Britain's Civil War over Coal

Britain's Civil War over Coal:

An Insider's View

By David Feickert

Edited by David Creedy and Duncan France

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Dedicated by David Feickert to Marina and Sonia and to the lads who so often took him away from them, his family, for ten years.

In memory of Kevin Devaney, miner, lecturer, trade unionist, political activist—a good friend and wry observer of coal mining life.

In memoriam
David Feickert 1946-2014

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FOREWORD

Dave Feickert joined the NUM industrial relations team shortly after Arthur Scargill relocated the NUM HQ from London to Sheffield to be nearer the coalfields. Previously, Dave was at Bradford University with the Working Environment Research Group (WERG) researching the impact of new technology on the UK coal mining industry and its communities. Many books have been written about the 1984-85 miners' strike but this is the first written by a top-ranking insider. It makes the reader aware of the challenge the NUM faced in trying to get to grips with an aggressive management strategy that differed from anything previously experienced in the industry. On the departure of Mike McCarthy in 1985, Dave took over as head of research. He got on well with everyone in the office and always had something good to say no matter how difficult things were.

Information about the new mining technology being developed by the Mining Research and Development Establishment (MRDE) was of great value because the National Coal Board (NCB) had stopped details of it being discussed at the Coal Industry National Consultation Council (CINCC). Dave's knowledge filled the gaps and put it in context of what we had gleaned to date. It became clear we were facing a transformation of the industry which could have been beneficial to coal miners and coalfield communities. Instead, the NCB with government backing and at enormous cost used the new technology as a stick to beat the NUM.

The roots of the miners' strike go back to 1973/74 when the oil crisis ended years of decline. The position of the NUM was strengthened as coal assumed a new importance in the British energy economy. It appears that from this point in time, the management strategy became much more aggressive. Although there is no definitive evidence that they were working to the Miron Plan there was an amazing similarity between the Plan and what actually occurred. Miron was the former chairman of the East Midlands NCB Division with contacts in high places. It is known that at this crucial time he met Lord Ezra the Coal Board chairman to discuss his plan. It is inconceivable that the document was not passed on to Peter Walker the energy secretary.

The first devastating blow listed in the Plan was launched in 1977 when two successive NUM national ballots rejected the reintroduction of a bonus scheme in the industry. On 8th December 1977, the National Executive

Council (NEC) agreed that Areas that wished to do so could enter into their own incentive agreements. This decision had grave implications for mineworkers' solidarity in the 1984-85 strike.

By the end of April 1978, every single one of the British coalfields was operating its own bonus scheme. The solidarity that had existed since the 1966 technology agreement, known as the "National Power Loading Agreement," was shattered. At this point the Union had not seen the Miron Plan. When it eventually came to light in 1986, we were astonished at how its proposals mirrored what had actually happened and was still on going in the industry.

Matters worsened in 1983 when the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (M&MC) rejected Schumacher's social market approach and recommended that output from low-cost capacity with relatively low marginal costs should be maximised and high-cost capacity reduced.

Dave and I regularly discussed the situation and considered what might be done to find a way out of it. We decided a technology agreement as in the 1960s was the ideal way forward for both sides but the Board's Chief Mining Engineer stated bluntly, "It was too late for that." Dave was never discouraged and was relentless in seeking to build alliances with other mining unions. In the energy sector he had good contacts but building alliances there was always going to be problematic and after the Gaddafi fiasco it became even more difficult.

The provocative NCB announcement at the CINCC on 6 March 1984 that they were to reduce the production budget for 1984/85 to 97.4 Mt, a cut back on the previous year's budget, suggested they had decided this was the time to take the miners on. It appears they had gambled on the miners being constitutionally defeated by being forced to call for a national ballot they could not win because of the breakdown of solidarity in the coalfields. However, that week the NEC decided in accordance with rule 41, to declare the proposed strike action in Yorkshire, Scotland and any other area that took similar action, as official (NUM minutes, 8 March 1984).

In 1992, as a recently elected Labour MP drafted onto the trade and industry select committee, I worked with Dave and others to devise a compromise which would have created market space for more coal. The strike had been lost and compromise was necessary if the industry was to survive. Disappointingly, Arthur Scargill rejected the plan leaving Heseltine, president of the Board of Trade, to close 31 collieries. What was left of the industry was privatised in 1994.

