STEELWORKERS IN STRUGGLE

An oral history of the 1980 national steel strike

CHARLIE MCGUIRE

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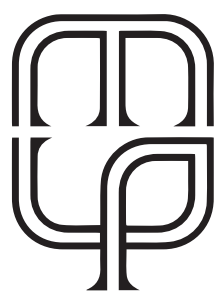

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In memory of Charlie McGuire, 1935–2024

Contents

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Introduction

The 1980s in Britain was a decade of conflict and division – for some the 'most exciting and controversial years in our post-war history',[1] for others a painful time, when full employment and welfare 'once seen as essential pillars of a civilised society … were now condemned as obstacles to economic growth'.[2] It was a period that saw continued Conservative Party rule; a resurgence of jingoism as the British scored a military victory in a faraway land; the final rupturing of the apparent post-war consensus between Toryism and Labourism; continued deindustrialisation and the onset of mass unemployment for the first time since the 1930s; a redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich and much controversy involving the activities of an increasingly politicised police force. Technological innovation and the digital revolution were also developing, putting down markers to what would eventually become fundamental change in the way that many people worked, communicated and lived their lives throughout large parts of the world.

One key feature of Britain in the 1980s was the Thatcherite assault on trade unionism. This was central to the neoliberal revolution, which, at a time of globalist capitalist slowdown, was aiming to reconfigure the relationship between capital and labour by attacking and reducing trade union power. In Britain, this approach had been heralded by the 'Stepping Stones' memo of 1977,[3] the leaking of the Ridley Report in 1978[4] and the Tory response to the Winter of Discontent in early 1979. In the decade that followed, capital would score a succession of vital victories over labour. Trade unionists won some disputes, but most major engagements ended in defeat and can be seen as milestones in the march of neoliberalism in Britain. The subject of this book – the steelworkers' strike of 1980 – was followed by mass redundancy programmes; fragmentation and marketisation of the industry; aggressive managerialism; an end to certain long-established collective bargaining arrangements; and eventual privatisation. In 1983, the National Graphical Association was brutalised by the state, both on the picket lines and in the courts, as the new anti-trade union laws were deployed for the first time during a strike at the *Stockport Messenger* in Warrington. In 1985,

the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was defeated after a heroic year-long strike. This would be followed by the destruction of the industry and the decline of the labour movement's most significant union. News International's eventual victory at Wapping two years later saw yet another pincer movement of the business class and the state against a vital section of the organised working class, aided in this instance by an act of treachery from within the trade union movement itself.[5] Wapping also revealed how the technological revolution could be used by capital as a weapon to wage further assaults on organised labour.

Even where capital was denied outright victory, such as the 1985 postal workers' dispute, it was becoming clear that the old consensual models of industrial relations were under attack, and that managements were willing to act unilaterally and aggressively to dismantle working practices and long-standing industrial relations procedures, particularly in nationalised industries.[6] Appeals to a moral economy during this, the 'moment of neoliberalism',[7] were no more successful than they had been during another era of social dislocation caused by the rise of unregulated free market economics in the eighteenth century.[8] Defeat on the industrial front was matched with defeat on the political front. Conservative Party wins in successive elections allowed them to pass seven Acts of Parliament between 1980 and 1990, each of which progressively reduced the ability of unions to defend jobs and conditions.

Neoliberalism had long identified trade unionism as an impediment to the free movement of capital and unfettered accumulation of profit. Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* in 1944 had warned of the perils of collectivist interfering with the delicate mechanism of the free market, while Milton Friedman's 1962 *Capitalism and Freedom* argued that trade unions themselves were the main cause of the unemployment they claimed to oppose. British neoliberals were inspired by this and presented certain outcomes of the capitalist economic slowdown of the late 1970s as justification for an assault on organised labour. Important here were the Winter of Discontent public sector strikes in early 1979. Even today, the collective memory of this period is sustained by the endless and often disingenuous rehashing of it in popular culture, and the focus on events such as the strike of the Liverpool gravediggers and crematoria workers in January to February of that year. In 1979, the Winter of Discontent was seized upon by the Right and used as a weapon to 'bludgeon' the labour movement at the May general election.[9] It was one of the foundational myths of Thatcherism in Britain and would be resurrected time and again throughout the 1980s, becoming their 'single most effective propaganda theme'.[10]

The accompanying narrative presented these apparently strike-happy trade unions as the main source of British decline, the main factor in the economic

slowdown of the 1970s, a key problem that had to be solved. Mapping neatly onto this was the argument that Thatcherism represented not just the response, but the future – that it was Margaret Thatcher who identified and 'relentlessly' hammered home the need for fundamental economic, industrial and political change, if Britain, 'the sick man of Europe' was ever to rise and retake its place among the world leaders.[11] According to this reading, trade unions were among the giants to be slain. They were backward and self-interested. Although rational actors, they were reactionary, set against progress, headed by 'politically motivated, unrepresentative, oligarchs'[12] who were oblivious to the fact that the days of heavy industry and bloated nationalised sectors – from which they drew most their members – were coming to an inevitable end.

Central to this attack on trade unionism was the reassertion of managerial prerogative, the 'right' of managers to manage. This would be a contributing factor to the widespread unemployment and acceleration of deindustrialisation in the 1980s. Nowhere would this be more apparent than in steel. Another feature of the attack was the focus on public sector industries, which were heavily unionised in the main. The 'role and appropriateness of public enterprise itself' was questioned and criticism was made 'of the alleged "featherbedding" practices of public sector management and the "restrictive practices" of the public sector trade unions'.[13] The notion that nationalised industries could best provide public services was undermined 'by a free market ideology that insisited that the private sector was on the whole as good if not better than the public sector in providing what the "public" wanted'.[14] This criticism would become relentless throughout the 1980s and intensified as the government declared its intent to cut public spending and reduce the deficits of public enterprises.[15] This both paved the way for, and was strengthened by, the Tory privatisation programme that accelerated after their second election win in 1983. As employees in a nationalised industry that was regularly pilloried in the right-wing press for its financial performance, it was an aspect of the Thatcherite agenda that posed real danger to steelworkers.

There is no doubt that, as the 1980s dawned, trade unions were facing up to a challenge. The Conservative government was determined to weaken them, as part of a wider strategy, which sought to apply neoliberal solutions to the problems of late twentieth-century capitalism. The consequences of this would be painful from the perspective of trade unionists and many working-class communities, but they were not inevitable. It was not predestined that workers and whole communities would be abandoned, or that a generation of young people would grow up in a period of declining opportunity and be unable to escape the cycles of poverty, low pay and unstable employment. Robert Taylor identified a consensus among political

commentators that, by 1990, Thatcher had solved what had been referred to as the 'trade union problem' in Britain.[16] New Labour's decision to retain all of Thatcher's anti-trade union legislation during its thirteen years of power would indicate that this consensus applied also to the two main parties. But this dilution of the limited measure of social, industrial and political power that trade unions possessed and had patiently constructed to defend working-class people was not something that was universally welcomed or unavoidable. Neither was the triumph of aggressive managerialism and the imperatives of the market.

These are some of the defining features of the 1980s and they are among the outcomes I wish to explore in this investigation into the history and memory of the 1980 national steelworkers' strike. This strike was one of the most significant industrial disputes in post-war British history and one of the key events in this most pivotal of decades. Lasting three months, from January to April 1980, the dispute was – at that point – the longest national strike since the General Strike of 1926 and accounted for just under nine million working days. It was also the first all-out, indefinite national industrial conflict between the trade unions and Thatcher's Conservative government, and the first real test of the government's mettle on this point of its programme. As such, it was a strike that would have consequences for both Thatcher and the trade union movement throughout the remainder of the decade.

The strike occurred in response to a 2 per cent pay offer by the British Steel Corporation (BSC) at a point when inflation was around 17 per cent, but it also came at a time when redundancies were spiralling within the industry. In other words, it was connected directly to the global capitalist slowdown and the attempts by the Right to restructure industry and labour relations in its interests. The outcome of the dispute was a higher pay increase for workers, but the main plank of BSC and Tory strategy for the industry – the undermining of trade unionism through redundancy, the sabotaging of collective bargaining and the marketisation of the industry – was not overturned. By 1986, the steel industry would employ just 54,000 workers, around 100,000 less than the 1979 figure. By any definition, this was a disastrous outcome for the steelworkers. This swift destruction of much of the British steel industry had deep social consequences, some of which remain evident today. BSC and the government had promised that the affected communities would benefit from investment and that secure replacement jobs would be created. The union leaders accepted rationalisation on this wing and a prayer. But these promises were rarely fulfilled. Instead, in many of the places that had been reliant on steel, ghost towns emerged.

The 1980 steel strike was a major event, and a turning point in the history of neoliberalism, deindustrialisation and trade unionism in this country. Given its consequences within communities all over Britain, the dispute is deserving of close analysis. Developing an understanding of this strike in all its many different facets, probing its outcome, and examining the short- and long-term impact are principal objectives of this book. But the strike and its aftermath were important for other reasons. It exposed the degree to which the Conservative government was prepared to inflict high levels of social distress in Britain to pursue its economic and political programme, part of which was a weakening of organised labour. The Tories may not have deliberately engineered for its own sake what even they feared could be a politically disastrous unemployment figure of between three and four million, but they accepted this as a consequence of their economic restructuring and welcomed the way in which it strengthened managerialism, and further weakened the unions.[17] And when it became clear that the sudden disappearance of over two million manufacturing jobs was not as politically damaging as feared, Conservatives became even more steadfast in their opposition to state investment and fiscal policies that might have reinvigorated industrial development. They preferred instead to preside over a credit-based boom in services and were content to see joblessness stay for several years at levels not witnessed since the 1930s.

The strike also highlighted some of the characteristics and failings of British trade unionism itself. Conservative Party hostility to trade unionism was clear, but at this point the unions, although never as powerful as their enemies suggested, looked potentially capable of resisting their attacks. Just over half of the British workforce was unionised, a historic high in union density. The Conservatives might have been determined to deal the trade union movement a blow, but they were also wary. The memories of lost battles were still fresh in the mind. As we will see, uncertainty and division characterised their approach in this crucial, initial period of rule. However, they would emerge from the steelworkers' strike with the strategy intact, thanks in part to the failure of the unions to challenge it. The discussion around why this happened is one that I hope to contribute to in this book.

Notwithstanding its importance, historians have overlooked the steel strike. To date, here has been just one monograph, Hartley et al.'s 1983 participant-observational *Steel Strike*.[18] This book explores two themes of organisation theory, namely how organisations manage uncertainty, and how organisations are cultures which enact their environments. The events of the strike in Rotherham are considered through this framework, with the aims being an analysis of how the strike transformed the daily dilemmas of the unions, and an examination of union responses, as the strike issues

developed over an extended period. The three researchers were granted permission to visit the local strike HQ, attend strike committee meetings and speak freely to activists. As was pointed out by one reviewer, this allowed for many valuable insights to be gained into the organisation of the strike in that town, the ambiguous role of leadership 'in a voluntary fighting organisation' and the tensions that existed between the local strike committee and the central leadership of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC).[19] There is, however, very little focus on the strike's origins[20] or the political background to it. A more serious failing, and one highlighted by another reviewer, was the absence of the worker's voice throughout the book.[21] This was especially unfortunate, given the unlimited access the researchers had to the Rotherham Strike Committee, and it prevented the authors from fully conveying or analysing worker understandings of the causes and consequences of the strike. Questionnaires were distributed and over five hundred replies received, which were summarised and are valuable to the historian. But these questions were multiple choice with the option of brief feedback being limited to a final question at the end. Because of this the book does not explore in depth the motivations of the strikers, their views on the events of which they were part, or the aftermath of the strike. The focus is also limited to Rotherham. Rotherham was an extremely well-organised strike centre, but still only one region in a national strike that took on a different complexion elsewhere. Finally, because the book was published in 1983, it is not able to position the strike in its proper historical context, which is that of the first national conflict between the forces of neoliberalism and a trade union movement they were determined to weaken, as well as a turning point in the deindustrialisation of Britain in the 1980s. The historical significance of the strike lies not only in what happened during January to April 1980, but in the years that followed, as the unions were weakened and the industry was destroyed. These limitations prevent the book from being considered a seminal study of the steelworkers' strike.

From the same year is Charles Docherty's (real name Keith Jones) well-researched, *Steel and Steelworkers: The Sons of Vulcan*. He devoted two chapters of this book to the strike, centring his discussion mainly on Sheffield and Rotherham. Jones was a full-time ISTC official in South Yorkshire and central to the organisation of the strike both regionally and nationally. He brings to his book a commanding knowledge of the events, but relies mainly on newspapers as his source material for the chapters on the strike and did not use interviews with strikers. Jones stated in an interview with the author that this book – published at a point when he was employed by the ISTC – made the strike seem more coherent and planned than was the case and did not explore divisions to any great degree. The book sets out a

clear narrative and has many gems of information, but the actual material on the strike is brief and reveals little about how the action was perceived by workers, or the purpose with which they went about trying to win it. The book was also published over forty years ago, which means it lacks historical perspective and reflection.

Martin Upham was the research officer of the ISTC. During the strike he established and edited an innovative strike newspaper, which not only provided up-to-date information and commentary on the action but formulated an alternative strategy for the industry. In 1997, Upham published a history of the ISTC from 1951, but it devoted just one short chapter to the strike and focused on its impact nationally.[22] As an authorised, official history, the analysis throughout the book focused little on the role and performance of successive ISTC leaderships, including that played by Bill Sirs, the ISTC leader in 1980. Upham offered a far more critical analysis in his interview with me in 2015. Dudley and Richardson's examination of BSC offered a detailed examination of the politics of the strike and its impact. But, as a single chapter in a book that covered the history of the corporation from 1967 to 1988, the scope and depth of this analysis was still necessarily limited.[23]

There has been significant research conducted on the international steel industry, much of which has dealt with the difficulties it faced in the 1970s, and the attempted solutions. Most of this research has indicated that the causes of the steel crisis were so deep-seated and intractable that the closures and widespread redundancy programmes were inevitable. For example, in their voluminous edited collection on the decline of the steel industry in Western Europe, Meny and Wright set out three structural factors that impacted negatively on steel production throughout the continent. These were a secular decline in steel demand, as new industries developed that were less reliant on steel; the changing geography of steel, with the number of countries producing steel rising from sixty in 1960 to ninety by 1980; and the general post-1973 economic recession, which affected heavy capital goods.[24] Warren referenced the first two of these factors in his work on US Steel, as background to why production in the US fell by one-third during 1973–90. To these he added the lack of governmental support for the industry in the USA, which seemed to amount to a policy of tariffs on imports, and little else.[25]

Hudson and Sadler also contextualised the decline of the British steel industry within a global political and economic framework. Factors here again included the rise in global capacity and output, through post-colonial industrialisation programmes, and the economic recession of the mid-1970s, which in Western Europe led to overproduction crises, overcapacity, declining profits and rising losses. The authors did identify the 'accommodative' nature of the British steel unions as a specific factor in the decline locally, but

above all else it was the logic of capitalist production which imposed itself relentlessly and defeated all opposition to closures throughout Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.[26] In their analysis of the nationalised steel industry post-1967, Dudley and Richardson explained the decline of the British Steel Corporation with reference to the impact of international factors, as well as industry mismanagement. The main factors were the 'overoptimism' of the 1970s, a period when constant growth in steel consumption was assumed; the failure of all parties within the industry to recognise that the domestic market no longer existed following the economic depression; and the naivety of the Conservative government that came to power in 1979 in assuming that BSC could quickly achieve viability.[27]

Given that most of the research completed on the steel industry accepts the decline as structural and inevitable, few scholars could make the case for its continued existence as a large employer. Even for those who highlight poor managerial decisions, there was an implicit recognition that rationalisation was unavoidable. An important exception here, however, is the research completed by Bryer, Brignall and Maunders. These three were centrally involved in the campaign against the closure of the steelmaking plant at Corby in 1979, and shortly afterwards published *Accounting for British Steel* which remains the most rigorous analysis conducted of the British Steel Corporation. The book is a sustained critique of BSC business strategy from its formation in 1967. It strongly challenged the industrial and political consensus that the solution to the crisis in the steel industry was more job cuts and plant closures and posited an alternative strategy that would have avoided large-scale job closures. Bryer et al. also explored the inability of the steel unions to defend their members and their industry in the 1970s and 1980s.[28] Maunders later published *A Process of Struggle*, a monumental account of the Corby campaign.[29] These works highlight the possibilities that existed for the survival of steel throughout and beyond this period, and the factors underpinning its decline.

This study into the 1980 steel strike was completed using oral interviews, nearly all of which were conducted with the author. Leaving aside the understanding that the method is the 'oldest skill' of the historian's craft,[30] there are other reasons for examining the strike and its aftermath through this medium. The dispute was an event that touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of working-class people throughout Britain. Yet these are often the same people who tend to be overlooked or excluded when it comes to the writing of history. As the famous Irish socialist James Connolly once pointed out, history treats the working class with contempt when it remains passive, with derision and misrepresentation when it moves into struggle, and is usually written in the interests of their exploiters.[31] Masalha has also

written on the crucial importance of oral history in giving a voice to the subaltern.[32] Understandings of this dispute and the events that followed can only be enhanced and deepened through a focus on the voices and the lives of some of those who took part in it.

The trajectory of oral history has sometimes been presented as moving away from an early commitment to 'recovering' the past, towards more sophisticated explorations of subjectivity, memory and narrative construction. This reflected poststructuralism, with its scepticism towards historical study generally and its rejection of the connections between oral testimony and actual historical experience. But it was also seen as a way of defending oral history from cynical voices within the history discipline itself who doubted the reliability of memory and relegated it to bottom place in their hierarchy of useful sources. The focus on subjectivity and memory has been influential to the development of oral history and has allowed its practitioners to add new weaponry to their intellectual armoury, but as Sangster pointed out, recovery did not disappear after the 1990s, and the roots of memory and subjectivity were already apparent before the 1970s.[33] This exploration of the steel strike is therefore influenced by both the 'recovery' and 'memory' methodologies. First, it defends the connection between oral testimony and historical experience. Many of the historical details of this strike could not have been recovered through any approach other than oral history. National and local press reports were a vital source of information, notwithstanding their role as a key ideological buttress of the rationalisation narrative. The socialist press added more depth to this detail, from a competing ideological standpoint. Trade union archives supplemented this, particularly ISTC Executive Council (EC) minutes throughout this period. But large gaps remained. On the day-to-day organising of the strike, very little was published, beyond descriptions of some of the picketing. What little there was became corrupted by inaccuracy and generalisation. We have also seen that two of the published accounts of this strike were written by union employees, who in interviews with me over thirty-five years later offered a different and more critical version of events. Oral history testimony proved invaluable in the painting of a far more granular picture of what was taking place during the three months of this strike.

Notwithstanding this very real connection between oral history and lived experience, when we engage with this research method we are of course mining memories. And memories are fallible. Influential oral historians such as Passerini and Portelli have devoted much of their intellectual energy to studying how and why particular memories are created, edited and reconstructed. They have discussed and theorised the meanings that lurk behind the memories and deepened significantly in the process our understanding

and awareness of the complex ways that historical events impact on people in the short and long term.[34] The latter's famous observation that the importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, 'but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism and desire emerge'[35] proved helpful in analysing and understanding many aspects of my interviews with strikers. Therefore, the oral history testimonies collected during the research for this book have been analysed both to recover lost details of the strike, and to deepen awareness of the meanings behind the memories and how and why they have been constructed and reconstructed. With the strike being the biggest single event in the history of the British steel industry, and a watershed in the deindustrialisation process, my aim with this oral history is to offer both the first comprehensive account of one of the most important disputes in British industrial history and also to evaluate the way in which it impacted and continues to impact those who not only lived through it, but who organised it, developed it and led it within the main steel-producing regions of the country.

The first chapter of the book analyses the steel industry, examines the factors behind its development and decline in Britain and sets out the context in which this strike would occur in 1980. The chapter also introduces the steelworkers, focusing on their backgrounds, the experiences that shaped them and the nature of the industry in which they worked. Chapter 2 examines trade unionism in the steel industry, explores its contradictory features, reveals its importance to steelworkers and tries to explain why this most 'moderate' of organisations was the first to engage the Thatcher government in an all-out, indefinite national strike.

Chapters 3 to 6 examine the course of the strike. Three and four include a focus on strike organisation and the picketing strategies of the strikers. They also discuss the extent to which rank-and-file bodies were in control of these activities. Chapters 4 and 5 include an examination of the private sector strike, the efforts made by steelworkers in this sector, the thinking that underpinned these actions and the effects of this action. The increased presence and role of the state in the dispute is also covered. Chapter 6 examines the hardships faced by workers and their families, and the responses they made to alleviate them. This chapter additionally explores the contradictory situation that developed between those union leaders who were looking for ways to end the strike, and the pickets and activists who were trying to intensify and spread it after more than two months of action.

Chapter 7 deals with the aftermath of the strike, examining memories of the subsequent deindustrialisation of steel and the failure of the trade union movement to resist this. The chapter also examines the impact of the strike on those who fought it, the way it changed their lives, their memories of the aftermath and their considerations of it today. In the conclusion I

discuss the wider significance of the strike, the crucial issues it raised for workers, trade unionists and activists in 1980, and its importance to new generations in the present.

Notes

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A ‘dirty, dangerous and hazardous’ industry

The story of the British steel industry was one of global domination, followed by decline in the face of increased international competition from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. When the British Steel Corporation was created in 1967, it inherited some serious problems, which were exacerbated by the government and corporation managers, leaving the industry ill-prepared for the economic downturn of the mid-1970s. This contributed to a crisis in the sector, resulting in deep cuts in employment, the first national strike in over five decades and the subsequent partial destruction of the steel industry. This opening chapter has two main aims. The first is to provide an overview of the history of iron and steel production and to explore some of these problems. It will be argued that the challenges faced by the British steel industry were compounded by management and government and that there was nothing inevitable about the scale of the difficulty it faced in 1979–80, or the supposed solutions hatched by BSC and the Thatcher administration. A second aim is to introduce the steelworkers, to examine some of their background influences, highlight some of the factors that led these workers into the steel industry and to look, from their perspective, at the nature of the industry they were entering.

I

As a primary sector upon which British economic power was based, Britain’s iron industry had grown from the late 1700s onwards, and by 1830 British pig iron production was 678,000 tons per year[1] – over three times more than the estimated 200,000 tons per year being produced in the United States.[2] Twenty years later, British production had jumped to 2.7 million tons per year,[3] most of which was produced in small blast furnaces near coal and iron ore deposits. The three most significant areas were the Black Country, responsible for 30 per cent of British pig iron production in the 1850s; South Wales; and Lanarkshire, where iron production developed

strongly following the development of processes that allowed for the smelting of blackband ironstone.[4] Steel was a newer industry and, up to the 1850s, had been made in much smaller quantities, with around 40,000 tons per year, produced through the laborious process of puddling iron in the 1,500 or so crucible furnaces in Sheffield.[5]

Steel was more reliable. Its carbon level made it harder than low-carbon wrought iron but more malleable and less brittle than high-carbon cast iron. Production of crucible steel had been developed by Benjamin Huntsman, a Doncaster clockmaker who had moved in the 1740s to Sheffield, a city already synonymous with cutlery production.[6] Its subsequent emergence as a mass-production industry was stimulated by two key technological breakthroughs in the 1850s and 1860s: Bessemer's process, of blowing air through molten pig iron to burn off impurities; and the open-hearth (OH) production system, developed by Carl Willhelm Siemens. Bessemer's relocation to Sheffield saw many of the local firms, including Cammell and the Samuel Fox works at Stocksbridge, take out licences to produce steel using his technology. In 1875, a new company, Steel, Peech and Tozer, was formed in the city and would become a major producer of railway tyres, wheels and axles. Along with Firths and Vickers, these companies would dominate steel production in the city in the decades that followed. David Colville also emerged when he opened the Dalzell iron and steelworks in Motherwell in 1872. The former tea and coffee merchant already owned a small ironworks in Coatbridge, but saw the potential of a much bigger works that could also produce steel. These regions became the mainstays of the British steel industry, along with Teesside, which developed rapidly following the tracing of the Cleveland ironstone seams in the 1840s.[7]

From the 1860s onwards Britain's predominant position in the global iron and steel industry was challenged both in Europe, by the industrialising economies of France, Germany and Belgium, and by the USA. These nations combined iron production with steel production. Sheffield had already established itself as the international centre of world steel production and in 1879 was still producing half as much steel as Germany and Luxembourg.[8] But the dominance was coming to an end. The British iron and steel industry was badly affected both by the Great Depression, and the rapid development of its rivals, most of which took place behind protective tariff walls. As the world's biggest exporter in iron and steel, Britain depended on open markets and free trade.[9] The USA had been a key market for British exports, but from the 1870s onwards, with civil war behind it, domestic iron and steel production accelerated. By 1890 the USA had become 'practically self-supporting' in this, and would soon be looking for export markets for its own surplus production.[10] Meanwhile, Germany had recovered from the effects of the unification wars, and by the 1890s had also overtaken

Britain in steel output. By 1906, Britain would be producing 6.46 million tons of a world production total of 50.8 million tons. The USA would be responsible for 23.4 million tons, while Germany was now producing 10.53 million tons.[11]

While this challenge to British pre-eminence in steel production was a predictable feature of western industrialisation, the British steel industry also suffered from internal weaknesses. The industry needed investment and reorganisation to ensure a more efficient use of the productive capacity. For some, the answer lay in tariffs,[12] but protectionist demands were in themselves a sign that the British steel industry was losing ground in technological development. Open-hearth furnaces, the electric furnace, alloy steels and the rolling mill were all British inventions, as was stainless steel,[13] but that hadn't prevented British steel manufacturers from falling behind their rivals.[14]

The steel industry enjoyed a good war during 1914–18, which strengthened the position of the dominant firms, but the decline was only halted temporarily, and a slump devastated the industry during 1921–22. Production fell from nine million tonnes in 1920 to just four million in 1921.[15] In 1930, the report of an inquiry into the industry headed by Lord Sankey concluded that steel production remained in need of 'great expenditure'.[16] At this point, between £1–2 million was being invested annually by steel companies, which represented around 1–2 per cent of the valuation of steel industry capital. It was estimated that around £15 million investment was necessary.[17] The years 1929–32 were marked by a brutal slump, which compounded the financial problems that many firms were experiencing.[18] The industry recovered to a degree in the later 1930s, benefiting both from the introduction of a 33.3 per cent tariff on imported steel goods, and also the rearmament programme.[19] By 1937, Britain's share of world production was 9.7 per cent – an increase of 2.1 per cent on the 1931 figure.[20] Output across the decade rose from 5.2 million tonnes in 1931 to a record height of 13.2 million tonnes in 1939.[21]

As in the previous war, steel firms prospered during 1939–45, with high production and profit levels.[22] There was no 1920s-style post-war slump after 1945, but this would be the period when the deeper deficiencies within the British steel industry became more visible. The Atlee government nationalised the industry towards the end of its six years in power. This was in the teeth of Conservative hostility, based mainly on the grounds that steel was profitable, unlike certain other nationalised industries. This nationalisation did not result in a reorganisation of the industry. The old company structure was left untouched, which allowed the former owners, and their representative body, the British Iron and Steel Federation (BISF) to effectively freeze out the new state body, the Iron and Steel Corporation of Great Britain. They were encouraged in this by the Conservatives, and when that party regained

power in 1951 the industry was swiftly denationalised and returned to its former owners, at a price far below the market value, and less than had been paid by the state for the nationalisation.[23] Accompanying the denationalisation was the formation of the Iron and Steel Board, a body charged with the supervision of the industry 'with a view to promoting efficiently economic and adequate supply under competitive conditions of iron and steel products'. The new board could veto any proposal it deemed prejudicial to the interests of the industry,[24] but had 'no power of initiative' in investment,[25] and in its approach tended to mirror the conservatism of the industry owners.

Steel production was monopolised by a small number of powerful companies, including David Colville & Sons; Stewarts and Lloyds; Guest, Keen & Baldwins (GKN); Dorman Long; and United Steels, the biggest steel company in the country. A later inquiry carried out by the Restrictive Practices Court in 1964 revealed that just ten companies were responsible for 80 per cent of UK steel production, with a further ten medium-sized firms producing 15 per cent and over a hundred firms producing the remaining 5 per cent. The key regions remained South Wales, Teesside, South Yorkshire, Scunthorpe, the Black Country and Lanarkshire. Certain firms dominated some of the areas, such as David Colville & Sons in Lanarkshire and Dorman Long in Teesside. But no company had complete control of a region, and other major companies such as United Steels and GKN had their interests widely spread. The implications of this type of ownership pattern could be negative; at Scunthorpe, for example, three different firms owned the three main works. The works were not integrated and largely supplied other plants in the possession of their respective owners elsewhere in England and Wales.

The post-war economic upswing stimulated growth in the steel industry. Output rose from 12.7 million tonnes of crude steel in 1946 to 21.7 million tonnes by 1957.[26] Rationing in steel ended in 1953, leading to a rise in the consumption of consumer durables.[27] House building also rose sharply in the first half of the decade[28] with Harold Macmillan's target of 300,000 houses per year surpassed by the end of 1953.[29] Bulging order books led to booming profits. During that decade, the combined annual profits of the twelve leading steel companies rose from £48 million to £167 million.[30] These profits masked deeper deficiencies caused through lack of investment and a reliance on outdated technology. There was an assumption among steel companies that existing capacity was adequate and that any extra output could be obtained by adding to this rather than building new plant and investing substantially. It was a complacency that would eventually leave them at the wrong side of a technological gap with their overseas competitors.[31] There were said to be in place 'gentlemen's agreements' with

foreign producers, ensuring Britain remained relatively free from steel imports.[32] But these would not last forever. Warnings were given. In 1946, the Iron and Steel Federation submitted a report which advocated the closure of small, obsolete works and the construction of three major integrated works in Clydeside, Northamptonshire and South Wales. In 1955, a report by the Iron and Steel Board cautioned that completely obsolete plant and plant well below the average now accounted for 33.5 per cent of all heavy steel produced in Britain.[33]

Change was slow, and in this respect the continued profitability of the industry was a further hindrance; as Heal pointed out, it had the effect of reducing the criticisms made of the industry and increasing the determination of individual companies to pursue their own course.[34] This meant that two of the longest-standing weaknesses of the industry would remain. These were the high level of duplication of finished steel capacity and the belief that certain products could only be made in certain regions.[35] In the context of a privately owned industry, it left some regions more vulnerable to the vagaries of the market. Evidence of this was seen during the brief recession of 1958–59, when the heavy steel-producing regions of Scotland and north-east England were affected to a far worse degree than other regions. Indeed, one of the Scottish steelworkers interviewed in this study recalled just how bad conditions in the industry were at this point.[36]

The technological lag meant that, by 1964, only 20 per cent of British steel was produced in basic oxygen steelmaking (BOS) furnaces.[37] This method, pioneered in Austria in the early 1950s, produced steel over ten times quicker than OH production. BOS was used by some steel firms in Britain, but the fact that it took until 1964 for the first BOS furnaces to become operational in Scotland highlighted wider shortcomings.[38] In contrast, by 1968 BOS plants accounted on average for around 43 per cent of steel production throughout other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.[39] Of the new steel-melting capacity completed in the USA in 1958, just under half was for a BOS process.[40]

Exports were sluggish. During 1950–57, West German exports of crude and finished steel rose from 1.6 billion tons to 4.9 billion tons. French exports rose from 1.8 billion tons to 4.3 billion tons, and Japanese steel exports rose from 212,000 tons to 1.5 billion tons. British exports, on the other hand, had risen from 1.74 billion tons to just 2.9 billion tons.[41] This meant its share of this market had dropped from 17.6 per cent to 11.6 per cent. Some of this was of course inevitable, but the difficulties were compounded by the investment strategy of the main companies in Britain. It is true that considerable levels of investment eventually did take place. From an early 1950s average of less than £50 million per annum, fixed capital expenditure, excluding schemes of less than £100,000, broke

through the £100 million mark for the first time in 1958. This investment would reach a peak figure of £199 million in 1961 and remained at a high level of £170 million the following year. Thereafter, however, there was a sharp decline, and by 1965 this had dropped back to £50 million.[42] This was probably down to a combination of a brief recession in the industry in 1962, and the possibility of a Labour government being elected, which might bring renationalisation of the industry back on the political agenda. But this reduction took place at a time when investment levels were rising abroad. For example, in 1964 British investment was the equivalent of $5.8 per ton of steel produced. This was less than West Germany ($10.2 per ton), the USA ($13.9 per ton) or Japan ($11.6 per ton). In fact, British investment per ton of steel produced was lower than every other EEC nation and Canada.[43]

Declining investment, rising international competition and the existence of outdated technology in certain plants were all problems for the steel industry in Britain in the 1960s, but the situation was not irretrievable. Although it had tailed off sharply from the early 1960s, the preceding burst of investment had not been insignificant. The Iron and Steel Board compiled a report in 1964 which reported that in heavy sections, light sections and bars there was a need for substantial investment, but that elsewhere the plant was of a better calibre. So while the difficulties facing steel in Britain were apparent, they did not seem to necessitate a massive restructuring programme based on extensive plant closures and redundancies. However, that is the solution the steel companies themselves prescribed in the mid-1960s, and it would be these prescriptions that would shape the new BSC, following its creation in 1967.

The principal reasons for this radical move by the steel firms were the cumulative effect of the steep rise in coal prices in the post-war period and the tight price controls in steel. During the period 1950–67, coal prices to the UK steel industry rose by 134 per cent.[44] This was a far higher figure than in any other European competitor or the US. Price controls on steel meant these rising production costs could not be recouped. Following denationalisation in 1953, governmental control over steel prices was reimposed by the newly established Iron and Steel Board. From 1958, the board based its prices on the costs of production incurred at the newest and most efficient plant that was most favourably situated for raw materials and markets. In other words, prices were being established based on improbable criteria. Sir Robert Shone, then a member of the Iron and Steel Board, highlighted this in a 1961 paper, where he suggested that costs at an 'average' plant were 14 per cent higher than at a new plant and 28 per cent higher at a high-cost plant.[45] But the method remained in place and is one reason why coal prices rose 164 per cent faster than steel prices during 1958–66.[46]

An additional problem was the steep rise in the prices of foreign ore imports. British steel producers became increasingly reliant on these in the post-war period, but freight costs were higher because only five ore ports in Britain could handle ships of over 20,000-ton capacity, and only the Tyne could do so at all times with no further improvement.[47] During the 1950s, ore imports from Sweden more than doubled in price, a rate of increase that was significantly higher than West Germany, Belgium or Holland.[48]

Rising fuel costs and the restraints on steel prices were regarded by private employers as existential threats to the industry. So too was Labour's victory in the 1964 election. Throughout the years of opposition, Labour had been divided on the question of extending nationalisation,[49] but state ownership of steel remained party policy for several reasons – it was the industry the Conservatives had fought tooth and nail to return to the private sector, and it also connected the party to its celebrated 1945–51 administration. In addition, the nationalisation of steel was important to the creation of a more balanced mixed economy, something to which all sections of the party appeared committed.[50] Steel played little part in Labour's 1964 campaign, but the manifesto contained a pledge to renationalise the industry, and this was enough to cause panic within the boardrooms of the steel companies. Faced with declining profitability and a Labour government favouring state ownership, the private employers acted. When Wilson called a snap election in March 1966, the BISF announced the formation of a committee, to investigate 'all aspects of iron and steel rationalisation and coordinated development'.[51] Headed by Henry Benson and containing many of the wealthiest private owners, the report was published just two months later. Although the BISF remained opposed to state ownership and spent considerable sums of money propagandising to that effect,[52] the sweeping nature of the Benson proposals strengthened the arguments of those who doubted the private sector's ability to take the industry any further forward. Several radical measures were advocated, including widespread closures and mass redundancies – around 65 per cent of existing steelworks and 100,000 jobs would disappear. Nine million tonnes of capacity would be scrapped, to be replaced with 12.5 million tonnes of new capacity, built closer to deepwater ports.[53]

This move towards the construction of coastal plants was designed to replace domestic iron ore with cheaper foreign ore imports. Benson shaped the strategy adopted by BSC five years later, but while the latter would have an estimated cost of several billion pounds, to be funded by the state, the question of who would pay for Benson was never properly answered. The report estimated that the private firms themselves could provide over 80 per cent of the funding through improved profits, but this seemed fantasy, as declining profitability had been the principal factor behind the commissioning

of the report in the first instance. Some capitalist commentators were beginning to draw the inevitable conclusions. For example, although it opposed state ownership on principle, *The Economist* accepted that reform would need to proceed from 'some quasi-nationalised central planning point' to succeed.[54] In reality, the vast scale of investment necessary to implement the Benson proposals was only possible under nationalisation, and following its re-election in 1966, Labour took steel into public ownership for the second time.

The nationalisation of steel represented something of a defeat for private capital, but the question of whose interests would be served by the new corporation lay unanswered. The signs were not good for those who believed that a nationalised steel industry should be a key socio-economic resource, and central to a national industrial plan designed to reinvigorate decaying industries. Conservative MPs, resourced by the BISF and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), made a determined and successful effort to restrict nationalisation to the production of iron and bulk steel.[55] State ownership was duly limited to the fourteen biggest bulk steel producing firms, the least profitable but most risky sector of the steel industry. This left a private sector which had lower overheads, a wider range of specialised products and far greater potential to make profit. Privately owned steel-producing and rerolling companies were responsible for around 10 per cent of the total output for crude steel and about 25 per cent of finished steel products by tonnage. Their share of the market value of the latter was higher, due to their greater involvement in the more lucrative special steel production.[56] The private sector was particularly strong in the manufacture of finished steel for the engineering industry. This included the hot rollers of non-alloy products in the Midlands and the manufacturers of alloy and stainless steel, three-quarters of which was produced in Sheffield.[57] In some products – bright bar being one good example – private sector companies had a virtual monopoly of the UK market. In other products, such as non-alloy light sections and bars, they were a serious competitor to BSC.[58] BSC dominated bulk steel production, but even here the capacity of the private sector would grow from 2.5 million tons in 1968 to around 5 million tons by 1980.[59] This process was boosted by the transfer of BSC Brymbo back into the private sector in the early 1970s,[60] and by the opening of mini mills, like Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent, which used electric arc furnaces and continuous casters to produce steel from scrap. By maintaining a substantial private sector and forcing the new BSC to operate within the confines of the market, the Labour government ensured that the British steel industry would continue to be subject to capitalist imperatives; BSC was expected to make a profit in its area of production and refrain from hampering the profitability of the more lucrative private sector. As McEachern

commented, it was only the form of capital's domination of steel which had changed, moving from one under the ownership and control of private capital to that which was now owned and operated by the state in the collective interests of capital.[61]

The new BSC was also saddled with a huge debt, because of overpayments made to shareholders of the companies. These payments were based on an average of the stock market values over the preceding five years, and not the two standard accounting procedures for valuing a business: the 'net assets' or the 'future profitability' approach. With stock market values being based solely on publicly available information, as opposed to detailed, inside information, the real condition of the companies was hidden. It ended up with shareholders being overcompensated by £342 million.[62] On vesting day in July 1967, BSC acquired the assets of fifty-eight iron and steel producing and rerolling works, which employed 243,000 workers.[63] An initial reorganisation resulted in four regional categories,[64] but this arguably strengthened long-standing geographical jealousies through the promotion of commercial rivalries.[65] It also increased the likelihood of duplication. A second reorganisation followed in 1970, and four new product-based steel divisions were created: General Steels; Special Steels; Strip Mills; and Tubes.[66]

The new steel divisions were expected to operate as individual profit centres, but deeper regional and national interests within the UK could not be so easily subordinated to the whim of a single company. For example, Ravenscraig, which was effectively three works in one, employing 12,000 workers at its peak, could not be considered a mere component of the BSC Strip Mills division. The works was crucial, not only to the Scottish steel industry,[67] but the Scottish industrial economy more generally, particularly in motor manufacturing, oil and gas, mining and rail.[68] A similar situation existed in South Wales, where Port Talbot, Llanwern and the new tin plate works at Velindre and Trioste were integral to regional development, and the emergence of the motor manufacturing, petrochemicals and electrical component industries, all of which were features of a restructured South Wales industrial economy from the 1960s onwards.[69] The reorganisation also had serious consequences for some of the English steelworks. For example, the decision to place Bilston in with Special Steels, as opposed to Tubes, was seen as disastrous and a major factor behind its eventual closure in 1979.[70]

The initial BSC strategy was based on maintaining and developing existing plants, but by 1971 the corporation was moving towards a more ambitious alternative. Echoing Benson, the basic premise was that while demand for steel would continue to rise, it could be met with fewer steelworkers and achieved through closing smaller plants and concentrating a planned £3 billion investment programme at five major steelworks – Llanwern, Port

Talbot, Ravenscraig, Lackenby and Scunthorpe – as well as the special steel plants in Sheffield and Rotherham.[71] This new approach was influenced by the coastal plants in Japan, which had impressed Benson, and which were visited in 1971 by BSC Chair, Lord Melchett, and his Chief Executive, Monty Finniston. Plans included the replacement of OH with BOS, and the intense development of Teesside in particular, which was due to receive one-third of the national investment and a new steelworks on the south bank of the Tees.[72] The idea was to move away from having a supposedly fragmented output over fourteen plants to a concentrated one in five plants.[73] This would facilitate a rise in steel production, from twenty-eight million tons in 1971 to forty-three million tons by 1980. The plan was dismissed by one analyst as 'totally unrealistic and wildly expensive',[74] and rejected by Whitehall, but a modified version, also based on the prioritising of coastal plants and the closure of smaller works, was accepted. This was the 'Ten-Year Development Strategy'. Plans were quickly announced for the closure or partial closure of eighteen plants. The social costs of this would be brutal, with employment levels expected to drop by over 50,000 to 180,000, but would, it was argued, increase production to thirty-eight million tons by the 1980s.[75]

The election of the Labour government in February 1974 resulted in a review of these cuts led by Lord Beswick and a temporary stay of execution for some of the threatened plants. But the new expansionist strategy was blown apart by the worldwide capitalist recession, which began in late 1973, following the 400 per cent hike in oil prices after the Arab–Israeli War. For much of the next decade, steel production in Western Europe would be depressed, with employment levels slashed by an average of 40 per cent.[76] The situation was bleak, but partly because of the longer-standing weaknesses in the industry and the course on which BSC was already set, no country would be as badly affected as Britain.[77]

The British Steel Corporation's ten-year plan had been devised with the objective of increased production with less labour. In the new economic environment, the first part of the plan was shelved, while the second was intensified. In 1975, Finniston suggested that BSC should have just 50,000 workers, concentrated at a handful of production centres.[78] The scale of the proposal can be appreciated when it is considered that BSC employed around 180,000 workers at this time. It was a kite in the air, but one that revealed the lengths to which the British capitalist class was willing to go, and the social misery it was willing to inflict, to maintain the viability of its system. BSC was also hampered by government policy. It was not allowed to raise prices to compensate for increased costs of outputs. Until 1972, the Heath government used BSC as a participant in its various counter-inflationary programmes.[79] Ministers wished to cap the price of steel products

as an anti-inflationary measure to keep input costs low and assist exports. For BSC to be carrying out such a socio-economic role was not in itself a problem; one of the arguments for nationalisation was to allow industries of vital economic or strategic importance the opportunity to operate beyond the constrictions of free market capitalism. However, BSC was not being run as a social and economic resource, free from market pressures, for the benefit of society. It was not compensated by the government for this and was expected to shoulder the burden itself.[80] This made it less efficient in capitalist terms and provided its critics with more ammunition. By 1978, these additional operational costs were estimated to be at least £100 million.[81]

BSC was also unable to restructure through its own finances. The £3 billion investment that took place during 1972/73 to 1977/78 came mainly from borrowing or issues of public dividend capital. These debts would soon become another stick with which steelworkers would be beaten. By 1978, BSC was operating at two-thirds capacity, and suffering because of the decline in the domestic motor vehicle and shipbuilding industries. The incoming Chair of British Leyland (BL), Michael Edwardes, had announced his arrival with a plan for 12,000 redundancies; the following year, this would be doubled, along with a 15 per cent reduction in output.[82] Meanwhile, to save the British shipbuilding industry, the government had, in 1977, nationalised twenty-seven companies and formed British Shipbuilders (BS), but in these choppy economic waters it struggled to stay afloat. BS posted a loss of £150 million in its inaugural set of accounts, saw its world order plummet and would cut 25 per cent of its workforce in the next three years.[83] The Callaghan government began to buckle under the pressure and, through the agency of high redundancy payments, allowed BSC to close the Beswick plants earlier than had been pledged. Clyde Iron was the first to go in 1977, followed by the ending of iron and steel making at Hartlepool.[84] Shelton was closed soon after, in the teeth of an impressive but unsuccessful campaign mounted by grassroots activists, sick of the failures of union leaders. But it soon became clear that other plants were under threat. Bilston and Corby were not part of the Beswick review, but from 1978 onwards both were involved in a rearguard action against BSC plans to axe steel production, which threatened over 8,000 jobs.

II

By the late 1970s, the British steel industry was mired in difficulty. This placed the livelihoods of many thousands of steelworkers in jeopardy and created the conditions that would culminate in the strike of 1980. As indicated above, in researching this book I had aimed to gain a wide geographical

spread of interviewees. I hoped that, by doing so, a fuller picture might be gained of the industry and the differing ways the issues raised by the strike and its aftermath impacted on steelworkers throughout Britain. The eventual result was not even, but included fourteen interviewees from Teesside, eight from Lanarkshire and Glasgow, seven from South Yorkshire, five from the West Midlands and one from Scunthorpe. Three interviews from South Wales steelworkers were used, but these were taken from an earlier British Steel oral history project. The interviewees who worked in the industry and were directly involved in the strike were mainly male, with two women. A third woman, who assisted in the organisation of local strike support activities, and whose husband was a strike organiser, was also interviewed. Significant numbers of women worked in the steel industry and some were actively involved in the strike, but efforts to secure more female interviewees did not succeed. It has been argued that because women often view their experiences and contributions to history as less important, something 'which comes from being a socialised female in this society', they may be less likely to volunteer as respondents in oral history projects.[85] In this respect, the project may have experienced the difficulties that some others have had. One interviewee was Asian, the rest were white. This is again despite the existence of Black and Asian steelworkers in this industry, and their involvement in this strike. There was a thirty-year gap between the oldest interviewee, born in 1931, and the youngest, born in 1961. This allowed for different perspectives on the strike shaped by the point in their lives that the event took place. It also allowed for reflections on the question of change and reform of the industry. Reflecting its dominant position within the British steel industry, most of the interviewees were BSC employees, but six worked in the private sector, five of which were in the Black Country, and one in Sheffield. This again allowed for points of comparison to be made between nationalised and private plants across a number of areas.

The social and educational backgrounds of most interviewees were similar. Almost all were working class, with parents in manual occupations. Most left school with few qualifications, before entering work. Only two interviewees continued education beyond the age of 16, but for one even this extension of study was connected to his job in the steel industry. One went to university. Not all interviewees dwelt on their childhood or schooling, but for those who did, there were patterns. Unsurprisingly, given the fact that most of the interviewees were or had been trade unionists, class was the prism through which their early lives were remembered and a concept that brought understanding and order to their memory. A common recollection was of an educational system not designed to develop or help fulfil the potential of working-class children but to prepare them for work in heavy industry. Mick Hawker, born in 1950 and brought up in Deepcar, near Sheffield,

captured this clearly. Hawker later worked in nearby BSC Stocksbridge. This was recalled as the inevitable outcome for him and many others of his class, in his community:

> I went to a secondary modern school, St Peter's, in Sheffield, at Parsons Cross. I remember we had a careers session and every single lad was asked, 'How do you fancy a job in engineering or steel?' I said, 'Well actually I wouldn't mind being a vet.' It was, 'What about steel or engineering?' … it was quite a small school, about five hundred kids, and I've got good memories of it; but not a single person, that I can remember, even went on to do A levels. I was in the top stream and usually did quite well in class, [but] there wasn't a sixth form because it was secondary modern. There was not an inkling that anybody would go on. There was Notre Dame grammar for the girls and De La Salle for the boys, but what I realised later, there was quite a class divide. St Peter's was looked upon, as I found out later, as being very down-market. That was for scruffs. That was for working-class kids.[86]

This recollection highlights some of the features of the new, post-war tripartite education system. Grammar schools were presented as the 'spearhead of the movement of social mobility', but less than 10 per cent of manual workers' children obtained places, compared to more than 50 per cent of the children of professionals and business workers.[87] Geoff Walters was seventeen years older than Hawker and was born in West Bromwich to a family and a community steeped in the iron and steel industry. The previous five generations of his family had all worked in the industry, including one distant relative who had worked in the Ruhr, Germany's industrial heartland. Walters attended Golds Hill primary school, which was built in the 1850s by the Bagnall family, the major iron producer and employer in the town since the 1780s. In keeping with the paternalistic, socially controlling role performed by major steel companies elsewhere,[88] Bagnalls also built an Anglican church for their workers in Bilston, which was later taken down and re-erected at Golds Hill, and some poor-quality houses that were demolished in the early decades of the twentieth century. Walters went on to attend a technical school, but his memory of this period in his life, particularly the way in which he disposed of the qualification he had spent two years gaining, is a very powerful signifier of his own class identity, and his belief that the education system was designed to suit the needs of employers rather than working-class children:

> I went to Golds Hill School and at eleven I left, failed the eleven-plus … I didn't know what it was for or what it entailed. Then I went to Hilltop School from age eleven to thirteen. In between there was a new Labour government elected … they brought in what they call a technical college, for the areas industry, steel, foundry, engineering, all that was round this area and so I passed for the technical college. I started when I was thirteen in 1946. They

> were leaving school at fourteen at the time. I come from a big family, seven of us, so I had to get permission from my dad and my mum to stay on the extra year. Technical colleges were to get young people into education that covers the industry of the area. In Cannock and all round that area, it was coal mining. We had a lot round here, but not so much as Cannock and Hednesford. So I went there and of course I passed all my exams there. I must have learnt something because I passed the exam and left at fifteen. I had the certificate of education which informed people who looked at it that I'd studied for two years. I wanted to be a draughtsman … I took [the certificate] to different companies, big companies, which of course, the same now, they're run and controlled by the Tory machine. I took them, 'I want to be a draughtsman.' Working-class lad of course, they could tell. It shone from me. They all said, 'That doesn't count. We don't take any notice of that.' So after about a month I went home and dad was there. I said, 'This, dad, is useless. I spent two years at technical college and nobody recognises what I've passed.' So I just threw it on the bloody fire and that was that.[89]

Bob Norton, who lived close to the heart of the local steel industry in Redcar, recalled a family tragedy connected with the industry and the lack of educational opportunities that had been open to working-class children like him:

> I was born in the shadow of the steelworks, just on the border of Lackenby Works. Big family, fairly poor, not much different to a lot of people in the area. We moved to a street called Vicar Street which was about six or seven streets away from the Cleveland steelworks, which was where my grandfather was killed, in an explosion in the steelworks in 1936. So there's been those ties with it over the years. I went to school locally, went on to a secondary education, and because of illness I passed my first half of the eleven-plus, I didn't sit the second half. When it come to leaving school, an option to take O levels was denied me because my family couldn't afford it, you had to pay for them. There was no public funding then.[90]

Don Readman was born in South Bank, in Teesside, in 1938. His account showed the connections that existed between the education system and the heavy industries that dominated this relatively small working-class community. In his case, this did result in entry to training and entry into a skilled steel industry profession:

> Me dad worked at Cargo Fleet, as a steelworks labourer. That's where I started off, at seventeen. I went to a secondary technical college, right opposite the steelworks. It was partly a school that my mother had attended when she was a kid. She lived in a row of houses opposite to the school. And she went there, and then during the depression they built what they called a dual school where they taught men skills in joinery and metalwork and things. And so they brought the two together, this really old building and this modern wooden

> bungalow type building. We were supposed to leave at sixteen, but they introduced this idea of taking your S1 Certificate – this is the first year of your higher National. They got the agreement with the local industries that we could start apprenticeships at seventeen. So we did the extra year. There was a kind of relationship between the schools and the local companies like ICI, and Dorman Long, as it was then, and various other places. So I got me Higher National Certificate like, yeah, at seventeen. In the September I applied for a few places – ICI, Cargo Fleet Works, and Dorman Long. And I got offered a job as an apprentice draughtsman with Dorman Long Steel.[91]

Russell Clearie, was born in 1945, in Cambuslang, and worked in Clydebridge for over four decades. Clydebridge was a lynchpin of the Scottish steel industry, notable for casting the sheared steel plates that made many a famous Clyde-built ship, including the QE2. At the time of the strike, it had been weakened by the closure of the ironworks in 1978, which was situated on the other side of the Clyde and had supplied gas to the steelworks, as well as the impending closure of Hallside. Class is central to the way that Clearie structures his past, and he repeatedly referred to it during his interview. As this extract shows, the fact that his family were too poor to sustain his apprenticeship in a traditional working-class trade show the different grades of poverty and hardship that could exist within working-class communities.

> I had a week as an apprentice joiner. I had always wanted to be a joiner, but unfortunately my ma and da couldn't afford it, because in that era it was a five-year apprenticeship, and you had to pay money upfront. And in that area, the community never had the money. It was a wee company, down where Cambuslang Rangers play, Somervell Street … My gran had wanted to pay it up, and I can still see my mum and dad, my mum in particular sitting breaking her heart in 6 Coolins Road saying, 'I'm sorry, son, we just can't get the money, from anywhere. I've tried the Provvy cheque, everything, and they cannae gie me any more than I already get. Cannae get the money.' You had to pay the company, it was like a deposit, so you'd stay there the five years.[92]

Clearie's memories of his grandmother, the role she played in the local Cambuslang community, are also revealing for what they show about the connections between class, gender and morality in working-class communities of that era. His belief that this that was a period when communities were more caring and people were more likely to help each other out and offer support in times of difficulty is tempered by the recollection that it was also a time when individuals, families and communities could also treat other, more vulnerable people, as sources of shame:

> My gran was the midwife here in Cambuslang, officially and unofficially as the saying goes. Gran used to send some of the girls to Saltcoats for a wee

> fortnight's holiday. They were the girls who were sent away because they were expecting, because in that era it was a blemish on the family … Everything was closed doors and backroom back then. If there was an illness, dementia or Parkinson's, the granny or auntie was put in the back room, oot the road. There was no trying to go through the NHS, which was just coming online back then. It was hard. That taught you a hard lesson because you shared everything in the community then. If there was a death or anything whatsoever, the doors were always open to give that help and support to whoever had died. If there was a birth, that support was given. You don't see it now, the immediate family does that now, it's not the same culture.[93]

The interviewees began working in the steel industry during three decades spanning the early 1950s to the late 1970s. The reasons behind their choice of this industry varied, but all revolved to some degree around a belief that this was the main local industry, which could potentially offer steady employment and a decent wage. Like Portelli's steelworkers in Terni,[94] some had strong intergenerational connections with the local companies. For these workers, entry to the steel industry was seen as inevitable, and it was coupled with the belief that they would remain there for the rest of their working lives. Martin Kendrick from Wednesbury in the Black Country remembered:

> The factory I worked at, [Firsteel] my grandad had worked at, my father had worked at, and my brother eventually started working there as well … it was the norm, it was a job for life, everybody was going to be hunky-dory for all time![95]

Melva Cook came from South Bank and decided at a young age that she wanted to work in the local steelworks. Her memories of this not only show the impact these large industrial employers had on younger people in places like South Bank, but, like Russell Clearie, the belief that this had created a strong sense of community in the area, which in the case of South Bank has now gone. They are exactly the type of memories Samuel and Thompson refer to when they noted how the past often functions as a reverse image of the present.[96]

> It was a great community, all streets with terraced houses. Everybody knew somebody. Little children, if they were playing out someone would look after them. Sad that's not the case these days. The steelworks, shipbuilding, chemical works, ICI, were all within a two- or three-mile radius from where we lived. My dad worked at the shipbuilding, a rigger. He was born in North Shields; there was a Smith's Dock there. His father had a contract up at North Shields, but when they opened Smith's Dock in South Bank, in 1918, they moved here … I left school in 1965, aged sixteen, and never had any leaning to go on to college. I'd always wanted to work at South Durham Iron and Steel Company, the Cargo Fleet works. Going on the bus to Middlesbrough, I used to say, 'I'm going to work there, aren't I?' They were lovely offices, lovely, and I just

> wanted to work there. When I did my GCEs I wrote to Cargo Fleet and Dorman Long, and about a fortnight later I got a letter from South Durham saying they had a vacancy for a junior shorthand typist in their accounts department and inviting me for an interview. I had the interview. I'd learnt the shorthand at a college in Middlesbrough, Pickerings. I had gone every Saturday morning. My mam paid for that, nine till half past twelve every Saturday. I had started going the September before I left school. Anyway, I waited about a week and still hadn't heard anything from Cargo Fleet. Then one morning the postman came. A neighbour was in our house, and the letter had the 'South Durham' stickers across it. I gave it to the neighbour to open and she said 'You got the job'. I said 'You're not kidding me are you?' I started the next week.[97]

Peter Phillips from Cambuslang also moved straight from school to the local steelworks at Hallside. There were strong family connections with that works:

> My uncle Obadiah was a roller at Hallside, one of the top men, and my faither's cousin was the personnel officer. I had the job six months before I left school. I left school on the Friday and started at Hallside on the Monday.[98]

Phillip Cranswick also relied on a family connection for entry into the steel industry, in South Yorkshire. Like many steelworkers, he lived in a community that had been shaped by the close relationship between coal and steel. His father had suffered catastrophic injuries in a mining accident, which had put the family into poverty, and he had relied on an uncle to get him started in the steel industry.

