

THE LANCASHIRE COALFIELD 1945-1972: NUM-LABOUR PARTY HEGEMONY AND INDUSTRIAL CHANGE

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Both the Lancashire coalfield and the process of industrial change have received relatively little attention in the huge volume of literature devoted to the coal industry. The coalfield was an important location for industrial change during the post-war period. Industrial change under public ownership consisted of the modernisation of the industry through the construction of new collieries and the re-construction of others, and rationalisation through the closure of collieries. The more recent colliery closures of the 1980s and early 1990s have pre-occupied commentators. By contrast, the colliery closures of the 1950s and 1960s have been subjected to less analysis. Central to the process of industrial change in Lancashire during this period was the role played by the National Union of Mineworkers Lancashire Area (NUMLA) and the Labour Party. The relationship between the two was important in overseeing industrial change. Yet, the hegemony they enjoyed in the political life of the coalfield was eventually constrained

by the process. This article examines how industrial change produced a degree of political change through reaction to its outcomes and in response to perspectives on industrial change carried by both the NUMLA and Labour in Lancashire. Union-Labour Party hegemony had been confirmed during the inter-war period through the commanding position attained by the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners' Federation (LCMF) and the Labour Party. The LCMF, from 1944 re-constituted as the NUM Lancashire Area (NUMLA), and the Labour Party enjoyed a close relationship. Proximity was reinforced by the pre-eminence of the pragmatic right of Labour politics in which co-operation with colliery owners was seen as essential in a declining coalfield. Pursuing industrial co-operation with 'progressive' employers was a staging post on the route to public ownership. The Lancashire miners' industrial and political agenda was one increasingly focused upon Labour's future plans for government. Public owner-



Miners and officials celebrate coal industry nationalisation in 1947 at Brackley Colliery near Bolton.

ship was one issue where industrial and political objectives converged. Politically, the Lancashire miners supported a narrow 'reformist' agenda concentrated on social and welfare issues. Both industrial and political objectives were important in maintaining LCMF-Labour Party hegemony. During the post-war period NUM-Labour Party hegemony achieved an unprecedented strength reinforced by public ownership of the industry and Labour's wider vision for post-war re-construction and modernisation. The main phase of industrial change began during the late 1950s and lasted until the early 1970s. During this period the number of mineworkers in Lancashire fell from nearly 45,000 to less than 20,000.¹ This was precipitated by a collapse in coal consumption as alternative fuels ate into coal's traditional markets, thus hastening industrial change. Both the NUMLA and the Labour Party in the coalfield supported industrial change. However, the price of support was a weakening of NUM-Labour hegemony.

The Case for Industrial Change

The strength of the case for the modernisation of the Lancashire coal industry was proven beyond doubt during the Second World War. The war years witnessed an increase in industrial disputes in the coalfield, to the extent that it became one of the most dispute-prone periods in the coalfield's history. The reason was that the industry was being asked to perform miracles of production while it remained in an antiquated condition exacerbated by wartime shortages.² The situation became so serious that the promising political career of Gordon McDonald, Labour MP for Ince, was curtailed as he was rushed back to Lancashire in 1942 to become Regional Coal Controller to try and sort out the mess.³ Lancashire's wartime record became such a bone of contention that it led to conflict between the NUMLA and the post-war Labour Government. It had become abundantly clear that the limited re-organisation of the inter-war Lancashire coal industry had failed to modernise the industry, to the extent that it had cracked under wartime exigencies. This led to a stinging attack from Shinwell when he was Minister of Fuel and Power.⁴ This row, in part, contributed to clashes with his parliamentary private secretary, Bill Foster, Labour MP for Wigan. The conflict became just one aspect of wider disagreement between Foster and Shinwell.⁵ However, these arguments led to a strengthening of the view that modernisation of the industry had to form the most important element of public ownership in Lancashire.

The Making of NUM-Labour Party Hegemony

The war years were also significant in Lancashire for the rising importance of the Communist Party. Hitherto, it had found it difficult to establish a foothold in the coalfield. Support had waxed and waned since the General Strike.⁶ The problem facing the Communists was establishing a threshold against the increasing entrenchment of LCMF-Labour Party hegemony. The Communist Party, as in other coalfield areas, had problems in sowing the seeds of its theoretical analysis against the strong pragmatic appeal of the LCMF and Labour. The coalfield became a sepulchre for theoreticians coupled with organisational deficiencies in the Party.⁷ Communist successes during the inter-war period had coincided with particular crises such as the 1926 General Strike and its aftermath, when it was able to match theory with specific action through industrial and political campaigns. However, the Party found it impossible to offer an attractive appeal outside periods of crisis in competition with a LCMF strategy of industrial co-operation and Labour's social 'reformism'. The high-water mark for the Party came during the war when it was again able to translate its appeal into specific industrial and political issues. This was

helped by the troubled position of the industry in the coalfield. In the political field, the Party was assisted by the popularity of its campaign for a second front in Europe.⁸ Moreover, wartime sentiments provided a more accommodating atmosphere in which it could operate. The LCMF's support for the re-affiliation of the Communist Party to Labour in 1943 was one example.⁹ Rising support in the region brought Party re-organisation in the coalfield which provided a more effective base from which to campaign.¹⁰ The election of leading Communist, Jim Hammond, to the post of full-time miners' agent for Wigan in 1942 was a major coup presaging the extension of its influence into key union branches.¹¹ Consistently an electoral irrelevance, the Communist Party nevertheless made its presence felt within the coalfield.

