

Franco-British communist solidarity in the miners' strikes of 1926, 1948 and 1984-85

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Abstract The British and French communist movements have rarely been an object comparison, partly because of the huge difference in fortunes enjoyed by the two parties. However, one important similarity between these neighbours was the size and importance of the countries' coal industries, as well as the militancy of their mining communities, where communism took root as a serious political and cultural force. This article examines acts of solidarity by British and French Communists during the most important miners' strikes of their parties' existence: the General Strike and Lockout of 1926, the French miners' action of 1948, and the British miners' last great struggle of 1984-1985. Through the study of archival documents, the press and other sources, we explore how these disputes constitute important moments in the history of British and French communism, as well as of their countries' respective labour movements. The dispute of 1984-1985 marks a culminating point that confirms the strengths and weaknesses of British and French communism's relationship with the miners.

Keywords communism, Britain, France, miners, strike, solidarity

The British and French communist movements are an unlikely subject for comparison. This is understandable. After all, at its post-war height, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) had only two MPs and 50,000 members, while, during the same period, the *Parti communiste français* ('French Communist Party', or PCF) received nearly 30% of the vote and participated in the coalition government that emerged triumphant from the Resistance. Nevertheless, communism on both sides of the Channel deserves comparison: the CPGB and PCF were founded in two neighbouring countries of similar size and economic development, at once allies and rivals in the development of their colonial empires. Another, related, similarity is the size and importance of the countries' coal industries, as well as the militancy of their mining communities, where communism took root as a serious political and cultural force. As a contribution to this comparative study, we will therefore examine acts of solidarity by British and French Communists during the most important miners' strikes of their parties' existence: the General Strike and Lockout of 1926, the French miners' action of 1948, and the British miners' last great struggle of 1984-1985. Through the study of archival documents, the press and other sources, we aim to explore how these disputes constitute important moments in the history of British and French communism as well as of their countries' respective labour movements. The dispute of 1984-1985, we argue, marks a culminating point that confirms the strengths and weaknesses of British and French communism's relationship with the miners.

The 1926 General Strike and Lockout

After the First World War, the much anticipated wave of revolutionary labour agitation failed to materialise in France and Great Britain. In 1920, year of the foundation the PCF and CPGB, French railway workers and miners suffered defeat. The following year, it was the turn of British miners to fail in strike action. The Ruhr crisis stimulated French and British communist solidarity with the German workers under occupation, but the Dawes Plan of 1924 temporarily resolved a reparations issue which communists had seen as heralding an inter-imperialist war. Nevertheless,

in the mid-1920s, a tangible threat of revolution seemed to come from the coalfields of Great Britain, starting with the ‘Red Friday’ of July 1925, when the Miners’ Federation wrested concessions from the government.

Throughout May 1926, the French communist daily *L’Humanité* followed closely the social crisis growing on the other side of the Channel. British employers were trying to impose on the miners wage cuts and changes to their working conditions. What’s more, according to *L’Humanité*, these captains of industry were recruiting fascist activists and other agents provocateurs to push the strikers into justifying police repression. In other words, the British workers were facing an inevitable strategic choice: ‘either to surrender without a fight to the employers’ demands, i.e. to consent to another Black Friday ... or to join battle and oppose the workers’ front to the fascist employers’ conservative coalition!’ⁱ Consequently, Paul Vaillant-Couturier, the newspaper’s editor, saluted the Trades Union Council (TUC)’s call for a general strike in solidarity with the miners: ‘There is not one French proletarian unaware of the gravity of the historic hours now being lived through by our comrades in Great Britain ... four million workers are ready to paralyse the head of the enormous British power.’ This crisis would shatter reformist illusions peddled by the CPGB’s hugely dominant rival, the Labour Party:

In front of them, the English State; behind it, the Empire, English finance, the English navy, English fascism ... Antagonisms unleashed, stronger than the Constitution. A theoretically all-powerful Parliament reduced to a bit part. The collapse of this whole puerilely outdated system which had survived with the ‘speaker’s’ wool sack and the Lord Mayor’s wig.

Very real threats weighed on the British workers: troops had just received ammunition for three days’ combat; reserve policemen were mobilised and fascist volunteers recruited. An ‘H Hour’ atmosphere reigned in Great Britain, wrote Vaillant-Couturier, before concluding: ‘May the French proletariat stand ready to support with all its strength the English proletariat in the grandiose struggle that is commencing’.ⁱⁱ

On 5 May, *L’Humanité* declared that ‘The Battle is General’ and announced the watchword of the French workers, transmitted by the miners’ federation of the communist-controlled *Confédération générale du travail unitaire* (‘United General Confederation of Labour’, or CGTU): ‘not one kilo of coal for England’. *L’Humanité*’s London correspondent, Gabriel Péri, informed his readers that the first measure taken by the public authorities was the arrest of Shapurji Saklatvala, the only communist MP, and linked this repressive measure with other struggles in the world’s biggest Empire:

A year ago, in Palestine, the Arabs, weary of servitude, insulted Lord Balfour, the Empire’s representative, once respected on the same level as the *Civis Romanus*. On the day before yesterday, a crowd of London workers jeered and chased out Winston Churchill, Chancellor of the Exchequer. At the two ends of the Empire, the wind of revolt is blowing! Yes, these two pillars of the apparently invincible British Empire are presently shaking.ⁱⁱⁱ

