

# Productivity Dealing and the Miners' Next Step

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1/-



Michael  
Harrington  
1970

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Nationalisation of the mines does not lead in this direction (to industrial democracy) but simply makes a National Trust, with all the force of the Government behind it, whose concern will be . . . to extract as much more profit as possible, in order to relieve the taxation of other landlords and capitalists.

from *The Miners' Next Step*, Tonypandy, 1911

### **Mining Royalties**

Two miles to the heart of the mountain,  
Where we slave from morn till night,  
With never a ray of the golden sun  
To cheer us with its light.  
With backs bent low by incessant toil  
We miners work in the seam below  
For a wage that means a crust.

Pick! Pick! Pick!  
In the tunnels endless gloom,  
And every blow of our strong right arm  
But helps to carve our tomb.  
But what is that to thee  
Who live by our blood and toil?

Two miles in the heart of the mountain,  
We delve in the dismal damp,  
Our bodies and souls, your royalties tolls  
In interest, profits and rents.  
Two miles from the heart of the mountain  
We come to present our claim,  
We march in silent procession,  
The old, the halt and the lame.

Two miles we come from the dungeon deep,  
Where for æons we have toiled in vain,  
We have kneaded the force that moves the world  
And you have branded our lot with shame.  
Two miles we have come as the ages run,  
We have come to present our claim;  
Your mining royalties we measure now  
By the blood of our brothers slain.

By the blood of our brothers slain,  
By the tears of their wives bereft,  
By the soul of the girl thrust out in the world,  
A prey to your hellish lust,  
By the blood of our sire's dead,  
We swear that our cause is just.  
That for mining royalties you, too, must pay,  
And when you pay, PAY US.

*Song of Virginia Miners, 1913*



# One Piece Work and Day Work

For 50 or more years the Miners' Unions carried out a propaganda campaign *against* the vicious piece work system which was used by the owners to divide the lads and set them at each other's throats. There is no doubt that the piece work system was the filthiest system of exploitation ever dreamed up by the ruthless 19th Century capitalist. Its effects on health, safety, living standards and worker solidarity can never be calculated.

In 1945, as Nationalisation drew near, miners hopes rose as the New Dawn beckoned. George Wilkinson, now NUM Secretary at Houghton Main, Barnsley, remembers it well;

It was our life long dream coming true. It was a Utopia. We were for it 100 per cent. What celebrations there were. The industry which had broken generations of miners was ours at last.

Disillusion was not long in setting in as it became obvious that nationalisation without workers control, was business as usual, exploitation as before. And piece work was continued in the New Dawn, which was fast turning to dusk. And of course, year by year, NUM Conference resolutions reaffirmed the miners' total opposition to it. To no avail.

It is hardly surprising then, that the NUM leadership should jump for joy when in 1965 the NCB declared itself to be in favour of a Day Wage system. Surely, many union leaders argued, this was a result of their years of 'constant pressure'. The Board had seen the light.

Since the end of the War few groups of workers have been pushed around more than the miners. They have been blackmailed, conned, slandered, bullied and thrown with monotonous regularity onto the scrap heap, victims of callous Governments, Tory and Labour, and ruthless employers. In view of this one could have expected a suspicious

attitude at the sight of the once big bad wolf turning into the fairy godmother and bringing in the sweets!

But no. Sidney bowed his gratitude, uttered a few statesmanlike speeches, and toddled off to the Palace, in top hat and tails, to receive the accolade!

A few voices, mainly detached militants and Communists not loyal to the future, 'Lord' Paynter, tried to point out that it was not the socialist and Trade Union argument against Payment by Results which had persuaded the Robber Baron (Baron Robens of Woldingham, PC, formerly Alf Robens of Wythenshaw, shop assistant) to abandon it, but they were drowned in the applause for Sir Sidney and 'Sell Out' Paynter.

