

AN EPIC STORY*

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FOR a short two-and-a-half years after the First World War there was a boom in trade followed by a slump and a steady increase in unemployment. A general attack on the living standards of the workers became the order of the day. It started with the miners. Early in 1921 controls imposed during the war were removed and the mineowners made an immediate attack on the miners' wages. Mining is the basic industry, with the miners as they were, the vanguard of the working-class movement. Defeat the miners, force them down and the rest of the workers can be dealt with in detail. That was the policy of the Tories then, it is the policy of the Tories today.

Consider, eight years after the Second World War, eight years of crisis for the capitalist system, 100 Tories launch an attack on the present form of nationalisation of the mines, while Churchill and his Yankee masters watch the effect of this trial balloon with the closest attention. 'Regionalise' is their cry. For generations the miners fought for national agreements. Stubbornly the mineowners, supported by the ruling class as a whole, imposed upon them district agreements, which kept them always divided. The Tories, speaking for capitalism as a whole, want to go back to that. 'Regionalise' is simply a new term for 'District agreements'. If this could be accomplished not only the miners but the whole working-class would be weakened and laid wide open for attack.

'The wages of all workers must come down'. Not only do the capitalists desire this—the Americans have ordered it. Butler must take measures to reorganise 'internal economy'. He has promised to do so. But standing there, sure and strong, blocking the way to an all round attack, are the miners. Through years of bitter struggle they have built up a union, more unified, more powerful than ever before in their long tragic history. Can the leadership be corrupted and can this powerful organisation be broken up? That is what the Tories are concerned with.

During our life-time the story of the miners struggle is the story of the working class as a whole with lessons that all of us must learn. In view of this, there was never a more timely production than the

* *The Miners: Years of Struggle.* A History of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain from 1910 onward, by R. Page Arnot. (Allen & Unwin, pp. 566. Illustrated. 35s.).

second volume of the official history of the miners. Technically it is an amazing book. I have not in many years seen a finer: truly a credit to the publishers. But it is the content we are most concerned with, however much we admire the artistic excellence. No richer store of vivid working-class experience has ever been brought together in a single volume. It is the official history of the miners, but it brings in transport workers, railway workers and, through the Trades Union Congress, the whole working class. It represents a living embodiment of Marxism. It demonstrates all through its pages the correctness of the Marxist analysis of capitalist society, the ruthless character of capitalist exploitation and the intense and unrelenting nature of the class struggle. Only a Marxist like R. Page Arnot could have written it and done justice to this great body of workers and the great and often dramatic, as well as tragic, contributions they have made to the progress of the working class. When we look at them now, through the pages of this book, let us remember that years ago, the miners, isolated in communities established around the pits, were looked upon as a sort of 'submerged tenth' and accordingly treated with scant respect by the coal-owners and the 'superior' people throughout the country. From these days of neglect and contemptuous indifference to the present position of recognition and respect, there is a history of struggle, of hardship and heroism unsurpassed in the annals of any other walk of life.

This second volume, *Years of Struggle*, far more valuable than the 'Memoirs' of leading statesmen or military chieftains, deals with the period from 1910 to the aftermath of the titanic struggle that followed the betrayal of the General Strike. It was during this period that the miners steadily consolidated their forces and pressed forward to become the most powerful force in the industrial life of Britain.

Don't just read this book, *study* it. How easily the ruling class can create the fiction that all progress, all 'benefits' have come from above! Lord Shaftesbury: Who hasn't heard of the 'great philanthropist'? But long before he introduced his important legislative measures, the fight had gone on without ceasing in the minefields, against the most intense opposition of the mine-owners and their allies. And the fight had to go on after this remedial legislation, for even after Acts were passed their proper administration was continually avoided or where they were operated it was only through the vigilance of the miners and the strength of their organisation in the different districts.

Consider this that happened forty years ago. 'The Coal Mines Act had been passed in 1911. Two years later there occurred at the Senghenydd Pit, in Glamorgan, the worst explosion in the history of coal-mining in Britain. On October 14th, 1913, no less than 439 lives were lost in this pit'. (Page 51). An enquiry was held and a report issued. So blatant were the infractions of the law that the Home Office was forced to take action. Through its Divisional Mines Inspector for Wales it prosecuted the mine-owners and manager. The case came before three local magistrates. They immediately dismissed the charges against the owners; and of seventeen charges against the manager, found him guilty of five. They imposed fines for each of these five charges, the highest fine being £10, the others £5 and £2. 'The local Labour paper headed its report "Miners' Lives at 1s. 1½d. each".' (Page 53).

Yes, miners' lives were cheap in the eyes of the pampered ruling class of Britain. If there is a change today it is not because of any softening on the part of the exploiters; it is—as the Foreword puts it—because of 'the power of organisation to protect and advance the welfare of the working class'. And as you go through the pages of this truly great history, great in its magnitude, great in its lessons, not only for the miners, but for workers everywhere, you see stage by stage the building of this powerful organisation.

