

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

MR. M. McGAHEY (Vice-President, National Union of Mineworkers): Conference, it gives me great pleasure to call upon the President of the National Union of Mineworkers to present his Presidential Address to this Conference. Arthur Scargill. (*Applause*)

MR. A. SCARGILL (President, N.U.M.): This year's Conference takes place in the wake of a devastating defeat for the Labour Party in the General Election — a defeat with many serious implications for the British people, and for our industry.

It is no good trying to minimise the impact of that defeat. It is the worst electoral defeat — apart from 1983 — suffered by the Labour Party since 1931. Nor is it any use of trying to minimise the problems we face as a consequence of this political, economic and social setback.

The destruction of Britain's manufacturing base, horrendous levels of unemployment, cuts in education and health expenditure, widespread dereliction of our inner cities, and the obscurity of a multi-billion pounds defence programme — are all set to continue under a Tory Government whose callous, divisive class rule is unmatched in modern times.

However, whilst saddened by the Election result, I have not come to this Conference to mourn. Trade unionism means having the courage, and using our ability, to fight against overwhelming odds, both industrially and politically.

Our trade union movement must now prepare to fight back against the attacks made upon us. I will deal with certain aspects of the movement's fight later in this address, but it is right that from the outset I give attention to those attacks made on our industry and our Union since the Tories came to power in 1979 — attacks which have affected mining families and communities as well as our members themselves.

These issues, which will be at the forefront of our debates during the course of Conference, must be discussed within a historical and class perspective in order to determine our policies — and how to implement them.

In early 1974, at the time of the previous Tory Government, a secret strategy document was put forward to Coal Board chiefs by a Board member, Wilfred Miron. It contained a set of proposals aimed at destroying the basis of the N.U.M.'s strength. The basic tenets were:

1. a pit incentive scheme, designed to divide Area Unions from one another while weakening the National Union;
2. a massive programme of new technology, deployed to close pits and eliminate jobs;
3. to undermine the authority of the N.U.M. by creating splits and divisions and ending national collective bargaining;
4. the introduction of a six-day working week;

5. the destruction of the National Five-Day Week Agreement, won after generations of struggle by our forefathers.

In essence Miron wanted to limit the future manning of the industry, to restrict, to neutralise — what he described as “alien and subversive political influences”.

This meant trying to ensure that a maximum number of people employed in the industry were not members of the National Union of Mineworkers.

Miron's strategy, adopted by the Board during the lifetime of a Labour Government, began the process of introducing the main elements of the plan. The Board has been implementing this blueprint stage by stage throughout the seventies and eighties.

They began with the incentive scheme — and in 1974, faced with organised Union resistance, failed to secure its introduction. However, in 1977, with the full backing of a Labour Government, the Board pushed through the incentive scheme, in spite of two ballot votes and a Conference decision rejecting it.

It is important to remember that this scheme could not have been implemented without the active co-operation of Union Areas and the N.E.C. As we debate major issues, such as the six-day working week, it is right that we remind ourselves of this important central point. Had all Areas stood in unity behind a Conference decision, there would have been no incentive scheme — in fact no Miron Plan — and dozens of pits and thousands of miners would still be operating in this industry.

Those of us who warned that the incentive scheme was dangerous — that it set man against man, pit against pit and Area against Area — and who campaigned against its introduction have been proved absolutely right. It was a major element in fragmentation during the 1984/85 dispute.

The second element in the strategy has been the rapid, steady introduction of sophisticated new technology such as M.I.N.O.S., F.I.D.O., M.I.D.A.S. and I.M.P.A.C.T. — all of which have been used primarily to wipe out human skills.

Yet another part of the Miron strategy was achieved when the Board supported the establishment of the breakaway U.D.M., and grasped the opportunity to terminate the conciliation scheme and bargaining rights enshrined in the 1946 Conciliation Agreement. British Coal's objective of introducing a conciliation scheme which only applies where a union has 50 per cent plus one membership at a unit determined by the Board is a recipe for disaster. This majority/minority concept has been imported from the United States where its implementation was the first stage of a policy which led to massive deunionisation.