The inability of the left to encroach upon NUM-Labour Party hegemony in political terms provided a good indication of just how far the advancement of the union and Labour had come during the inter-war period. The post-war period saw hegemony reach a maturity which made it insurmountable. This process was assisted by what Howell describes as the emergence of a 'Labour machine' in the coalfield.¹² Elements of this had become apparent during the inter-war period. Succession and patronage of office in LCMF and the Labour Party was one feature. The career patterns of leading union officials followed an almost familiar seamless pattern. For most senior officials it was a case of working in every grade in the pit, getting elected as checkweighman then as a branch union official, and thereafter to either election as a full-time miners' agent or a place on the union executive. Subsequently, most activists chose between a union career or one in Labour politics by obtaining the nomination for one of the coalfield's safe seats, often supported by a district miners' association. The union career, rather than political office, was usually the preference. At the local level, union and political office often ran together. This succession of power through patronage became an established feature of coalfield politics. Leading union officials and Labour figures emerged from certain geographical areas of the coalfield through the support network of local branches, pits and district associations. For example, the Tyldesley 'machine' helped support the early careers of two union secretaries: Pemberton, secretary from 1927 to 1945, and later Vincent from 1971. In Labour politics it helped launch the careers of two coalfield MPs during the inter-war period: Rowson at Farnworth and Tinker at Leigh. During the post-war period it assisted the political career of Fred Longworth, an ex-miner and union official and first Labour chairman of Lancashire County Council.¹³ At the top of the union the key post was the full-time secretary. The full-time district miners' agents held the next most important positions. These were permanent offices after election. The union president was less influential, particularly after re-organisation in 1944 when the NUMLA president was chosen by annual delegate ballot. The presidency was a figurehead role with no effective authority apart from agenda setting and representing the union. It was the longevity of office of the full-time secretary and miners' agents which were important in extending and consolidating patronage. The LCMF and NUMLA had only five secretaries between formation in 1889 and the 1984 strike: Ashton, Pemberton, Hall, Gormley and Vincent. Succession of office was less a case of passing down the baton than passing down a Masonic bag of regalia in which the union's secrets of succession were held. In the same way, longevity of office for the full-time miners' agents allowed them to create fiefdoms in the coalfield from where they could extend power and influence. For example, Seth Blackledge was miners' agent for Wigan from 1917 until 1942, a post Jim Hammond then held until retirement in 1967.¹⁴ The formation of the NUMLA in 1944 reduced local influence with the dismantling of the district associations. Although centralising tendencies

increased with the creation of the NUMLA the establishment of local panels of branches serving specific districts of the coalfield within the new union structure ensured that a tradition of localism was maintained in Lancashire. However, the Lancashire panels never assumed the sort of political influence that they enjoyed in coalfield areas such as Yorkshire.¹⁵

The development of this 'machine' was replicated in Labour politics from the inter-war period. Miners' district associations were able to influence the selection and nomination of Labour candidates and give support to miners on trade councils while local Labour organisations could be 'packed' for crucial votes with a majority of miners. Similarly, Labour Party representatives with union connections influenced local government. Labour's domination of local government led to a high frequency of uncontested municipal elections from the late 1930s as the Tories and Liberals withdrew. Only the occasional independent or ratepayer candidate tested Labour's domination in many areas. Post-1945 saw Labour making greater progress on Lancashire County Council, with mining and coalfield representatives featuring more prominently.¹⁶ At the parliamentary level, succession of office was often reduced to a 'rubber stamp' affair. For example, McDonald's nomination at Ince in 1929, following Walsh's death, hardly involved a credible contest, as did Brown's in 1942 in the same seat. It was a similar case in the same year when Foster replaced Parkinson at Wigan.¹⁷ The union was able to exert tremendous influence within local trade councils and constituency Labour parties. Although places like Wigan were inaccurately described as NUM 'pocket boroughs', miners were able to exert a high degree of influence over local Labour politics until well into the 1960s. The selection of Alan Fitch, an ex-working miner at Wigan in 1958, following the death of the sitting MP was secured with the support of the Wigan miners and the NUMLA.¹⁸ The development of the Labour 'machine', together with a NUM-Labour stranglehold, led to allegations of 'cronyism' and of mis-use of power, particularly in local government during the post-war period.¹⁹

The strength of Labour's grip on the coalfield during the post-war period was even tighter than before 1939. Labour majorities were consistently high, while the Tories and Liberals found difficulty in