Those voices were right though. The Baron had been persuaded by the new voice of, so called, *scientific management*, like Pepsi, Presley and Polaris, a relatively recent import from the USA. Luckily those few voices have been growing louder and more numerous. An increasing number of miners can't hear the words, 'Power Loading Agreement,' 'Day Wage Structure' or even 'Sir Sidney' without spitting. For it is becoming clearer every day that they are just another method in the Bosses' well known game of squeezing more work for less money out of the poor sod who goes down the hole!

### **Productivity Deals**

What was actually happening back in 1965 was that the Baron was preparing to use the miners as an experiment in exploitation called *Productivity Bargaining* or *Dealing*. Simply this was to mean *Two* main things.

*1 That you could only get a rise in pay if what they chose to call the CAKE was increased in size*

The Prices and Incomes Board were the first to say this. This was set up by the Labour Government who appointed a Tory chairman, business whiz kid, Aubrey Jones. He is justly famous because he put his new idea on incomes into practice before he took up his job. He demanded an increase on the salary offered of a cool £12,000. The salary offered, by the way, was £13,000! Anyway, Barbara and Harold, well known friends of the people, were quick to echo Tory Aubrey. Considerations like parity with other groups of workers or the rising cost of living were no longer to be considered.

*2 Management wanted more discipline and control in the place of work.*

You see a lot of workers were doing outrageous things like, demanding the rate for the job, and bits of control over speed, mobility, manning, work intensity, fall back rates, redundancy and safety. Such a dreadful situation had to stop! Everybody was saying it. *The Times*, the *Daily Express*, Prince Philip, Lord Cooper (he's a trade union leader!) and of course, the Robber Baron himself. 'My managers must manage.' What a brilliant mind! In 1968, the Donovan Commission reported

on industrial relations. This was made up of learned judges, captains of industry, tame trade union leaders and sundry other 'experts.' It added "statistical prejudice" (that's prejudice against the worker all right but backed up by masses of figures) to the straightforward anti-worker prejudice of *Times*, *Express* and Finger-Out-Philip. The Unions don't have enough control over *their* members, the managers over *their* work force, and of course stewards and rank and file obviously(!) have far too much control. The answer to these nasty problems? Yes! You've guessed right first time, *Productivity Bargaining!*

So, in the past five years Productivity Dealing has become as popular as 'Double Diamond' and by Summer 1970 an estimated 8,000,000 workers were involved from Aluminium Smelters to the men who put the hole in the Polo mint. Some of them have been operating long enough now for us to see clearly some of their effects. The very first was at the Esso Oil Refinery in 1960. This one was signed in a blaze of publicity, books were written about it, which helped employment among university dons, and it took the workers to the top of the earnings league table in the Southampton Area. By 1968 the noise had died down and so had the wages! Fawley workers went down to second last in the league table of eight, and the lads are currently looking for ways of opting out.

There was the Deal involving London busmen. A new way of life said the press. Actually it was. The Union sold one-man-operated single-deckers, one-man-operated double-deckers, split shifts and then their pants. It brought them £1 per week rise per year in the last four years which is exactly what they averaged for the previous five years before the Deal.

The workers in the Nationalised Steel industry were told very brutally 'Management will deploy individual employees in any manner they consider will be efficient.'

In every deal we know of, where the Deal has been in operation for some time, the reaction is the same. A steward in the York British Railways Carriage Works, which accepted a Deal in 1968 now says 'We thought we had a good deal three years ago. Now we feel we were sold down the river . . . on pay, conditions, the lot.'

### **Power Loading and Pay**

The PLA has now been in operation long enough to look for results. On wages the Union expected a levelling *up*. We have actually seen a process of levelling *down* area to area.

**In 1966 a face worker at Houghton Main was getting 100 to 120 shillings per shift. He now gets the Yorkshire rate under NPLA of 89/10**

**At Brodsworth, as long ago as 1960 a face worker got 84/- as against 89/10 today**

Clearly the Board have struck an exceptionally good bargain for this picture could be repeated on any of the coalfields or at any of the

pits, where demand and strong local organisation pushed earnings up and up. Contraction of the industry has meant that an increasing number of surviving pits were in this category.