The 1946 Conciliation Agreement which recognised all our members and afforded them full collective bargaining rights was unilaterally scrapped because British Coal was determined to terminate *real free collective bargaining rights* for British members.

This tactic is directly in line with moves made against other unions by the Tory Government: teachers and workers at G.C.H.Q. are among those who have had their rights taken away by their employers and Government — and are facing the same kind of attack on this front as the N.U.M.

It is ironic that this Conference will see a major debate on the question of working hours in the coalmining industry — and even more ironic that the issue at the centre of the stage will be the Board and Government's attempt to introduce a six-day week and destroy the Five-Day Week Agreement.

Ironic because in 1947, at the first N.U.M. Conference following nationalisation here in Rothersey, the Minister for Fuel and Power, Manny Shinwell, said he *accepted the responsibility for the introduction of the five-day week. It was, he said, inevitable, and he made it clear that there was complete unanimity in the mining industry on this issue.* He pledged that the Government had no intention of seeking to bring about suspension of the five-day week.

Speaking at the same Conference, Lord Hyndley, the first Chairman of the National Coal Board, said that the most substantial, far reaching change implemented by the new N.C.B. had been the introduction of the five-day week . . . *“a change earnestly desired by the mineworker and one for which the special nature of his job . . . provides ample justification.”*

It is therefore, particularly poignant that 40 years on a Tory Government, clearly embarked on a policy for privatisation, is seeking to reverse the policies fought for by our forefathers and introduced by a Labour Government 40 years ago. Indeed, the British Coal's attempt to destroy the Five-Day Week Agreement, extend the working

day and the working week is yet another example of its overall strategy in line with the "Miron Plan".

However, it was not until Tuesday of last week that British Coal admitted to the N.U.M. that its policy is to introduce flexible working at all high technology pits and eventually at all pits in the British coalfield.

In fact, Sir Robert Haslam had already let the cat out of the bag on 28th May, when he said that "more flexible working was needed and British Coal would carry on bringing in six-day working at local level." At its meeting with us last week, British Coal, in confirming this policy unequivocally, also stated that they would not negotiate with the National Union — and I understand that a similar decision has been conveyed to other mining unions in the industry.

There has been a great deal of publicity about British Coal's attempt to introduce the concept of the six-day week at Margam in South Wales — a colliery which would not come into operation for five or six years after development begins.

It is right, therefore, that in this Presidential Address I should make reference to this issue and expose the real intentions of British Coal as they seek to destroy five-day working and circumvent the National Union.

Margam was promised to our industry in the 1974 Plan for Coal — on the basis of the Five-Day Week Agreement. The Board had always agreed that it would be a viable unit on that basis; indeed, until a few months ago, the only questions ever raised by the N.C.B. about Margam centred on possible, geological problems or prevailing general market demand.

Now the Board argues that Margam could not operate profitably on a five-day week. But its financial projections are utterly and deliberately wrong. Independent economic experts have calculated that working a five-day week, Margam would produce annual net profits of between £2.8 million and £4.5 million, taking into account a cheap E.E.C. loan for half the capital expenditure.

If a pit with 2,220 men, such as Wearmouth in Durham, can produce one million tonnes of coking coal at a profit before interest, then I submit there is no way that a project such as Margam with only 650 men can avoid making a substantial profit producing the same tonnage. Indeed, the difference between the two pits in manpower alone equals a £15 million per year saving at Margam — working a five-day week.

British Coal is trying to use Margam and other major projects as a "sprat to catch a mackerel". Their real purpose is to establish the principle of six-day working, smash the five-day week and weaken the National Union of Mineworkers. Their intention is to refuse to negotiate with the National Union and seek to reach "deals" at Area level (unless, of course, the Area concerned happens to be Nottinghamshire or South Derbyshire!). In the event of an Area not reaching an agreement, British Coal's tactic is to bypass the Area and go to local level — as they did at Wearmouth in County Durham.