The PCF’s central committee called for a ‘United Front for aid to the English proletariat’, and, after the first bloody confrontations between strikers and authorities,

Péri described a ‘Paralysed England!’: ‘It is very possible that the workers of Silver Town, Leeds and Poplar have never in their lives opened a book by Marx or Vladimir Ilitch. But one day, to the mine owners’ ultimatum, these workers have replied with a *no possum* expressing the will to resist’. The Labour leaders Ramsay MacDonald and J.H. Thomas had offered these workers only ‘smooth declarations and timid proclamations’ that could not hide the raw reality of class war. Indeed, the worker’s masters ‘taught him – with bludgeons! – that only the construction of socialism would put an end to their slavery ... The Baldwin government wields the Browning revolver! MacDonald and JH Thomas pretend to teach him the principles of English boxing!’.^{iv}

Franco-British communist solidarity accelerated. The CGTU launched a national subscription in support of the strikers. There was also created a committee to organise ‘the exodus of children and help in kind for the strikers’ families’. Péri described an enthusiastic solidarity meeting in London, but also mentioned acts of mutual aid by the British, Belgian, Czechoslovakian and German employers. In this ever more bitter class struggle, it was urgent to end ‘the scandal of the publication in Paris of the *Daily Mail*’.^v

On the British side, the *Sunday Worker* noted with satisfaction the impact of the General Strike on French communists. Printworkers had, indeed, refused to print more than 40,000 copies of the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail*. In fact, it seemed that, for once, the French looked to the British masses for guidance. An ‘eminent figure’ in the PCF told the weekly:

This is by far the biggest thing that has happened since the Russian Revolution. It means a stand up fight for economic and political control between the Workers and the bourgeoisie. On the way the battle goes will depend, not only the well-being of the British Worker for the next fifty years, but the very existence of the world-wide movement for the emancipation of wage slaves.

According the French communist interviewed, it was a completely new crisis involving ‘effete parliamentarianism’ and ‘organised labour’. The British journalist concluded:

French capitalism is no less interested in the result. It knows that British capitalism is fighting the battle of capitalism the world over. And the logical consequence is that, in every way possible, bourgeois and capitalist France will give encouragement and active support to those who, in Britain, are trying to fight down the Workers.^{vi}

On 9 May, *L’Humanité* announced that Great Britain was now without heat and light. The following day, it observed that armoured cars were patrolling the streets of London while strikers held enthusiastic meetings. However, in his editorial, Vaillant-Couturier deplored the decision by the ‘excessively cautious’ TUC leadership to reject material aid offered by Soviet workers.^{vii} While the British government ‘organised civil war’, the French workers riposted by creating a Sailors Vigilance Committee. This act of solidarity seemed to have immediate results. On 12 May, the PCF

newspaper announced: 'In Bordeaux the ships are disarmed. Two hundred and fifty wagons of vegetables are rotting'.^{viii}

But this issue of *L'Humanité* came out just after the 'tragic night' that saw the TUC call off the General Strike. Vaillant-Couturier criticised the lack of leadership responsible for this 'English truce': 'The old traditions, the illusions of the English proletariat again did not enable them this time to force the hand of their leaders'. And yet, there were revolutionary lessons to be drawn from this defeat: 'The communist party and the Minority Movement have shown in this struggle a class spirit that places them at the vanguard of the proletariat. A page in the history of the labour movement has been turned'.^{ix}

For Gabriel Péri, 'the English battle [was] not over': 'From now on, thousands of British workers are escaping from the debilitating influence of reformism'.^x Despite the 'betrayal by right-wing leaders', the PCF sent a combative telegram to the CPGB, congratulating it on its vanguard struggle against the bourgeoisie.^{xi} For the CGTU, Pierre Semard denounced the 'capitulation by trade union leaders and English Labourists'.^{xii} *L'Humanité* reassured its readers that 'the English proletariat will take its revenge'.^{xiii}

The *Sunday Worker* reported that French workers were 'aghast' at the betrayal of the miners: "'Thomas and Ramsay MacDonald", one of the Communist deputies told me, "are saboteurs not only of British, but of international Labour"'.^{xiv} However, the paper continued to announce French acts of solidarity with the miners, who were continuing an increasingly desperate struggle during the Lockout. John Mellroy and Alan Campbell have observed that this strike was the exception that proved the rule that foreign miners were reluctant to act in solidarity with their British counterparts.^{xv} In June 1926, a wildcat strike in Boulogne stopped the export of coal to England. August saw a meeting at the Cirque de Paris where 10,000 listened to a speech by CPGB leader Robin Page Arnot, while a twenty-four hour strike was called in all the French coalfield. However, the success of this action proved limited: on the front page of the CGTU's paper, *La Vie ouvrière*, British miners condemned 'betrayal by French reformist leaders'.^{xvi} Nevertheless, in October, five months after the 'truce', the CGTU still gave 250,000 francs to the miners' strike fund, and vigilance committees in Boulogne, Dunkirk, Calais and Dieppe refused to load coal. The *Sunday Worker* quoted a comrade named Herchet: 'Even in Algeria our coloured members have steadfastly refused all duty on British vessels'.^{xvii} However, at the beginning of December 1926, *La Vie ouvrière* announced to its readers that the British miners were 'defeated because they were betrayed': 'in the course of this strike the English capitalists have shown so much ferocity that they have built up an enormous amount of hatred among the miners'.^{xviii}