**Fred Higgins, a Bentley Miner has calculated where face earnings would now be, on the basis of pit bottom bargaining. A worker in a strong pit would now be on £6 a shift.**

One of the arguments for the new style of Bargaining, used by the Board and of course by the leadership was that the lower paid workers would benefit from restraint at the face. To that, another Yorkshire miner says:

They must be kidding! My pay is £15 per week. It has risen by exactly £2 17s 6d since 1965. In the previous five years before PLA it rose by about £3. The figures speak for themselves.

The miners as a group have had shabby treatment but the pay and conditions of surface workers is downright disgraceful. The writers of a recent pamphlet, "A Future for British Miners?" comment:

Lest anyone suppose it is light work today on the surface let him go to the pit yard and watch the men at the screens, lifting out the rock that comes up with the coal, handling heavy stores and supplies with little more handling equipment than they've ever had. . . . Half of them are over 50, most of them men whose injuries and age have relegated them from work underground.

However, it was face workers earnings which the Board wished to check as that held the key to reducing the size of the wage bill. Sadly enough the PLA has done this job even more effectively than did the big stick of former times.

The number of men who shall comprise a PL team will be assessed by method study . . . the Union may have an observer present . . . the number of men will be assessed by management . . . the selection of men who are to comprise a PL team shall be made by management. . . . Power Loading men are expected to work diligently and to co-operate in securing maximum utilisation of the machines . . .

### **. . . and Conditions**

Falls in earnings are fairly easy to measure. You can see your pay chit and the wife is very soon badgering you when she arrives home from the shops with a half-empty basket. Much more difficult to measure, but in the long term far more dangerous to a worker's life are the other changes which the Productivity Deal ushers in. Looming over all is the clear attack on *Control* at pit level. The NPLA stated the position quite clearly:

This means that in the vital areas of manning, flexibility (mobility) and work intensity *all Control* is to be taken away from the men on the job.



Before the NPLA the checker was the lad elected by his mates to haggle over job price with the deputy. With this vital job removed, he has become increasingly a management man . . . more like a charge hand in a factory, nominated by the boss and carrying out his orders. At a number of pits where the leadership and organisation has been strong this has not yet happened. The Checker is still seen as workers' man and that's how he sees himself. However, it is the Management's intention to change this situation at the first sign of weakness. The well-organised will ignore what has happened at many pits at their peril. For it means the end of worker representation at the point of production.

Now if the idea of shrinking control in the place of work is a bit difficult to put your finger on, its effects are clear for everyone to see.

'That bloke hasn't been down a shaft for 16 years.'

We suggest that there are a number of reasons for the rise in Productivity—not all of which are applicable to every pit.

### 1 Method Study

This is the laughable system which is called *Scientific*, but which is really only the so-called *Expert's* opinion.

*Does that mean less work, or more?*

### 2 Flexibility

This has meant that increasingly there is no time for a breather. As Ken Birch, a miner at Bentley for over 30 years, says:

In the old days if a machine broke down you could snatch a break for a chat, which helped to keep you human! Now there's always somebody waiting to push you off to another job.

*Does this mean less work, or more?*

### 3 Supervision

has risen very steeply indeed. In 1965 the ratio of under-officials to manual workers was 1:11. It has now risen to 1:8. These figures don't

We have already spelt out the shocking wages situation. The NCB's claim of rising Productivity is no mirage.

### **Output per manshift, up 25 per cent in the last 5 years.**

In fact it is the highest rate of increase in British Industry in this period. No doubt some of this is accounted for by the fact that a further 180,000 men are on the cobbles. But the fact is inescapable that there has been a steep rise in productivity at the majority of worked pits. What is the explanation for this? After all, a number of NUM officials argued that the Day Wage structure would mean less hard work, not more.

One official said, as recently as late August 'The lads have never had it so good. They please themselves how much they do.'

The reaction of a Bentley miner to this statement was unprintable even in the permissive society! But he did add, by way of explanation

tell the whole story either. George Wilkinson believes that supervision has more than doubled since 1966:

Before '66 you had a deputy, the occasional overman coming round, and the shotfirer (Grade II Deputy). Now you have a district deputy, a face deputy, a district overman, a face overman and Grade II Deputies.

