of controlling the terms upon which the Interim Report was implemented. Each day that the strike wave continued saw the demand for nationalisation become more prominent, a development which threatened to short circuit the Federation's "wait and see" attitude. For a moment it seemed that the MFGB EC was about to lose control, and that at the

eleventh hour the long awaited show down between miners and the government was at hand. As in February, the pressure told on Smillie, whose health deteriorated once more.[2] During crucial talks between Smillie and Lloyd George at the height of the unrest, one observer wrote:

> Anybody who saw, as I did, Mr.Robert Smillie as he came from the conference room in 10 Downing Street...would have been struck by his air of utter weariness and profound dejection. Sucking at a pipe which it was too much trouble to light, he stood alone for several minutes, rather a pathetic figure, with nothing of the demagogic passion about him.[3]

Hodges told the Daily Herald on July 31st: "The marvel is that the whole of the miners of the country were not on strike on Monday of this week. Only a few men realised how near we were to a general stoppage."[4] Uneven and ill-coordinated though it had been, the unrest had succeeded in bringing matters to a head within the Federation. With the equivalent of half the members of the Federation on strike amidst widespread disgruntlement with the Sankey process and the government, there was never likely to be a better chance for direct action over nationalisation. The choice facing the MFGB EC was clear. On the one hand, it could carry on what the rank and file groups had started (but proved unable to finish), by putting the strike wave on an official footing, and extending it to the other coalfields in a decisive offensive against the government. Or it could seek to nurture the fading hope that there was still mileage in the Sankey process, that Lloyd George might somehow pull the rabbit of nationalisation out of the hat of a Tory

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2 Spencer told Nottinghamshire miners that they were "driving a bayonet into his heart. They had a mighty leader, but he was worn out. He should not have been called upon to go immediately into battle again, but sent away to rest." Mansfield and North Notts Advertiser, 1 August 1919.
3 Leeds Mercury, 25 July 1919.
4 Daily Herald, 31 July 1919.

dominated government, and that if he didn't, direct action could still then be used.

The Federation leadership plumped for the latter option. In the first place, a national strike in the summer of 1919 was no more attractive a prospect than it had been in February or March. All the factors which had then led the EC to seek a way out of a conflict were present once more; the influence of rank and file groups visible in the strikes which were affecting several important coalfields, the general atmosphere of unrest and insurgency outside the mining industry, and the widespread predictions of a clash between the Triple Alliance and the government in which the latter was once again threatening to use all the forces of the state. Taken together, these were more than enough to resurrect fears that a national strike might easily turn into a general conflagration in which Executive control might prove impossible. Journalists close to events had little doubt about the anxiety of the national leadership; the Leeds Mercury reported from a meeting of the MFGB EC that:

> Conversations with the miners' representatives gave the impression that they have no wish to go to the bitter extremity. They fully realise what that would mean, not only for the country, but for themselves.[5]

Leaving aside the unease about the possible consequences of a national strike, there were other reasons why the MFGB leadership chose not to use the strikes as a platform from which to go on the offensive against the government. In the first place, its entire case for nationalisation rested not on notions of class antagonism and conflict, but on cooperation between miners and the state for their mutual benefit, and the benefit of the national community. Such a view not only weighed

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5 Leeds Mercury, 25 July 1919.

heavily against the use of direct action in the minds of the leadership; it depended upon the belief that the state could be used for liberal and progressive purposes, and encouraged the hope that there were powerful members of the government who were prepared to use it in this way. In actual fact, over the course of the summer it had become increasingly plain - to anyone who wanted to see it - that the government was not going to nationalise the mines if it could possibly avoid it. If the mauling of the Ways and Communications Bill had not made that clear, then the MAGB's campaign amongst back-benchers, the government's counter-offensive in the shape of the 6s rise, and the widespread press reports that Duckham's scheme of trustification was the favoured option should have done.

However, the MFGB EC remained blinkered to these political developments and it continued to try and pick a way forward through working at the fault lines within the Coalition. The lack of fixity of national political alignments and agendas encouraged it in the belief that, should public opinion be roused to high enough levels of support for the miners, the Coalition might collapse, and that in the fall out, a new government which was committed to nationalisation might emerge. Although it had not formally abandoned direct action, a growing section of the Federation leadership had been moving in this direction ever since the wave of public sympathy which the first sittings of the Sankey Commission had attracted to the miners' cause. The strike wave of the summer bucked this developing trend within the MFGB, and threatened to force the leadership to face up to that which it was studiously trying to avoid - namely, that Lloyd George's government was preparing to renege on its promises, and that while the Federation waited, the Sankey process was withering on the vine.

The trouble was, that in seeking to keep alive the possibility of a peaceful political outcome the Federation Executive was not just placing false hopes in the "Welsh Wizard". The logic of its position meant that the MFGB must defend the sanctity of the Sankey Commission and mobilise its resources against the strikes. In attempting to hold the line over Sankey, the Federation leadership turned on sections of its membership, and exposed its internal divisions to the government, thereby surrendering the initiative at a critical moment.