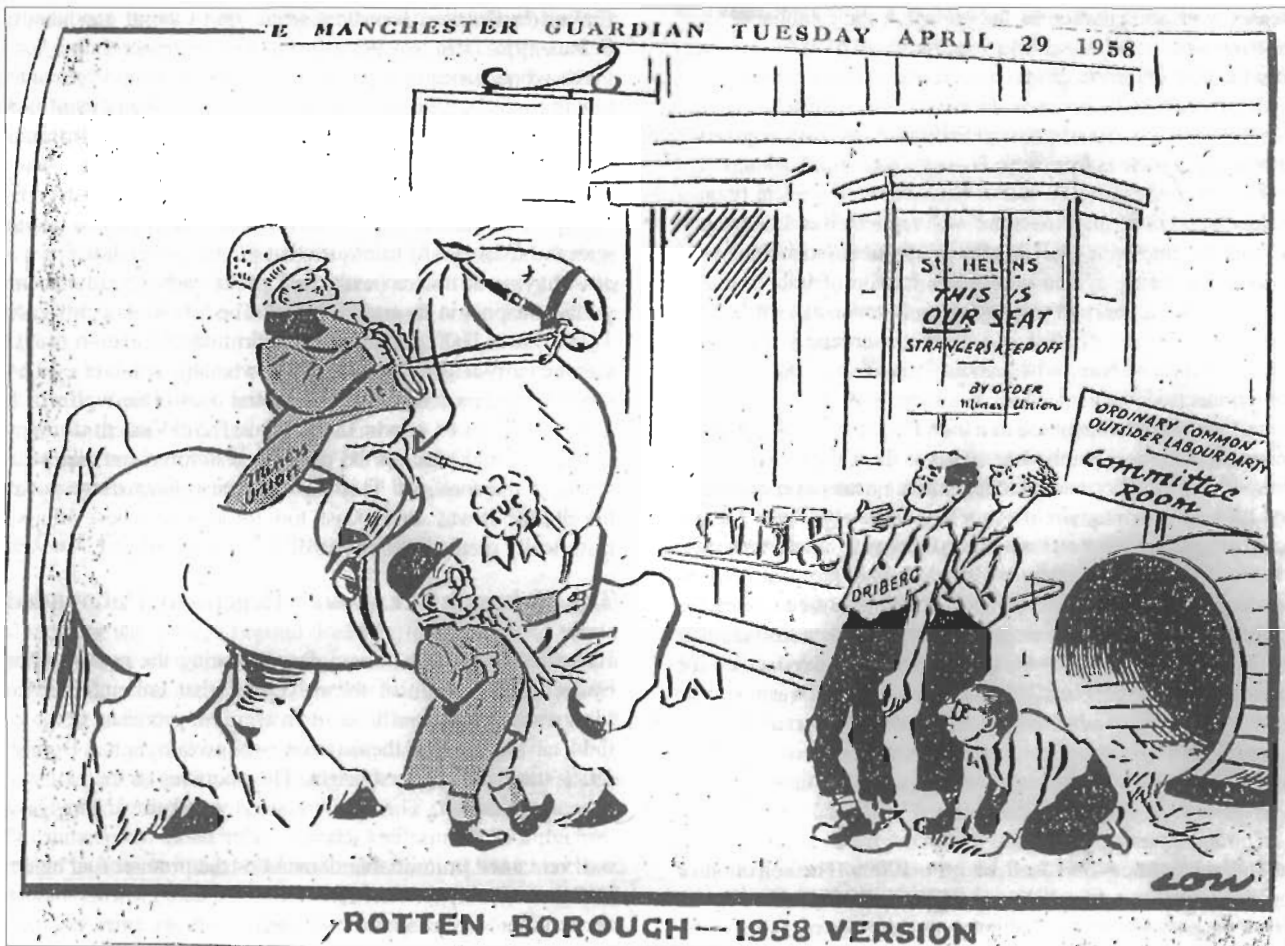
finding candidates to contest seats. The Liberal candidature at St. Helens in 1950 was described as nothing more than a "courageous reconnaissance".²⁰ Labour hegemony was underpinned by a potent trinity: public ownership of the pits with a commitment to the modernisation of the industry; Labour's wider programme for post-war re-construction; and the notion that Labour was the undisputed 'natural' party of the coalfield. On the industrial front, NUMLA efforts were aimed exclusively at pursuing co-operation with the Coal Board to ensure that public ownership was a success, having in tandem with the Labour Party invested so much political capital in its establishment. The NUMLA secretary from 1945, Edwin Hall, exploited the unbridled domination of NUM-Labour Party hegemony to wield power. His tenure of office was characterised by a high level of central control through which he maintained an iron grip on union affairs.²¹ Sid Vincent commented that Hall could pick up the phone and enforce compliance anywhere in the coalfield. This was some testimony to the power at his elbow.²² It was some boast, too, for a union whose affairs had historically seen a high degree of local autonomy.

The 'Triumph of Labour': Hegemony Unbounded

Hegemony was further strengthened during the post-war period by an intensification of the perception that Labour represented 'progress'. It was seen to be delivering on promises to the coalfield, having defeated the dark forces of private capital. During the 1950s the future seemed bright. The iniquities of the past were a distant nightmare. The coal industry was being re-invigorated through a modernisation scheme under public ownership, while coal remained in insatiable demand as the premier fuel against a background of post-war coal shortages and growing industrial demand as the economy reverted to peace-time conditions. Labour politicians interpreted these benign conditions in two ways. Firstly, that this state of affairs was permanent. The post-war settlement in the Lancashire coalfield was a feature that was expected to accompany 'progress' into the future. Secondly, they saw this as the final chapter in the natural law of political progression in which the Labour Party was triumphant. The level of confidence they displayed seems extraordinary half a century later. In 1956, at an event to celebrate 50 years of unbroken



The very model of a modern mine: Agcroft Colliery, Pendlebury, during the late 1950s.



ROTTEN BOROUGH--1958 VERSION

A press view of the Driberg Affair: Edwin Hall is the small figure wearing spectacles and a jockey cap pointing at Tom Driberg.

Labour representation at Ince and Westhoughton, Harold Wilson and local Labour leaders confirmed that the people of the coalfield had entered into a "compact" with the Labour Party. Labour continued to carry the orb of 'progress' before them on behalf of the coalfield. In return, it was expected that "their people" continued to support Labour. There was even talk of this "compact" in religious terms as Labour sought to "re-consecrate" the coalfield for generations to come.²³ This was NUM-Labour hegemony at its apotheosis without effective challenge. In another sense, hegemony was reinforced by a view held by both left and right that public ownership was a project they should continue to support, despite differences of opinion over specific issues. During the 1950s, both the Communist and Labour parties agreed that modernisation of the industry in Lancashire under public ownership was absolutely essential. The only ripples of political disturbance during the 1950s and early 1960s emanated from the friction generated by Labour's own internal wrangles as they digested the lessons of post-war government and subsequent loss of power. One of the most damaging debates was over disarmament, a debate which set left against right, underpinning factional ideological tensions within the coalfield. Polarisation over disarmament also set elements of the 'rank-and-file' on a collision course with leadership.²⁴