Dave and I were very good friends and often called at The Dog and Partridge pub in Sheffield after a hard day's work for a pint or two of Guinness with the team. He was a kind generous man, compassionate and

brimming with humanity. It is a privilege to have known him and to have worked with him.

—Michael Clapham, February 2020

PREFACE

We, Duncan and Teri France, met New Zealander Dave Feickert about ten years ago at a mutual friend's house. We found him a fascinating character, who told us some of his experiences in the mining industry around the world. He also talked about fighting for the rights of coal miners in the UK in the 70s and 80s. It was amazing listening to his memories of promoting vital safety measures in China's deadly coal mines.

When we heard of his tragic early death, his second wife, Jing, told us that Dave had been writing a book about his experiences in the UK. He had documented an inside story of the social, political and industrial strife associated with the miners' battle against mine closure. After reading Dave's book, we realised that it had to be published, if only to shed light on the traumatic events that ultimately led to the demise of the UK coal industry and the emergence of oil as a competing energy source with all the economic problems that came with it.

Dave's account brought back memories for me (Teri), the daughter of a coalminer and living in a close-knit community of Yorkshire miners in my childhood. I experienced the trauma of returning home from New Zealand on holiday only to find the village shabby and neglected and no longer the busy happy place where I was brought up.

Dave began writing the book about 2004 but he was constantly travelling the world to help in other mining crises and advising on solutions to problems related to the industry, so the book wasn't completed in its entirety when Dave's untimely death intervened, 2 June 2014.

I (David Creedy) met Dave in China where we discussed common interests in mine safety and miners' health. He coerced me to go to New Zealand to join a technical team advising the families of the miners who perished in the Pike River coal mine disaster. We also chatted about our past experiences in the UK mining industry—he from the point of view of the miner and me giving the management view on the advancement of coal mining technology with its potential of causing major job losses, which had concerned him in the 1980s. Whilst I worked for the "other side" on R&D to improve productivity and safety, I can understand Dave's concerns.

The book gives an enthralling insight into a critical period in British industry. We appreciate very much having the opportunity to participate in the production of a fine testament to a great guy. All three of us feel that this

book should be made available to the world. We have endeavoured to preserve Dave's words, philosophy and personal style and have taken the liberty of adding an Epilogue, Dramatis Personae, Glossary and Bibliography. Any errors are those of the editors for which we apologise in advance.

—Duncan & Teri France, David Creedy, March 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors are grateful for the advice and generous assistance of Marina Lewycka, Michael Clapham, Jonathan Winterton and Philip Wright. We thank Peter Gaskell for providing the cover picture from his father's archives. We owe Jing Feickert a special thanks; without her drive and encouragement the book would not have been published and Dave's magnum opus would have been lost for ever.

On Dave's behalf we thank all those who contributed to his original research.