It could almost be said that the MFGB EC conspired in the defeat of the YMA. Whilst in public it blamed the strike on "the shilly-shallying and dilly-dallying of government officials", in private it made no attempt to conceal its hostility towards the YMA from the government.[6] Robert Horne informed Lloyd George that "Hodges told Tom Jones that he was not going to fight for a fraction", and that Brace and Hartshorn had told him that they and the rest of the Executive were willing to make a deal even though Yorkshire would "probably complain bitterly that it was being let down."[7] The government did not deliberately provoke the Yorkshire strike, though many miners believed it had.[8] However, it was quick to take

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6 Smillie to the NUSMW Annual Conference, cited in Leeds Mercury, 14 August 1919.
7 Horne to Lloyd George, 25 July 1919, F/27/6/23.
8 Militants in Yorkshire felt that: "From an intelligent workers' standpoint, the motives underlying the present dispute, which we contend has been deliberately forced on us by the coalowners and the Government, are motives whcih are being directed against the main plank in the miners' programme...The Government has attacked us at the moment it thought action by the Triple Alliance was pending, with disorganisation as the objective." Workers' Dreadnought, 23 August 1919. Similar sentiments were often voiced at strike meetings in Yorkshire. There is no evidence to suggest that these accusations were accurate, and in any case it is unlikely that the government would have pursued such a high risk strategy in July; after all, we know that the government was worried that the Yorkshire strike could

advantage of the situation once it realised that the MFGB would sacrifice the YMA in order to make a deal which would undercut the strikes in the other coalfields. Lloyd George told the Cabinet on July 25th, hours before the piece rate deal was struck: "If the Government had the Miners' Federation behind them in fighting the Yorkshire Association it would be a very great advantage."[9] Once the unofficial strikes had subsided, there was little incentive for the government to seek a quick solution in Yorkshire. In fact, there were positive benefits to be gained from leaving the YMA twisting in the wind. During the first week in August Lloyd George told the Cabinet:

> He thought it just possible that the Yorkshire strike might collapse, in which case the Yorkshire miners might be so indignant with Mr.Smillie for his attitude towards them that they would desert him. The government would then be in a more advantageous position. It might be preferable to wait and see whether the Yorkshire strike did not fizzle out, before we risked provoking a general strike, before declaring against nationalisation.[10]

In the meantime, the government maximised its advantage by mounting a public relations offensive against both the YMA and the MFGB. A series of letters from Horne to Hodges, published widely in the press, asked what, in the light of the national agreement on piece rates, the MFGB leadership was doing to bring order and discipline to its ranks.[11] Given their own part in creating the situation, the complaints of Federation leaders that the strike, and its defeat, were the government's fault sounded shrill.[12] It was their own policy which had enabled the

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become general.

9 WC (599) 25 July 1919; CAB 23/9/63.

10 WC (606 A) 5 August 1919; CAB 23/1/158.

11 See for example, The Times, 30 July 1919.

12 Hodges complained that the government was seeking "to place the onus upon the MFGB to secure a resumption of work in a district in which the government is entirely responsible for a strike." Daily Herald, 31 July 1919.

government to isolate, strangle and defeat the Yorkshiremen, and grieviously weaken the Federation into the bargain. "We have been deceived, betrayed, duped", Hartshorn protested upon hearing of the government's decision against nationalisation. His post-mortem at the MFGB Conference on September 3rd, whilst less well-known, was more revealing of how that deception had taken place:

> The Prime Minister is at the head of a Tory House of Commons. He could have done either of two things. He could have said that nationalisation of the mining industry is absolutely inevitable, and if the present Parliament will not carry it through I am prepared to go to the country, and in so doing he would have had the whole-hearted support of the Labour movement at his back. As a matter of fact he has said: I can only go so far as the Tory majority in Parliament will allow, and they will not allow him to go in this direction....What has happened is simply this, that the Prime Minister and his Government have surrendered to the mass of shareholders.[13]

It might be said in the MFGB EC's defence that the Coalition did eventually collapse, and that the strategy it had pursued in the summer of 1919 had not, therefore, been without a hope of success. However, to base a strategy on the hope that the government would collapse, and collapse in time, was risky in the extreme, especially when one considers the size of the Tory majority in the House of Commons. By the time the Coalition did disintegrate, the challenge of direct action had evaporated, the miners were in a headlong retreat, and the political realignment which followed in government was to the right, not the left.

The limitations which had handicapped the unofficial movement in the first quarter of the year were visible once again in the unrest of the summer. Firstly, the parochial nature of the unofficial groups again ensured that the strikes remained disconnected local affairs. Even though the demand for direct action over nationalisation was a common and

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13 MFGB Special Conference, 3 September 1919, p.16.

popular one amongst strikers, there was no organisational mechanism for expressing this nationally. Secondly, the militancy of the summer was not spread evenly across the country. Whilst all the coalfields were affected to some degree, key areas like Durham, Northumberland and Scotland remained relatively quiescent. The most noticeable gap was in South Wales, the supposed spearhead of unofficialism. There were strikes here, as we have seen, but they were brief, sectional and uncoordinated. There is no evidence that the rank and file movement in South Wales made any attempt to follow the example of its counterparts in Lancashire and the Midlands, and link up with the action underway there. In fact, the attention of the SWSS and its supporters was diverted elsewhere during these critical weeks, towards seeking physical confrontations with the jingoistic supporters of C.B.Stanton's British Empire Union. A series of pitched battles took place in the Rhondda, Aberdare and Neath valleys in July and August, as the militants tried to disrupt the anti-Bolshevik propaganda tour of the Russian Social Revolutionary, Luboff.[14] More research could be done on the nature of these violent skirmishes, during the course of which C.B.Stanton's famous pistol was reportedly brandished once more, but clearly they had no impact whatsoever on the domestic issues which were dominating the MFGB. Perhaps the SWSS was simply sidetracked in its enthusiasm to defend the Russian Revolution; perhaps the anti-state ownership stance of The Miners' Next Step and Industrial Democracy for Miners meant that it saw no significance in strikes which were raising the demand for nationalisation. Whatever the reason, the abstention of the SWSS represented a serious weakness in the unofficial front.

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14 Western Mail, 15 to 29 July 1919.
South Wales News, 16 to 29 July 1919.

