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The Changing Face of the Enemy Within

Four decades ago, miners like me were labelled ‘the enemy within’ by Thatcher. Today, the same rhetoric is being used against British Muslims and all supporters of Palestinian freedom, writes Ian Lavery MP.



(Credit: Ian Hodson)

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Forty years ago, a dispute that would echo through the decades was pushed upon miners and mining communities by a government determined to use whatever they could to destroy the organised working class in Britain. Then, as now, ordinary hard-working men and women,

simply fighting for what they believed in, were smeared by the holders of the highest offices in Britain.

During that dispute, the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher described miners as 'the enemy within' and the Home Secretary, Leon Brittain, described mining leaders as extremists and striking miners as practicing mob rule.

The language should be familiar to followers of British politics in recent times. Striking doctors and nurses described as militants, climate protestors accused of hating Britain and, more recently, those protesting in sheer frustration at Britain's failure to call for a ceasefire in Gaza described as 'hate marchers.'

In 1984, the government willingly smeared ordinary people to enable a fundamental shift to the free-market economics that continues to devastate our country by smashing the strongest champion of the organised working class, the National Union of Mineworkers. Today, a government hated in large swathes of the country and hunting for an issue to turn the tide, are using the same tactics to try desperately to cling to power. Yesterday it was the miners, today it is the Muslims.

Last week, our unelected Prime Minister appeared on the steps of Downing Street to make deranged pronouncements on the state of the nation. The diminutive Tory leader appeared behind the government rostrum making incredibly dangerous statements which smeared hundreds of thousands of people across this country. Whilst he did not utter the words, it was clear that his intention was to use dog whistle politics to define a new enemy within.

Whilst people may pour scorn on the words of Rishi Sunak, there was not long between pronouncements from Margaret Thatcher and feeling the might of the state directly upon me. Arriving at Blyth Power Station in Cambois, in March 1984, I joined pickets from Scotland and across the North East. Within minutes of arriving, I was pulled from the throng by police and assaulted and caged like a wild beast in a four-foot by four-foot windowless vehicle alongside scores of other miners. We were detained for hours in horrific conditions without having a clue where we were and decanted into Ashington magistrates court. An officer I had never seen before claimed to be the one who had arrested me. I was acquitted on this technicality despite having committed no crime.

Whilst Orgreave remains the most prominent example of state violence at play in the strike, there were thousands of instances of state violence that took place during the dispute. On one occasion, I remember being at Whittle Colliery just off the A1 and standing on the brow of the hill whilst picketing. Suddenly, row after row of Black Mariahs began streaming up the

road. Hundreds of police officers confronted us, chasing peaceful pickets into the Colliery yard and unleashing violence and arrest upon the men.

Whilst there are still high-profile examples of police failure, the rhetoric of government has not yet crystallised into mass examples of state violence against today's protestors. However, the sinister messaging coming from the highest echelons of government is finding a violent outlet with the enabling of the far right. The sight of Nazi salutes on Whitehall on Remembrance Day, after being emboldened by the then Home Secretary, was a horrifying example of what I fear is to come. The rhetoric from the very top is smearing ordinary people and putting them at risk of serious harm.

Solidarity

The reason that we came so close to victory during our dispute is something those seeking justice today should take note of. Our fight to save whole communities was sustained, in the face of the might of the state, by two key pillars. Working class solidarity and the rising to the occasion of our own. The degree to which men and women in mining communities were forced to reach potential through circumstance was unbelievable. Without their oratory, organisation, and activism the strike would never have gone so far.

I will never forget my great friend Anne Lilburn, described as a housewife from Hadston, who rose to national prominence sharing platforms with the finest speakers in the land; Tony Benn, Dennis Skinner, Rodney Bickerstaffe, Arthur Scargill and many more. She never looked out of place. Neither should we forget the efforts of those who organised the pickets and distributed food and essentials.

The similarities echo in today's protests. Ordinary people moved to activism and oratory by being unable to turn a blind eye to injustice. The attacks of senior politicians amplified by the gutter press are simply a sign of their terror as ordinary people are once again organising.

With no formal strike pay in place for miners our efforts were sustained by the supply of a couple of cigarettes, a cup of Oxo and a cheese sandwich. As a non-smoker who doesn't like cheese, I made do with the Oxo. The miners were creative in sustaining themselves. My branch, for example, had bought a potato field in north Northumberland, near to Seahouses, organising trips for striking miners to pick the crop and subsidise their diminished diet. Today's disputes will find their creative vent too.

I will always remember the heart-warming act of kindness from the dirt-poor miners of apartheid South Africa who gave up a days' worth of pay for their comrades in the UK. That cheque remained uncashed and framed on the wall of the miner's HQ in Barnsley reminding us of their kindness and the bond that exists between workers everywhere. My own family

were sponsored by Norwegian trade unionists who vowed that we would not starve, and I will never forget the juggernauts of Christmas joy that landed in the coalfield courtesy of the CGT in France.

The bonds of solidarity built across social movements in the UK should never be forgotten. The film *pride* captures the solidarity from the LGBTQ movement but there was solidarity from communities of colour too. And whilst the Labour Party was mealy mouthed about the strike from the top, the support received from local politicians and councils could not be underestimated.

The Conservative Party have always sought to define an enemy within. The cause being championed may have changed but their destructive politics needs an ‘other’ to drive division and hatred towards. The Labour Party should not be sucked into their desperate attempts to divide our nation. The protest movements of today should continue to build the bonds of solidarity that brought the miners so close to victory during our struggle. This must extend to seeking the support from communities like my own and us repaying that unequivocal support that we received during our battle in the early 80s.

To paraphrase the slogans of banners of old: together we can change the world for the better, but divided we will fall.

About the Author

Ian Lavery is the Labour Party member of parliament for Wansbeck.