Into battle with the bazooka bands

(Pages of Labour history)

Tom Brown

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One way of writing history is to take a social group, in one place and at one time, leaving the broad drama of great events, and treating the subject as a microcosm, letting the minutiae of humble lives interpret the greater story. In thus taking one corner of the Durham Coalfield as my subject I might as well be writing of the coalminers of Scotland, South Wales, Yorkshire or almost anywhere.

When the General Strike of 1926 ended, I lost my job in Coventry. Four weeks after the Strike I decided to go North, but at Coventry station I was told: "We can issue a ticket to Derby only. The railways are so disorganised we cannot guarantee any travel beyond that distance." So, with three tickets and four trains, I reached Newcastle (about 185 miles) in 18 hours. The Government had boasted of their skeleton blackleg service and this was the result, even four weeks later.

From Newcastle I went to live in the small mining town of Birtley, part of the urban district of Chester-le-Street in Durham, and found and made a home in Elizabethville (though not in the Congo). Here in 1914 about 600 temporary houses, a school, church and hospital had been built for Belgian refugees, hence the title. In 1919 the refugees went home and the government locked the empty buildings and – the village was surrounded by high spiked iron railings – the heavy iron gates and refused to allow homeless people to occupy the huts. Then, in the course of three days the place was taken over, mostly by ex-soldiers and the gates removed and dropped in a brook. The police were ordered to expel the squatters who promptly formed a defence force and posted round the clock sentries. After a few months, authority decided it was better to accept the fait accompli and charge their unwelcome tenants rent – 7s. 9d. a week.

When, on May 21 1926, the national lock-out of coal miners took place, Durham had already been out for two weeks on a county issue. That and a long series of single pit strikes had left the strike fund broken (at that time each mining county in England had a separate union, linked in the Miners Federation Of Great Britain). But Durham went, with the rest, solidly into the battle.

How, then, did the miners' families live? There was a national miners relief fund which was big, though not nearly as big as the distress it was to relieve. Durham received its share but there were 120,000 men plus wives and children to feed, clothe and shelter and most of that had to be found at home. The Guardians gave relief to the strikers but soon that was drastically curtailed. The Boards were under the control of the Minister of Health who ordered all relief to single or

married able-bodied men to cease. Relief, and not very much at that, was to be given only to the wives and children.

The County Council, with a majority of miners, gave free breakfast to schoolchildren over five years of age. The same body had formed clinics for children under three. Here a fortnightly medical check of the babies was made and a weekly allowance of one pound of full-cream dried milk and a bottle of codliver oil given for each baby. Children's clothes were sold at cost price. The garments were almost half the price the mothers would have paid in the shops and the goods were certainly superior. Most of the work of these clinics was organised locally and done by volunteers.

Then someone discovered that an Education Act allowed the Council to institute primary schools for children between three and five but without supplying the money for such a venture. So it was put to the Council that they could pass a resolution to establish primary schools for the under fives without fixing a date, then give school meals to the primary scholars. This legal hocus-pocus was carried out and the kids got their free meal quite legally.

The local co-operative, with some backing from the CWS, [Co-operative Wholesale Society] was able to give some credit to the miners' lodges – as always. And, always, such credit was repaid weekly, from the second week of the return to work, until the whole of the debt was paid. There is a strong traditional streak of puritanism in Durham and the repayment of such debts of honour was considered not only just, but sound business – there is always a next time.

The local co-op was small, nothing like the city giants, but like many small co-ops was efficient. It owned the only large store in town and the only cinema. It had meeting rooms and a hall, a barber's shop, a billiards saloon, allotments, a farm producing fresh meat, milk and eggs, with cottages for its labourers.

Rent did not trouble the majority as long as the strike lasted. Many lived in coal companies' houses and a rent strike was automatic. Any attempt at eviction would have been met by a thousand-strong picket. Coal was got by searching the waste heaps which, like young mountains, adorn the coalfield scene.

There was recreation, too. There were village fiestas, without the feasting. A procession led by at least one excellent brass band, a meeting, a sports day with athletic events for children and adults (first prize, a bar of chocolate) and, in the evening, an open-air dance or a concert. There were ladies' football matches and comic football matches between teams of boisterous clowns and comic boxing shows – at times everything comic. But frequent meetings were important too, for they served the part of a Press.

Rival to the silver bands, some well known, were the bazooka bands, the "bazooka" [kazoo] being a sixpenny instrument one hummed into. About 40 of these, with drums made quite a noise. All the bands – there must have been a few hundred of them in the country, including children's bands – were in costume, a condition being that the costume should not cost a great deal. Sometimes 20 bands would take part in a local carnival, tramping miles to the site. I recall one fat man who, dressed as a sultan in the remains of a bedspread, marched at the head of his "harem" of 40 women, a very proud sultan he looked, and the "Tramps", each wearing a battered bowler and spats, who played their tune, then sang, "We're on the road to anywhere" like a choir. There were bands of Zulu warriors, Red Indians, knights in tincan armour, battalions of Fred Karno's Army, bands of mermaids (the most difficult of the lot) and of pirates (the easiest).