Furthermore, even in those coalfields where the strikes were most widespread, they were nonetheless uneven in character. In Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, Mansfield and Chesterfield provided high profile centres of militancy; the mass meetings here were dramatic events, and virtual no-go areas for the officials, but the smaller villages of the Leen Valley, for example, provided quietly contrasting foci of loyalty. In Lancashire, Wigan miners were more prone to militancy than their counterparts in Atherton and Tyldesley, who remained remote from the strike wave. Again, within the militant centres themselves, the miners were not a homogeneous body. In the first place, the generational divide which had been a limiting factor in strikes earlier in the year again made itself felt. References to this in newspaper accounts are plentiful, but one from a Lancashire official will suffice as an example:

> The older miners are alright, they have the sense to do what is right; but the young hotheads, who have had no experience, think it is a great lark to go on strike and dislocate business. They do not stop to think of the consequences, they are like a bull in a china shop, and the elderly and more cool-headed men have great difficulty in restraining these young bloods.[15]

Such variations in geographical and generational experiences were aspects of a general unevenness in both industrial militancy and political radicalism. The fact that the return to work took place on the basis of a deal on piece rates alone shows that, by this time, what were referred to as the "advanced men" were in a relatively small minority. The experience of the summer suggests that their ability to influence the content and direction of the strikes had been to a large degree contingent upon official inaction over what were regarded as legitimate concerns by the membership, namely the strike in Yorkshire and the piece rate issue. By giving recognition to these concerns, and advocating action while the

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15 Leigh Chronicle and District Advertiser, 25 July 1919.

officials were calling for restraint, the rank and file groups won respect, and a wider audience for their own agenda. This accounts for the radical current which flowed through the unofficial strikes, and the widespread questioning of the officials' guardianship of the Miners' Charter which accompanied them. A comparison with the official strike in Yorkshire provides clarification. Here, by giving their approval to industrial action to rectify limited grievances, union leaders re-confirmed their legitimacy as custodians of the membership's collective economic and political interests. Consequently, whilst there was more industrial action here than anywhere else, there was hardly a trace of the radicalism displayed elsewhere.

As the strikes of the summer subsided, the position of the militant miners deteriorated throughout the Federation, and with the defeat of Yorkshire it became acute. In Lancashire and the Midlands, there was a backlash against the rank and file groups which had led the unofficial action. In Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, they were booed and heckled at some of the mass meetings which voted to end the strikes. Owen Ford, boasting that he had personally pulled out several collieries in the Mansfield area, was met with a cry of: "You can cause some misery, can't you?" At Sutton, miners "shouted down an extremist who was trying to dissuade them from passing a resolution to go to work." At Lower Hartshay colliery, a resolution was passed "dissaproving of pithead meetings being held in the morning, thus stopping the pits, and declaring that in future stoppages must only take place after proper notice has been given."[16] At a Special NMA Council meeting, a resolution was passed: "That we highly

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16 Nottinghamshire Guardian, 25 July 1919.
Mansfield Reporter, 25 July 1919.
Nottinghamshire Evening News, 25 July 1919.

appreciate the action of our officials in standing by the resolution passed at the Annual Conference at Keswick."[17]

In Lancashire, we have seen how the Reform Committee's recourse to desperate measures to keep the strike going had provoked an angry reaction from many miners. The L&CMF leadership took advantage of this to re-stamp its authority over the membership, and reinforce its view of legitimate union practice. "Leadership and constitutionalism were essential" a branch official told his members, "otherwise disorder and chaos would prevail."[18] Greenall and his colleagues steered the reaction against the "lawless course" that the reform committee had taken into an offensive against the whole idea of direct action. Prior to the strikes, on July 19th, the L&CMF Council had instructed its delegates to the Triple Alliance to vote in favour of direct action over conscription, troops in Russia etc. Now the Council reversed its decision, and recommended a "no" vote in the Triple Alliance ballot which was still at this time scheduled to take place.[19]

In Fife and Lanarkshire the reform committees had been struggling to make headway since the aborted general strike at the beginning of the year. In April an attempt was made to coordinate the activities of the committees when representatives from Fife, Lanarkshire and the Lothians met in Glasgow and established the Scottish Mineworkers' One Union Movement, with James MacDougall as its Secretary.[20] In May and June the committees pushed for action over miners imprisoned for picketing offences committed in January, against the proposed increase in Income Tax, and for various

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17 NMA Special Council Meeting, 24 July 1919.
18 Chris Holding, Plank Lane branch; see Leigh Chronicle, 1 August 1919.
19 L&CMF Council Meeting, 9 August 1919.
20 The Worker, 24 May 1919.

changes to their union constitutions. None of these efforts met with any success however, and by June MacDougall was complaining that a shortage of speakers on industrial unionism was preventing the committees from holding regular meetings.[21] In August calls were made in the miners' section of The Worker for solidarity with the miners in Yorkshire, but these were half-hearted and met with no response.[22] By September, the One Union Movement was in a slump. The Glasgow shop stewards Campbell and Gallacher toured Fife in September to try and resuscitate the committees, but their report made depressing reading. They had found the militants subdued, inactive, and complaining about the apathy of their workmates.[23]

In South Wales too there were signs that popular enthusiasm for direct action was on the wane. The SWSS suffered a number of defeats at the SWMF Annual Conference in June. In a break with union tradition, W.H.Mainwaring, A.J.Cook and Noah Tromans stood against Brace, Winstone and Onions for the posts of President, vice-President and Treasurer, but they were soundly beaten.[24] So too were resolutions seeking to bar MPs from holding union office (which would have removed Brace, Richards and Onions from their posts), and to dismiss Tom Richards for his conduct in the run up to the initial strike ballot in February. Interestingly, the lengthy discussions which accompanied these resolutions "became an argument between the syndicalists and the Parliamentarians" about "syndicalist aims and methods." S.O.Davies made "a fiery speech in support of syndicalism and direct action and against antiquated constitutional methods" and William Brace summed up the case for the

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21 West Fife Echo, 30 June 1919.
The Worker, 31 May & 7 June 1919.
22 ibid., 9 & 16 August 1919.
23 ibid., 20 September 1919.
24 SWMF Annual Conference, 16-21 June 1919; the voting was as follows: William Brace 177, W.H.Mainwaring 61; J.Winstone 227, A.J.Cook 24; A.Onions 173, N.Tromans 71.