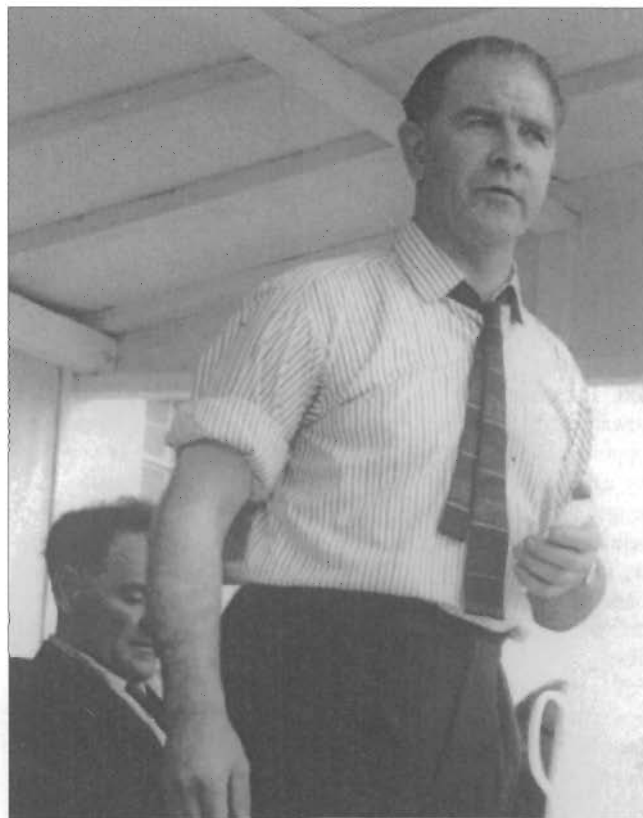
The Driberg Affair

The confidence of the immediate post-war years was shattered from the late 1950s by a dramatic downturn in demand for coal. The coal industry in Lancashire became rapidly engulfed in the requirements imposed by rationalisation. This posed an unprecedented challenge for the NUMLA and the Labour Party in the coalfield. The NUMLA was eager to maintain and extend its influ-

ence as the imminent decline of the industry brought urgency to this task. During the late 1950s, Hall and his executive wanted to see more NUMLA-sponsored Labour MPs in the coalfield, in addition to the two at Ince and Wigan. Fitch was successfully supported into the Wigan seat. Gormley was destined for Burnley, to contest a by-election there caused by the retirement of the sitting MP. The NUMLA also had their attention fixed on St. Helens. The stage was set for what became known as the 'Driberg Affair'. Hall asserted that St. Helens was a miners' seat.²⁵ Although a miner had not represented St. Helens since the early twentieth century, miners had played a prominent political role in the constituency. St. Helens was an expanding area for mining with a more optimistic outlook for the industry; one reason why Hall coveted it. In 1958, the sitting Labour MP retired, opening the way for a by-election. Labour HQ in London wanted Tom Driberg for the nomination. Hall and the NUMLA executive objected because their preferred candidate was Tom O'Brien, a miner from the right who was president of St. Helens Trades Council and Labour Party. Hall's first problem was that although O'Brien was backed by the St. Helens Party 'machine' and the NUMLA executive, he was not the unanimous choice of Lancashire miners. The vote for the miners' nomination among NUMLA branches was divided. It even split the St. Helens panel, with many on the left opting for Ted Woolley, a Trotskyist from the Manchester area. Hall's second problem was that divisions within St. Helens ran much deeper. Ideological opposition from the left to O'Brien saw Sutton Manor branch nominate a left-wing 'rank-and-file' candidate against O'Brien. If that was not problematic enough, there was a sectarian issue. There was a long-running debate over allegations of domination of the Trades Council and Labour Party by Roman Catholics which led to the resignation of a senior councillor and Labour official in the middle of the nomination process. That pro-

voked another rival nomination from outside the mining union on a sectarian ticket opposing O'Brien. Enter Tom Driberg. While Driberg could count on some trade union support in St.Helens, he mistakenly over-estimated the level of union support he could garner. Driberg's nomination and main support in St.Helens came from the Labour clubs and constituency members. This set off a separate row between the 'political' wing of the Party in support of Driberg against the majority of the 'industrial' wing in St.Helens.²⁶

One would have thought that given these circumstances the NUMLA leadership might have decided that it would be folly to pursue O'Brien's nomination and let Driberg take it, and in all probability the seat. It is some measure of the insistence of the NUMLA leadership in demanding the seat that it continued to support O'Brien. Hall did not want Driberg in St.Helens. The big guns of the NUMLA were turned on Driberg to demolish him even before short-listing. Hall felt that he was not suitable for an "industrial seat". He was condemned as an "intellectual" opportunist who was looking for a safe seat. The destruction of Driberg became for Hall a vitriolic assault. He despised Driberg by personal inclination and political persuasion because of his intellect and as a representative of the left. Driberg's personality, style and sexuality lurked in the background of these attacks.²⁷ As a result of the weight of these assaults, Driberg wisely decided that he did not like the taste of this particular Lancashire 'hotpot' and withdrew his name before he reached the short list. Labour HQ was left with no choice other than to let Hall have full sway, given the influence of the miners. The trouble for Hall was that in the process of demolishing Driberg he had fatally damaged his own choice, Tom O'Brien. The pro-Dribergists were so aggrieved that their strength and numbers swelled, with the addition of a nominal pro-Driberg element consisting of left-wing 'rank-and-filist' miners and those supporting sectarian issues, all united against Hall's intervention in favour of O'Brien. Hall's attempts to stamp his authority on the seat had backfired. The outcome saw St.Helens Trades and Labour Party select a compromise candidate, Les Spriggs, a rail-



Joe Gornley addresses the 1963 Lancashire Miners' gala. Jim Hammond is behind him.

wayman from the Fylde nominated by the NUR. Hall and the Lancashire executive were livid at the outcome they had so wilfully orchestrated. They grudgingly endorsed Spriggs.²⁸ The affair demonstrated that the NUMLA leadership, dominated by the right, were so confident of its authority and influence that it had



Jim Hammond, in typical pose, addresses the 1965 Lancashire miners' gala.

got to the point of arrogance. The events of 1958 carried with them a hint of desperation as the NUMLA sought to extend and maintain its grip on Labour politics in the coalfield at a time when the industry in Lancashire was about to disintegrate. This desperation was demonstrated again in 1964 when the NUMLA sponsored a Labour MP outside the coalfield, by supporting Eric Ogden at Liverpool West Derby. Ogden subsequently became embroiled in Merseyside issues rather than those of the coalfield.²⁹