The failure of the general strike and lockout of 1926 would have important consequences for the British labour movement. Certainly, the event enabled the CPGB to attract new recruits, especially among young miners; and the 'treason' of TUC and Labour leaders created a long tradition of hostility towards the 'old' reformists. But this 'treason' also demonstrated that the vast majority of the labour movement had abandoned syndicalist methods, turned away from 'direct action' and preferred a reformist and parliamentary road to socialism. Kevin Laybourn writes: 'The General Strike revealed once and for all that pure industrial strategy would not

work and that the trade union movement had better get on to the Labour Party train rather than fooling about with the ultimate deterrent – the General Strike'.^{xix} This strategy would bear its first fruits with Labour's electoral victory of 1929.

The gap between the CPGB and Labour, as between the PCF and the socialists of the *Section française de l'internationale ouvrière* ('French Section of the Workers International', or SFIO), would deepen further with the Comintern's adoption, in 1928, of a policy of 'class against class'. By the early 1930s, the PCF and CPGB inhabited political ghettos of differing sizes, at the core of which were mining communities: in France, most notably the Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Cévennes; in Great Britain, West Fife and South Wales. The anti-fascist struggle, firstly with the Popular Front then the Second World War, would enable the parties to leave these ghettos and reach the apogee of their membership and support. This period would also see the – uneasy – unification of the mining unions.

1948: *La Grande Grève des mineurs*

With the onset of the Cold War, and the expulsion of PCF ministers from the French coalition government, in May 1947, the revolutionary situation so feared and hoped for seemed on the brink of becoming reality during the French miners' 'great strike' that began in October 1948. Initially, this action, launched against a government plan of wage reductions and changes to working conditions in this newly nationalised industry, was widely supported. But it hardly united the French left. During the strike there were several deaths and thousands of wounded, as troops and the soon notorious riot police of the *Compagnie républicaine de sécurité* ('Republican Security Corps', or CRS) were deployed in the coalfield, under the orders of Jules Moch, the SFIO and ferociously anti-communist minister of the interior.

The conflicts linked to the strike also had ramifications for the British labour movement. The TUC, dominated by Labour, gave no sympathy or solidarity to the PCF-dominated *Confédération générale du travail* ('General Confederation of Labour', or CGT). On 11 October 1948, Arthur Horner, communist general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), travelled to Paris to attend the CGT's congress. He declared to delegates: 'No British miner has authority to speak against the French miners' strike, and if he does so it is entirely unofficial. It is also untrue that the British miners have decided against assisting the French miners ... I am sure that, in spite of propaganda, when the British miners know the full facts of the French struggle they will rally to your support'.^{xx} But the following day, Will Lawther, Labour president of the NUM, distanced himself from the strike, saying: 'Since 1926, by political action and by conciliation and arbitration the British miners have improved their position. If it is correct that the British miners are far ahead of the French miners, it is all the more necessary for the latter to take the British miners' advice to seek conciliation and arbitration, and accept the Social Democratic point of view'.^{xxi} During a visit to Paris, Lawther confirmed his adherence to the Atlanticist camp by choosing to lunch with general George Marshall. Indeed, according to Nina Fishman, the reformists used the French miners' strike as a *casus belli* 'to unleash an official campaign against the communists inside the British trade union movement'.^{xxii}

Despite being disavowed by the TUC leadership, Horner was not completely abandoned. Naturally, the *Daily Worker* followed closely the clashes between French miners and security forces, and presented the miners' struggle as that of their British counterparts: their defeat would lead to the degradation of conditions on both sides of the Channel. Two strongly communist British areas expressed their solidarity. *La Vie ouvrière* published an 'international solidarity' league table: Scottish miners came in third, behind Czechoslovakian and Hungarian miners, but ahead of 'Italian women' and Belgian, Polish and Romanian trade unionists.^{xxiii} *L'Humanité* quoted a resolution by the miners of the '*Rhondda rouge*': 'we support Arthur Horner's request for solidarity with our comrades in France because we consider that to be one of the basic principles of our movement'. The resolution pointed out that by supporting the French miners, the British miners would defend themselves against the repercussions that the current conditions of French miners could have on the living conditions of British miners: 'we express our indignation at Lawther's attitude and we emphasise that he has just received the very dubious honour of becoming the hero of all the reactionary newspapers of this country. We demand that action immediately be taken to stop all export of coal to France for the duration of the strike'.^{xxiv} On 31 October, veteran PCF leader Marcel Cachin was in London for a mass meeting in support of the *Daily Worker*, where the French miners' strike was a central reference.

In November, Cachin wrote to CPGB leader Rajani Palme Dutt: 'The current political situation in France is difficult to describe in the midst of the constant flow of events ... Things are moving very quickly here. Our reactionary forces are endemic, resorting to blind violence and provocation: the last cards to play by sinking castes and regimes'.^{xxv} But solidarity between French and British communists was largely ineffective. Similarly, the support of the population in the coalfields and sympathy for the miners elsewhere in France were not enough to prevent defeat. What's more, the CGT had been weakened by the CIA-sponsored breakaway union, *Force Ouvrière* ('Workers' Force', or FO).