> My dad and grandad, or my second grandad, the first one was killed in the First World War, were miners at Silverwood. My dad, a pit prop hit him in the spine, and he had to come out of work, thrown on the scrapheap. From the feet up, he was paralysed. They put him in an iron lung. He got a tumour on the spine and when it reached his heart, he'd gone. I was thirteen. Through all the time after his accident, all that time, we never even got any loads of coal. You were only eligible for that that if you were working. I left school at fifteen. I had an uncle who had been a Grenadier Guard in the war; he worked in the steelworks and got me a job there.[99]

Keith Jones came from Shotton in North Wales and entered the industry mainly because the local works was one of the biggest in the country and the major employer in the town. Jones was unique in this project, because he left the industry at a young age to study English at Jesus College, Oxford, but then returned to it again:

> I worked in the steelworks and then I won a scholarship to Oxford … But I had already become qualified in HNC and engineering technology and I basically went back into engineering … I was in something called the Progress Department,

> then I gave all that up and went to Oxford, but I didn't fancy the Oxford academic life – you know, it's a bit rarefied and a bit theoretical, so I went back into steel.[100]

David Wilkinson came from Parson's Cross in Sheffield. His father was a bricklayer and his mother worked in the Batchelor peas factory. His entry into the local steel industry came through the Engineering Industrial Training Board (EITB), a body which had been set up in 1964 to provide new generations of recruits to the engineering and electrical industries, which was funded by a levy on 29,000 firms:

> I left school in 1971 and went to the EITB, the Engineering and Industrial Training Board. It was a big centre for craft apprentices in Sheffield, in Peter Street. And we did lathe work, shaping work, milling work, we did electrics, sheet metal work, fitting, and at the same time you did the first part of your craft certificate at a separate college of further education, so you were in the college for twelve months and you did everything – you did four weeks of everything. If you were bright and had an understanding of electrics, you did electrics. I had done very well with fitting and very well with machining with fitting and turning jobs, in all aspects. So they said to me, when you're looking for a job in July we suggest you look for an apprenticeship as a fitter and turner. All these companies used to come – British Steel, Shardlow – and it was like a mass interview. They were impressed, and we were impressed, and I got my first choice: Sid Hardie engineers.[101]

As a recognised skilled craft worker, David's pathway within the industry was laid out. For those who entered as unskilled workers, the situation was different. Steel comprised numerous and vastly different types of workplace, ranging from small-scale engineering workshops employing handfuls of workers to huge steelworks staffed by thousands. There were a multitude of jobs. These could broadly be separated into two categories – manual and staff – but within those two categories lay dozens of occupations and grades. There was mobility, with many workers moving from one job to another, particularly within the larger works. It was common for manual workers to start as unskilled labourers, before developing skills that would result in transferral to new grades that demanded higher levels of ability and responsibility. Phillip Cranswick recalled it took him twenty years to become an overhead crane operator at Templeborough, which was one of the better-paid jobs in the works.[102] A similar situation could be seen with many staff jobs. The industry had a tradition of promotion based on seniority and time served – referred to by many interviewees as a 'buggins turn' system. This was a hangover of the system which had characterised the industry in the nineteenth century, where length of service was the most important criteria in securing promotions.

For many of the women who joined the industry, there were fewer opportunities and less mobility. Melva Cook was one of the few who did this, but her recollections are of gendered workplaces, characterised by pay inequality:

> Most women in the steel industry were either shorthand typists, comptometrists, canteen staff, tea ladies, or secretaries. There were very few women in the industry. I was a shorthand typist, but I used to ask for clerical work. The cashier at Cargo Fleet, he got moved to Dock Street in Middlesbrough. I was asked if I was interested in the vacancy and said yes. So, I went to clerical. Most clerical workers were men. Women clerical workers were on a different pay grade. It wouldn't happen now. That was one of the things that changed after the strike. I was on CT2, most men were on 3, but the pay grades were different anyway. I was the only woman who moved from typing to clerical. None of the secretaries or comptometrists did that.[103]

For those who entered the manual occupations during the 1950s–1960s, many of the memories are of an industry which could offer reasonable pay and regular work, but had poor conditions and was dangerous. Tommy Brennan's interview offered some examples of this. Born in 1931 into an Irish immigrant community in Carfin, Lanarkshire, he began working in the industry in the early 1950s at the Dalzell steelworks in Motherwell. Reflecting on these early experiences, Brennan described as 'dirty, dangerous and hazardous' the workplace environment encountered by so many steelworkers all over the country:

> At Dalzell, I worked at the pit side, which was heavy, hazardous at times, and very, very warm. If you were working on the pit side you were exposed to all the overhead cranes, the steam engine pugs shunting up and down … you had to have your wits about you to work there. There was no such thing as safety boots, safety helmets, glasses, or anything like that. That didn't happen, they didn't exist, so you made the most of what you had. To give you an insight into what it was like, we had open-hearth furnaces that were lined with refractory brick. Sometimes, if the furnace cooled back too quickly, the brick cracked and fell in, then you had what was called the 'rummel up'. All the labourers in the plant would be summoned into the melting shop and you were lined up in front of the furnace. When it had been off for twelve hours or so, in you went. We used to get hessian sacks and punch them into hoods, and dip them in the water trough, shove it on your head. If you were lucky you had gloves, or those rubber things the bricklayers used to wear. You'd run into the pile of bricks, lift one, and run back out again. There was a manager there, an old bugger, and he'd watch. If you dropped a brick on the way out of the furnace he'd say, 'Just go to the front of the queue, laddie.' It was horrendous. Talking about it now, you can feel the heat under your nails, as if it were bubbling.[104]

Health and safety improved, a point which is reiterated in many of the narratives. It was seen as a gradual process, stimulated by the 1967 nationalisation and the Health and Safety at Work Act (although this didn't come in until 1974). State ownership was seen as resulting not only in good wages, but far better pensions and more comprehensive health and safety provision. But steel was never completely safe. Indeed, one year after the passing of that health and safety legislation, Appleby-Frodingham Works in Scunthorpe became the scene of one of the worst accidents in living memory when eleven workers were killed following an explosion in a torpedo ladle.[105] Clydesdale workers Jimmy Coyle and Joe McGuinness offered their own memories of an industry that was always unhealthy and occasionally lethal:

> On a good day, when the sun was shining and there were holes in the roof and the sun was streaming through, you would see all this fine dust. The mandrel bars were coated in graphite before they went into the bloom to be rolled, so they could be extracted easy, and that was all over the place. They said that the stuff wasn't toxic, but I've always maintained if you get enough rubbish in your lungs it'll have an effect. When the crane hit the buffers, you'd see the dust everywhere … We had a guy who walked in, there was a blockage in the rolls, and this guy walked in between the rolls to see what was happening and the operator pressed the button, the tube started rolling, bang! – shoved his rib cage through his heart.[106]

> There was a laddie who fell over into a slag pot. You'd use a long rod to test the temperature in the slag pot. But when you move the furnace up, the gap gets bigger. He stood on a ledge to do this, lost his balance and fell in. They had to empty the slag pot with the remains in it, if there were any, and pour some into a coffin for his family … even with all the safety precautions, there were a lot of deaths.[107]

Russell Clearie recalled conditions as a main focus of trade union activity:

> We always spoke about terms and conditions, terms and conditions. Like coming doon from a 44-hour to a 42 to a 40 to a 38 to a 36-hour week. It was always about conditions. Health and safety. British Steel, Colvilles before them, they always bought A1 material, but didnae look after their workforce. The quality of the gear, the overalls, for some of the jobs was terrible. They'd be 'Naw, you're no getting another set.' We managed to move from an annual set to a twice yearly set, but we had to fight through health and safety meetings for that.[108]

Clive Colbeck started at Skinningrove as a 16-year-old in 1977. His descriptions reveal an industry that remained hazardous:

> There was an old side press. This was a hydraulic machine and it was outlawed really, and we shouldn't have been using it … it just straightens kinks out of

> bars. It was a hydraulic-like hammer that used to come out and nudge the bars, and if you pressed the button too hard and it came out too far it would shatter them, and they shot up in the air. This guy at Loftus was hit in the head by a piece, and he was scarred for life. He got a six-figure-sum payout. It was very dangerous. Once, I got a bar on my foot. I got £700 compensation. I had to go slinging … where you work underneath an overhead crane and you are the one who throws the chains underneath and lifts the load up, if you like, and these are all bars that are just like – if you could imagine dropping a load of cocktail sticks and put some chains around them and then lift them up and they all gather together, and they are all mismatched and crossed and everything like this, and then you just put them on a heap to be dealt with later. And this heap slowly grows up and grows up, and all these bars are all entangled and twisted, and if you are at the top and you have to take these chains off you have got to climb up this heap. The whole weight, which could be anything up to about ten tonne on top of this heap, and of course it all dropped, some bars just resting on, just slightly, and it is like a minute earthquake. Everything just drops, and my foot was underneath it one day when it did. Things like that used to happen quite regular. Health and safety training? There was none whatsoever. We didn't even wear earmuffs, hats, no overalls – just had to wear your old clothes when I first started.[109]

This was at a point when health and safety standards were higher, at least in some works, from where they had been in the 1950s. Yet the recollections are of a hazardous working environment. I have noted how one version of autobiography is that of the 'good old days', but an alternative version is the progress from 'darkness to light', where 'the past is a negative mark against which later achievement is judged'.[110] Although conditions had improved, it remained a dangerous working environment, something which perhaps explains why we see similar narratives on health and safety being repeated by people who are separated by decades, in terms of their age and starting point in the industry.

There was no single type of person that went into steel, and no single reason for doing so. But in small towns such as Southbank and Cambuslang, which had been created to service major industrial employers, there was an expectation of employment in one or other of these sectors. Bigger towns, such as Motherwell, and cities like Sheffield may have had wider employment opportunities, but steel was of central importance. For example, at the time of the 1980 strike, there were in the region of 12,000 BSC employees in Motherwell, which at that point was over 50 per cent of the total manufacturing jobs. Patterns are discernible. The entrants into the steel industry, those who worked in manual or lower staff and clerical roles, were working-class people who saw in these industries perhaps their best, and in some instances only, opportunity to obtain well-paid and secure employment. This was a time of high employment generally, but most working-class people had a

limited range of employment opportunities. They were positioned for wide varieties of manual work by an education system that denied them entry to the professions. Eighty per cent of children in England went to secondary moderns, the 'poor relation' of the grammar schools.[111] Between 1924 and 1962, the percentage of the population as a whole attending university rose from 1.5 per cent to just 4 per cent. Teacher training had risen from 1 per cent to just 2.5 per cent in the same period. Access into higher education was restricted generally, but for working-class people the barriers were even steeper. Of those children born into the so-called 'manual class' between 1936 and 1945, 94 per cent had no post-school education, 1.3 per cent went to university, 0.6 per cent to polytechnics and 4 per cent to college. This compared to figures of 64 per cent, 14 per cent, 2.5 per cent and 19.5 per cent respectively for those born into the 'salaried' class. Twenty years later, a similar story remained in evidence. Even for that generation, born as late as 1965, the percentage of wealthier middle-class children enjoying some type of post-school education was more than three times higher than their working-class counterparts, and nine times higher, if we focus solely on university entry.[112] Further and higher education was not an option open to the overwhelming majority of working-class school leavers. Working for a major employer, like BSC, was seen as a good option, and for many, the only option.

III

Steel had been integral to the rise of British capitalism, but by the 1970s the industry was in difficulty, due to a variety of factors, most pressing of which was economic depression and the mismanagement of the industry by private and state employers alike. Steel was a barometer of capitalism; when capitalism thrived, steel flourished, but when capitalism was in crisis, the fortunes of steel plummeted. This had been the case in the late 1920s to early 1930s, and it was visible again in the 1970s. In these changing conditions, some of the prescriptions being floated by the capitalist class for resolving the crisis had dire consequences for the workers employed in the industry. Steel had always been a dangerous and hazardous industry, but one that offered its workers reasonably secure employment. This was now under threat. But steelworkers existed in an environment where trade unionism was important and offered some check against unfettered managerial prerogative. The next chapter will consider this, as the neoliberals took power, attacked wages, conditions and jobs, and shunted the industry towards its first national strike in over fifty years.

Notes

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3 Carr and Taplin, *History of the British Steel Industry*, p. 6.
4 Birch, *Economic History*, p. 173.
5 Carr and Taplin, *History of the British Steel Industry*, p. 11.
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31 Blair, 'British Iron and Steel Industry', p. 573.
32 Blair, 'British Iron and Steel Industry', p. 573.
33 Young Fabian Steel Group, *Crisis in Steel*, p. 8. The Iron and Steel Board was set up after the 1951 denationalisation, and tasked with supervising and promoting the efficient supply of iron and steel products under private ownership conditions.
34 Heal, *Steel Industry*, p. 104.
35 Heal, *Steel Industry*, p. 105.
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41 Cottrell, Giant *With Feet of Clay*, p. 11.
42 Keith Ovenden, *The Politics of Steel* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 19.
43 Cottrell, Giant *With Feet of Clay*, p. 34.
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51 Ovenden, *Politics of Steel*, p. 81.
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2

‘You only get knighthoods for being obedient’

The cuts and closures of the late 1970s presented severe challenges to steelworker trade unionism, but the problems became even more acute after May 1979, when the Conservative Party took office. This was after an election campaign in which, as we have already seen, the Winter of Discontent was used to berate the Labour Party and the elimination of ‘trade union power’ was presented as the political order of the day.[1] Trade unionism in the industry was dominated by the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation. It was a union whose leaders had traditionally accommodated the interests of the employers, but one with a large membership and an activist layer that had confidence in its own strength and was willing to exercise its own agency on the situation. While the structures of the union protected the leadership from direct challenge, the tensions and contradictions within the organisation did surface at different points and could act as a source of pressure upon them. This chapter explores trade unionism in the industry in the period that preceded the strike. It will reveal both its strengths and its weaknesses, concluding ultimately that by internalising the declinist discourse constructed by BSC, successive Labour and Tory governments and the media, the steel unions were not prepared for the closures onslaught in the latter part of the decade. This would have implications for the way that the strike was fought, the way it would be ended and the aftermath that followed.

I

Trade unionism in the steel industry was complex, with eighteen unions organising in the sector. The largest was the ISTC, which had over 100,000 members, with the National Union of Blastfurnacemen (NUB) next in importance, with around 18,000 members. Apart from the managers union, the Steel Industry Management Association (SIMA), these were the only two unions which organised solely within the steel industry. The remainder

was composed of general unions and a National Craftsmen's Co-Coordinating Committee (NCCC), dominated by the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) and representing around 25,000 workers in total. All the interviewees who took part in this research were trade unionists. The levels of activism varied. A few were never involved in union activity, but many others were union representatives in their workplaces and active participants in the structures of their respective organisations. The political outlook of the interviewees ranged from Trotskyism to Toryism. There were a few ex-communist party members, but most were supporters, to some degree, of the Labour Party, and many were members. Most took part in the picketing and strike organisation. All interviewees bar five were ISTC members. Two of this five were members of the AUEW Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS), with the remaining three being AUEW members. Some were key workplace representatives and one interviewee was a full-time ISTC official at the time of the strike. Another was a member of the union's lay Executive Council, with several more taking positions on that body in the years that followed.

Every worker who commented on the question remembered trade unionism as a strong force within the steel industry, with many recalling the bigger and medium-sized works as effectively closed shops. Joining a trade union was recalled as something that simply happened:

> As a young lad of eighteen, I'm coming down the steps of the old steel plant, and at the end of the steel plant, there's a chap that used to stand there, and I didn't know him from Adam, with his pipe, like my dad used to smoke a pipe, and he called me once, and he said, 'Vic, are you in the union', and I said, 'No, I aren't'. He said, 'Well you are now', just like that. I said 'Pardon?', and he said 'You are, and I'll be stood here every Friday and it's one and threepence.' They used to knock it off on a pence card, so that was me, in the union, and it's the best thing I ever did.[2]

Vic Jeffries reflection that it was the 'best thing' he ever did shows the positive impact that trade unionism could have on the lives of working-class people. Public discourse in Britain has long been shaped by a conservative ideology that characterises trade unionism as an 'enemy within',[3] making these memories of the good achieved through collective organisation valuable. This is despite the weaknesses of their position in relation to employers and government; as has been noted, even when they organised half the workforce, unions in Britain only ever wielded a 'restricted, fragmented and largely negative power over the market 'which was never converted into positive power over the state'.[4]

But while joining a union was expected of all entrants into these workplaces, there was less expectation of activism. Willie Rae was the chair of the joint

unions at Clydebridge. His story is not unusual, in that he first got involved to address problems that he felt weren't being taken up.

> You had to join a union. There was a trial period, but if you didnae join a union you were kicked out. In Clydebridge, the ISTC, there was a Staff Branch, a Branch 1 and a Branch 3, that was the Maintenance Branch. I was in that. I got into the union because the two reps for Branch 3 were on the other side of the work and I felt they never came near us or came up and asked us if we had any problems, or did we see anything we didnae like. I mean, first of all, oor wages then, they were crap, it was broo money we were getting.[5]

For others, there was a history of family involvement in the labour and trade union movement:

> My dad was on the executive of the union … His branch had over 950 members and every month he would sit on a Saturday and handwrite all these entries, and he looked after people. He was just a very kind man. When he retired, he set up a rights and advice centre. I saw that example, and I was fairly clear what I wanted to do – I wanted to be a full-time official. I became a TUC official [then an ISTC official]. I got involved through my dad and I knew people, but for the ISTC it was a bit of a leap to take me on. I mean, as far as they were concerned they were taking an Oxford graduate on, and I became organiser of the manual workers in the biggest division of the union, which was South Yorkshire. I was around twenty-five.[6]

> My family were all socialist-minded. My brother was a Labour councillor, my father was a councillor too, he was ILP [Independent Labour Party]. I was always that way, but I never put myself forward for council or anything like that until I was thirty-three. I became delegate. I wasn't sure if I could do it, but it was ok, and I did it for eighteen years.[7]

Although it did not organise all steelworkers, the ISTC was the classic vertical union, an industrial union in ambition and structure. It organised different grades and categories of workers across the manual and staff divide, in all occupations. Melva Cook was a cashier by this stage, and recalled being recruited into the ISTC, partly because of concerns and uncertainties over the future of the industry:

> One of the union reps came round and pointed out all the benefits of being in the union. Some of these guys had been in the union twenty years or more and could see the way things were going in the industry. So I joined. We were all in Steel House Branch.[8]

The union also organised some middle-managerial employees. BSC had opposed the ISTC's demand to recruit at this level,[9] arguing that this was the 'managerial and confidential' area.[10] In 1969, the Corporation had given its blessing to the formation of SIMA. But the ISTC did not give up, and

following a dispute at Scunthorpe during 1972–73, negotiations began, and the union secured the right to recruit among middle managers.[11] Expanding further into the white-collar worker section was an important step for the ISTC and allowed it to offset the decline in membership caused through the reduction in the number of production workers. The relationship between the ISTC and SIMA was difficult. The ISTC aspired to be the main union for all managers, but SIMA, although possessing only 10,000–12,000 members at its peak in the late 1970s, was always able to represent a far bigger percentage of upper managerial grades. SIMA wasn't a mere bosses union, but neither was it part of the TUC steel committee. It very rarely (and never officially) engaged in any type of collective industrial action against BSC and, on those occasions when other unions were engaged in official strike action, SIMA did not offer support or solidarity but instructed members to continue with their normal work duties. If the strike was unofficial, SIMA members were authorised to do extra work to maintain production.[12] Willie Rae highlighted some of the practical difficulties when trying to represent workers and managers in the same organisation.

> A guy who was actually a friend of mine, still is, wanted to discipline one of the heat treatment workers, but I wisnae having that, and I said 'Naw, you're not on.' McDermott, the manager, he beat it. 'Nothing to do with me', he said. Anyway, afterwards, the guy said to me, 'I'm in your union, and you've just called me a liar. Why are you no representing me?' And that's when they chucked the ISTC. The managers in the Staff Branch, they went to SIMA. You could understand them, up to a point. I knew he wisnae a liar.[13]

The ISTC had the potential to resist the cuts agenda pursued by BSC and successive governments in the 1970s. The union had a reputed £11–£12 million in its reserves,[14] a figure that would equate to over £50 million today. It dominated all the larger BSC works and the main private steelworks. It possessed more collective expertise and understanding of the issues affecting steelworkers than any politician or employer. But the union never managed to emerge as the hub of opposition to the cuts and closures programme of the 1970s–1980s. It was sidelined by BSC and the Labour governments of the 1970s, and treated with contempt by the Thatcher administration that came to power in May 1979. To understand why, it is necessary to examine the ISTC and analyse the role it performed within the industrial relations framework of the steel industry.

Throughout its history, all ISTC leaderships were hostile to left-wing politics and appeared close to the iron masters and steel bosses.[15] Nearly all the general secretaries were knighted or given life peerages upon retirement, and most were prominent figures in a range of anti-communist trade union

front groups funded by British and American intelligence.[16] Several in the ISTC leadership at the time of the strike were believed to be freemasons, something which itself had negative implications for union democracy and autonomy. One historical factor that fostered the close relationship between unions and employers was an early system of labour recruitment, known as 'buttying', where a skilled ironworker was paid a tonnage rate by the employer, which he would use to pay workers on lower grades.[17] It generated uniformity of interest between some skilled workers and employers, and underpinned the sometimes huge pay differentials within the workforce.[18] Buttying was eventually eliminated from the industry, but while the early steel unions had opposed it, the ISTC was a product of this industrial culture and environment, remaining, 'very elitist … a first-hand melters union'.[19] Perhaps more significantly, for years, the ISTC had agreed to tie wage rates to the market price for steel, a mechanism that literally aligned the interests of its members with those of the employers.[20] As one commentator pointed out, for decades, ISTC members were paying for accountants to study steel prices, as opposed to negotiators who might secure higher wages.[21] In his interview, Keith Jones argued that it was this, plus the fact that the industry was profitable, and the recognition that most ISTC production workers had nowhere else to go in terms of employment, which led to such servility among the trade union leadership:

> You only get [knighthoods] for being obedient, you don't get them for defending your men. It was a very wealthy industry and actually very contented – profits were good, and wages were tied to the Brown Book, to steel prices. So, when prices went down, wages did. They've got you there, whereas tradesmen – craftsmen as we call them – they had their own skill, they were independent.[22]

The internal structure of the ISTC worked against militancy. National officials were appointed for life. There were no elections to these positions and no way of removing occupants. The Executive Council, the ISTC's 'supreme governing and administrative authority',[23] was made up of twenty-one lay members, who were all working steelworkers; but the election process was a labyrinth of geographical divisions, electoral areas and trade groups, many of which were outdated and anachronistic. The system was used by the leadership of the union as means of maintaining control. There was no provision within the union rules for any rank-and-file structure beyond the individual branches, which themselves were based on the workplace unit – e.g. the melting shop or mill.[24] Each branch secretary would conduct negotiations with management, but would be cut off from combined action with other branches. There were joint branch committees, but these could not embark on joint action unless permission was granted from the national

officials.[25] This meant that even the most effective and capable branch secretary would find it difficult to move beyond their branch and build solidarity action throughout a works. Neither was there a broad Left within the ISTC. An attempt was made to set one up in 1979 in the region where the Left was clearly the strongest: Sheffield and Rotherham.[26] The response from the ISTC leadership was instructive. At the 1979 annual conference – to which loyal monarchist Bills Sirs had invited Prince Charles – Sirs claimed that it was the International Socialists (IS) who were behind the venture, that they were trying to 'steal' the union from ordinary members, but that he would 'destroy' them first.[27] Two months later, in an article first published by the NATO-funded, anti-communist, Labour and Trade Union Press Service of the British–American Committee for Transatlantic Understanding,[28] Sirs again condemned the Left as a 'tiny minority of unrepresentative activists', more interested in 'polishing up irrelevant slogans from fifty years ago' than defeating the Tories.[29]

Brian Molyneux, the secretary of the joint branches at BSC Stocksbridge, was also the secretary of the body Sirs had referred to – the Liaison Committee for Constitutional Reform. Molyneux was not a member of the IS, or Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as it had been called since 1977, but according to colleagues, was 'hounded' by management after the liaison committee published a pamphlet which advocated some mild reforms within the ISTC, including the introduction of elections for full-time officers and for the conference to replace the Executive Council as the sovereign body.[30] Molyneux was soon sacked from his job, as was Joe Herbertson, who worked in the Hoyle Street research and development laboratory. Herbertson was a member of the SWP and edited a rank-and-file steelworker newspaper in Sheffield, the *Real Steel News*, which was a play on the title of the official BSC journal. In response to these sackings, over four hundred union members who worked in the same shop as Molyneux came out on strike, but were informed by the ISTC leaders that their action was unofficial.[31] This occurred in early December 1979, meaning that some ISTC members at Stocksbridge would end up being on strike for almost four months. Interestingly, at the same 1979 conference, in response to a motion seeking to democratise the national leadership by subjecting them to election, Sirs stated that he had a permanent contract of employment from the ISTC and would sue anyone who tried to challenge this by supporting the motion![32] This stifling of democratic structures and left-wing groups within the ISTC made it even less likely that national strike action would ever occur.

Mick Hawker was also a member of the SWP in Sheffield. He recalled Sirs' red scare tactics at the 1979 conference. Hawker also suspected these sackings occurred because Molyneux and Herbertson were both effective

trade union activists, and may have been the result of collusion between management and right-wing ISTC officials:

> [The SWP] had a guy called Joe Herbertson, a very intelligent person and a natural organiser. He's since gone back to Australia, but was working in the research and development labs at Hoyle Street, trying to come up with a process for continuous casting of strip steel. He ended up getting sacked in '79 going through to 1980. He was just unfairly dismissed. Brian Molyneux, who was the branch secretary in the melting shop, he had been sacked two or three weeks prior, and so the melting shop were out solidly in support of him. Brian wasn't an SWP member, but he was known as a good ISTC branch secretary who fought for his members, got compensation for them, wasn't afraid to take action, had got a world view. Management obviously knew that there was going to be a strike. And at the ISTC national conference the previous year there'd been a discussion about infiltration from the Left, I think probably meaning us, and that they were going to root it out. So it was always suspected that there was collusion between the union machine and management in terms of identifying Joe and identifying Brian Molyneux for people that they wanted to get shot of.[33]

Such collusion is usually difficult to prove, but as seen in other industries it does occur, and on some occasions can be quite blatant.[34] In his interview, Keith Jones spoke about Molyneux and Herbertson. Unlike some other union officials who were Communist Party of Great Britain members, Jones was open to working with Trotskyists, which may have been a factor in the Left beginning to have a presence in the ISTC in Sheffield at this point. Jones also expressed his belief that Herbertson and Molyneux were sacked following collusion between right-wing ISTC officials and BSC management.[35]

There were local and regional rivalries within the ISTC. This was due to the history and the structure of the steel industry, where private firms had existed in competition with each other, and also reflected variation in the profitability of certain area-based product groups. Looking after your own region and ensuring that it remained 'viable' was often more important than notions of national solidarity. This is something that would remain even after the second nationalisation had created in BSC a single, national steel-making corporate body that covered much of the industry. An example of this was a comment made in December 1979 by the ISTC Divisional Officer for the No. 2 Region, Peter Woods, shortly before BSC announced 52,000 redundancies. Speaking to the local newspaper, Woods noted 'provided we can make the industry pay and don't cause any problems, there is a good future for Teesside'. This was because the BSC business plan prioritised Teesside 'in preference to older steelworks'. He went on to say if there was a question mark over any plant, it was Consett – bad news, of course, for the thousands who worked there, but something that Teesside workers need

not concern themselves with, according to Woods.[36] Of course, many activists and union officials did display solidarity with workers from threatened plants elsewhere in the country, and this comes through in the interviews, but the tension between collectivism and narrow self-interest remained a feature of steelworker trade unionism before and after the 1980 strike.

Another factor was the ISTC's 'tenacious' support for conciliation and arbitration mechanisms.[37] In the event of disputes, the conciliation process was convoluted, and it was only after three stages of negotiation that a strike could be officially called.[38] In practice, most cases were resolved at a local level, but the labyrinthine architecture played its role in neutralising workplace militancy. In this respect, the ISTC can be seen as a good example of the 'cooperative' union, described by Walther Müller-Jentsch – compliant to the needs of capital, willing to incorporate its bargaining function into the requirements of capital, and more concerned to maintain the machinery of such bargaining than challenge the rationale behind management decisions.[39]

II

The political and economic environment in which the steel unions operated in post-war Britain was shaped by economic growth, a commitment to the collectivist ideals of the welfare state and the goal of full employment. During the years 1945–70, trade union membership in Britain grew from 7.9 million to 11.2 million.[40] Organised labour made advances on pay, conditions of employment and labour law, all of which resulted in an improvement in the lives of the workers they represented. The ISTC gained a significant victory during the war when government and employers conceded the Guaranteed Week Agreement (GWA). This had been a key moral demand of the ISTC, and would be defended by activists in the decades ahead as the 'greatest advance in bringing some stability in the hours of work and wages of iron and steelworkers since the industry began'.[41] The GWA addressed the extreme casualisation within the industry – the 'master and slave' situation – where workers could be forced to tramp around the country, being hired for a few hours at this or that works, before being sacked, depending on the needs of an ironmaster.[42] It gave workers a guaranteed weekly wage and provided a basic security for them and their families. Mirroring trends in other heavy industries, the number of workers employed in the steel industry fell during the post-war decades,[43] but steelworker trade unionism became stronger, with the ISTC increasing its membership from 112,000 in 1950 to a high point of 133,000 by 1970, thanks to the influx of staff grades. It was just under half of the 270,000 or so that worked in the entire steel industry, but trade unionists commanded

a substantial majority in the medium and larger works. This stronger bargaining position led to improvements in conditions for steelworkers, including a reduction in the working week[44] and progress on the issues of compensation for industrial injuries, pensions and redundancy pay.[45]

However, if the post-war decades saw the ISTC achieve gradual improvement in conditions for steelworkers, the process surrounding the 1967 renationalisation highlighted a weakness, which was the union's unwillingness to forward a view on how the industry should be organised. The Wilson government had solicited the suggestions of various parties in the industry, but the ISTC chose not to contribute. The reasons for this were the union's belief it should not 'engage in management', and its conclusion that any restructuring of the industry must result in job losses, in which it would be implicated.[46] This failure of the ISTC to defend the staffing levels in the industry, or construct an industrial strategy based on their retention, would be repeated in the 1970s, with damaging consequences for steelworkers.

The 1967 nationalisation altered industrial relations in steel. The main unions became part of a new TUC Steel Industry Consultative Committee (TUCSICC).[47] Although each union continued to conduct separate pay negotiations with the new BSC, TUCSICC was established to develop 'an agreed approach to the problems and opportunities that nationalisation was supposed to bring'.[48] Another new organisation, the Independent Steel Employers' Association (ISEA), was established to advance the interests of private companies in that sector of the industry. In the period following nationalisation, agreements were made covering improved holidays, employment and income security and pensions. There was also the establishment in 1969 of the joint accident prevention advisory committee.[49]

These improvements in conditions showed the potential benefits for workers in nationalised industries through strong union representation, but in other respects the situation was less positive. McIvor has highlighted the continued importance placed on managerial authority in this era.[50] There had been an expansion in workers participation in some decision-making processes, but not to the point where managerial prerogative was undermined, and certainly not in BSC. Speaking in 1968, corporation personnel director Ron Smith had stated that the trade unions 'have a right to a much closer degree of consultation with the industry than hitherto',[51] but in practice little changed, notwithstanding the introduction of 'worker-directors'. The rationale behind BSC's opposition to ISTC recruitment of management grades has already been noted. Around the same time, a joint steering group was set up composed of BSC directors, civil servants and the deputy chair of ICI, and given the remit to review BSC's proposed ten-year development strategy. The one notable participant excluded from this steering group was that of the unions. Whatever disagreements existed between the government and BSC over the

future of the industry, everyone was agreed that the steel unions should play no part in these discussions.[52] True, the ISTC had been reluctant to contribute to government consultations in the 1960s, but the point is they weren't being invited to the party by BSC in 1971.

The ISTC was a union with a deep hostility to militancy and acceptance of managerialism. It seemed weak, and was regarded by government and BSC as weak. But whatever the many shortcomings it had at leadership level, the union possessed numerical strength and a clear and historically grounded sense of its own importance and role within the industrial relations framework. The recollections of steelworkers bear this out. They do not correspond to the view of the ISTC as a boss's union, but suggest a more complex reality. Relations between managers and unions were fluid, and if nationally significant strikes were rare, local smaller walkouts and strikes certainly were not. When trying to understand the nature of trade unionism within steel, it is important to recognise not only the political outlook of the leadership and the subordinate role they occupied within the industry, but the confidence that union activists possessed, and the awareness they had of their own strength. Their organisations had been built up over several decades, and within many workplaces the fruits of this were powerful lay structures that often represented almost the entirety of the workforces. Pay and conditions were negotiated by unions nationally, but could be improved upon locally, depending on the strength of trade unionism in the workplace. For the chair of the joint ISTC branches at Parkgate, it was this local workplace organisation, distinct from the full-time salariat, which was the bedrock of steelworker trade unionism:

> You negotiated nationally for your national wage rise, but any changes within the structures of your own plant, you negotiated it. You didn't allow divisional officers to become involved. You got a certain amount of pride – you organised your plant, you did negotiate a fair, substantial amount of their wages at plant level. If they wanted to put in a new bonus system, it was the lads in the plant who negotiated that. It was a sense of failure if you had to fetch in a divisional officer – you felt you weren't doing your job as a branch official. It was the branch committee who negotiated. They always took a negotiating committee in with them off the specific jobs you were talking about … it gave you a strength that I'm not quite sure you'd get if you just paid your subs and got a letter in January saying you're getting a pay rise of 1 per cent.[53]

Mike Hull's account reveals the importance union activists placed on having a strong workplace organisation and a leadership that had emerged from the shop floor. His account also reveals the importance some activists placed on maintaining the established industrial relations procedure within the industry. There was an awareness of their limitations, but also an expectation that these arrangements would be adhered to and that management

could not simply railroad through its own agenda, arbitrarily. Tommy Brennan's story of a strike at Ravenscraig showed what could happen if managers did attempt to force through changes to agreed working practices arbitrarily.

> Come the Friday afternoon we still hadn't reached agreement, and the director was adamant he was going to introduce these changes on Monday morning. I said to him, 'Look, if that happens, I can assure you that five minutes after it is introduced both this plant and Gartcosh will be idle.' But he had two or three quislings who were advising him this wouldn't happen. He said 'No, Friday is the deadline. If we don't have an agreement, it will be introduced.' On Monday, we went out and so did Gartcosh. Five days we were idle … until we sat around the table and got an agreement.[54]

BSC managers and government ministers underestimated the strength of the ISTC and its ability to fight. They read the union leadership's hostility to militancy as a weakness to be exploited. Tommy Brennan's account is a good example of how trade unionists valued their role within the collective bargaining processes in the industry. As one steelworker trade unionist pointed out in interviews, the ISTC 'had a long tradition of negotiation and keeping its agreement, and using its procedures, pretty closely'.[55] There were serious downsides to such an approach: it prevented the union from making any fundamental challenge to employers, and did result in it imposing and enforcing deals that were not in the interests of its members, or supported by them.[56] But the corollary was the understanding that, in strongly unionised workplaces, local BSC managers could not expect to implement change arbitrarily.

Some of the other strikes and disputes involving interviewees before 1980 were brief, but no less intriguing for what they revealed about struggles between workers and managers. John Marston, who worked at Firsteel, a private works in the West Midlands, remembered a dispute about a chair. On the face of it, it seemed unimportant, but it was a conflict about power that revealed the contempt some in management had for workers:

> We had a strike about a chair by a rolling mill. It had been there for years … because if it was lower-gauge material, a run could take about 15 to 20 minutes to do, so they used to sit down. It niggled a couple of the supervisors; they didn't like people sitting down. So it was one maintenance fortnight, the production director went in just before we came back to work and he threw the chair on top of the skip. He knew what he was doing, it was psychological. So the first shift back on was two young chaps. One was a dear friend of mine … as soon as he saw the chair had gone, bang, the stop button went, 'We're not working' … I fetched the works director down. So in the office there's the works director, production director, there's the supervisor, there's the two men off the mill and there's four committee men, and we stood there

> for four hours arguing about the chair. It was the first time I'd ever seen a director or a manager turn on a supervisor … he put his head in his hands, he said, 'We're arguing, look how many of us are here, we're arguing about a chair. How are we going to resolve this?' I said, 'You give me a key to the canteen, I'll fetch a chair, put it by the mill, the mill will run.' He said, 'Give him a key.' I went in, put the chair by the mill, and that chair stayed there until that mill went, until they shut the place down. But the men wouldn't sit on the chair because it was a point of principle. We're showing you what we're doing and that's it.[57]

The way John Marston recalled this as a deliberate act – that it was 'psychological' and that it was the first time he had seen a manager turn on the supervisor – reveals a lot about class relations in these workplaces. Geoff Walters recalled an exchange with a Bagnalls' owner who seemed to have had a lifetime of doing as he pleased. This event, which took place in 1956, was also important, in that it sheds light on the way immigrant workers could be treated at a time when South Asian immigration into Britain, and regions like the West Midlands in particular, was rising. It came at a time when local Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) organiser Les Payne had found that some immigrant workers in the local foundries were working 70-hour weeks for between £9–10 per week.[58] This was less than half of what Geoff was earning in Bagnalls at that time for a flat week.[59] It was also a time when some local white trade unionists were protesting against the employment of Black workers and had engaged in strike action to that end,[60] and a full twelve years before Wolverhampton MP Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech.

> On a Thursday afternoon, the gaffer – if you want to know his name, he's dead now, Mr Elwell[61] – he used to go up the forge. We were still puddling iron then, so this gaffer used to go up the forge where they were all Asian workers. They'd just started to come over from Pakistan. He used to say, 'Right, you, you, you, you twelve are finished. Tomorrow night, cards, gone.' Of course I don't get to know this until after it had happened the couple of times. I thought, 'What the blooming hell is this bloke doing?', you know. Then he broke another law. The forge was a big building … and there were no walls, it was just a shed over furnaces. He went up one day, he always used to walk round the ground. He walked over, and of course these Asian lads had got fire buckets, it was cold, naturally. He kicked the ruddy buckets over. Well that didn't go down with me very well at all. And then I just found out about him sacking these twelve. I said to Bill, 'First time I'll be in to see the gaffer.' We walked in, and Bill said, 'I'd like you to meet Geoff Walters, the new branch secretary.' Elwell went, 'Hello, Geoff.' I looked at him in the eyeball and he knew that I wasn't going to shake hands with him because I've got to give him a rollicking in a few minutes time, haven't I? I said, 'There's only two points today.' I said, 'You kicked all the fire buckets over in the

> forge. These lads are cold up there. All it is is a bit of coke or whatever. They've got a fire bucket, and that's where they keep warm'. I said, 'I'll be quite straight with you. I'm not going to bugger around the bush. Listen, if you do it again, you'll have 250 people outside the gate with a bloody fire bucket and we won't come back until you've replaced all the fire buckets.' He went red. 'I've never been spoken to like this before in my life.' I said, 'There is another thing. You're sacking twelve are you, and you've started twelve more on. What's that all about?' 'Never', he said, 'I'm a churchgoer.' I thought, 'Well I'm not, but that doesn't matter.' I said, 'Well I'll tell you this mate, do it again' – I was laying the bloody law down. Whether I'd got the right to I don't know or what. I said, 'Do it again and I'll tell you something', and I'd only been in the union about five weeks. I said, 'Do it again and I'll tell you, I'll have the union lawyers down here that quick, their bloody tails will be on fire because you, mate, are out of order.' Anyway, the Asians, were they in the union? I checked up and I'd only got about 36 per cent of 250 people in the union … I got a fitter, he was a Sikh. I was telling him, 'I can't converse with them.' He said, 'I can speak their lingo, Geoff.' I said, 'Well tell them what I've done and if they wanted in the union, come down.' Then next morning they were all lined up by 8 o'clock. I'm going to tell you, this is the truth, this is. I asked to converse with every one of them. Not one could sign their name. Every card was with a cross, and I initialled it. I organised all the Asians that worked in the forge. There was never any more sackings … When I went down to Grays Inn Road, the ISTC headquarters, this one lad said to me, 'What's your branch?' I told him, he said 'You know what we call your branch here … We call it the League of Nations.' We'd got Pakistanis, Indian, Sikhs, West Indian, Italian, Sicilian. We ended up with a blacksmith from Hungary after they arrived after the Rising in 1956. Racialism was settled on the shop floor. It went nowhere else. Racism died out. There was no 'Well he's a P**i, he's a Sikh.' Every man who paid his money was a trade unionist in our branch. It was bloody great.[62]

Nazabat Hussain was from Pakistan and started working in the steel industry in Teesside in the early 1970s. Although he enjoyed his time at BSC and sees it as crucial in allowing him to build a new life in Middlesbrough, his account does also show that, like the Asian workers at Bagnalls in the 1950s, immigrant workers in the 1970s would often have to start in the dirtiest jobs:

> I worked on the Sinter Plant at South Bank. I started around 1972–73. It was general labouring, shifting all the s***e, nothing special. Spillages, blockages, you had to clean them out. It was heavy. If the belt broke it would all come down, all the material, and you had to clear it all out. I was started as a temporary worker and you had to work nights, but I enjoyed it – you could do your work, nobody bothered you. After six months they gave me a contract. I worked in the coke ovens. Then the new plant was built at Redcar and the manager took me there. I was happy to get any work.[63]

III

From the start, BSC initiated a reorganisation process based largely on closures and redundancies. Accompanying this was the popularisation of a narrative that there was no feasible alternative. This narrative gained momentum throughout the 1970s and was strengthened because the unions failed to challenge it. In January 1973, as the Heath government prepared to publicise the Ten-Year Development Strategy, the Minister for Industry, Tom Boardman, commented:

> Any conceivable strategy must mean a large reduction in the British Steel Corporation's employment. Many existing plants have no commercial future and there is no way in which they could be kept alive. Modernisation, however much we may regret it, means fewer jobs.[64]

The national press regularly reinforced this message, most notably during a series of crisis talks between BSC and union leaders, in December 1975 to January 1976, on the issue of redundancies:

> British steel is currently losing money at a rate of £400 million per year. Some of these losses are due to the worldwide economic recession, which … will be corrected by recovery. What will not go away of its own accord is overmanning within the steel industry … what the BSC must not do – and what the Government must not let it do – is to give up its efforts to reduce its labour force to an effective level.[65]

This discourse was not limited to BSC, the Conservative Party and the broadsheet press. By the mid-1970s, neoliberal ideas were gaining acceptability among Labour politicians.[66] Rooted in the party's internalisation of capitalist ideology, it was a development that would have negative consequences for trade unionism in the period ahead. With capitalism in crisis, Labour leaders were ill-prepared for the restructuring offensive mounted by those who were advocating a break from the 'consensus' politics of the post-war era as the only answer to economic decline. As we noted in the introduction to this book, this branch of capitalist ideology was not new. Its main proponents had been active since the 1940s in their efforts to eradicate the economic and political power of organised labour. But in this changing and more chaotic context of a global recession, their prescriptions were now gaining momentum. In 1974, Friedrich Hayek was awarded the Nobel memorial prize for economics; two years later, the recipient was Milton Friedman.[67]

The year 1976 saw the Callaghan government accept the International Monetary Fund austerity diktat, 'seriously undermining' longer-standing commitments to full employment and welfare.[68] But signs that Labour was yielding to the imperatives of neoliberalism had already become evident to

steelworkers. In August 1975, Michael Foot, the Secretary of State for Employment and Ebbw Vale MP, told constituents that steelmaking at the threatened works could not be saved, concluding 'BSC's case is that they can manufacture steel more cheaply elsewhere than they can here at Ebbw Vale. The facts on this are incontestable.'[69] In 1978, the Labour government produced a pessimistic White Paper entitled 'The Road to Viability'. Among the main provisions here was an acceptance that steel was in permanent decline, productivity of labour was low, and that none of the Beswick plants had a future.[70]

Given the power of this discourse, it is not surprising to find that few workers challenged it in any fundamental way in their interviews. But different explanations were offered for the problems they felt the industry was facing at that time. This will be looked at more in the next chapter, as these memories often connect with recollections about the cause of the strike. For now, it is enough to note that, for some steelworkers, the real damage had been perpetrated by the private owners, because of their failure to invest in the industry in the post-war decades. The rise of rival steel producers in Japan and West Germany was understood due to them being rebuilt with new technology from scratch after the war, making comparisons with Britain unfair. One trade unionist recalled an industry in poor condition in the 1960s, one where the guiding principle appeared to be profit and where investment had been low:

> The industry had been left for too long without being modernised. And just thinking of one example, the old Number 9 mill at Cleveland works, which was still operating at that time, was actually a mill that they brought out of Germany after the Second World War … they took the mills from Germany, but then finished up putting brand new mills in the German steel industry … Private industry wasn't prepared to invest; they just wanted to make out of it what they could do at the time. There was no thought about what they could do in the future.[71]

Rather than resist, steel union leaders internalised this declinist discourse and accepted the reduction in employment levels in the industry as inevitable. In so doing, they acted in ways that recall Lukes' analysis of the third category of power, the ideological hegemony of elites which compels subordinate groups to 'accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they cannot see or imagine an alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial'.[72] During the first significant series of closures in the early 1970s, TUCSICC, chaired by ISTC General Secretary Dai Davies, demanded only that there be more consultation over closures and more government-supported surveys of the affected towns and areas to identify industries that

might be attracted to provide jobs. No financial analysis of the Ten-Year Development Strategy was ever undertaken by the ISTC or TUCSICC, notwithstanding the terrible implications that it had for thousands of steelworkers.[73] We have already noted the ISTC's unwillingness to be involved in discussions about the industry's future. This attitude left the unions defenceless against what was fast becoming the hegemonic view – that tens of thousands of jobs must go for the new BSC to survive. The rationale behind the closures programme was never challenged, nor did the unions put an alternative forward. A special conference was held in Sheffield in March 1973, which discussed the situation, but the position adopted by Davies showed no real sign of change. To the dismay of many in attendance, Davies declared that the steel unions could 'not logically oppose modernisation'.[74] Instead, he called for assurances that replacement jobs would be provided for those who would soon be made redundant:

> Before a plant is closed, adequate employment opportunities must be provided … it is not a policy of opposition to change but of insisting that change is phased so that as jobs are lost in steel, other jobs are created in new industries.[75]

Even before the sharp spike in unemployment in the mid-1970s, the government was well aware that this was not possible; a select committee report issued that same month noted 'there is no longer reasonably full employment and in many of the areas where closures are taking place, or to be expected, the chances of redundant workers finding work outside the industry are not good.'[76] In 1975, BSC formed a subsidiary company named BSC Industry (BSCI) which was supposed to stimulate new economic investment in areas left bereft following plant closures. The BSCI board was dominated by BSC managers, but also contained two trade union representatives, new ISTC General Secretary, Bill Sirs, included.[77] By the time of the strike, BSCI claimed to have assisted in the establishment of two hundred job-creating ventures, which it 'hoped' would create 7,050 jobs by March 1982.[78] It was unclear how many of these job opportunities were down to other agencies, but even if the expectations had been fulfilled, it was a drop in the ocean compared to what was required for an industry which was shedding tens of thousands of jobs every year. BSCI presented itself as the 'conscience' of BSC,[79] but acted more as an alibi for the cuts programme. By involving themselves in the running of this company, the union leaders were arguably becoming complicit in this.

Bill Sirs had been appointed ISTC general secretary in February 1975. He seemed more open in some ways than his predecessors and oversaw the introduction of an annual delegate conference for the first time. But there was no change politically. In May 1975, Sirs headed TUCSICC in

negotiations with BSC and accepted voluntary redundancies 'where it was mutually agreed that overmanning exists'.[80] He then successfully lobbied the ISTC executive, to endorse this agreement.[81] It still wasn't enough. In December 1975, BSC Chief Executive Bob Scholey announced a package of cuts, including compulsory redundancies and the end of the GWA. In a throwaway line to reporters, he also described press speculation that 44,000 steelworkers might lose their jobs as 'just for starters'.[82] The scene seemed to be the setting for a major showdown, but independently of the ISTC leaders, and to the surprise of BSC, several thousand steelworkers in South Wales began a week-long strike on 9 January 1976 against the removal of premium shifts. The development caught BSC and the ISTC leadership unawares, and made it more difficult for the former to implement its plans. However, in the agreement that was eventually signed two weeks later, the ISTC leadership accepted BSC's core argument that identified 'overmanning' as a key problem to be resolved. This deal enshrined managerial prerogative; managers were to provide the unions with figures on a works-by-works basis 'showing existing manning levels and manning levels they believe to be desirable'. The unions were to promote voluntary redundancy schemes to their members. But if staffing levels were not reduced within twelve weeks, 'other redundancy measures' were to be applied. As the BSC house journal *Steel News* crowed, it was a historic agreement: 'for the first time in BSC's history, the steel unions have agreed that the industry is overmanned'.[83]

In 1979, Scholey would claim that the unions backtracked on this agreement, but 24,000 steelworkers lost their jobs during 1976–79, with minimal resistance from the steel union leaders. In 1978, Bill Sirs stated that if the unions were kept informed early about closures, tens of thousands of jobs could be negotiated away without any 'general upheaval'.[84] He also failed to defend existing employment levels; redundancies were acceptable if they were accompanied by 'modernisation' of the industry. [85] And when the Callaghan government began implementing the Beswick closures earlier than scheduled, Sirs limited his role to that of an agent negotiating high redundancy payments for steelworkers. In his autobiography, and elsewhere, Sirs would criticise these same workers for accepting redundancy payments, as opposed to fighting to defend jobs.[86] However, most of these plants had been earmarked for closure since 1973 and were being run down. No union strategy for saving them was at hand.[87]

Sirs was the most powerful union leader in the steel industry, but he wasn't the only one who accepted the closures programme. Cut from a similar cloth was the NUB General Secretary, Hector Smith. A burly South Walian with some rough edges, Smith had seen action at Dunkirk at the age of just twenty, before returning to work at Ebbw Vale. He became

leader of the NUB in 1971, and seven years later was presented with a 'thank you' plaque by BSC Chair Sir Charles Villiers and Bob Scholey at a special dinner marking the centenary of his union.[88] In an unfortunate intervention the following year, he urged British Leyland workers to accept the so-called 'recovery plan' hatched by Michael Edwardes and Ian MacGregor, which presaged around 25,000 redundancies.[89] Smith believed that if the British Leyland workers refused to accept this ultimatum, the steel industry would lose a market. But in making this argument, he also offered insights into his own acceptance of managerial prerogative.