Parliamentary road. The rank and file movement in South Wales had been strong enough to force an open debate in the highest forum of the SWMF about the ideas contained in The Miners' Next Step, but not strong enough to win it. The vote was 177 to 76 in favour of the Parliamentarians.[25]

Following on from this, the press made much of a resolution passed by the miners of Cwmtillery on July 24th that: "All persons acting under the red flag of revolution be immediately expelled from representing this lodge."[26] This was taken, in conjunction with various other developments like the warm reception afforded by Rhondda miners to the Prince of Wales on his visit there, and the collapse of an unofficial strike over victimisation at the Lewis Merthyr colliery, to mean the end of the road for the "extremists." The Echo noted that "A marked change is coming over the South Wales miner", and the Western Mail reported that in the valleys, "the common belief is that the day of the Red Flag extremists is passing."[27]

Press reports gave a one-sided view of the changing mood in the coalfield, and the alleged backlash against the militants was doubtless exagerated.[28] The "extremists" of South Wales would, as we know, continue to be an important part of mining politics in the 1920s and beyond. Despite this, it seems that albeit in an impressionistic and biased manner, the press had drawn attention to a real phenomenon - the passing of the syndicalist moment in its South Walian heartland. Its legacies were complex, but the various strands are traceable perhaps through the subsequent careers of Noah Ablett, A.J.Cook, Arthur Horner and Nye Bevan.

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25 Western Mail, 18 June 1919.
26 South Wales Echo, 26 July 1919.
27 Western Mail, 26 July 1919.
28 See for example, South Wales Echo, 24 July 1919.

Ablett was heartbroken by the defeats of the 1920s, and spent the last years of his life wracked by illness and alcholism. Cook spurned the Communist Party, choosing to influence events from within the official structures of the SWMF and the MFGB. Horner combined communism and trade union officialdom, whilst Bevan crossed the river to try and fill his bucket in Parliament with the Labour Party. All of them were outstanding individuals, and their own personal biographies fill important pages in the history of the labour movement this century. But in an important sense the different routes which they took all had a common source - a desire to compensate for the failings of the syndicalist movement from which they had all sprung. Significantly, this carried them out of the rank and file in which they had pinned their earlier hopes, and, with the exception of Ablett, into prominent national office. None of them became "gentlemen" in the way that The Miners' Next Step had talked about leaders, but their positions involved them all in making compromises and adaptations in the name of a pragmatism which as younger men they had scorned.

The subsidence of the unofficial strikes and the defeat of Yorkshire were accompanied by other retreats and defeats in the industrial world. By the end of the first week in August the police strike was in a tailspin. The solidarity strikes on the London tubes and at the Nine Elms depot had not spread; nor had Tom Mann proved capable of launching a second front in Liverpool, where branch meetings of dockers and railwaymen declined to answer his call for action. Isolated, the strike collapsed ignominiously, its participants were victimised wholesale, and trade unionism was rooted out of the force. The strike on the NER, whilst a victory in so far as it led to the abolition of the unpopular eyesight tests, failed to escalate into a national movement for the abolition of the Conciliation Board, as

the Vigilance Committees had hoped it would. On top of all this, on August 12th, the Sub-Committee of the Triple Alliance Executives met, lost its nerve, and voted to "postpone" the ballot on direct action over conscription and military intervention in Russia. Taken together, these developments amounted to a turning of the industrial tide. Hartshorn wrote:

> The lack of far sightedness and discipline on the part of the Yorkshire miners, and the collapse of the farcical strike of the Police Union, have for a time destroyed the driving force of the direct action movement.[29]

The Times agreed, its editorial on August 5th proclaiming the collapse of the police strike and the slow strangulation of the Yorkshire miners as a "turning point in industrial warfare."[30] A week later, following the Triple Alliance's U-turn, it recorded the demoralisation of trade union militants:

> During the past fortnight, feeling among the organised workers has been settling steadily against the use of the strike weapon for other than industrial aims. The movement of which the police strike was symptomatic, failed so signally to win support that the extremists were becoming confused, and appeared to be at a loss to know how to retrieve the situation.[31]

Within the MFGB, the balance of forces shifted decisively against the direct actionists. This both reflected and contributed to the shift which took place within the labour movement as a whole. In the first week of September, the MFGB and the Triple Alliance both met in conference to discuss the way forward, but the result was a foregone conclusion. The Triple Alliance voted to confirm the decision of the Sub-Committee, and shelved the idea of taking direct action to halt the reactionary foreign

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29 South Wales News, 30 August 1919.
30 The Times, 5 August 1919.
31 ibid., 13 August 1919.

adventures of Winston Churchill.[32] At the Federation Conference, the Executive announced its "regret" at the government's decision, but advised the miners against taking industrial action "at this stage." It was, Smillie explained:

> our duty to consult our fellow trade unionists, and, further, it is our duty to the nation itself to give time to put it before the nation before any drastic action is taken on this matter.[33]

