

Scottish National Party government to pardon arrested miners after 36 years

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On October 28, Scottish National Party (SNP) government Justice Secretary, Humza Yousaf, announced a pardon for Scottish miners convicted of certain offences during the 1984-85 nationwide strike. A total of 1,424 miners and others were arrested in Scotland during the 1984-85 strike, with 13,000 arrested UK wide.

To enact a pardon, the SNP will introduce legislation into the Scottish parliament, and it will come into effect on passage of the bill.

In announcing the pardon fully 36 years after the events, Yousaf said, “This collective pardon... applies posthumously and symbolises our desire for truth and reconciliation, following the decades of hurt, anger and misconceptions which were generated by one of the most bitter and divisive industrial disputes in living memory.

“The pardon is intended to acknowledge the disproportionate impacts arising from miners being prosecuted and convicted during the strike—such as the loss of their job... it will also recognise the exceptional circumstances that resulted in former miners suffering hardship and the loss of their good name through their participation in the strike.”

Yousaf’s announcement made sure not to say that any financial redress would be made available to those miners dismissed from their jobs as a result of convictions arising from the strike.

The miners’ strike was deliberately provoked by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. Her election in 1979, along with Reagan in the US, represented a political shift away from the policies of class compromise of previous decades towards direct class confrontation.

From the mid-1970s, the major corporations had sought to counteract falling rates of profit through an aggressive turn towards global investment and internationalised production. As part of this strategy, they demanded the deregulation of the economies of the advanced industrial countries, the slashing of tax rates and the destruction of welfare provision. Thatcher put forward a programme for the economic and social reorganisation of Britain in order to make it globally competitive. This was centred on the privatisation of profitable nationalised industries to open key areas of the economy to corporate investors and the dismantling and closure of any that required subsidies—epitomised in Thatcher’s commitment to “rolling back the frontiers of the state” and letting the “lame ducks” go to the wall.

When the strike began there were 174 pits in the UK, employing

over 181,000 men and producing 90 million tonnes of coal. At the beginning of March 1984, the Tories called for the closure of 20 uneconomic coal pits, with the immediate spark for the strike the announced closure of Cortonwood Colliery, in South Yorkshire.

The action began on March 5, 1984 and was to end on that same day a year later. It saw 26 million days lost, the most since the 1926 British general strike.

From the start, the strike was politicised, with the Thatcher government, describing the miners as the “enemy within” and recognising the NUM as its most militant representative. Writing on the 20th anniversary of the strike the *World Socialist Web Site* commented, “The year-long miners’ strike of 1984-85 was a watershed in political life in Britain. The worst single defeat suffered by the working class in the post-war period, its results continue to resonate to this day.”

We continued, “The miners faced brutal attacks by the police, who utilised techniques of suppression never seen before in mainland Britain. Mounted officers charged at pickets and through the streets of mining communities. A national task force was created of heavily armoured riot police, which was used to mount military style attacks. Miners were prevented from freely moving around the country, and special courts were created to deal with the large numbers of arrests made.”

The article explained that “The suffering of the miners during the strike was on a scale almost without precedent. Some 20,000 miners were injured or hospitalised, 13,000 arrested, 200 imprisoned, two were killed on picket lines, three died digging for coal during the winter, and 966 were sacked.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) under the leadership of the Stalinist, Arthur Scargill, insisted that mines only close on grounds of exhaustion and called for the preservation of a nationalised and subsidised industry. But the Scargill leadership refused to challenge the isolation of the strike by the Trades Union Congress and Labour Party. They ensured that the substantial support that existed within the working class was not mobilised against the hated Thatcher government.

The Tories responded to their defeat of the miners by closing the majority of remaining coal mines within a decade. In 1985, the government closed 23 mines and in 1986 another 17.

In 1994, Thatcher’s successor John Major announced the closure of 55 more pits and the privatisation of British Coal. By the time the Tories left in office in 1997, 125 mines had been closed since the strike. In 2012, only three privately run deep coal mines

remained in Britain and the last deep mine, Kellingley colliery, closed in December 2015.

Our two-part assessment of the miners' strike, first published in March 2004, can be read [here](#).

Scottish miners arrested during the strike disproportionately lost their jobs after the event. Some 14,000 miners went on strike in Scotland. Although only representing seven percent of the UK mining workforce, they represented 30 percent of all miners who lost their jobs following convictions. In Scotland, around 500 were convicted of offences during the strike, of which 206 were dismissed from their jobs. Major confrontations between police and striking Scottish miners took place at the former steel production plant, Ravenscraig, in Lanarkshire, where pickets tried to stop scab lorries delivering coal to the plant. Nearly 300 people who were protesting at the entrance to Ravenscraig were arrested in just one day on May 3, 1984.