In the same way the Churchills and their kind have always tried to create the impression that the miners, however evil their conditions might be, were quite contented with their lot and were only led astray by a 'handful of Extremists'. Well, take the chapter on the first national strike, the strike which more than anything else drew the Federation together and made it into a real national fighting force. Never was there a greater example of working-class democracy. Read of the conferences called at the different stages of the struggle, of the ballots which reached as high as eight to one in favour of strike action; it not only exposes the fiction of a 'handful of Extremists', manipulating the organisation, but it is also an exposure of the fact that a 'handful' of reactionaries are manipulating many of our important unions today. They certainly would never agree to the measure of democracy to be found through all the struggles of the miners as revealed in this entrancing history. Nor would Churchill and/or Attlee dare to take a ballot in such a way as the miners' leaders did, on the subject of peace or war against the countries of socialism, or on American domination and American occupation troops.

It should also be noted that as a result of this first great national struggle, thousands of miners realised how they had been duped by the hypocritical pretensions of the Liberal government. That lesson was drawn by the Marxists, including the mightiest Marxist of them all, Ilyich Lenin, at the time, and history has amply proved their judgment. In the same way the industrial and rent battles during the First World War, ended Liberalism in Glasgow and throughout Scotland as a whole.

In all these struggles the government and the press have always been rigged to serve the interest of the exploiters. Brutal is the ruling class, when brutality looks like paying. At other times, cunning, courteous—corrupt and corrupting, smug-faced and treacherous, always seeking for division, either in the leadership or the ranks and using it for the undoing of the workers. All these methods have been used against the miners. Asquith, Lloyd George, and Baldwin were all masters of cunning and deception. Churchill, even before 1914, did not shrink from violence. There was his drafting of police and troops under General McCready to the Rhondda in 1910—all vividly pictured here. But it was in the events leading up to, and during the General Strike, that the vicious hatred of this man Churchill for the working class was fully evidenced. Miners' M.P.s in parliament should remember when he talks of a 'show-down with Russia' (a working-class country) that it was this same Mr. Churchill who wanted 'a show-down with the miners' and prepared for it. In August 1925, when the miners with the full backing of the T.U.C. threatened a stoppage if their wages were reduced, Baldwin gave a nine-months' subsidy to the coal-owners to keep wages as they were for nine months. During that nine months the government made every possible preparation for a 'show-down'. Churchill was the supreme commander in this historic phase of the class war, on the side of the capitalists; provocation after provocation. For he knew that no preparation of any kind was being made by the General Council, and that their supreme command, Thomas and Bevin, were men of straw so far as a real class battle was concerned; and up till the last moment these two and the others on the General Council hoped against hope that somehow or another they would get out of their pledge to support the miners. But the rank-and-file of the working class were determined to remain loyal; and Churchill, very well prepared, forced them to a 'show-down'. Nine months of betrayal during which nothing was done, then nine days of a General Strike and open and

complete capitulation and betrayal on the part of the General Council. But despite this terrible set-back, the long seven months' struggle which the miners had to face kept the spirit of the working class alive and prepared the way for new advances. All through that terrible seven months period their most implacable enemy was Churchill. Amongst their best friends were the miners of the Soviet Union. That was as it should be. It is something the miners and others of the working class should never forget.

In these pages we find, too, vivid pictures of the personalities of those who gave leadership to the valiant miners. There is the great soul Robert Smillie, for years excluded from the vice-presidency because he was a socialist; the wretched betrayer Frank Hodges, who as a junior Minister of MacDonald's Government gained contacts with the financial world and so found his way out of the labour movement into the banking fraternity and the ranks of the mine-owners themselves; here is the fiery Welshman A. J. Cook, who headed them in the days leading up to the General Strike and seven long months of heroic struggle, indefatigable in agitation in the coalfields.

Of this second volume the *Manchester Guardian* reviewer admitted that Page Arnot had done a brilliant job, but he thought that he was too hard on the capitalists. No, sir. It is not Page Arnot who is 'too hard' on them; it is the facts. The facts expose their cunning, their trickery, their treachery and their crimes. Page Arnot is a Marxist, a brilliant Marxist, as the reviewer admits, and as such he marshals the facts in such a way that they speak for themselves. Through these pages you see the miners standing up heroically against the most enormous onslaughts of the ruling class and their venal politicians and equally venal press. You see the right-wing leaders of the T.U.C. cringing and cowardly, desperately afraid—and afraid above all of a working-class victory over the exploiters.

There are many lessons to be learned from this great volume, but the greatest of these is the lesson of leadership. Working-class unity with a leadership strong, resolute, unafraid—a Marxist leadership—that is the combination that will bring sure and certain victory for the workers. Once they get leadership adequate to their strength, the days of capitalism will be numbered. That is what the pioneers set out to achieve. That is what we must accomplish; and this great book, this second volume of the history of the miners, will be a mighty weapon in the carrying out of this historic task.