The resolution which the MFGB put before the TUC Conference on September 10th did not mention direct action, asking only that the Parliamentary Committee "immediately interview the Prime Minister on the matter..."[34] That Jimmy Thomas, the arch opponent of direct action felt able to second this resolution was indicative of the shift which had taken place both within the Federation and the wider trade union movement. J.Cotter of the Ship Stewards' voiced the frustration of the militants:

> Personally I take action to mean - direct action. If you are going to do it, do it and don't talk so much about it. All they have been doing so far has been to talk and vote about it.[35]

This process of delay and consultation was, however, far from over. Lloyd George felt no compulsion to snap to attention, and delayed meeting the TUC delegation until October 9th, by which time the railway strike had been settled. His position, of course, remained unchanged since his House of Commons speech in August. When the TUC reconvened, a full two months later, it was decided that the time was still not right for direct action, as the public was not yet fully behind the miners. The upshot was the Mines for the Nation campaign, which dragged on into the New Year, arousing little interest outside mining areas. Even within labour circles

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32 MFGB, Triple Alliance Conference Report, 4 September 1919, p.35.
33 MFGB Conference, 3 September 1919, p.15.
34 TUC Annual Conference, 1919, pp.259-274.
35 ibid., p.298.

there was no real enthusiasm. The Labour Party's Annual Report in 1920 noted that the campaign of demonstrations "was conducted under somewhat difficult circumstances, owing to the impossibility of...securing the services of as many of the Party's front rank speakers as they desired."[36] The farcical pretence that direct action was still under serious consideration was finally ended on March 11th, when a Special TUC Conference voted against a general strike, and for a continuing propaganda campaign in preparation for the next general election, whenever that might be.[37]

As the idea of direct action lost its grip within the labour movement, the vacuum which it left behind was filled by the politics of electoralism. This process was encouraged by the series of by elections at Swansea East, Bothwell, Pontefract and Widnes over the summer months. Whilst Bothwell was the only genuine mining constituency, all the others bordered onto major coalfields, and were dominated by the issue of mines nationalisation. MFGB leaders had sought, with considerable success, to turn the contests at Swansea and Bothwell into referendums on the question. of nationalisation of the mines. Smillie and Hodges were the main speakers in David Matthews' campaign in Swansea, which just failed to get him elected. At Bothwell shortly afterwards John Robertson trounced his opponent, a Liberal coalowner, thus "driving home the nail into the Coalition's coffin which the voters at Swansea had started so well on its way."[38] Robertson's success invited comparison with the "disastrous" strike which was underway in Yorkshire:

> It is not often that the defeat of a Government candidate has a steadying influence. The victory for mines nationalisation at the ballot box has

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36 Labour Party Annual Report, 1920, p.8.
37 R.P.Arnot, The Miners, pp.217-8.
38 Lanarkshire and Hamilton Herald, 2 August 1919.

> demonstrated the power of political action, and it has thus provided a sound argument for members of the Labour Party who are strongly opposed to direct action.[39]

The Labour Party looked to follow up the Bothwell breakthrough with victories at Pontefract and Widnes in early September. Pontefract was a large and industrially diverse constituency straddling the eastern edge of the South Yorkshire coalfield. Polling took place after Lloyd George's announcement on nationalisation, and, with a sizeable mining vote in the constituency, the Labour Party's election agent confidently stated that the result was "a foregone conclusion".[40] And yet, in a shock result, the Coalition candidate beat the YMA checkweigher Isaac Burns by a fairly comfortable margin.[41] The YMA claimed the result was due to the fact that the Labour Party had concentrated more resources on the contest at Widnes, in which Henderson was seeking a return to Parliament, but according to the Goole Times: "The non-mining section of the Labour Party reply that the Yorkshire strike had more than anything else to do with the result, because it antagonised many workers and their wives."[42] This explanation seems feasible, for to non-miners the widely disruptive Yorkshire strike must have seemed an ill-thought out dispute over an obscure issue.[43] Isaac Burns had been hard pushed to explain, let alone

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39 Sheffield Weekly Independent, 9 August 1919.

40 Although it was not strictly speaking a mining constituency, the 8,000 miners constituted the main occupational group, with dockers and seafarers numbering 7,000, and agricultural workers 6,000; see Yorkshire Post, 8 September 1919.
Goole Times, 1 August 1919.

41 The voting figures were W.Forrest (Coalition Liberal) 9,920; I.Burns (Labour) 6,445.

42 Goole Times, 26 September 1919.

43 Certainly the Yorkshire press made no attempt to explain the wider issues involved. So, for example, the Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette, 12 August 1919; "It is rarely indeed that a dispute so disastrous in its consequences to the community at large has been prolonged on so trivial an issue as appears to be the case in the present strike of the Yorkshire miners."

justify, the strike, and he was portrayed in the local press as an irresponsible trouble maker, "a direct actionist and revolutionary" who was "unrepentant" about the strike, or the widespread disruption it had caused in the regional economy.[44]

To any Labour Party leaders who were looking for ammunition to use against direct action, and there were plenty who were, the Yorkshire strike and the Pontefract result provided a compelling case. Presented in a certain way, the Yorkshire miner's strike had simply muddied the waters on nationalisation, and eased the political pressure which the Bothwell by-election had put on the government. Not only had direct action been ineffective, or so they said, it had also proved itself to be electorally disastrous. The Widnes contest provided a sharp contrast. Henderson's campaign had steered well clear of the direct action controversy, emphasising instead his qualities as a statesman and Parliamentarian. In his acceptance speech, he welcomed his election not for himself personally, but for the effect he hoped it would have upon the labour movement:

> From the Labour point of view, I regard the result as important because it strengthens the hands of those working class leaders who desire to restore the confidence of the workers in constitutional machinery and rehabilitate Parliament in their eyes as the legitimate instruments of reform.[45]