LOCATION MAPS

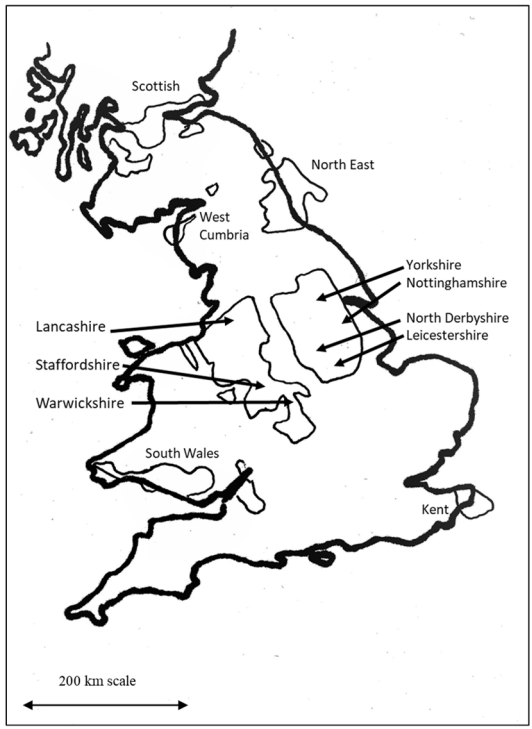


Figure 1. The major UK coalfields

Figure 2. Locations of referenced collieries in Scotland, North-East and Cumbria

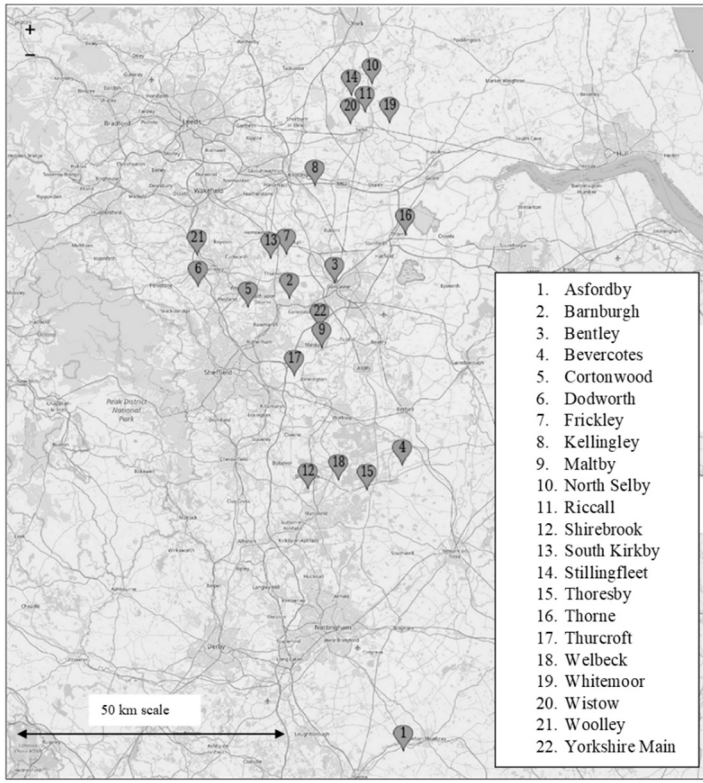
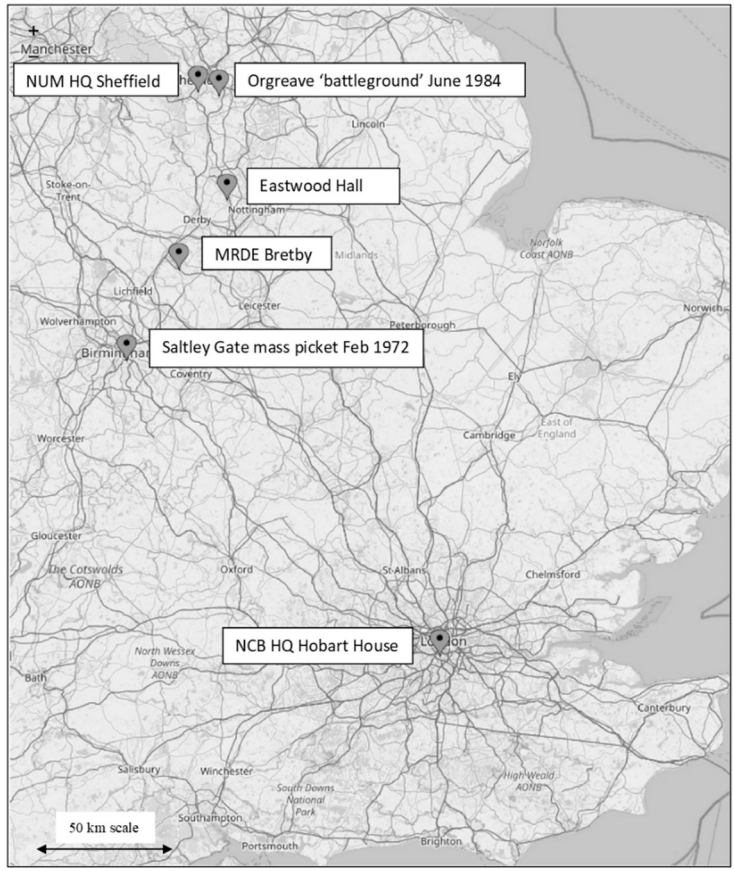


Figure 3. Locations of referenced collieries in Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Warwickshire

Figure 4. Locations of referenced collieries in South Wales



Map data© OpenStreetMap (https://www.openstreetmap.org/) contributors, ODbL (https://opendatacommons.org/licenses/odbl/1.0/)

Figure 5. Key non-colliery locations

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Dave sets the scene with an overview of the issues as battle lines are drawn and events unfold that will determine the future of coal mining in the UK.