The failure of the strike also reassured London. In its report on the events in France in 1948, the Foreign Office explained that 'there is now little danger of a communist Government'. From now on, according to British diplomats, the main danger to the Fourth Republic would be General de Gaulle. Granted, the PCF remained the biggest party in the National Assembly, and had 'served the Cominform well in the damage done to France and to Western European recovery' during the strike. Nevertheless, Jules Moch had proved to be 'remarkably effective'. The diplomats concluded: 'We are entitled to believe that France is on the right road and that though there are sizeable obstacles still ahead she will succeed in whatever is the Latin equivalent of muddling through'.^{xxvi}

In France, the coalfields remained important, as did communist influence, despite the persecution of strike activists. But, by the end of the 1950s, the industry was threatened by the diversification of energy sources away from coal. The rationalisation, and therefore reduction, of the coal industry was proposed in 1960 by Jean-Marcel Jeanneney, President de Gaulle's industry minister. If, in 1963, French miners were the first to shake De Gaulle's authority with a successful strike, they were very much fighting a rear-guard action against what Diana Cooper-Richet has described as the 'chronicle of a planned death'.^{xxvii}

The Miners' Strike of 1984-1985

On 6 March 1984, at Cortonwood pit in Yorkshire, began the biggest strike in British history. The NUM, under the leadership of Arthur Scargill, called out more than 120,000 miners to resist a programme of closures by the managers of an industry still in public hands. This dispute, which would lead to several deaths and hundreds of wounded, saw conflict between pickets and police and the intelligence service, in a situation that, in places, came close to civil war. Described by prime minister Margaret Thatcher as the 'enemy within', the most militant union in the country counted within its leadership a considerable minority of communists, notably the NUM Vice-President Mick McGahey. The strike divided the miners themselves, notably in Nottinghamshire, as well as the entire nation. This epic strike, probably doomed to defeat from the very beginning, attracted solidarity on an international scale, starting with France.

At the time, the French coal industry was going through a crisis similar to that in Great Britain. The victory of the left in 1981 had raised hopes for the expansion of the coal industry. After all, François Mitterrand chose Carmaux, the coal-mining fief of legendary socialist leader Jean Jaurès, to launch his presidential campaign. But with the Socialist-Communist coalition's swift turn to austerity, such plans were abandoned, triggering the resignation of Georges Valbon, communist director of the *Charbonnages de France* (equivalent of the National Coal Board (NCB), also created after the Second World War). On 2 March 1984 – coincidentally the day after the NCB announced the closure of Cortonwood – in response to an appeal by all the union federations, French miners gathered in Paris. They marched from the Place de la République to the headquarters of the *Charbonnages de France* to protest against cuts in production and jobs. With the slogan 'Miners yes, unemployed no!', 15,000 miners from all the French coalfields protested against 6000 job losses. In his speech, the CGT miners' leader, René Le Guen, insisted that 'national coal' remained 'the right choice'.^{xxviii} But the CGT did not go as far as to call for strike action. After all, the PCF, with which the CGT remained closely associated, still had ministers in the coalition government, although the contradictions caused by their participation were becoming increasingly unsustainable.

It could therefore be said to be by proxy that French communists and CGT militants supported the British miners standing up to *la Dame de fer*. Despite the police and the courts, the British mines were paralysed by the strike. In his editorial for *L'Humanité*, José Fort denounced the 'Thatcher model' which had been brutally illustrated by the recent death of David Jones, the first of the miners' casualties: 'David and his comrades are not "backward-looking" opponents of technological innovations. They are confronting a business that aims over several years to reduce the number of mining employees from 184,000 to 100,000 and close seventy one pits'. For the editorialist, the British miners were opposing 'right-wing Europe':

Europe? So many illusions surround this word. For the youngest, it facilitates better communication between peoples and freedom of movement. For the oldest, the future of harmonious economic development depends on this Europe. Where is the truth? Europe is ill. Wasting away from the crisis, it lurches from failure to failure. Three million unemployed in Great Britain, more than two million in the Federal Republic of Germany. Dismantled

businesses, entire sectors of the economy annihilated, thousands of small family enterprises destroyed. Is that the future? Is that the Europe of tomorrow?

In fact, argued Fort, the example of the 'Iron Lady' was not exclusive to Britain. Thatcher's programme resembled 'to the nearest comma' that of France's right-wing opposition alliance, and of Helmut Köhl's candidates for the forthcoming European elections. For the French communists, Fort concluded: 'Europe could be something else'.^{xxxix} (Unfortunately for the PCF, the electorate did not listen, and three months later the PCF's share of the vote in the 1984 European election fell to 11 per cent, down from 20 per cent five years before.) Meanwhile, the French communist daily followed closely the repressive measures taken against the British strikers, and reported Yorkshire NUM's Owen Briscoe's declaration that 'This is a police state'.^{xxx}

On 17 June 1984, fifteen weeks into the strike, the Thatcher regime seemed to show its true colours when the police charged six and a half thousand miners blocking the coking plant at Orgreave. Around fifty workers were injured, including Arthur Scargill, who was hospitalised. *L'Humanité* took note of this 'warning': 'Madame Thatcher has rejected their demands and sent in her "anti-riot" squads. It is what they like to call "fair-play" on the other side of the Channel'.^{xxxi} At the end of July, the Great Britain group of the PCF's international section, the PolEx, noted that 'these attempts to isolate the movement, the savage repressive measures that have already caused the death of two miners, are not weakening the resolve of the "gueules noires"'.^{xxxii}