If we also include the changing role of the Checker at many pits it becomes clear that it is intended that Supervision should play a much more positive role than ever before.

*Does this mean less work, or more?*

4 Increasingly managements are introducing two cutting machines to a bank. Coal is therefore cut twice as fast, yet the teams have reduced in size.

*Does this mean less work, or more?*

5 A number of miners report that double shift working is taking place regularly at their pits. This means that at the end of a shift the lads stay down. The Boss saves travelling time and because it's overtime, he is not required to pay bonus.

*Does this mean less work, or more?*

6 The employment of outside contractors like Cementation on preparatory work means that the gap between coal cutting operations is reduced, stepping up the pressure on face workers.

*Does this mean less work, or more?*

Productivity is rising steeply at most pits. The NCB is producing advert after advert suggesting that work at the pits is something like the Beach at Torremolinos! They are even inviting people to return to the beauties of colliery life who were sacked years ago, for 'persistent absenteeism'. So there is a serious labour shortage. *Yet, someone is turning out more coal.* And, it's not the increasing army of NCOs or the gentlemen of the Board Room!

### **Shift Work**

When Tony Cliff examined over 100 prod. deals in the course of writing his handbook for Trade Unionists, he discovered that in virtually every one, an intensification of shift work was either a direct part of the deal or a closely related feature. The pits were no exception. Four shift working started 'experimentally' in 1965 and despite some token resistance at some pits, it quickly spread throughout the industry.

When we talk about shift working we should pull no punches. It is a rotten system which puts profits before people. It disrupts family and social life. It is ruinous to health with irregular sleep and irregular eating. It helps to undermine the Union's strength by further dividing workers and making representative attendance at meetings practically impossible. The more complicated the Shift System the worse the effects. Cliff quotes from a number of books and reports which underline just how vicious it is:

day workers get an average of seven and one-half hours sleep per night, which is an hour more than the overall average of rotating shift workers. But when they are working the night segment of their shift, rotating workers average only five and one-half hours of sleep. The biggest problem for rotating shift workers occurs when they move from their turn on the day shift to the night shift. One study report that only 37 per cent of the workers adjust to the new sleeping times immediately, while 28 per cent of the workers said that they took four days or more to adjust to the night shift . . .

#### Another study

done among German workers showed that the ulcer rate was eight times as high for the rotating shift workers as for the fixed shift group.

The most frequently mentioned difficulties in husband-wife relationships concern the absence of the worker from the home in the evening, sexual relations, and difficulties encountered by the wife in carrying out her household duties.

Another area of family life that seems to be adversely affected by certain kinds of shift work is the father-child relationship . . .

#### Accidents

The most disgraceful aspect of the whole dirty business is the FACT that there has been little appreciable cut in the rate of those killed, maimed and seriously injured. The most uncontrollable rise is of accidents arising from the use of machinery. A Barnsley miner said:

The teams will soon have another supervisor toddling along behind them. A Doc. with needle and thread to stitch on all the fingers and toes that get sliced off.

He was no doubt exaggerating but the fact remains that work intensification leads to more accidents not less, and this is true of all industries.

**In 1957 the rate of accidents per 100,000 manshifts was 115.3.**

**In 1966 it had risen to 196.06. There has been a slight overall fall since then. However, once again overall figures do not tell the whole story. In the Barnsley area, which contains some of the most highly mechanised pits in Britain, 13 out of 22 pits show a rise in rate for the first six months of 1970 over the 1969 figures, ranging up to 20 per cent.**

#### Disease

A Bullcroft, Doncaster miner, Angus Martin, says: 'In Scawthorpe you don't need an alarm clock to wake you in the mornings. The chorus of coughing in the street does that!' Curly Owen of Brodsworth says: 'All face workers have got pneumoconiosis. They are bound to get it, with dust levels so high since wholesale mechanisation.' The number of pneumoconiosis cases diagnosed by Medical Panels has shown a steady increase since the NPLA. And this despite the substantial de-

crease in the labour force over the same period. A Swansea miner writes: 'In my area the increase is staggering and the most disturbing feature is that where previously it was mainly men in their 50's and 60's who reached the danger levels now you get a hell of a lot of lads in their late 30's and 40's.' All are agreed that not nearly enough precautions are taken. Arthur Palmer, of Carlton, Notts, writes:

The new gramm-metric system is already giving rise to concern. Faces unapproved under the previous system are now approved, more velocity of air rather than increased dust suppression seems to be the order of the day.