In 1927, a pay dispute between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the British government resulted in a withdrawal of labour from the collieries, the first official miners' strike since 1926. In 1974, the National Coal Board (NCB) launched a Plan for Coal aimed at modernising the industry, replacing old capacity with new and increasing production efficiency, meaning significantly fewer jobs. Concern about colliery closures led to a punishing strike of almost a year in 1984-85 championed by Arthur Scargill of the NUM.

Table 1-1 Timeline

1947	Coal industry nationalised on 1 January
1960s	North Sea oil & gas production builds
1973-74	Oil and coal energy crises
1974	Official miners' strike over pay
	Plan for Coal–investment and technology
1981	Government's only defeat on mine closures
1984-85	The miners' strike over colliery closures
1987	NCB rebranded as British Coal
1997	British Coal privatised
2015	The last deep-mine closed on 18 December
2019	A new deep-mine in Cumbria seeking planning approval

Between 1979 and 2003, Britain was transformed from a country with 295,000 coal industry employees producing 109 Mt (million tonnes) of deep-mine coal to a country with 6,000 miners producing 16 Mt of coal. By 2015, only 2,000 employees remained in the UK coal mining sector. The last remaining deep coal mine, Kellingley Colliery in North Yorkshire,

closed after a final shift on 18 December 2015. Four Mt of coal were produced in the UK in 2016, all from opencast mines; 14 Mt were imported in the same year from Colombia, Russia and the USA. This is the book that explains why and how the UK coal industry died.

The miners came very close to winning a settlement of the year-long strike in 1984-85, much closer than was appreciated at the time. This was during the crucial months of September/October 1984, when the pit deputies voted for strike action and, more importantly, the electricity generator, the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB), told the government that coal stocks were so low that the lights would start to go out in winter. While the real issues of technological change and restructuring in the coal industry were never allowed onto the negotiating table by the government or the NCB, the NUM's basic demand for the withdrawal of the closure proposals of 6 March 1984 could have been won. The settlement could have included a new independent element in the Colliery Review Procedure in accordance with the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) agreement that no pits would be closed by the NCB without an independent review. It could also have been put in the context of the 1974 Plan for Coal, with no reference to pit closures on "economic" grounds. While these proposals would not have resolved the complex issues wrapped up in industrial restructuring, it would have created a space for negotiation.

The wider political consequences of a settlement in favour of the miners for the country as a whole can only be speculated about now. This book looks at why a settlement was not reached and tries to draw some new lessons. The consequences of defeat were only too plain to see in the devastated coalfield communities. After the strike, the NCB accelerated the pit-closure programme and the Conservative government rapidly stepped up the privatisation of public industries and services, with the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs and a rapid decline in public service provision. The ruinous effects of those interminable years on our public wealth cannot be cured overnight but a deeper understanding of what happened before, during and after the miners' strike can provide some indications of how not to proceed.

In 1983/4, the government, led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and the senior NCB management, lied to Britain's miners, their unions, their communities and the whole country. In their denials and their counter-propaganda to the union's own defensive campaign, they revealed that they were already involved in a war of disinformation. Some of this was documented in Mrs Thatcher's memoirs, published ten years later.[1] She recorded that the NCB chairman, Ian MacGregor, had told her in September 1983 that he intended to cut 64,000 miners' jobs over three years and reduce

capacity by 25 Mt. He also told her that he needed the redundancy scheme extended to miners under the age of fifty. This was done in January 1984 just before the strike was provoked. At a crucial meeting on 6 March, NCB officials reluctantly admitted that they wanted to cut at most around 21,000 jobs, reduce capacity by 4 Mt and close around 20 pits, the same as the previous year. That was enough to start the strike. The rolling programme of closures, which we knew would continue but which the NCB denied, meant that we had no choice but to act decisively.

Table 1-2 British governments 1964-2010

Years in office	Party	Prime Minister
1964-1970	Labour (2 terms)	Harold Wilson
1970-1974	Conservative	Edward Heath
1974-1979	Labour	Harold Wilson (1974–1976) James Callaghan (1976–1979)
1979-1997	Conservative (4 terms)	Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990) John Major (1990–1997)
1997-2010	Labour (3 terms)	Tony Blair (1997–2007) Gordon Brown (2007–2010)

Adapted from www.gov.uk

NUM president, Arthur Scargill, was right on two counts in particular: firstly, the huge scale of the redundancy and closure programme and secondly, the inability of the consultation procedures of the industry to handle the issue. Collective bargaining would have to be used as well. Yet the employer, the NCB, was under severe political constraint and refused consistently to acknowledge either publicly or privately how deep the transformation of the industry would be. In effect, a number of secret or semi-secret strategies were being pursued simultaneously. These are described in Chapters 1 to 5.