Jim and Joe

The period of rationalisation was dominated by two figures in the union: Joe Gormley from the right and Jim Hammond from the left. Each represented different aspects of the union's attitude toward industrial change. Both were ideological and personal opponents. However, the late 1950s and 1960s were characterised by agreement on how the industry should respond to the challenges it faced. Both were reconciled to a view that modernisation represented 'progress' toward a sustainable and viable coal industry in Lancashire. They believed a Labour government would be best able to carry this through. Gormley's rise within the union was meteoric. He assumed the post of secretary in 1961, at the relatively young age of 42, on Hall's retirement. Although Gormley had spent his early career in Lancashire pits, including a spell as a union branch official, he had never sought a union career. His ambition was for a career with the Labour Party.³⁰ Gormley only turned his attention toward union high office when his political career had been blocked by his rejection for the nomination to contest Burnley in 1959. He never saw himself as a union leader, although paradoxically that was the role he etched out with great success. Gormley was a complex character. He could be blunt, mercurial and frequently pugilistic.³¹ He was certainly a practical man. His combination of cunning and shrewdness, together with his ability to assume deceptive moods to suit the moment, constituted a deadly combination. Socialism for Gormley was definitely not about 'means', it was only about 'ends'. This was important in determining how Gormley interpreted working class progress. Gormley espoused the antithesis of socialism by laying great emphasis on the ability of the individual to obtain beneficial improvement through the strength that trade unionism provided.³² Trade unionism and Labour politics were about searching for opportunities and exploiting them for the benefit of 'the lads', as he liked to call miners. This aspect of his character and political philosophy went some way to explaining why he became accused of playing fast and loose. The integrity question tended to follow

him around. It certainly gave succour to his personal and political enemies. On the other hand, as a union official, Gormley's greatest asset was his ability to work in a business-like way with his enemies.

One aspect of Gormley's character was his ambition.³³ He was able to use his connections within the 'right wing' union leadership and Labour 'machine' to good effect. This sometimes got the better of him. He was so eager for a career in Labour politics that he slipped up badly in front of the Burnley selection committee. There were cogent reasons why Gormley was not selected. Dan Jones, an engineering union official and Labour colleges tutor from South Wales, was the preferred candidate, because he was seen as a better choice to handle the growing crisis in the textile industry and modernisation of the area. Furthermore, it was unlikely that a miner would be selected because of internecine quarrels within Burnley Trades Council and Labour Party. In Gormley's favour, was the fact that although he was a miner supported by Burnley miners, he was an outsider to the area. However, Gormley transformed a reasonable chance of selection into a complete disaster by arguing in favour of multilateralism. Disarmament was not the committee's first priority in selecting a candidate. Rather, its main concern was finding a good candidate who was strong on economic and industrial issues and who was acceptable to a majority of interests in organised labour in Burnley. Burnley was not, as Gormley suggested, a "hotbed" of unilateralism. Jones was not chosen primarily because he was a unilateralist. The subsequent row provoked by Gormley's rejection was over the snubbing of a miner by the selection committee, which re-ignited local arguments. It was not, as Gormley later suggested, as a result of his multilateralism.³⁴ Had Gormley been selected for a political career with Labour, there is no doubt that his attributes and talents would have seen him go far.

While Gormley got the top job in the union in 1961, Hammond was seen as the second most important figure in the coalfield as the most prominent and one of the longest serving full-time miners' agents. He had unsuccessfully contested the position of secretary in 1945, losing to Hall. Pemberton had made certain that the succession went to Hall in order to keep the left out. Hammond's election in 1942, for the post of full-time miners' agent, saw him record an emphatic win over the two candidates of the right. Hammond was a popular figure not necessarily because of his ideology. His main territorial base was in the Wigan area from where he hailed.³⁵ The area was hardly known for its militant politics.



Mosley Common Colliery, Boothstown near Tyldesley, during the early 1960s: A flagship re-construct colliery.



Joe Gormley with Harold Wilson in 1964.

What Hammond could offer was a formidable and respected negotiator, meticulous on detail, and capable of tackling management in a highly effective way. He was also a mean orator and one of the union's more cerebral officials. As a pit lad, he was 'black-listed' by Wigan Coal Company for his agitation. Hammond, as an embittered young activist, whiled away his days in Wigan Library among the history and politics books. He was going to get his revenge by being smarter than the opposition.³⁶ As an ideal recruit for the Communist Party, he became a leading figure in the region until his resignation in 1956. Thereafter, he retained his left wing views, but worked for the return of a Labour government.³⁷ Hammond laid a great deal of emphasis on "working class struggle" in which discipline and leadership were important. He believed that working class education, self-respect and solidarity were the key to political advance.³⁸ Jack Dunn, Communist leader of the Kent miners, entered the 'Jim and Joe' debate after Gormley had published his memoirs in 1982 with a stout defence of an old comrade. He observed:

I knew both well-Jim was all that Joe wasn't, a dedicated committed socialist, well read, analytical, erudite, who didn't have to rely on gut reaction. He had a profound understanding of society and didn't need a ghost writer for his speeches.³⁹

For all his talents, Hammond had a number of flaws. There were two Jim Hammonds. There was the highly capable union official and party comrade who Bernard Crick once interviewed. Crick felt he had met "a shrewd old activist".⁴⁰ The other Jim Hammond

was touched with the Quixotic. He was a man in danger of intoxicating on his own rhetoric. His conference speeches were fantastic voyages that swatted everything under the capitalist sun. He liked to present the broadest picture to miners in terms of issues facing the industry, in which he took the moral high ground of debate – worthy but not practical.⁴¹ The problem for Hammond was that rhetoric and reality rarely matched. He often came in on the oblique side through his exaggerated claims. This was not well received by phlegmatic officials and miners. Hammond's other drawback was his officiousness, made worse by the fact that he saw himself as the 'secretary who never was', having been twice thwarted for the post in 1945 and 1961. Hammond always liked to think of himself as a working class strategist and theorist. He referred to his job as "his hobby".⁴² As Vincent said of him, he managed to retain his popularity and respect but "never got anywhere" (did not achieve higher union office) in an eminently practical business.⁴³