In June 1984, the PCF pulled out of the coalition government, which intended to pursue its policies of austerity and modernisation, notably of France's nationalised industries. As Granville Williams points out, 'the PCF urgently needed to re-establish itself as the militant party of the Left and increased support for the miners fitted perfectly into this strategy'.^{xxxiii} From now on, the CGT had free rein to lead a movement of solidarity with the British miners. At a press conference on 11 September 1984, Henri Krasucki, general secretary, explained the international stakes of the strike: 'The British miners' battle is waged against the policy of liquidation of production dictated by the European Coal and Steel Community and put in place in numerous European countries'. For Krasucki, Europe's coal policy was completely unacceptable: 'rather than developing our resources, they are being closed down'. Now free to speak after the communist ministers' exit from government, Krasucki directly attacked the governments on both sides of the Channel: 'When you think of the destructive policy pursued in Great Britain, France and elsewhere, you say to yourself: "stop these vandals and quick; end this absurd policy, fight against it". That's what our British comrades are trying to do and that's why we support them'.^{xxxiv}

Hence the urgent need for solidarity. Already in May, the CGT had sent a fact-finding delegation to the Kent coalfield. Aware of the danger posed to the miners' cause by coal imports, on the night of 23 May CGT militants dumped 600 tons of coal in the railway sidings at the Calais docks. Ten days later, French miners returned to Kent with 30,000 francs (£3000 at the time) collected from miners and their families. Two hundred children were then hosted by mining families in France during the summer holidays. On 12 October, the CGT's headquarters in Montreuil saw a large gathering

hail the departure – to the strains of the ‘Victory’ bars of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony – of a convoy bound for Calais. This caravan, made up of thirty lorries and sixty cars covered with posters of the NUM and CGT, as well as British and French flags, passed through the mining towns of Hénin-Beaumont, Sallaumines and Avion, then processed past demonstrators at a motorway toll near Arras. Addressing a crowd at the port of Calais, Krasucki took pride in the 500,000 francs collected and the 300 tons of food and sanitary products loaded on the lorries, declaring:

Doesn’t our convoy look great! We are trying to be worthy of [British miners] and worthy of us, of our traditions. We are part of a great movement of international solidarity. Just like the boat chartered by the World Trade Union Federation with the help of Denmark’s seaman’s union which, departing from Rostock in the GDR, is arriving in Hull near Sheffield filled with food supplies from the socialist countries as well as Sweden and Denmark.

He added that Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Lebanon, Nicaragua and El Salvador had also contributed to the solidarity movement.^{xxxv} Standing next to Krasucki was Malcolm Pitt, communist leader of the Kent NUM. *The Times* reported: ‘In faltering French, Pitt told CGT members that Mrs Thatcher was “the parrot of President Reagan, perching on his shoulder”, preaching the same militarist and imperialist policies. “There is blood on British coal,” shouted Mr Pitt, to chants of: “Thatcher is a fascist” from among the crowd’.^{xxxvi}

On arrival in Dover, Krasucki addressed his hosts: ‘Miners of Great Britain, admirable miners’ wives, you are waging the longest strike we have ever seen, at least in Europe. In the face of poverty, in the face of brutal repression, you show a dignity, an endurance that draws upon the finest qualities of your people’.^{xxxvii} ‘Comrade Krasu’ then took part in a public meeting organised by Kent NUM in Aylesham, addressing 800 strikers. For a day, Snowdown colliery welfare hall became the ‘world centre of international solidarity’. The *Times* reporter David Cross was particularly impressed: ‘In the end, it was not Mr Arthur Scargill, the British miners’ leader, but 30 French lorry drivers in their jeans and leather jackets who stole the show in the Kent coalfield where the biggest rally so far in support of the seven-month strike took place at the weekend’.^{xxxviii} Speaking first, Kent NUM secretary Jack Collins recalled solidarity with the French miners during the 1948 strike. The French miners’ leader Augustin ‘Tintin’ Dufresne then stressed to the crowd that his union would never betray the NUM.

‘British miners welcome the “French invasion”’ was the headline of the communist *Morning Star*. According to its correspondent, Harry Sansom: ‘on Saturday evening [Aylesham] was invaded by the French. But no protests were made because unlike William the Conqueror, they came to give not to take’.^{xxxix} This warm welcome was not echoed in the rest of the British press, which was widely hostile to the miners. On the same day, London’s *Evening Standard* published a cartoon lampooning the CGT convoy. Ignorant pickets, wearing Kent NUM T-shirts, were shown throwing stones at the lorries of ‘Roux frères gastronomie Arras Béthune Nœx-les-mines’, who were bringing ‘French miners’ food products’ to the ‘heroic miners of Kent’. A terrified driver (dressed, of course, in a *marinière* sweater) says to his colleague: ‘I wonder what they didn’t like, Michel? The escargots? The frogs’ legs? The Algerian sheep’s eyeballs Algerian?’.^{xl}

On the other hand, in a brochure brought out by the CGT, the French trade union emphasised the long history of solidarity between French and British miners. Léon Delfosse, honorary president of the CGT's Mining Federation, remembered the great strike of 1948:

We were attacked from all sides, by the same reactionary forces that are now attacking the British miners, and, in this context, national and international solidarity was one of our best means of defence. Our enemies were aware of this. Hence the news in the media on 9 November 1948, according to which an English MP was accusing the CGT of using for its own benefit the £1000 sent by Scottish miners. It was clear: they were afraid of the British miners' solidarity and were using this lie to break it.