Local election results consolidated the process by which representative politics made its recovery. The Labour Party Executive's Report in June 1920, which looked back over the period since the general election, gave special mention to the mining areas of Durham and Monmouthshire, where

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44 Goole Times, 5 September 1919.
45 The Times, 13 September 1919.

the Party had gained majorities on the County Councils.[46] In the November 1919 municipal elections, Labour had increased its number of councillors by 1087, to 1257.[47] In London the result had been "phenomenal"; Labour won 572 seats out of a possible 1,362, compared to only 46 in 1912.[48] "Throughout the country", the Executive Committee's Report stated proudly, "the local authority "where Labour governs" is now by no means a rare exception, and public bodies where Labour is unrepresented, are becoming a vanishing quantity."[49] The Labour Leader could again speak confidently about the "March of Labour", while in South Wales, the ILP leader Emrys Hughes was able to take up a tougher stance towards direct action than he had been capable of at its height in 1919. In an article written for the Merthyr Pioneer in April 1920, he articulated the political transformation which had occurred in the politics of the South Walian labour movement over the previous year or so:

> Nationalisation will come when the Labour Party comes into power, or when Labour is strong enough to influence government policy in that direction. It does not require a great deal of imagination to see the way things are going to trend during the next decade. The increase in the Labour Party's vote...shouts clearly that the workers are beginning to realise the importance of the political method.[50]

The turn away from direct action and towards electoralism within the labour movement was a crucial element in the stabilisation of British society in the post-war period, and one which was well underway by the end of 1919. In the sense that men like Clynes, Henderson and Thomas had been the most vocal advocates of such a course, then the swing of the

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46 Labour Party Annual Conference 1920, Report of the Executive Committee, p.35.
47 Labour Leader, 6 November 1919.
48 Labour Party Annual Conference, 1920, Report of the Executive Committee, p.37.
49 ibid.
50 Merthyr Pioneer, 24 April 1920.

pendulum towards the Labour Party was a victory for them. However, when Lloyd George had looked for help in steering the ship of British capitalism through stormy waters, his gaze had fallen not on these moderates, but on Robert Smillie. At the height of the unrest in March, he had warned his Cabinet colleagues against proposals which were being floated to arrest the miners' leader. "Smillie is an extreme man" he told Bonar Law:

> but the fight he put up against the extremists induced them to accept the [Sankey] Commission and proves that he has some measure of statesmanship in his equipment. If the leaders are under lock and key, the movement will pass into the hands of hot-heads and feather-brains of the Noah Ablett type.[51]

Shortly afterwards, he explained to those assembled at the Paris Peace Conference how his government had avoided the extremes of social conflict by making careful concessions to British workers through their trade union leaders:

> As a result, trade unionists such as Smillie...who might have become formidable, have in the end helped us to avoid a conflict. The English capitalists, thank God, are frightened; this makes them reasonable.[52]

Lloyd George singled out Smillie with good reason; as leader of the most powerful group of British workers he played a pivotal role in the maintenance of social peace in 1919. It was Smillie's standing amongst the miners which was crucial in securing the initial acceptance of participation in the Sankey Commmission, and opening up an escape route from the collision course upon which the government and MFGB had appeared set. The promise that participation would not mean abandoning the power of direct action came more persuasively from Smillie than from the likes

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51 Letter to Bonar Law on 20 March 1919, cited in Wrigley, (1990), p.164.

52 P.Mantoux, Paris Peace Conference, 1919: Proceedings of the Council of Four (Geneva, 1964), p.34.

of Brace or Adamson. His reputation as a trade union leader was unmatched by his contemporaries in 1919. Not only had he led the first ever national miners' strike, he had refused to condemn the South Wales strike of 1915, and he had given his backing to the 1917 Lanarkshire strike against profiteering.[53] "They become gentlemen" and gain "considerable social prestige" The Miners' Next Step had warned about trade union leaders, and yet Smillie had defied the stereotype. Refusing offers of government posts during the war and retaining his working class roots and lifestyle in Larkhall, he was no social climber. Militants who were looking for the tell-tale signs of *embourgeoisement* which were held to foretell betrayal found none.

Perhaps this explains why the rank and file critique of officialdom was not applied to Smillie in 1919. Following the aborted attempt at a general strike in Scotland, Reform Committee members wrote that they placed their trust in Smillie and confidently expected that he would lead them to victory.[54] As late as July, John Maclean gave his opinion that "Smillie may yet be the glory of the British revolution."[55] Smillie was the national figurehead of a direct action "movement" which was surrounded by an aura of rebellion and shot through with the vernacular of revolution. And yet not only was he politically opposed to revolution, he was against the exercise of workers' industrial power in the volatile atmosphere of 1919. Apparently, he later confessed that accepting the Sankey Commission had been "the greatest mistake of his life", though it is doubtful whether he would have done much differently had he had the chance over again.[56] His energies as a trade union leader in 1919 were

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53 The Call, 9 August 1917.
54 The Worker, 15 February 1919.
55 ibid., 19 July 1919.
56 Workers' Dreadnought, 14 August 1920; interview with Tom Watkins about Smillie.

directed overwhelmingly towards the avoidance of conflict and upheaval. When offered a final bite at the cherry of direct action in 1919, at the Triple Alliance Conference in September, he again declined. Though it was figures like Thomas and Sexton who pushed hardest for calling off the ballot on direct action over Russia, Smillie used his influence as Chairman to back them up.[57]

That Smillie was the figurehead of the direct action movement gives the lie to the myth, common at the time, that it was a revolutionary movement. As was suggested at the beginning of this study, one cannot really talk about a national direct action "movement"; certainly it wasn't something that one could join. In political or philosophical terms, direct action as a concept was equally loose and amorphous. All things to all people, it could be anything from a means of overthrowing Parliamentary government, to a means of rescuing it. Direct action was an ideological house with many rooms, and under its wide roof it could accomodate men as diverse as Will Hay and Bob Smillie, John Maclean and Ramsay MacDonald.[58]

This thesis does not subscribe to the idea that workers are theoretically militant whilst union leaders are always moderate. Smillie, for example, spent much of his life far to the left of those he was seeking to represent. However, if the potential for a revolutionary direct action

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57 MFGB, Triple Alliance Conference, 4 September 1919, p.33.