High Noon at Bolton

There is a tendency to contrast both the personal and political differences between Gormley and Hammond. Emphasising the differences between the two became part of Gormley's own attempt to create and perpetuate the 'Gormley myth' so well expressed in his memoirs.⁴⁴ Moreover, it is easy to slip into a perspective on coalfield politics of the period which focuses on the differences between the two leading figures and the strands of opinion they represented. This became typified by the events of 1960-61 over the ballot-rigging affair, when matters came to a head. Gormley



George Brown addresses Lancashire miners in 1965. Brown was an architect of Labour's accelerated colliery closure programme announced in 1965

and Hall were accused of rigging the ballot in favour of Gormley's bid for the post against Hammond. Hammond alleged that Gormley had convinced Hall that his support for his chosen successor, Arthur Bubbins, should be switched to Gormley because Bubbins had no chance against Hammond, thus letting in Hammond and the left. As a result, Hall switched to Gormley. They then allegedly 'cooked' the ballot result. The outcome saw Hammond and his supporters picketing the Bolton headquarters of the NUMLA. Hammond felt that he had been duped again, as he was in 1945 when Pemberton 'arranged' Hall's succession. Gormley resigned the position and ran a second ballot in which the Electoral Reform Society counted the votes. The outcome saw a similar result to the first ballot. These events saw union business in uproar, recriminations flying and trench warfare breaking out between the two camps, as it was widely believed there had at least been some 'interference' with the first ballot.⁴⁵ It might be thought that this affair would have made it impossible to bring union officialdom back together again following the factionalism that ensued. While ideological divisions were ever present, it is remarkable how the NUMLA became notable for the high degree of agreement over the main issues facing the coal industry during the 1960s. This was particularly the case over the need to modernise the industry against the pressing demands of coal's rapidly deteriorating situation. This transcended all ideological disagreements.

Back Together: United Under Industrial Change

The differences between Gormley and Hammond were subsumed by their united approach to the realities facing the industry. Although there were differences of emphasis over industrial change, on matters of substance they were as one, including maximising co-operation with the Coal Board over modernisation and rationalisation. Both the right represented by Gormley, and the left represented by Hammond, highlighted different aspects of modernisation. Gormley focused on modernisation as a pre-condition

to improve prospects for his members within a re-fashioned industry, as part of the wider aim of working class advance. Hammond saw modernisation in this light too, but focused more on its role in rationalising the economy and society as part of the wider aim of social progress. Both these objectives became intertwined as Labour's agenda for government unfolded with an emphasis on modernisation and 'planning'. Importantly, both believed that the problems of the industry could only be solved through modernity. This belief intensified as the coal industry faced severe rationalisation from the late 1950s, as alternative fuels encroached upon the industry's traditional dominance. It also increased their support for a return of a Labour government committed to modernisation of the industry in which coal was expected to play an important part in the modern fuel economy. The dilemma they both faced was that supporting modernisation inevitably meant a reduced role for coal by offering tacit support to the alternative fuels. They both felt able to square that particular circle by extending support for modernity to a belief in Labour's wider modernisation strategy. This included a commitment to oversee the consequences of industrial change in coal through modernisation of the coalfield, including a strategy of industrial diversification. Support was further strengthened by a view that public ownership was the right framework in which industrial change in coal could be achieved effectively and without serious economic and social dislocation underwritten by a future Labour government, working together with the Coal Board and NUM. This accorded with the assessment of the Labour Party in the coalfield. The attractiveness of these arguments rested on the ability of the NUMLA and Labour to demonstrate the distinctiveness of the claims made for a future Labour government. Modernisation and rationalisation of the coal industry in Lancashire meant marking out a political space for Labour in which it was seen carrying forth the mantle of 'progress', even though this involved the dismemberment of the industry in Lancashire.

The NUMLA and Labour Party in the coalfield were able to exploit concerns over coal industry rationalisation by focusing attention on the deficiencies of the Conservative government's fuel policy, in contrast to Labour's claims on fuel and economic and social planning for new industrial growth in the coalfield. The TUC and Labour Party contrasted the Tories' lack of a coherent fuel policy with their commitment to a national fuel policy.⁴⁶ This enabled the NUMLA and Labour to appropriate specific coal industry concerns in an effective way, for example, over open cast mining in Lancashire, which they used to bolster electoral support during the 1958 by-election campaign in Wigan.⁴⁷

Maintaining support for Labour also meant articulating a response to colliery closures. The 1959 Revised Plan for Coal increased the pace of modernisation and rationalisation. There was a need to respond to the critical collapse of coal consumption during the late 1950s, as a result of the challenge posed by the new fuels of nuclear energy and oil.⁴⁸ The outcome of the 1959 Plan saw 31 collieries close in the Lancashire coalfield in the six years to 1965 with the loss of over 14,000 jobs. The majority of the closures were in the Wigan district.⁴⁹ The NUMLA and Labour were able to withstand the political fall-out in two ways: firstly, by working together to encourage the notion that industrial change represented a progressive development which would be properly overseen by the Coal Board and a future Labour government; and secondly, by 'managing' industrial change in such a way as to neutralise criticism of the process. The 1958 by-election and 1959 general election in Wigan were notable for the intervention of the Communist candidate Mick Weaver – a NUM branch official – who accused the NUMLA of collaboration with the Coal Board in closing pits and of lying about the scale of colliery closures. The intervention only served to highlight Labour's agenda. The problem for Weaver was that it provided an opportunity for Fitch to expound Labour's vision for the coalfield in a persuasive manner. Fitch was able to offer mineworkers what appeared as a credible,



Alan Fitch, Labour MP for Wigan.

sustainable and viable future beyond large-scale mining. Modernisation, he argued, would involve pit closures, but new and reconstructed collieries would take their place. He conceded that the Wigan district was a "dying area" for coal, but asserted that miners would be able to transfer to the modernised pits elsewhere in the coalfield. He further argued that a future Labour government committed to industrial diversification through regional and



Alan Fitch holds forth to local miners.