In fact, only two days later 80,000 Scottish miners had protested against the declaration by the MP who had made the accusation, Lieutenant-Colonel Baker-Withe, and had challenged him to prove his allegation. The accusation was then quickly withdrawn, Baker-Withe admitting he had received fake information.

Delfosse also remembered this delegation, 'with the two Moffats, Alex and Abe, leaders of the Scottish miners, Jock Dunn, from Kent, and Danny Evans, the old Welsh lion as the miners had nicknamed him': 'It is this memory among so many others of the wonderful solidarity that surrounded us in 1947 and 1948, which leads me to say that the campaign in favour of our mining comrades of Great Britain must achieve unequalled success'.^{xli}

Back in Paris, Henri Krasucki wrote to Arthur Scargill: 'The CGT will respect the commitments I announced in that fine mining community of Aylesham'.^{xlii} The trade union then launched its biggest solidarity operation, *Christmas CGT*, which aimed to distribute 300,000 presents to the children of British miners. Krasucki declared:

Five hundred thousand miners in their eighth month of strike action are faced with a reactionary government which hopes to starve them and their families into submission. Women and men of admirable courage are struggling against the desertification of their region, for their jobs, for the defence of their national coal. They are right to do it, and they must win, for their sake and that of everyone, for that helps each of us to defend our own coal. We, our coal, the Germans and the Belgians, theirs as well.

A list of toys to collect was issued: 'puzzles, balls, jigsaws, sports bags, electronic games, paint boxes, compasses, dictionaries (English-French), watches, pens, alarm clocks, rackets, roller skates'.^{xliii}

The appeal got a big response from union militants, which is illustrated in this tract distributed by building workers in St-Pierre-des-Corps, a historic communist stronghold in Indre-et-Loire:

Christmas: that's *NOEL* in English. For the children of British miners (among them a large number of Scots, SCOTLAND being a mining country) the fireplace risked remaining empty. In front of them they have the sadly famous

‘Iron Lady’. For several months now she has been attacking their children after successfully requesting a vote on a law allowing her to reduce the benefits due to strikers’ children!!! After 36 weeks, their morale remains high!^{xliv}

Christmas CGT managed to collect 400 tons of food and 200,000 toys, not to mention millions of francs for the NUM. On 13 December 1984, ten lorries loaded with teddy bears, bicycles and all sorts of toys left Montreuil. The convoy passed through the mining towns of Billy-Montigny, Lens and Liévin, arrived in Dover, then headed as far north as Edinburgh, where Augustin Dufresne addressed 2000 people at the Usher Hall. The toys were distributed in several mining centres, including Durham and Mansfield. Sam Scott, secretary of Northumberland NUM, wrote to CGT secretary Joannès Galland: ‘My Branch secretaries spent all Monday sorting and distributing these gifts and their astonishment was expressed by adjectives such as: magnificent; unbelievable; incredible; amazing’.^{xlv}

French communists and CGT activists were keenly interested in the struggle of women in the coalfields. Thus, *La Vie ouvrière* described the daily fight of ‘Marsha, miner’s wife’.^{xlvi} For the Great Britain group of the PolEx, Renée Pamart wrote a report on four wives of striking miners (two from Derbyshire and two from Wales) who stayed in France at the PCF’s invitation:

The welcome they received was quite extraordinary. In Lorraine (Pienne and Bouligny) more than 400 people turned out. In the Bouches du Rhône, more or less the same number. In Seine-Maritime, the town hall of Saint-Etienne du Rouvray was packed. In the Paris region the welcome was of the same quality in the town halls, the housing estates, at the hospital of Kremlin Bicêtre, in the workplaces on strike, and at the RATP.^{xlvii}

It was also a journey to political consciousness. The four British women ‘discovered the Party’:

I am convinced that it was an unimaginable shock for them. Each of their interventions proved it. They also had some hard words for the socialist party and the President of the Republic. At the start, they did not yet see the link between the closure plan in Great Britain and the closure plan at the level of the European Community.

The Christmas solidarity campaign moved them the most: ‘they often wept with emotion, but – they say – in Great Britain you do not cry. Thatcher would be too pleased’. Pamart observed: ‘I have rarely met women with such an acute sense of the class struggle. Everything seemed to make sense when their husbands announced the strike. They spoke at length about international acts of solidarity (noting in passing that the government had blocked despatches of food from the Soviet trade unions to “check if they weren’t poisonous”)’.

The women’s delegation was received in thirteen party federations, and 23 million francs were collected (of which 4.6 million in the Nord alone). In Clayes-sous-Bois, they met two former deportees of the Second World War, including a Jewish woman who had been deported at the age of twelve: ‘They had never heard of the camps and

the Resistance. And they asked us to forgive their ignorance'. At the last meal offered by the powerful Val de Marne federation, in the Parisian 'red belt', Lynn told Pamart that she had heard in Strasburg a song that she did not know and that 'people were raising their fists'. 'We therefore sang to her *l'Internationale*. We were returning to spend the night at the friendship house in Ivry. Dining there were sixty Soviet children who had come from Moscow to give a concert. There were introductions then the Soviet children sang *l'Internationale*'. Pamart added that 'all the miners' wives will know that it is thanks to the Party and the CGT that Christmas will still be a time for fun'.^{xlviii}

This unparalleled conflict corresponded to socio-economic tendencies that crossed the Channel. In the left-leaning *Le Monde diplomatique*, correspondent Maurice Lemoine assessed the long strike of the British miners:

Unpopular, filled with verbal and sometimes physical violence, the tenacious strike by British miners is not simply a human drama for those living through it. It translates in exemplary fashion the anxiety of European workers in the face of the modification of conditions of exploitation of natural resources and industrial complexes on a global scale.