58 Lenin and Trotsky were even counted by some as being co-habitants. Alex Macdonald wrote in the Merthyr Pioneer, 19 July 1919: "Kerensky is an indirect actionist, Lenin and Trotsky are direct." He then went on to list as "indirect actionists" Henderson, Clynes, Thomas, Brace, Hodge, Barnes, Tillet, Thorne, Adamson and Wardle. Direct actionists included Smillie, Williams, Hodges, Cramp, Paul, McManus, Murphy, Kirkwood, Maclean "and hosts of others who stood by their class when they were most needed."

movement in mining did exist in 1919, then it lay with the miners themselves. The unofficial strikes which took place could reflect the sectionalism and the prejudices of the communities from which they sprung, but equally they could exhibit notions of class consciousness, workers' control and internationalism. Nonetheless, these elements do not seem to have crystallised into a revolutionary consciousness amongst more than a small minority. Industrial struggle never attained a momentum or reached a level sufficient to spontaneously generate a revolutionary consciousness, as described by Rosa Luxemburg in her depiction of the "mass strike."[59] In fact, the strikes that did take place were so localised and short-lived that it is very difficult to make meaningful connections between struggle and the dynamics of class consciousness in 1919; instead it has been possible to provide no more than snapshots of the attitudes and opinions of participants.

For a genuine revolutionary direct action movement to have emerged in mining would have required the establishment of explicitly revolutionary organisations in all the major coalfields, linked up nationally, and prepared to do battle not just with the right of the MFGB leadership, but with the left as well. The reality was, of course, very different. In practice the unofficial groups remained hamstrung by their parochialism and by a less than watertight theory of the trade union bureaucracy. Above all they were not revolutionary organisations. Individual revolutionaries played an important part in setting them up and developing their programmes, but overall the groups were composed of miners who held a wide range of political beliefs. Ultimately what they

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59 For a discussion on the dynamics of class consciousness and the role of trade unions and strikes in this respect, see John Kelly, Trade Unions and Socialist Politics (London: Verso, 1988), pp.32-146.

had in common was a faith in industrial militancy, but this alone was not enough to carry the day inside the MFGB, and as a consequence this faith itself diminished.

However, as a popular idea rooted in an impetuous militancy, direct action was profoundly important in 1919. In an ill-organised, almost spontaneous way, it served as a rallying cry which, for a brief historical moment, threatened to carry important sections of the labour movement in a new direction. The experience of the war had politicised trade unionism. In a way which wasn't quite true of the earlier "Non-Political" syndicalism, direct action in 1919 was in an overt sense about dissolving the divisions between politics and economics within the labour movement.[60] As Straker told Triple Alliance delegates:

> Just as the working classes are becoming enlightened, they are recognising the close relationship between these two questions, and that politics have now got into the economic field, where trade union questions became political questions, and political questions became trade union questions.[61]

At the beginning of the year, all roads seemed to be leading away from Parliamentary and electoral politics and towards direct action, and the Miners' Charter was guiding the way. This had posed a threat not only to coalowners and government, but to the Labour Party as it struggled to carry out its post-war readjustment. Some had even entertained the possibility of a split. The Daily Herald had observed that "in the ranks of Labour there is a tendency for two parties to arise. Direct Action chants the one; Political Action sings the other."[62] At the moment when the threat posed by direct action was at its greatest, it was ironically

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60 This was the slogan of Tom Mann's Industrial Syndicalist.
61 MFGB, Triple Alliance Conference, 23 July 1919, p.29.
62 Daily Herald, 1 August 1919.

enough the MFGB that gave the Labour Party a leg-up in the shape of the Sankey Commission. Rather than being an auxilliary weapon to support industrial action, the wave of public sympathy to which the Commission's hearings gave rise alerted the miners' leaders to an alternative strategy. From the end of February onwards, and encouraged by the Labour Party, the priority became one of seeking to force the government to concede its demands through the pressure of public opinion. The Miners' Charter which had begun the year as the leading banner of the direct action "movement", ended it as the Mines for the Nation campaign, an adjunct to Labour's New Social Order, to be achieved by the same electoral methods. As the Charter atrophied, so too did the idea central to direct action, that social change and even socialism itself might best be brought about by the collective industrial power of workers.

In the mythology of the labour movement, direct action died along with the Triple Alliance on "Black Friday", 15 April 1921. That this was a key date in labour's history is not at issue. Six months later, following the bitter defeat of the MFGB, Ramsay Macdonald welcomed the end of an epoch:

> We may well look back upon these dark days with gratitude. The events of this strike ought to settle for a long time the influence of those who preached the doctrine that Labour can emancipate itself by industrial means alone.[63]

Not until the defeat of 1921 (and even, arguably, 1926) was the idea of direct action utterly rooted out of labour politics. And yet although the idea had survived beyond 1919, it was in retreat long before Black Friday. For many militants, that debacle was little more than a re-run of 12 August 1919, when the Triple Alliance leaders had called off the ballot on direct action over Russia:

> We may confidently assume that the power of the Triple

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63 Socialist Review, July - September 1921, p.197.