> It's not easy to accept rationalisation … in fact, it's bloody painful as we in the steel industry know only too well. We've shed tens of thousands of jobs in the last few years. And it's especially hard for trade unionists and trade union officials to accept these changes … but unions are gradually seeing the truth that there is no point in fighting for every job if the end result is no work for anyone. In BSC we are still de-manning. My union now say to BSC, 'You show us where we are overmanned in the blast furnaces or coke ovens, and we'll negotiate phasing out of these jobs … so it must be with Leyland.[90]

A new dynamic entered politics with the election of Thatcher's Conservative Party in May 1979. Labour ministers had dispensed with Keynesianism reluctantly, but arguably remained concerned about the social consequences of cuts. They had also put some pressure on BSC to negotiate rather than cut jobs arbitrarily. The new Conservative Secretary of the State for Industry, Sir Keith Joseph, was different. As founder of the neoliberal Centre for Policy Studies, Joseph was a true believer who saw economic growth as bound up with job cuts, pay restraint and a weakened trade union movement. Key to neoliberalism was the belief in a 'transnational revolution … which necessitated a far-reaching restructuring of the economic, social and political conditions for capital accumulation'.[91] The defeat of the labour movement and the removal of its ability to frustrate the imperatives of capital were central to this process. Both the Ridley Report and Stepping Stones had dripped with hostility to trade unionism and the nationalised industries. Ridley had specifically identified steel as the ideal example of a 'non vulnerable' nationalised industry where trade unionism was weak, where 'we might provoke a battle … where we can win'.[92] Sirs warned the Tories 'not to delude themselves' about the ISTC's supposed softness,[93] but the agenda was being established. Stepping Stones advocated something much more fundamental than a mere victory at the polls. There had to be 'a national recovery … a sea change in Britain's political economy … an explicit rejection of socialism and the Labour trades union axis … and the replacement of Jim's sick society with "Maggie's healthy society". Again, it was the trade

union movement that was pinpointed as the major obstacle to change; unless they were weakened 'national recovery was not possible'.[94]

Soon after the election, Keith Joseph repeated a call previously made by Charles Villiers that BSC would be required to break even after March 1980. With BSC's losses totalling £444 million in 1977–78 and £309 million in 1978–79,[95] a mass redundancy and closure programme seemed in the offing. Labour MP John Silkin believed that if Joseph followed through, it would lead to the closure of at least one of the five major steelworks.[96] BSC managers were becoming concerned; at the SIMA conference in Harrogate in September 1979, General Secretary Bob Muir, asked 'Where is our capacity to fall? Fifteen million tonnes a year, twelve? eight?' Muir seemed to be suggesting common action with the ISTC and others when he called for the drawing up of an 'inner fortress' beyond which BSC would not retreat.[97] It was at this conference that Villiers offered his own prescription for restoring BSC to health, the gist of which was that managers needed to 'be bastards'.[98] The comments were roundly condemned by trade unionists and Labour MPs alike. The following month, BSC announced the end of heavy end production at Shotton Works, and with it, 6,400 jobs. Shotton was a Beswick plant, but had been given a five-year reprieve in 1977, with a further review to take place in 1982. However, BSC argued that huge losses were being incurred and cuts were needed immediately.[99]

A serious attempt to disrupt the closures and cuts hegemony was made in 1979 by two groups of academics, who had been contacted by campaigners in Corby. Despite being viable according to the criteria set down by BSC itself, the Corby heavy end, which employed over 5,000 workers, was threatened with closure. This was a consequence of the ten-year strategy; it was understood that Corby's order book would pass to Redcar, where expensive new plant, including the largest and costliest blast furnace in Europe, would soon be operational. In response, the Retention of Steelmaking at Corby (ROSAC) organisation was established.[100] ROSAC quickly contacted a group of economists at Cambridge University and accountants at Warwick University to assist them in this campaign.[101] The Cambridge group condemned the closure on wider economic and social grounds, but towards the end of 1979 the Warwick group, having examined the accounting figures produced by BSC, produced a detailed rebuttal of the business strategy itself. They concluded that the corporation had overestimated the savings that would be made from the closure of Corby and failed to appreciate that it could thrive with an investment of £34 million over five years. The group also called for a review of BSC's commercial practices. The report challenged BSC managers on their own ground but, perhaps because of that, was summarily dismissed by corporation management at a meeting on 1 November 1979.[102] In his participatory analysis of the Corby campaign, Maunders argued that,

although TUCSICC and the ISTC wanted to keep Corby open, they seemed unwilling to openly support the Warwick conclusions to do so. There were echoes of leadership failings at the time of nationalisation; because the union leaders possessed no independent plans of their own for running the industry, and therefore no way of challenging managerial prerogative, they largely accepted BSC managerial strategy, which prioritised the five main centres of production, Redcar included.[103]

Coming off the back of the closure in April 1979 of Bilston heavy end, another non-Beswick plant where a high-profile campaign to keep steelmaking alive had been defeated, Corby was a watershed in the journey towards a national steel strike. The ISTC could only accept so many blows from BSC. In the last analysis, it was a worker's organisation, and within the union there was a growing awareness and resentment that they were regarded as weak by a 'truculent' BSC. On the day the Corby closure was confirmed, the ISTC Executive Council posted a warning to BSC and the new government:

> Unfortunately, we are dealing with people who for many years have mistaken cooperation for weakness. To them and the government, we would suggest the need to think carefully and considerately in full joint negotiations before mistakes occur that cannot be corrected.[104]

At the meeting, executive members called for an overtime ban and a withdrawal from talks about 'manning restructuring'. They also issued a call to the other steel unions to support a 'rolling programme of selective strikes'. Sirs wrote to Jim Callaghan a day later, outlining the degree to which he was being driven against his will towards militancy:

> My union, and other unions also, finds itself pushed towards actions which are opposed to our inclinations and our record. We have done all we can to ease the transition from a backward industry starved of investment to a dynamic industry, resting on modern plants. Now we find the negotiating space taken away from us … At Corby, 5,500 jobs are to be tossed into the bin in pursuit of a mirage: a British Steel Corporation breaking even by March next Year.[105]

On 30 November 1979, Scholey and BSC sales manager Gordon Sambrook met with the ISTC executive and dropped another bombshell by announcing plans to cut capacity from 21.6 million tonnes to 15 million tonnes. When added to the closures at Corby and Shotton, this would remove 52,000 jobs from the industry, one-third of the total workforce.[106] In response, the ISTC Executive Council consulted area and branch committees about possible strike action.[107] The annual pay negotiation was running parallel with these events, and at a joint meeting of BSC and the union Central Negotiating Committee (CNC) on 3 December, the unions rejected a pay deal that amounted to a 2 per cent consolidation on last year's award. Four days

later, a specially convened ISTC executive meeting received reports from several area committees, including the Clyde, Midland, Rotherham, Corby, Teesside, Clydesdale and Ebbw Vale, all of which called for a strike on the pay offer. Following a vote, it was agreed that the first national steel strike since 1926 would begin on 2 January 1980.[108]

Although job losses were spiralling from the mid-1970s onwards, many steelworkers recall this as more of a post-strike phenomenon – a memory which speaks volumes for the even-worse catastrophe that befell the industry during the early 1980s. Reflecting on the challenges of this time, some ISTC activists pointed out that the steel unions had always accepted redundancies as part of what they considered the modernisation of the industry. Technological advances in steel production which reduced employment levels were regarded as inevitable, but accepted with the proviso that the job losses were voluntary, limited to workers that were near retirement age, and accompanied with wage increases for the remainder of the workforce. These memories occlude some of the larger closures of this period, such as Ebbw Vale, Bilston, Shotton, Corby Heavy End and Shelton, which were not voluntary and wiped out thousands of jobs across generations. But underneath this defence, there was also the sense in some of the testimonies that the ISTC was being placed under enormous pressure by BSC, and that in this bleak scenario only the best organised plants could defend themselves:

> The unions were using their strength to keep [closures] at bay because, clearly, management had got to be careful … They wouldn't go for the big plants because I think they knew the consequences were too dire. This started before the 1980 strike. They started to take steelmaking out in some areas like Corby. They took their steelmaking out about 1978, and they took steelmaking out of plants in Wales – smaller plants. I think they took the steelmaking out in Hartlepool as well, by agreement. But they left other parts – the mills – and they reached agreement on them sort of thing. In some areas, it became pretty bitter. I don't think the unions [accepted job losses too easily]. The ISTC had always reached an understanding that the only people who would lose their jobs were people who were getting older, or wanted to go. And there used to be some payment for that. And some of them were getting to the end of their working life. It were a hard industry and, when you got to sixty it were hard work. So, they reached agreement on that. They went along with new working practices, with technology. They always did that, but it cost the company money. And that were the traditional way of bargaining in the industry.[109]

Steelworkers have different views on the inevitability of so-called rationalisation of the industry and the performance of their own organisations in the struggle against it. Like all memories of this strike, many of the reflections here have been reconstructed and influenced by later developments in the

industry, and British society generally. For Ian Stewart it was – in hindsight – a process that could not be avoided:

> I remember before the strike … we were told there needed to be job losses, we had too many people. You are probably talking up to 30,000 people working in the steel industry in Teesside at the time, and you look at what there is now and … the difference in production levels … people seen the steel industry as an opportunity to provide employment whether there was any [need within the industry for such] employment or not, it was better people going into work than being on the dole … I can understand that.[110]

However, Sheffield BSC worker David Wilkinson believed that the Conservative government was behind this negative portrayal of the corporation, and he rejected the argument that the industry was overstaffed with unproductive workers:

> We knew Thatcher had a plan. I knew they had a plan. A blind bloke on a galloping horse knew they had a plan. Steel industry had lost a lot of money; it was edging towards making some redundancies; union was resisting. Hand on heart, I never saw that much waste; I never seen people skiving. I've heard people say – I've even heard it said to me – 'Ah British Steel, three men to do one man's job.' But that's not the British Steel I remember. I were that knackered after work I used to fall asleep on the bus. There was one bus driver I knew, that if I didn't get off his bus at the right stop, he'd stop the bus and come up back and waken me, saying 'This is your stop.'[111]

Other interviewees recall the closures differently and rejected the arguments being made by BSC in defence of them. This will be examined in more depth in the next chapter.

IV

Three days after the ISTC announced the strike, BSC finally confirmed the closure of Consett steelworks, which employed almost 4,000 workers. Consett, in the black financially but not one of the big five, was therefore not part of BSC's future strategy. This latest blow provoked consternation among steelworkers, but was defended by the Teesside BSC regional manager, Derek Saul, as being a necessary move, which would leave the division 'much leaner and fitter'.[112] At this stage it was only the ISTC who had decided on strike action, but the other significant unions in the industry were also moving towards that position. On 18 December 1979, the NCCC recommended that their respective executives support the ISTC's stance. Hector Smith pledged that the NUB would not cross picket lines, commenting, 'All unions in the country are insulted by the 2% offer.'[113]

With a national strike now just days away, the press subjected the steelworkers to heavy pressure by stressing the folly of the action and the need for more plant closures and redundancies. For example, *The Economist* argued that 'BSC's productivity is so far below its foreign competitors that it needs a big rise to hold onto its share of the world markets, i.e. fewer jobs, not higher output.'[114] The *Guardian*, which had backed Labour in the election seven months earlier, argued that the steel industry was 'grossly overmanned', with productivity per worker 'appallingly low'. It proposed a period of negotiation, but that if this failed, 'BSC should be free to go ahead, unilaterally, with its own economy programme.'[115] Much of the local press was no different. Even in those areas heavily dependent on steel for employment, similar arguments were being made. For example, the *Evening Times* (Glasgow) argued that not only could there be no pay rise, but that job losses were necessary, commenting: 'It is a sad fact that the British Steel Corporation simply cannot afford to pay what the men want without increased productivity … job losses are something they will have to learn to live with.'[116]

The press doubted the ISTC's ability to lead a strike and predicted a quick collapse. *The Economist* suggested this, for several reasons, ranging from the difficulties of keeping the issue of pay and closures separate – the two issues would eventually coalesce and drive a wedge between those whose plants were safe and those who were threatened with closure – to the long-standing rivalries between the steel unions. The latter argument seemed to have merit, with the most recent example being a six-month demarcation dispute between the ISTC and TGWU at the new £100 million Hunterston ore terminal on the Firth of Clyde.[117] The ISTC had also called for a one-day strike and overtime ban in response to the planned closure of Corby heavy end, but this had been rejected by other unions. As *The Economist* noted, the latest cuts meant the equivalent of ten Corby-scale closures, 'but it does not follow that the unions will be ten times more determined.'[118]

But even if all these arguments were correct, it did not mean the unions would not go on strike. Developments were occurring that suggested a monumental struggle might be unleashed. Following weeks of rumours, on 14 December 1979 BSC confirmed its intention to cut the combined steel production at Port Talbot and Llanwern from 5.2 million tonnes to 2.75 million tonnes.[119] Details were yet to be finalised, but at least 10,000 redundancies were expected. The potential knock-on effect of this led to fears being expressed that over 50,000 jobs could be at risk in Wales. On 18 December, the Wales TUC (WTUC) called for a national strike in the Welsh coal and steel industries, beginning on 21 January 1980.[120] On the same day, workers at two mass meetings held at Consett pledged to fight

the closure of the plant. A document presented by the ISTC outlined the economic case for Consett and the dreadful consequences for the region should the plant shut down.[121]

By this stage, most steelworkers knew that an all-out strike was inevitable. Some had begun to prepare for it. In accordance with the rules of the ISTC, there was no strike ballot. The mood of the workers appeared to be mixed. Ian Crichton recalled divided opinions:

> We had a mass meeting in the canteen and there was as many people probably arguing against it as there were for it. It was a question of the great unknown – we hadn't been on strike since 1926 for the general strike, so there was quite a lot of ambiguity. I remember as just a young guy I actually got up on one of the tables and tried to stiffen the resolve because it was obvious we were going to come under the cosh.[122]

Other strikers remembered a greater degree of support. Vic Jeffries said 'the majority of people that I spoke to … were for it … I think the majority wanted it'.[123] Paul O'Neill recalled how it had been pressure from the branches themselves that had forced a reluctant leadership into action:

> They (the ISTC leaders) were pushed into that strike. They didn't want it. They were pushed into it … and once they'd called it, they didn't expect to have to stick to it, and they were gobsmacked that it lasted three months. I think if they'd been offered anything prior to Christmas, anything at all, they'd have taken it and chanced their arm, and I think the majority of the workforce might have backed them anyway. They could have [decided not to go on strike] but … given the feedback from the branches they couldn't do that, you know. So when you say they were pushed into a corner, they were also pushed into a corner by the members.[124]

Bob Norton disputed the notion that it had much support, but his comment below also reveals that he thought the issues were serious enough to warrant some type of industrial action:

> The Tony Cooks of this world might have thought the guys are solidly behind us. Load of bollocks. We would have been better going on a course of action that perhaps would have been more disruptive, rather than what I felt was going to be destructive … if the first aiders had withdrawn their service, that would have been quite disruptive because a lot of the workforce would have said, 'No first aid, none of us are working.' You only needed small, important, as people perceived them, organisations to have an impact. If the loco drivers worked to rule, you would soon start to slow production down, you'd have to start winding the blast furnaces down and clearly the impact on the steel furnaces would be the same. I suppose when you intend to fight a war, you need more strategy behind it, rather than a big hammer, let's all go on strike.[125]

Tony Cook, criticised here by Norton, actually shared his view about the benefits of a selective strike:

> I had suggested that we should guerrilla it first. In other words, when the crane drivers came in on a night shift, we say, 'No lads, you're on strike' … and give them a shift's money. Now, there's a works with no crane drivers for the whole shift. Doesn't matter how many other people are there, they'll all have to be paid. And you go to the loco drivers at Llanwern, a couple of nights later, say the same thing, or a couple of days later and do the same thing, and keep on doing that. That's exactly what the civil servants did later that same year.[126]

Doug Fisher had recently completed a commercial apprenticeship at BSC Wolverhampton and Bilston, spending his time between those works. Aged just twenty at the time of the strike, he was both an active member of the ISTC and the Conservative Party. In an interview that revealed the complexities of his political and class identity he stated that he 'could never, ever criticise Margaret Thatcher', but was fully supportive of the strike. To some extent, Doug appears to have been looking to his own post-strike future, but confirms a general and shared enthusiasm for the strike among his work colleagues at Wolverhampton.

> Me and my mate were both out-and-out Tories, but we were still very focused on looking after the workers' interests. You class union people as being very left wing, Labour, whatever, but we weren't. We were very much the opposite. When I was seventeen, I was a member of the Young Conservatives. Why did I get involved in the steel strike? I wanted to stand up for what I thought was right. During the strike, I marched to London. Even though I was a massive Maggie Thatcher fan … British Steel was an old-fashioned company, badly run and losing a fortune … I stood up for what I thought was right for the people who were around me on a day-to-day basis. But that had nothing to do with the government, it was all to do with the people who ran British Steel. The government never ever intervened. It was purely financial. There had been no pay rises for X amount of years, and the powers that be called a nationwide strike. I was only a young kid then, only twenty, and I just thought well, I'm gonna go along with it, because obviously we'd got pickets on our gates, and I thought that well obviously I don't want to upset these lads that I've got to work with for the next amount of years, and things like this, so I went along with it … the strike was hundred per cent supported at Wolverhampton. Absolutely. Everyone stuck together.[127]

Mike Hull saw the issue in straightforward terms. The union upheld the interests of its members. The union had called a strike. The union expected support, and got it.

> I was always interested in industrial politics. There were a lot of serious union people, most of them syndicalists, like myself, who didn't have much

> time for national politics. They were more interested in the well-being of the people they worked with, at the point of work, the point of production, not some abstract thing miles away. A lot of people, although they were members of the Labour Party, they weren't councillors or that, it was secondary, they were mainly trade unionists, and that's where I was. I was a syndicalist … there had not been a national strike, but it wasn't unknown to have local strikes, and we'd had a couple here. Yes, [there was support for the national strike], it was close-knit, and if the organisation said you were going on strike, you were going on strike and that were it. The union looked after you in the good times, and now you had to look after them when it became a bit rough.[128]

Unlike the interviewees in other regions, all the Scottish steelworkers knew each other. Some had worked together, and many had kept in touch with each other. All were veterans of long years of involvement in the close-knit world of Scottish steelworker trade union activism. This seems to have helped generate a collective memory on this question, as they all spoke with enthusiasm about the large degree of support the strike had. The following extract was typical of the sentiments expressed:

> They were a quite militant crowd here and they were unbelievable for the picketing. You did have some guys who were conservative-minded. But they never spoke out against it. There were no complaints about it, we were going out on strike, let's go. The determination was there.[129]

Thatcher was concerned at the unfolding events. During a phone call with Jim Prior on 22 December, the pair let loose a stream of insults about Villiers, rubbishing him in turn as 'wooden' … 'useless' 'hasn't a clue' … 'very conceited', a 'poor negotiator'. Thatcher correctly believed that Bill Sirs was being pushed unwillingly towards a strike and reckoned he would accept a low offer to avoid it. She indicated a willingness to sanction an 8 per cent increase, in the form of 2 per cent consolidated, 3 per cent from the scrapping of the guaranteed week and 3 per cent neat. In return, the government would expect 'some reduction' in what it termed 'restrictive practices'.[130] Later the same day, Thatcher spoke to Keith Joseph, where she expressed fears of a steel strike spreading to British Leyland, damaging Tory hopes of achieving low pay rises elsewhere.[131]

Further talks did take place between the ISTC and Villiers, but the latter's offer of 6 per cent with productivity strings and an end to the guaranteed working week was rejected at a meeting in London on 28 December. According to Thatcher's private secretary for economic affairs, Tim Lankester, BSC would have raised the offer to 7 per cent, a figure they believed would have been accepted by Sirs and Smith. But the corporation was now convinced neither leader could carry their members; the executives of both unions had

attended the meeting and were said to be 'in a very militant mood'.[132] The following day, Sirs described the situation in the industry as a catastrophe. 'We have', he continued, 'been faced with 100,000 workers leaving for the dole in nine years and 42,000 are due to go next year.' Sirs concluded that the pay offer was actually a 15 per cent pay cut and, as such, 'ridiculous'.[133]

V

British steel unions had historically been among the least militant within the TUC. For decades, the leadership of the main union, the ISTC, had courted the employers and had tied the interests of its members to the vagaries of the steel market. But the union had strength. It contained over 100,000 members and included key groups of activists in many BSC works throughout the country. There was no significant rank and file, or broad left, organisation as such, but what these activists did possess was a willingness to fight back and an awareness that the time for such a fight had arrived. The relentless redundancies and closures had created this groundswell of opposition, with the low pay offer acting as the final insult. By the end of December 1979, matters had reached the point of no return. There would be no further talks. The question of whether there should or would be a strike was now irrelevant. It was happening. The only question that mattered now for steelworkers was whether they could organise themselves effectively enough to stop British industry in its tracks and inflict a major defeat on BSC and the new Thatcher government.

Notes

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5 Interview, Willie Rae, 14 December 2016.
6 Interview, Keith Jones.
7 Interview, John Foley (Scotland), 13 December 2016.
8 Interview, Melva Cook.
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10 Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 104.
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12 G. Bamber, Militant Managers*?:* Managerial Unionism and Industrial Relations (Aldershot: Gower, 1986), pp. 105–6.
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14 Bill Sirs, *Hard Labour* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985), p. 105.
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16 For more details see Robin Ramsey, *The Clandestine Caucus*, special issue of *Lobster* magazine (1997).
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29 *Man and Metal*, 56:8 (October 1979), pp. 230–31.
30 *Socialist Challenge*, 17 January 1980.
31 *Socialist Review*, 17 (19 Jan–16 Feb 1980), pp. 6–7.
32 *Socialist Review*, 17 (19 Jan–16 Feb 1980), pp. 6–7.
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36 *Evening Gazette*, 7 December 1979.
37 Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched*, p. 10.
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42 *Steelworkers' Banner*, 2.
43 Pryke, *Nationalised Industries*, p. 192.
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3

‘It’s got to be a people’s war’

The task of organising the strike and bringing the industry to a halt fell mainly to rank-and-file activists in local strike committees. Many had little experience of any form of strike action. None had encountered a strike like this. A cessation of the production and movement of all steel in Britain would have necessitated an army of pickets hundreds of thousands strong. This was not possible, but the unions did succeed in building an effective strike organisation that posed a serious challenge to BSC and the Conservative government. This chapter examines steelworker memories of this early period of the strike and includes their understandings and reflections of why the strike happened and some of their early picketing strategies. It reveals the scale of the challenge faced by the strikers and the demands it made of them. The chapter highlights the changes that can occur within the outlook of labour movement activists when they are engaged in struggle, and the often unexpected and ingenious responses they make to the difficulties encountered.

I

The beginning of the strike was marked with widespread picketing of BSC plants. Although a tiny number of Corby workers broke the strike, and were later expelled, the ISTC publicly claimed one hundred per cent compliance from its members,[1] something which was confirmed by the press, and BSC.[2] It was just the second day of 1980, but many pickets were already expressing their determination to stay out for the remainder of the year if needs be.[3] Within a few days, many of the larger works did not need to be picketed, such was the level of compliance. There was said to be little chance of BSC making an early move to engage the unions in fresh negotiations. All sides, it seemed, were digging in for a prolonged confrontation.

Government ministers adopted a public position of non-interference in the dispute, but were not neutral, as Keith Joseph made clear on the first

day of the strike, when he condemned the action, claiming it would cost BSC customers everywhere and result in a steel industry 'smaller than it need be otherwise'.[4] TUC General Secretary Len Murray replied that the dispute had been caused not by the unions but by a Conservative government determined to 'impose its theoretical monetarist policies on a negotiating situation'.[5] In his New Year message, Jim Callaghan condemned the 'dogmatic monetarist fanatics' within the Tory government who seemed bent on destroying British industrial capacity in coal, engineering and steel.[6] Sirs agreed, describing Joseph's call for local productivity deals as code for even more redundancies and closures in the industry.[7]

Many steelworkers would come to believe that BSC deliberately provoked the strike to weaken the ISTC, making it all the easier to cut employment in the steel industry to the bone and hamstring trade unionism generally. When asked about the rationale behind the low BSC offer, Joe McGuinness replied:

> They wanted to break our backs, they wanted to break our backs and that was just the start of it. We finished up wi' 11 per cent plus 4½ guaranteed on that bonus system. Overall, that comes in aroon 16, 2 per cent less than inflation. So why did they go through all of that with us, to finally turn roon and offer that 11 plus 4½? That was 9½ more from where it started aff. We went through all of that and went out on strike. It was about weakening us.[8]

These are memories strengthened by events that unfolded in the years after the strike – namely the disintegration of the steel industry during 1980–83 – and other defeats suffered by the trade union movement thereafter. But they also correspond with steelworker thinking as it was being expressed during the strike itself; for example, a cartoon published by the ISTC in the first week of the strike depicted Thatcher asking Bob Scholey, who was dressed like a Chicago mobster, if he and his godsons would 'take out a contract' on the miners and dockers, after he had 'dealt' with the steelworkers;[9] as early as January 1980, some steelworkers were placing their own dispute in a wider context, that of a struggle between the trade union movement and a Tory government determined to destroy their industries and their organisations. Given all of this, it is little surprise that some consider this strike to have been much more than a pay dispute:

> I don't totally believe it was about the money … I think it was about closures. The advancements in the steel industry, Monty Finniston had spent a lot of money, things were now up and they were going to make big profits, make it right for privatisation … Aye, they definitely [provoked the strike] … They've admitted it, start off with the steel strike and then on to the miners' strike.[10]

> It was nothing to do with money, it was to do with saving jobs really … They'd been preparing like they did with the miners, stockpiling steel supplies

> and stuff like that long before the strike. So it was, politically it was like taking the unions on to try and really destroy the movement. They wanted [privatisation] but nobody wanted to buy it unless it was profitable.[11]

> There was the nationalised works at Bilston. Round Oak, that got knocked down. The Patent Shaft, another private place that went too. I think that's what started the strike, I think they announced that some of these big places are going to go, and people said 'Well it's our jobs, it's our livelihoods, it's our sons' livelihoods – we've got to do something about it' … I always remember a gang of pickets came from Bilston steelworks and they stood on the weighbridge at Ductile Steels, where I worked. They explained that Bilston had had notice to close and they wanted the support of everyone working in the steel industry, because sooner or later it'll be everyone's turn … that's the way I saw it too.[12]

It is noticeable that two of these three extracts mention privatisation of the steel industry, something that was not finalised until 1988. But the long process towards this goal would begin soon after the end of the steel strike, with the creation in 1981 of the first of the 'Phoenix' companies by BSC and the private sector. In that scenario, connections between the steel strike and the Conservative government's determination to privatise the industry are traceable.[13] It is also possible that Geoff Hawkins conflated the earlier decision to shut Bilston with the strike; iron and steelmaking had ended at Bilston in April 1979. This strengthened his view that the 1980 strike had occurred because of government determination to run down the industry, and was overtly political in character, as opposed to being a simple wages dispute.

These extracts reveal an interplay between collective and individual memory. Memories of the strike's origins and its meaning have been influenced by several factors, including a belief expressed by many in 1980 itself that the Thatcher government was setting out to destroy the unions, and the swift deindustrialisation of steel which took place during 1980–83.[14] They have also been influenced by other events that occurred later during Thatcher's period of office. The memories of the steelworkers are of course individual, but with one or two exceptions they all place the strike in the context of an industry that was being deliberately sabotaged by a government determined to defeat organised labour, to leave working-class communities defenceless. They are examples of Portelli's description of the dynamic nature of memory, of how memory is not fixed but an 'active process of creation of meanings'[15]

As indicated in the previous chapter, some steelworkers rejected the arguments being made by BSC management and the government concerning the decline of the industry. The interviews also highlighted the 'big is beautiful' strategy of BSC that would sound the death knell for so many works outside the five major plants:

> A lot of plants hadn't had been invested a great deal in. Following on from the period when it was privately owned, there was a quite a lot of investment. Some people would argue that it was mistaken investment. Sir Monty Finniston adopted a significant investment campaign. Up at Hunterston for example, they built iron ore facilities. At Teesside a cinder plant went in, a pellet plant, a brand new blast furnace, which at the time was the biggest in Europe, with plans to build a second one. Unfortunately, round about that time there was a serious recession, and demand for steel basically collapsed all over the world. It hit us particularly bad. Management argued that our man hours per tonne, compared to our competitors, was woeful, and therefore there had to be a lot of rationalisation. [The union didn't accept that] … we argued that they weren't comparing apples with apples, and whereas in Germany, for example, they had a lot of contractorisation, a lot of contractors working on the job that weren't counted in the figures.[16]

Some of the themes highlighted by Ian Crichton in this extract were excavated more thoroughly in an ISTC strike newspaper, the *Steelworkers' Banner*, which was published weekly during the strike. It was produced by a team of three: ISTC research staff, Martin Upham and Len Powell, and the union's press officer, Keith Bill.[17] Upham, the union's senior research officer, was the driving force and chief contributor to the *Banner*. Crucially, Upham had gained access to other statistical sources that undermined BSC's case, and was also in contact with the Warwick academics who produced the comprehensive critique of the closure of Corby.[18] Under Upham's editorship, the *Banner* had verve, and was packed with well-researched articles and cartoons. It waged attacks on British Steel on several fronts: the pay claim; BSC's management of the industry, past and present; and the media/BSC/government-driven assumption that British steelworkers were among the least productive in Europe.

Upham's own memories of this period are that of a union leadership poorly equipped for the struggle that lay ahead:

> The union stumbled into the strike, totally unprepared, and it was quite eerie watching it from close up. All the discussions in 1979 had been about trying to maintain the fabric of the industry; there had been Corby, there had been Shotton and the rest of it. All that was going on, when suddenly out of nowhere we find ourselves on a collision course on the pay issue and not about jobs at all – or at least it didn't look like it was about jobs, and in a very short time we hurtled into a pay strike. The union was totally unprepared. There was no sense of what it was like to have a national strike. It was very far from being a militant leadership, to put it mildly, so no thought had been given to organising it. I thought we are going to have thousands of pickets all over the country – what are they going to do all day? … they'll need something to read, we need to arm them with arguments about what is going on in the industry. That was the main motivation, to put in the

> hands of the strikers themselves popularised arguments about the future of the industry.[19]

The memories again revolve around more fundamental concerns: job losses, plant closures, the future of the industry. The *Steelworkers' Banner* was a strike journal, but it was clearly designed to counter these hegemonic narratives on the causes of and solutions to the crisis within BSC. Upham's account is also notable for its critique of an ISTC leadership that had internalised the arguments of the employers. He went further, suggesting that it would not have been possible to advance the radical arguments made in the *Steelworkers' Banner* had there not been a breach in the relationship between BSC and the ISTC leaders.

> The union leadership had essentially gone along with the employers' analysis of the industry. I was appointed, probably as late as 1979, to a body called the Analytical Steelworking Party, which was a body of the OECD. For the first time that gave me access to other statistical sources, which really seemed to undermine everything that the employers were arguing about productivity. There was also Neddy, and they had an iron and steel committee, and they were producing a lot of material. [The ISTC leaders] had gone along with job losses one hundred per cent. If you go through the Dai Davies years … what they got was a commitment to an expansion of the industry, so by about 1973 the ten-year strategy for steel had been published and it promised the five big coastal plants … but this didn't deal with the issue of what was going to happen with the heritage plants. That was an obvious worry, but then Labour came in with the Beswick review that put back the dates of the closures. However, they didn't deal with the question of what would happen when the deferred dates came through, and the chickens were all coming home to roost by the late seventies. Sirs hadn't really thought about it either; he hadn't worked out what to do. In their minds, they had all accepted the arguments about productivity. It was statistical nonsense the union had swallowed. Nobody had ever stood up and said 'Wait a minute, these comparisons are all completely bogus. Where are all the ancillary workers, where are all the contractors'? It was statistical nonsense that the union followed and it took the strike for all of this to spill out. If there hadn't been a conflict situation, I wouldn't have been allowed to go for the jugular in that way. It was the breakdown in relationships between the employer and the union that actually created the space.[20]

In its first edition, the paper highlighted the corrosive impact of high inflation on steelworkers' wages, but the scope quickly widened. Ruinous managerial incompetence was detailed, the high cost of unsubsidised British coking coal was highlighted and the planned reduction in capacity to fifteen million tonnes was scrutinised. The paper concluded that both BSC and the Conservative government were deliberately stigmatising steelworkers to deflect blame

from their own incompetence and conceal the ongoing run-down of British industry:

> To cover up their own mistakes, evade their own responsibilities and avoid any public criticism, both government and BSC are trying to show that steelworkers alone are to blame for the crisis the industry is in. The British public, the media, all steelworkers and the TU movement should be made aware of this plot to undermine the industrial base of the UK economy; a ploy to shift all blame onto the shoulders of BSC's employees, their families, and steelmaking communities.[21]

The newspaper would continue in this vein, challenging managerial prerogative and offering a counter-narrative to the government/BSC/press consensus that steelworkers were to blame for the ills of the industry. Many of the suggestions and arguments it made would find their way into the ISTC's 'New Deal for Steel', which was published later in 1980 and which for the first time outlined an alternative ISTC strategy for the steel industry.[22]

Real Steel News also saw the connection between the strike and the jobs question. Although it often consisted of just two pages and lacked the *Banner's* in-depth analysis of BSC strategy and the international steel industry, in its second strike edition the bulletin argued that the strike had been provoked by the Conservative government who, it said, saw a victory on wages as a step towards 'sacking half of us'. Predicting no let up in the redundancy offensive, *Real Steel News* called for the defence of every job and every works, concluding that whatever the outcome of the strike 'the tremendous solidarity developed between us, the power and will to act quickly, must be harnessed in the fight against closures'.[23]

II

From the first week of the strike onwards, a concerted effort was made to stop the movement of steel. Several unions pledged support, with ASLEF (Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen) and the NUR (National Union of Railwaymen) stating they would not transport iron ore, imported steel or BSC products. The TGWU and GMWU (General and Municipal Workers' Union) gave similar assurances for road haulage, and the International Metalworkers' Federation ordered a halt to steel imports to Britain, declaring the British steelworkers' fight to be their fight too.[24] Much of this support would remain purely verbal, but for now steelworkers welcomed it. At Redcar, day one of the strike saw dozens of pickets stop a stream of cars from entering, creating a four-line hold up.[25] A similar scene was in evidence at Cargo Fleet, where pickets were attempting to persuade

SIMA members to respect the picket line. SIMA had pledged to do so if their executive agreed to the action, but this agreement would not be forthcoming.[26] The only plants operational on Teesside were the coke ovens at Redcar and Hartlepool, which were 'ticking over' at safety level, and the giant Redcar blast furnace, which was packed with coke and made as airtight as possible.[27] Hartlepool port was blacked by dockers from the TGWU, and activists were also said to be 'keeping a watch' on the unregistered ports of Whitby and Scarborough, where it was feared that imports might be attempted.[28]

One feature of the picketing was the involvement of workers from plants earmarked for closure or severe cuts. A fleet of Corby pickets were sent to King's Lynn and Boston to prevent the movement of steel from the local docks. Local ISTC branch secretary Robert Stone said, 'It's not for us, but for those left behind.'[29] Another hundred or so were dispatched to Grantham to picket the John Lee stockyard.[30] ISTC divisional officer George Cooper paid tribute to union members at Shotton, saying they had struck 'for a rise which they may never receive'.[31] Bilston steelworks ISTC leader Dennis Turner was the chair of the local strike committee and helped organise the activities of the flying pickets in his area.[32]

In Sheffield, the secretary of the Yorkshire Divisional Strike Committee, Ted Thorne, described the strike as solid and turned his attention to stopping the stockholders moving steel. ISTC official Keith Jones was central to the organisation of the strike in Sheffield, and nationally. He said the aim of the action was to 'cripple big business and force the government to act'.[33] Throughout South Yorkshire around 23,000 steelworkers had joined the action, and all steelmaking had stopped. The region would later be described as the best organised and most militant area throughout the strike, with an estimated 7,000 pickets available for deployment around the region.[34] Picketing of the Kent coastline took place, with the active support of the local NUM branches.[35] Most Scottish steelworkers were not due to return to work until 3 January, but around a thousand had been expected back at Ravenscraig and had not turned up. The absence of these workers, and the fact there were already picket lines in evidence at Scottish plants, did not bode well for BSC or the government.[36]

The national strike HQ was the ISTC central office in London. Each day there would be three union officials staffing the strike control room, with a full-time official from South Wales, Brian Connolly, also being dispatched to assist the national leadership. There were seven divisional offices throughout the country, staffed by between three and six organisers and officials, depending on the region. However, it was not the national leaders or the divisional officers and organisers who organised the strike. That task fell to the local strike committees. Many of these had been set up hurriedly. As

a result, they relied heavily on small networks of key activists and were often ad hoc in structure. The degree and effectiveness of local strike organisation varied, but all were faced with the same challenge: how to stop the movement of steel in their areas. Given the almost incalculable number of plants, factories, workshops and businesses connected to the steel industry, it was a logistical task probably unprecedented in British industrial history. Jones has pointed out how, in some individual towns and cities, there could be hundreds of picketing targets. He described Birmingham and the Black Country as a 'picket's nightmare, where steel seemed to come out of the ground and from the sky above'.[37] Even in South Yorkshire it was impossible to target every steel stockist or supplier. Because of this, the tactics were more of a 'hit and run'.[38] This meant it would not be possible to close the industry down fully, and that for some companies – perhaps many companies – it could be business as usual.In their participant-observation study of the strike in Rotherham, Hartley et al. noted that a strike committee had been established on 16 December and met twice before the strike began.[39] Keith Jones spoke about this:

> The ISTC organisation was on branches. So you had a workshop branch, a melting shop branch, a rolling mill branch, my dad's branch, which was Strip Mill 3 Branch, and so on. They came together once a month in a joint committee on a voluntary basis. There was the Scunthorpe one on a Sunday morning, the Rotherham one on a Saturday night, which I attended as a full-time officer. Now that became the Rotherham Strike Committee, that was the fulcrum, that was the Petrograd Soviet. That was the basis. They took it into their own hands, it was a rank-and-file movement. Don't get me wrong, I was ready, willing and eager … The Rotherham joint committee was the Rotherham Strike Committee. Then I set up a coordinating committee for the whole region, that was Scunthorpe, Stocksbridge, Rotherham. All of that became Division 3, as it was. I think we called it a strike coordinating committee. It wasn't formalised. There was the Rotherham Joint Committee, then the one we formed above that – it was totally informal. That was the one with the power. It made sense to set that up. It worked for the thirteen weeks.[40]

Mike Hull recalled the early picketing organisation and strategy. Although there were not enough pickets for every workplace connected to steel in South Yorkshire, he believed they had the numbers to stop the most important plants and works in the region:

> Originally [in the organisation of picketing] we used area – for example, people who lived in Wickersley down the road all met and picketed the plant. The bigger branches like our branch organised to go picketing away from home, or on a day basis, like to Birmingham or the docks or somewhere like that … The strategy was to stop the movement of steel – to stop it at its point of production and its point of import into Britain from abroad. And that, basically,

> was it. You didn't need anything else … We were never, ever going to get the bodies, we were never going to physically have enough [for everywhere], but we thought we had enough to cover the main places.[41]

Pete Reid recalled the initial importance of the branch organisation at Normanby, as well as the wider strike committee structure that was set up as the strike gained momentum:

> Everything was done through the branch structure. We had a small team, around a hundred plus. Our shop steward at the time was a lad called Jock Donaldson, and he pretty much made an appearance on every shift … there was an overarching Scunthorpe Strike Committee, and the way it operated, there was an old shop in Scunthorpe town centre, and you'd go in at the end of the day and put your name down on where you wanted to picket. The guy who was driving the car would get a petrol allowance for this, and the rest would pile in and off you'd go. It was small numbers, carloads. I went to Immingham Docks, and it was a case of just talking with the drivers, asking them not to move steel around, Selby, and a couple of small stockholders.[42]

John Whittingham remembered the beginning of the strike as a positive move, almost as a liberation. He also believed that the local union members and workers would need to organise and lead the strike for it to be successful:

> The strike was like a release value, with regard to all that had preceded it, the bad press and all the rest. So when it eventually did happen, at least something was determined, and people busied themselves about doing it and got involved. Everything was voluntary. The strike committee evolved from the negotiating committee, the group negotiating committee. We didn't want to be seen to be doing as we were told – i.e. it was the union bringing people out on strike. I've always worked against that notion … The extent to which everyone cooperated once the die had been cast spoke for itself. I remember, saying to Peter [Woods], 'It's got to be a people's war … we've just all got to muck in, and do it ourselves. We'll get interested parties to help.' I had no idea of the scale that it was likely to develop into.[43]

Tony Poynter recalled the organisation of picketing at Lackenby:

> The divisional office ran a strike committee for this area which involved all the works. The very senior member of the union in each workshop were on that strike committee. It met in Middlesbrough on a weekly basis. We weren't on the actual big strike committee in the region, our branch. But things happened during the strike that changed that a bit. The branches themselves organised the picketing at their own works. At the beginning, I mean there were twenty-five, thirty at our branch, we used to cover Steel House and Lackenby, and they were there from day one, and some drifted away and some more come and join. It varied, but there were some who stuck it right through from day one to the very end and who became even more and more active.[44]

Graham Ward offered some detail on strike organisation in South Wales:

> I was involved at Llanwern, part of a team that used to organise the pickets, that organised coke deliveries for braziers … I was based just outside Llanwern. That's where the group did its organising for the area. You had Ebbw Vale, Llanwern, Panteg, Guest Keen, and the two smaller works, Orb and Wyness. They used to meet in the basement room at AEU House once a week to review the situation and decided on what was to be done. I used to occasionally picket myself. I spent seven days a week there, break up for half day on the Saturday … I didn't find anybody who were against us as such, any criticism of what we were doing … people were very sympathetic.[45]

Malcolm Bourton, an Executive Council member also from South Wales, had opposed the strike on the grounds that the negotiating process could have continued, but when the action began he put his best efforts towards winning it:

> My involvement in it was total, from 6 o'clock in the morning to 10 o'clock at night. Virtually every day, for three months, I was somewhere either locally or national. It was a very difficult time. We'd be organising every day, picket rotas, going out with the pickets every morning, you used to go out early in the morning. We had a cat-and-mouse game with the police. They'd be looking at us from the side of a mountain with binoculars and I'd be looking at them from the bus. We used to set them off; it was comical in a way. The local people were really great with us, fair play. They gave credit to people, people with money problems, they gave us money. We had quite a thriving strike fund going. We were paying people to go out picketing and this and that and feeding them and everything. So, yes, from that point of view, it was an experience, one that drew us together. There was a mixed reaction in the works, from the other unions. There was always this ISTC and us kind of thing. But by and large a lot of them did a lot of hard work.[46]

In Scotland, activists in the main works started to build their organisation, following the strike call in December. Peter Phillips and Russell Clearie helped organise the Clydebridge and Hallside workers, the latter of which was a Beswick plant and had received its closure notice in December 1979.[47]

> I was a flying picket. I was working at Clydebridge, but we organised it from the Miners' Welfare at Hallside. I was on the Miners' Welfare committee. We used the room there, and I had the keys, so I worked out of there as a flying picket. One of the things we did [to stop steel being moved], we would chase lorries on to the M74 – A74 as it was then. There was a big hill, and we'd get in front of them and slow right down. They couldnae get into gear, so they'd have to stop. Then we'd take off and get in front of another one, and stop it.[48]

> We had the old labour rooms, down near Richmond Park, near the laundry place. Motherwell was the centre, and that's where the money went. We picketed all over. I had what we called a hit list, people you could cry on, the flying pickets. After we had done the manning, I could say 'Right, you've got two days aff, or you've got three days.' We would still turn up every day, but we rotated the pickets. The hit list was flying pickets, who you could communicate with to stop lorries. We sent pickets fae the tip of Scotland to the tip of England. We sent seven down in two carloads to Lands End. They done it in ten and a half hours, and then you were talking no motorway that you've got now. Once you went doon there, different ones in Devon, you have Plymouth, all the ports, you had one, about twenty miles from St Ives, that was the big place.[49]

As Clearie pointed out, the national headquarters for organising strike activity in Scotland was in Motherwell. Initially, this was based in the Glen Cafe in town before a room was secured at the local town hall. There was regular communication between all the various local strike committees, and this centre in Motherwell. Initially, much of the picketing of the Scottish works was local. Pickets were placed at the main works, and at Hunterston.[50] Joe McGuinness recalled support from other trade unionists:

> The gates at Clydesdale and Imperial were covered, there was never any danger of people going into work, we always had people there to make sure. Then, we started moving out to stockholders. There were two or three stockholders on Unthank Road, but we got an easy time of it for a while. We had an agreement with Eddie Dolan of APEX, who was their full-time officer. The guys who were there on the works gate were APEX members and we asked Eddie if he would stop his men from opening that to let lorries through with steel either way. So that was an agreement, so we didn't have much hassle for a while.[51]

Mass picketing and flying picketing would become hallmarks of the steel strike. This may seem difficult to explain, given the ISTC's right-wing nature and its reputation for meekness. However, as we have already noted, the union had contradictory features; it was led by cliques of right-wingers who were opposed to militancy, but at local level contained activists, some of whom were far more politically radical, who felt that a fight back was necessary. The restrictions posed by the union structures, which made solidarity action difficult to organise, had been blown away because of a national strike being declared. It was now easier for these rank-and-file activists to organise across branches. As both Keith Jones and Mike Hull pointed out, in this scenario, joint branch committees became important and were often the basis of local strike organisation. In the early part of the strike, there was real enthusiasm for the action, which goes some way to explaining why the picketing was so widespread. The cuts had been ongoing

for years; a further 52,000 redundancies were in the offing, and a zero pay rise had been offered at a time when inflation was around 17 per cent. It had been this anger and discontent from the branches and the areas that had pushed the Executive Council into declaring a strike. Hull also made a crucial point when he noted how 'The paid organisation either walked or were pushed to the side … it was a case of "This is a workers' strike, keep your nose out".' In other words, it was the rank-and-file activists who led the action. In most regions, full-time officials did not play the leading role. Keith Jones was an exception, but he remembered the other full-timers in South Yorkshire disappearing into a hut and rarely being seen afterwards. A similar picture is painted in many other interviews. In most instances, the memories revolve around local committees, branch committees, rank-and-file committees.

The decision to engage in large-scale picketing and flying picketing was a new tactic for steel industry activists, but it was one that had gained prominence within the labour movement throughout the 1970s. It had been witnessed during a strike of clothing workers in Leeds in 1970, but became synonymous with the national miners' strike two years later. While there had been some limited use of flying pickets during unofficial miners' strikes in Yorkshire in the 1950s,[52] it was the 1972 action, the first national miners' strike in forty-six years, that brought the tactic to the attention of trade unionists all over Britain. Kelliher noted the effectiveness of flying picketing, and concluded it was this that led to the Right conflating it with intimidation and even violence, preparing the ground for the state repression of trade unionism later on.[53] Allen estimated that the miners' strike witnessed 24-hour secondary picketing at around five hundred sites, involving 40,000 pickets each day.[54] Some of these engagements, like Saltley Gate and Longannet, have a cherished place in the popular memory of labour movement activists. These memories, which were strengthened by the eventual victory of the miners, inspired many other trade unionists. Later that same year, building workers engaged in their first national strike since 1926, and also used the flying picket tactic. In adopting flying picketing in 1980, the steel union activists in the various joint branch committees were displaying their appreciation of a tactic that had proven to be successful and fitted the precise needs of their own struggle perfectly.

III

On Monday 7 January 1980 a march was held in Motherwell, attended by several hundred, and headed by the STUC and six Labour MPs, including the Monklands MP and future Labour Party leader, John Smith. At the

protest, STUC General Secretary Jimmy Milne described the strike as a 'sink or swim' situation for all trade unionists across Britain:

> This is not just a battle for the steelworkers … if the steelworkers go down, it'll have an impact on every other settlement in the country. Without a steel industry there will be no shipbuilding or motor car industries and Britain will be reduced to importing steel to survive.[55]

On the same day of this march, pickets targeted Steel Stockholders in Whitegates, a firm which employed around a hundred people and whose managing director was the Motherwell FC Chair, William Samuel. The press reported 'ugly scenes' and claimed the road was strewn with broken bottles and planks spiked with three-inch nails, to prevent lorries entering or exiting the plant. There were reportedly a hundred pickets outside the plant, and about fifty police. Samuel eventually agreed to a meeting with the pickets and suspended all movement of steel for a month, saying later 'We did not make any effort to breach the pickets with BSC work, but only did our normal contract work in line with ISTC policy.'[56] It was later alleged that the agreement permitted Steel Stockholders to move 'urgent orders' of steel,[57] a dispensation that led to criticism being levelled at Tommy Brennan, who was accused of granting this independently of the strike committee.[58]

The following day the picketing shifted to Watson Towers, which was part owned by Bobby Watson, who, like Samuel, was a well-known figure in Scottish football, being a former Rangers and Motherwell footballer and the current Airdrie manager. Assisted by a considerable police presence, Watson drove through the picket lines and was jeered by pickets, who shouted that he would be blacked in the future and get the 'red card'.[59] Joe McGuinness recalled Brennan also allowing steel to be moved from Watsons on the proviso it wouldn't be used until after the strike, another dispensation that upset several Clydesdale pickets to the point that they ended their involvement in strike activity.[60] The British Leyland truck plant at Bathgate and the Talbot plant at Linwood were also picketed, and pickets were in place at Caterpillar in Uddingston, Honeywell electrics in Motherwell and the Hoover factory in Cambuslang.[61] At Grangemouth, over forty wagons of steel were stranded, following the refusal of dockers and TGWU lorry drivers to handle it.[62]

As some of these reports and comments from Scotland indicate, an early target for pickets everywhere was the steel stockholders. These were private companies which acted as a link between the steelworks and industry and supplied around 40 per cent of the market.[63] On day one of the strike, John McTaggart, Chair of the Clyde area joint committee, pledged to 'picket the lot … they will gain no advantage'.[64] Bill Sirs set out the position of the

union nationally, commenting in early January 'They are out to make a killing but we will kill them.'[65] Behind the remarks of both men was the belief that these companies had been amassing steel supplies throughout December, in the expectation of large profits once the strike began, potentially weakening the strike. The director of the National Association of Steel Stockholders, Richard Rawlins, refuted this, commenting, 'This is not our dispute … it is not true that we got in huge stockpiles before Christmas.'[66] But in early December Rawlins had stated that, in the event of a strike, his members would be able to supply *more* steel to British industry.[67] Moreover, a confidential intergovernmental report pointed out that 'considerable supplies' of steel were held by stockholders, and that there had been 'heavy last-minute movement' from them to steel users, which had benefited industry.[68]

This early pressure on the stockholders was maintained across the country. At its first meeting following the strike's commencement, the regional strike committee in the north-east of England targeted the Robert Frazer depot in Hebburn, which was the biggest steel stockholder in the region. In South Wales, the ISTC Divisional Organiser John Carberry stated that 'We are picketing all steel stockholders in the area – M. E. Rees, Matthews Steel and Gowerton Iron and Steel.'[69] In Middlesbrough, the three main stockholders were Hadfield and Partners (not to be confused with the large private steelworks in Sheffield), W. G. Readman, and Parson & Crosland. All were picketed and became the scene for clashes between police and strikers. One week into the dispute, directors at Hadfield called the police to their Skippers Lane plant, claiming that pickets had roped the factory gates together to prevent the movement of lorries out of the plant. There were around fifty pickets at Readman's, with seven being arrested on 15 January and charged with obstruction of the highway and breach of the peace.[70] These were the first arrests in the region. One picket recalled some of the flashpoints at Readman's and the adoption of innovative picketing.

> At Readman's, this manager came out and said, 'You're alright, I'll back you, lads.' And that picket was on from half-past eight in the morning till five o'clock at night. Then we got a phone call from the guy in the switch-box at the nearby level crossing to say, 'The bastard's bringing them out at night.' So we went down, in the van … at 5 o'clock or 6 o'clock, and we stood off to one side, and this lorry started coming out, so we stood in front of it: 'No, you're not coming out, mate, sorry – there's a strike on here. Your manager said he's going to back us and not send anything out.' So he went back in and the manager wasn't there of course, you see, so we stopped them that night, stayed overnight. Next day, nothing come out, so we went back again on the evening, and [a lorry driver come up and says] 'He's coming out.' 'No, he's not. We'll stand in front of it. He's going to have to knock us over', you

> know. Next thing I know, a vanload of police turned up, including a gentleman called Inspector Roberts … and he come up and said, 'You can't do this … you'll get arrested.' Six lads got arrested. The strange thing was, these six lads they got charged for obstructing a public highway. It got thrown out of court. Because where they were stood was private land. It wasn't actually on the highway.[71]

According to one press report, Readman's was the scene of 'around the clock picketing'.[72] It was also reported that a lorry which had picked up a load of steel from the company depot at Cochrane's Wharf was trailed by pickets to Thirsk, ten miles away. There, the driver was persuaded to return the load to Readman's.[73] Relations between pickets and managers at Parson & Crosland were initially amicable, although that did eventually change:

> I spent most of the strike at Parson & Crosland and had a reasonable relationship with the management. The manager at the time understood our plight. The union official there, he supported us, he had a son working in the steel industry. And we had a policeman there and he had two sons working for the steel industry and he used to picket the cars. People stop for policemen. We used to go round the cabs [to talk to the drivers], he said, as long as you act in a good behaviour, no shouting and bawling at drivers. The union chap in there used to say, 'Oh I think we're going to take some stuff out tonight', then there was a mass picket. Sometimes after the mass picket the relationship was strained. It was after one mass picket we stopped two lorries. Next day, the director or manager of the set-up, he said, 'I've let you come in, get a coffee, get tea, been polite … not going to anymore, it's my business … our business, it's our jobs. I draw a line there.' Later on the foreman, the union official, walked out. He had a job with the stockholders, but came and sat on our picket line. I met lots of people from the works; we knew where people were coming from. We used to get the odd hot-head we had to quieten down. 'No', I says, 'it isn't us and them, it's their livelihoods' … 'Yes, we want to picket and stop people going in.' And lorries did turn round and go out and wouldn't get anything off.[74]

One characteristic of these two accounts is the almost benign role accorded to the local police. Inspector Roberts makes an appearance in other Teesside oral histories, and is recalled as a fair-minded officer with family connections to the steel industry. This will be examined in Chapter 4, but suffice to note here that many – but by no means all – steelworkers remember local police officers as being less aggressive and violent compared to those drafted in from elsewhere later in the strike. Hensby's recollections are also complex in other respects. There is awareness of the difficulties Parson & Crosland managers and employees faced because of the picketing. He doesn't regret the picketing and points out how the union steward in the works also joined the strike. But he does display empathy with those who worked in that

stockholder's yard and an understanding of their position. One Sheffield picket made similar reflections regarding the lorry drivers. He revealed how his attitude during the strike was harder, but that now, over thirty years later, he could appreciate the dilemmas they faced:

> Some would turn back very reluctantly. I've seen people in tears. I saw a driver in tears. It was a choice that if he didn't go in, he'd lose his job. So it was a desperate situation. I mean I didn't think of it in those terms at the time because I suppose I had a much tougher view of things, a lot less sympathy for people, but I think I'm a bit more understanding of the position that they actually found themselves in.[75]

By 7 January 1980 the strike had spread to other unions within BSC. The TGWU and GMWU (General and Municipal Workers' Union) members joined the action, with Dave Basnett, the General Secretary of GMWU, describing the situation now as 'potentially the most dangerous dispute in the post-war period'.[76] Two days later, representatives from the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) which organised around 16,000 of the 25,000 craft workers, also rejected the government pay deal and officially joined the strike.[77] In fact, most of its members had already joined on 2 January and had been refusing to cross picket lines since then. The remaining seven craft unions followed suit. SIMA was now the only union in the steel industry not on strike. Mick Hawker recalled the strike organisation at Stocksbridge:

> There was an old Miners' Welfare just up from one of the main gates, because there used to be a pit at Stocksbridge that had closed not long after the Second World War and nationalisation. They set up the strike headquarters at the Miners' Welfare. I think there were meetings, there were certainly meetings, but I think there'd probably be an executive group, and very quickly it was determined that we were going to be picketing, and not just our own place, we'd be going to other places. But the hub of it was the Miners' Welfare. There were people in and out there every day. There were food parcels being organised and distributed, probably the latter end of the strike more so. There'd be meetings in … I can remember going to a meeting in the Friendship Pub which was further up the road. Stocksbridge was very active in terms of the picketing and demonstrations. We sent people down to London.[78]

Another key figure at Stocksbridge was Brian Molyneux, who, as we noted in the previous chapter, had been sacked a few weeks before the strike began. The campaign to reinstate Molyneux was suspended at the start of the national strike, but he remained prominent within the Stocksbridge and Tinsley Park Strike Committee throughout the dispute. In an interview in the first week of the strike, Molyneux set out the position of the South Yorkshire Divisional Strike Committee, that the strike would only be settled

on the basis of a 20 per cent index-linked pay rise, with no strings and no redundancies.[79] Hawker, for his part, became heavily involved in strike activity, and recalled some of his experiences in London and Germany, attempting to publicise and build support for the strike. It was something he recalled as inspiring and humbling – especially when the past record of the ISTC was factored in:

> In London, we had public meetings, going round various workplaces, asking for support, financial support. I attended, I think it was either the electricians or the engineering branches of Fleet Street, and they put on a pound a week levy. Considering they had thousands of members, that was a very important thing for us. We got great support off them. I can remember going to the Westminster Tower to meet, I think it was an electrician. The first thing he said to me, 'I don't want you to say anything because I don't want any response from you. In the past, when we were on strike, you did nothing.' I said to him, 'I agree. I'll hold my hands up to that, we've been crap at supporting people.' They had a collection or a levy, but supported us. He was right in saying what he said. He spoke about going to what I think was the Barbican and the site convenor … there was actually a sign up on the wall saying I think any new starters see Big Jim McKinley. So we explained who we were, and he just went round the canteen collecting money for us. We came away from that with a fair amount of money. Through the Socialist Worker organisation in Germany, we got invited over. I can remember speaking at a meeting and I can't remember where it was, I think it might have been Hanover where the audience was German and Turkish and Greek. So what we said was then translated into the different languages, and we got support from them, financial support. It was fantastic.[80]

Ian Stewart and Don Readman recalled that their branch held two meetings per week, one at Dormanstown, for those employed in the BSC plant, and one for those employed at the Britannia Works, which was owned by Redpath Dorman Long (RBL), a subsidiary of BSC.