In the final analysis, British Coal will seek to bypass the Union completely, at National, Area and local level — and, using United States tactics, deal directly with the workforce over the head of the Union.

The N.U.M. has constantly opposed (including a unanimous decision at the last Annual Conference) any attempt to introduce continental shift-type working, or coal production on Saturdays and Sundays, and I say that no Branch or Area should discuss, negotiate or agree to any concept which breaches National Agreements and unifying principles on which this great Union is built.

I was not elected President of the N.U.M. to negotiate or accept an extended working day or working week. Before I prepared this Address I looked at my election manifesto, and I said two things. "We want a shorter working week within the terms of the five-day week agreement". Secondly I said, "If people do not agree with that policy don't support my view". Incidentally, I also said something else in that Presidential Address. For the benefit of the media who constantly harp on about periodic elections, I said that I supported the principle of five-yearly periodic elections, and that remains my personal point of view, but I don't want someone like Lord Young, unelected and unaccountable in the House of Lords, telling this Union how to conduct its Rule Book and affairs and internal organisation. (*Applause*) If there is to be any change in hours it should be towards a four-day working week and a six-hour day. How can we contemplate any other policy, with over four million on the dole, and thousands of young people daily facing the hopelessness of unemployment?

To suggest that projects like Margam are being designed to create additional jobs is a lie. These new pits are not providing additional capacity. British Coal plans to introduce six-day working and high technology, and this policy, as they admitted last Tuesday, will wipe out at least five times the number of jobs that are created.

The Board's plans for six-day working are a device for destroying and not creating jobs. It has now acknowledged to our Union that its strategy for flexible working will affect every mineworker and every pit in Britain.

I pledge for my part that whatever decision comes out of this Conference I will accept it, irrespective of my personal views. I will accept it in the interests of unity, and I ask every Delegate and Area to give the same commitment, as together we face the common enemy: British Coal and the Tory Government.

Let's be absolutely clear: we want Margam and other major developments. We must at the same time insist that the National Five-Day Week Agreement finally won 40 years ago through the blood, sweat, toil and tears of our forefathers is defended.

British Coal have refused to meet the Union and negotiate a settlement of the 1986/87 Wages Claim — they attempted to "blackmail" the Union by suggesting that they would only negotiate provided we would accept their American majority/minority conciliation concept.

The shabby deal agreed between British Coal and the Breakaway consists of a two year deal which has produced a derisory 3 per cent increase on basic rates.

It also includes an attendance incentive payment and a Conciliation bonus, both of which are essentially "no strike clauses".

For over half a century our Union fought to get rid of iniquitous attendance and conciliation payments. In 1987 the British Coal backed U.D.M. recommended and accepted the reintroduction of these arrangements and in effect, agreed a "no strike deal".

We have made clear that our 1986/87 Wage Claim has not been settled and we do not accept that any "deal" with the U.D.M. prevents us from *negotiating* our claim. The Board have now had to concede that the "strings" attached to the pay deal with the U.D.M. cannot legally be applied to N.U.M. members.

Our enemies often allege that the N.U.M. has not negotiated any wage increase during the past five years. This is a lie. In fact, while the U.D.M. was concluding its shabby deal of 3 per cent, the N.U.M. negotiated a basic rate increase of over 6 per cent, and a total package worth 25 per cent for weekly paid industrial staff.

We regard any increase in pay for mineworkers instituted by British Coal this year as an interim award, and Conference should record its determination to secure justice for our 1986/87 claim.

The Board's latest move has been the introduction of a Disciplinary Code which not only departs dramatically from the procedure operated since 1948, but represents the most vicious Draconian measures seen anywhere in British Industry.

British Coal are dismissing employees for incidents which occur miles away from their place of employment. It is a blatant interference with civil liberties and human rights and in my view is a tactic which goes back to the 1920's and 1930's when people were dismissed for trade union activities.