Bang goes Mosley Common: the modernisation vision bites the dust. Mosley Common being demolished in 1974 following closure in 1968.

industrial planning policies would nullify the negative effects of industrial change.⁵⁰

For the most part, industrial change proceeded with little opposition. The left criticised the NUMLA leadership and the Labour Party for having acquiesced in a process that involved such a heavy colliery closure programme.⁵¹ The problem for the left was its criticism carried with it an inherent dilemma on closures which fatally weakened its arguments. The left found it difficult to produce clarity in its critique of industrial change simply because it too had been in the vanguard of endorsing coal industry modernisation as a longstanding objective. Similarly, its prescriptions for dealing with the inevitable consequences of the process lacked coherence and credibility.⁵² For the majority of mineworkers, Labour's strategy proved appealing because modernisation of the industry was construed as the implementation of an outstanding commitment. At the same time, there were positive attractions in terms of wages and conditions for those remaining in the modernised industry working at new and re-constructed collieries.⁵³ More importantly, Labour was able to make positive connections with the coalfield electorate through its modernisation agenda. During the 1964 general election, the Party successfully pursued its modernisation claims. These accorded with demands emerging from within the NUMLA and from the coalfield community for new coalfield investment.⁵⁴ If there were negative issues, these were confined to matters arising from specific colliery closures, together with the increasing sense of insecurity felt by mineworkers. The 1962-63 period proved critical as the pace and intensity of rationalisation increased after a review of the 1959 Plan.⁵⁵ Rationalisation saw many mineworkers forced to transfer to the

new pits, frequently involving excessive travel, new shift patterns and 'downgrading', with reduced status and pay. The faltering progress of a flagship re-construction at Mosley Common colliery in the Manchester district highlighted the problems associated with modernisation of the industry and added weight to those who harboured misgivings over the direction of industrial change.⁵⁶ 'Rank-and-file' criticism was mainly directed at the Coal Board, with the NUMLA and Labour able to deflect political criticism onto the Tory government.⁵⁷ Labour was thus able to continue to present itself as the political guardian of the coalfield best able to pilot it through what was seen as a difficult transitional period. Furthermore, Labour propagated a discourse of industrial modernisation through the close relationship it enjoyed with the NUMLA. Finally, both Gormley and Hammond embarked upon a more populist strategy during the early 1960s, through which they were able to convince mineworkers of the efficacy of industrial change.

Labour and Colliery Closures: Business As Usual

Political difficulties for Labour over industrial change in the coalfield were predominantly phenomena of the late 1960s, following the return of a Labour government in 1964. In 1965, Labour published a Fuel White Paper which relegated the role of coal, despite anticipation by the NUM that coal would be accorded a central place. Labour was clearly backing the alternatives of the new oil-based economy, together with nuclear power. By 1967, a further Fuel White Paper acknowledged the arrival of North Sea gas as the pre-eminent fuel of the future.⁵⁸ For the coal industry, these new departures in fuel policy meant another round of rationalisation, rather than the stabilisation expected under Labour. This was confirmed in November 1965, with Labour's announcement of the Accelerated Colliery Closure Programme (ACP).⁵⁹ Reaction from the NUMLA leadership and the Labour Party in the coalfield was high on rhetoric, but essentially passive. Loyalty to a Labour government, in power for the first time after years in opposition, was combined with a belief that despite what Labour was doing to the coal industry the Lancashire miners would not be seeking a new political home. Added to this was emasculation at the national level of the NUM and the Mining Group of Labour MPs as influential political forces. The NUMLA leadership thus avoided challenging the Government over its priorities for further contraction in favour of dialogue over tackling the consequences of the programme and a call to mineworkers to "fight for coal" against the new fuels.⁶⁰ For the Lancashire coalfield an acceleration of rationalisation meant not only more closures, but also threats to collieries hitherto expected to have a viable future. These included those in which there had been new investment and to which miners had been transferred in the expectation of a long-term future. Moreover, the cumulative effect of years of colliery closures meant that the opportunities for absorption of 'displaced' miners were declining. This all came on top of a less benign general economic outlook from the late 1960s.

Times of Trouble: Industrial Change Questioned

It was the specific incidence and pattern of colliery closures which did most to damage Labour in the coalfield during the late 1960s. The ACP involved the closure of a further nineteen collieries, including three high-profile closures in the Manchester district at Astley Green, Bradford and Mosley Common. These three closures accounted for more than half of the 11,000 pit jobs lost under the ACP in Lancashire.⁶¹ The circumstances surrounding a number of these closures demonstrated that the 'rank-and-file' were increasingly likely to direct criticism at the Labour Government.⁶² On the other hand, it was the specific impact of the ACP on pre-



Joe Gormley shares the platform with Vic Feather, TUC General Secretary and Sid Vincent, as Harold Wilson addresses mineworkers at the 1971 Lancashire miners' gala.

viously unaffected areas of the coalfield which did most to increase tension. Closures, partial closures and closure threats in the Burnley and St. Helens districts produced a rising level of dissent throughout 1967-68. The period witnessed an increase in the virulence of 'rank-and-file' opposition to closure in the St. Helens district, focused on a partial shutdown of Sutton Manor colliery.⁶³ In Burnley, rationalisation in coal was seen as a reflection of decline in the textile industry. Pressure for a change of direction on coal industry policy saw a resolution from a threatened colliery at Bank Hall for the Lancashire miners to take immediate strike action over closures and withdraw payment of the political levy to the Labour Party. The resolution was defeated. Yet, the fact that this resolution was given a sympathetic hearing at all was testimony to the level of dissatisfaction with Labour at this time.⁶⁴ The gravity of the situation facing Labour was confirmed with the fragmentation of the previously united NUMLA leadership on industrial change. Senior officials in the Burnley and St. Helens districts with impeccable records of Labour Party loyalty began to question the propriety of co-operation with the Labour Government on industrial change. In the Burnley area, officials went as far as to join campaigning critical of Labour policy.⁶⁵