But as that long, warm summer began to fade into autumn, the struggle became grimmer. The first serious blow was made, against the Chester-le-Street Board of Guardians, who had

refused to obey the Government's order to cease relief to single men. The Tory Government deposed the elected Guardians, whose work was unpaid, and put in their place three highly-paid commissioners. The new regime stopped all relief to men, single or married, who **might** be able to work. The only relief was to wives, 8s. [shillings] a week, and children, 1s. a week. Thus a family of six received 12s. a week in the form of a food voucher, no money, compared to the dole of 29s. a week. This measure of economic terrorism was applied not only to strikers but to all unemployed "on relief", miners and other workers, and was continued after the strike for a few years. Following the strike, these people without money were dunned for rent. The only ways to get money were to sell part of their meagre rations, or pick coal from the waste heaps and try to sell it. 4-5s. for a week's hard work, less to the unlucky.

The police acted against the strikers picking coal from the heaps; the men went in larger groups, the police were reinforced. The miners begun prospecting for coal in the fields like gold diggers but this meant spreading out. Pressure increased with the coming of cold weather. A nearby wood of commercial fir, belonging to Lord Lambton, was completely felled and sawn up. A coalowner magistrate, whose large house on the North Road had three tall gateposts of 18in. square oak, found, one morning, that they had been sawn off six inches from the ground.

Then the Notts. Miners' Association, led by Labour MP G. A. Spencer, broke away from the Federation and returned to work. Heavy police reinforcements appeared in Durham, the biggest, heaviest constables from distant counties; and attempts were made to re-open strikebound pits. Scarcely a miner, with the exception of a few in South Shields, could be found. The blackleg gangs were token forces of bankrupt shopkeepers and of professional layabouts from the town.

The pits were usually closed after three days. Sometimes after the first day, and the owners resorted to surprise but there was always a strong picket awaiting the scabs at the end of their morning shift. Scouts took to following on bicycles the truckloads of police: this in turn led to the police making dummy concentrations to lure the men to the wrong pits but there were always enough pickets to go round.

News travels fast in a mining area and even the sound of running feet and a shout would bring out men, boys and women in a mass picket – yes, women pickets, and punching ones, too! It was hard, bitter fighting: usually, before the scabs could be reached, the charge of six-foot-plus, 15-stone policemen swinging batons in arm-breaking, skull-cracking blows had to be met and broken.

The pattern was for the picket to gather early, to prevent a surprise getaway. The police would try to disperse them, but would soon gather about the pit yard. The scabs would wait at the pithead for 2, 3 or 4 hours, then the police would make their big charge and the main battle was on. A prisoner always went to jail for 6–12 months. The wounded were, if possible, carried off by their comrades.

I recall one such episode on the old North Road near Gateshead; where a colliery had "re-opened". The Birtley men gathered there. Two tramcars came to pick up the scabs, the police were pushed back, the trolleys pulled off, all windows broken, starting and steering handles removed; one tram derailed and the tramwaymen sent home, all in a few minutes. We hung about for three hours, then half a dozen scabs dashed from the back of the yard, down the hilly fields, towards the new North Road.

From the hedges sprang small, slim, youthful figures, who ran like hares after them and did nothing but trip them up, then pounding behind came heavier figures and in two minutes the scabs were unfit for work for a week or two. On the main road the fighting broke out again. At

night some of the scabs who lived in Gateshead were visited in their homes; they did not return to the pit, which, in any case, closed after three days.

At another pit, which lasted only one day, a sergeant lifted his baton high to give the signal for a charge and was at once felled by a stone. At another a sergeant (the supers, like the Duke of Plaza Toro,[1] led their armies from the rear) appeared to give an order to charge and rushed into the crowd, while his men stood still. I never found out where he went to.

One surprise nearly succeeded, but a few young fellows, very early in the morning, went to the "reopened" pit, to be charged by treble the number of police and sought refuge on the waste heap. These heaps of loose stone are tricky and one runs up them zigzag fashion. The police tried to run straight up and every man started his own avalanche. The men on top helped these, too, and pelted the constables, but they were marooned in a sea of blue serge. Then, after several hungry hours, they saw columns marching from every village for miles around. Lucknow was relieved.[2]

All this time hunger was growing. Over a nearby hill a miner's wife was picking late blackberries. She was hungry, ate some without washing them and died of poisoning a few days later. Said the coroner: "There is no doubt that the poor woman was very hungry."

In December, a national ballot of the miners favoured a return to work, except in Durham, which voted by a big majority to stay out. In the face of a national return, however, the E.C.[Executive Committee] had to disregard the vote. Out from mid-April to December, the miners went back, the strike was over, but not the fight. Their union was intact, their spirit unbroken.

Yet, apart from the social war, it was a peaceful community, more peaceful and ethical than London W.1, though the police were regarded as an occupying army. A woman or a child could walk alone in the dark, doors were left unlocked. A sociologist, speaking of this and the following period in Durham, said that the absence of crime was the most remarkable feature of the depression and attributed this to "steady living and the steadying influence of the Union." ([Charles] Muir, **Justice in a Depressed Area**, p. 32–33 [1936]). Later, the Pilgrim Report said that there was here little self-pity, but a determination to fight the effects of poverty and unemployment. Yet, it said, 71 per cent had been out of work for 5 years or more, compared to Liverpool's 23 per cent and Deptford's 3 per cent. (**Men Without Work**, 1938).

It was a consciously working-class community, self-reliant and ready for spontaneous action, best when its leaders were in London. There was, of course, a deal of petty gossip and such in a "Coronation Street"[3] way, but in struggle they were loyal to one another and in some local pit disasters – even unto death.

[1] From Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers*

[2] An ironic nod to the Siege of Lucknow, during the Indian revolt of 1857

[3] Famous British soap opera, which started in 1960.

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