We have already seen N.U.M. leaders like Paul Whetton and Mick McGinty in Notts. sacked for supporting the N.U.M. British Coal now threaten activists all over the coalfield simply because they insist on belonging to the National Union of Mineworkers.

The N.E.C. are supporting moves at this Conference to take industrial action in the event of British Coal refusing to withdraw their vicious Disciplinary Code and I say if you are fed up with harassment and intimidation at local and Area level by the Board, you will not only support this resolution but translate it into positive action throughout the coalfield.

Since the end of the miners' strike, there have been 70,000 jobs lost — exactly the figure I predicted when I addressed Conference in 1983. There have been 42 pit closures and 19 mergers — and if British Coal is allowed to introduce flexible six-day working at least 31 pits will be closed and 40,000 jobs destroyed.

Britain needs an expanding, developing coal industry, capable of meeting the challenge of the 21st Century. This nation needs all the new pits and projects referred to by British Coal last Tuesday all of which incidentally were originally promised in the 1974 Plan for Coal — as additional, not replacement capacity.

This Union must regenerate the spirit built up in the historic miners' strike. In association with the magnificent women's support groups and others, the N.U.M. must begin a massive public campaign and fight back in the coalfields to stop any further butchery of our industry and our communities.

Those inside and outside the mining industry who gave birth to the U.D.M. swore it would have over 60,000 members within a year and become the majority trade union in mining.

In fact, this British Coal backed organisation has slumped to below 20,000 and in its main base, Notts. over 25 per cent of miners are now back in the N.U.M.

The true nature of the U.D.M. was revealed yet again during the General Election when the Notts. U.D.M. called on its members to vote AGAINST Labour and this shows why our policy towards this company outfit is correct.

There must never be any dealing with the U.D.M. and whilst there is a place for every miner in the ranks of the N.U.M., the leaders of the Breakaway — whose actions helped victimise many of our members — can never be readmitted to our great Union.

More than two years after the end of the strike over 300 of our colleagues remain locked out by the Board and several are still in jail. If this Union has one fundamental central task, it is to ensure that our victimised miners are not forgotten. This Conference must again pledge it will not rest until every single miner has been reinstated.

Our Union continues the long struggle for victimised members, against pit closures, job losses and for decent wages and conditions. We continue because there is no other choice — the only alternative to mass class action is abject surrender and that is no choice at all.

Throughout the coming week, this Conference will be saluting an outstanding class fighter who has truly earned himself a reputation both in Britain and around the world.

I first met Michael McGahey over 25 years ago and along with Peter Heathfield and many, many others, I have learned a number of lessons from this dogged class fighter. Michael said that trade unionists must never be constitutionalised out of action and there must be no compromise of basic principles on issues affecting our Union or socialist faith.

With his foresight, he recognised and warned that the federal structure of our Union, which has been traditionally a strength, has become in many ways a weakness. More than anyone else, Michael has warned that parochialism and federalism weaken the N.U.M. as it confronts a common enemy — "There's only one coalfield — the British coalfield; and only one miner — the British miner", he has declared time and time again.

His role in the 1984/85 dispute, as in the strikes of 1972 and 1974, has left an indelible mark on the history of our union. He is a man of vision, and a true internationalist. No one for example, has campaigned harder for the release of Nelson Mandela than Mick McGahey; no one has worked more energetically for the liberation of the oppressed in every part of the world.

As Michael McGahey leaves his leadership positions in our great Union, he looks back on a lifetime of struggle — struggle that will continue and develop — not only against the oppressive management of British Coal, but against a rotten corrupt capitalist system which holds back the liberation of mankind.

In acknowledging his outstanding contribution to our Union and the Labour Movement, I know delegates will join me in pledging our continued commitment towards achieving the socialist society and peaceful world to which he has devoted his entire working life. Michael, I salute you. *(Applause)*