> We were part of the North East Coast Semi-Craft Committee and had regular meetings down at the old AEU offices on Borough Road. As an organisation, it was something new to us. It is surprising what you can do when you start to get involved. We had about six hundred members and we used to have two meetings each week. We had meetings on a Monday morning down at the British Steel club down at Dormanstown that was for all the workers in sort of the British Steel area, and then we had another meeting on a Friday afternoon in the old Labour club in Middlesbrough for people who used to work in RDL, which was Britannia Works, Stockton, the old foundry down near where the Riverside Stadium is now. The meetings, they were always full. It became a sort of social gathering, and people used to come along and see what everyone had been up to and that sort of thing.[81]

Readman also picketed at Stanton and Staveley, the BSC ironworks in Derbyshire, where a small number of GMWU production workers were continuing to work on the grounds that they had a separate wage agreement with BSC. The rates were almost identical, but the other problem was these workers were carrying out work normally done by 150 striking NUB members.[82] By this stage the NUGMW was officially involved in the strike, but hadn't addressed the situation at the works. The ISTC and NUB eventually acted, and at a joint meeting held on 16 January 1980 they pledged to organise a mass picket, which would include a coachload of strikers from each division.[83] Over six hundred attended this picket, which was held five days later. The picket was a success, and the works was forced to close. Don Readman did the 280-mile round trip to take part in this picket, but in keeping with the jokey tone he adopted during much of his interview, played it down, preferring to offer a light-hearted anecdote in the place of memories about the actual picketing.

> We did the Malleable at Stockton. And then we did one where we had hired a minibus and took a gang of lads down to Derbyshire to Stanton and Staveley pipe place down there to try to get them to support the strike. I had an apron that had bikini bottoms printed. The police officer said 'Do you have to wear that?' I said, 'Well, it's just a bit of a joke, isn't it, having a bit of fun.' He wasn't too pleased about it.[84]

Two meetings were held between BSC and the unions during the first week of the strike, but these were unsuccessful. On 4 January, the corporation offered 8 per cent on the basic pay, plus what seemed to be a 4 per cent productivity bonus, but this was rejected. The strike coordinating committee indicated at a joint executive meeting that it would accept 8 per cent on the basic plus 5 per cent from a value-added bonus scheme. Sirs described this as enough for a return to work and a continuation of negotiations.[85] This much was lower than the 20 per cent demanded by strike committees around the country as an acceptable price for settling the dispute. It suggested the gap between BSC and the union leaders was narrow, but in an article published soon after, Sirs highlighted the unacceptable strings that had been attached to the BSC offer: these included the introduction of more 'lump' freelance labour and a further 12,000 redundancies.[86] Local initiatives were also being mounted, some of which revealed BSC's true intentions for the industry. On 7 January, BSC Teesside Managing Director Derek Saul unveiled a proposal of 6 per cent on the basic plus 11 per cent from a 'locally negotiated element'. Saul's proposals made clear that 10 per cent of this 11 per cent locally negotiated portion would be financed from closures and redundancies.[87]

IV

The government met on 10 January 1980 to discuss the dispute. Ministers recognised the willingness of the workers to fight, conceding that while they would get no strike pay and could quickly become impoverished, steelworkers 'had a cause' and could stay out longer than industry could withstand steel shortages. Concerns were expressed that the private sector of the industry would be affected. Metal Box, the major company in the canning industry and employer of around 34,000 workers nationally,[88] was believed to have only four weeks' stock for food and drink cans, and less than two weeks' supply of the 16 ounce tins. It was predicted that British Leyland would be in difficulties if the strike lasted several weeks. Fears were expressed concerning the possible spread of the strike into the South Wales coalfield. The government also noted the implications of the recent Law Lords ruling in the Express Ltd v McShane case. This was a ruling that a dispute between National Union of Journalists members and local newspaper proprietors could be extended to include Press Association journalists who provided copy for those newspapers.[89] The government believed that the ruling had effectively made secondary industrial action immune from civil law action. The meeting concluded by noting 'the long-term credibility of the government's economic policies was at stake and it could not afford to buy off a strike'.[90]

This discussion highlighted three themes: the degree to which the wider trade union movement was prepared to support the steelworkers; the role of the private sector within the strike; and the attitude and response of the state towards the strike. These were questions that would eventually decide the strike, but at this stage that outcome was impossible to predict. The strike was now moving into its third week. From the union perspective, there were grounds for optimism. Their ability to organise and sustain a national strike had been doubted in the run-up to January. But the strike showed no signs of weakening. Many workers had been drawn into industrial action for the first time in their lives. Not all had agreed with the action, but at this stage the focus seemed to be more on achieving a settlement that would make it worthwhile.

Secondary action seemed critical. As Tony Cook, in his PR role, commented at the time, the steelworkers 'seemed to have been cast in the role of gladiator fighting the lion with our bare hands'.[91] Active industrial support was proving difficult to secure. The Cabinet meeting on 10 January had noted NUM leader Joe Gormley's opposition to a miners' strike on the issue of BSC cuts. Gormley, later praised by Sirs as a 'sincere and practical man … a tower of strength during our strike',[92] was subsequently alleged to be one of twenty-three senior trade unionists who regularly provided sensitive

information on union activities and activists to a secret industrial section of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch.[93] He publicly declared his position on the same day of that Cabinet meeting, though the government knew beforehand. Gormley's comments came at a meeting with South Wales NUM delegates in London, held to discuss the looming crisis. The dangers posed to the Welsh economy by the run-down in the steel industry seemed catastrophic. A confidential BSC report admitted that the planned cuts in South Wales were on a scale 'never encountered before in a relatively small geographical area'.[94] A study prepared by the four South Wales county councils stated that the region had suffered 53,000 redundancies during 1977–79, and that the proposed cuts at Llanwern and Port Talbot would raise unemployment levels from 57,700 to a predicted 97,800.[95] A call had already been made by the Wales TUC for a general strike in Wales to begin on 21 January, but this required the approval of the national trade union leaderships in London. Gormley's opposition was therefore crucial. 'They did not ask us to call a national strike', he pointed out, in reference to the steelworkers, 'and if they did I would have been forced to have told them it was unconstitutional.'[96]

Gormley wasn't the only national trade union leader opposed to strike action. On 15 January, it was reported that the WTUC had been forced to abandon its plan for a general strike following pressure from the TUC. This had included the leadership of the ISTC and the other steel unions; they considered the planned general strike to be 'distraction' from their negotiations with BSC. This point was put forcibly to the WTUC at a meeting of the TUC nationalised industries committee, and not surprisingly led to a change in plans. Rather than a general strike, there would be a one-day stoppage of Welsh miners and steelworkers on 28 January, with the general strike now postponed to 10 March.

Reflecting on some of these events, South Wales ISTC official John Foley made it clear that, although he ended up playing a very active role in the strike, he hadn't supported it and considered it to have been a waste of time. In this respect, his views chime with those of other Welsh steelworkers or ISTC officials who were interviewed as part of the British Library 'Lives in Steel' project. This may seem difficult to understand. South Wales was the region most threatened by the cuts, and in the years that followed the strike it suffered badly from high unemployment as the coal and steel industries contracted. The NUM South Wales Administration Officer Don Haywood described the situation at the time as 'the biggest issue Wales has ever faced'. Plaid Cymru referred to it in similar language, considering the issues raised by the strike to be the most serious since the 1930s.[97] The reason for this negative memory about the strike may be that, because both Llanwern and Port Talbot survived in the 1980s–1990s, the cuts that took place were

reconsidered and later seen as being for the best. This certainly seems to be the way that some in the ISTC in South Wales would eventually view this period. But it may also have been because, in 1980 itself, the strike was being fought on the wrong issue, for the wrong reasons, and that this was a source of frustration for Welsh steelworkers and trade unionists:

> My reading, my reaction, was what the hell have we got ourselves into? We didn't want it [a strike on pay] in South Wales … if anything we wanted a dispute over jobs, but you know it was over money. We were told by our people from other areas in the UK that it's got to be about money because they couldn't get their guys to go and fight for jobs in South Wales.[98]

Attitudes seemed to be hardening. In a change of tone, Bill Sirs made a speech in Middlesbrough on 11 January and stated that the ISTC would now not accept anything less than a 20 per cent pay rise.[99] On 12 January, over a thousand steelworkers from Rotherham, Corby, Sheffield and Shotton converged on Birmingham to picket Keith Joseph, who was due in the city to meet a group of West Midland TUC leaders. They dished out a barracking that left the Secretary of State shaken and he was visibly emotional during a TV interview broadcast later that evening, displaying exasperation at the unwillingness of steelworkers to accept his arguments. Among the Birmingham pickets was Corby ISTC member and Labour councillor Karen Locker, who commented 'What we're facing is part of the Tory strategy to take on the working-class movement … we've lost enough jobs, they've pushed us so far now we've got to fight and we've got to win.'[100]

Pressure was building, and throughout the country strike leaders were examining ways of intensifying it further. In mid-January, the strike committee in Scotland met and decided that all steel movement throughout, and into the country, had to be stopped. It was a gargantuan logistical task, as Tommy Brennan pointed out:

> Scotland had the biggest area, four hundred miles from Carlisle to John O'Groats, but the coastline is much longer, and we had to cover the main ports. The main ports for bringing steel in were Leith and Aberdeen, with the oil fields and the pipelines, Marylands One and Two. We had pickets at Dundee, another big port, and we had pickets in Wick.[101]

Plans were drawn up, and it was decided to place pickets at all the ports referred to by Brennan. Aberdeen was a place of particular interest, and in addition to the port, the stockholders' yards which supplied the multibillion-pound North Sea oil and gas industry were also targeted: 'If we can stop North Sea development significantly, it will make people down south think again about their attitude towards this strike.'[102] Pat Shevlin argued that the disruption of just one shipment of steel out to the rigs would cost thousands

of pounds per hour in lost drilling time.[103] It was also reported that shop stewards at Nigg, on the Cromarty Firth, and Ardersier, near Inverness, had agreed that they would not handle any new steel in the yards.

On 21 January, the first pickets were dispatched to the north. Given the distances involved – Wick is 270 miles from Motherwell, and Aberdeen and Dundee are 150 and 85 miles respectively – and the less developed nature of the road network in north-eastern Scotland at the time – it was decided to send groups of core pickets, who would remain in place permanently, to be supplemented on a weekly basis by temporary pickets. Initially, it was suggested that it would be single men who would remain away, while married men did one week in three on the road, and two at home.[104] As it was much further away, the picket in Wick was wholly permanent and lasted the duration of the strike. The Wick strikers were placed in a guest house run by a Mrs Baxter, but for those who were stationed in Aberdeen, living conditions were a bit more basic:

> A coachload of us went up. We were in the first load. I was a married man with four weans, but I stayed there for six weeks. We were in the seamen's mission, fourteen of us in a room this size [a small meeting room in the Jimmy Brandon Learning Centre, Motherwell]. I had the bag of money to pay them. They got £1 a day.[105]

Tommy Brennan helped organise the Aberdeen picket and explained why so many were in the same room in the seamen's mission and in another, larger building used by the pickets. In getting these places cleaned up and ready for living in, he also allocated duties to the pickets along the lines of their religion, something which chimes with other works that have highlighted its significance within heavy industrial workplaces in Scotland.[106]

> When we got there, the boy said to me, 'Where's the boilermaker's convenor?', and I said he would be up with the next batch, next week. He said, 'We only have digs for the boilermakers!' So there we were, in Aberdeen, no digs, middle of January. Anyway, the Chairman of the Trades Council, Ron Webster, told us that they had a building we could use, where they had stuff stored. So I got the guys together, and told them 'Here's the situation. Our accommodation has been let down, but Ron has offered this building across the road. But it's an old building, used only for storing furniture. Two groups. From here to the left, you're over to the building. I want it cleaned up and cleaned out. Make it fit for habitation. The rest of you, here you go: the Catholics, go to the chapel house; the Protestants, the church – the Protestant church; the Masons, down to the Masonic Hall. Anyone not in those categories, tag onto one of them. The objective is mattresses, blankets, pillows, cooking utensils.' Away they went. The result was twenty-nine mattresses, sixty blankets, eighty pillows, various cooking utensils. We put fifteen mattresses together on one floor, fourteen together on the next, and grabbed the blankets. A further

> arrangement was made with the seamen's mission for eight pickets, although in the end far more used the room. The following morning we got a minibus and started to put the pickets out.[107]

The success or failure of the strike hinged on strikers' ability to halt the movement of steel, or at least slow it to the point where industry suffered. This created tension on the picket lines between pickets and those who were either attempting to work, or supply those who wanted to work. Bamber argued that managers were put in a 'difficult position' during the strike, with many choosing to continue working to maintain the integrity of the plant 'otherwise there would be no jobs for anyone to come back to'.[108] Ian Crichton recalled less lofty motivations and a breakdown in relations between the ISTC and SIMA:

> There was another organisation that represented more senior management, some who could have been represented by us, and they went to work. That was SIMA, and they were driving past us every day. I had a bit of a reputation in the sense that I believed in the power of persuasion rather than putting my catapult ball-bearing through somebody's window. I found that the persuasion worked better than the threats … On occasion it did get quite nasty, out of frustration more than anything else. With SIMA, some of them didn't have the common sense to say the right thing. When they wound the window down, they'd say 'What's the latest offer? Oh we are up to 11 per cent. Oh. you can't accept that', and then drive through.[109]

V

The strike was now in its fourth week. It was solid and seemed to be enduring. Throughout Britain, many trade unionists who had never been involved in industrial action before were learning quickly. In the face of some serious logistical challenges, they were proving themselves to be capable of organising and sustaining the biggest strike the country had seen in decades. There was no danger of strikebreaking at the main BSC works. Drawing on the lessons of previous disputes, activists were also developing mobile picketing organisations that targeted both the production and movement of steel more widely. The industry was huge and fragmented. It stretched the length and breadth of Britain and ranged from major steelworks with thousands of employees to tiny workshops with handfuls. It included docks, ports and wharves, large and small. It was an industry that could not be stopped completely, but activists hoped they could create enough disruption to force both BSC and the Conservative government to concede a new and radically different settlement. A successful outcome depended on this, but the strike had yet to generate such power. However, steelworkers were now

preparing to play the card they felt would achieve their aims. This move was described by some as the 'nuclear option' – the involvement of the private sector steel plants in the strike, and a total shutdown of the British steel industry. It would be a move that would open a legal minefield, influence future labour law and reveal both the deep reservoir of solidarity that existed between all steelworkers, as well as the cracks and divisions within the workforces over the continuation of the strike.

Notes

1 Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched*, p. 139.
2 See, for example, *The Times* and the *Guardian* for 3 January 1980.
3 *Evening Gazette*, 3 January 1980.
4 *The Times*, 3 January 1980.
5 *Guardian*, 3 January 1980.
6 *The Times*, 31 December 1979.
7 *Guardian*, 2 January 1980.
8 Interview, Joe McGuinness.
9 *Steelworkers' Banner*, 1.
10 Interview, Ray Hensby, 22 May 2014.
11 Interview, Don Readman.
12 Interview, Geoff Hawkins, 10 November 2016.
13 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, p. 155.
14 Hudson and Sadler, *The International Steel Industry*, p. 65.
15 Allesandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different' in *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 52.
16 Interview, Ian Crichton.
17 Interview, Martin Upham, 14 August 2015.
18 Interview, Martin Upham.
19 Interview, Martin Upham.
20 Interview, Martin Upham. The OECD is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 'Neddy' was a reference to the National Economic Development Council.
21 *Steelworkers' Banner*, 1. For more on this see Charlie McGuire, 'Going for the Jugular: The *Steelworkers' Banner* and the 1980 National Steelworkers' Strike in Britain', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 38 (2017).
22 ISTC, *New Deal for Steel* (London: ISTC, 1980).
23 *Real Steel News*, strike edition 2, 1980.
24 MRC, ISTC executive meeting minutes, 24 January 1980.
25 *Northern Echo*, 3 January 1980.
26 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, p. 124.
27 *Evening Gazette*, 2 January 1980.
28 *Northern Echo*, 3 January 1980.
29 *Socialist Challenge*, 10 January 1980.

30 *Workers Action*, 19 January 1980.
31 *Guardian*, 3 January 1980.
32 Gavin Campbell, 'In the Shadow of Elisabeth: A History of the Battle for Bilston Iron and Steelworks, *c.*1967–1980' (PhD thesis, University of Wolverhampton, 2020). pp. 393–95.
33 *Workers Action*, 19 January 1980.
34 *The Times*, 3 January 1980.
35 Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 192.
36 *The Times*, 3 January 1980.
37 Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 170.
38 Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 170.
39 Hartley, Kelly and Nicholson, *Steel Strike*, p. 33.
40 Interview, Keith Jones.
41 Interview, Keith Jones.
42 Interview, Pete Reid, 3 December 2021.
43 Interview, John Whittingham, 1 May 2014.
44 Interview, Tony Poynter .
45 Graham Ward, interviewed by Alan Dein, April 1992, 'Lives in Steel', reference C532/064/01–03 © The British Library.
46 Malcolm Bourton, interviewed by Alan Dein, March 1992, 'Lives in Steel', reference C532/076/01–02 © The British Library.
47 Pryke, *Nationalised Industries*, p. 206.
48 Interview, Peter Phillips.
49 Interview, Russell Clearie.
50 *Evening Times*, 3 January 1980.
51 Interview, Joe McGuinness. APEX was the Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff.
52 Victor L. Allen, *The Militancy of the Miners* (Shipley: Moor Press, 1981), p. 191.
53 Diarmaid Kelliher, 'Class Struggle and Spatial Politics of Violence: The Picket Line in 1970s Britain', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 46:1 (2021), p. 16.
54 Allen, *Militancy of the Miners*, p. 200.
55 *Motherwell Times*, 11 January 1980.
56 *Glasgow Herald*, 10 January 1980.
57 *Glasgow Herald*, 12 January 1980.
58 *Socialist Press*, 30 January 1980.
59 *Glasgow Herald*, 11 January 1980.
60 Interview, Joe McGuinness.
61 *Guardian*, 15 January 1980.
62 *Glasgow Herald*, 8 January 1980.
63 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, p. 121.
64 *Glasgow Herald*, 3 January 1980.
65 *Guardian*, 4 January 1980.
66 *The Times*, 10 January 1980.
67 *Financial Times*, 10 December 1979 (italics added).

68 National Archives Kew (hereafter NA), CAB 28/167/ 1, 2nd Report of the Interdepartmental Contingency Group, 10 January 1980.
69 *Workers Action*, 12 January 1980.
70 *Evening Gazette*, 16 January 1980.
71 Interview, Paul O'Neill.
72 *Northern Echo*, 24 January 1980.
73 *Northern Echo*, 24 January 1980.
74 Interview, Ray Hensby.
75 Interview, Mick Hawker.
76 *The Times*, 8 January 1980.
77 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, p. 124.
78 Interview, Mick Hawker.
79 *Socialist Challenge*, 10 January 1980.
80 Interview, Mick Hawker.
81 Interview, Ian Stewart.
82 *Workers Action*, 26 January 1980.
83 MRC, minutes of a special meeting of the executives of the ISTC and NUB, 16 January 1980.
84 Interview, Don Readman.
85 MRC, minutes of a special meeting of the executives of the ISTC and NUB, 7–8 January 1980.
86 *Evening Gazette*, 14 January 1980.
87 *Evening Gazette*, 10 January 1980.
88 *The Times*, 5 February 1980.
89 Express Newspapers Ltd v McShane: HL 1980. https://swarb.co.uk/express-newspapers-ltd-v-mcshane-hl-1980/#:~:text=There%20had%20been%20a%20dispute,taken%20against%20the%20local%20newspapers [accessed 16 February 2023].
90 NA, CAB 128/67/1, 'Conclusions of a Cabinet Meeting', 10 January 1980.
91 *Evening Gazette*, 7 January 1980.
92 Sirs, *Hard Labour*, pp. 3–4.
93 See BBC TV, *True Spies*, episode 1: 'Subversive My Arse' (27 October 2002), 46 – 58 mins, on Vimeo. https://vimeo.com/159535823 [accessed 16 February 2023].
94 Joe England, *Wales TUC, 1974–2004: Devolution and Industrial Politics* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2004), p. 48.
95 Standing Conference on Regional Policy in South Wales, 'South Wales and the 1980 Steel Crisis: An Impact Study and Action Proposals' (1980, unpublished).
96 *Northern Echo*, 11 January 1980.
97 *Socialist Challenge*, 17 January 1980.
98 John Foley (South Wales ISTC), interviewed by Alan Dein, March 1992, 'Lives in Steel', reference C532/073/01–02 © The British Library.
99 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, p. 127. Sirs later blamed Scargill for initiating this demand. But as we've seen, steelworkers themselves in South Yorkshire had already raised that demand.
100 *Socialist Challenge*, 17 January 1980.

101 Interview, Tommy Brennan.
102 *The Time*s, 22 January 1980. In 2011, it was estimated that the North Sea oil revenues equated to a contemporary value of £166 billion. This is around £250 billion in 2024.
103 *Socialist Challenge*, 24 January 1980.
104 Tommy Brennan strike diary, courtesy of Tommy Brennan.
105 Interview, John Foley (Scotland).
106 For a discussion on this, see Ewan Gibbs, *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialization in Post-War Scotland* (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2021), pp. 109–18.
107 Interview, Tommy Brennan.
108 Bamber, *Militant Managers?*, p. 106.
109 Interview, Ian Crichton.

4

‘You can’t have half a union out and half a union working’

The unions and the private employers were not officially in dispute, but from the earliest point attempts were being made to bring this sector out. The thinking was clear. If a steel strike was to be successful, movement of all steel to industry had to stop. There were forty-four private steelworks, and if they continued to produce and transport steel an already difficult task might become impossible. This chapter explores the private sector strike. It reveals the extent of the unity that existed within the steel unions on the importance of the private sector action and argues that many activists in the private works saw the two sectors of the industry as connected. These workers clearly regarded the BSC struggle as their struggle. They believed the real issue was jobs and the future of the industry, and they made significant sacrifices to support the BSC strike. However, there was also discord within the unions. Virtually all private sector works were involved in the strike, but enthusiasm for the action was patchy, with significant numbers of workers returning to work before the action came to an end. Within some of the private plants themselves, this would create a lasting divide. The chapter also highlights the contradiction between the efforts of rank-and-file activists and the role of the union leaders, one of whom would not only publicly weaken the strike by repeatedly blocking its extension into the private sector, but during confidential meetings with the government made damaging concessions that would have serious implications for the outcome of the strike and its aftermath.

I

From 2 January 1980 onwards, activists were arguing for a private sector strike. Keith Jones recalled the attitude of the Rotherham Strike Committee towards the private works in Sheffield:

> They said ‘No, we’re not having this. The private sector is coming in. We’re not having them sitting’ – because they were near neighbours, they hated them – ‘We’re not having them’ – my words not theirs – ‘sitting the other side of

> the M1, freely working while we're out on strike. No, they're coming out as well.' And they picketed them from day one.[1]

Bill Sirs opposed the demand, arguing that many private companies were vulnerable financially and might not survive. He believed it would be better for the unions to merely threaten a strike in the sector and use this 'bargaining counter' to pressurise the government into action.[2] Most steelworkers disagreed with Sirs at the time, and several decades later almost all interviewees in this project considered the question of the private works to be critical to the outcome of the strike. The clarity of the recollections reveals the importance of the issue. Ian Stewart felt the decision not to call out the private sector straight away worked against the success of the strike and reflected wider weaknesses in ISTC thinking and strategy:

> This is where … the leadership was somewhat naive in the ISTC. First of all they had given plenty of notice that they were going to go on strike to allow places to stockpile, and then there was the private industry. They weren't willing to call them out. I don't know whether they thought 'Oh, we only need to be out a few weeks and they will give in or they will come nearer to meeting our demands.' I don't think at the time it was properly appreciated [the extent to which] this Conservative government was [backing BSC].[3]

For Geoff Walters, the situation was clear: private sector steelworkers were ready to fight, but were being hobbled by a poor leadership. Geoff delved back into the history of steelworker trade unionism to find a precedent for current events, and to strengthen his argument.

> They called BSC out, but the private sector carried on working. Now this is what they wanted, of course: divide and defeat. I'd been having it from the representatives to the Midland Wages Board and from ordinary workers and that, that it was completely wrong to have more than half the union out on strike and the rest at work doing the ruddy orders. This happened exactly the same in 1913, in Wednesbury. The tube workers and the steelworkers were out on strike, but the Midland Wages Board did not come out on strike. Now, Sirs tried to do the same again, get the BSC out on strike but keep the private sector producing. Now what happens there? The orders kept coming in and the gaffers in the private sector would roll them if they could. To me and to all the other guys here in the West Midlands, it was wrong. I told Sirs straight to his bloody face in January 1980 at a hotel on Hagley Road, 'You can't have half a union out and half a union working. You either have the union you're all out, or the union you're all in.'[4]

Martin Upham believed the union should have acted immediately to call out the private sector:

> Bill Sirs tried to keep it as two separate issues, but that was impossible … the private sector should have been called out. It became an issue in any case for the survival of the union. If you're going to have a steel stoppage you've got

> to stop steel. You've got to stop it coming in the country, and you've got to stop steel production.[5]

Firsteel employee, Martin Kendrick, held a similar view about the importance of jobs:

> There was never any question for me – solidarity is solidarity. If we were asked to come out, we'd come out … because of my background I knew [BSC closures] had implications for us, but across our factory people saw it as two different worlds. They thought it would be the steelmaking that would cop it, that processing would be ok … If we kept our heads down, they'd leave us alone. There was confusion about whether it was about a pay rise for the public sector, or whether it was jobs. That was one of the great topics of debate, throughout. Bill Sirs did make it clear, it was about wages, and in that sense weakened people's resolve. If they had come out clean in the first place and said it was about jobs, and stuck to that line, I think we would have got a stronger, more committed, call. It was already happening. Bilston had gone … that was part of the discussion when we were initially called out – what would happen if they do that to us?[6]

As well as highlighting the significance of the wider jobs issue, Kendrick's remarks reveal a divide between those who saw the public and private sectors of the industry as distinct and felt the latter might survive if they kept their 'heads down', and those, like him, who regarded the fate of the private sector as bound up with BSC. But they also display his belief that a BSC strike called explicitly on the jobs issue would have had more purchase among private sector steelworkers and made it easier to build a higher level of support.

John Marston was the president of the ISTC branch at Firsteel and supported strike action in the private sector. But convincing his own branch officials and members was not straightforward:

> I'd got to convince my officials and then I'd got to convince the members. It was 'Why are we going out on strike to support them? They wouldn't support us' – the very narrow-mindedness of smaller plants. But I knew that I could convince them if I could convince my branch officials, and we did. We got them out. In my view, the fight was our fight because if they could break the British Steel workers, we would be the next ones down the line. I saw it as standing by our own people.[7]

On 4 January 1980, Ted Thorne pledged that private plants in South Yorkshire would be targeted, and that if the ISTC pickets were unable to cover all the targets he would ask the NUM to assist. Yorkshire area NUM leader Arthur Scargill agreed to supply pickets, if any request came.[8] In an interview on BBC's *Nationwide* a few days later, Sirs admitted that his influence was weakening. He complained that 'people were coming in and causing trouble' and that when a strike went on for more than two weeks

it became difficult to control.[9] Other union officials agreed. TGWU district officer Ray Rowlands moaned that pickets were 'out of control', while ISTC assistant general secretary Roy Evans accused Sheffield pickets of 'acting against the instructions of this organisation'.[10] ISTC national officer Ken Clarke also complained about the difficulties of controlling 'enthusiastic' pickets who were 'embarrassing' the leadership.[11] Russell Clearie revealed some tensions between full-time officers and pickets at Clydebridge, while Keith Jones offered memories about their role, or lack thereof, during the strike in South Yorkshire:

> We chased our full-time officials. They wanted to keep the Clydebrig open, because they could have brought the plate steel from anywhere. A minister came down to me and I said to John, 'I'm sorry, but we're out here on a national strike.' And then Big Ian Scobbie, the full-time official, he came doon and Obi chased him, chased him from the car park.[12]

> The [South Yorkshire] divisional office was the biggest in the union at the time. There was a divisional officer and he was the head of it, an organiser – me – another organiser, and a staff organiser, and so a complement of four – plus two secretaries. There was a kind of a hut in the ground and they all went into that and stayed there for the duration of the strike, never emerged. The guys would come and pick me up and there'd be rows of sugar bags in the window for the tea, and they said 'What are they doing in there?', and I said, 'I don't know' … But those bags of sugar became kind of symbolic for everything we were against. People were saying 'Drag them out!', and I said 'No, no – we're not doing that. If that's what they want to do, leave them.'[13]

Momentum was with those wishing to extend the strike. Interviewed on TV at the time, Jones was asked why he was breaching union policy by organising secondary picketing at private employers. He replied that the ISTC 'could be on strike for three years' if it allowed foreign and private sector steel to be imported or produced and moved around the country.[14] The *Steelworkers' Banner* added its voice, arguing that the ISTC had been pushed into a political battle by the Tories, which could not be confined to the nationalised industry. The newspaper highlighted the political affiliation of several leading private companies, including GKN, who had donated £25,000 to the Conservative Party and £3,000 to the blacklisting body, the Economic League:

> Can these companies honestly believe that we consider them to be neutral in this present dispute? The answer is as simple as it is obvious. They **are** involved and they too stand to gain if the ISTC is defeated in this struggle.[15]

The *Banner* also posed what seemed an unanswerable question to those opposed to strike action in the private sector: how could the ISTC ask trade

unionists in other industries to back the strike if it was not willing itself to mobilise its own entire membership? Following a consultation with private works' union representatives, a special joint meeting of the ISTC and NUB executives finally voted to extend the action to the private sector.[16] Sirs struggled to accept this decision and insisted that the action be delayed for eleven days, a caveat he later described as 'the only thing I could achieve today on their [the private employers'] behalf'.[17]

Sirs' belief that the threat of a private sector strike could pressurise the government into action would now be put to the test. Along with Hector Smith, he met with Keith Joseph and Jim Prior on 19 January, and followed this up by meeting Joseph and Thatcher two days later. At these meetings Sirs showed his knowledge of the industry, but also made damaging concessions. He indicated that he would accept the formation of multi-union committees to negotiate local productivity agreements in return for 8 per cent on the basic and a 5 per cent bonus, pending the establishment of the committees. Sirs also outlined his own track record in negotiating away jobs in return for higher wages and bonuses, pointing out a previous example of this at Port Talbot, where over five hundred jobs had gone. At the meeting with Joseph and Prior, he stressed how he and the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU) leader Frank Chapple, who was also on the TUC General Council, 'had managed to stop talk of a national strike'. As the steel strike itself was already national, it can be assumed that this was aimed at preventing wider action involving other groups of workers. At the meeting involving Thatcher, Sirs conceded that he was prepared to 'lose members' in the maintenance and service sectors and agreed that middle-management grades were 'badly overmanned'. He also pledged to keep pay and closures separate, 'though there were those who wanted to bring the two issues together and make the strike a political one.' Throughout both meetings Sirs hardly mentioned the private sector strike; he did not use it as a bargaining counter, preferring instead to appeal to the government to lean on BSC and compel them to 'be sensible'.[18] But at both meetings the government mantra was reiterated; unless 'productivity' was raised, there would be no more public money for steelworkers.[19]

II

The situation became more difficult for the unions when a group of sixteen private steel companies took advantage of the delay to the strike, raising a writ and a restraining injunction at the High Court to prevent their employees taking part.[20] Until the case was heard, the private sector strike was illegal. Events were moving fast. On 17 January, BSC unveiled full details of the

so-called 'Slimline' cuts programme, planned for Port Talbot and Llanwern. Redundancies were expected, but the specifics provoked shock. Port Talbot at that stage had 12,415 employees. Around 1,200 of these jobs were already earmarked for redundancy, because of a previous cuts programme. 'Slimline' envisaged a workforce of just 5,701, which would mean the removal of 56 per cent of employees in just one year.[21] Llanwern was to be cut from 9,353 to 4,899. In total, 11,337 jobs across the two plants were to be axed from an existing workforce of almost 22,000. Villiers warned the unions that their agreement on this was necessary by 31 March, or one of the works would be closed altogether. George Wright described this as 'totally inhuman'.[22] It would later transpire that, unbeknown to the national officers, ISTC officials in the threatened works had already accepted 'Slimline' and were secretly involved in discussions with BSC about its implementation before and during the strike.[23]

The National Coal Board (NCB) pointed out that the reduction in output across both plants would immediately slash the coking coal market by 1.6 million tonnes – the equivalent to about ten mines, 7,000 miners and five hundred staff. It was believed these figures might be doubled if BSC also began to source foreign coking coal. Donald Haywood, a senior official of the NUM, criticised the ISTC leaders for focusing solely on pay, and predicted that these cuts could lead to a general strike.[24] At a delegate conference of the South Wales NUM held on 21 January, speaker after speaker claimed Wales would be turned into an industrial wasteland with more than half a million redundancies. Area President Emlyn Williams said that his members would rather 'eat dirt' than accept steel cuts, which would 'destroy the region's coalfields' and could shut twenty-one of the thirty-six pits. Williams also took aim at Sirs' strategy of separating pay from closures by declaring 'survival is more important than wages.'[25] The South Wales NUM and the WTUC had favoured an all-out strike for 21 January, but this had been blocked by the British leaderships of both the ISTC and NUM, as well as the TUC. The WTUC had also tried to include BSC's closure plans, and the intention to use imported coal to be included in the steel strike demands, but this too was rejected by a TUCSICC that continued to view talks with the government and BSC as the best way to save jobs.[26] In a sign that the militancy could not be quelled completely, plans for a one-day general strike on 28 January in Wales – the first since 1926 – were finalised by over twenty unions at a meeting of the WTUC.[27] Bob Taylor, a worker in the hot mills at Port Talbot, probably spoke for many when he said:

> I firmly supported the Wales TUC strike … I was very disappointed when it was called off. I think they will keep putting it off because the TUC in London don't want it. It's a pity because it's about time someone did something about jobs.[28]

This close relationship between steel and mining was not limited to South Wales. In other regions, the recognition that Tory policy threatened both industries resulted in the miners emerging as a key source of public support for the steelworkers. NUM Scottish Area President Mick McGahey led a march of miners down Unthank Road in Bellshill, where Steel Stockholders was being picketed by the ISTC. The event, described as a 'brilliantly stage-managed exercise which gave the impression of a conquering general marching into a besieged town', saw McGahey address steelworkers and express his union's 'solidarity and support' for their strike:

> We are interdependent on each other. We need your steel for our jobs and you need our coal for the coke ovens. Therefore, we have come today to lend you our support and we hope to continue that support until you gain your victory and I hope it will be a good one … whenever the steelworkers require the support of the miners on the picket line, they only have to send word and we will come.[29]

On 21 January, Arthur Scargill joined a demonstration of over 2,000 steelworkers in Sheffield and later addressed a rally at the City Hall alongside Bill Sirs and three Labour MPs. His analysis made implicit reference to the Ridley Report of two years earlier, which had identified the ISTC as an easy target, but contained the hope that organised labour might construct its own counter-programme for change:

> The Tories calculated this strike as an attack on one of the weakest links in the labour movement. They wanted to give a political and economic lesson to the whole working-class movement. Listening to the Mad Monk on *Weekend World* you can see that the Tories are not only bent on destroying the steel industry but all nationalised industries. And here's a lesson for future Labour governments. Let's stop taking over lame ducks in industry and take over all their white swans instead … I've been accused of interfering in the steel strike. I plead guilty. They say refrain from secondary picketing. What they mean is refrain from effective picketing … The lessons of our struggles against the last Tory government is that solidarity is the key to victory. If the steelworkers win against the Tories, it's a victory for all of us.[30]

Twelve members of the South Yorkshire Divisional Strike Committee also met with Scargill at his NUM office in Barnsley to seek advice on picketing. Footage of the meeting was broadcast on *TV Eye* and showed Scargill advising the steel trade unionists and making available the picketing maps and organisational logbook from the 1972 and 1974 NUM strikes.[31] Scargill also revealed that the Yorkshire miners had pledged to black steel deliveries to collieries and coal board workshops.[32] One historian recently argued that steelworkers and 'many people, even on the Left' were critical of Scargill's intervention and its impact in this strike.[33] But as we can see, his involvement

included sharing platforms with Sirs at mass strike rallies, something that Scargill could not have organised and something that Sirs would never have instigated, given his hostility to the NUM leader. It suggests that control of the strike in this area was with local activists, that it was they who were setting the agenda and planning the events, and that it was their respect for Scargill as well as the close connections between the two industries that underpinned their decision to involve him in their campaign.

Many interviewees made references to the support they received from the NUM. Tommy Brennan was present when McGahey marched his members into Bellshill and recalled other acts of solidarity at that time:

> Mick McGahey was great with us. Mick said to me, 'If you need supplemented, on the picket lines, let me know, and I'll have the miners there in double-quick time.' We said, 'Mick, we're the steelworkers, it's our people on strike, we'll do the picketing, thanks just the same.' But … the miners, they gave us great support in 1980, you have to be honest about that, and they had collections at the pithead. Unequivocally, they gave us one hundred per cent support. I can remember we were on a picket at Mossend, and there was no fire that morning, we had run out of gear. And who should appear but Mick and a couple of his henchmen. 'Where's the fire?', and I said, 'Oh no, we've run out of wood.' He says to one of the guys, 'Phone up such and such and get a ton of coal down here right away.' And the coal did get delivered onto the picket line.[34]

Mike Hull's memories of NUM support in South Yorkshire focused not only on the financial support, but also on how miners were able to black steel imports into the pits, without endangering their viability:

> The miners gave us a lot of support. They gave us money – not from the central funds, from local pits. You'd go to a pit and collect money. There were a lot of pits in this area back then: fifteen, twenty pits, easily. Two miles up the road was Yorkshire Main, the biggest pit in Yorkshire. They didn't fetch steel in during the strike, and that was great. They had large amounts of stocks of steel that they could reuse. They were fair and there were no disputes.[35]

Paul O'Neill recalled this type of support. Importantly, he recalled that in order to get this assistance, contact between the unions had to be initiated and the request had to be made, it didn't simply happen:

> We did contact the Durham Coalfield and the Yorkshire Coalfield and asked them not to accept H-bars, because H-bars were used in the tunnels. And the miners started to refuse to take them. Eventually, somebody thought about this [and said], 'Well, hang on, let's get these involved [laughing]!' This was just at the back end of the strike because that was the only time – because they weren't going to volunteer it. Let's get it right: you have to ask for this

> yeah? When they were asked, they supported, but they weren't asked till towards the end of the steel strike. If they'd been asked straightway, then the coal would have started to affect it.[36]

III

On 25 January, the High Court dismissed the employers' injunction, but this was reversed the following morning at a speedily convened appeal presided over by Lord Denning. The appeal judges concluded that there was no legitimate trade dispute between the unions and the private plants, and declared the private sector strike illegal.[37] The ISTC appealed to the Law Lords, with 1 February set as the date for the hearing. But resistance was already building. Hector Smith argued that the Denning ruling only applied to the ISTC, and that he would instruct the NUB to continue picketing.[38] Strike committees throughout the country were declaring their opposition to Denning.[39] The Darlington & Simpson private mill was picketed by over two hundred strikers, including flying pickets from Consett and Skinningrove. ISTC members at the works reported that 730 union members had gone on strike, with just five members from the white-collar sections working.[40] Several Labour MPs called on Denning to resign. Consett MP David Watkins referenced Denning's 'long record of anti-trade union judgement', while Bob Cryer, Labour MP for Keighley, described the ruling as a 'political decision, rather than a legal one.'[41]

Denning had made several anti-trade union judgements during his career, and was believed to be the judge who redefined solidarity action as 'secondary' action.[42] He had ruled against the unions in the *Express* v. McShane case, and his past record was referred to by Tony Cook:

> We were caught on secondary action, by Lord Denning … the bastard. People think that Lord Denning was one of the greatest. No, he was a brilliant man who rationalised his own bloody prejudice, was Denning. Make no mistake about it. How many times was he appealed as Masters of the Rolls, and lost? It was a fair quantity of times. And one of the times was our strike, because we decided to bring the private sector out. Halfway through. And we got injuncted. Somewhere in my papers I used to have an injunction from Lord Denning. Telling me I mustn't do this, and Lord love him and rest him, and we got beat on that, Denning found against us.[43]

The anger over the Denning ruling coalesced with opposition and anger over the potential mass redundancies in South Wales. On 28 January, the one-day general strike took place in South Wales, and may have involved as many as 200,000 workers,[44] with around 250,000 taking part in rallies

and marches in support.[45] Michael Foot and Bill Sirs both addressed the main rally in Sophia Gardens, Cardiff, and received a thunderous reception. Speaking under a banner which read 'Save Steel, Save Pits – Save Wales', Sirs appeared visibly moved and broke into tears as he expressed his readiness to go to prison if his ISTC executive voted to defy the Denning judgement.[46] Jones is probably right when he identified this as a point when the strike could have escalated into a wider showdown between the TUC and the government.[47] Speaking that day, Terry Thomas, a leading figure in the South Wales NUM, stated that miners were ready to fight, but could not do so alone. He expressed hope that the ISTC would now turn its dispute over wages into a dispute over jobs.[48] John Perrins of the NUB and the Port Talbot Strike Committee described the conflict as political, and criticised Len Murray and the TUC for cancelling the general strike set for 21 January.[49] The prospect of the strike widening and the ISTC general secretary being jailed was potentially hazardous for the government. But after a long meeting the next day, it was Sirs himself who eventually convinced the ISTC executive to 'follow the law of the land', call off the strike for now and wait for the outcome of the Law Lords appeal.[50]

Thatcher's Cabinet welcomed the Denning judgement, but feared it had provided a 'rallying point' around which both 'moderates and militants in the trades union movement could combine in opposition to the government'. Keith Joseph stated that whatever the Law Lords decided, it was 'desirable to handle all relations with trade unions with special delicacy in the coming weeks'.[51] The government had other problems and faced the threat of strike action, both on the London docks, and from low-paid manual workers in the water industry, who had already submitted a pay claim of 46 per cent.[52] Thatcher believed a water strike would pose 'a serious threat to the life of the community' and spoke of mobilising the army in response.[53] A *Daily Mirror* editorial charted a huge level of anger in the trade union movement, and a growing gulf between even 'moderate' trade union leaders and the Thatcher government. Concerns were expressed that the one-day stoppage in Wales might spread elsewhere.[54] Geoffrey Goodman highlighted a rising social anger in steelmaking areas, noting how the government, by uprooting communities, destroying towns, and increasing VAT while cutting taxes for the rich, had fomented an 'eruption'.[55]

The five Law Lords met on 1 February and unanimously, if reluctantly, overturned Denning, concluding that there were 'no relevant differences' between this case and the *Express* v. McShane case.[56] One of the five, Lord Scarman, offered some free advice to the government on the precise changes to the law that were necessary to make such action illegal.[57] Even at this juncture, with a legal victory in his pocket, Sirs continued to oppose involving the private sector immediately and urged a week's delay, to put pressure on

BSC. However, the ISTC executive decided to start the strike immediately.[58] Telegrams had been coming in from local strike committees demanding action and the pressure was too great. In comments to the press that must have jarred many activists, Sirs stated: 'The only man who spoke against the decision was me. We have had one victory today and one defeat.'[59]

The private sector strike was now on for real. Martin Kendrick recalled this as an exciting time in his life, but noted the logistical challenges facing pickets:

> As a young lad – and there were three or four of us in the same position– it was great, it was the first serious thing that had happened in our grown-up lives. My dad was on the strike with us. My grandad, he was retired but was all in favour of it, and he was adamant it was all about jobs and not money, and that we should all stick together. We did most of the places around here. We did JB and Eslees, in West Brom, we did three or four places, stockholders mainly … The T&G was the main hauliers union and there were negotiations going on behind the scenes to get them to support us. It was mainly privateers that was the problem. There was no real violence, but there were strong conversations going on, with one or two drivers pulled out the cabs, but nothing serious. What tended to be the pattern, we'd arrive and the companies would ring up whoever and say 'They're here', so the deliveries would never arrive. We'd disappear in the evening, then we'd get a phone call the following morning saying 'They're working again, get over there as fast as you can.' So it was a totally fluid situation. From our place there would be about half the workforce took part in picketing, about a hundred and twenty. There were a few places locally that were supportive, and they'd have just a token picket, literally a couple of guys dropped off with a brazier and some wood for the day. The general consensus, in terms of the employers, was that if there's a picket here, we won't operate, If there ain't a picket here, we will operate. So you had to try to get someone to all of them.[60]

John Marston remembered some of the details of the strike organisation and confirmed Kendrick's comments concerning the importance of having a physical presence at private plants, even if it was just one or two pickets:

> There was a strike committee, Dennis Turner was the chairman, Bert [Turner] was the vice-chairman. We used to meet in a little hut in Bilston and they used to say we need people here, there and whatever. So we'd go out to smaller independent places … we went on to Bore Steel up the road; they did the wider strip down to the automotive industry and nobody could stop them. We put a little hut on their car park … and we got our pickets in there. We couldn't stop the steel going out of there. What we did, Charlie Hall, who was from Corby, myself, and a couple of officials went to the T&G offices across to West Bromwich, and met their full-time officer Stan Cameron. He heard our arguments, he heard their arguments, and he said, 'Right, what I'm going to tell you lads', – the lads from Bore's – 'is if there's a picket on that

> gate', and I can remember this as though it was yesterday, he said, 'if he's got no arms and no legs and he's got a picket badge on, there's no steel going out.' He said, 'If there's not a picket there, carry on.' We put two people on, and they respected that until the end of the strike.[61]

Martson also recalled the importance of flying pickets and gave a good example of how their introduction could alter the dynamics of the struggle locally:

> I came back from picketing at 7 o'clock in the night and was eating my tea, and a coach pulled up. We'd been having trouble at this one plant; we couldn't shut them down. A coach pulled up, knock on the door, a great big bloke, fisherman, from Rotherham. 'John Marston?' I said, 'Yes'. He said, 'Dick Knox has sent us.' Dick was the full-time officer. 'Dick Knox has told us that you've got a problem at a plant you can't shut down.' I got in my little minivan and took them up to Darlaston and showed them this place. They said, 'Leave it with us.' They got deck chairs out, they were all fishermen, they were all big men, big steelworkers. They shut it down. We couldn't keep them for long, you see; they were too important. They were going somewhere else, but it made a point to the management – if you keep doing it, they'll be back again.[62]

Peter Phillips recalled some of the picketing experiences in Glasgow:

> GKN in Rutherglen, that was the big one. The way it worked, they lined up the lorries and the polis would come marching doon, so they would cover the gates, keep us all back and the lorries would all run through. I always remember this one guy, Peter, turns up in the middle of the f****** winter with a pair of sandshoes on, a pair of denims and a wee T-shirt, and this big coat. So, he says to us, 'See when the polis come, when you're talking to the lorry drivers … I'm gonnae tan the lorries. He'd gone doon the night before and sussed oot where he was going to tan these lorries, and run through a hole in the fence, so he had it all planned oot. So, we're all standing there, and the lorry comes doon, the polis, they're talking to the guy. So the polis are on the outside, and we're on the inside. So he throws aff his jaiket, and he's got a hammer under his jaiket, he's got this T-shirt on, and he runs through with the hammer and whacks this lorry, the windscreen of the lorry. He whacks the second one with the hammer, throws the hammer at the third one, it bounces aff it, runs like f*** … and runs right past the hole in the fence. He got jailed.[63]

Geoff Hawkins remembered the picketing of private plants in the Black Country, which was buttressed by flying pickets from other regions:

> Every day we would meet outside Ductile and decide where we were going – maybe over to Brierley Hill, or somewhere. We only went local, but there were some blokes from Sheffield and Wales at Brierley Hill. They put them up in lodgings, but it was very rough, really rough where they were, like a dosshouse, because you'd only get a pound-a-day picket money.[64]

Solidarity action was building. Consett steelworkers picketed MacCreadie's stockholders in North London and spoke of bringing more pickets to stop the movement of all steel in the capital; Welsh steelworkers were sent to Bristol and Yeovil; and Shelton Bar workers picketed in Birmingham.[65] This type of activity often brought steelworker pickets into close contact with trade unionists from other industries. One key group here was the dockers, whose support was necessary if the movement of steel was to be stopped. But while the TGWU nationally had apparently instructed their docks members not to move steel, ISTC activists often found they had to make the case themselves at the docks to get support. Ian Crichton went as a flying picket to the Millwall docks in London, and recalled the difficulties facing the strikers there:

> I was absolutely staggered at the amount of steel that was coming in, the lack of organisation – and even though they were colleagues, they weren't really doing what they should have been doing. I became a great pal of his, a massive rugby player, Tommy Fellows, [but] the first time we met we clashed quite significantly. I watched wagon after wagon after wagon going into this dock, and I walked up to him and I said 'Are you in charge here?' And Tommy said 'Yes, why?' I said, 'Well what is the point of a hundred guys being here?' He said, 'Well if you think you can do better, you try it.' So I stood in front of one lorry, and he wound the window down and he said, 'I have been driving though these guys here now for three weeks. That is the first time anybody has bothered to tell me what this is all about. I am still going through, but I will speak to my local shop steward and ask him to come and speak to you' – which is what he did. So the two shop stewards came out, and I said, 'The TGWU has issued a directive not to move steel … You are not supposed to be moving the steel.' [One said] 'We don't know anything about any directive … jump in my car, I will take you down to the local dock office.' We walked in, and the regional district secretary for the Transport and General [was there]. He said, 'A directive? Just wait there.' And he left his door slightly ajar, and I heard a secretary on the other end of the line say, 'Well you know what this will mean, don't you?' He came back and he says, 'You're right, there is a directive. Come on, let's go down.' There were about a hundred dockers there and they absolutely ripped into me. One guy said, 'You come down here picking our f***ing nose. You have never been on strike in your life.' He says, 'I'll tell you something about strikes, son.' He said, 'I have been on strike every week for the last twenty-five years.' He said, 'F***ing California fruit pickers stop the job, I have to bloody stop my job … I haven't had a full week's work here for about twenty years, so don't come looking for … '. Another guy said, 'Look, look, give the lad a chance.' And so I explained what it was about, and the two activists came up and said, 'Right, we are stopping the job, but don't be lazy. I want pickets on this gate, all the time, morning noon and night, otherwise they will think you aren't committed to it.' And that started it. All the docks packed in apart from one rebel dock at pin and wheel.[66]

The attention then switched to this one dock, who were refusing to support the strike. Crichton expected the task of persuading them would be difficult, but was helped here by Maurice 'Maury' Foley, who had been the chair of the London dockers during the national strike in 1972.[67]

> I said to the guy coordinating the strike in London, Brian Connolly, 'We have stopped Dagenham, but we have been told we have got to put a mass picket on at pin and wheel. They'd told their own guy, 'We don't care if you have got a directive or not, we're not doing it.' So I went down, great big gang of guys, and [our pickets] had been ball-bearing the wagons that had been going through. So anyway this guy– a Jack Dash type character– Maury Foley they called him, I'll never forget his name, he came up to me and he said, 'I am going to go in there now' – a right cockney guy he was – 'and have a word with our colleagues.' I said, 'Do you want me to come?' He went 'No, no. Don't do that, it's far too dangerous.' So what he said to them, god only knows, but he came back out, saying 'Right, they are stopping the job.' I said, 'What, just like that? They have been rebels.' 'Don't worry', he says. I said 'I'm sorry about all the guys with the catapults and spitting at the windows and all that.' 'Nah, don't worry about that', he said, 'when we were on strike, we burnt the f***ing place down' [laughing]. That was the kind of atmosphere at the time that was prevailing.[68]

Those steelworkers picketing in Aberdeen were also finding that gaining the support of the local dockers was not a job for the fainthearted:

> The second morning we went to see the dockers. Our full-time officer Eddie Marsh and I went at 5.30 in the morning to catch the night shift and the day shift, and all we could hear was 'Away and work ya lazy b*******, we're no supportin yeez.' Anyway, we went into the big hall – and that hadn't changed, the big hall, with the platform, where the gaffer stood and picked out the men who were working that day. Eddie said to me, 'My Yorkshire accent might not go down too well here, Tommy, will you do the talking?' So I started telling the dockers why I was there, what was happening, then I suddenly heard this shout, 'Haw you, ya little b******', and this guy was like the wrestler Giant Haystacks, and he came down, and he was scattering people in front of him, and he said, 'Ah'm fed up listenin' tae you, see you, shut your f****** mouth, I'll do the talkin.' And he turned round and said, 'Right, let's get this over wi. Aw them who support the steelworkers go to that side of the room [points left], aw them that's no supporting them, go to that side of the room [points right]. But before you dae anything, ah'm gawn to this side of the room [points left].' I thought 'Game, set and match, brilliant!'[69]

After leaving Aberdeen they travelled further north, to the Nigg construction yard near Inverness. It was successful, and shop stewards put an embargo on steel. But on the way back, Brennan, Marsh and another ISTC activist,

Donny McGuire, ended up stranded between Tomintoul and Cockbridge – a notorious, extremely high, nine-mile stretch of road that was known to ice over in the summer, far less the middle of January. With the help of some farmers they eventually made it out, reaching Aberdeen after seven hours on the road.[70]

Solidarity was in evidence at Hull:

> They put an embargo on steel at Hull, but wanted pickets there to help their position in terms of maintaining that embargo. So we turned up. We got invited into the shop stewards cabin, and they gave us tea and all the rest of it. Then we went out on the gate: 'If you have any trouble just give us a ring and we'll sort it out.' So we stopped every wagon coming into Hull Docks, whether it had got steel on it or hadn't got steel on it, and we were talking to the drivers. Traffic was backed up for miles, literally miles. The shop stewards had threatened that if anybody comes in they'll end up with a load in the dock. I think that was a threat. Not that it was going to happen, but they could make it impossible for anybody to work out of Hull Docks. Then this guy came past in a white van giving two fingers and being all cocky, just drove past us. So we got his number and transmitted that to the Hull shop stewards. In about ten to fifteen minutes he comes out very shamefaced: 'Look, I'm really sorry.' He couldn't apologise enough for the error of his ways. That showed the power of the solidarity, that sort of solidarity. How much that meant was a fantastic thing.[71]

These recollections and those of John Marston and Martin Kendrick reveal much about the relationships between different groups of trade unionists, and the role of union leaders in this strike. They suggested that while there was potential for solidarity among workers, it had to be built and developed. The TGWU leadership had done little to build support for the strike, especially among the dockers. In some areas, directives had been issued not to move steel, but they hadn't been communicated with any intent. Ian Crichton's memory of the situation in the London was endorsed by a contemporary report, which stated that it had taken the TGWU nine weeks to finally order a stop to the movement of steel in the London docks.[72] The accounts above also show the importance of the picket line; support from other workers was often conditional on the steel pickets having a physical presence at workplaces. This recollection was made repeatedly by interviewees. If you were asking for support, you had to show other workers that you were serious, that you were committed. The TUC itself had pointed out how a body of pickets could bring home 'the depth of feeling that exists among the strikers and also constitutes an effective appeal for solidarity'.[73] The example of the steel strike showed that when the steelworkers travelled to meet with other workers to discuss with them their dispute and the need for support, and pledged to picket places thoroughly, solidarity and support

could be built. But such was the size and scale of the industry that not all places could be picketed, something which again underlined the role that could be played by other union leaders.

IV

There was potential for spreading the strike beyond the steel industry, but within the steel unions themselves support for the private sector action was not universal. The two works causing most difficulty were Hadfields in Sheffield and Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. Hadfields, described by Sirs as 'an old, inefficient kind of works',[74] had electric arc furnaces that produced around a thousand tonnes of bulk and specialist steel per week. The company had been purchased in 1977 by Lonrho, a conglomerate which owned firms in numerous industries across the world. Although it remained one of the larger steelworks, in just three years Lonrho had slashed the Hadfields' workforce from 5,200 to 2,800,[75] something which led some Hadfields' workers to accuse them of asset stripping.[76] Sheerness, on the Isle of Sheppey, had been opened in 1971, and was a mini-mill which also used electric arc furnaces to produce continuously cast billet, round and ribbed coil and rounds and rebar. Both works made steel in much smaller quantities than BSC works, but the range of products was similar to the corporation and so they were competitors, to some extent.

