

## REMEMBERING THOSE WHO DUG ON

There is a danger in tying too many exaggerated expectations to the talks on the coal dispute which begin today. Of course there are the best possible reasons to wish a quick end to a strike which has caused such damage to our social and political life in so many ways and for so long. The end can scarcely be far off. But too much eagerness can actually defer the prospect of a just settlement. It may undermine the National Coal Board's negotiating position and put at risk all the crucially important gains which can and must be secured. There is a place for magnanimity, but it must be exercised within the context of a firm grasp of fundamental objectives. Preconditions or no preconditions, the gap between the expressed positions of the two sides remains as wide as ever.

The strike has been sustained in its course by an extraordinary succession of gleams of hope which proved false – hopes of rescue by the overseers, the railwaymen, the dockers (twice), the TUC, and the winter itself. Now there is virtually only one more light still left glimmering: the hope that the decline of the

pound will at some stage compel the Government to come to a compromise to reassure overseas investors. In this one respect, some miners may feel that time is still on their side.

But this is the most fallacious will o' the wisp of all. Certainly the economic uncertainty created by the strike is one factor of the pounds' decline, though it is a less significant one than the price of oil – for Britain is seen as a country floating on North Sea oil rather than one with its foundations rooted in cheap coal. In foreign eyes, the coal strike has been evidence that the British disease is still endemic. It has indeed affected confidence, and the only way that confidence can be restored will be to end the conflict on terms that leave no shadow of doubt that the strike has failed.

It is not only on the central issue of closures for economic reasons that a fudge would be disastrous. No bargain would be morally acceptable which jeopardised the interests of working miners for the sake of peace. There are still many pits where only a small number of courageous men have accepted the futility of the action and resolved

to cross the picket-lines. They have identified themselves now, and if the strike ends before there have been significant further returns they will be highly vulnerable to reprisals from a resentful majority.

The Coal Board must be ready to take the firmest disciplinary action to protect these workers. Its resolve in this regard will be judged largely by how firmly it maintains its refusal to re-engage the 500 or so miners who have been dismissed for various criminal offences during the dispute. It is too easy for dismissals even for sabotage or violence during a strike to be meted out and received as part of the shadow-play of the dispute, to be wiped away in the final negotiation. But some of these cases involve very severe attacks which are neither legally nor morally excused by having been made "in furtherance of a trade dispute", and which may too easily serve as a warning of revenges to be taken after the strike is over. The miners who, at real risk to themselves, rejected the irrational, intimidatory and unconstitutional struggle foisted on them by their leaders deserve better of us than that.

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