This process of deindustrialisation was at work in the urban landscape of the north of England: 'It is still night in Sheffield on the immense, ghost-like and moribund industrial estate. A crazy metal cemetery, kilometres of abandoned factories, hangars stripped bare, warehouses with broken windows up for sale and collapsed walls, grey with soot, blackened by smoke'.^{xlix}

Indeed, in February 1985, at a press conference, Henri Krasucki and his British counterpart, Norman Willis, took up this theme, denouncing 'a phenomenon of deindustrialisation that is developing all over western Europe'.¹ Also in February, Gerry Pocock, head of the CPGB's international department, addressed the following message to the 25th Congress of the PCF: 'British miners highly appreciate the outstanding international solidarity and support shown to them by French workers in their bitter 11-month strike ... Working people of Britain and France face many similar problems. On the basis of the shared heritage of Marxism our Parties seek to develop politics and strategies based on the specific problems we face in our countries'.^{li}

But the strike was in its death throes. The Thatcher government had prevented the energy crises which had worked in the miners' favour in previous disputes, while police had been deployed effectively. The methods of Arthur Scargill, notably the lack of a national ballot and the use of mass picketing, and the legalism of Labour and the TUC (an echo of 1926?), further divided and alienated public opinion. International solidarity had itself proved problematic, despite the evident successes described above: the NUM leadership failed to prevent the increased export of coal from Poland, while the union was besmirched by its receipt of aid from the communist bloc and, allegedly, the Libyan dictator Colonel Gaddafi. Scargill's dream of an international miners' federation uniting communists and non-communists would never become a reality.

In early March 1985, the NUM called for a return to work. In *L'Humanité*, Bernard Frédéric drew up a balance-sheet of the strike: 'Certainly, a good number of the miners had returned to work these last few weeks, pushed by the difficulty of making ends meet ... But half of the 180,000 "gueules noires" of Her Majesty had stood firm. ... A battle lost, perhaps; but as for the war ...'. Frédéric went on: 'Oh! Of course, in France and especially Great Britain, there won't be a shortage of voices in praise of the "Iron Lady"'s firmness'. But this triumph for Thatcherism had cost Great Britain dearly: 'there is talk of 5.5 billion dollars lost – 2 per cent of Gross National Product. The conflict was also a bloody one – half a dozen deaths. More than in Poland during the Solidarity strikes ...'. It was therefore too early for champagne corks to start popping in 10 Downing Street. And *L'Humanité* offered its readers another source of hope: the Lorraine coalfields had just gone on strike.^{lii}

While the British strikers returned to their pits, 'their heads held high', the French communist daily, not for the first time, laid into social-democratic treason:

The Labour Party distinguished itself during the conflict by its inaction. Or worse. Yesterday, the party leader, Neil Kinnock, declared in a television interview that there could be no question of an amnesty for miners found guilty of 'serious crimes' during the strike ... After having refused to support the strikers, the Labour Party, through the voice of its leader, is giving Mrs Thatcher the green light to pursue a policy of repression.^{liii}

The Iron Lady's victory was applauded by right-wing newspapers *Le Figaro* and *Echos de l'expansion*. 'Maggie's phew!' was the headline of the pro-socialist daily *Libération*: 'one year of strike action, one year of suffering for nought'.^{liv} In *L'Humanité*, Yves Housson remarked on the absence of emotion felt by most French observers 'who did not lack emotion when the strikers on the front page were of Polish nationality'.^{lv} In the name of the CGT, Augustin Dufresne declared: 'The battle of the British miners is our battle. We are confronted with the same European policy and that of the multinationals, who are abandoning our resources in favour of imports, notably from South Africa. Iron and steelmaking are also being sacrificed'. Dufresne recalled the CGT's considerable solidarity effort, as well as that of trade unions in the communist bloc and many other countries. The British miners would also have noticed that 'unfortunately, for political reasons, other organisations did nothing', notably the reformist FO.^{lvi}