The ISTC had a strong presence at both works, but problems became evident when the union extended the strike. On the third day of the private sector strike, it was reported that Hadfields' workers were unhappy, claiming they had not been consulted about the action. They were said to be willing to support it for the time being, but at this point only six hundred employees were on strike.[77] The antics of Lonrho Chief Executive Tiny Rowland and Hadfields' Managing Director Derek 'Dan' Norton guaranteed much press attention. Both expressed opposition to the ISTC's private sector action, but initially gave public support to the union in its strike against BSC, doubtless on the basis that a successful resolution would remove the threat to their own works. An appeal to Thatcher to 'accelerate' government action against the 'sheer physical intimidation' of the pickets[78] was probably a better indicator of their real attitudes. In early February 1980, Rowland and Norton visited BSC to force a discussion about the strike with Villiers. They had also apparently wanted to talk about taking over parts of BSC, including its Yorkshire and Humberside works, as well as the whole of Shotton Works.[79] Unsurprisingly, Villiers gave them short shrift.[80] Their efforts seemed to have paid off when Sirs granted Hadfields a dispensation, which allowed for a return to work. A delighted Norton offered Sirs £25,000

for the strike fund, which was politely declined by the ISTC leader. However, the Yorkshire Strike Committee ignored Sirs' dispensation[81] and demanded a vote of confidence in his leadership. Spokesman Stan Sheridan explained why: 'The lads feel the strike has not been handled the way it should have been from the start … and we are not going to stand by and allow dispensations to be handed out to any firm, not even by Bill Sirs.'[82] The confidence vote was later dismissed by the EC, but did nothing to dampen the criticisms of his leadership as weak and vacillating.

Picketing continued at Hadfields, but on 10 February the situation became more tense when employees voted to return to work. Speculation began to mount that the ISTC was preparing to end the strike in the private sector, in return for agreements that steel could be produced but not dispatched. Sirs' ill-fated Hadfields' dispensation was based on this proviso, and ISTC national officer Sandy Feather hinted that a change in union policy on the private sector strike might be forthcoming.[83] On the same day as the Hadfields' vote, craft union negotiators accepted a deal to end the strike worth 10 per cent on the basic plus a 4.4 per cent productivity bonus.[84] It appeared that BSC had split the united front between the steel unions and the craft unions, but when the proposed deal was put to a full delegate meeting of the craft unions, it was rejected by a two-to-one majority.[85] Not for the first time, the attitude of the grassroots activists had proved decisive. The same could be said about many of the private works' trade unionists. The idea that their involvement might be ended by the ISTC leaders after just ten days ignored the agency of the workers organising and staffing the picket lines, and their views on a dispute in which they were now deeply involved:

> I think we were always of the opinion that we could stop it all [the movement of steel]. We thought the more we can chip away, [the better] because work then had gone. Forget about your work, this is part of our life now – trying to stop this, trying to stop people going in. We were absolutely convinced that we could stop the movement. If we could have stopped the movement of steel, it would have brought them to their senses quicker.[86]

Marston's comment here, 'forget about your work, this is part of our life now', shows the importance this strike had taken. And even though four decades have passed, activists like him were aware at the time of the implications of this strike for the future of the industry. This commitment, energy and determination did not seem a resource to be deployed and switched off at the whim of the national leaders, but something that might take the strike out of their control altogether.

The vote at Hadfields was not followed by an immediate change in policy towards the private sector strike. The ISTC leadership was swaying, but attempted to remain upright. In the immediate aftermath of the vote, activists

intensified picketing at the works. Hadfields' electrician Chris Fowler recalled lukewarm enthusiasm for the strike in the works itself:

> Not being a member of the union on strike, I had little sympathy. There had been a series of demands and strikes being made by the major unions, flexing their muscles. The miners had done it on a number of occasions, where they'd look for increases in the benefits they got, or wages. It was becoming a bit tedious and even predictable. Even for someone like me, my family were Labour supporters, my father and grandfather were staunch labour supporters, fairly strict union men, it was becoming a little bit predictable and almost greedy. I'm not so sure [that my father saw things differently to me]. I think he went along with it. There wasn't a huge amount of support from the steelworkers at Hadfields … and there was never any threat that steel production would stop at Hadfields.[87]

Chris Fowler's late father, Eric, was an ISTC convenor at Parkgate, and according to Chris 'at the heart' of a lot of strike activity in 1980. The comment that Eric may also have had reservations about the strike is revealing for what it suggests about Chris's memory of the dispute. For if someone like his father – a well-known and respected local trade unionist and strike leader – had doubts about the action, then all opposition to that strike was legitimate. It should be remembered that all interviewees who played an active role in the strike remained of the view that the action was justified and that the ISTC was correct to act as it did in 1980. None deviated from that view. It is here that the oral history concept of composure – where an interviewee constructs a version of the self that sits comfortably with the social world[88] – might provide insight into Chris Fowler's memory. His social world included a father who had been important to the strike locally. The analysis of events he offers perhaps provides a framework for incorporating both his opposition to the strike and his father's involvement in it.

The comment about the unions being 'greedy' and that this was a 'strike too far' fits neatly with negative discourses around trade union power in Britain. In the period leading up to the steelworkers' strike, the miners had not threatened a pay strike. They would come close in 1981, but that would be on the issue of closures, not pay.[89] The summer of 1979 had witnessed a series of one-day and two-day strikes by engineering workers, whose £60 per week wage lagged almost £10 behind that of the average industrial worker.[90] The fact that it is the 'greedy' miners who are recalled as exemplifying this myth of the chaotic, strike-prone 1970s is testament to the strength and vitality of that discourse, which is regularly reproduced in many popular cultural depictions of the 1970s, as well as much of the historiography.[91]

Mike Hull offered some intriguing reflections on the situation at Hadfields, and the private sector strike more generally. He displayed an ambiguity about

the stoppage in the private plants, but recalled Hadfields as a symbolically important plant which had to be targeted:

> There were a lot of medium-sized private plants in Sheffield. The only one who didn't come out was Hadfields … If we could have trusted the management to produce the steel for the producers they had before the strike, we might not have had a problem. But I don't think we could trust them. We were frightened they would take British Steel orders, and we'd never get them back. There is no way we could have monitored that, even though they said we could. On the basis of probabilities, I think we should have picketed them, yeah. I'm not quite sure about [the private plants joining the strike] and I'm not quite sure even at that date that I thought they should, but I can understand people wanting them on strike, because they were steelworkers, and we were on strike. There was division. It caused a lot of feelings that never went away, yeah. Some friendships were ruined and it got nasty. Hadfields was the plant that nobody trusted. It was a signature plant. Rightly or wrongly it had got to be shut down.[92]

The picketing at Hadfields reached a highpoint on 14 February, when around four hundred South Yorkshire NUM members, Scargill included, joined the eight hundred or so steelworkers on the picket line.[93] The works was closed as a result. Chris Fowler was on safety duty that day:

> We used to go to my parents on a Saturday for tea. My brother, he also worked for British Steel. My dad said to me 'The miners are coming along next week. There's two days planned.' There's a main road that runs from Rotherham to Sheffield, close to Hadfields, and there's a road called Vulcan Road that runs off that, probably a hundred yards long, that runs down to the main entrance of the factory. I got off the bus … and as I approached and turned onto Vulcan Road, there was a swell of bodies, literally hundreds of bodies, filling Vulcan Road. So I slowly began to make my way through these bodies, and as it became more obvious that I was making my way towards the entrance there was a couple of cries of 'Where is he going?' and 'Scab!' There was no physical contact of any kind, and I think it was reported in the press later there had been, but for me there wasn't. The crush started to close in on me as I almost got to the edge of the crowd. The police had formed a barrier and there was a twenty-yard gap between the crowd and the main entrance of the factory. Just as I got to the police barrier, the crush began to close in on me, as it was obvious I was a Hadfields' worker. And at that point I began to get a little concerned, and literally all I felt was someone grab my arm and I thought, 'Oh Christ, here we go.' And it was a police officer, and they'd actually come into the crowd, grabbed me, and literally dragged me out. And then I'd got the twenty yards to walk to the main entrance, where there were two union representatives, speaking to any workers who were going in, to say, you know, 'Are you not going to support the union? Would you not consider not going into work today?' And the amusing bit is that one of these is my dad. He just

> looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. He knew I was on emergency cover … my wages were being donated to charity. That is the way it worked. So my dad knew I wasn't a production worker, I wasn't a steelworker as such. He said to me afterwards, 'I'd been trying to keep an eye out for you. I knew you were due to be on that. I was trying to avoid you having to go through all that you went through with the crowd.' And that was it, really. He knew the situation. I never really felt physically threatened. I never felt as if I was in any kind of danger. I wasn't a production worker, and it was members of that union who were on strike. And because of the thing I was doing, the safety cover, I would have gone in anyway, so I didn't see myself directly as a strikebreaker. Electricians were split in two unions. We weren't huge – about forty members – I think we did support the strike officially.[94]

The detail shows the degree to which the events of that day were imprinted on Fowler's memory – an example perhaps of the flashbulb memory theorised initially by psychologists and taken up by some oral historians. The way Fowler pointed out on more than one occasion that he was not a strikebreaker was also noticeable. He opposed the strike and believed it had little support in the works, but did not want to present himself as a strikebreaker. Fowler was correct because workers like him who provided safety cover during the steel strike were not strikebreakers. There was an acceptance by unions that the steelworks needed to be kept safe and in working order, to ensure both their continued viability and the safety of the people who lived in the immediate vicinity.

David Wilkinson was also on the Hadfield picket. His memory is different:

> Ha, did Hadfields come out? They were supposed to, they were members of the union. They didn't come out … I don't think they necessarily wanted to help us. I think some of them looked at it and said, 'Well, if their steel jobs go, our steel jobs might be safe.' The first time I went there were probably about a dozen people there, but as it went on there were more of us, and there were obviously more police – it was more heated. For about a week there were big pickets. Anyway, somebody kicked a copper. Copper turned round and said to me, 'Right, you're going with me', and mysteriously a van appeared and four of us got bundled into the van. I didn't know the other three. As we got in, there were two coppers either side, who gave us a kick when we got in. We got brought to Water Lane. They gave us a kick, and there were one, he was looking at them, and they gave him another kick. Then they jumped out and shut the door on us. I was thinking, 'They've took me to the charge office, and I'm going to get charged.' They were probably going to throw me in chokey. Him with the lump on his head, they went to him first. Instead of taking him to the duty officer, they took him the other way, to the door, said something to him, and he went. Then they said, 'You two, come with me, you're going.' Even then, I didn't realise we were going home. I thought we were going in a van, somewhere else. They took us to

> the door and said 'Go on.' Now, was it because they gave us a slap, or was it because they gave us a kick? I don't know how many were arrested that day. Quite a few. But they never took our names. Now I've always regretted this, and I should have paid more attention, but I'm sure the coppers never had numbers on. I can't be one hundred per cent sure. I'd be lying if I said I could. But the funniest thing. I used to smoke, and when I stopped they gave me a drug called Champix. I was told I'd have these vivid dreams, and I had some horrible dreams … once I dreamt I was at Hadfields, and I was bursting my arse to see if they had numbers! It was in there somewhere [taps head]. I took them for six weeks, then I had to stop.[95]

The Champix-fuelled dreams about those events at Hadfields are a unique indicator of the impact this event had on David Wilkinson's life for many years afterwards. Tony Cook was similarly critical of the Hadfields' workforce, feeling they had never wanted to be involved. But he also felt the legal action had taken the steam out of the strike in the private sector and damaged morale:

> We went to the Lords and we won. But those four or five days were crucial, it was a banana skin, and it took a lot of momentum out of the strike. There were a couple of big places in the steel industry that were still private. Hadfields – because the union had told them to come out, they did, but then they went back. We never got them out again. They wouldn't have it.[96]

At Sheerness, opposition to the strike was even stronger. A works meeting in early February voted 300–7 against involvement in the strike.[97] Only a minority of the eight hundred workers had been in attendance, but the vote was representative of workplace attitudes. The general argument was that Sheerness paid high wages – estimated at between £7,000–£8,000 per year, including overtime,[98] and that relations between management and workers were cordial. As one Sheerness worker put it, 'We get good money here and have never had to go on strike. The strike has nothing to do with us and we refuse to be intimidated by the pickets.'[99]

Sheerness was the only private works that never joined the strike at any point. A mass picket was put in place. On 7 February, three coachloads of activists from Teesside and Wales picketed the site, but opposition came from a group of Sheerness workers' wives who cheered every lorry that entered the plant. One lorry driver also got out of his cab to threaten pickets with an iron bar. Another made four attempts to smash through, finally knocking down a picket and breaking his leg.[100] Taffy Watts, the President of the ISTC at Sheerness, said that there was 'absolutely no chance' of men stopping work.[101] The fact that ISTC branch officers themselves were so forthright in their opposition to the strike showed the difficulties facing the union. On 10 February, over two hundred flying pickets massed at the

gate, including large delegations from Sheffield, Scunthorpe, South Wales and Teesside. Some had planned to stay, but encountered hostility from the local population. Leonard Perret, the landlord of the popular Blue Town pub, the *Jolly Sailor*, was threatened with having his premises burnt if he didn't stop serving pickets.[102] Tony Cook also recalled how owners of local guest houses refused to rent rooms to flying pickets, which forced them to book into accommodation in London and endure a round trip of 110 miles per day.[103]

There are numerous references to Sheerness from the interviewees. One picket, who preferred to remain anonymous, justified picketing the works on the grounds that Sheerness was a competitor to BSC and that continued production there weakened the strike. He recalled tensions, which spilled over into violence, on the Sheerness picket lines:

> Things did get out of hand down there. Sheerness was a big competitor to certain BSC plants. It made the same products. Busloads went down there. It did turn proper nasty. It's like all strikes: you are producing a certain product and you want to grind everything down. If British Steel come out and stop producing this product, you don't want your private competitors supplying it and feeding off it. Basically, they're the ones who're going to win, at the end of the day, because their order books will be full, they can increase the price. Basically, they can dictate on what they want to do. What we wanted was the support from them to say, yes, right, we agree with you, we'll come out with you, and yeah, we need a wage increase as well. If there was solidarity there, we could have done it. But all they did, at Sheerness, was sort of profiteer. They had a massive order book and they put the prices up. [Their workers] were in the same union, hence there were lots of things that went on down there.[104]

V

The steel strike was now well into its second month. Strike organisers had fought hard to get the private plants out, but at this stage it was too early to measure effectiveness of this action. The government repeatedly played down its impact, but the fact that the CBI Director-General, John Methven, was warning that industry might grind to halt within another three to four weeks was not lost on steelworkers.[105] It did raise hopes that their action was beginning to bite. But they were also hurting. Most steelworkers had now gone several weeks without any money, and some were suffering. The events at Hadfields and Sheerness revealed division, even though most ISTC members were willing to continue the strike. These divisions received much coverage in the press, threatening the morale of those steelworkers who

had now been on strike for several weeks. It was also clear that the union leaders were wobbling over the issue of the private plants. Sirs had not only opposed the strike publicly, but along with Smith had indicated to the government there would be little resistance to future rationalisation, from this pair anyway. The strike had been well observed, supported and organised for the most part, but the steel unions were now entering the most crucial period of the dispute, and it would be decisions taken during this time that would shape its eventual outcome.

Notes

1 Interview, Keith Jones.
2 Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 96.
3 Interview, Ian Stewart.
4 Interview, Geoff Walters. For more on the 1913 strike see Paul Fantom, 'Community, Patriotism and the Working Class in the First World War Home Front in Wednesbury, 1914–1918' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2016), pp. 51–70.
5 Interview, Martin Upham.
6 Interview, Martin Kendrick.
7 Interview, John Marston.
8 *The Times*, 5 January 1980.
9 *Glasgow Herald*, 9 January 1980.
10 *Workers Action*, 19 January 1980.
11 *Workers Action*, 12 January 1980.
12 Interview, Russell Clearie.
13 Interview, Keith Jones.
14 *TV Eye*, Thames Television, 24 January 1980. 'Trade union movement | Secondary Picketing | Arthur Scargill | TV Eye | 1980', YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jPj6ZbtF5M [accessed 10 December 2024].
15 *Steelworkers' Banner*, 5.
16 MRC, minutes of special joint meeting of the executives of the ISTC and the NUB, 16 January 1980.
17 *Northern Echo*, 17 January 1980.
18 MTF, PREM19/308 f38, Record of a Meeting Held at 10 Downing Street, 21 January 1980; PREM19/308 f50, Record of a Meeting Held in Ashdown House, 19 January 1980.
19 *The Times*, 22 January 1980; Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched*, p. 141.
20 MRC, minutes of a special meeting between the executives of the ISTC and NUB, 24 January 1980.
21 R. Fevre, *Wales is Closed* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1988), p. 35.
22 *The Times*, 18 January 1980.
23 Fevre, *Wales is Closed*, pp. 30–35.

24 *Workers Action*, 19 January 1980.
25 England, *Wales TUC*, p. 48.
26 England, *Wales TUC*, p. 47.
27 *The Times*, 22 January 1980.
28 *Socialist Challenge*, 24 January 1980.
29 *Evening Times*, 28 February 1980.
30 *Socialist Challenge*, 24 January 80. The 'mad monk' was a reference to Keith Joseph.
31 *TV Eye*, Thames Television, 24 January 1980.
32 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, p. 130.
33 Sandbrook, *Who Dares Wins*, p. 150. The reference relies on a quote from a Hadfields' convenor who was neither involved in, nor supportive of, the strike.
34 Interview, Tommy Brennan.
35 Interview, Mike Hull.
36 Interview, Paul O'Neill.
37 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, p. 129.
38 *Evening Gazette*, 30 January 1980.
39 *Northern Echo*, 28 January 1980.
40 *Northern Echo*, 29 January 1980.
41 *Northern Echo*, 28 January 1980.
42 Roger Welch, 'Judicial Mystification of the Law: Rookes v Barnard and the Return to Judicial Intervention' in K.D. Ewing (ed.), *The Right to Strike: From the Trade Disputes Act 1906 to a Trade Union Freedom Bill 2006* (Liverpool: Institute of Employment Rights, 2006), pp. 195–218.
43 Interview, Tony Cook.
44 *Guardian*, 29 January 1980.
45 England, *Wales TUC*, p. 49.
46 *Guardian*, 29 January 1980.
47 Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 180.
48 *Socialist Challenge*, 31 January 1980.
49 *Socialist Challenge*, 31 January 1980.
50 MRC, minute of ISTC Executive Council meeting, 29 January 1980.
51 NA, CAB 128/67/4, Conclusions of the Cabinet Meeting, 31 January 1980.
52 *The Times*, 15 January 1980.
53 NA, CAB 128/67/3, Conclusions of the Cabinet Meeting, 24 January 1980.
54 *Daily Mirror*, 29 January 1980.
55 *Daily Mirror*, 19 January 1980.
56 MTF, PREM19/309 131, Lord Diplock ruling on secondary picketing (BSC steel strike), extract from PA tape.
57 *The Times*, 8 February 1980. See Scarman's comments on p. 12.
58 MRC, minute of ISTC executive meeting, 1 February 1980.
59 *Guardian*, 2 February 1980.
60 Interview, Martin Kendrick.
61 Interview, John Marston.
62 Interview, John Marston.

63 Interview, Peter Phillips.
64 Interview, Geoff Hawkins.
65 *Workers Action*, February 1980.
66 Interview, Ian Crichton.
67 See 'Maurice Foley: 50 years of Fighting for Union Rights in the London Docks', *Socialist Worker*, 5 May 2005.
68 Interview, Ian Crichton.
69 Interview, Tommy Brennan.
70 Tommy Brennan strike diary.
71 Interview, Mick Hawker.
72 *Socialist Press*, 5 March 1980.
73 Kelliher, 'Class Struggle', p. 18.
74 Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 97.
75 MTF, PREM19/310 f308, Department of Industry Record of Conversation, Adam Butler, Patrick Mayhew, Derek Norton, Len Murray, 18 February 1980.
76 Interview, Chris Fowler, 5 November 2016.
77 *Northern Echo*, 4 February 1980.
78 MTF, PREM19/310 f207, Derek Norton to Margaret Thatcher, 15 February 1980.
79 MTF PREM19/310 f308, Department of Industry Record of Conversation, 18 February 1980.
80 *Northern Echo*, 6 February 1980.
81 Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 97.
82 *Northern Echo*, 13 February 1980.
83 *Northern Echo*, 11 February 1980.
84 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, pp. 133–34.
85 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, pp. 133–34.
86 Interview, John Marston.
87 Interview, Chris Fowler.
88 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 59.
89 See interview with Arthur Scargill, *Marxism Today*, April 1981.
90 Average earnings for all industrial workers are included in the April 1979 New Earnings Survey, quoted in *Steelworkers' Banner*, 4. The engineering workers eventually settled for £73 per week. *Guardian*, 7 October 1979.
91 One recent example being Sandbrook, who argued in 2019 that unions were 'engaged in what seemed an endless competition to outflank one another on the Left' and that 'eight out of ten people thought the trade unions were too powerful'. Sandbrook, *Who Dares Wins*, p. 142.
92 Interview, Mike Hull.
93 Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 182.
94 Interview, Chris Fowler.
95 Interview, David Wilkinson.
96 Interview, Tony Cook.
97 *The Times*, 8 February 1980.
98 *The Times*, 13 February 1980.

99 *Evening Gazette*, 5 February 1980.
100 *Workers Action*, 23 February 1980.
101 *Northern Echo*, 8 February 1980.
102 *The Times*, 12 February 1980.
103 Interview, Tony Cook.
104 Interview, anonymous picket.
105 *Gazette*, 4 February 1980.

5

‘The dead hand of the state’

The strike would come under pressure from mid-February onwards, as the state began to intensify its efforts to bring the dispute to an end. With picketing more intense, a sharper focus was placed on policing. Allegations of police brutality and state surveillance of activists were made. The ISTC headquarters in Rotherham was burnt down, a crime for which no one would ever be arrested, far less charged. The strike also exposed and exacerbated division within the Conservative government on how to proceed with their stated aim of weakening the trade union movement. Some prominent Conservatives advocated an all-out assault, but others were fearful that a major confrontation at this early stage might end in disaster for the government. The BSC action continued to hold firm, but in the absence of a clear direction from the leadership the strike in the private works weakened. The interviews reflect these processes. They focus on the fate of the private sector strike and reveal the depths of the divisions that opened up as the action began to weaken. The interviews also draw also on deeper collective memories concerning the relationship between the state and the labour movement in Britain; for many activists, the events of 1980 would come to be viewed as part of a continuum of Thatcherite sabotage of the labour movement, situated between the Ridley Report and the miners’ strike of 1984–85.

I

With government and BSC attitudes hardening, the propaganda war took on a greater importance. The unions were given a boost in this regard when *World in Action* researcher Laurie Flynn was handed a cache of internal BSC documents by a BSC employee, which were subsequently broadcast by the team in a report titled ‘The Steel Papers’.[1] The programme aired on 4 February 1980[2] and had an explosive impact, exposing BSC managerial incompetence and rejecting the low productivity of labour figures routinely rolled out by Conservative politicians and the press. Most damning of all

was the suggestion that Keith Joseph had effectively provoked the strike. According to the documents, Joseph had requested that BSC adapt to the tighter cash limit he was planning, but concluded that the corporation's response – titled the *Radical Review*, and including further reductions in output and even more closures – was not radical enough and needed revision. One casualty was the proposed wage deal for 1980–81. BSC had budgeted for a 10.5 per cent settlement in 1980, followed by 13 per cent in 1981, but this was abandoned during the revision process demanded by Joseph. An unnamed British Steel personnel director cautioned that what BSC officials had taken to describing as the 'zero offer' carried with it 'quite serious risks of industrial action, especially if trade unions perceive it as reflecting upon government's influence upon the corporation'.[3] Six months before the strike, Bob Scholey had warned of the potential for disruption if such an offer was made at a time when living costs were increasing by 15–20 per cent. Judging from her comments on the eve of the strike, it is unlikely that Thatcher was aware of Joseph's actions. BSC implicitly accepted the papers as authentic,[4] but attempted to force Flynn to name his source and took out an injunction against *World in Action*, preventing the programme from being repeated and any further disclosure of material.

'The Steel Papers' had an impact on steelworkers, which remains evident today. Geoff Hawkins remembered it by name and recalled some of its contents:

> When we were on strike, that programme, *This Week*, they used to delve into things like this, there was one called 'The Steel Papers'. They found out that steelworks that were going to close, they had full order books, so whether this was a sell out by the government who knows, it all seemed to be political.[5]

Several other steelworkers, who didn't recall the programme by name, articulated similar arguments and observations about the steel industry regarding the productivity of steelworkers and the disingenuousness of BSC management. 'The Steel Papers' may well be a factor in why so many steelworkers remain adamant that the strike was provoked by the Conservative government; it certainly showed that government ministers could impose their will on BSC and made a mockery of their claims to be uninvolved in the dispute.

But if 'The Steel Papers' suggested a hidden hand working against the interests of steelworkers, attention was becoming fixed on a more identifiable opponent – the police. All police leave was cancelled in Kent on 20 February in expectation of another mass picket at Sheerness.[6] 'Turn Them Back' shrieked the right-wing press,[7] but at a strike rally in Motherwell, Mick McGahey predicted to loud cheers that pickets 'will do to Sheerness what they did to Hadfields'.[8] They certainly tried their best, mustering an impressive

1,000 steelworkers and over 360 Kent NUM members in one of the largest pickets the strike would witness. However, they were met with a force of over a thousand police officers and were unable to shut the works. Employees had been bused in earlier, at 4 am, and the police formed a barrier across the access road leading up to the plant.[9] Among the more bizarre sights of the day were those wives and partners of the Sheerness workers who confronted the pickets with steel pots and saucepans on their heads.[10] No lorries attempted to drive through picket lines, but Sheerness employees claimed that 2,000 tonnes of steel had been moved out prior to the picket. Civil servants had expressed fears of violence between pickets and local TGWU members, including dockers, who were said to be supportive of the Sheerness employees.[11] In the event, the violence came from a more predictable source. Five pickets were left requiring hospital treatment after police arrested twenty-nine outside the works. This included Penny Jackson, the secretary of Scunthorpe Labour Party, who was dragged by the hair and kicked by police officers, and a male picket who tried to intervene and received a barrage of blows to the face for his trouble.[12]

The picket had been a remarkable effort, and Brian Connolly insisted that the action had been a success because it had shown the Sheerness workforce 'what trade unionists from all over the country think of them'.[13] Sheerness Chair Clancy Schueppert stated that, while the movement of goods and materials was impossible for much of the day, the pickets had left by 4.10 pm. This allowed for deliveries to be brought in and finished steel taken out of the plant after 4.30 pm.[14] There had been talk of a 24-hour picket, but this hadn't been possible. It showed the difficulty steelworkers had in making their action effective at Sheerness, a remote location where the strike faced a wall of hostility from local people, hoteliers, pubs, shops and guest houses.

The actions of the police at Sheerness brings into focus the role of the state and its influence on the dispute. It was a theme which most interviewees spoke on. Ian Crichton reflected on the different experiences he had with police in Teesside and London during the strike.

> At Cargo Fleet we put a mass picket on and the police responded and all the guys linked arms to stop supplies coming through. Half a dozen big squad cars came with policemen and they said, 'I am going to ask you one more time, part the way and picket normally or I am going to unleash the dogs.' The guys wouldn't do it, so the contents of these great big police cars emptied and they are charging. They have got a proper military-based strategy against a ragbag of guys linking arms, so you can imagine what happened – they kicked the hell out of us, and the dogs were yapping and what have you. But after it was all over it kind of let off a bit of steam, and we were laughing and joking. And the odd policeman that stayed behind we had a joke with

> them, you know – look at this state of this place, it's not fit for pigs, and all that kind of thing, because they were only ordinary working guys, totally distinct from my later experience when I went to picket in London. In London you had the remnants of the SPG at the time, the Special Patrol Group of their police. Our police were predominantly sympathetic working class, but they had more of a political sense to the policing in London, very, very aggressive. If somebody had ever told me that I would see a police officer dead-legging women, because in some of the plants there was a significant contingent of women used to work, and they used to target them knowing full well that your immediate instincts were to bend down and help them up and then they could rush through. They were totally different … you could tell they were right-wingers, racists.[15]

Crichton recalls violence being meted out to pickets both in Teesside and London, but draws a sharp distinction between the two. It is true that the Special Patrol Group (SPG) was a notorious, often violent, paramilitary police unit. Nine months before the steel strike, an SPG officer had used an unauthorised weapon to kill Blair Peach, a teacher who was attending an anti-racist march in Southall. The investigation into Peach's death found that many SPG officers maintained their own private illegal arsenals, with one officer also collecting Nazi memorabilia.[16] The SPG were part of London Metropolitan Police, but other regional police forces had similar units,[17] something which Mike Hull and his wife Val touched upon:

> [Mike Hull] The police could be nasty – the SPG were thugs. Beat one of our lads half to death at Pressed Fisher in Birmingham. There was a picket and the SPG came and kicked the shit out of Kevin. He were a right mess, in hospital about two or three days, but you couldn't prove nowt. The SPG, the London coppers, they were the worst, they were looking for trouble. When I was in Sheerness, you could tell they were trying to goad you. Thugs. And they were thugs, they were fascist thugs, the SPG. They've never changed, and they never will, and that hatred of the police lasted a long, long time – ten or fifteen years. In mining areas here, it's longer. I know a friend of mine who was disgusted that his son is a policeman. But the local police were different.
>
> [Val Hull]: Local police, they were different. My cousin was a policeman, but when they wanted to cause trouble, they brought in other people.[18]

The incident that Mike Hull referred to took place on 6 February at the British Leyland Pressed Steel Fisher Works at Castle Bromwich. This was part of an attempt to target the car industry, one of BSC's main customers. Eye-witnesses estimated there were three hundred police officers at the Castle Bromwich plant, of which thirty were believed to have been SPG. The policing was rough and violent throughout the morning, with pickets being surrounded and several being booted and struck to allow lorries

through. In the aftermath, some pickets would accuse TGWU officials based in Oxford of ordering union drivers to break through their lines.[19] This culminated in one picket, Kevin Casey, being dragged off to the security cabin, where he was beaten so severely there were fears for his life. According to one report, no one was allowed to visit the injured man in hospital for the first couple of days. The attack was so shocking that an ISTC branch secretary from Sheffield broke down in tears when describing it to a meeting of the Selly Oak Constituency Labour Party in Birmingham a few days later.[20] But it was ignored by the national press; two days later *The Times* was claiming it was the police officers who had suffered minor injuries officers during picketing at the works.[21]

Discussing his own arrest and prosecution, Paul O'Neill drew a distinction between local and outside forces:

> We had this mass picket and all these police vans turned up, and Roberts had whispered in my ear that some of these police were from outside the area and he had no control over them. He was supposed to be in charge, but he didn't know them to control them. So we're all stood in front of this gate, and this lorry is coming out, inching … Police come up one side, start pushing, helmets getting knocked off, which upset them. In the melee, I ended up behind the police, in front of the lorry. One of the policemen who'd lost his helmet turned round and saw me, came charging back and pushed me the other way, and I bounced off the side of the lorry and broke his indicator light. I got done with criminal damage, deliberate criminal damage, yeah, and I got found guilty. The solicitor was talking to these policemen and said, 'And you were able to see with clarity Mr O'Neill turn round and deliberately smash this?' 'Yes, sir.' And he had two witnesses. And they took no notice of my two witnesses who saw that it was an accident. They imposed a fine plus the cost of the indicator light.[22]

The miners' strike, it has been suggested, saw the construction of an 'accepted mythology' that local police were more benign than those brought in from elsewhere. This was a line pushed by the local police themselves, even though they were often 'just as active as the external ones'.[23] The interviews here suggest something similar in relation to the steelworkers' strike. Outside forces could be more violent – and the SPG certainly was – but many local forces were also trying to break the strike or reduce its effectiveness. Another common feature of the interviews was a belief that police tactics later deployed in the miners' strike were sharpened during the steel strike. Mike Hull viewed policing and the wider state response to the steel strike as a 'template to destroy the miners'.[24] Russell Clearie said that 'some of the incidents on the telly [during the miners' strike] remind me of what the Police Federation tried to do to the steelworkers'.[25] Tony Poynter saw the policing in 1980 as 'practice' for the miners' strike.[26] John Marston

considered the steel strike as a 'dummy run' for the miners' strike, reflecting bitterly that 'they got away with it'.[27]

This memory of police acting with impunity – as though they were above the law – was certainly commonplace in the testimonies of many striking miners,[28] as well as printworkers at Wapping later in the decade.[29] Political policing has a long history in Britain, and experience has always been regarded as a useful teacher. South Yorkshire police concluded that the steel strike had exposed shortcomings in their ability to respond to mass picketing; they could muster no more than four hundred officers at any one time for strike duty, and had been forced to rely on reinforcements from seven other forces. These mutual aid policing practices stretched back to the time of the Chartist movement, but the experience of the steel strike led some chief constables to conclude they were inadequate and too expensive to fund. The government did later revise the policing command structure, centralising the coordination of the police support units. They also instructed the National Recording Register and the Association of Chief Police Officers to coordinate the policing of future national strikes.[30] So, in some respects, the events of 1980 did influence the police response during 1984–85.

Tommy Brennan and John Foley offered similar accounts about the strike in Scotland. Unlike some local strike leaders in other regions, Brennan made a point of contacting the police to inform them of the picketing, believing that this created good relations. He also revealed that some police had been willing to stop the lorries so pickets could speak to them, but in late February there was a sudden change:

> We went to the power stations at Kincardine Bridge, to picket them. We went to see the local police at Kincardine and the big sergeant said, 'Here's what'll happen. Our guys will stop the lorries and your guy will talk to them, and that's the way it'll operate. If they turn, they turn, if they don't, there's nothing we can do about it.' That's how we operated anyway. If a lorry insisted on going through, you couldn't do anything about it.[31]

> But it all changed one weekend. I was the spokesman down at one of the places. And this Sergeant, who had been nice to me, all of a sudden he says, 'There's a lorry coming in … eff off.' I went like that, 'What?' But that's the day we all got lifted, about thirteen of us.[32]

Tommy Brennan briefly consulted some notes about the strike before recalling this change in policing:

> On 20 February, we had problems on the picket line – the police were becoming more aggressive. The next morning I was speaking to a local policeman that I knew, Joe, in fact I used to have a pint with him now and again, and he was facing out the gate and I was facing in. We'd had no problems up until the day before. The Home Secretary had given instructions to the police on how

> to deal with steel pickets, and it was pretty obvious those instructions were: 'Don't stand any nonsense, just lift them at the first opportunity.' So Joe said to me, 'There's the hooligans in uniform arrived.' Now this was a policeman saying this to me. And I looked round, and there were two minibuses with police. Joe said to me, 'Tommy, you're being pointed out. If I was you, I'd move', he says, 'Because if you don't, you're going to be lifted.' I said 'Joe, there's no way I'm moving.' A lorry arrived and I went to speak to the driver – this was a stockholder's yard – so I started to explain everything to him, but after about five or six minutes he was still insisting he was going through. So I got down and told the guys what was happening, and said 'Look, he's insisting he's going through, but I'm gonnae have one more attempt to see if I can persuade him not to.' I went back up to the cabin again, and I'm speaking to him, and the next thing, wham, I was bent over this wall and there was four of them and they handcuffed me, huckled me into the motor and into the jail at Bellshill. Fourteen arrested that day and another nine in Wishaw.[33]

> There were a lot of rumours they were the army. In the station there were thirteen of us, and I was the only one charged with police assault, which I hadnae done. I was talking to the driver when I got huckled into the Black Maria, and this sergeant comes in and says 'You're charged with police assault', and he hadn't even seen whit had happened. I got fined £250 for police assault. The main polis that spoke against me, the wan in the van who hadn't seen anything, the lies he told! He says I ran between the back of the van and ran and kicked the polis, to be a hero. A lot of nonsense. The polis in the back of the van, he didn't see anything, but told all sorts of lies.[34]

As we have seen during other strikes, many steelworkers who were arrested were advised by union-appointed lawyers to plead guilty.[35] Brennan chose not to do this, and instead sacked the lawyer, got the ISTC to replace him with a better firm, and fought his case. He lost, but avoided a fine and was given an absolute discharge. Foley was fined and left with a criminal record that would affect him in later life.[36] As Brennan indicated, in addition to the arrests at Unthank Road nine pickets were arrested at Steel Stockholders' Wishaw Yard, before William Samuel, for the second time in this strike, agreed to suspend all movement of steel. Thatcher later wrote to him, expressing disgust at the 'ugly scenes' and promising that her planned legislation would bring such picketing to an end.[37] Overall, Strathclyde Police had arrested thirty pickets, with twenty-three being held overnight at Motherwell Police Station.[38]

Brennan recorded 20 February 1980 as the day the Home Secretary instructed the police to take a harsher line against the pickets. That date did mark a step change in the policing of the strike and was one that had been coming for some time. From the earliest point of the strike, the Tory Right, business leaders and the press had called for a tougher response. This was intensified when the private sector became involved, and reached

tipping point with the mass picketing of Hadfields in mid-February. That rattled the government and led to a flurry of phone calls between Thatcher and her ministers the following Sunday. The highlights of these conversations included Keith Joseph's obsession with Scargill and his desire to have him charged with a breach of criminal law; Thatcher's (failed) knee-jerk proposal for a one-clause bill that would immediately outlaw all secondary picketing and secondary strike action; and the intertwined relationship between government and police, when it came to strike-breaking. Noticeable here was the hostility to the strike from the police chiefs, their determination to keep steel plants open and their demands that the government give them full support to conduct mass arrests if necessary.[39] A course of action was decided by the Cabinet the following day. The Home Secretary, Willie Whitelaw, suggested a statement in Parliament from the Attorney General, Michael Havers, outlining the law as it stood, which he could then follow up with guidance to the police. The following day, Havers duly delivered, informing police that they possessed greater powers than were at present being used. This included the power to limit the number of pickets in any one place, 'where they had a fear of disorder'. He also instructed police that pickets massed in large numbers to prevent access to workplaces were not protected by the law and could be arrested, as they were acting to obstruct rather than persuade.[40]

Mike Hull reflected not only on the policing he encountered, but other examples of state interference:

> Our phone was tapped, very crudely. We knew someone who worked at the exchange and they told us it was tapped. William Hague, the politician, his father owned a pop factory at Parkgate. So we said, we were going to send X amount of pickets to an address in Parkgate, and they must have thought it was a factory because we were sending a lot of people there. When we got there, one person had a walk round to see what it was like. There were about twenty or thirty policemen there. And it was a big joke – we'd sent them all to a pop factory. We sent them on other wild goose chases, but that one is the best example.[41]

Peter Phillips had a similar story to tell:

> I know for a fact my home phone was tapped. I hired a minibus from a local guy – he didnae hire them, but I got it. I knew the guy well, he still lives in Hallside village. He phoned me up and said, 'Peter, I've no to give you this minibus, I've been told not to give you it.' He later told me it was the polis who said, 'Don't give him that minibus.' The only way they could have known was through my phone. It's the only way they could have known.[42]

On 19 February there was a police raid on the Birmingham Labour Club, which involved dozens of officers, backed up by a dog unit and several

police vehicles. This was the HQ for the strike in Birmingham, and the purpose of the raid was to seize strike documents left in the room being used by the pickets.[43] The following week there was a much more serious incident, recalled by Mike Hull:

> I don't know now. I couldn't put my hand on my heart and say it wasn't the state who burnt our offices down. It was February, we had all the momentum and everything was going in our favour. We had everybody picketing, we had everything organised really well, and then, all of a sudden, someone threw a petrol bomb through the door and the office went up … There was someone in the office; he had to jump through the window, and quite easily could have been killed. The police could never get to the bottom of it. Now, whether they tried very hard, I don't think they did. This was the main ISTC union office, but what made it worse, it was a terrace, and there was a house next door to it where a family lived. Ours was the end terrace; quite a big old Victorian terrace. It did knock us back a bit. Fortunately, the leader of the council found us some old offices in Parkgate. But it took us another week to get back. The feeling was the state had done that.[44]

This attack took place in Rotherham on Saturday 23 February 1980. The firebombing of a union office during a strike was a serious and rare crime in Britain, but, in contrast to the blanket media coverage of picketing at places like Hadfields and Sheerness, this act of arson was barely reported in the national press, with no attempt being made to discuss its wider implications.[45] Local press reports named the person inside the building as Bruce Wotton and commented on how he had to jump from the first floor of the building to save his life. His wife combined relief at the fact he had escaped with anger at the 'demented' people who had carried out the attack.[46] ISTC official Joe Pickles apportioned some of the blame to the Tory propagandists and press, whose demonisation of the strikers had 'led people to believe we are evil people'.[47] Bill Sirs visited Rotherham later that day, reporting back to the Executive Council that Wotton had suffered a broken ankle and the gutted building had incurred around £40,000 worth of damage.[48] Mike Hull's belief that the state might have been involved and that the local police hadn't tried hard to solve the crime shows the degree to which many activists had become alienated, as a result of the tactics of the police and the attitude of the government. He displayed how this led to him and other steelworkers reconsidering the nature of the strike itself:

> I'm not sure what it meant to other people, but it came to mean a different thing in South Yorkshire and in some other parts. Originally, it was a strike about money, but it became something different to the activists and officials. It became a battle with the state. The attitudes changed; you felt the dead hand of the state on what was supposed to be an industrial dispute. You got the impression she [Thatcher] wanted to teach us a lesson and used the auspices

> of the state to do it. It grew to what happened at Orgreave. It was changing from a pay dispute to something else. It changed for the activists, but to be honest, even the normal steelworkers were asking questions like, 'Why haven't policemen got numbers on their shoulders, when by law they've got to?' You'd ask one, and they'd say, 'Well, it's because if there's a scuffle and you get hurt.' And you say 'Piss off!', it was because you couldn't identify them.[49]

Keith Jones said the union knew almost straight away the identity of the arsonist, as he was injured by the fire and found nearby, but believed the real source of the attack to be one of the major private employers in Sheffield. Unlike Sirs, who depicted the private works as financially weak, Jones argued that they were making hefty profits in Sheffield and that this was the motivation for the attack. He also recounted another serious incident that involved his wife and young child, and the impact this had on him:

> We had some very muscular private employers – they were making £10,000, a ton profit, which was no small figure in this city. It was always an engineering city Sheffield, high-value production. We closed a lot of them down. My wife at the time, we had a son and he was eighteen months old, and a —— company steel wagon overtook them and dropped its load on their bonnet. And it was an ingot bloom – a round ingot – it came off. Now I've discussed this with people since. I said, 'Do they come off?' They said, 'Yes, because they're only chained on, and if it's not done properly…'. My son, he said, 'Mummy screamed, and I banged my nose.' The car was totally wiped out – it was completely written off. So, I know that much. I mean my wife, she never told me at the time, but they could have been killed, and if they had, I would have topped myself, there is no question about that. I wouldn't be here. I would have thought, 'I done this.' I spoke to the police and they told me the driver had got out and ran away, which was very unusual. So, we roll on. After the strike I stood for the general secretary position, but because it wasn't a democratic institution – it was a committee that decided it – their preferred candidate won. I was transferred to a dying area, North Wales, back to my home area. Now that company had reformed as —— and ran steel into Trafford Park steelworks. I was there as a union official dealing with it, and was chatting with a couple of their drivers. Without saying who I was, or being too probing, I said, 'What was that thing I heard about in Sheffield during the strike?' And they just said, 'That wasn't one of ours.' That's all he said. Now I know what I think, but I'll let you make your own construction. Those are the facts, my wife and son nearly killed with a steel ingot …
>
> The attack on the office? It was a Saturday night, and I'd left the office – because they timed it too late. We had a big, old-fashioned terraced building in Rotherham – and he'd come in through the back door, it was open when it shouldn't have been, poured petrol everywhere, all the fumes had filled the internal cavity – then went through the front door and put a torch through and it blew back and burnt him. Yeah, and it went up like a bomb – it kind

> of banged because of all the fumes. The guy who was in the upper room jumped out – there were two-foot prints on the garden, you know? It was meant for me, it was my office, no question it was meant for me. Some of the guys on the Left, the Trotskyist Left, they brought the name to me. He was basically a ne'er-do-well, because that's how these things are done. It's not like the movies – there aren't professional hitmen waiting in places. You just get some vagabond, whose an alcoholic. I didn't tell the police. I thought, 'He's just a wretched person really' – but he was a tool. The person responsible, who's now dead, was called —— ——, Director at ——. He was also known as —— ——. I mean, I got on ok with him – he was a big, bluff, masculine kind of a guy – but it's the kind of thing he would do, very hands-on, rather crude.[50]

In South Wales, John Foley commented that he was given police protection at both his home and office in South Wales, following the firebombing in Rotherham, but like many others expressed disdain at many other actions of police forces during the strike.

> I have a lot to thank them for, the police. When our office was petrol bombed in Sheffield, within twenty-four hours I had a guard front and back of my office, and my home in Newport … We had a lot of aggro, not from local police, but from that regional patrol group. We wouldn't tell them where we were going; they seemed to get the information from bus drivers … I suppose it was a battle of wits. But generally, from the local police, even though I wouldn't cooperate, and I got some threatening letters from the chief constable of Gwent particularly because I was based at Newport, we had a good relationship. But it was always when that damn regional patrol group came in that we received a kicking, and we saw it even got worse during the miners' dispute. I must admit my perception of the police and my respect for them has never recovered.[51]

II

In addition to policing, the extension of the picketing in the strike, and the sustained anti-trade union press coverage of events at Hadfields and Sheerness, brought the issue of solidarity or secondary action to the fore of the political agenda, exposing tensions within the government. The Conservatives were committed to passing anti-trade union legislation, but there was disagreement between right-wing ideologues such as John Hoskyns, a key adviser to Thatcher, and some 'wets', including the Employment Secretary Jim Prior, on the issues at stake and the pace of the required changes. Hoskyns believed that employers should be free to sack any striking worker, and went on to advocate a battery of measures, dubbed 'Havoc 80', that would ban all secondary action and, crucially, provide the right to sue for damages unions

who engaged in such activity.[52] However, from the summer of 1979 onwards, Prior had been piloting a more modest bill. Restrictions were imposed on picketing and the closed shop. The former was to be limited to six employees at the primary site, and the latter was to be conditional on 80 per cent of the workforce agreeing to such a practice.

The absence of outright bans on secondary action and closed shops displeased the Tory Right, but Prior was keen to avoid an early showdown with the unions of the type that had occurred over the 1971 Industrial Relations Act. Soon after the steel strike began, the pressure began to build on him to beef up his planned restrictions. In early January, Thatcher appeared on *Weekend World*, and amid an interview that focused largely on the steel strike pledged that the issue of secondary action and the degree of immunity trade unions had from breaches of commercial contracts would be addressed in the bill.[53] The Law Lords verdict on the private sector strike also added to the pressure, as the Lords themselves had outlined the need for new legislation to prevent such action in the future. In early February, over one hundred Tory MPs signed an early-day motion demanding immediate legislation to restore 'industrial equity'.[54]

Pressure also came from the private steel bosses. In a meeting with Thatcher and Prior, the Director General of the British Independent Steel Producers Association (BISPA), Alex Mortimer, called for 'urgent action' to outlaw all secondary striking and picketing, while John Patterson, Chair of Duport Steel and prime mover behind the legal challenge to the private sector strike in January, complained that management morale in the industry was being 'destroyed' by the 'inadequacy' of the existing laws.[55]

Prior responded by publicising the insertion of a new clause into the bill which restricted secondary action to the first supplier to the company in dispute.[56] As he had already made clear to Thatcher, although secondary action conducted by employees of the first supplier to the company in dispute would remain legal, the bill would make it illegal for workers from one firm to induce, through picketing, workers from another firm from going into work. As applied to the steel strike, it meant that stockholders and private companies could still be picketed by their own employees, as these companies had contracts with BSC, but picketing at transport companies would be banned if their contracts were with the stockholders.[57] BSC workers would also be banned in the future from picketing private works. These were significant anti-trade union measures, and showed the impact of the strike on the Tory Party and government, but did not go far enough for some. Prior was grilled by the backbench 1922 Committee, but responded in stark terms, warning the right wing of the Tory party that if the government rushed into 'hard action' it might provoke a general strike.

He conceded that another bill in a year or two might be necessary, to deal with the other issues.[58] Prior would soon be replaced by Thatcher's close ally, Norman Tebbit, and banished to Northern Ireland, but he had set in motion the Tory permanent revolution as applied to trade union reform, the approach that would whittle away trade union rights piece by piece over the next ten years.

The situation remained tense within the private plants. In contrast to the public statements of Tory politicians, the action was having an effect. At the BISPA meeting with Thatcher and Prior, John Patterson had described the situation as 'horrific' and claimed the private companies were losing £10 million per week.[59] Joseph conceded to the Cabinet that shortages of tin plate were affecting the canning industry.[60] It was later revealed that BSC and the CBI held regular meetings during the strike, at which they decided to leak inaccurate information to the press, playing down the impact of the strike. Secret documents suggested that the corporation was aware that the strike was affecting many industrial sectors, but was determined to hide this in its public statements.[61] The truth occasionally leaked out. The CBI's northern director, and future Tory MP, John Cran, said that he had information from thirty local firms, stating that if the strike went beyond the end of February, they would be in trouble.[62] Darlington & Simpson introduced a small level of redundancies, while Head Wrightson placed hundreds of workers on a four-day week.[63] Metal Box had already laid off around 7,000 workers and cut production at twenty-two of its thirty plants. The company had a 70 per cent share of the British tin can market, but was able to fulfil orders for only around 30 per cent of its normal load.[64] On 16 February, the Road Haulage Association estimated that between 800–1,000 drivers had lost their jobs, because of the strike in the private sector.[65] Duport steelworks in South Wales announced plans for redundancies. Smedley HP ceased tinned peas production and paid off around 180 staff at their York factory, while Brooke Bond, which owned the tinned food brand Fray Bentos, did likewise with 250 of their 350 staff in Hackney.[66]

Bill Sirs accused government and industry of concealing the true facts with the aim of 'trying to break the trade union movement'.[67] However, the strike in the private sector was potentially a double-edged sword; the more successful the action, the greater the redundancies it might create. Activists argued that a victory for the BSC workers over Thatcher and the employers would boost trade unionism in the industry and strengthen their hand in resisting closures in both sectors.[68] But in a context where the strike was ongoing, with no sign of victory in sight, and where the leader himself didn't believe in private sector action and had internalised the BSC case for

cuts, the dangers were clear. At a public meeting organised by the King's Lynn Trades Council, it was disclosed that 550 Metal Box employees had been made redundant in Wisbech.[69] The workers, all trade unionists, were said to have blamed the government for this, but the pressure was building as fears over jobs escalated. Sheerness remained the biggest headache. At a meeting of the ISTC and NUB executives on 19 February, it was pointed out that other private sector companies were returning to work, and that this was partly due to fears that Sheerness would steal their orders.[70] The following week's ISTC executive meeting saw private sector delegates speak of a 'weakening of resolve' among their members, 'due to the threat of job losses and the risk of plant closures'. Sheerness was cited again, and it was claimed that the company had indeed been carrying out orders initially placed with other plants, now on strike. At this meeting, an angry Sirs blasted the Sheerness workforce, claiming they 'did not have the same traditions of trade unionism' as other plants. A resolution was passed warning Sheerness ISTC members who were continuing to work that they would be expelled from the union.[71] The justification for this also rested on an allegation that Sheerness workers were calling on other works to break the strike. The resolution was implemented a week later, and all six hundred Sheerness ISTC members were expelled.

The complexities of the private sector strike were highlighted at Darlington & Simpson Rolling Mills, where around 750 of the 1,000 employees were ISTC members, with the remainder being spread around the various craft unions. This plant had joined the strike after a 723–7 vote in favour. A letter had also been sent to thirteen members who had continued to work that they would have no future at the plant when the strike ended, and that no one would be prepared to work with them. However, management argued that the strike was delaying a major order to Iraq said to be vital to the firm's future. They pushed for a dispensation to move out parts of the work already complete, threatening that the order could be lost. Shop stewards at the plant believed there was no question of this happening, but there were signs that support for the strike might be weakening. John Cheadle, a former ISTC branch secretary, was now said to be the 'leader of the anti-strike movement in the Mills'. In what seemed a bizarre claim, he had earlier argued that the ISTC had 'no jurisdiction' over any of the employees in the works as they had all signed letters leaving the union before the strike had spread to the plant.[72] The current branch secretary, Morris Hutchinson, was also opposed to the strike, and had previously expressed hope that the ISTC executive would soon call it off.[73]

In the West Midlands, around 9,000 private sector steelworkers had initially joined the strike across several works, two of which had remained

out even after the Denning judgement.[74] Some of the picketing in this region had been intense.

> The big one was the Patent Shaft. I was there, there was police charges, there was all sorts. Bricks went through lorries' windscreens; it seriously turned nasty. Obviously, they could compete with British Steel. It was the same situation with Hadfields in Sheffield, but Hadfields wasn't as bad as Patent Shaft. The police [pause] … well they did the job they had to do. If people were being violent or untoward, they step in, truncheons raised. I wouldn't say they were heavy-handed, just doing their job. The drivers? They just shit themselves, basically. It was something I disagreed with. They had a living to earn, and you did have a***holes who did things that I disagreed with. We were here to do a job. They were here to do a job. You know? To me, it was stupid. You didn't get a chance to speak to them. As soon as they tried to drive towards a picket line, that's when the bricks came. People would try and stop them, talk to them, but certain drivers they just accelerated, and that's when the bricks came.[75]

Support was holding for the action in the Black Country generally, but problems were developing at Round Oak in Brierley Hill. Threats were being made that the works may close permanently. By this stage, several manufacturing firms in the West Midlands were reporting that customers abroad had invoked penalty clauses for failure to meet delivery targets. CBI regional director Stephen Rankin also noted that one major company had predicted over a thousand lay-offs unless there was a settlement within a fortnight.[76] Rather than being viewed as evidence that the strike was succeeding, and that further pressure might result in a victory, this type of discourse tended to further weaken the morale of those opposed to the strike. On 19 February, a coachload of private sector ISTC members visited the union headquarters in London. The delegation was divided, with some expressing support and others warning the ISTC leadership to 'settle the strike or we split the union'.[77] Forty workers from Firth Brown in Sheffield were part of this delegation. They warned that the works would shut permanently if the strike continued. James Willis, ISTC branch secretary, said, 'We want to go back to work and will unless there's a solution by the end of the week.'[78] But when a vote was taken a few days later, it did not produce a clear cut result, with only around half of the one thousand members at Firth Brown voting in favour of a return.

This was the context for the difficulties at Round Oak, and on the weekend of 23–24 February, the workforce met secretly and decided on a return to work. Employees were ferried into Round Oak at 6 am on the Monday, catching pickets unawares. ISTC official Clive Lewis played down the significance of the return by noting that, 'Round Oak has been the only crack in our ranks.'[79] But within the activist base, there was anger. Geoff

Walters had attended the meeting with the executive in London and remained supportive of the strike. He recalled the picketing that took place at Round Oak after this return to work:

> We heard Round Oak was going back to work. I knew that that was going to happen because we, the private sector, went down to see Bill Sirs and the Executive Council in London. Jack Bate got up and told Bill Sirs, 'You want to hurry up and get it sorted because I can't hold these blokes much longer.' He told Bill Sirs that. Then it came through that they'd had a meeting and decided they were going back to work, they were going to break the strike. Of course we all went there. All my lot went there. I'll be quite honest with you, it could have ended the same as Orgreave for the miners. The police station for Round Oak is about three hundred yards, and they were marching the police from the station past the pickets in groups of forty – left, right, left, right, left, right. There's only one thing that I still believe that stopped Orgreave happening at Round Oak: it's because the majority of the policemen that were on duty were neighbours. Neighbours, friends, go down the pub with them. Black Country people are close. With the miners, those coppers came from all over the country. They had got no feeling for the people that they were facing. That's what stopped an Orgreave at Round Oak Steelworks because it was hot, it was man.[80]

Jack Bate was the leading ISTC activist at Round Oak, but believed the strike should be ended in the private sector. John Marston also recalled this:

> I always had a lot of time for [Jack Bate]. He used to take a deep breath and then he would come out a very strong speaker, never needed notes or anything, all from the heart. I can see him now standing up in that meeting, and they were part of the private sector. He said, 'Bill Sirs has took a job on that he can't finish. He's fetched us in to finish it off for them because he can't do it.' Towards the end of the strike, Jack Bate was on the coach going into Round Oak Steelworks, scabbing. He scabbed towards the end, and then he ended up as an EC member after that, and I was absolutely fuming about it.[81]

In the immediate aftermath of this return to work, a downbeat Jack Bate told ATV that the ISTC strike had put the company on a 'crash course', and that he could not be responsible for 2,000 people ending up on the dole.[82] Deindustrialisation and the threat of unemployment seemed to hang like a spectre over private sector steelworkers. Consett flying picket Arthur Carter revealed that private sector workers were being issued with ultimatums from managers to return to work or face the sack.[83] A further blow was delivered the following week when Patent Shaft announced plans to close. The 150-year-old company had posted a £2 million loss in the past year, and concluded that a recovery was not possible. The final cast at the factory would take place on 17 April 1980, and in the October all the machinery

would be auctioned off. A company spokesperson said that although the strike had 'not helped', the decision had been taken 'independently of it'. Around 85 per cent of the company product was steel plate, for which there had been a substantial surplus in Britain and throughout the world since 1945.