Lawyers representing the National Union of Miners (NUM) welcomed the pardon but said it was only a first step. The organisation calls for those sacked following convictions to be awarded financial compensation to make up for lost wages and pensions.

Quoted in the *Times* October 29, Alex Bennett, now 73, who at the time of the strike was chairman of the NUM at the Monktonhall pit near Musselburgh, spoke of his experiences. "At the start of the strike there was no trouble on the picket line. It was the local police from the mining communities who were involved. We knew them, they drank in the Miners' Welfare. That changed in June 1984, when they took away all the local police and brought in strangers and snatch squads and started making arrests.

"I was arrested on June 24 outside Bilston Glen [pit] by a snatch squad, with a colleague who was also an official with the NUM. They tried to charge us with mobbing and rioting but they couldn't make it stick, so we were charged with breach of the peace."

Bennett's case was heard at a court in Edinburgh in December 1984. "We were found guilty, and in January I got my P45 [job termination notice]. The strike ended, the men went back to work, but I didn't."

He told the paper that though he won an employment tribunal he was blacklisted by the National Coal Board and was unable to find work for three years.

Yousaf's announcement followed the final report by the John Scott review which recommended a pardon for convicted miners. The review, under the leadership of John Scott QC, was announced in June 2018 by Michael Matheson, who was then the SNP's Cabinet Secretary for Justice. It called for miners and other interested parties to submit evidence to the review by November of that year. The review was due to report by 2019 but was later granted an extension.

The SNP had previously blocked attempts to examine the injustices done to Scottish miners when Labour Member of the Scottish Parliament, Neil Findlay, attempted to raise the issue. A *Guardian* opinion piece by journalist Kevin McKenna in March 2015 noted, "Scotland... has a chance to mark the [30th] anniversary [of the miners' strike] by giving belated justice to the hundreds of Scottish miners wrongly fitted up by our own police force during the dispute. [F]indlay has researched the cases of

many of these men, whose lives have been ruined by the lies of the Scottish police. His pleas to the SNP government have been constantly ignored, though... Findlay's case for a review of the conviction of 500 Scottish miners who were wrongfully criminalised by the police and judiciary was published in a report at the end of last year. It contains clear and corroborated evidence of police wrongdoing, upheld by the judiciary but ignored by the SNP."

The blanket refusal of the SNP to consider an investigation of police conduct in the miners' strike in Scotland began to soften in 2015. Chris Stephens, who was elected SNP MP for Glasgow south west to sit in Westminster in May that year, called for a shift in the SNP policy. The newly elected Stephens was secretary of the SNP trade union group with around 15,000 members.

In a *Scotsman* article on October 12, 2015, Stephens reported he had written to and would ask Matheson "to consider holding an inquiry into policing miners, arrests, dismissals and miners who lost out on redundancy pay, during the miners' strike in Scotland."

Mass arrests were made during the brutal police attack on miners at the June 1984 Battle of Orgreave in South Yorkshire—one of the main centres of the mining industry. Police arrested 93 miners at Orgreave and 95 pickets were charged with riot, unlawful assembly and other offences. In June 1991, the South Yorkshire Police paid, in an out-of-court settlement, £425,000 in compensation to 39 miners for assault, wrongful arrest, unlawful detention and malicious prosecution. No police officer has ever been disciplined in relation to the events.

In 2016, then Tory Home Secretary Amber Rudd ruled out an inquiry into the role of the police at Orgreave. Following Rudd's decision, the SNP administration came under increasing pressure within its ranks to demonstrate its independence from Westminster and call for an inquiry into the policing of the miners' strike in Scotland.

Central to the SNP's pardon of the miners is an effort consign the strike and its lessons to the past forever, in favour of a "reconciliation" on all sides. Its official announcement included the comments from Justice Secretary Yousaf, backed up by Nicky Wilson, President of the National Union of Mineworkers (Scotland) and Iain Livingstone, Chief Constable of Police Scotland. SNP First Minister Nicola Sturgeon commented, "We have an opportunity now to bring reconciliation to miners and to police officers and to try to heal the wounds of the past. We will call upon the UK Government to adopt the same reconciliation approach in taking forward a UK-wide inquiry."

The decision of the SNP, regardless of their political calculations, has major implications. It is further damning evidence that the state committed crimes on a mass scale against miners and their families in order to defeat them at all costs.



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