> Alliance as a force, either in industry or politics, is gone for ever. All over the country the workers in the different industries had come to look upon the Triple Alliance as being the vanguard of the revolutionary forces of the now thoroughly awakened workers, but in the space of a few hours their hopes were dashed to the ground.[64]

The demoralisation to which this had given rise would be mitigated somewhat by "Labour's Fling" in 1920[65], but this episode involved a considerable amount of posturing by labour leaders, and a compelling case can be made that the Council of Action was pushing at an open door.[66] When another real test came eight months later, it was the example of 1919 and not 1920 which provided the most telling lessons. In an important sense then, Black Friday and the defeat of the miners were the crowning acts in direct action's demise, but this process had already been well underway before 1919 had drawn to a close. Viewed in this way, 1921 may be seen as the epitaph for the earlier and more critical year.

We have been, it is worth reminding ourselves, dealing with only one section of the working class, and the experience of the miners cannot be taken as synonomous with the experience of that class as a whole. Despite the broad spread of industrial unrest in 1919, sectionalism between groups of workers remained, and each section had its own particular experiences, its own industrial and political specificities. Nonetheless, with a million members the MFGB occupied a special place in the labour movement. At its inception, the Miners' Charter had evolved from being the particular programme of one occupational group into a symbol for an entire class. Its fate was, therefore, an integral part of the process by

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64 The Worker, 23 August 1919.
65 Miliband, op.cit., Chapter 3, (iii).
66 Stephen White, "Labour's Council of Action, 1920", Journal of Contemporary History, no.4, 1974.

which the direction of labour politics was decided in the post-war period.

Various historians have pondered alternative outcomes. Woodhouse, for example, holds that not only might a national miners' strike in 1919 have won its far-reaching demands, it could conceivably have developed "insurrectionary overtones."[67] As Hutt saw it, the government was, until March at least, "confronted with the alarming prospect of a general strike fraught with revolutionary implications."68 Certainly, it would have provided the general labour unrest with a much needed focus, and might have succeeded in forging a real national direct action movement out of the frenetic and uncoordinated strikes which were taking place across industry. Had this happened, then the question of state power, of "who rules?", would doubtless have arisen. In Saville's view, a succesful miners' strike would have transformed the whole history of the 1920's. Nationalisation would have wiped out the most reactionary group of British industrialists, and boosted the industrial and political position of labour in society as a whole. The disasters of 1921 and 1926 would not have taken place, and, though socialism would not have been the result ("the political leadership was too strongly labourist"), "the victory of the miners in 1919 might have helped to make Britain a more civilized society."[69] Other suggestions might be made here; when the Communist Party grew in the 1920's, it was in a period of retreat for the labour movement. Had the Communist Party been formed on the back of a major industrial and political victory it is likely that its size and influence

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67 Woodhouse, Thesis, p.158.
68 Allen Hutt, The Post-War History of the British Working Class (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), p.18.
69 John Saville, The Labour Movement in Britain (London, 1988),pp.46-47.

would have been much greater, in which case revolutionary politics in Britain might not have been so effectively marginalised.

Such counter-factuals are useful only in so far as they help to illuminate in new ways the actual course taken by history. The miners and the Triple Alliance had declined the opportunity of launching an offensive national strike in the favourable conditions of the post-war boom and the general atmosphere of militancy which accompanied it. As a consequence, when the battle did come two years later, the miners were on the defensive and fighting in hostile terrain. Almost inevitably, the radicalism and optimism of the year that everything had seemed possible came to be buried under this defeat, and the political orthodoxies to which it gave rise.

We leave the last word on perspectives to two retired South Wales miners who lived through this period as young men. One looks back to 1919 as a golden age for the miners; the other highlights the themes of betrayal and lost opportunity.

Mel Thomas from Maesteg:

> They felt that the Sankey Commission had solved all their problems anyhow, that was the general feeling. And even today of course, if you talk to the older man and you ask him a question as to what was the outstanding agreement he ever knew, and Sankey was the best man the miners ever knew, Sankey.[70]

James Griffiths, Ex-President of the SWMF:

> The slide down began after 1919; pits were closing down and unemployment was growing, and in some areas there was a drop in wages already. The export trade in coal was never recovered after 1918 in fact. For the miners, 1919-20 was a big turning point, not only economically

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70 Interview with Mel Thomas, 17 May 1973, SWML MT/60/6.

> but politically as well. We were told "don't strike", the Sankey Commission will look into everything. Lloyd George pledged that what the Sankey Commission decided the Government would accept. So the word "Sankey" is writ large in mining politics. There was no question of misunderstanding. We stayed at work then because the pledge was absolutely definite that whatever Sankey recommended would be accepted by the Government. Before we knew it, almost, we were fighting for survival.[71]

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71 R.A.Leeson, Strike. A Live History, 1887-1971 (London, 1973), p.74.

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Staffordshire Weekly Sentinel
Tyldesley and Atherton Chronicle
Walsall Observer
Walsall Pioneer and District News
Wakefield Advertiser and Gazette
Wakefield Express
West Fife Echo
West Yorkshire Pioneer
Western Mail
Wigan Catholic Herald
Wigan Examiner
Wigan Observer
Yorkshire Catholic Herald
Yorkshire Evening News
Yorkshire Evening Post
Yorkshire Evening Press

Yorkshire Gazette
Yorkshire Herald
Yorkshire News
Yorkshire Post
Yorkshire Telegraph and Star
Yorkshire Weekly Post

*(iii) Labour and Socialist*

The Call
Daily Herald
Forward
The Herald
Industrial Syndicalist
Labour Leader
Merthyr Pioneer
The Plebs Magazine
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