This was the first closure of a major steelworks in the private sector since nationalisation, and an event that shocked steelworkers everywhere, damaging morale and support for the strike.[84] Resistance was promised and a campaign was mounted, which among its other features involved ISTC leader at the plant, John French, blocking the M1 motorway in Birmingham.[85] But as Hudson and Sadler have pointed out, the reality was that when steel plants gave notice to close, they always closed in the end.[86] The steel unions always seemed too fragmented and parochial, too concerned with their own local and sectional interests, and ultimately too poorly led to mount effective industrial action against closures. The steel strike had achieved much through joint action, and many steelworkers wanted a fight on both fronts, but the union leaders had no intention of fighting the closures. Occasionally they would come face to face with this demand, and were dishonest in their replies. For example, on 22 March, Sirs and Smith both appeared at a rally in Newport and were asked why the jobs and pay issues had been separated. Smith – who had lectured BL workers to accept 25,000 redundancies – responded flatly that this is what the negotiating committee had decided. Aware of the inadequacy of that answer, Sirs argued that it had been the decision of the TUCSICC, but that 'from the outset' he had always wanted to keep the issues of jobs and pay together.[87] This was untrue; at his meeting with Thatcher on 19 January, Sirs had made a point of telling the PM how he had kept the issues separate, against the efforts of those who wanted jobs to be part of the strike demand.

At the ISTC executive meeting on 25 February, Sirs argued that many private sector workers 'were getting desperate due to the fears raised in many instances by managers about job losses'.[88] Workers at Firth Brown and Spencer Clark had voted to return to work.[89] On the same day, 21,000 redundancies were announced at BL, 18 per cent of the workforce.[90] But despite all the negative press coverage, the enduring hardship, the opposition from Sirs, and the very real fears over their jobs, as the end of February neared, 11,000 of the 20,000 private sector steelworkers were still out on strike.[91] It was a remarkable number, given everything that had occurred. But in the absence of any clear directive or guide from the ISTC leadership, confusion was growing. Following the ISTC vote at Firth Brown, engineering workers there voted by 7:1 to also end their strike. Engineering shop stewards had advised against this, but were outvoted. Two-thirds of the private sector in Sheffield were now back at work.

A series of large rallies were held to reinvigorate the action. In Scunthorpe, over 3,000 people attended a demonstration and rally in the town, addressed by Tony Benn and Arthur Scargill. Scargill stated that he had not seen such depth of solidarity since the 1974 miners' strike and argued that victory in this dispute was in the gift of the TUC.[92] In South Yorkshire there were two mass rallies, one at Rotherham United football ground, the other in Sheffield town hall. The latter event was attended by 1,500 people and addressed by members of the local strike committee, including Keith Jones. The latest pay offer of 10 per cent was discussed and rejected, on the basis that it was 'blood money', the price of which was 52,000 redundancies.[93]

The ISTC executive held a further special meeting on 29 February to discuss the private sector strike. A report from Round Oak was read, which outlined ongoing management threats to over 1,500 jobs should the strike continue and the need for the workforce 'to totally accept management's proposals on reductions in manpower'. Several private sector activists addressed the meeting and pointed out that, in many workplaces, there had been a return to work. This was against the instructions of the union, but left branch officials in an 'exposed position by remaining out on strike while their membership had returned to work'. Sirs attempted to chivvy the EC towards an official end to the private sector strike. He pointed out that the annual agreement with ISEA was due to expire on 31 March, but that the 'problem' of the stalled negotiations with the Midland Iron and Steel Wages Board could not be resolved until the strike ended. Remarkably, he also argued that the continued media reference to private sector strike action and picketing was a 'distraction' from the BSC dispute; from being considered the nuclear option that would atomise BSC and the Tory government, the private sector strike was now presented as a hindrance. The EC resolved no formal change in the policy regarding the private sector strike, but in those companies where the membership had resumed work, branch officials were also to return to 'exercise control and surveillance within the works'.[94] The message was clear, and it unravelled the strike in the private sector.

John Marston recalled the EC meeting, where this decision was taken and clearly disagreed with it:

> We were out for six weeks, and we'd got no intention of going back, but at the EC meeting Bill Sirs said, 'If you're under pressure from your members, you can go back to work.' It was the biggest mistake ever because what do you call pressure? Anything is pressure. Joe Bloggs up the road, 'Well I've got to pay my mortgage, I need to go back to work.' That's pressure, isn't it? It's how you interpret pressure. It collapsed. The whole lot completely collapsed. I said, 'I'm not going back', because the officials wanted to be back in, they wanted to be back in. I said, 'Well I'm not going back to work until every single member of ours has gone in.' We had a chap jump up, and he said,

> 'Well I'm not going back to work.' I said, 'Well I'll stand with you on the picket line, mate.' This man had never spent a minute on the picket line. We knew that he was working somewhere else, and he didn't want to go back to work. I said, ' I'll stand with you … the day they're going back, I'm not going in.' The others then were embarrassed, and they said, 'Well we're not going in then.' We sat outside on the weighbridge for a full day. The managing director actually came out with a little silver tray with cups of tea for us. He said, 'I don't agree with what you're doing, but I do respect what you're doing. But I think you should be back at work because they're all in.' This chap had also gone back into work.[95]

Although the action was never officially called off, the private sector strike began to disintegrate. Again, the situation at Darlington & Simpson Rolling Mills captured trends elsewhere. This was a works that had voted heavily in favour of the strike in February, but on 3 March decided by a 'huge majority' to return to work.[96] Only thirty voted to continue the action. Crippling financial problems lay behind the vote. Less than a third of those who had been on strike for five weeks had their applications for supplementary benefit approved. Morris Hutchinson said they had done all they could to support the BSC strike. He reminded members that the EC meeting on 29 February had 'more or less' left it up to individual branches to decide whether to continue the strike. Because of that, he did not feel that they were going against their union. It was now being reported that 'many' private steel firms throughout the country were doing likewise and offering the same justification.[97] Raines on Tyneside voted to remain out, but by 14 March they were among the last to do so. By 18 March, every private works in the country had returned.

The end of the strike in the private sector of the industry was a huge blow to activists. Many had seen this as their trump card, which would force Thatcher to concede. The strike had clearly had an effect. That much could be seen with the redundancies and temporary closures that had hit the sector. But five weeks of strike action hadn't been long enough to shift either BSC or the Conservative government. The strike had always been opposed by Sirs. Even after it had cleared the legal minefield at the end of January, he continued to place obstacles in its path. Sirs' negativity has to be seen as a factor in the decision of the ISTC to allow the private sector strike to peter out after just one month of strike action. As we have seen, at the point the ISTC leadership was making this concession, on 29 February, most union members in the sector were still on strike. Some continued to remain on strike for over two weeks thereafter.

The breaking of the strike at Round Oak was significant because, unlike Sheerness and Hadfields, this was a major private works led by committed trade unionists who had been behind the strike from the beginning.

The way the strike was ended at Round Oak, and the picketing that followed, damaged morale and strengthened the position of BSC and the government. It has been argued that the decision by Round Oak workers should be understood in terms of what has been presented as a moral economy framework; in a local context, where Bilston had been shut with the national leadership failing to offer a fight to save it, and where Patent Shaft had been served notice that it was next, Round Oak workers felt the only way they could protect their jobs and community was to return to work.[98] The point concerning the failings of the national leadership seems unanswerable; the ISTC had no more of a strategy for dealing with the threats posed to private works than they did for the BSC ones. But for steelworkers like Geoff Walters and John Marston, Round Oak had broken the strike, and in so doing weakened the position of all steelworkers. This was not a local dispute but a national strike with implications for steelworkers all over the country. In their view, Round Oak was less moral economy and more a case of self-interest, an embodiment of the parochialism that had left steel unions hamstrung for the best part of a century. Forty years later there was an anger in Walters' final words on Round Oak, and an unforgiving attitude towards those he considered to have led the return to work:

> I used to get on really well with a bloke from Round Oak; he had the rhetoric, a real left-wing lad. He could get up and speak and lay it all down for everybody, but when it came to the nitty-gritty, him and all his blokes went back to work … Now of course they've got that second name: Mr Jim Smith Scab, Mr Charlie, whatever his name is, Scab. It opened my eyes, the strike did [very long pause] … I know I was a bit of a bloody hard case, but stupid things happened. Everybody was changed after that strike. I lost a lot of friends, never spoke to them again, but I've gained a good many friends. But I miss that bloke at Round Oak, a big mate of mine. As I was on the pickets he was inside the works organising against the people that he'd supposed to have been. His name was Jack Bate. There was a lad from Leazes, you know, a massive big friend of mine. He was sneaking through the back of the works, through the fence, going to work. I never spoke to him again. Friendships were finished. John French, from Patent Shaft, he's a great lad. But when I say to him, 'Remember the scabs at Round Oak?' he says, 'Geoff, it's gone now, it was a long time ago.' But it should never go. Yes, I know it's the truth. I used to take my grandkids out to Stourport, and we used to go through Brierley Hill, and I always used to tell them, 'Now, this is Brierley Hill, commonly known to the steelworkers as scab country.' It's very true, man, and it was scab country. They broke the bloody strike in 1980. We had a conference in the Midlands after the strike, and I was there, and who should get up was Jack Bate on the rostrum giving it the rhetoric again. Now I made a show of my bloody self. I got up, I walked to the back, and I walked down the middle aisle straight towards him, like that. I was eyeballing him all the

way along, and I got there, and I was about from here to that wall [about ten feet] from here, and he was on the rostrum, and I went, 'You're a scab.' I turned round and I walked out. If they'd have wanted to take me on, the way I was feeling … Now, that's my opinion of a strikebreaker.[99]

III

Hopes that the strike might spread to the mines had also been dashed. A 160-strong South Wales NUM delegate conference was held on 20 February and voted unanimously in favour of joining the steel strike.[100] Pithead ballots followed over the next few days. Bearing in mind Gormley's opposition to strike action, it was a move that revealed the depth of the miners' concerns over their futures. It was expected that the pithead ballots would endorse the delegates decision, but at a Cabinet meeting held on 21 February, Keith Joseph indicated to his colleagues that a different outcome was more likely.[101] This was before the result of any pithead ballot vote had been publicised, but Joseph appeared to be well-briefed, because by Monday 25 February, of the twenty-one pits that had declared a result, twenty had voted against a strike. The final tally was 22,000 votes against strike action, with 4,000 in favour.[102]

Discussing this in his history of the Wales TUC, England commented that the 'shock troops of the Welsh working class had refused to go into battle'.[103] But this is a misreading of the situation. As Ian Isaacs, the secretary of St John's NUM lodge at Maesteg, pointed out at a recall NUM delegate conference shortly afterwards, one of the key reasons for the defeat of the strike call was the lack of backing from the NUM national executive and the TUC.[104] Isaacs stated: 'It was clear that the rank and file felt the Welsh miners could be isolated by taking action alone from 25 February. They were willing to fight, but wanted a firm national lead.' Isaacs also accused colliery managers of interfering, by pressurising pits into bringing forward their ballots, and feeding them inaccurate information to sway the vote in their favour.[105] Jack Pugsley, the secretary of Nantgarw colliery lodge, said 'We were prepared to join a strike approved by the TUC, but not to be pushed into going alone. Our men are very angry.'[106]

Following the ballot, George Rees, President of the South Wales NUM, expressed 'extreme' disappointment, but believed that the results showed that the miners would take action as long as it was organised on a national basis throughout Britain's coalfields by their National Executive Committee (NEC).[107] The Left viewed the collapse of the proposed South Wales NUM strike with dismay, blaming the national leaderships of the TUC, NUM and ISTC for their repeated failure to broaden the strike. They argued that

the original call for a general strike over the closures had been supported by a nine to one majority of South Wales miners, but that two months of prevarication, including the manoeuvres made by the TUC and ISTC to replace the call for a general strike with one day of action, had taken its toll. They also pointed out how, although McGahey and Scargill had brought miners on to the streets to support the steelworkers, it was only the South Wales NUM that appeared to be willing to come out on strike, and how in this isolated situation it was perhaps not a surprise that the ballot had been lost.[108]

IV

By the end of February, the impetus that had been injected following the entry of the private sector was on the wane. The involvement of the private works had been hugely significant. It showed that real solidarity could be built between steelworkers, even in these difficult circumstances. At a time of economic recession and spiralling inflation, thousands had sacrificed several weeks' wages in a struggle that their own leader had constantly said wasn't theirs to fight. Perhaps if the connected nature of the two sectors had been outlined, and a more positive position take by the union leadership, more enduring support from that sector would have been possible. However, the threat of job losses was palpable in the private steelworks. Those workers needed to know that their own jobs would be defended and that redundancies would not be accepted. These assurances never came. In addition to this, the state was beginning to turn the screw to defeat the strike. Following an intervention from the government, policing was becoming more aggressive, violence was being used, arrests were increasing and anti-trade union legislation was being strengthened. Some employers may themselves have resorted to criminally violent deeds to defeat the strike. But despite all of this, the two-month BSC strike was holding. And notwithstanding Tory and corporation propaganda to the contrary, it was having an effect, albeit not to the level hoped for by steelworkers. In the period ahead, activists would dig in and look for other ways of placing pressure on BSC and the government.

Notes

1 Allan C. Hutchinson, 'Moles and Steel Papers', *Modern Law Review*, 44:3 (May 1981).

2 For more, see David Boulton, 'On the Renowned Steel Papers "World in Action" programme', Granadaland website, 27 February 2016. www.granadaland.org/

david-boulton-on-the-renowned-steel-papers-world-in-action-programme/ [accessed 10 December 2024].

3 Several pages of verbatim extracts from the documentary were reproduced in the *Steelworkers' Banner*, 7.
4 See letter by BSC secretary, R.W. Roseveare, in the *Guardian*, 19 April 1980.
5 Interview, Geoff Hawkins. 'The Steel Papers' was on *World in Action*, not *This Week*.
6 *Northern Echo*, 20 February 1980.
7 *Daily Express*, 20 February 1980.
8 Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 198.
9 *Militant*, 29 February 1980.
10 *Militant*, 29 February 1980. See photograph on p. 15.
11 MTF, PREM19/310 f189, Gross to PS/SEC of State and Industry, Nationalised Industries: No. 10 minute to MT, 19 February 1980.
12 *Militant*, 29 February 1980.
13 *The Times*, 21 February 1980.
14 MTF, PREM19/310 f189, Gross to PS/Sec of State Industry, Nationalised Industries: No. 10 minute to MT, 20 February 1980.
15 Interview, Ian Crichton.
16 David Renton, 'The Killing of Blair Peach', *London Review of Books*, 36:10 (May 2014). See also David Ransom, *The Blair Peach Case: Licence to Kill* (London: The Committee, 1980), p. 32.
17 Joanna Rollo, 'The Special Patrol Group' in P. Hain (ed.) *Policing the Police* (London: John Calder, 1980), pp. 153–208.
18 Interview, Mike Hull and Val Hull, 7 December 2016.
19 *Socialist Challenge*, 27 February 1980 interviewed pickets from Corby, who made the allegations against a named TGWU official from Oxford, who was responsible for British Road Services drivers at BL Cowley. There was much traffic between the two BL sites.
20 *Workers Action*, 16 February 1980.
21 *The Times*, 8 February 1980.
22 Interview, Paul O'Neill.
23 Jackie Briggs, 'The 1984/5 Miners Strike: The Politicising Effects' (PhD thesis, University of York, 1995), pp. 136–37.
24 Interview, Mike Hull.
25 Interview, Russell Clearie.
26 Interview, Tony Poynter.
27 Interview, John Marston.
28 Peter Gibbon and David Steyne, *Thurcroft: A Village and the Miners' Strike* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1986), p. 96.
29 Lang and Dodkins, *Bad News*, pp. 71–77.
30 Keith Barlow, *The Labour Movement from Thatcher to Blair* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 165.
31 Interview, Tommy Brennan.
32 Interview, John Foley (Scotland).

33 Interview, Tommy Brennan.
34 Interview, John Foley (Scotland).
35 Lang and Dodkins, *Bad News*, p. 72.
36 Many years later, Foley was assaulted in what he believed was a case of mistaken identity and sought advice on claiming criminal injuries compensation, but was advised by a lawyer that the criminal conviction he incurred during the steel strike would make it impossible for him to win his case. He never proceeded with the action.
37 MTF, PREM19/310 f188, Thatcher to William Samuel, 21 February 1980, Nationalised Industries: MT Letter to William Samuel (Steel Strike) [Legislation to address secondary picketing].
38 *Glasgow Herald*, 21 February 1980.
39 MTF, PREM19/310 f213, Summary of Conversations from Sunday 17 February 1980.
40 *The Times*, 20 February 1980.
41 A similar incident was reported in *Workers Action* on 9 February 1980, although it was an ice cream factory on that occasion.
42 Interview, Peter Phillips.
43 *Workers Action*, 23 February 1980.
44 Interview, Mike Hull.
45 For example, the *Guardian*, 24 February 1980.
46 *Northern Echo*, 25 February 1980.
47 *Militant*, 29 February 1980.
48 MRC, minutes of quarterly meeting of ISTC executive, 25 February 1980.
49 Interview, Mike Hull.
50 Interview, Keith Jones.
51 Interview, John Foley (South Wales).
52 MTF, PREM19/261 f29, Hoskyns letter to Howe, 29 February 1980 (conversation with Brittain and Joseph). www.margaretthatcher.org/source/prem19/prem19-0261 [accessed 10 December 2024].
53 This was Thatcher's first major TV interview since her election victory in May 1979. A full transcript is available at MTF: www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104210 [accessed 10 December 2024].
54 *Northern Echo*, 5 February 1980.
55 MTF, PREM19/262 f144, Meeting with BISPA, 5 February 1980, No. 10 record of conversation (MT, Prior, Joseph – British Independent Steel Producers Association). www.margaretthatcher.org/source/prem19/prem19-0262 [accessed 10 December 2024].
56 Peter Dorey, 'Weakening the Trade Unions, One Step at a Time: The Thatcher Governments' Strategy for the Reform of Trade-Union Law, 1979–1984', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 37 (2016), p. 179.
57 MTF, PREM19/261 f51, Prior minute to MT, 14 January 1980 (immunities & picketing).
58 *Northern Echo*, 18 February 1980.
59 MTF, 'Meeting with BISPA', 5 February 1980.

60 NA, CAB 128/76/7, Conclusions of a Cabinet Meeting, 21 February 1980.
61 *Sunday Times*, 17 August 1980.
62 *Evening Gazette*, 4 February 1980.
63 *Northern Echo*, 5 February 1980.
64 *The Times*, 1 March 1980.
65 *The Times*, 16 February 1980.
66 *The Times*, 4 March 1980.
67 *Evening Gazette*, 6 March 1980.
68 *Real Steel News*, national strike edition, 3.
69 *Militant*, 29 February 1980.
70 MRC, minutes of special meeting between the executives of the ISTC and NUB, 19 February 1980.
71 MRC, minutes of quarterly meeting of ISTC executive, 25 February 1980.
72 *Northern Echo*, 7 February 1980 (feature also on a married couple who had moved to London to help staff the strike office).
73 *Northern Echo*, 13 February 1980.
74 *Northern Echo*, 4 February 1980.
75 Interview, anonymous picket.
76 *The Times*, 26 February 1980.
77 *Northern Echo*, 19 February 1980.
78 *The Times*, 19 February 1980.
79 *The Times*, 26 February 1980.
80 Interview, Geoff Walters.
81 Interview, John Marston.
82 See Jack Bate interview on 'ATV Today, 26.02.1980: Steel Strike'. www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-26021980-steel-strike [accessed 10 December 2024].
83 *Militant*, 14 March 1980.
84 *The Times*, 1 March 1980.
85 Interview, John Marston.
86 Hudson and Sadler, *The International Steel Industry*, p. 105.
87 *Workers Action*, 29 March 1980.
88 MRC, minutes of quarterly meeting of ISTC executive, 25 February 1980.
89 *Daily Mirror*, 23 February 1980.
90 *The Times*, 25 February 1980.
91 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, p. 137.
92 *Militant*, 7 March 1980.
93 *Militant*, 14 March 1980.
94 MRC, minutes of a special meeting of the ISTC executive, 29 February 1980.
95 Interview, John Marston.
96 *Northern Echo*, 4 March 1980.
97 *Northern Echo*, 4 March 1980.
98 See X (formerly Twitter), posts 1–17 in the following presentation by Paul Barnsley. The moral economy defence is in post 16. https://x.com/barnspaul31/status/1278659510287110144 [accessed 13 December 2024].

99 Interview, Geoff Walters.
100 England, *Wales TUC*, p. 50.
101 NA, CAB 128/67/6, Conclusions of a Cabinet Meeting, 21 February 1980.
102 *The Times*, 25 February 1980.
103 England, *Wales TUC*, p. 51.
104 *Militant*, 29 February 1980.
105 *Northern Echo*, 22 February 1980.
106 *The Times*, 22 February 1980.
107 *The Times*, 25 February 1980.
108 *Socialist Press*, 27 February 1980.

6

‘The solidarity was amazing’

The demise of the private sector strike weakened the unions in their struggle against BSC and the Conservative government. The BSC strike remained robust, but hardship was beginning to bite. Poverty levels were rising. As part of its anti-union agenda, the government was also intensifying its efforts to reduce social security payments for families of workers on strike. Many strikers and their families were struggling to make ends meet. Strike committees had put measures in place to offset the worst effects of the distress, but were never going to be able to protect everyone. Activists also searched for new ways to increase the pressure on BSC and industry more generally. Flying picketing continued, other industries were targeted, and the provision of safety cover for steelworks began to be questioned. From another direction, however, moves were afoot to bring the dispute to an end. Union leaders began publicly floating suggestions that fell below stated aims and objectives. Ultimately, it would be this willingness on their behalf that would bring the strike to a halt at the end of that third month. The interviews reflect these themes and are explored in this chapter. They reveal the difficulties some workers faced as they endured three months without pay, and the degree to which this was alleviated through collective action. They explore some of the efforts that continued to be made to escalate the action. Female trade unionists played a key role in all of these activities, and the chapter highlights some of the challenges these women faced, many of which emanated from within the male-dominated trade unions themselves.

I

The mobilisation of internal and external resources is crucial to any social movement’s hopes of success,[1] and in the run-up to January, most local strike committees were trying to do just that. As it was a national strike, neither the ISTC nor the NUB issued weekly strike pay. Some craft unions issued strike pay, but these organisations contained less than a quarter of

the workers involved in the dispute. This meant that much of the responsibility for dealing with the social consequences of the strike passed to the local strike committees, which were dominated by the ISTC. Hardship money for those in the greatest need was dispensed by the union HQ to the regions, but this had to be supplemented by the local committees. Methods of achieving this included fundraising, often from other unions in the locality; the obtaining of welfare rights advice for strikers, to ensure they were fully aware of their entitlements to state benefits; and the lobbying of Labour councils to show leniency towards those steelworkers in rent arrears, as well as the utility providers.

Families were also important and, for many, acted as a source of support throughout the dispute. It has been argued that, in some areas, the survival of so many miners for a year on strike in 1984–85 was down to the 'weaving of a new safety net for the whole community. The weft was created through help from relatives and friends, while the warp was organised by the local NUM.'[2] The steelworkers' strike was significantly shorter, but, as the memories of those involved show, local strike committees throughout the country, again with the support of families, neighbours and other local labour movement organisations, wove similar safety nets.

John Whittingham and Tony Cook recalled some of their efforts in Teesside. This included contacting wider political and community groups sympathetic to the strike, gaining expert advice on welfare rights, and meeting with utility providers, some of whom seemed hostile. Some of this was undoubtedly influenced with gendered ideology when it came to presumed expertise about family budgets:

> We got somebody down from Newcastle. They came to give advice on benefits. We gave them an office by the door. We were not experts on this. Some were saying, 'You can't have this and you can't have that if you're on strike', but these people were saying, 'We can show you a way to get something for your kids, we'll get something for your kids', and this and that, and we did have a bit of food distribution. Food from local people.[3]

> We had a soup run. The people at Eston Labour Club, they were absolutely great. They were very considerate to me. And they did do a soup run every day, to all the picket lines. I also arranged meetings with the utilities. Frank Collarton, he's deceased now, he came down, and went through things very quickly, and very succinctly, and helped rightly, you knew were you were. But, the water board man. Young. Accountant. Striped suit on. He said, 'If they don't pay the bill, they'll get the water cut off.' I said, 'What are they going to do, they can't pay?' Horrible person. We also had a hardship fund, where you were allowed to give £5 out for hardship. I remember two young women came in, and I said, 'How are you managing?' I said, 'This fiver, can you do what you can with it, and write down what you've bought and whatnot, how

> you've managed it. It amazed me what they did with this five quid. Obviously it was sort of all basic, soups and stuff, but never the less. Because I didn't know what use five pounds or whatever was to anyone with a family.[4]

Mike and Val Hull remembered a similar situation in Rotherham:

> You could get some money from the state then, if you had children. So we organised people to talk to those people [about benefits]. We got a lot of help from the tax office union. They set up an office in our office and sent a person there. Later on, we organised shopping. There was a local grocer and we used to buy a shopping basket every week for anyone who needed it. So we had to make sure the money came in for that. We had to make sure people went to the pits and the engineering places, to get money for the strike. It affected people differently. Some people thought they would be going on strike, so they saved a bit of money. If the wife and the husband both worked at British Steel they got nothing. I don't think there was the abject poverty you saw in the miners' strike. But three months is a long time. Some, but not all, were in poverty. But there was a hardship fund, and every week they could go and get a bag of groceries from Asda.[5]

Mick Hawker recalled the support he received from other trade unionists while campaigning further afield in London:

> We ended up in St Paul's Cathedral Deanery, which was a squat. This seventeenth-century Christopher Wren building, it was a bit of a wreck, the ceilings were beginning to fall in, plaster coming off the walls. We were in the massive room, probably ten or fifteen of us, maybe a few more in our sleeping bags at night. Next thing, somebody has come in to wake me up saying, 'Mick, there's some people from Fleet Street, from the canteen', some women from the canteen had brought sandwiches.' It makes me emotional now to think of it. There was soup and sandwiches that they'd brought – amazing solidarity. Obviously they worked nights, and they took us to Fleet Street and introduced us to people. One guy I can remember pulling £5 out of his pocket and giving it to us. The solidarity we had from Fleet Street was absolutely amazing.[6]

Like many interviewees, Ian Crichton played down the effects of three months without a wage on him personally, before discussing others who were affected by it. Like Mike Hull, he also highlighted the difficulties faced by families where both partners worked in BSC. This was not uncommon in towns heavily dependent on the industry for employment, and from time to time individual cases would make the local press. But his words also reveal divides within the workforce, which were worsened by the strike, and his own firm belief that some who were adversely affected could have done more to help themselves:

> I missed two months' mortgage, and the mortgage provider basically said, 'That is why it's not a good idea to go on strike' etc, from his warm office. I

> had to bite my tongue, but to be honest I wasn't too bad because we were getting picket allowance, which helped a bit, and a lot of people who subsequently moaned that they ended up in financial hardship, they could have helped, they could have come down and picketed as well. The unfortunate thing was there were quite a few people where both partners worked for the steel industry. At that time – because Thatcher hadn't had time to undo it – you could claim for a certain amount of subsistence, but she stopped that before the miners' strike. I remember [Jim] Callaghan saying at the time, 'It is a perfectly legitimate payment because these people over the years have paid into that, so in circumstances of a dispute they should be getting some measure of support.' So it was a struggle, but I planned for it. I know people who were so embittered by it – some of them left the union, some of them were still bemoaning the fact that, fifteen years later, that they lost their houses, and some of them had their mortgages foreclose. That bitterness on the plant stayed behind. There was always a split between those people who fully supported the stoppage and those people who thought, you know, that it was a pyrrhic victory.[7]

The picketing allowance referred to by Ian Crichton was generally around £1 to £1.50 per day, paid from funds distributed by the union centrally to the various regions. More was made available to some of the flying pickets. Tony Cook recalled flying pickets who travelled from Teesside to Sheerness being given an allowance of £4 per day.[8] Paul O'Neill remembered a figure of £2 for those who had to travel.[9] Geoff Walters suggested that some flying pickets from South Yorkshire were receiving much more than this:

> We were getting paid thirty bob a day for a turn up on the picket line, another bone of contention with the big boys at the top there. Of course, when we picketed Round Oak, I said to one of the lads on the picket line, 'Well, where's this bloody Rotherham Red Army?' And he went, 'They're in the pub, Geoff.' I said, 'You what?' He said, 'They're in the pub.' I went into this pub, and they were all in there playing three-card brag, getting it down their necks. Well it wasn't up to me to tell them what to do. I wasn't the gaffer. But Red Roy [Bishop] ought to have told them, our organiser. Then I found out they were on £20 a day. I never told my members.[10]

As a counter to Tory propaganda, which painted steelworkers as highly paid public sector workers earning over £100 per week, the *Steelworkers' Banner* had argued that the average basic wage of a BSC steelworker was only £66 per week.[11] This figure was also repeated by the union leaders in discussions with government.[12] In his correspondence with the government, Dan Norton boasted that the basic wage of £80 per week, that Hadfields' workers apparently received, was 'far better' than that of their BSC counterparts.[13] Picketing allowances of £20 per day would not only have exceeded this wage, but also would have sucked the union finances dry. No other

pickets recalled such a high allowance, and the consensus is that the figure was low. Some flying pickets may have spent their allowances in the pub – indeed, as Pete Reid pointed out, one Scunthorpe pub made this a condition of allowing pickets to use their car park[14] – but it is not possible that any more than the tiniest minority of flying pickets would have had £20 at any point in this strike. And even then, it is unlikely to have been for anything more than a day or two, if at all. Geoff Walters' allegation about the Rotherham pickets hints at tension among strikers, suggesting that the growing solidarity between activists from different areas hadn't offset the regional disunity that had bedevilled steel unions in the past. The degree to which strike funds and expenditure had been properly controlled and monitored was an issue that would emerge more fully after the dispute was ended. Some interviewees touched on this. Tony Cook alleged that, in some other regions, large sums of money had not been properly accounted for. He quoted a figure of £200,000 in one region, which had not been audited, and claimed that an unnamed left-wing organisation had purchased a house with strike funds and had installed printing presses. Cook was a long-time member of the Labour Party, but as he put it, 'not of the extreme left'.[15] The region to which he referred was unnamed, but it would seem to be South Yorkshire, as such an incident was mentioned in more detail by Mick Hawker, who offered a different version of events:

> —— had got an idea to create this hub in Stocksbridge, and the strike was coming to an end – it might even have ended by that time – and so we've got this massive amount of money. The ISTC was eyeing it up because they were supplying money to the pickets, and here we were with this massive amount of money, so they were wanting to get their hands on this. —— was wanting to buy a house in Stocksbridge, which was quite close to one of the gates, to provide this union hub. Really, it was a mad idea. Politically I think it was a bad idea. So that never happened. The ISTC insisted on auditors, everything had to be audited … where there's money, there's accusations of misappropriation, auditors came in and there was no suggestion, there was no question of any money being misspent. That all died a death. I do believe that the ISTC probably got a big chunk of the money. I think afterwards some of that money would have been in the hands of the multi-union committee and would have gone back out to support various things.[16]

Most interviewees believed their own areas to have behaved properly. There were occasional comments that some people might have been spending more than they should, and one reference to a local strike leader disappearing with a 'bag of doubloons' to a nearby pub; but on the whole, strike organisers were convinced that there had been no misappropriation of funds in their areas. In Scotland, the treasurer of the strike fund was Gerry Heyhoe, who was recalled as being 'as honest as the day is long'.[17] Another Scottish

steelworker shared his approval of the way the NUM dispensed funds to the ISTC, arguing that this limited the chances of money going missing.

> We went up to Edinburgh, the mines up that area. Three went up. There were collections on the dayshift, backshift, nightshift, and they would put the money into the office and then phone through to tell whoever was on the desk at Motherwell how much had been collected. That was a good thing. Say for talking's sake, £500 had been collected, [Motherwell] knew what was coming, so there was nae chance of anyone saying, 'We'll shove some in our pockets.' And that was the way that I liked it.[18]

Supplementary benefit payments were possible for strikers who had dependents. Commenting on this, Val Hull remarked:

> A wife and child, they could get money from the state, but obviously when it came to the miners' strike they had learnt from that and stopped it. They assumed they were getting strike pay. That mitigated a lot of the hardship. It were almost like a test case.[19]

This comment is consistent with so many other memories of this strike, which liken it to a laboratory, where many of the measures deployed to defeat the miners were perfected. It is endorsed to an extent by the historical record. The Thatcher administrations never abolished supplementary benefit to striking workers' families completely, but did reduce the payment following the steel strike and lowered it again between then and the miners' strike.[20] The Conservative Party had long wished to address this issue, seeing it as a way of weakening the unions.[21] The 1979 Conservative manifesto pledged that Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) payments to the families of workers on strike would be reduced.[22] Keith Joseph began to plan in more detail after taking office,[23] but it was the steel strike that saw the issue move centre stage. Conservative ministers knew that the ISTC's reserves would run dry if they issued weekly strike pay to over 100,000 members for a lengthy period, but in public they stressed the union's wealth. In January, former Labour MP turned Tory Social Security Minister, Reg Prentice, complained that it was 'utterly deplorable' that more than one million pounds had been paid out in supplementary benefit to the wives and families of striking steelworkers, 'while the unions had not paid out a penny piece to support them'.[24] In fact, while many eligible workers were yet to receive a penny in benefit, the ISTC was already dispensing money to local hardship funds throughout the country. On 13 February, Thatcher accused the ISTC of 'sitting on a small fortune' while the 'taxpaying public' financed its strike.[25] Informed by the findings of an ad hoc committee of Tory MPs, the Cabinet eventually decided that all strikers would be 'deemed' to be in receipt of strike pay of £12 per week, and that this figure would be deducted from supplementary benefit payments. It was

also decided that strikers would not be eligible for urgent needs payments, except through the *force majeure* circumstances of fire or flood, or some other emergency totally unrelated to the dispute. The new measures would be included in the forthcoming Social Security Bill, and became law in November 1980.

As with policing and employment legislation, the proposed change in welfare law was accompanied with a harsher implementation of existing legislation. For example, DHSS officials in Cleveland sent posters to GP surgeries, specifically aimed at steelworkers, warning them that all claims for sickness benefit would be looked at 'more stringently'. Stretching irony, the DHSS maintained that it would be 'unfair' if some strikers received more than others, by 'swinging the lead' with fraudulent sickness benefit claims. In addition to a full review, it was suggested that a second medical opinion be sought before sick notes were handed out. However, as a spokesperson for the South Tees Division of the British Medical Association pointed out, there had been no increase during the strike of steelworkers looking for sick notes.[26] DHSS officers could also be callous. The following case was not untypical. It involved a couple from Corby, Irene and John Carter, who had made a claim. DHSS officials demanded to see bank account statements before any money was issued. Noting that the claimants had £252 in the bank, and that the supplementary benefit payment to married couples was £33 per week, officials informed the Carters they could expect nothing for eight weeks. Irene Carter pointed out that the statement had been issued before she had withdrawn £100 from the bank account to help pay for her father's funeral, but it made no difference.[27] Pete Reid recalled other examples of pettiness, in his interview:

> When we went out, we would go picketing, and we got I think £1.50 allowance, so you could buy something to eat at lunchtime. Then, when you came back, you got a bacon sandwich. Now that bacon sandwich was split between me and my wife, and the £1.50 went in the pot to feed the kids. My wife wasn't working, and that was another difficulty. You were allowed to claim, I think it was £11.57 per week, something like that, from the dole. And when I went down, they asked me for documentary evidence that my wife wasn't working. It's impossible to provide evidence that someone isn't working. How do you prove that? That delayed payment for about ten days, and I'm sure they played that game with other people.[28]

In addition to this hostility, the DHSS was also seriously under-resourced. Temporary offices were established in various towns to process claims, but huge backlogs developed. Most applicants received nothing from the state for several weeks. By mid-February, fewer than 6,500 of the 9,800 claimants in Teesside had received any money, because of the inadequate resourcing of the system.[29]

II

When discussing the ongoing effects of the strike, most steelworkers focused on the various support networks that existed, rather than the meagre welfare assistance. The concept of community was a framework that many utilised when discussing responses to, and the impact of, the strike. Obi Phillips from Clydebridge offered an example of this:

> How did people cope? The strike committee. They used to get money aff it. Lot of the auld miners down there donated to it, whenever they had it. The local shopkeepers did a lot, they gave us a lot, here, and in Rutherglen. The shopkeepers, the bakers, they were brilliant. There was a strike fund. People were really in trouble, money for weans or something, they could get that, money fae the strike fund. There was also a social welfare fund as well. We paid in every week to that, a social welfare fund. That got used for all different things, including Christmas parties for the weans an that. We used some of the money from that because it just lay there. People tried to look after each other. If someone was a bit short, someone else would help them. My family, my faither, my maw, they aw helped oot wi rent an that. Some people had it a lot worse than we did.[30]

Like most of the Clydebridge workers, Phillips lived in Cambuslang. His depiction of the town was that of the working-class community, where people had a shared sense of identity, borne from its industrial character. His memories in some ways recall the groundbreaking research conducted in the 1950s on the mining community of Featherstone, where, it was argued, strong and powerful 'bonds of social solidarity' and community cohesion existed, based on common experience and 'common memories of past struggle'.[31] Phillips also included the shopkeepers, a class often regarded as conservative and individualistic, but because of the nature of the town, and the nature of the strike, and the fact that so many local people worked at Clydebridge, they were drawn to support the steelworkers by providing some free food. This sense of community is what underpinned the high levels of local support and this recalled sense of togetherness and solidarity. It is another memory that offers a challenge to more dominant discourses about trade unionism in this period. It shows the ability of working-class people to self-organise, and how in certain circumstances local trade union organisations could draw in and gain support from, and effectively lead, wider groups and classes within society. An example, perhaps, of a popular socialist memory – important to the development of socialist political culture and crucial to challenging the hegemony of the Right.[32]

It is noticeable that few of the interviewees considered that they themselves suffered any real hardship. When references are made to poverty, it was normally other people who were being referred to. But three months is a

long time without money, and people did suffer. Here and there in the accounts contradictions appear, and a sense of the difficulties some of the interviewees faced did come through.

> We had three children: a 16-year-old, a 14-year-old and a 9-year-old. We just generally survived on stews and soups and stuff like that. My wife was quite handy with a sewing machine and she's an artist, as you can see, so she used to sell a few things. Her sister used to give us food parcels and things like that. Members of the local church, the Anglican Church, there was one old lady there who gave me this envelope one day and said, 'Just a little help.' And when I opened it, there was a fiver in it. Things like that. But some people were saying, 'Are you still off work? Why aren't you back at work?' The family were quite good … I think it brings people together though, become part of the community really. I used to go down sometimes to the beach at Redcar when the boats were coming in, buy a few fish and say, 'Don't the strikers get a few extra?' And the fishermen like would throw a few more in for you. You had that support – it wasn't always like visible, but it was there.[33]

Ray Hensby also received some welcome assistance from the local church, but his account revealed the pressure his family was under:

> I used to attend the church occasionally, so got on well with the vicar in Marske, and he asked me, 'Do you want to earn some money?' I mowed his garden. He knew the situation we were in. Monday, he called me into the vicarage. A big box of groceries, fruit and vegetables. He said, 'There you are.' And, I said, 'You shouldn't have done this.' He says, 'You're on strike, things are tight.' And he says, 'Oh, by the way, there's fifty quid.' I came in – we used to have an old table there – and I just put it down, and Norma was in tears. I think a lot of people felt the pinch. Some days Norma said, 'Well I haven't had anything to eat today because we just can't afford it.' It was to feed the kids. My eldest was going to the Bydales school, he must have been about eleven. He said, 'I want to get some new shoes, the old shoes are tight-fitting. And so I heard a rumour they were giving vouchers for new shoes at the office, so I went into Middlesbrough, I went to the office, and I says, 'I'm on strike.' And they looked me up, 'Oh aye, your name's down here.' You've been picketing in this, that and the other. So he gives a voucher, and I think it was for Clarks. We'd never been to Clarks in our lives, and he got a really good pair. Even now we joke about the best pair of shoes he ever had. I'd be lying if I said [it didn't have an effect]. Some coped better than others. I felt sorry for people similar to us … people with young children. I think it did, it hit hard.[34]

Jimmy Coyle recalled the challenges:

> People depended a lot on families. My wife stopped working after Louise was born, but once the strike began to bite, Sadie had to get a job, as a cleaner in the factories in Newhouse, then as a home help, so that's the things we had to

> do. You were relying on neighbours, people like that, because you were getting nothing. We used to try and make sandwiches for people, make curries, things like that, and soups for the guys who were on picket duty, things like that. Pink lint sandwiches, that stuff, spam, and sausage curries. You were trying to make things stretch out. Then we got the Fine Fare vouchers as well, they got sent. It was hard for a lot of people. We got by. But it was hard for others.[35]

Russell Clearie also reflected on the stresses and strain that everyone was under:

> The strike lasted longer than any of us would imagine. But that was after thirteen weeks. I can remember staying up at the by-pass at the time, and —— —— coming, and it was his wife. She gives us the two kids at the front door and says, 'You've got my man oot on strike, so you can rear my kids.' That was how emotional it got. But there was a lot of women supporting us.[36]

Peter Phillips remembered the difficulties, as well as the assistance offered by the miners' welfare committee in Coatbridge:

> It was fourteen weeks without any money. My daughter was just born. The only thing you got was milk tokens; you hadn't a ha'penny coming from anywhere. None of us had any savings; all you heard about was people being skint. Family got them through. My ma used to come across with biscuits and fruit and make soups, and [my wife] Pam would dae the same. The Miners' Welfare was mega rich. In 1980, it was turning over £300,000 at that time. Think about that now. Every committee member got £3 for attending. That bought him a pint, a couple of pints, probably five or six pints at that time. Every committee man put this £3 in. I was on the committee, and we gave it to the pickets.[37]

The strike added pressure to the role of women in many families, with some finding that their part-time jobs were now the main family income. In a report on the strike's effects in Eston, one woman pointed out that the £25 per week she earned from a part-time job in a paint shop, along with £7 family allowance and £4 child allowance, was now the entire family income.[38] In the Middlesbrough area there had been 3,000 cut off orders from the Post Office Telecommunications service, because of unpaid phone bills. This was partly a result of a backlog caused by a strike in that service some months before, but was also a reflection of the poverty caused by the steel strike. Unions had appealed for concessions for their members on strike, but this had been refused. Requests for assistance with payment of electricity bills had risen from 1,000 in December, to 1,500 in January, to 2,000 in February.[39] One woman disclosed how the main meal for her and her husband was parsnips and brussels sprouts.[40]

There were reports of rising levels of distress and deprivation. Strike organisers in Corby referred to the growing discontent of the local community

and the 'dire' financial hardship that many were in. Apart from a week's tax rebate, many strikers had had no income since their last pay on 21 December 1979. Of some 8,000 local steelworkers on strike, it was estimated that 2,000 were single or married couples without dependents, not in receipt of supplementary benefit. As early as 19 January 1980, the strike committee's welfare officer, Thomas Barrowman, had warned that 'This week, everybody is living on the scraps from the pantry, tins of peas, or condensed milk. Next week, they will not even have that.' Barrowman showed the strains in the relationship between the union and the local community. 'As union representatives we are trying to subdue considerable anger against the union. We are being kicked to death on this. The union has got to review the situation on strike pay and hardship payments and make finances available.'[41] The local strike committee had only £200 in its hardship fund, most of it contributed by other unions also on strike. It was later reported that local shops were donating produce and money to fund food parcels for strikers, garages were selling cut-price fuel and fish and chip shops were offering discounts. A few days later, at a church hall in the town centre, vegetables were distributed to strikers at a cost of 70p per bag. Barrowman pointed out here that 'The fund is not adequate. We are always appealing for more, but we are trying to do something to relieve the hardship which is being felt here.'[42]

The ISTC leadership was stung by this criticism and would later point out that the first two months of the strike cost it around one million pounds on relief and hardship payments. The union also displayed its characteristic intolerance to dissent, threatening disciplinary action against John Cowling, a leading ISTC activist in Corby, following the distribution of a petition with over eight hundred signatures that was calling for strike pay. The situation in Corby was clearly of concern, however, and was intensified after the suicide of 42-year-old Margaret Coleman, a switchboard operator at the plant. At her inquest, held on the day the strike ended, details emerged of her financial troubles. Coleman had no dependents, so did not qualify for supplementary benefit. The rules here were, in the words of one government minister, 'very stringent' – benefit would be paid only if an individual could show they were in 'urgent need', with no possibility of support from a parent or relative. They were expected to exhaust their own resources at a rate of £14 per week, and that any payment made thereafter would not take their resources to more than £10.50 per week.[43] Little wonder that, throughout the whole of 1978, only 230 strikers received this payment – 1978 being a year when over a million workers had been involved in strikes in Britain, and 45,000 payments were made for dependents.[44] Coleman had just £11.10 in her bank account and debts of over £150. Although her father had apparently offered £80 to tide her over during the strike, she

hadn't wanted to take money from others in her family, feeling that it was not their responsibility. Coleman's entire income during the fifty days she spent on strike was £10 hardship money and a £5 food voucher. Increasingly anxious, she was said to have changed from a 'cheerful person to one haunted by money problems'. Coleman contacted DHSS officials, but had been told she did not qualify for supplementary benefit. An appeal had been made, but she was informed that there would be no payments until March at the earliest. On 20 February, Coleman overdosed on sleeping tablets and drowned in her bath. Barrowman appeared at the inquest and agreed that the ISTC was wealthy 'in bricks and mortar'. Barrowman said he had been given £800 in hardship money for an area that had over 8,000 steelworkers. He had asked for more, but stated that his appeals 'had fell on deaf ears', and predicted more deaths if the strike continued.[45]

The suicide of Margaret Coleman was the most distressing event connected to the steel strike. But her death seems almost to have slipped from historical memory of the steelworkers. No interviewee mentioned her by name, and only one – Willie Rae – during a discussion on the effects of the strike, recalled that someone had drowned themselves in the bath.[46] This may have been because none of the other interviewees worked in Corby, or simply because of the passing of time. But the ISTC itself made no reference to Coleman's death in any of its EC meetings at that time. Neither did Sirs refer to it in his autobiography, although he did mention giving £10 of his own money to a Sheffield striker who was suffering hardship.[47] It would be unfair to blame the ISTC for this tragedy. DHSS officials were unbending in their attitude towards her plight and appeared to leave her with no hope. But the failure of the union to make any reference to the tragedy, or send a national representative to her funeral and inquest, does suggest a desire to forget all about it. There was a defensiveness within the ISTC on the issue of strike pay. The union repeatedly argued that, with 100,000 members on strike, they would quickly be bankrupted if they issued weekly strike pay. It was a point reinforced by Sirs,[48] and one that steelworkers themselves could understand in the context of a national strike:

> Imagine how many worked for the British Steel Corporation. It would have cut the union's funds to bits in a very short space of time. That used to be one of the arguments the members put. 'We're getting no strike pay.' We had to say, 'Well, you can't pay strike pay because you'd have no funds left.' You could, when there was a local strike for a week or something, then they got strike pay because they could sustain that. But a massive national strike, they couldn't do it, it were impossible. Too much money involved.[49]

Tony Poynter's colleague, and friend, Ray Hensby, felt the union leaders lacked empathy with the plight of ordinary members. Hensby recalled the

march and rally in Consett, which kick-started the campaign to save the steelworks. This event took place in the pouring rain on 14 March, almost eleven weeks into the strike, and was attended by over 2,500 people, including Bill Sirs, Hector Smith and the local Labour MP David Watkins. After the mile-long march, protestors filled the Empire and Plaza cinemas for the speeches. In his address, Sirs reminded those gathered that Consett was viable, and that the problem was BSC managerial incompetence. He also criticised the government for the 'lunacy' of shelling out £20 million in order to find replacement work, when the Consett people already had jobs,[50] and alleged that Thatcher didn't even know that Consett was to close, until told by an aide during the January meeting with Sirs and Smith.[51] The march and rally was a positive step in the campaign to save Consett, but some were less than impressed at the conduct of the union leaders and officers that day:

> On the Consett march it was all the top officials, you know, Bill Sirs and all people, all the top senior union officials there. And really they were having a bit of a laugh and a joke, and I said, 'Well, yeah, you're getting paid.' It was nearly the end of the strike, and I thought, 'Well, yeah, the wife was trying to scrape things together for food, and yeah, you're knocking whiskies back' … And it weren't until people mentioned it that it's all right us going on strike, but they aren't on strike, they aren't feeling the pinch. So I think that hit home a bit. There was two standards. The union officials were paid and weren't on strike.[52]

Unusually, for a 60-year-old trade union leader at that time, Sirs was a keen runner and swimmer, and a non-smoking teetotaller, so he wouldn't have been among those knocking back whiskies. But he did lead a privileged existence on his Hertfordshire estate, that was quite removed from most steelworkers. Some union officials did not take any pay during the strike, Keith Jones being one.[53] But this was not mandatory, and any suggestion it became so was never made at the ISTC executive meetings.

Don Readman recalled the toll taken by the strike, as the weeks passed. He argued that this served the purpose of weakening the resolve of steelworkers, leaving them unable to resist the closures that followed on:

> I'd never been on a picket line before – there was this novelty, and you felt you were part of trade union history, with the struggle over the years. But I think, as time wore on, people got a bit disillusioned. I think it was like, in some ways it was a bit of a softening-up process really. People went back a bit disillusioned, and then were ready to bail out type of thing. They'd had enough. And I think that was what the strike was all about really. After you were stood on the picket line in the snow and the rain and struggled for money, and after three months I think anybody would become disillusioned.[54]

But while there was some resentment towards the national and local leaderships, and some weariness, this hadn't translated into public opposition to the strike. In fact, there seemed to be little demand that the strike be ended, and much criticism of those few individuals who suggested this. In Middlesbrough, two NUB members attempted to set up an anti-strike committee, and planned on sending a petition to Margaret Thatcher expressing their views. A public meeting was arranged by one of the men at nearby Normanby Hall, but the booking was cancelled by Langbaurgh Council, and the men were told by Labour Councillor Garth Houchen that no other hall in the district would be made available for such a purpose.[55] Fourteen of the thirty-two Labour councillors worked for BSC, and the group as a whole were said to be 'wholeheartedly' behind the strike.[56] Both Langbaurgh and Middlesbrough borough councils also mounted campaigns to encourage striking steelworkers to apply for rates rebates.[57] A similar scenario was alluded to in Motherwell by Jimmy Coyle:

> The Labour council was very supportive. Vincent Mathieson was the council leader then, and Vincie worked in the steel industry, worked in one of the labs. We had great support. No problems. When guys were struggling with their rent, they put things in place to try and help us. Council wouldn't chase you up [for rent], gave you a chance, to let it accrue and pay it back later.[58]

III

At the end of February 1980, some women who were the wives of striking steelworkers organised a march to call for an end to the strike. The leader of this group, Brenda Barry, was a 45-year-old cleaner at Teesside Polytechnic, as well as a mother of eight children. However, a union counter-demonstration was planned in response. In the event, the anti-strike march proved to be a damp squib, with only seven women turning up for it. The protesters handed in a letter to the local ISTC offices in Marton Road, where over eighty striking steelworkers and their supporters gathered. Some of the comments were clearly sexist, with the women being urged to 'go home and make the dinner'.[59] Barry later insisted she had been misunderstood, had not suggested a return to work at any cost and merely wanted to restart negotiations.[60] Tony Cook recalled these events:

> There was this women's march, and the *Gazette* was building it up. The police rang us up and said, 'Look, we want some cooperation here. What are you going to do about this?' They sent an inspector down, and he said, 'You'll keep your pickets away', and all we could say was, 'Well, we'll do our best to keep the pickets away', and we said to everybody 'Stop away.' They didn't, did they? I mean, there were pickets, lasses from Cargo Fleet here, they'd got

> everybody from Cargo Fleet. And [we said] we'll let four or five of [the anti-strike marchers] in for a cup of tea, they can put their point of view … Anyway, this march came round the corner, and there were about seven [women on it] … So that was a real debacle.[61]

It was obvious from his demeanour when telling this story that Cook did not take this march seriously, breaking into a chuckle when he remembered the low attendance. But his point, that some female workers from Cargo Fleet turned up as a part of a counter-protest, was significant. By framing the counter-protest in this way, he was challenging the narrative of the marchers, who in 1980 had attempted to create a split along gender lines, between male workers, who were on strike, and their wives and partners, who were having to deal with the effects. In this respect, Cook's sentiments were not dissimilar to those expressed by Langbaurgh Councillor Marjorie Barton, who had urged 'wives, sisters and mothers' not to be 'defeatist' and get out and show their support for the strike.[62] Other women on the counter-protest had also been keen to challenge the central point that the women's march organisers were making – that the strike lacked support. 'We are all in the same boat', stated one, 'My bairns cry for sweets just the same as hers, but we're all one hundred per cent behind it.'[63]

The back-to-work march and counter-demonstration brings into focus the wider role played by women during this dispute. The overwhelming majority of the workers taking part in the strike were men, but the steel industry also had many women workers. One flying picket from Lackenby recalled their presence on the picket lines:

> In the ISTC, the main steel union, 10 per cent of the membership was female, so it was suggested that the pickets going to the West Midlands would be 10 per cent female. This tactic surprised one scab lorry driver at GKN in Wolverhampton. During the war the workforce of Cargo Fleet was mainly female, and this tradition carried on up the 1980s. The operators would have to push backward and forward the massive hydraulic switches every thirty seconds for seven hours a day, resulting in powerful upper body strength, so when a lorry drives through the picket line of about thirty pickets a fist punches the cab door, denting it. The furious driver from inside the compound exams the damage, grabs a crow bar and starts walking towards the pickets demanding to know who did the damage. Out steps a petite, young woman who walked right up to the scab and said, 'I did it. What are you going to do about it?' With a puzzled look on his face he returned to the safety of the compound.[64]

Some of the women who were interviewed recalled negative gendered attitudes being displayed towards them and their involvement in the strike. Christine O'Neill, originally from Bristol, but living in Teesside in 1980, provided a good example:

> I was in the blast furnacemen's union, but we weren't involved at all because we were women and we were cleaners. When this stuff about the strike come up, I was phoning round people – 'Are we on strike or what?' Because we didn't know. So, in the end, we all went down to the office gate, to find out what was going on, at six o'clock one morning. 'Oh yeah, you're on strike.' 'Oh, thanks for telling us, yeah.' And then there was this big meeting in North Ormesby, somewhere, I can't remember where it was now, and we all went down, as you do, and the front row was empty – they were all sat there … so we all just plonked ourselves … 'What are these bloody women doing here?' In the end, I stood up, because I'm a mouthy cow anyway, I stood and said, 'Excuse me, we pay our subs, we pay our dues! We have every right to be here as you do!' And they shut up, but that was it – I mean, they didn't want to know us. They didn't tell us anything. And this went on for three months … nobody ever told us anything … There wasn't a lot going on [laughing] in South Bank itself. Maybe there was on the picket line, down on the gates, I don't know. We just didn't go down because we just … didn't feel like we were that involved in it really … . I would have gone down. You should have seen me in the coal strike – I mean, I was on every picket line I could get on! Yeah, I would have gone down. And I think that's one of the things I found quite difficult as a stranger in the area. They weren't that militant really. I mean, Bristol is not known for its militancy, but we were far more militant down there than they were up here.[65]

Christine O'Neill's reflection here bears comparison to an account given by two women who were on strike in Sheffield. They noted that although there were a lot of women on strike, not many were centrally involved, with only around ten on the picket lines, and a few more helping in the office. The women thought this was partly because they hadn't been encouraged to get involved in the union before – it had seemed to be mainly for men. These women took part in picketing and fundraising activities in the region.[66] Another three women who became involved in strike organisation and activism at Stocksbridge were Enid Beevor, Sylvia Taylor and Ann Dawson. In an interview conducted in the thirteenth week of the strike, they reflected on the challenges to their involvement in the strike and how these had been overcome. This began with a look back at the failings of the union leadership to defend women workers before the strike, and ended with an appreciation of what was at stake in this strike:

> ST: We started a fight with management on an equal pay issue – women only on half men's bonus for the same job. We never won it of course – the company just turned around and said 'You're too late: the union already signed for the bonus rates!'
>
> EB: At the beginning of the strike, the office didn't want women involved … first thing they said was that we could make sandwiches.