Arthur was right by instinct but also because we had done the research. A group of us post-graduate students from Bradford University gave a presentation to the NUM executive in 1982 showing that the automated technology being introduced throughout the central coalfields would result in a massive productivity increase and a concentration of production in fewer mines. If the market for coal remained the same, this would itself lead to at least 123,000 job losses in the collieries or, in the worst-case, over 165,000 representing 74% of the 1981 pit workforce of 225,000. As Nelson Mandela, with his customary frankness, observed at an international mineworkers' conference in Johannesburg in 1992, "Arthur Scargill has been vilified for trying to defend his members." His figure of 70,000 job losses was continually attacked as scare-mongering and was denied systematically by government and NCB alike. That figure and even our worst-case scenario were proven to be considerable underestimates. From 1980 to 1990, employment in the UK coal industry fell by 188,000. [2]

Many commentators criticised the NUM and its leadership for not holding a national ballot for strike action against pit closures. This decision created real dilemmas for the union and the tactical organisation of the strike. Yet it was by no means a simple choice as has been portrayed. Others criticised the Union for engaging in mass picketing of the pits not on strike, mainly in the Midlands. A civil war waged against the mining communities generated such pressure that, in effect, an internal civil war broke out inside the Union, wherein members in the Midlands did not understand that their jobs were at risk. We had not been able to persuade them, so deeply had the counter-propaganda sunk in. Subsequent events were, sadly, to prove the Midlands men wrong in their understanding as the overwhelming majority of them lost their jobs too. There was a justifiable frustration among those on strike and the NUM was forced into tactical decisions that sometimes had the effect of making matters worse. The "Battle of Orgreave" between 5,000 pickets and 6,000 police was too easily painted as insurrection by a right-wing government with malevolent intentions. The coal industry had lived in a world of distorted media-reflected images since the strikes of the seventies and, in the eighties, this image was used systematically against us, changing the perceived personalities of the leading actors.

Support from other energy unions was often demanded rather than sought constructively, whereas the rail unions offered their support without question. Perhaps most critically of all, we failed to organise effectively to win enough support from the key power station workers, as had been done in the seventies. This was the only real way in which we could have broken out of the cycle of negative tactics into which we had been pushed. None of this was easy in 1984. These issues and others are explored in Chapters 6, 7

and 8 that cover the strike itself. Mistakes by the union allowed the CEGB and the government to just squeeze past the severe crisis created by both the reduction in coal supplies and the pit deputies' ballot for strike action in October 1984. That was the month of real terror for the Thatcher government, when it was told by the CEGB that there would have to be electricity disconnections in the winter, so short were coal stocks at the power stations in the strike-bound coalfields.

It was a "lucky victory" for the government.[3] However, it was 1994 before the real story of the power-supply crisis started to emerge into the public domain with the publication of an exhaustive study by former officials of the electricity industry. The secret strategy pursued against the NUM went much wider than the industrial arena. It also included a co-ordinated offensive by the security services to weaken the union's effectiveness still further. These conspiracies have emerged in stages, most recently in 2002 in the BBC2 series, *True Spies*, while earlier revelations have been reported extensively elsewhere.[4] The security services could only define us, without justification, as subversives, because the government never wanted a negotiated outcome of the substantive issues; for that would have been understood as an NUM victory. Set beside this political cynicism, the magnificent resistance by the striking communities, the Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC) movement and all the NUM's supporters throughout the country and the world, is quite properly remembered.

Working for the NUM

It was a tremendous privilege for me to work for Britain's miners and their major union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), for ten years between 1983–1993. This was the central period during which the most right-wing Conservative government worked so assiduously to destroy the union and the industry, as well as the coalfield communities within which both were embedded. This book is a personal record of the long, arduous campaign to defend those communities, seen from the point of view of an NUM officer. For most of this time I worked as the union's national research officer. It is necessarily an incomplete view of what happened during Britain's terrible twentieth century civil war. A complete view of such a complex stream of events will, perhaps, never be published. But there is a need for as many views as possible to be recorded, especially the views of those who were trying to defend the coalfield communities. The journalists, politicians, scriptwriters and film-makers have made their contributions and others will hopefully make more.

