

The lessons to be learnt from British coal miners' strike

TO HELP us understand the new law which Botha is planning for South Africa, we are going to look at Britain. Why do we look at Britain?

There are two main reasons. Firstly, because Botha also looked at Britain. He looked at the experience and plans of the government in Britain. And he decided that he would bring back some of their plans to SA. So Botha's new labour bill is very much like the bill which Margaret Thatcher's government has made in Britain.

Secondly, because the workers in Britain also struggled against the laws which were used to attack them.

Their struggle was led by the British miners, who went on strike for nearly one year. So we want to look at the strike to see what lessons it can teach us in our own struggle.

What happened in Britain?

At the end of the 1970s, the capitalist system was in a crisis. The bosses began to be scared about their profits. So, together with their government, they planned a set of attacks against the workers and working class organisations in Britain.

These were some of the ways in which they planned to attack the workers:

- Cutting wages.
- Forcing workers to work harder.
- Dismissing workers.
- Increasing the prices of services that workers and their families need — like hospitals, education and transport.

• Privatisation; this means selling things that are owned by the government to private bosses, so that the bosses can make a profit.

• Cutting the taxes of bosses and rich companies so that the government had less money to pay for the things that workers needed.

But the plans could not just happen. The government and bosses knew that workers would struggle against these plans and defend themselves. So they had to look for ways of weakening the defence and strength of workers.

This meant that they had



Striking British coal miners at a rally.

to find ways of weakening the organisation of workers. One of the things that the British government did was to make some new laws to help them. These laws were made in 1980, 1982 and 1984. And they are planning to make a new law this year as well.

These are some of the things that the new laws did:

- They made it much harder for workers to go on a legal strike.
- Solidarity strikes were also made illegal.
- Workers could not make a picket of more than six people.
- If bosses lost money because of the strike, the

courts could force the unions to pay the bosses that money.

- It was easier for the bosses and the courts to interfere in the decisions of the unions.
- When workers had to vote on any question, the new laws said that they had to vote according to the rules made by the government, not according to the rules made by the workers.

The government was hoping to weaken democratic workers' control; to stop militant action; to weaken the unity of workers. The first new laws came in 1980 and 1982.

But the government did not use them immediately. Instead, it was hoping that workers would feel threatened and scared. But the unions met in their federation, the Trade Union Congress (TUC). They organised a special congress to decide what to do. And that Congress made one policy: The first time the government attacked any workers or union with these new laws, the TUC would organise a general strike of all union members in Britain.

Because of this policy, government hesitated. Then, in 1983, it attacked some strikers with the new laws. Instead of organising a general strike according to the policy of the TUC, many of the main leaders of the TUC ignored the policy.

In fact, they said that all unions should forget about the policy and the general strike. And when that happened, some workers were confused and started to wonder whether they could fight these new laws. So the first attempt to fight the new laws with a general strike was not successful.

Then there was a second

attempt to fight the new laws. In 1984, the bosses on the mines made a plan to dismiss thousands of workers. They were trying to cut costs. More than 100 000 miners went on strike to defend their jobs.

The government and the bosses used many weapons to try to defeat the strike and weaken the union of the miners, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). These are some of the things they did:

- They offered money to miners, to bribe them to break the strike.
- A minority of miners opposed the strike. The bosses helped this minority of miners to split the NUM and set up another union that supported the bosses.
- The government sent thousands of police to help this minority of miners get into work every day.
- They sent thousands of police into the communities where the miners lived.
- Many many strikers were attacked by the police.
- 10 000 strikers were arrested.
- Altogether, the government and bosses spent R20-billion to try to defeat the strike.

Every day, the government and the bosses used their newspapers and also the radio and TV to spread propaganda against the strikers and the NUM.

They used their new laws: to say that the strike was illegal, to say that solidarity action was illegal, to take away millions of Rands that the union had collected for the strikers; to take away the building of the NUM.

The miners tried to strengthen their strike against all these attacks. They organised strike committees, to

make sure that the strike was disciplined and that support for the strike was strong.

Strikers went all over the country to try to convince all miners to join the strike. They organised support committees, to make sure that food and money were collected for the strikers. They organised mass rallies and demonstrations so that the support for the strikers was clear for everyone to see.

To strengthen their action they organised to occupy some mines. They tried to organise supporting strikes and solidarity actions. In some places, there were such strikes. In other places, there was blacking action. Some train drivers and steel workers refused to touch any coal while the miners were on strike.

The miners and their supporters organised days of action, where hundreds of thousands of workers stopped work to join demonstrations for an hour or few hours.

With all these weapons, and in all these ways, strikers defended their action for nearly one year. In that time, through their action, they were defying the new laws every day. They were turning the new laws into a blunt weapon of attack. It was the strikers and their supporters, not the law which was deciding what would happen.

But after nearly one year, the miners were defeated. Their strike was defeated because they were too isolated — they did not have enough solidarity action and support to strengthen them.

Some union leaders especially were scared of the new laws — so they were not ready to struggle to make

sure that there was the strongest possible solidarity action. And we have seen that there were many many weapons used against the strikers and their union.

After this strike was defeated, workers in Britain were not so ready to take action. The bosses and the government started planning even more attacks.

But they had not seen one very important weapon of the strikers — their disciplined unity. Because when the strikers went back to work, they went back together, in enormous marches, with the flag of their union flying. Many of them went back to prepare and organise — so that they would be stronger next time.

For some time, since the end of the strike, there has been less militant action by British workers. But today we can see things starting to change again. In the last month, many of those same miners who were on strike in 1984 have been on strike again. Some of them have even been on strike twice. One time was to demand higher wages. The second time was to show solidarity with nurses on strike.

And it is not just the miners. The nurses have been on strike, the car-workers, workers in the harbours and on ships. Only last week, there was a mass demonstration of more than 100 000 workers to demand better health care.

And when they take this action, the British workers are saying what the miners said in 1984: It is not the law which will decide what we do. It is we who will decide.



A striking British coal miner making a plea to his colleagues.