AD: Yes, that's all they thought we were good for.

EB: I just kept going down and saying, 'You've got to get the women organised.' I just kept asking what I could do. They replied, 'No women on the picket line.' Then they gave me a job to do – to contact all the men on the picket lists who weren't on the telephone when they were needed for duty. This was only after we had a meeting with some officials present who said – under pressure – that if we could get organised we could have a small corner in the picket office to help them out. Then I got the picket lists for my job and found out the number of women who had put their names down for duty and were never called out – so I called them all out on the picket line at Hayden Nylos. There was a great response to this.

AD: It was Sheerness that really turned them.

EB: Oh yes, Sheerness. It was arranged that a group of women would go down the day after the mass picket to confront the 'back-to-work' pickets who were abusing our pickets. But with persuading they changed their minds, and we were allowed to go on the mass pickets, and that was the changing point. They saw us stand our ground with the men as they kicked us up and down – and make no mistake, those SPG can kick! But we took it as good as the rest of them, and after that the men accepted us, gave us picket duty the same as anyone else, and now they've got me on the strike committee itself.

[Interviewer] What's the response to you now on the picket line?

ST: Terrific – they've really looked forward to us coming. It's changed their whole attitude to us as women. They take us on the level we are. There's no chance of any of the fellas on the picket saying, 'Give up your job, you're just a woman.'

AD: We see it as a fight on jobs – a fight for the future of our country, not for today but for tomorrow. Sheffield is steel – if you don't have steel, you don't have Sheffield.[67]

In her discussion on feminism and the use of oral history, Sangster scrutinised the diverse memories and narratives that several female textile workers had constructed about a 1937 strike in their workplace in the Canadian city of Peterborough, Ontario. She argued that the sharply different narratives from the strike

> rather than being simply contradictory and ambiguous, or individual representations of memory, were reflections of, and active rejoinders to, women's work and family experiences, dominant ideals of femininity, the existing power structures of capitalism and patriarchy, and sometimes even women's resistance to those structures.[68]

Memories were also shaped by the way that women were treated by the men who dominated the strike organisation, with some dropping out of

activity because they 'were not adequately integrated into the union, seldom informed of strategy or considered potential leaders; the result was their disinterest in the union'.[69]

Although separated by several decades and occurring in a different country, Sangster's approach helps us understand the diverse memories and recollections about the 1980 steel strike, from the perspective of the women who were involved. We can see that Christine O'Neill was committed to the strike and the labour movement more generally. She would have been more involved in strike activity, but was locked out of this by her male-dominated union branch, who clearly did not regard cleaners as their equals and wondered why they had been allowed into the union in the first place. Christine was on this strike for three months. It was the longest dispute of her working life, but she has barely any memories of the activism that accompanied it, beyond that meeting at the beginning of the strike. It is also revealing that she has far more vivid memories of the miners' strike, a dispute in which she was not a protagonist, but one in which her involvement was welcomed. The account from the three Stocksbridge women also shows the obstacles that were placed in the road of women taking part in the strike, and the hostility they faced in their desire to become more involved. In this case, however, just like Edith, the only class-conscious trade union militant among Sangster's interviewees, these women, through their own determination, were able to overcome the discriminatory attitudes, and went on to play an important role in their local strike organisation.

Melva Cook remained on the strike for its entirety, but she didn't agree with the action and did not feel she could take part in the picketing:

> The offer was a ridiculous amount, it was low. Although I didn't want to strike, I felt I had to. We benefited, higher pay rise, better hours, but it was three months of absolute hell … I had no involvement in the strike, some girls from the IT department did, from Steel House, and a couple of girls in the engineering department, tracers, they were involved, and they said to me, 'Why don't you come on the picket?' But I said I couldn't because I couldn't genuinely say I wanted to be on strike. On the picket lines they were stopping wagons and lorries going into the works with coal and coke, trying to disrupt the steel-making process, but I couldn't have done that. I could see things needed changing, but I didn't think it should have come to a strike like that. I thought they could have tried other things, not a fully blown strike. It was so difficult: my cousin worked at Cleveland, his daughter worked at Steel House, two younger children at school, his wife didn't work, they were one family who really struggled. Around South Bank, a lot of people struggled. Waiting for the January pay day as well. First couple of weeks, it's ok. but when you hit January 25th, and it was pay day, that is when it was hard. I couldn't put much petrol in the car, walked everywhere. I don't think I could honestly say my views changed. Some people did, but not me.[70]

Val Hull was not employed in the industry, but was determined to become more involved, and did so working in the strike office in Rotherham throughout the dispute.

> I did all the admin, taking calls, all the typing, the letters that were sent out, and I enjoyed it. I had never been involved in anything like this. I needed to get out of the house. I was at home listening to all the stuff coming through on the news on the television, and each day something would come through that would scare me, and I'd think 'my god', and then Mike would come home and say, 'That didn't happen at all, that's not happening.' So rather than be sat here, I decided to come and do something. I thought it was right what they were doing, so I agreed with the strike, I was behind the strike, but we'd not long been in that house, just two years, we'd taken out a bigger mortgage, so I was scared. But everyone was brilliant. The headteacher of my daughter's school came to my house and said, 'You haven't applied for free meals for Lydia.' And I said, 'I don't want her to have free school meals. I don't want her to feel different to everyone else.' She had gone round all the parents of the children cause there were quite a few where we lived, given them forms, and said, 'You have to fill them in, it's your right. Just send in an empty envelope on Monday morning and she'll think she's giving her money the same as everyone else.' That was the headteacher of the school, so everyone was behind it. One of the funniest things, because I'd been finished work for about six years, because I had been a secretary in a manufacturing company, my typing skills were quite rusty. So initially I made quite a few mistakes, and I'd screw them up and start again. Then about a week later they were doing some report on the strike, and some of these letters must have been fished out of the trash, because I saw them and thought, 'I typed that'. But it was nothing incriminating.[71]

IV

Towards the end of February, BSC intensified the pressure on the strike by balloting the workforce to decide if they wanted a ballot on the pay offer. This 'ballot about a ballot' was viewed by the unions as 'intensely provocative'[72] and an attempt by Bob Scholey to go over their heads to undermine support for the strike. It was a new tactic for BSC, and one that seemed to have been borrowed from British Leyland, where it had been used to weaken trade unionism and impose job cuts. The ISTC's initial response was confusing. Rather than a straightforward boycott, they advised members to either ignore the ballots or spoil them with the words 'pay the steelworkers'.[73] There were 132,404 ballots issued, of which 86,457 were returned, with 1,448 either spoiled or blank. Of this, 58,502 voted 'Yes', with 26,517 voting 'No'.[74] Scholey said it was now 'blindingly obvious' that the strike

should be called off. The ISTC responded that the 'Yes' vote constituted only 44 per cent of all balloted workers.[75] The union also alleged serious flaws in the process, including ballot papers being sent to people with no connection to the industry.[76] These were valid points, but Sirs was stretching credulity when he described the result as positive and evidence that the union had majority support. The ballot had not been on the detail of any pay offer, but government ministers exploited the result arguing that it proved most steelworkers wanted to return to work. They also presented it as bolstering the argument for compulsory strike ballots more generally in industrial relations.[77] Scholey stated that BSC did not want to go over the head of the unions with a ballot on the pay offer, but would not continue in a 'permanent vacuum'. The ballot envelopes were now ready, and he gave the ISTC a week to make suggestions on how best to organise this.[78]

The 'ballot about a ballot' further damaged relations between the unions and management. In response, some strikers began to advocate more seriously the complete withdrawal of safety cover. This had been a contentious issue throughout the strike. It was accepted by all sides that skeleton safety crews were needed to maintain huge and dangerous, as well as expensive, installations like blast furnaces and coke ovens. Unions and management would negotiate the number of workers who would be given dispensations to allow them to cross picket lines. However, throughout the strike, trade unionists had argued that some managers were exploiting safety cover agreements to bring more workers in than was necessary, so that other work could be completed. At Consett, for example, the unions had set a figure of seventy-four safety workers and viewed the local BSC managers' demand for 240 as a deliberate attempt to sabotage the strike.[79] In January, Skinningrove had been left without safety cover for a day, following allegations that managers were carrying out additional work, and breaching picket lines.[80] In early February, the South Yorkshire Strike Committee called for the withdrawal of cover from blast furnaces, before being instructed by the ISTC leadership to restore it.[81] On 26 February, Redcar pickets, frustrated at 'fighting a gentleman's strike' as opposed to the war it had become, also called on safety workers not to enter the works. The morning shift, and around half of the back shift and night shift, all observed the call, much to the displeasure of both BSC and union officials.[82] The issue also exposed divisions and mistrust between the unions themselves, as Tony Poynter's comments here suggest:

> We had a bone of contention with the blast furnace and the coke ovens shut down. In any local strikes, there had always been the understanding that you would put safetymen in to keep it ticking over. To some extent, the NUB abused that. They didn't have full crews, but they had more men, and that used to cause [problems] – they had what they called dispensations, they had

> officially signed letters. I remember, on a couple of occasions, the pickets decided as soon as they gave them the letter – they chucked them on fire and said, 'Bugger off, you're not going into work.' And that caused all the trouble. This were a few weeks on. We weren't against them sending some in because it were sensible. But I think they were overdoing it like … Well, I don't think, I know.[83]

Don Readman recalled ISTC worker-directors at Redcar doing unnecessary work, and how this resulted in an attempt by the pickets to pull the safety cover, threatening the new blast furnace. He also remembered that some electricians had been attempting to inflate their numbers in the works, and that this had continued until the EETPU itself stepped in and put a stop to it.[84] There were press reports to this effect at that time, alleging that some electricians had forged or photocopied dispensation letters, which they had used to gain access to the complex. The response of the unions was a large picket, 160 strong, outside the complex, and a call for a one-day removal of all safety cover, the response to which was said to be one hundred per cent successful. Lackenby EEPTU representative Cliff Dixon also produced evidence of these forgeries, and said that he was fully behind the protest action.[85]

On 4 March 1980, a group of NUB strikers at Scunthorpe called for the suspension of safety cover. That same day, over seventy representatives from strike committees throughout the country met in Salford to discuss a new strategy 'designed totally to dislocate steel production'. The focus here was how to best coordinate activities nationally,[86] but one of the tactics endorsed was a withdrawal of safety cover. Crucially, however, the strike committee representatives voted to forward this as a recommendation to the national executives of the unions, and not as a measure to be implemented immediately. Stan Sheridan argued that 'if this call had gone straight out from the meeting, safety cover would have been withdrawn within 24 hours'.[87]

Ian Crichton remembered this demand for safety cover removal being made at a difficult point in the strike, and recalled some of the discussion that accompanied it. He was sympathetic, but felt the withdrawal of safety cover would have been counter-productive:

> One contentious issue of the time was, should we bring the safety cover out? We had people on safety cover because there is a lot of gas on a steel plant – that new blast furnace that we had, it was fired up in 1979, and we had to keep it banked up, it had to be kept hot with just coke in it. That had never been done before, and it was considered something of a real achievement, but the more militant people were saying 'Look, two months into the strike, it is ridiculous. We have got people in there keeping the plant going. Really, if we want to put the management under real pressure right, we should withdraw the safety cover.' I could see where the argument was coming from in terms

> of the strategy, but what was the point of destroying your seed corn? If that furnace had gone, that plant would have gone with it, and everybody would have been out of work. And I was persuaded by Brian Connolly. He said, 'Look, some of the steel plants are close to urban conurbations and you have got to consider the risk of explosion and problems associated with gas.' Probably that would have been turned to the advantage of our adversaries in terms of being able to paint a picture of us not acting responsibly. So, all things considered, I don't think it was particularly the right strategy at the time.[88]

There was no chance of union leaders endorsing a policy of safety cover withdrawal. In fact, the demand highlighted the disconnect between some rank-and-file activists and their leaders because, while they were meeting to plan new ways of ramping up pressure on the BSC, union leaders were taking steps to end the strike. As early as 22 February, Sirs and Smith, in a memo to Thatcher, had offered the following concessions: union acceptance of local productivity lump sum bonus schemes; a commitment to 'international manning levels' – job cuts, in other words – and the principle that all pay increases should be based, as far as possible, on 'improved performance' – the productivity argument. In return, they asked for 15 per cent on the basic and a 5 per cent lump sum bonus payment.[89] The memo was informed by a joint ISTC-NUB executive discussion on 20 February, but was not publicised to the wider membership. In the second week of March, Sirs went public with the proposals, with an article in the *Steelworkers' Banner*. He spelt out some of the implications: 'It will not be easy for us. It will require revolutionary changes in traditional beliefs and practices. It will mean surrendering many customs and habits. It will mean negotiating away many jobs.' Sirs outlined what he expected in return. In addition to the above rise in the basic rate and the lump sum bonus, this included a minimum wage of £65 and a shorter working week from 1981.[90] The outlines of an agreement were here: union acceptance of rationalisation in return for a higher wage for those fortunate enough to keep their jobs. In a newspaper article the following week, Sirs reiterated much of this, but offered more concessions, including adjustments in the guaranteed week agreement. It outlined just how much ground the union leaders were willing to concede to end the dispute.[91]

In this article, Sirs stated that 'practically all of the important principles demanded by the corporation have been conceded'.[92] This was true and, in hindsight, it marked the beginning of the end of the strike. Negotiations continued, with fourteen hours of talks taking place over 10–11 March. The talks didn't produce a settlement but, speaking two days later, Sirs publicly distanced himself from the 20 per cent claim, making it clear he would accept 14.4 per cent on the basic plus 5 per cent on productivity bonuses. BSC had long known he would accept much less. By the following

week, the ISTC was calling on the government to set up a committee of inquiry as a means of ending the dispute. At a joint ISTC-NUB executive on 18 March, a resolution to that effect was passed. [93] The other unions added their support. The TGWU and GMWU pressed the two steel unions for a settlement, while the NCCC indicated they would ballot their members on any new BSC proposal, should one be made.[94] AUEW engineering section leader Gavin Laird went further by stating – in advance – that he would be willing to accept *any* recommendation made by an arbitration committee. Prior responded by rehashing the line that, as the government was not involved, so the unions and BSC would need to organise this themselves, or look to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).[95]

The resolve of the union leaders was disintegrating, but local strike committees continued to look for ways to build momentum. An eight-hundred-strong picket descended on Hadfields on 12 March, but were attacked by police snatch squads, with around ninety being arrested.[96] There was also a concerted effort to organise a picket of Ford Dagenham. This was one of the biggest industrial sites in Europe, stretching across over four hundred acres and employing 30,000 workers. To be successful, such an action required a huge number of pickets and agreements with Ford trade unionists. This in turn meant a significant input from the leaderships of both the ISTC and TGWU, but here the action was hampered as both unions were opposed to a picket at Dagenham. Allegations were made that the two unions had been allowing steel to be unloaded from the private Ford dock at Dagenham and transported to other factories. Some local ISTC and TGWU union officials were said to be openly hostile to picketing action at the works. Sporadic efforts were made by strikers throughout the dispute to place a picket there, but the sheer size of these works made this too difficult, and it wasn't until week twelve of the strike that the ISTC and TGWU leadership were finally forced into a position of official support for a picket. This pressure came from Ford's trade unionists themselves, as well as TGWU lorry drivers and the steel pickets.[97]

Picketing was also extended to BL Cowley, following the TGWU's decision to belatedly issue a directive to its drivers to observe picket lines. However, a local TGWU official, David Buckle, was accused of sabotaging this, by interpreting the directive as limited to deliveries of new steel. It seemed to sum up the situation that, almost three months into the strike, some union officials were doing their best to hamper and limit the effectiveness of the action.[98] Finally, following a meeting of the ISTC and NUB executives, it was decided to accept the formation of a committee of inquiry, assisted by ACAS.[99] A three-person team was soon set up – Lord Lever, Richard Marsh – an ex-Labour MP turned Thatcherite, who was now President of the British Iron and Steel Consumers' Council – and Bill Keys from the Society

of Graphical and Allied Trades (SOGAT). Agreement was quickly reached and publicised two days later. Basic pay would be increased by 11 per cent and a 4.5 per cent local productivity bonus would be paid, on the proviso that multi-union works committees were established in all regions.[100] The proposed deal was accepted by all the union leaders and would now go for final approval to the negotiating committee. After thirteen weeks, the steel strike seemed over.

V

Thirteen weeks without income created huge difficulties for many steelworkers, which not all were able to overcome. The union activists did their best. They recognised this would be a problem before the strike started, and had tried to put measures in place that might alleviate the hardship. The ISTC argued that it could not fund strike pay, but overall, the union spent around £1 million of its £11–12 million reserves, so was nowhere near breaking point on that front. The suicide of the Corby BSC worker Margaret Coleman was the most tragic event of the strike, and does seem to have been connected to the penury she was experiencing as a single woman on strike with no dependents. This brings into focus the state and its ongoing efforts to break the will of the workers to continue the strike. A public discourse was being created that sought to justify cuts in DHSS payments to strikers and their families, and laws were passed that would achieve this. It was another example of how the trade union movement, and its ability to take independent action, was targeted relentlessly during this period. The union leaders had been actively looking for ways of ending the strike and had now agreed to a deal that traded a pay rise for fundamental change in the structures of the industry. But these leaders had not been driving the action for three months, and they could not be certain that those who had been to the fore would accept this agreement.

Notes

1 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movement and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
2 Gibbon and Steyne, *Thurcroft*, p. 211.
3 Interview, Tony Cook.
4 Interview, John Whittingham.
5 Interview, Mike and Val Hull.
6 Interview, Mick Hawker.

7 Interview, Ian Crichton.
8 Interview, Tony Cook.
9 Interview, Paul O'Neill.
10 Interview, Geoff Walters.
11 *Steelworkers' Banner*, 1.
12 MTF, PREM19/308 f38, No. 10 record of conversation (MT–Union leaders), Record of a meeting held at 10 Downing Street on Monday 21 January 1980 at 10.30 a.m. to discuss steel dispute.
13 MTF, PREM19/310 f208, Department of Industry Record of Conversation, Adam Butler, Patrick Mayhew, Derek Norton, Len Murray, 18 February 1980.
14 Interview, Pete Reid.
15 Interview, Tony Cook.
16 Interview, Mick Hawker.
17 Interview, Tommy Brennan.
18 Interview, John Foley (Scotland).
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7

‘We won the battle. We lost the war.’

The steel strike ended on 1 April 1980 and was followed by an acceleration in the closures programme and the laying of the groundwork towards privatisation. Many steel-making areas suffered throughout this process. By the mid-1980s, the scars of deindustrialisation would be widespread. Steelworker memories of these processes are varied, reflecting the impacts on their own lives and the communities of which they were part, but all share certain features. Some remember the strike as a success, with the later retraction and destruction of the British steel industry considered a separate and unavoidable process. Others make direct connections between the strike and subsequent run-down of the industry, and the wider deindustrialisation in Britain. All considered the collapse of the steel industry to have had dreadful consequences in their areas. Many felt that the main driver of this process was technological, while others saw it as a conscious decision by successive Conservative administrations to abandon manufacturing industries and move more towards a service-based economy. There was recognition that while the steel industry was dangerous and unhealthy, those communities dependent on it had been devastated by unemployment. This final chapter will analyse several themes raised by the interviews, exploring the outcome of the strike, the decline of the industry and the longer-term and wider deindustrialisation process in Britain.

The union leaders presented Lever as a win, but its acceptance was far from certain. At Port Talbot, a meeting of one thousand craft workers voted by ten to one against, while Pat Shevlin confirmed the seven Scottish-based representatives on the CNC would reject it.[1] There was also now a strong possibility of a national dock strike in support of steelworkers. Over a hundred dockers in Liverpool had been suspended on 20 March following their refusal to handle steel cargo bound for India, with 5,000 walking out in support of their colleagues the following day. Len McCluskey, then a TGWU official on the Liverpool docks, commented, ‘This is the first industry to come out in support of the steelworkers … it is vital every other section of the movement follows this lead.’[2] The TGWU declared the Liverpool action

official on 25 March, and a dock's delegate conference was planned for 1 April to discuss a national strike. This was the day the steelworkers' CNC met to reach a decision on the Lever proposals. Dockers' delegates voted by sixty to one in favour of a national dock strike,[3] but the result was relayed only to the ISTC national officers, and not the CNC.[4] Whether this would have made any difference to the outcome of their vote is an unanswerable question. As the ISTC leaders arrived to discuss the Lever proposals with the remainder of the CNC, they received a barracking from groups of pickets outside the union HQ, with some breaking in and occupying the offices.[5] In the end, however, the Lever recommendations were voted through by forty-two votes to twenty-nine, bringing the strike to an official end.

This development in the docks had been important. A national dock strike in support of a national steel strike had the potential to create a crisis for the Thatcher government. Even before the TGWU had declared it official, the Rotherham and Scottish regional steel strike committees sent telegrams to the ISTC leadership asking them not to authorise any return to work in case the dock strike spread further.[6] This was discussed at a joint NUB-ISTC executive meeting on 24 March, but the decision was taken to press ahead with the demand for a court of inquiry, a move that would ultimately bring the strike to an end.[7] Keith Jones had been important in persuading the dockers to back the steelworkers and continues to view this as the moment when a major challenge to Thatcherism was possible.

> I addressed the dockers in a boxing stadium in Liverpool. Totally unofficial it was. These are the great moments in our lives, I admit that. I just wish more could have come from it. The possibilities were there, and the dockers did respond and said, 'Yes, it's time, let's do this.' Remember, Thatcher was a new prime minister, she didn't have her Cabinet behind her, she was wobbly as hell. And it could have been done. I will say to my dying day, we could have done it – we could have changed the course. Maybe not massively, but sufficiently. We could have kept something of the steel industry because it would have been converted into a jobs issue. Courts of inquiry never go anywhere, which is why they have them. If only they knew, the executive. I mean, I work inside with the establishment, if you like, in my role now, and it's the one thing they can't manage, that kind of strike action. If only the executive knew, that's the real power, and we had it, we were on the streets, I had an army of 10,000 activists, we had the dockers there, we had everyone supporting us, we had emotional support, and they could have done it, they really could have done it.[8]

For those who considered the strike purely as a pay dispute, the recollection was that Lever had awarded the steelworkers a good deal. John Foley recalled the deal in positive terms: 'The deal was brilliant. From 2 per cent to 14 and a half, it was brilliant.'[9] But a marked feature of other interviews

was the way the pay rise was recalled as much lower. Paul O'Neill remembered it as a 2 per cent settlement, while Martin Kendrick felt the deal combined the worst of both worlds – a low pay rise and an acceptance of cuts by the unions. For him it was a turning point:

> The strike was initially about pay, and I think they put a fairly significant claim in, certainly in the high teens, and they eventually settled for 3 per cent and some strange arrangement where they could discuss plants, and this was the first time we had heard any of that. So, just in terms of the straight cash, which is what the strike was called for, what were they doing? Bill Sirs was saying it was a victory. But in what terms was it a victory? I couldn't work that out … and that whole part of the deal that said there would be discussions around some plants, one or two plants I think, might have been in South Wales, Port Talbot and Llanwern, but why? Why did they feel the need to make those cuts? It was an enlightenment for me, because it was at that point that I thought, you know, we'd need to start thinking about the bigger picture, and it was then that, the more you looked at it, it was a sell-out.[10]

These memories are linked to the subsequent destruction of the steel industry and reveal its impact on steel-making regions and communities. It is telling that Kendrick noted the connection of the pay deal to rationalisation. He expanded on the consequences of this:

> Darlaston was a thriving place, but undoubtedly what happened after the strike was a terminal nosedive. The perception I have is that this strike almost gave the green light for this to happen. All sorts of employers started to do things that I don't think was on their minds before, but they had seen how to do it and get away with it. There were closures. You go over the bridge here to Darlaston, you'll see probably twenty-five, thirty empty factories that were emptied between 1981 and 1985. It all started there and then. Three quarters of the places we picketed no longer exist. Darlaston was a thriving market town, a rich little town, with a market.[11]

Many other steelworkers agreed that management emerged strongest from the strike:

> The strike was a show of strength, on one level, but once we went back, the management, to a certain extent, knew that they could do what they liked because we wouldn't do it again. It wouldn't happen again, simple as that.[12]

Tony Poynter made a similar argument when he said that the strike had 'drawn the sting' from the ISTC.[13] This corresponds to a narrative that has been created about BSC in the post-strike period – namely that managers adopted a harder line against union practices and began to implement the sort of changes considered by them to be overdue and necessary, if BSC was to emerge as a credible business force. Some managers have claimed that, during the strike, meetings took place and lists were drawn up of

working practices that they would move to abolish after the resumption of work.[14]

Later commentators also view the strike as having 'demoralised' the unions leaving them unable to resist BSC's cuts programme.[15] There is some truth in this – the steel unions seemed weaker and managerialism stronger in the years that followed the strike. But in the period immediately following what had been an unprecedented three-month strike, it is doubtful that management could have been so sure or so confident of their position. Glimpses of this fleeting period, when the balance of forces between worker and employer was in flux, can be viewed in some of the testimonies. In an example of the contradictions sometimes evident in oral history testimony, Paul O'Neill also recalled how – shortly after returning – he refused to load wagons, on the basis that the chains weren't working properly and there was also a hole in the floor, which created a health and safety danger. This resulted in a visit from a manager, who pointed out that none of this had ever been a problem in the past. 'In the past we were working together. We're not working together anymore', O'Neill replied.[16] Many steelworkers across all regions also recalled strikes occurring immediately after the resumption of work over the use of lorry firms who had broken picket lines during the strike. John Marston offered some detail on this:

> We'd got instructions that Hayes Freight crossed the picket line in Sheerness, so we said, 'You're not coming in.' This caused a hell of a problem with our works because they used to take all our steel out. There was a big meeting, and we had the managing director there, everybody sitting there, and we said, 'We've got it here. We've got a photo of the lorry.' Their boss, he said, 'Well he only went there to turn his tractor round.' He said, 'He didn't go in to take any steel in.' In the finish, it was resolved, but he absolutely had to grovel to us to get his transport back into that or else he'd have gone bankrupt because he'd got no other contracts.[17]

South Yorkshire pickets designed a poster which showed a defiant steelworker alongside the words, 'Treated with contempt. Not ever again.' The message seemed clear: this was not a cowed workforce. BSC managers had to be careful, and could not have been confident that the ISTC had been weakened by the strike. It suggests that the memory of a demoralised post-strike workforce might have been constructed during the later run-down and disintegration of the industry. It also indicates, possibly, that had the ISTC leaders seized the momentum upon the return to work in April, the positivity and the solidarity created through a ninety-three-day strike might have been built upon.

For all interviewees, the memories of the strike outcome are fixed in the bleak context of deindustrialising 1980s Britain, and a disappearing steel

industry. They are memories that recall the difficulties they faced at the time, and those that lay ahead:

> We got 16 per cent in the event. We won the battle. We lost the war. And we lost the war for a few other people. Not because they didn't necessarily support us, but because they didn't know what was going on.[18]

Even this account, which attempts to separate out the issues, struggles to disentangle the later fate of the steel industry with the outcome of this strike. Over 45,000 BSC jobs were lost within one year of the strike ending, and another 56,000 between 1981–85.[19] The contributing membership of the ISTC dropped from 106,222 in December 1979 to 73,492 in December 1980.[20] Cuts and closures had been a feature of the British steel industry for many years prior to 1980, but these had been spread out over a much longer period. And while such cuts had been opposed by the unions, the ISTC had now accepted an agreement that included a mechanism for an acceleration of the closures – the local productivity bonus scheme. Tony Poynter discussed this, accepting that the local productivity bonus was a challenge to national negotiating frameworks, but maintaining that the latter had remained intact:

> They wanted local lumps on pay bargaining, to take the national thing away from pay. They didn't succeed by the way. They wanted bargaining to be done for pay in the works and that way they could create differences between different works … The deal was 10 per cent on the basic and 4 per cent local bonus. The first year it were agreed as long as you sat down and formed a committee for that works to negotiate having a lump sum bonus part of the pay in future, you got it that year. But the next year, that's when it started to change a bit. What I liked best were the fact that you were still keeping your national pay negotiations and that meant that you were all going to get the same basic rate – it were then a case of how strong you were locally. And I always thought we were pretty strong locally. If you've got a lot of people, you've got more power … The consequence arrived later were a massive change to jobs situation. Maybe they wouldn't be losing their jobs, but they'd have to do more work. That's productivity.[21]

Local bargaining and bonus schemes existed long before 1980,[22] but not in the form or nationwide scale now being rolled out by BSC. The aim of the corporation was the breaking of the national wage-bargaining structure, which would weaken the unions and allow local managers more autonomy in the framing of business strategy.[23] This facilitated greater marketisation of the industry and was a signpost towards privatisation. The fact that BSC was willing to pay a bonus in return for the mere establishment of multi-union works committees shows the value they placed on getting the unions to accept the measure. Poynter's comments raise some other points.

Following the formation of the works committees, local conditions and contexts became more important. He indicated that much depended on the strength of the union organisation locally, and also that it led to a 'massive change' to the jobs situation. In this respect, the local elements of the deal were arguably the more significant. This seemed to be the view of Ian Crichton:

> They wanted productivity-linked bonus schemes, which the unions had always been against. That was the strategy of the company, probably driven by links to government. It became the lump sum bonus and it prevailed right up until I finished. Ultimately [it was an attack on the national framework]. At times, you couldn't put a fag paper between the agreements that were struck either between the Welsh steelworkers, Scottish steelworkers, the Midlands and ourselves, but they all negotiated separate agreements, and it did drive a coach and horses through a national negotiating facility.[24]

Local bonus schemes were crucial in shaping the future of BSC. Negotiations between BSC regional managers and multi-union works committees became arenas in which pay increases were traded for job losses. There was a long history of this in the steel industry. Kelly has highlighted much earlier attempts by BSC to reform collective bargaining practices and rationalise the multiplicity of existing bonus schemes into more streamlined, works-wide productivity schemes. But such change hadn't been attempted in this fashion or country-wide scale.[25] Steel unions remained opposed to compulsory redundancies and closures, but their acceptance of voluntary severance agreements meant they were being tied into a cuts programme that was building huge momentum.

The most important feature of the lump sum schemes was the linking of payments to works performance. The main criteria for measuring this was tonnes of steel produced per worker, a quotient that was obviously increased if the divisor was reduced. Bonus payments became tied to workforce reductions. For example, in March 1981, the Teesside multi-union committee agreed to a reduction of 3,800 jobs – almost 20 per cent of the industry workforce in the region – in return for an additional 3 per cent lump sum on top of their wage and an initial 4.5 per cent bonus.[26] Twenty-three weeks redundancy pay was offered, and under the new incentive system due to become operational in January 1982, a reduction from 10.38 to 8.65 worker-hours per tonne of steel would provide a 5 per cent bonus per quarter. This incentivising of redundancy, and the tying of it to high bonus payments, seemed a departure from trade union principles, but is not recalled in that fashion. In fact, local productivity schemes 'met with little worker or union resistance',[27] and are remembered positively today by some who worked in the industry:

> The bonuses were the best thing that happened for us. Everybody in steel house said that the only good thing about the strike was when you started to get these bonuses. It was worked out from the tonnage produced, and sometimes we had virtually a double pay packet. We were all checking when the tonnage figures came out from the mill: 'What is it this week?' We all got the same bonuses – across Teesside we had some really good bonuses, as I say, almost double your salary. It did take the edge away from the three months.[28]

Similar developments were witnessed elsewhere:

> A new multi-union bargaining unit was established covering Ravenscraig and Gartcosh with bonuses based upon improvement in man hours per ton. This agreement aimed at manpower reduction was further developed in 1982 when the local unions abandoned the practice of standard manning in favour of the mobile allocation of labour as determined by production requirements.[29]

When asked about the redundancies that were part of this process, most steelworkers replied that they were normally limited to older workers, who wanted a pay-off, and sometimes involved cross-matching – swaps between workers in redundant posts who wanted to stay, and others in retained posts who wished to leave. As Terkel's interviews with US steelworkers remind us, steelwork was often hard, and by the time they reached their fifties, many were looking to leave.[30] Ian Stewart was a member of the Teesside works committee. He accepted a connection between the work of the committee and job losses, but stressed that these were voluntary, and tended to be older workers who were happy to seek terms. However, there was a recognition of the implications this had for young people.

> A lot people wanted to go … Certainly [the need to protect jobs for younger people] was an argument always put forward by the unions. But having said that, again, I think people were at the time more interested in themselves, in terms of 'Well, what am I going to do, what's the future for me?' And, in particular, somebody say who was maybe getting finished, in their forties or fifties, you know, would there be any future for them? Would they get another job? So while, yes that perhaps was a thought, I don't think it was too much of a thought in a lot of people's minds.[31]

There is perhaps a contradiction in the argument that the unions accepted voluntary redundancy agreements, while continuing to warn that access to the industry was being closed off to young people. It was perhaps to resolve this that many steelworkers argued, as we see here, that it was the workers themselves who were effectively responsible for the job losses. When discussing the closure of Consett in 1980, and the later demise of Clydebridge, Peter Phillips noted:

> British Steel didn't shut Consett. Consett shut Consett. They voted to take the money, same as the Brig. It was the workers who sold it – don't let anyone

> kid ye on that. Most of the guys who'd been in here thirty years were saying, 'I'm going to get a pay-off of seven grand.' I had a pal who was only in there months, walked oot with two grand. They shut the rolling mill in 1982. We had a meeting in the small plate bay. Archie Easton, the manager, he said, 'I'm going to put you on 80 per cent of your wages. The alternative is to shut the mill.' It went to a vote. It was all the guys who want to shut it, go to the right, all the guys who want to keep the mill open, go the left. We tried to keep it open, but thousands went to the right, a couple of hundred to the left. What made it worse, some guys who were keeping their jobs, they went to the right.[32]

Christine O'Neill felt that the Teesside steelworkers who took redundancy payments effectively sold the jobs of the next generation:

> In South Bank and Grangetown something like 10,000, and in Cargo Fleet as well, were made redundant in a very short time. But I did think … I mean, I remember going to work one morning in … They sort of had a big gatehouse and we used to go in there and tell them we were in like, you know, and it was quite a lot of blokes in there, and they were all bragging about how much money they were going to get, and I'm looking at them and said, 'But you're selling your jobs … You're selling your kids' jobs.' You know … But they couldn't see it. And it wasn't till the whole lot went that people started realising what … what had happened.[33]

Throughout the 1980s, the locally negotiated element of the pay became increasingly important. BSC offered a 7 per cent national pay rise in January 1981 – suspended until July – as part of its attempts to sugar their cuts plan, but that would be the last national pay offer until December 1984.[34] The ISTC attempted to resist this, but was undone in November 1981 by the other steel unions,[35] and in 1982 by their own officials at Port Talbot and then Ravenscraig, all of whom agreed local deals.[36] The 1984 award was an exception, designed with the aim of keeping the BSC workforce out of the miners' strike. Referring to the relationship between the redundancies programme and local productivity schemes, Blyton concluded that the main outcome was 'minimum manning' within BSC works.[37] As it moved towards the final stages of privatisation, BSC was content to reinstate a mix of local and national pay bargaining, culminating in a two-year national deal in 1988. But by that stage, the battle was over; 100,000 jobs had gone from the industry, and the ISTC's membership had been reduced to just 26,000.[38]

Reflecting on the bleak aftermath of the strike, Mick Hawker believed that a different outcome had been possible, but drew a straight line between weak steel union leadership, a lack of active solidarity from other unions, and the deindustrialisation that followed:

> A lot of people sensed that Bill Sirs was the employer's trump card, that he would make a deal and wouldn't do what was necessary to actually win the

> dispute. I think it's just the nature of right-wing full-time officers. They're there to make a deal. We didn't get the 20 per cent and, had we won – well, had we got solidarity from the transport, had we got solidarity from engineering, then that decimation of the steel industry probably wouldn't have happened. A whole swathe of the steel industry in Sheffield went in the early eighties. Factory after factory after factory was shutting. Massive layoffs, massive redundancies, the private sector was really badly hit. Firth Brown, I think there was about 6,000 worked there, shut. Firth Brown Tools, I think there were 2,000 or 3,000 worked there, shut. Hadfields shut. Then the contraction of the British Steel Corporation, there were redundancies every single year. Had we won – and winning was dependent, I think, on solidarity – then that would have knocked Thatcherism for six right at the start. The miners' strike might not even have happened. We characterised it at the time as a bad draw, but realistically we lost.[39]

Hawker's dismissal of Sirs was shared by many interviewees on this project. But the more substantive point being made displays a belief in the power of organised workers, and active solidarity in the form of secondary strike action, something which was missing in this dispute until those final few days. Some activists at the time could see what was at stake. For example, Andy Fenwick, a member of the South Teesside Strike Committee, wrote during the strike: 'We are Maggie's miners … we could bring down this reactionary Tory government as the miners brought down the Heath government in 1974.'[40] It didn't happen, and for many, looking back, the strike came to be considered as a historic lost opportunity, a chance to wreck Thatcherism before it developed momentum, thus avoiding the traumatic defeats suffered by organised labour later in the decade. This connecting of the steel strike to the miners' strike and a better world, if both had been won, is a thread that runs through many of the testimonies, whether it be on the theme of government strategy, policing tactics or, in this case, strike outcomes. The belief that the Tory onslaught might have been derailed in 1980 is one shared by Martin Upham. When asked about the possibility of turning a strike over pay into one over pay and closures, he answered:

> I never spoke with [Sirs] about this. I was not his right-hand man. I think he might have been aware that, if you take on the government – and it wasn't just any government – over the future of the industry, you're directly confronting the state. But I think they could have been defeated. I think we could have brought them down. They hadn't passed any of the anti-union legislation at that point.[41]

These responses from steel union activists, and the hopes that underpinned them, recall testimonies given by veteran Italian communists to Portelli in the 1970s, and presented by him as examples of uchronia in oral history. They are memories that stress how history could and should have been,

memories that focus on possibility rather than actuality … memories that 'contrast the existing world against a desirable world'.[42]

Keith Jones' comments above, on the dock strike, showed that he shared the view that a different outcome was possible. He went on to argue that something of a steel industry could have been saved and rebuilt, but that the problem was the lack of a political programme that would have kept steelworkers together. In the absence of this, workers in different plants did what was in their interests, and some did well enough out of the productivity agreements:

> I saw the connection [between the deal, productivity bonuses and redundancies] but the trouble is, when you go from that [the strike] to that [fighting closures] it's very quick. People needed money – they'd had thirteen weeks without. I sat on the productivity bargaining bonus committee – simply because I had to, because that was the only game in town. I hate to sound like a Marxist textbook, but unless there is a revolutionary structure in place– in fact, it doesn't have to be revolutionary, just a democratic structure – which provides an alternative, people will cleave to what they know, and some people got well paid. Not everyone got made redundant, and that's how they achieved the closure programme really. The Llanwern agreement was based on productivity and signed by Brookman, and that was the end of it because there was no more fighting then – the Llanwern agreement agreed the run-down of the industry. A victory would have been 15 per cent – that was fine – but also a commitment to negotiate the future of the industry, which brings into play jobs. Now, the Left of me – and there are plenty to the Left of me – would not have accepted this, but I would have accepted a slimmed down industry because I am a realist. Business ebbs and flows, and I would have accepted the ebb providing we had an industry. We don't have one. We've got Forgemasters here, but the Craig has gone, Llanwern has gone, Shotton has gone, we no longer have an industry, we just have a few works. So that would have been my negotiation, a broader settlement which would have had an element of industry reconstruction in it. They wouldn't allow it, but I had the impression then and now that it was an opportunity lost. We could have had it, we wouldn't have saved the world, it's not a fairy tale, but it would have been a reduced steel industry that we could have built back up because commerce will invest in steel if they think there's a buck to be made.[43]

Jones also believed that, in the absence of such a programme or structure, the old guard of officialdom – who, in South Yorkshire, had retreated to a hut with their bags of sugar during the strike – reappeared, regained control, eventually forcing out some of the activists:

> The strike ended and they emerged, took control and then put us on trial … Of all the things I'll reference here, there's a film called Taras Bulba, and it's Yul Brynner, and he's a Polish Cossack or something, and they win the battle, and then the Tsar calls them to the parade and they turn the cannons on them

> and shoot them. Cause you know? You've served your purpose, job done … don't need you anymore.[44]

The avalanche of steelworks closures and redundancies from 1980 onwards is associated with Ian MacGregor, who was appointed BSC chair in May 1980 via an expensive loan agreement brokered between the Conservative government and MacGregor's US investment bank Lazard Frères. It was the Callaghan government who had brought Scots-born MacGregor back to the world of British industrial relations, by appointing him as a non-executive director at British Leyland in 1977. He then helped design the 'survival' plan that cut 25,000 jobs.[45] MacGregor was hostile to trade unions, viewing them as a disruptive, 'overtly political' inconvenience, to be ignored during decision-making processes and tolerated only if they agreed with his decisions.[46] His usual approach to a 'failing' company was to present workers with two choices: total closure or huge cuts. He would then appeal to them on an individual basis over the heads of the unions to accept large-scale redundancies. MacGregor first used this tactic in the USA, and it would remain a characteristic of his career in Britain. At BL, he advised Michael Edwardes to refrain from negotiating with the unions,[47] and after the switch to BSC, quickly crafted a familiar-looking survival plan for that corporation and attempted to bypass the unions to ram it through. This entailed a slight reduction in steel capacity from 15 million tonnes to 14.4 million tonnes, but a huge number of job cuts, 20,000 in total, including Normanby Park in Scunthorpe. These were, of course, on top of the 52,000 job losses that BSC had finalised shortly before the strike.[48] MacGregor utilised the latest technology to cut the unions out of the process, recording two statements on video tape and compelling BSC workers throughout the country to watch on canteen TVs. In the films, MacGregor was seated behind a small table, and like a biblical prophet issued catastrophic warnings of 'more closures and redundancies on a larger scale' unless his survival plan be accepted. High on the wall behind MacGregor was a clock, and he referred to this during his address, by stating that every time the clock ticked, BSC lost another £30.[49] It was an image that stuck in the mind of John Whittingham:

> The famous clock on the BBC News, you've never seen it since, the ticking clock. And every tick meant another hundred thousand pounds that British Steel had lost. That was on every night. Every night. And I really resented that.[50]

Whittingham recalled the ticking clock scene as occurring on national TV just before the strike, and as one of the events that stiffened the resolve of steelworkers to take part in the action. There are inaccuracies in his memory, but as we know, these can and do sometimes lead us 'through and beyond

facts to their meanings'.[51] MacGregor's broadcast increased the alienation many trade unionists felt from BSC management, and fed resentment among many like John Whittingham over the way that workers were depicted as the main problem in the industry. Again, it shows that for many workers this was not merely a pay dispute, but the culmination of grievances that had been building for years.

MacGregor was belligerent and confrontational. He was not the architect of a BSC cuts programme that stretched back to the early 1970s, but saw closures and profitability as interlinked and retained maximum agency to shape corporation policy. As he had done elsewhere, in January 1981, MacGregor authorised a ballot of BSC employees on his cuts plan. The ISTC complained they had not been consulted, but in an uncomfortable TV performance, MacGregor rejected this, and claimed to have 'no real explanation' for the negative attitude the union had towards him.[52] Unlike the BSC ballot during the strike, the ISTC recognised the threat and organised a rival ballot, to be conducted at branch meetings. The two polls showed the advantages that management always possess; while BSC could post voting slips and stamp addressed envelopes to every employee, the union had to rely on members turning up to meetings to vote. The BSC ballot was a success for MacGregor, as 78 per cent of those who took part supported his plan. He saw this as providing a 'green light' for its implementation.[53] The ISTC ballot revealed a divide between production and staff grades; the former, usually more at risk from redundancy, opposed the pay rise, the cuts and the new bonus scheme. These were all accepted by staff members.[54] The result placed the ISTC leadership in a quandary, but it was one they soon escaped through acquiescence with MacGregor's scheme.

MacGregor's public persona was that of the no-nonsense businessman. The Tory minister responsible for his recruitment gushed over him as 'one of the world most outstanding managers'.[55] Steelworker trade unionists remember him differently. All considered him callous. Some felt he was unhinged. Tommy Brennan recalled negotiations with MacGregor at Ravenscraig:

> In 1980, MacGregor made an announcement that he could save £100 million by shutting the Craig, and that was the start, it was a war of attrition. He was a very difficult man to deal with. He threw figures at you across the table, thinking you were a dummy. But we were always prepared for MacGregor and threw them back at him. And when we did that, he used to get confused. He got irritable with us and instructed the director at the Craig, [Len] Raby, to ensure that no one in senior management liaised with us in any way, and that no information was to go to us. But what he didn't know was that we had a system where we could get information, where we used to get a phone call saying, 'There's a wastepaper basket in such and such an office. You may be interested.' And we would walk down and get it. And they even got it that

> they would mark the papers, they would put some mark on them, and we were told watch out, they know who's getting what. But when they done that, I used to go down to Kitty in the typing pool and ask her type it out for us, and we would then get about five copies of it made.[56]

MacGregor's efforts to prevent Ravenscraig union representatives from accessing company information was managerial prerogative par excellence and in line with comments he later made, which identified the restoration of 'the fundamental right to manage' as his main priority on re-entry to British boardrooms in the late 1970s.[57] It sheds more light on MacGregor's later role at the National Coal Board – the maintenance of tight control over data, the practice of drip-feeding selected snippets of information (and lies) to workers, while attempting to cut the trade unions out of the discussions about the future of the industry – these would all characterise his leadership of the NCB.

The redundancies and closures piled up. Like all EC steel producers, the UK from December 1976 had accepted measures designed to cut output, as a response both to global market conditions, and in line with an EC ideological objective of removing state aid from the industry. From October 1980 onwards, these measures escalated from price controls to production quotas.[58] But the level of job losses was much higher in Britain than in any of the other main EC steel producing countries. During 1981–84, 44 per cent of BSC jobs were lost, a far higher rate than Italy (12 per cent), France (13.5 per cent), Belgium (13 per cent) or West Germany (17 per cent).[59] The example of Italy is significant here. Italian decline in output and employment was smaller because of a conscious political decision made by the state at that point to protect both the small, private Bresciani firms in the north, and the large state-owned complexes, mainly in the south. In Britain, the conscious political decision faced in the opposite direction.

Cuts and closures were just one plank of BSC policy; the second was the development of BSC-private partnerships, the so-called 'Phoenix' companies. This was a central feature of the preparation for privatisation. As can be seen clearly with the example of Phoenix Two, the creation of United Engineering Steels by BSC and GKN, the implications of these partnerships were dire for BSC employees. This took until 1984 to complete and resulted in the closure of several existing works, including Tinsley Park, and the company that had been the scene of much drama in 1980, Hadfields, which was bought by BSC and GKN, and closed. The closures were designed to clear the way for the new company at a time when demand for engineering steel was in decline. The unions in Sheffield attempted to impose production quotas, to prevent orders being transferred away from the threatened plants, but were isolated and ultimately defeated. By this stage, there was a new

BSC chair at the helm, Robert Haslam, but the priority remained the same – 'privatisation – as quickly as is practicable'.[60]

This context of closures and creeping privatisation proved immensely difficult for union activists to deal with. Mike Hull reflected on the situation at Parkgate, following the strike, and showed the degree to which managerial prerogative became entrenched. Like armchair generals moving toy soldiers around a board, it was BSC managers who marshalled the figures outlining how much steel would be produced and how many workers had to be removed from the BSC payroll. The unions were locked out of this process. From BSC's viewpoint, their only role was to find the necessary numbers willing to take voluntary redundancy. Hull's account shows that BSC managers were not trusted by workers, that the figures they presented the union with were often seen to be completely inaccurate.

> Redundancies? That could be done nationally or locally. Some bright person would have a figure, and that would go to the plant and the mill. It could be implemented with negotiations. There was conflict between people who did want to go, and those who didn't. It wasn't unusual for redundancies one year, and then people taken on a year later – it was arbitrary. We did challenge the figures, but they were so arrogant, they didn't listen to you. I know a couple of lads who came back three times. They were trying to work out how much steel they'd use each year, but they never got it right.[61]

In Teesside, male unemployment rose from 10 per cent to 24 per cent during 1979–85, and female unemployment rose from 7.5 per cent to 15 per cent.[62] By 1985, over 50 per cent of unemployed people in the region had been out of work for a year or more, with a further 36 per cent unemployed between two months and twelve months.[63] In the West Midlands, the contraction in employment between 1980–83 was 358,000, with over 80 per cent of those redundancies taking place in manufacturing.[64] Corby saw its male unemployment rates rise to almost 30 per cent in 1981, which was three times the official national figure. In South Wales, male and female unemployment rose well above the average, reaching levels of 16 per cent and 14 per cent respectively. Some of the major works that survived for a few more years, like Ravenscraig, would also be gone by the early 1990s, leaving in this instance a local unemployment rate in Motherwell that might have been as high as 26.8 per cent.[65] The effect on local communities became visible, and can be evidenced in the recollections of those steel industry workers who witnessed it.

> I don't think anybody thought the steelworks would shut. You thought, it's been here all this time – it's not going to shut … It's jobs for life. Your sons get jobs there. And I think it was a bit of a shock when they found out they were going to get shut. And then it started sort of creeping across, from Cargo

> Fleet into Cleveland. It was, you know … one minute, you were going past Cargo Fleet, there it is, and next minute, it was like, oh, half of it's gone! Very, very quickly … And you couldn't go and photograph it because you got chased …
>
> It seemed like a pack of dominoes coming down. Both sides of the road in Darlaston used to be lined with factories. Drop Forging, Reubery Owens, Garringtons, Wellman Smith Owens, all gone. In the mid-eighties, they had this rule. If they took the roofs off the empty factories, they wouldn't have to pay rates on them. Course once the weather gets in, any machinery that was there got rusty and ruined. I can always remember going past different places, seeing all the machinery had been dragged outside and left as scrap. The amount of money that was wasted, with this machinery, it was criminal. I know young people grow up, and they rebel, but this was the time when they seemed to get in more trouble, you know with drug-taking and violence and car theft. It all seemed to come from this period.[66]

> The job losses started not long after the strike. Round Oak, '82. Patent Shaft, they announced that was closing during the strike. Bagnalls went in '84 and I never got another job until '89. I was fifty-one when they shut down. There was a lot of people out of work … What did people do? Have you ever seen a hairy-arsed steelworker stacking shelves at ASDA? That's what happened to them, or they didn't work at all. Believe me, it gets into you, it gets into your head.[67]

In the historiography of deindustrialisation, an important development has been the moral economy standpoint, which, building on the earlier work of E. P. Thompson, has facilitated a close examination of the thinking and activism of workers and trade unionists who argued that employers and government were illegitimately and deliberately destroying an agreed economic or workplace order.[68] Some of the extracts above, and many others, can be examined within this framework. They reveal that, for those workers who were most impacted by deindustrialisation, there was something deliberate, unjust and immoral at this destruction and subsequent abandonment of steelworkers and their communities. Mike Hull's belief that managers often made up the figures to suit themselves, in order to deliberately cut jobs; Christine O'Neill's recollection at the shock caused by the arbitrary removal of jobs the community believed would always be there; Geoff Hawkins' condemnation of the socio-economic crime of allowing factories and valuable machinery to rot; Geoff Walters' pithy take on the fate of men who had been proud steelworkers, but were now low-paid shelf-stackers – they all convey injustice and unfairness at the destruction of an agreed industrial order and the abandonment of the people who had relied on it. The anger this provoked remains palpable several decades later. For Christine O'Neill, the whole process was destructive, unnecessary, and resulted in an economic

wasteland – but it was one that had been deliberate and conducted with the intention of weakening working-class organisation:

> It weren't a lot to do with the industry, it was how to break the working classes, because the steel unions and the miners' unions were the strong working-class unions. It wasn't all to do with shutting down the industry. It was breaking the working classes, and that's what she did. Because once she got the steel strike done, and then once she got the miners done, all the other unions were just like too weak to combat it, and I don't think people realised what was happening. I know I didn't really, at the time … And I hate the woman. I'm so glad she's dead. She came up to Middlesbrough … I mean, it was quite quick the way they just demolished things. I mean, they demolished the whole of Cargo Fleet, and she stood in the middle of Cargo Fleet, in this derelict site, and called the men of Middlesbrough 'moaning minnies' because they were going around [the area, saying 'Any jobs?']. Now, nobody knew she was going there or she might not have got out alive [laughing]. But that's how I think of it now … is it weren't so much … about shutting down the industry, it was … it was breaking the working classes. Because it was either France or Germany, they put all their steelworks on hold, kept them, you know, as you do with steelworks, until the market picked up again, where she just went shoong! I hate the bloody woman.[69]

The huge level of redundancies and closures during 1980–83 meant that no steelworks was safe. This now included the big five, around which the industry was centred. Ravenscraig was the most vulnerable, and in 1982 MacGregor suggested to the government that the works be closed.[70] However, Scotland's industrial base was already in danger of disintegration. During 1979–81, Scottish manufacturing lost around 11 per cent of its output and 20 per cent of its jobs.[71] Over sixty factories had either fully or partly closed, prompting Kilmarnock Labour MP William McKelvey to quip that the Tories had destroyed more of Scotland's heavy industry in two years than Hitler had managed in six.[72] Closing Ravenscraig would have serious political ramifications. It would remove 6,000 BSC jobs, but Strathclyde Regional Council estimated that the knock-on effects would result in around 14,000 job losses in the region, 10,000 of which would be in North Lanarkshire, an area where male unemployment was already at 22 per cent.[73]

Scottish Tory politicians were fearful. All parliamentary seats in the west of Scotland were considered marginal by the party. The loss of Glasgow Hillhead – Tory since its 1918 creation – in March 1982 underlined that clearly enough. It was for these reasons that the decision was taken out of MacGregor's hands. The Conservatives were pressurised by a campaign to save Ravenscraig, and buckled, with several MPs, including the Scottish party Chair, Michael Ancram, and the Scottish Secretary of State, George Younger, expressing opposition to the closure. In October 1982, Patrick

Jenkin informed the House of Commons that the government, and not MacGregor, would make the decision on the closure of a major steelworks, and later guaranteed Ravenscraig at least three more years.[74]

The rapidity and extent of the cuts programme raises the question of why the unions never attempted to organise a strike in support of jobs. It was a question put to most interviewees, and in their replies numerous themes emerged, all of which were internal, as opposed to the strength of the government and BSC. They included the weakness of the union leaders, the fragmented nature of steelworker trade unionism, and a supposed lack of fight among ordinary ISTC members, who were demoralised by the 1980 strike.