I had gone to work for the Union in 1983 to support Arthur Scargill, the miners and their union, in the battle we all knew was coming, and to try to find a positive solution to the industry's problems. I knew it would not be easy and Arthur always knew that he had not recruited a mere apparatchik. I had been an industrial worker and a shop steward and knew the trade union and Labour Party world. At the NUM national office, we had one of the best trade union staffs, working for one of the best unions in the country. I have nothing but admiration for my colleagues, especially those who remained with the union through the long defensive battles after the strike. Although we were loyal, we were not uncritically so. Some of us belonged to a generation that saw leadership in a new way, where advice needed to be frankly offered. Arthur was not used to this. At various moments we were furious with one another, at other times we worked cohesively, finding effective common solutions to immensely difficult problems.

NUM National Secretary, Peter Heathfield, was the other elected official based in the national office. With his calm, pragmatic wisdom, he was able to harness independent-minded staff members to good effect. His role was extremely important in keeping the office working as a team while under tremendous pressure. The experience and outcome of the strike taught some of us the importance of taking initiatives, sometimes independent ones, which in a very traditional organisation like the NUM was not always appreciated. I have an abiding admiration for all those NUM officials, members and the women in the Women Against Pit Closures movement, who fought so hard for what we jointly believed in. Their sense of humour, in particular, sustained us. Many are now [in 2004] in other roles, taking their unique experience into other arenas. I have an affectionate regard for those of our erstwhile enemies who, in later years, were prepared to fight to defend the coal industry. On reflection, I feel that the real lesson of Britain's twentieth century civil war is one which the country has yet to learn, that is how to live and work within the European Union's economic and social model. [Editor's note: the 2017 referendum which initiated a process to leave the European Union had yet to happen. Neither had the urgency of reducing reliance on fossil fuel energy become a European and UK priority].

With a European-style collective bargaining system in operation, Britain could have kept a substantial coal industry. Clean coal technology and increased thermal efficiency in new power stations would have reduced harmful emissions and helped the transition to a lower carbon economy. The one coal industry the European Commission (EC) has always wanted to keep, would be fully alive. But the Commission was as helpless as we were; for energy policy is determined nationally, not by the EU. Now, instead of being the only EU country that is self-sufficient in energy and a net oil

exporter, in a few years we will join the others in their growing energy dependency, importing 75% of our energy needs by 2020.[5] We will be at the very end of the gas and oil pipelines from Russia, central Asia, Algeria and the Persian Gulf. The USA will reach a similar position before us. [Editor's note: when Dave Feickert wrote this in 2004, wide-scale fraccing for shale gas and oil in the USA had not yet been established and the UK was still committed to the EU].

References Chapter 1: Introduction

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CHAPTER 2

MINERS DRESSED AS ARABS

1974 is a crucial time for the British post-war economy, when the coal miners are on strike. Dave Feickert is a 28-year-old between jobs travelling to visit a friend in Switzerland. What he overhears on the train will shape his future as a champion of the working coal miner and of mining communities. The story begins with the miners' strike in 1974 and the fall of the Conservative government, led by Edward Heath, in the middle of the world's first oil price shock. A group of miners from South Wales travels to London dressed as Arab sheikhs to lobby the NUM National Executive Committee (NEC) for strike action.

In January 1974, I left London by train to visit a friend in Basel, Switzerland, stopping over in Frankfurt on the way. The next morning, I took the first train to Basel from the Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof and found myself unexpectedly on an expensive express to Switzerland. There were very few passengers in the carriage and I became an unwitting eavesdropper to a fascinating conversation. Four pin-striped British businessmen were sitting across the aisle. They looked occasionally at me, probably assuming that I was a German youth on his travels. After all, I had a backpack.

The businessmen were preoccupied with the then rapidly deteriorating political situation in Britain. They found it "most worrying," "very serious," and "quite dangerous." Expressions of deep concern about the outcome of the coal dispute, which was at that time still only an overtime ban, coloured every phrase. Prime Minister Ted Heath had enforced a three-day week for industry to eke out dwindling coal stocks at the power stations. One of the businessmen then announced that his Board had taken an important decision. A leading academic would be attending the next Board meeting to give a briefing. He was an expert on the Russian revolution and he would be focusing on the few short months of Kerensky's Russian provisional government which was overthrown by the Bolshevik insurrection in 1917. The businessmen seemed convinced that Britain was entering a similar pre-revolutionary period and they saw the miners at the heart of it.