### Redundancy

The signing of Productivity Deals in the Mining Industry is the surest way of ensuring more miners in the Dole Queue. With total demand falling every year, increasing the output per man shift can only mean fewer, and fewer, pits and men.



# Two

# The Miners' Next Step

In the course of researching for this pamphlet we have read a number of excellent pamphlets and articles by miners, ex-miners and university lecturers sympathetic to the miners' case. Few have related the latest stage in the attack on miners' conditions to the new Employers' Offensive, Productivity Bargaining. All however quote impressive statistics which prove beyond reasonable doubt that the miner's existence has been a rotten one and is a rotten one.

It is our contention however, that, any pitman who doesn't already believe he is being trodden underfoot in the crazy search for profit; killed, maimed, injured, diseased and thrown on the scrap heap, is not likely to be influenced one bit by a battery of statistics as long as the Baron's Bank Balance.

*The central problem is what can be done about it?*

## **The New Mood**

In the last two years we have seen the appearance of a sprinkling of local rank and file papers, miners discussion groups. Coupled with the interest of Miners in the Workers' Control Conference and the display of rank and file militancy in some areas in October 1969 it indicates that there are a considerable number of miners who are extremely dissatisfied with the current situation and would like to do something about it. The vital job is to link them up into a nationwide rank and file organisation.

A rank and file organisation would obviously draw up its own aims and programme as the result of protracted discussion. What we offer here are simply suggestions which might form the basis of such discussions.

## **Four Broad Aims**

- 1 To unite the left in the NUM in an open organisation which can campaign for changes in the structure and policies of the Union*
- 2 To seek to build a Fuel Workers' Alliance by opening meetings and publications to workers in the Oil, Gas and Electricity Supply industries*
- 3 To provide an information service by exchanging experience on such questions as National Fuel Policy and Productivity Bargaining*
- 4 To combat by vigorous campaigning the defeatism which has been so strong since the War*

## **A Possible Programme**

- 1 For a £25 minimum wage.
- 2 Opposition to productivity bargaining as a deliberate employers' attack on living standards and working conditions.
- 3 Workers' control of the mining industry and the state as the only guarantee for a satisfactory life for working people.
- 4 Democratic elections at regular intervals with right of recall of all Union officials. At each pit a lay executive should be elected from a council of workers, composed of one member of each team of workers, democratically elected and instantly accountable for any and every decision made.
- 5 Democratic control over the results of all negotiations, with voting on separate items in package deals at branch and national level.
- 6 Five days work or five days pay for all miners up to the age of 65.
- 7 And part of all future negotiations with the Board
  - A service supplement of 6d. per shift per year of service over the flat rate, to protect earnings of older miners.
  - A four day week.
  - A six hour day.
  - A very substantial shift allowance (Double Time) to reduce its value to the boss.
  - Four weeks paid holiday.
- 8 In fighting Prod. strings, demand
  - Mutual agreement on manning and mobility.
  - Method Study wholly open to inspection by elected union committees.
  - Greater safety measures not less: one machine on the bank only; increase of pit bottom breaks; all teams to be supplied with dust control equipment.
  - Outlaw double shift working.
  - No further mechanisation without full employment guarantees.

## **Conclusion**

It is only by the militants getting together and hammering out policies and strategies that any progress at all can be made. It is urgent that this job be undertaken if demoralisation is not to bite deeper. Perhaps many will find this pamphlet impracticable. It is up to them to suggest better tactics. The reasonable, the responsible men have had their chance. They have no credibility left. The field is open to the militants now. For the sake of every miner they must capture it.

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