Ian Crichton indicated that the ISTC leadership had no strategy for protecting jobs, even though for many steelworkers this had been the more important issue. He went on to argue that the decline of steel might have been arrested if a such an alternative industrial strategy was in place:

> Given the enormity of the problem, I don't think they did have a particular strategy, and it all came to a head, ironically over wages rather than rationalisation and the preservation of jobs. That was a particularly controversial aspect of the 1980 strike. There are still people to this day who said it was fought over the wrong thing, that it shouldn't have been fought over the wage that had been offered in 1979, it should have been on the basis of having an agreed strategy with successive governments in terms of how we restructure and maintain a steel industry of our own … . Could steel have been saved? Only if there had been a totally different strategy. Manufacturing had been allowed to decline probably since the early seventies – it had been declining before that, but the acceleration of decline was considerable. It would have needed a totally different strategy – perhaps based on the German model, where making things to sell is the fundamental to any successful economy – but we just basically relied on the financial sector. To have a vibrant steel industry you would have needed a lot of central planning and have that aspect as a fundamental part of the economic structure. Labour didn't have it, and the Conservatives certainly didn't have it.[75]

Crichton also maintained that, while he always resisted and fought against closures, others chose not to, for various reasons:

> After the strike, thousands of jobs a year were going, plants shutting right, left and centre. I've been on more marches and campaigns to keep plants open than I can remember, from Gartcosh and Ravenscraig in Scotland, to Ebbw Vale in Wales, Roundhay in the Midlands, all kinds of small companies, and we put arguments for all of them. Cargo Fleet itself where I worked, I wrote the campaign document to keep it open. Because they had used piling to put into the Thames Barrier, one of the phrases I used which was quoted by our management was that it was British Steel workers, working in Cargo Fleet

> Works, that were actually keeping the government's feet dry in Westminster … [There was no demand for a strike on jobs], possibly because the legislation had changed, there was a compulsory ballot, and also because the 1980 experience was so fresh in people's mind.[76]

Neither Martin Upham nor Jimmy Coyle could recall much of a strategy to save the industry:

> The strike outcome wasn't much of a result. Sirs put a favourable gloss on it. But you judge it by what happened afterwards. It was a defeat, there's no question it was a defeat, because then they moved in and quite rapidly achieved the closures. That was the real test; there was no stomach really. The closures went through amazingly fast. The union leaders were agreeing that these deals would be struck locally, so that meant there would be no national leadership, there were no national guidelines, if I remember rightly, as to what could or couldn't be agreed. So then all the divisional officers, full-time officials etc would just be negotiating the best deal they could get. The closures were ridiculous. Thousands went out the door and whole steel plants closed, like Consett. There was no case to close Consett … those boys, they came out loyally on the strike, it was terrible. I remember travelling up there with my wife a few years later, and I thought, I'll go back to Consett, a visit, and there was f**k all there, it was just a green park. Unbelievable.[77]

> Sirs was a nice guy, a good enough general secretary, but he was forced into the fight in 1980, that's my view. I don't know if there was a strategy. We had the so-called Triple Alliance. I don't know how effective that was – when you look back, I don't think it was effective at all. I don't know if there was any strategy there, where they would set out their stall and say, 'We'll fight this, we'll defend that.' It all happened anyway. They decimated the coal industry, they decimated the steel industry, the rail industry is still going though its own problems.[78]

Mike Hull indicated a lack of national solidarity within the union as a reason for its inability to fight closures:

> It would have been difficult for the union at national level to evolve a strategy. The union was divided. Before nationalisation we were all different private companies, fighting for markets against each other, even though the markets were separate. Wales, strip; specials, here. But they were split, there was not the feeling of togetherness. South Wales would not come out on strike for Ravenscraig.[79]

Jimmy Coyle also referenced the relationship between Scottish and Welsh steelworkers and seemed critical of the latter for fraternising with the class enemy:

> We were friends with [Labour MP] John Reid, when he was elected, and when we went down for executive meetings, Joe [McGuinness] and I, we would go

> over to Parliament for a blether with John, maybe go for a meal. Anyway, this time he took us to the Lords bar, where we could buy a drink, and who is sitting there but Big Peter McKim and Joe Lewis, from Wales, and they're sitting there with Tory MPs. And, by the way, they nearly fell aff their chairs when they seen us coming in. There wasn't a great deal of love lost between the Welsh guys and the Scots guys. You'll hear all the terms of endearment, all the solidarity, aw the rest of it – a lot of piss.[80]

The theme was picked up in depth by John Marston:

> They announced the closure of Ravenscraig steelworks, and we wanted to fight them on it, and we could have done it. I remember going to Motherwell football club, and Gordon Brown was giving a speech there. I'd never seen anything like Ravenscraig in my life until I went up, and you saw the factory and you saw the town round the factory, and it brought it home to me. I was on the executive, and they were arguing about whether we support Ravenscraig. The South Wales delegation, almost to a man, couldn't give the support. An old friend of mine, he said, 'We can't travel all that far. It's seven hours on a coach to Scotland.' That infuriated me, but they saw it, actually, if Ravenscraig closes, Port Talbot and Llanwern were secure. That's the way they looked at it. It was quite nasty. We all took our banners up. So our number one region is Scotland, two was Teesside, three was Rotherham, four was the East and West Midlands, five was Llanwern, six was Port Talbot, seven was North Wales and eight was London. Every banner was there but five and six. There was nobody there from South Wales. This is where I get annoyed because Port Talbot now has got nowhere to go. They either fight for themselves, which they should have done for their colleagues before or they go under. It's absolutely terrible, but I know the history. I'm one of the few who knows all the history. Ravenscraig was a good plant, they closed it down, the community went, and it was absolutely disgusting. People thought that the more plants they closed, the more secure their jobs would be … It would have been difficult to get anybody out after the 1980 steel strike. I think it was this thing about 'my plant, 'let them shut that one down, we'll be more secure', and things like that. But I still think there were people in Port Talbot, Llanwern, Corby, everywhere, who would have supported Scotland.[81]

The long campaign to save Ravenscraig was referenced throughout the testimonies of Scottish steelworkers. The local union strategy included the making of an economic case for the works – something which, as Tommy Brennan points out, was ultimately used against them by BSC and, he claimed, was not reciprocated by the South Wales works:

> At the Craig, we had five golden rules. One was to make an argument for the five major plants. Another was there must be an economic case. If there was no economic case, forget about it. I remember at the House of Commons Select Committee saying to Bob Scholey, 'If you have an economic case, put it on the table to be examined, and if you're proved to be correct, I'll sit round the table with you and discuss closure terms immediately.' He never took us up.

> They eventually closed us through production pauses and preferential loading. They took the five plants and introduced a production pause for Ravenscraig and preferential loading at the other plants. That knocked everything from under our feet. The support from other plants was not reciprocated. If all the steel being used in this country was being made in this country, there was a need for five plants – that was our argument. As far as Wales was concerned, Wales was number one. I had great friends in Wales, we always had good relations, but a national strike? Let's put it this way – when Ravenscraig was closed, who was heading the union at the time? A Welshman, one of the weakest general secretaries we ever had – a weak, weak, weak general secretary.[82]

The belief that South Wales ISTC leaders were unwilling to support the Ravenscraig campaign is one shared by many steelworkers, including all the steelworkers I interviewed in Scotland and several elsewhere. Some conceded a lack of unity was also in evidence in Scotland itself, but alleged that the Welsh steel union leaders were actively hostile to the campaign to save Ravenscraig.

> The union was fractured. Brennan was only interested in Ravenscraig, that's all he was interested in, he didnae gie a f*** about Clydebridge or Dalzell, he was just interested in the Craig. So we just looked after ourselves as well. But we picketed Ravenscraig during the strike, we went and helped there, when Yuill & Dodds were trying to go in. The Welshmen were walking aboot with badges saying 'Shut the Craig', shut Ravenscraig and aw that. That was a bit of a shock when ye think about it, you know, badges saying 'Shut the Craig'. You're no gonnae get unity, are you?[83]

ISTC divisional officer in Newport John Foley refuted the allegation that he wished to shut Ravenscraig, but conceded that his only interest, and all his energies and campaigning, were designed 'to get what [investment] I could for my own plants'.[84] The relationship between the two works has been placed by others in a wider context of a declining industry, where hopes of national trade union unity had been destroyed by the torrent of cuts and closures, and where the South Wales works felt threatened by the successful, but exclusionary, national Scottish political campaign to keep Ravenscraig open:

> The debilitating and divisive effect of uncertainty upon trade unions in the steel industry had now become very apparent. Llanwern union leaders launched a campaign to protect their workers, to prevent it becoming a victim of Scottish political pressure to keep Ravenscraig open. They submitted evidence to the same select committee which compared Llanwern's profits to Ravenscraig's losses and claimed far greater customer satisfaction with the quality of Llanwern's output. The committee finally recommended that, for the present, no works should be closed … but the damage to national trade union organisation had been done.[85]

By 1984, the steel unions were struggling in the face of the closures programme, and divided internally, with many activists concerned about their own works and regions. It may have been understandable in the context of a savage retrenchment programme, but it arguably allowed for works to be isolated and picked off by BSC managers and the government. It was also an approach that would affect the attitude of the ISTC to the biggest industrial dispute of the era, the 1984–85 miners' strike.

In response to the rapid rise in unemployment, and in recognition of their shared interests and industry connections, the NUM, NUR and ISTC launched the Triple Alliance in 1981. Meetings of the three executives followed,[86] but little else happened thereafter in practical terms. The campaign to save Ravenscraig witnessed a large rally of the three unions in London on 26 October 1982, but it wasn't until 1983 that the alliance was revived, and a programme of public rallies and meetings planned. This coincided with a change of personnel in the NCB when, in September of that year, MacGregor was installed as its chair. The roots of the miners' strike were sunk long before this appointment,[87] but MacGregor quickly brought matters to a head, announcing a raft of pit closures in March 1984, which led to the commencement of rolling strike action throughout the country.

Sirs clarified the ISTC's position when he expressed sympathy for the miners, but declared that he 'didn't want to see steelworkers' jobs sacrificed on someone else's altar'.[88] With BSC being a main NCB customer, the ISTC had no choice but to negotiate with the NUM regarding coal supplies. The NUM wanted the ISTC to reduce the main BSC works to safety level operation. They saw this as a means of increasing the pressure on the NCB and government. Scargill considered this as reciprocating the support given by the NUM to the ISTC in 1980.[89] However, the ISTC recalled that no pit had closed in 1980 – a point reiterated by many steelworkers in this project – and believed the NUM did not fully understand the vulnerability of works such as Ravenscraig. Negotiations resulted in agreements to limit coal supplies to the works most reliant on NCB coke – Ravenscraig, Scunthorpe, Llanwern – but all came unstuck. The Ravenscraig agreement broke down in April, and again in early May, with Mick McGahey alleging that the ISTC had admitted the works was operating at 70 per cent capacity; this was far higher than safety level.[90] With coal supplies being halted by the rail unions, BSC hired fleets of lorries to run coal from Hunterston, and a mass NUM picket was placed at the works in response.

By the end of May 1984, the focus had switched to the Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire, which supplied Scunthorpe. BSC managers had demanded an additional 5,000 tonnes of low-sulphur coke, supposedly to ensure the stability of the furnaces, but the NUM saw this as an attempt to breach the agreement and placed a picket on the plant. The policing soon

turned violent, and on 27 May mounted police and riot squads ran amok through picket lines, beating miners indiscriminately and arresting over eighty, Arthur Scargill included. The ISTC sympathised, but refused to support the blockading of coke lorries. This led the NUM to declare as void the various local agreements that the ISTC had preferred to a national agreement. At its national conference in June, in an emotionally charged session held behind closed doors, the ISTC pledged to reach a new agreement with the NUM, but would later dismiss as 'tantamount to a national steel strike' an NUM request that steelworks be limited to safety-level production.[91]

In early September, the TUC Congress passed a resolution supporting the blockading of all movements of coal, coke and oil, but this was opposed by both the ISTC and the EETPU. Sirs warned ISTC members that a vote for the miners would be a vote to close their steelworks. He described the TUC statement as a call for a general strike, which, he claimed, 'no one wants because of the damage it would do to unions, people and the country as a whole'.[92] Two weeks later it was announced that supplies of coal to Ravenscraig would be increased from 18,000 tonnes per week to 22,500 tonnes.[93] It marked the final end of any hope the NUM may have harboured about active ISTC involvement in their dispute.

Tommy Brennan was one of the central figures in these events, and has come in for criticism for the role he played during the miners' strike. There is evidence that he and ISTC regional official Clive Lewis passed details of Triple Alliance meetings to the Scottish Office, which gave police advance knowledge of changes in NUM picketing.[94] In a 2004 radio interview, Brennan described the miners' strike as the most difficult time of his life.[95] In my interview he was composed and calm, probably because it is a topic on which he has spoken many times. Brennan focused on the friendship he had with McGahey, and pinned much of the blame for the breakdown in relations on another figure in the NUM, who allegedly lacked McGahey's understanding of the predicament faced by the ISTC:

> Every now and again Mick McGahey would be subpoenaed in London, because the NUM wouldn't let their pension fund be invested in South Africa, and of course [the NCB] trustees were arguing that it had to be invested. Every time he went, a boy called George Bolton, who was Mick's deputy dog, he took over. We had an agreement with the miners that we worked below even the safety levels of our own strike. We took all the miners' executive, Mick and all his gang, through the whole of the Craig, showed them what happened and where things were, and gave them documentation, anything they wanted to show them that what we were saying was correct. They were satisfied, and we made an agreement that we'd work to a certain level. Mick was away, and Bolton came up to the Craig and said, 'Right Tommy. I want those furnaces shut down.' And I says, 'George, don't be so silly. You know fine well we can't

> close the furnaces … we can't take the heat off the furnaces, they've got to be operating at a certain level' – and we were giving the miners a thousand pounds a week, by the way, a thousand pounds – 'we can't take them down any further otherwise we'll damage the furnace, damage the ovens, and you'll do what MacGregor can't do, shut the Craig. It's not on. You're fighting for your jobs and we're fighting for our jobs as well, remember.' 'If you don't take them aff, if you don't shut it down, I'll leave you with no enough coal to make a pan of chips.' That was his words to me. I said, 'Geordie, you're living in cloud-cuckoo-land. The minute you put a picket on that gate, they'll run lorries through here, and they can get 10,000 tonnes of coal a day in here if they want. The other thing is, I'll lose control of those guys down there. Not everybody in this plant agrees with what we're doing, not every trade unionist on the works committee is fully behind us in bringing the plant levels down to what were operating on, 'cause our guys are losing a fortune', and so they were. They put pickets on the next day at Ravenscraig – huge picket.[96]

Peter Phillips spoke about the miners' strike and the dilemmas it posed. He refers here to the crucial decision of the ISTC crane workers to unload coal from the *Ostia* ship at Hunterston, for transport by lorry to Ravenscraig, in August 1984. This action, which provoked a dock strike, occurred because the dockers and railway workers were supporting the NUM and had refused to unload and transport the coal:

> We were there, when the decision was made to take the coal, a meeting at the AUEW halls in Motherwell. Clive Lewis drew us all together and said, 'Look, there's a ship lying off Hunterston, full of Polish coal, and I'm asking your permission to let it land. We were like that, 'F**k off, no way!', and all that. And he says 'the reason I'm asking is that I've spoke to McGahey, and the others who were in charge, and asked them to release enough coal to keep the blast furnaces ticking over.' He says, 'and they've basically told me to f**k off, they've told me that under no circumstances will they be releasing any coal to the steel industry.' He says, 'If we don't dae this, Ravenscraig will run out of coal in fourteen days, and if that blast furnace goes doon, it'll never come back on again.' So, we had to all search our hearts, and my granda' was a miner, died in the mines, all of my family, Cambuslang is steeped in mining, and at the time I was VP of the Miners' Welfare, so was like that, 'What di we dae?', but ye know you must save Ravenscraig, cos Ravenscraig was the body, we were the legs, it supplied us with steel, it kept us all going, so we decided [to let the coal be unloaded].[97]

These testimonies give some insight into the difficulties facing steelworkers. All Scottish steelworkers who were interviewed expressed support for the NUM, but most rejected criticism that the ISTC could have done any more to assist them. The crux of the matter was output. The NUM never publicly requested a complete shutdown of the industry and the switching off of the furnaces in the way that Bolton is depicted in his private meeting with Brennan, or McGahey with Lewis. They were aware that this would destroy

blast furnaces and coke ovens. Instead, the NUM asked for a reduction to safety level operation. Peter Phillips indicated elsewhere in his interview that production levels at Ravenscraig may have increased through pressure from BSC management.[98] This corresponds to statements made by Scholey during this period when he warned that any move by the ISTC to accept less than 18,000 tonnes of coal per week at Ravenscraig would be 'managerially unacceptable'.[99] This represented 75 per cent of its normal figure, which was far in excess of the minimum level for steelmaking.[100]

Brennan's comment that Ravenscraig worked at a lower level in 1984 than during the steel strike itself was inaccurate. Whereas steel was being made in significant quantities in 1984, according to one well-placed source, no steel was produced at any BSC works during the 1980 strike.[101] Blast furnaces and coke ovens don't produce steel, and BOS furnaces can be maintained at an appropriate temperature without making steel. Safety level operation usually means banking up the ovens and the blast furnaces, as happened with the new giant blast furnace at Redcar in 1980, or producing small quantities of coke and iron, as Pete Reid explained in relation to Normanby Park in 1980:

> Blast furnaces were damped down, they still had to be fired and kept at a certain temperature. A certain amount of coke and iron ore put through them, but the pig iron was tipped off into a large pit and the slag tipped off into the slag pit piles. It was only run about twice a shift. I don't think we made any steel at all, it was just iron that being produced.[102]

Peter Phillips and Russell Clearie remembered the support they gave to miners at Polmaise Colliery, but also the difficult relations between the unions:

> PP: Fallin had nothing, Fallin didnae have a penny, we were sending stuff oot fae Clydebridge regularly. But they didnae know it was steelworkers donating to them.
>
> RC: They hated the steelworkers with a vengeance, because of what the Craig had done.
>
> PP: Because of the Triple Alliance – rail, steel and coal – if we had all stuck together it would have been a different world. However, we were sending all this stuff up to Fallin miners. Miners' strike finishes, and they're having – of all things – a victory dance. So they invite me and Willie Patterson. So we walks in, and the boys are all there, the miners, including the six who got sacked, and they're all 'Thanks very much'. Then they said, 'Whit d'yeez dae?' 'I work in the steelworks.' 'Ye f*****g what?' [laughs] 'I work in the steelworks.' I thought I was gonnae get killed. But Big Patterson said, 'Wait a minute, we supported ye. Everything you did, we supported yeez, we're fae Clydebridge.' Only one guy was an a***hole, and big Wullie said, 'Look, f**k off, it's f**k all to do with us.'

> RC: The late Mr and Mrs Port used to collect wi the tins for the miners here in Cambuslang. They took me up to Fallin and gave me a Davy lamp, and I had the same experience, because when you say 'steelworkers', because of what the Craig had done. But if we had all stuck together, it would have been over and finished with and we would have won. The miners couldnae dae it thersel. It's the old theory about the bunch of sticks. Dead easy to break one, but when you put a bunch together, it's very hard.
>
> Interviewer: So you think Ravenscraig should have come out during the miners' strike?
>
> RC: Yes, in my opinion.[103]

John Marston believed that the ISTC could and should have done more to assist the NUM strike. He argued for a targeted approach:

> People think that Margaret Thatcher won the miners' strike, and she didn't. It was the inaction of senior general secretaries … We had the Triple Alliance, we could have stopped that strike because all our workers were in Orgreave and we were strong in Orgreave. I think they would have come out. It's all about the message, and I think if they'd have got the right message, they would have come out. But Sirs loathed Scargill, there is no doubt about that … I can remember he said, 'He's not going to crucify our steelworkers on the altar of the miners', that's what Sirs said. I think it's despicable what he did. My view is if you don't agree with somebody in our class system you best keep your mouth shut [rather] than condemn them. I think that's the worst thing that ever happened. It split that alliance up and it was disgraceful because we'd never had anything so powerful as that before. There were certain targets like Orgreave, which was power. If you'd have talked about a steelworks, well you've got to be careful then because the furnaces have got to stay open, you can't shut them down. But I think you could have selected [targets] or just said, 'We're having no coal in here.' Coal is important to coke, which is vital to steel, but if they'd have said, 'No, we're going to support the miners so we're not having that coal', it would have took the onus off the people inside the plant. They wouldn't have needed to go on strike. It would have put the onus back on a publicly owned company who the government was accountable for.[104]

Marston also spoke of the difficulties this caused him as a local ISTC activist and the longer-term outcomes of the miners' strike:

> We were totally discredited. I used to go to Labour Party meetings and would cringe. They'd say, 'What union are you from?' and I'd say, 'ISTC', quietly, because I was that ashamed. I absolutely loved my union. I mean, they've done that much for me that I couldn't fault them, but at that time we'd got Bill Sirs and Roy Evans – well that tells you all you need to know. I used to think I can't justify what's been done, but I've got no control over that. I think people who knew me respected it. We did all we could locally. We used to go

> out, we used to get food for them. We'd go and stand on picket lines with them. We'd show our solidarity in that way, but our union just left them. I'll never change my view … You hear all this now about how Scargill was right. Well it's too late. They didn't want to listen to reasonable arguments. I've almost fell out with people about it because I was adamant that it was an attack on us. It wasn't an attack on the miners, it was an attack on the working classes of this country.[105]

Like many labour movement activists who reflect on this period as a way of understanding the subsequent triumph of the Right and the ongoing impact of neoliberalism in the present day, Martin Kendrick viewed the miners' strike as the last chance to defeat Thatcher and the Tory deindustrialisation programme:

> The ISTC should have come out, nationally. Scargill was my hero. I find it difficult that history is being rewritten over and over again, to see what is being done to him. You can argue whether the method of calling them out was right or wrong, but it seems to me that is academic. The point is they should all have been out. There was never any doubt that Scargill was right. Everyone seems to focus on whether there should have been a ballot or shouldn't have been a ballot, but there shouldn't have been any need for a ballot. It is one of the great misnomers that Scargill was the author of it – he wasn't. He was reacting to what was going on at the time. In Cannock we had two or three pits, and there were things going on there before the national part of it developed … there should have been a general strike, it was the last chance for trade unions in this country to do anything. Our strike was critical, with hindsight. MacGregor was put in there – nobody knew who he was at the time other than he was Maggie's axe man. But what he was really doing was honing his skills. It really was the precursor to the big one, which was always going to be the miners. It was devastating to me. I didn't see it at the time with the steel strike, I was too carefree and stuff, but once I had started researching and investigating it, it was clear that it was part of a much bigger programme, and it really was going to turn us into the warehouse of Europe. It does keep me awake at night, let me tell you, the idea that we don't make anything anymore.[106]

In the aftermath of the miners' strike the Thatcher government continued with its policies of privatisation and the weakening of the trade unions, and was re-elected in 1987. BSC was eventually privatised in 1988, with the new company, British Steel, continuing the closure programme of the old. This new private sector status, along with the onset of an economic depression in 1989, made many works even more vulnerable to closure and less able to pressurise politicians. Casualties in this period included Ravenscraig and Clydesdale in Scotland and Brymbo in North Wales. As Upham points out, where there were no closures, the industry management were continually cutting back, with interruptions to production and redundancies.[107]

Five years before its eventual closure in 1991, Clydesdale was the scene of an eight-week strike.[108] Management had presented the workforce with a familiar-sounding 'survival' plan, which included dozens of clauses, including compulsory redundancy. The outcome was a withdrawal of that principle, but it is recalled as a defeat and a bitter strike by those who experienced it:

> The 1986 strike was basically about two things: compulsory redundancy and undermanning. They were saying we were to be undermanned. They were saying we need these principles. But one of the principles was compulsory redundancies, and we would never agree to that.[109]

> It was a much nastier strike. And you had individuals going through the picket line. That's what made it nastier. There were a couple of scabs in the finishing end and the mill end. There wasn't a lot of them. Not a great outcome to this strike. They withdrew the compulsory redundancies but kept the undermanning. Nae gains in money or anything like that. Their attitude changed, a complete change from guys you had dealt with for months and years before, and really, it was vicious, they were vicious, and you felt as if you wanted to put your fist on their face. The attitude was something we had never experienced before. You had sometimes to bite your tongue – they maybe felt they had knocked the stuffing out of people with the eight-week strike.[110]

Like some of the other examples of steel deindustrialisation discussed above, the eventual demise of Clydesdale was remembered as deliberate but unnecessary, an unjust outcome that would and could have been avoided had different investment decisions been made:

> For the life of me, I don't know how British Steel could hand over work that was done by Clydesdale to a French company. You had the steelworks – a brand new steelworks. The continuous casting. You had the quench and temper, which was right up to date. You had the imperial, which was all modern. The one thing missing was a good mill. You had two mills. It would have led to some jobs going, but if you had put in one good mill it would have saved the industry.[111]

> Clydesdale could have been saved if the right investment had been made. The investment happened all around, and it was good investment. But the part that was missing was the part that made the main item that we had to sell, which was the tubes, the pipes. The mills were outdated. Don't get me wrong, they were still good. They still produced a good product. But you just didn't get the same productivity without a modern mill.[112]

At the end of the 1990s, British Steel merged with Dutch company Hoogovens to form Corus, which Tata bought in 2007. In 2015, Tata shut Redcar steelworks, ending 160 years of iron and steel production in the region. Tata remains the largest company, but has regularly been mired in financial difficulty and has just 8,000 employees, around 4,000 of which are at Port

Talbot. In January 2024, the company announced the closure of the two blast furnaces at the works, which, it is expected, will result in almost 3,000 job losses.[113] The other main companies are Liberty Steel, which employs around 2,000 workers and has also experienced severe financial challenges, and British Steel Limited, which has a workforce of 3,500. In a situation of uncertainty, where technological progress has continued apace and where China is now responsible for over half the global steel output, it may seem unreasonable to expect that a British steel industry could employ any more than this. But even in a Western European context it is a very low figure, dwarfed by the 80,000 employed in the German steel industry and lower than the 30,000 in Italy. In truth, the British steel industry no longer exists, and the responsibility for that lies with the companies who have steered its progress over the past three decades, the governments who shrunk it and sold it off in the first place and the subsequent administrations who have watched on as it continued its decline. But it also includes the steel unions, who reached a watershed in 1980, with the decisions they took then reverberating for decades and impacting on the industry and its workers from that point on.

Notes

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5 Docherty, *Steel and Steelworkers*, p. 219.
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10 Interview, Martin Kendrick.
11 Interview, Martin Kendrick.
12 Interview, Paul O'Neill.
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33 Interview, Christine O'Neill.
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36 Upham, *Tempered Not Quenched*, pp. 167–71.
37 Blyton, 'Steel: A Classic Case', p. 643.
38 Dudley and Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain*, p. 180.
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40 South Teesside Strike Committee, *Teesside Banner*, 3.
41 Interview, Martin Upham.
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44 Interview, Keith Jones.
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49 *Steel News*, special issue (undated, *c*.December 1980).
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51 Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 2.
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76 Interview, Ian Crichton.
77 Interview, Martin Upham.
78 Interview, Jimmy Coyle.
79 Interview, Mike Hull.
80 Interview Jimmy Coyle. The irony here is that the Scottish steelworker trade unionists also courted the support of local Tory MPs during their campaigns to save Ravenscraig in the 1980s.
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102 Interview, Pete Reid.
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113 *Guardian*, 19 January 2024.

Conclusion

The 1980 strike was the most significant event in the history of the British iron and steel industry in Britain and a critical turning point in the wider deindustrialisation processes that accelerated during that decade. Supported by over 100,000 workers, it was a major social event, characterised by intense levels of activism, commitment and determination and an unprecedented degree of flying picketing. But despite this, a BSC management that was wrong-footed at the beginning of January had regained ascendancy before the year's end. When Ian MacGregor issued his cuts plan in December 1980, all the steel unions bar one accepted it without question, with the sole recalcitrant, the ISTC, falling into line soon after. By 1982, the steel unions would be in full-scale retreat. The successful campaign in the autumn to protect the big five may have left the ISTC leadership flushed with success,[1] but the closures of Clydebridge Plate Mill in November and Round Oak in December of that year were more significant, and symbolic of the existential crisis in which the industry was now mired. By 1983, when the redundancy toll of the previous three years tipped the 90,000 mark, it was almost as if the strike had never occurred. But notwithstanding this bleak outcome, the roots of which were in the deal signed by the union leaders, there are many reasons for considering the strike as momentous, not only in its own context of the 1980s, but as an event that remains relevant and rich in its significance today.

The type of all-out, national strike that occurred in January 1980 – the 'trial of strength' engagement[2] – has always been a rarity in British industrial relations, and a measure of last resort when trade unions are pushed to breaking point. The ISTC had a history of leaderships who were hostile to strikes and a rulebook that seemed bullet-proof when it came to preventing them. But it had to respond to the relentless destruction perpetrated by BSC and successive Tory and Labour governments. The industry had been shedding jobs since the 1950s, but from the mid-1970s onwards this accelerated to the point where an existential threat was posed to the ISTC. Many of the workers who were propelled into action by this had little or no experience

of strikes, and their ability to construct a functioning apparatus for fighting this dispute so quickly is a valuable reminder of the resourcefulness that can be generated within labour movement organisations in struggle. Strike committees were quickly established throughout the country, and picketing teams were organised. Many pickets stayed local, but significant numbers also took part in what was, geographically, the most extensive deployment of flying picketing in British trade union history. Across the eight hundred miles from Wick to Cornwall, thousands of works, plants, docks, stockholders, factories and workshops were visited and picketed by striking steelworkers. For some, this meant living away from home for several weeks at a time, in order that picketing be conducted in remote locations. For others, it meant repeated travels to and from a variety of locations, near and far. For all, the energy this required was considerable.

Another feature of the strike was the way local committees took control of the action from an early stage. As one picket put it, 'The paid organisation partly walked and were partly pushed to the side … it was a case of "This is a workers' strike, keep your nose out."'[3] In some areas, unofficial strike committees were set up specifically to combat the influence of 'bureaucrats and officials'.[4] This gave the strike vitality and allowed it to develop. This is not to suggest that these committees were beacons of participatory democracy, but by placing most of the responsibility for the strike organisation on local activists, rather than full-time officials under the control of the central leadership, it provided them with the space to make their own judgements and frame their own responses to the needs of the situation on the ground. It allowed them to take greater ownership of the dispute and to both display and enhance their organising skills.

This feature of the steel strike has been witnessed in relation to other high-profile disputes,[5] and it brought steelworker trade unionists into closer contact, not only with each other, but with trade unionists from a range of other industries. From all over the country they showed their support for steelworkers by attending meetings and rallies, organising solidarity events and raising money. One interviewee became visibly emotional when remembering the support and the solidarity that he encountered from other trade unionists while picketing in London. It underlines the central importance of collectivism, the recognition that each individual worker and trade unionist does not exist in isolation but is part of a bigger and stronger whole, to which they can look to for support, but to which they also have a responsibility. It was evident throughout the strike, most notably in the decision by almost 20,000 private sector steelworkers to come out on strike in support of a pay claim that they themselves would not benefit from. It was also evident in the activism of pickets from plants that were due to close regardless

of the outcome of the strike, including Corby, Bilston, Consett, Hallside and Shotton. This was later dismissed as the actions of individuals who were looking simply to enhance the redundancy payments they knew were coming – a cynical conclusion at odds with what these workers were saying and doing during the strike. It also explained why dockers throughout the country refused to unload steel, leading them to eventually support a national strike on the issue.

The continued importance of trade unionism to these steelworkers was evident during the interviews. For many, it is a commitment which remains, even though they have left behind the workplace and entered retirement. If we understand the creation of self as an ongoing process generated through interweaves of individual identity with social interaction and social structure,[6] we can appreciate the significance of trade unionism to the continuing development of identity and sense of self for these steelworkers. Trade unionism was central to the way that they navigated their engagements with society throughout most of their lives, and in many instances remains so today. In that important respect, this oral history project recalls a previous one involving the author which examined building workers in and around London in the post-war decades. As one participant in that project put it, 'Through trade unionism you felt a sense of belonging – you belonged.' These are sentiments which would undoubtedly chime with the steelworkers in this project.[7]

The testimonies revealed the different meanings the strike had to workers who took part. The conflation of the jobs issue with pay was a constantly recurring motif. The steel strike was nominally a pay dispute, but was generated by the significant levels of discontent over the management and future of the industry. It has been argued that strikes can take the form of wage disputes not simply because workers, quite understandably, put wages above many other considerations, but also because of the restrictions of the collective bargaining framework – in other words, pay is often the only terrain on which workers can fight employers. As Hyman comments, it is possible for a strike to reflect 'both a natural heightening of economic aspirations and … the tentative articulation of discontent at oppressive managerial control'.[8] Grievances over managerial prerogative and its consequences can be displaced, and can be a factor in generating momentum in what appear to be pay disputes. As the interviews suggest, the steel strike is an example of this, with the jobs issue and the future of the industry never far from the surface in the recollections of many who fought it. This reveals the degree to which the later run-down of the industry formed a bleak, shaping context in the construction of memory around the strike. But it also displays the importance of the jobs issue at

the time of the strike itself, as the factor that had pushed the unions to action.

The repeated references to the miners' strike also show its ongoing significance to a whole generation of labour movement activists. Consigned to history four decades ago, this remarkable strike continues to tower over all others with a power that seems undiminished. It was detached long ago from its own important-enough context and repositioned as something even more momentous, even more crucial, the totem that signified sacrifice, commitment, courage, justice – but ultimately defeat – with catastrophic consequences for the entire trade union movement. It is often used as an alibi for all subsequent failures of the Labour movement, failures which, when they did occur, usually hinged on how those struggles were led and fought.

The steel strike may have been played out four years earlier, but the miners remained present in many interviews and shaped the reconstructions of many steelworkers. These took different forms. It was an opportunity to kill Thatcherism in its cradle – before Thatcherism had a chance to consolidate itself and eventually defeat the NUM and the organised working class. It was a laboratory for the state to begin development of its panoply of anti-trade union measures – measures it would later perfect and use to defeat the miners and the organised working class. It was an example of the inadequacies of right-wing trade union leaderships who couldn't or wouldn't recognise the reality of the enemy they faced and the existential crisis this enemy posed to their communities, their whole way of life, throughout the industrial heartlands of Britain up and down the country – inadequacies which would eventually allow Thatcher to isolate and defeat the NUM and demoralise the organised working class. This lament for the loss suffered in 1984–85 is especially acute for steelworkers, because of their own difficult and painful involvement in the events of that strike.

These references to the miners' strike also remind us of the crucial political and ideological context in which the steel strike occurred. In opposition, the Conservative Party had been flying kites and floating strategies based on weakening the unions and commercialising and privatising state-owned industries. Election in May 1979 put this change on the agenda and strengthened the hand of those in industry and government who wished to make immediate progress in this direction. Steelworkers were among the first to feel the consequences of this. Given the rate of inflation at that time, it is difficult to read the 2 per cent offer – a consolidation from the 1979 pay deal – as anything other than a deliberatively provocative gesture, from both BSC and the Conservative government. The Thatcher government did not expect a national strike in response – Thatcher herself expressed concern in late December when it became clear that a national steel strike was now in the offing – but they must have believed that the unions would emerge

from such a process weakened, divided and chastened. The strike did not unfold in accordance with Tory predictions, but in the period following its conclusion, BSC would be emboldened and, in this new neoliberal climate, did seize its opportunity to push further. It has been shown how the Thatcher government subsequently changed the terms of the debate around the role of nationalised industries; strengthening anti-trade union forces within those industries; introducing measures such as local productivity bonuses and more casually employed labour. This was the same ideological and political attack that cleared the way for BSC to fundamentally change industrial relations in the steel industry, and forms the background to later disputes, including the miners' strike. It does leave open the question of what would have happened had the steel unions and the TUC recognised what was at stake in 1980 and acted more resolutely to defeat Thatcher and BSC.

For many trade unionists, involvement in this strike changed the way they saw the world. Ian Crichton recalled a jaded docker telling him that within a month of going back, it would feel as though they had never been on strike, and that they wouldn't want to help other groups of workers. Looking at the ISTC as an organisation, we can see there is truth in this. Crichton remembered disagreeing, but reflected on the dockers' words when the ISTC refused to take part in a one-day national TUC stoppage on the issue of unemployment and cuts. This was in May 1980, just one month after the steel strike ended. There is of course no inevitable correlation between strike action and political radicalism.[9] Some studies have suggested that it is only ever a small minority whose outlook is changed fundamentally because of involvement in a strike. But the steel strike did radicalise some of its participants. In a questionnaire completed by over five hundred Rotherham steel union activists during April to June 1980, over 77 per cent concluded that the strike had made them more militant, in terms of their attitudes towards industrial relations.[10] It is true that this may not necessarily have led to more militant activity, but many interviewees spoke about the ways their lives were altered, and it is one of the most positive legacies of the strike. Ian Crichton remained active in the trade union movement and spent years campaigning to save threatened steelworks all over the country. Ray Hensby joined the Labour Party and became active politically, remaining in it until the late 1990s, before resigning when the Blair government refused to remove any of the anti-trade union laws. Ian Stewart became more involved in his union branch and was the branch secretary for many years. Several, including Tony Poynter and Joe McGuinness, later became presidents of the ISTC Executive Council. Jimmy Coyle, Vic Jeffries, John Foley and Russell Clearie all became Labour councillors and committed themselves to dealing with the consequences of deindustrialisation and improving the conditions of working-class people in the communities of which they were

part. So too did Martin Kendrick, a person for whom the strike acted almost as an epiphany:

> It was a life-turning event. I'd a grandad who never shut up about politics, and who used to be avoided at all costs before the strike, turn into a chap full of wisdom who needed to be listened to afterwards. I had seen stuff that I had never imagined was going on in the world and people doing stuff to us from on top, inside the union and politically, and I didn't even know the names of these people. I thought it's time I started finding out what was going on, and what was affecting our lives.[11]

Val Hull recalled the effects on her and Mike's life:

> We wanted to learn more. The year after the strike, I began an Open University degree, and the year after that, Mike did too. And that was an outcome. We met quite a lot of people during the strike. Unlikely people as well, like Barry Hines, the writer, and Ken Loach. They came to our house. They were making a film that was banned! Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger, lots of people – and it sort of set us on another road. We both ended up with degrees in applied social science. The strike changed our perspective on a lot of things. I think it had that effect on a lot of people. You saw life totally differently. I think I had gone through life with rose-tinted glasses, thinking everything was fair. If you did the right thing, everything would be all right. And then you realise that life isn't like that. It's devious, and doing the right thing, you don't always come out the best.[12]

Paul and Christine O'Neill also did degrees in humanities, at Teesside Polytechnic, and were later active members in the Labour Party. Both were involved in campaigning around the issues of apartheid in South Africa, US imperialism in Central America and – of course – the miners' strike. Paul also wrote a song about the strike and sang it at the end of his interview.[13] Phillip Cranswick became a poet, and published some thoughtful works on the steel industry and his family history.[14]

For others, the period following the strike was one of job insecurity. Geoff Hawkins left Ductile Steels following the introduction of a new shift system, where fitters could be called in during the night after having worked through the day. He ended up working on the railways, along with many former miners from Rugeley, and recalled the changes in working practices that took place in that industry following privatisation in the mid-1990s.

> Railway hours were always unsociable – but it was worse after privatisation, it was eleven- or twelve-hour shifts. You'd have four or five of these shifts, leaving you too tired to enjoy time off. Before that, we used to work eight-hour shifts.

Mick Hawker was sacked at Stocksbridge in 1991 for union activity, and took out an unfair dismissal claim, which he won. The judgement stated

that he had been dismissed for his trade unionism. He later retrained for a new career in the NHS as an operating department practitioner, assisting anaesthetists. He remained positive about the prospects of social change, stayed involved in trade unionism and had an unexpected reunion with the individual who had sacked him:

> I established myself in theatres and I became the union rep. Who should be made chairman of Sheffield Teaching Hospitals but David Stone, who was the managing director of Stocksbridge when I was got rid of. So he's been made chairman, and one of the first things they do, they have a visit round the area. So he came into theatres. I said to the deputy manager to tip me off when he's coming. So he did, and I was working in neuro theatres, and he'd got his mask on and he's got his hat so all you can see is eyes. So I said to him, I said, 'Are you David Stone?' He said, 'Yes, why?' He said, 'Who are you?' I said, 'My name's Mick Hawker, you made me redundant.' 'Oh, sorry.' I said, 'Yes, I was sorry as well.' Meanwhile, the line manager is pulling me away saying, 'You've got a job now.'[15]

The strike also revealed the limits of trade unionism, especially steelworker trade unionism. Most unions are defensive mediators in the uneven conflict between capital and labour. They encourage restraint among their members and seek consensus with capital. Unions rarely challenge managerial prerogative in any sustained or fundamental way and are usually deferential in their engagement with it. Throughout the thirteen weeks of the steel strike, all the other national union leaders involved in this dispute, and those they looked to for support, seemed keener to restore this relationship with capital than resolve the deeper issues that were provoking conflict. The scale of the problems facing the industry required a different approach from the unions, to protect their members. Most of the industry had been nationalised in 1967, but BSC was still expected to become profitable and compete in domestic and international markets. Although it did play a social role, in that it provided reasonably well-paid, secure local jobs with better conditions of employment than the privatised sector, BSC was subjected to the same laws as all industrial enterprises in capitalism. And the fact that the most profitable components of the steel industry had been retained in the private sector rigged the rules of an unfair game even further.

The logic of capitalism meant the industry would be subject to the blast of market forces, including trade slumps, international competition and internal restructuring. One trade unionist spoke about the importance of having an economic argument against plant closure, but, as we saw with the closure of Consett, and Bilston before it, BSC managers could have a narrow conception of what constituted an economic argument, leaving this as flimsy ground on which to base the livelihoods of thousands of workers. Social as well as economic arguments needed to be made, but the

steel unions never adopted such an approach. They internalised the logic of capitalism and accepted its diktats, to the immense cost of their members and workers in other industries too. Closures were of course resisted, but were never successful. There was a similar story playing out in Europe. One of the reasons for this is that the steel unions on the continent shared many of the features of their British counterparts. Some were weakened by fragmentation and division, most seemed to accept managerial prerogative, when it came to decisions about the future of the industry, and none offered any alternative to the rationalisation programmes which were rolled out across the continent. Even the strongest European steelworkers union, IG Metall in Germany, a union that had led a partially successful seven-week national strike in the winter of 1978–79 on the issue of a shorter working week and higher wages,[16] was incapable of developing a strategy different to that of the steel companies. Like the ISTC, it was prepared to accept pay increases in return for redundancies, albeit in far smaller numbers.[17]

The ISTC was caught in the headlights of the closures juggernaut and offered almost zero resistance. Bill Sirs would later take refuge in the supposed lack of militancy and fight among his members, and posit that as the reason for the closures, but the 1980 strike had displayed this in abundance and might have been developed further. This was the crucial turning point, the time when the issue of jobs and the future of the industry had to be raised. Pay was important, but a victory on closures would have delivered a major blow to managerialism in the industry and stopped Thatcher from achieving one of her key objectives – the weakening of the trade union movement. Instead, Sirs limited the scope of the strike to pay and worked to weaken militancy. His stance on the private sector strike should have rendered his position as general secretary untenable. In private meetings with Thatcher and other Cabinet ministers, he offered concessions on closures and local productivity arrangements that read like a BSC wish list, before appearing on strike platforms, dishonestly promising a fight to the end. When the axe began to fall on the industry from 1980 onwards, Sirs offered no defence or alternative. By this stage, ISTC researchers had produced a viable rival strategy for steel that borrowed some of the arguments raised in the *Steelworkers' Banner*. With Sirs at the helm, these arguments were never pursued with vigour by the union or taken seriously by BSC. In Sirs, the ISTC had a leader who was never remotely up the task of defending his members, but bearing in mind this was a union which for decades had tied wages to the market price for steel, he was – along with those who followed him – a leader in keeping with the traditions of his organisation. Very few steelworkers in this project spoke warmly of Sirs, and none – even those who liked him or worked closely with him – believed that he had a strategy for saving the

industry. For some steelworkers, this is because they didn't believe anyone could have saved steel, but it is telling that at a time when the union was haemorrhaging thousands of jobs, not one interviewee could recall a strategy or a plan or a campaign that could be identified with the union leader to save them.

Any leader would have found the situation in the 1980s to have been immensely difficult. To face down the Thatcher government over steel closures the ISTC needed the industrial muscle of other unions, including the NUM. That wasn't on offer from other general secretaries, but with the ISTC itself refusing to mount a national struggle over closures, it was never sought either. It had looked a possibility during the 1980 strike with the NUM balloting for a strike in South Wales and the TGWU dockers voting for a national strike over the situation in Liverpool. The seeds of solidarity were there, but were left unnourished. The South Wales miners were left isolated and eventually decided against strike action. Sirs later mocked the dockers with an untrue comment: 'For eleven weeks dockers had been unloading millions of tonnes of imported steel, and now at last they wanted to join in!'[18] This was a potentially crucial development that the ISTC leadership had contributed nothing towards, but one that was scuttled when they, along with the other unions, accepted the Lever recommendations.

The steel unions rarely operated with a unified sense of purpose; such were the rivalries within. The ISTC itself was also divided. In some respects, this was a hangover from the pre-nationalisation decades, when private companies competed against each other, and workers developed a loyalty to their company as opposed to their class. This lingered on long after nationalisation. One trade unionist in Scunthorpe stated that as far as many of the workers in his plant were concerned, they did not work at BSC Normanby Park, they worked at John Lysaghts, and John Lysaghts made steel that was better than all other steel.[19] In other respects, this lack of unity bore witness to a parochialism and sectionalism that has been identified as a characteristic of the British trade union movement more generally.[20] The testimonies from Scottish and other steelworkers about the lack of support from South Wales reveal fault lines in the organisation that might have hampered a national campaign to save all jobs. Several Scottish steelworkers told the tale of Welsh steelworkers wearing 'Shut the Craig' badges. I never saw one, but reality or myth, they highlighted a deep lack of trust between different areas of the union. That said, John Marston's comment about how all other regions bar the two from South Wales supported the Ravenscraig campaign, and his view – shared by others – that, even in South Wales, ordinary activists were also were supportive, reminds us that there was perhaps more potential for national campaigns over jobs than is sometimes appreciated.

Only the remnants of a steel industry exist today. Towns and communities suffered as the industry either died or was reduced to a rump, in terms of employment. Most interviewees viewed the process negatively and commented on the social and physical deterioration of the places in which they lived. They commented on the strong social fabric that had once created vibrant communities and compared it to a present where this has been eroded and strained and, in some cases, destroyed. This sentimentalisation of the past compared to a harsher present may be a common feature of oral history, but it is a fact that many of these areas did become much worse places in which to live. They did become poorer; they were transformed into communities where jobs were at a premium and poverty and cynicism were on the rise. Examples of this can still be witnessed. In places like South Bank, which was born and developed as part of the Teesside steel industry, it is possible to walk down streets today where derelict houses can be purchased for a few thousand pounds.

When reflecting on the shifts that had occurred in the post-war decades, one steelworker commented that in the year he was born, India won its independence from the British Empire, but by the time he retired it was Indian companies that owned the British steel industry. 'These are the kind of things that can turn around in sixty years', he commented. It was a remark that captured the conditional, transitory nature of British industrial power, and the realisation that this has been supplanted by others. Sixty years is less than a lifetime, but in that time the processes of change have wreaked remarkable results in the British steel industry. In the first chapter of this book, Britain's ascent and the beginnings of its decline in steel was traced, with the subsequent chapters detailing a strike which saw steelworkers attempt to exert agency to protect their interests, and an aftermath in which the decline accelerated at speed. Cowie and Heathcott have argued that deindustrialisation was just one episode in a long series of transformations within capitalism', and that 'what millions of men and women might have considered as solid, dependable, decently waged work only lasted for a brief moment in the history of capitalism'.[21] Many of the testimonies in this oral history project relate to this. As memories constructed long after steel ceased being a mass-employment industry, they provide insights into the longer-term consequences and impact of the strike and the closures that followed. They reveal the challenges and difficulties faced by steelworkers in this later period and how they tried to address them.

Many of these testimonies are shot through with a pain over loss – loss over their industry, their communities, their class and their organisations. Russo and Linkon have highlighted the multiple loss experienced by workers during deindustrialisation, and how this relates to economic security, identity and faith in all manner of institutions.[22] We can see this in many of the

steelworker testimonies. This should not be mistaken for 'smokestack nostalgia', or considered a falsified, uncritical reconstruction of the past, airbrushed of the many harsh negatives of life and work in the steel industry. Instead, it is more akin to the critical nostalgia that Gibbs has discussed in relation to Scottish miners.[23] Steelworkers spoke of the dangers and risks they faced while working in the steel industry. They understood the industry was hazardous and gave many examples of this, including fatalities. The environmental pollution associated with steel was also mentioned. Melva Cook remembered her mother checking the wind direction before she hung out the washing, as it could end up coming back in dirtier than before.[24] Ray Hensby recalled the snow turning pink at Consett, because of chemicals leaching out of the works.[25] Another interviewee was aged forty-six when he lost his job in the industry in 1981, and found it virtually impossible to get any regular work again. However, he believed he probably would not have been alive at the time I interviewed him (2016) if he had remained until the usual retirement age in the unhealthy and dangerous world of steel production.[26] Recollections on the day-to-day class divides in the industry revealed difficult social relations between managers and workers, and the connection between this and industrial conflict. Black workers and women workers suffered specific forms of discrimination, which often went unnoticed within the white, male leadership of the steelworker trade unions.

These memories of loss are not simply about what departed, but how it was taken, and what replaced it. The workers, trade unionists and local communities had no say in the destruction of these industries, they had no agency in this process, and were largely abandoned to a bleak future, where decent secure employment was, for many, a thing of the past. An interviewee commented that in his local area, Rugeley, they now have one of the largest Amazon warehouses in the country, a place which, in reference to the pay and conditions, he described as a 'hellhole': 'Do you know where they built it?' he asked, 'On top of Lea Hall Colliery … the most productive pit in the country.' In a single sentence the whole deindustrialisation process is summed up. Lea Hall Colliery was a modern pit, which only opened in 1960, but it remained a coal mine and the work there was difficult and unhealthy. However, it provided well-paid, stable employment for workers, who were further protected by a strong trade union. The interviewee recalled that many miners were earning around £500 per week in the early 1980s. In 2013, it was estimated that at the point when the mine shut in December 1990, the highest paid Lea Hall miners were earning the contemporary equivalent of £900 per week.[27] By contrast, in 2013, Amazon was paying many of its Rugeley workers £6.20 per hour – a mere penny above the national minimum wage.[28] Workers have complained that they don't have time to take toilet breaks.[29] Amazon is also a notorious union-busting

employer,[30] and, while Lea Hall Colliery may have been a dangerous place to work, health and safety is deplorable at Amazon sites; an investigation by the GMB revealed that ambulances had been called to the Amazon warehouse at Rugeley on 115 occasions between 2015–17.[31]

None of this was unavoidable; all of it happened because of decisions made in boardrooms, in government and in the offices of Labour movement leaders. When trade unionists and workers look back to a period when unions were stronger, when pay and conditions of employment were more comprehensive, when employers had to be wary, and when communities seemed more cohesive and the future was more certain – at least for some – and conclude that things were better, it is because they were better. They understood the pitfalls and the shortcomings of work in dirty and dangerous industries, but recognised that what replaced it was much worse. However, for some, it is not only about what might or could have been, but what can be in the future. The 1980 steelworkers' strike exposed many of the weaknesses of trade unionism, principally in leadership and ideology, but also highlighted many of its strengths. The steel industry is effectively gone in Britain, but the issues which provoked and sustained the strike – low pay, managerialism, lack of agency, job losses, the imperatives of neoliberalism, government and employer hostility – continue to challenge workers and demand responses today, also a time of economic hardship and crisis. Few would have predicted that among the many groups of workers taking strike action in Britain today would be junior doctors, as well as nurses, teachers, railways workers and university lecturers. But we should not be surprised. The steel strike revealed that a fightback can often come from the least expected source. It also showed that when trade unionists enter struggle, they are capable of great feats. The resilience, energy, determination and ingenuity of steel strike activists is a lesson in what can be achieved when conflicts begin. Their strike didn't succeed, but they waged a struggle and put up a fight, the outcome of which was not inevitable and might have been different. For workers and trade unionists engaging in struggle today, perhaps the main challenge is to harness that spirit and that example of 1980, while taking it to different outcomes.

Notes

1 See Sirs's comments in *ISTC Banner*, December 1982.
2 Hyman, *Strikes*, p. 20.
3 Interview, Mike Hull
4 For example, the South Teesside Strike Committee, as they made clear in their *Teesside Banner* bulletin.

5 For example, Tony Lane and Kenneth Roberts, *Strike at Pilkingtons* (London: Harper Collins, 1971), pp. 12, 102–4.
6 Anthony Elliott, *Concepts of the Self* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 22–45.
7 Charlie McGuire, Linda Clarke and Christine Wall, '"Through Trade Unionism you felt a Belonging – you Belonged": Collectivism and the Self-Representation of Building Workers in Stevenage New Town', *Labour History Review*, 81:3 (2016).
8 Hyman, *Strikes*, pp. 130–32.
9 Hyman, *Strikes*, pp. 179–238.
10 Hartley, Kelly and Nicholson, *Steel Strike*, pp. 194–201.
11 Interview, Martin Kendrick.
12 Interview, Val Hull. The Ken Loach film was *A Question of Leadership*.
13 The final verse gives a flavour of Paul's song:

> Now, I stand again in a rolling mill, it's three months since I was last here.
> The strike is o'er, we're back at work, 'twas a union man's greatest fear.
> Bill Sirs and Co, they let us down, traitors to their class,
> I don't want to be here, but here I am, to feed my burns and lathes.

14 *Ten of the Best: A Showcase of Poetry* (London: United Press, 2015), pp. 1–27.
15 Interview, Mick Hawker.
16 See IG Metall, *The Strike in the Iron and Steel Industry* (Frankfurt: Frankfurt am Main, 1979).
17 Rhodes and Wright, 'The European Steel Unions', p. 181.
18 Sirs, *Hard Labour*, p. 109.
19 Interview, Pete Reid. Normanby Park was the post-nationalisation name for John Lysaghts.
20 Hyman, *Strikes*, pp. 230–31.
21 Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, 'The Meanings of Deindustrialization' in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 4.
22 John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, 'Collateral Damage: Deindustrialization and the Uses of Youngstown' in Cowie and Heathcott, *Beyond the Ruins*, pp. 202–3.
23 Gibbs, *Coal Country*, pp. 100–4.
24 Interview, Melva Cook.
25 Interview, Ray Hensby.
26 Interview, Phillip Cranswick.
27 Sarah O'Connor, 'Amazon Unpacked', *Financial Times*, 8 February 2013.
28 O'Connor, 'Amazon Unpacked'.
29 *Mirror*, 20 November 2011.
30 *Guardian*, 4 February 2022.
31 See entry for 1 June 2018, at *The Campaign So Far*, GMB Union website. www.gmb.org.uk/amazon/the-campaign-so-far [accessed 6 March 2024].

Index

Note: Union affiliations at time of 1980 strike are in parentheses