Broken Promises: The Consequences of Industrial Change

Pressure on Labour over industrial change was also building in a different direction. The promises of Labour's magic antidote to the consequences of rationalisation remained unfulfilled. Although there were occurrences of localised unemployment during the early 1960s, it was the late 1960s which saw consistently rising levels of unemployment as the effects of colliery closures accumulated. It was becoming clear that despite some important industrial projects the policy of industrial diversification was running into the quicksand.⁶⁶ The worst effects of industrial change were felt in the heartland of the coalfield in the central areas of south Lancashire in the Wigan and Leigh districts, where occupational concentrations of mineworkers had traditionally been greatest. Even by 1951, localities such as Abram, Ince-in-Makerfield and Tyldesley still had over 30 per cent of their male working population employed in the pits, with Haydock the most concentrated in the coalfield at 56 per cent. Elsewhere, typical values were in the 10-25 per cent range, with many areas recording less than 10

per cent concentrations.⁶⁷ Alternative employment opportunities for mineworkers displaced in areas of high occupational concentrations in mining were virtually non-existent, particularly for older and 'disabled' miners. Male unemployment accelerated in the Wigan and Leigh districts during the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁶⁸ The NUMLA and Labour had placed a high premium on delivering new industrial growth to underwrite industrial change. The fact that this had not materialised was partly due to government attitudes toward the Lancashire coalfield. There was a reluctance to offer special assistance or grant development status over a long period of time. This was based on the erroneous belief that the coalfield would not suffer serious economic and social consequences as a result of the decline of coal.⁶⁹ Parts of the coalfield had 'enjoyed' development status between 1946 and 1959, but the record of attracting new investment during this period was abysmally poor.⁷⁰ Government attitudes were only one element of the problem facing the coalfield. The two NUMLA sponsored Labour MPs, Fitch at Wigan, and McGuire at Ince from 1964, whose constituencies contained among the highest concentrations of mineworkers, had established themselves as leading campaigners for development status and new coalfield investment. Fitch became a key spokesperson on regional and coalfield issues as chairman of the Mining Group of Labour MPs, the Lancashire and Cheshire Council of Labour and the South Lancashire Development Committee.⁷¹ The 'campaign' lacked clarity and vigour because both the NUMLA and Labour Party assumed a state of self-denial over coal industry contraction. This extended into the late 1960s as the toll of colliery closures mounted and only 1,600 of the 11,000 mineworkers displaced by closures under the ACP found jobs in the industry.⁷² Denial became pivotal to the NUMLA leadership's and Labour's belief in coal industry modernisation at all costs, to the extent of ignoring its consequences. They were trapped into an adherence to the government's sanguine assessment of the consequences of industrial change, because to have done otherwise would have jeopardised their commitment to it. Conceding the serious implications of contraction, or shouting too loudly at the government, would have undermined their overriding belief in the need for industrial change. Their dilemma only increased with the return of a Labour government in 1964.

Conclusion: Hegemony Challenged

The significance of the events of the late 1960s was firstly in the

way 'rank-and-file' dissatisfaction over the ACP in Lancashire fed into rising industrial militancy during the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁷³ Secondly, NUM-Labour hegemony in the coalfield came under serious scrutiny for the first time. In part, this resulted from the disintegration of the industry in Lancashire. Contraction gradually eroded the structures of mutual political support between the NUMLA and Labour. The influence of the NUMLA on trades councils and within constituency Labour parties declined as it was eclipsed by other groups in organised labour, and constituency members to the left of the Lancashire miners. However, the importance of industrial change was not only a loosening of the NUMLA's grip through the decline of institutional structures of support. Industrial change brought an increasing willingness to question the validity of NUM-Labour Party hegemony for the first time. A retrospective analysis of industrial change saw new forces emerge on the left bringing together disaffected 'rank-and-file' and ex-mineworkers, other groups in organised labour, and left wing groupings of constituency members to challenge the old hegemony. Ideologically, this embraced a galaxy of left wing opinion, including the left of the Labour Party, elements of the 'old' left and individuals and groups on the 'New Left'. This was particularly evident in the St. Helens and Wigan districts. The immediate focus was on the inability of Labour adequately to tackle the consequences of industrial change seen through increasing constituency pressure across the coalfield. A more profound expression of this analysis came with a critique of the whole post-war 'settlement' for coal under public ownership, of which the NUMLA and Labour Party had been such devotees. The conclusion was that the 'settlement' had not delivered objectives for the coalfield through the industrial change that the NUMLA and

Labour had so eagerly pursued. Central to this critique was questioning the role of NUM-Labour Party hegemony in the process. The cohabitation and incestuous relationship between the Coal Board, the NUMLA leadership and the Labour Party were seen to have squeezed the goodwill of mineworkers and the coalfield community like a pulpless orange. These relationships were, it was argued, instrumental in determining outcomes for coal industry contraction. Questioning the legitimacy of NUM-Labour Party hegemony through an analysis of its role in industrial change became an important element in the leftward shift in coalfield constituencies during the late 1960s and 1970s.⁷⁴ Fitch and other coalfield Labour MPs did not suffer inordinately at the hands of the electorate in the 1970 general election. The swing to the Conservatives in these seats was either around, or only slightly above, national and regional averages, although it was much greater in declining industrial constituencies with a mix of coal and textiles such as Westhoughton.⁷⁵ More significantly, it was the terrain of coalfield political debate that had been irrevocably altered by industrial change, as Labour faced a less certain and more uncomfortable time from the late 1960s. This was demonstrated through de-selection challenges to sitting MPs and the questioning of Party democracy by activists. Industrial change thus had some impact on political change. It is interesting to reflect how rapid this change had been. In the space of just over ten years the old certainties and verities which had sustained NUM-Labour Party hegemony for over half a century were undergoing critical examination. This did not extend to a new political dispensation for the coalfield. The strength and durability of Labour Party domination was enough to ensure it was maintained. However, industrial change had initiated a process of weakening this hegemony.

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