At the end of May, *L'Humanité* described 'industrial turmoil' in the coalfields of Lorraine, while gladly announcing an end to butter rationing in Poland.^{lvii} Nevertheless, the end of the British miners' strike was a severe defeat for the labour movement. In order to assess the strengths and limitations of the longest strike in the history of Great Britain, *L'Humanité* interviewed Pete Carter, industrial organiser of the CPGB, who was of the opinion that 'what was lacking was a rallying of all these various sympathies in a mass popular movement'. The journalist noted with regret: 'Alongside the Communist Party – alas too weak! – which threw all its energy into the battle, the opposition Labour Party which could have played this role, chose not to'.^{lviii} For the PolEx, Pierrette Le Corre wrote a report on the British miners' return to work. She looked back on a 'long and heroic' strike marked by 'practical solidarity, international solidarity and remarkable organisation'. For her, the NUM's struggle had suffered from the breakaway by Nottinghamshire miners, and had been contained

by the government's preparatory measures, 'the solidarity of international capitalism', as well as 'the unanimous chorus of hostile mass-media'. As for what remained of a deeply divided and dwindling British communist movement, the *Morning Star* – whose conservative editorial board was at odds with the CPGB leadership – 'supported the strike unreservedly', while, according to Le Corre, *Marxism Today*, the iconoclastic CPGB theoretical journal edited by eurocommunist Martin Jacques, 'only supported the strike from a distance'. This confirmed for PolEx their growing fears about the revisionist drift of a CPGB increasingly critical of militant labourism. Also in this report, comrade Le Corre remained very circumspect on the import of coal from 'people's' Poland: 'One of our comrades said that Poland allegedly increased its supplies by directing them to small British ports. A claim that is difficult to verify'.^{lix}

In June 1985, divisions were clear to see at a meeting of western communist parties, called at the last minute by the PCF, to analyse 'the crisis'. Delegates discussed economic decline and deindustrialisation. For the CPGB, Brenda Kirsch drew lessons from the miners' strike: the defeat showed the importance of 'broad alliances' and of winning public opinion. What's more, the discussions in Paris showed the centrifugal forces at work in the communist parties of western Europe. While differences of opinion emerged on the role of the EEC, new technologies and relations with other left-wing organisations, some parties, reported Kirsch, hesitated to give importance to ecological or feminist struggles.^{lx}

End game

The defeat of the NUM was the swan song of the labour movement in Great Britain and, with that, communist influence. Meanwhile, the strike called in Lorraine was also a false dawn. On the two sides of the Channel, and as predicted by British and French trade union leaders, the decline of coal accelerated: the last deep mines in France and Great Britain would close in 2004 and 2015 respectively (Snowdown colliery had already closed in 1987). The British strike also rumbled on in the media: in 1990, investigative journalists accused Arthur Scargill and the NUM of having accepted secret finance from colonel Gaddafi's Libya as well as from the Soviet bloc. Scargill, it was alleged, had even misused the donations for personal gain. In 1994, the left-wing journalist Seumas Milne refuted the Libyan hypothesis, while unmasking Roger Windsor, the NUM's finance director, as an agent of the British secret services. But Milne's investigation, and the opening of Soviet archives, confirmed the importance of financial aid by the USSR – authorised by Mikhail Gorbachev, then a rising star in the Soviet party. It also confirmed the key role played by the CGT in the transfer of this 'Moscow gold' to the NUM.^{lxi}

These three episodes showed how miners' strikes on both sides of the Channel raised revolutionary hopes and brought about considerable acts of solidarity between British and French communists. They also highlight structural weaknesses: the marginality of the CPGB in relation to the wider labour movement, the inability of the PCF to eliminate its own reformist rivals on the left, and, more generally, a failure to conquer public opinion. The failures of these strike actions also highlighted the decline and fall of mining in Britain and France during the twentieth century, which had provided fertile ground for communism, but which was also crushed in the force field of international economic and political change and the shift to other energy sources.

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ⁱ *L'Humanité*, 3 May 1926. 'Black Friday', in British labour history, refers to 15 April 1921, when the leaders of transport and rail unions announced a decision not to call a strike in support of the miners.

ⁱⁱ *L'Humanité*, 4 May 1926.

ⁱⁱⁱ *L'Humanité*, 5 May 1926.

^{iv} *L'Humanité*, 6 May 1926, 7 May 1926.

^v *L'Humanité*, 8 May 1926.

^{vi} *Sunday Worker*, 16 May 1926, p5.

^{vii} *L'Humanité*, 10 May 1926.

^{viii} *L'Humanité*, 12 May 1926.

^{ix} *L'Humanité*, 14 May 1926. The National Minority Movement was established by the CPGB in 1924 to spread its influence among the trade unions.

^x *L'Humanité*, 14 May 1926.

^{xi} *L'Humanité*, 15 May 1926.

^{xii} *L'Humanité*, 16 May 1926.

^{xiii} *L'Humanité*, 23 May 1926.

^{xiv} *Sunday Worker*, 23 May 1926, p5.

^{xv} John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Keith Gildart (eds.), *Industrial Politics and the 1926 Lockout. The struggle for dignity*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press 2009, p80.

^{xvi} *La Vie ouvrière*, 20 August 1926.

^{xvii} *Sunday Worker*, 31 October 1926, p2.

^{xviii} *La Vie ouvrière*, 3 December 1926.

^{xix} Kevin Laybourn, *The General Strike of 1926*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 1993, p104.

^{xx} Nina Fishman, *Arthur Horner. A Political Biography. Volume 2. 1944-1968*, London, Lawrence and Wishart 2010, p758.

^{xxi} *Daily Worker*, 14 October 1948.

^{xxii} Fishman, *Arthur Horner*, p760.

^{xxiii} *La Vie ouvrière*, 11 November 1948.

^{xxiv} *L'Humanité*, 23 October 1948.

^{xxv} Archives of the CPGB, Centre for Labour History, Manchester, CP/IND/Dutt/06/04.

^{xxvi} National Archives, Kew, FO371/79042.

^{xxvii} Diana Cooper-Richet, *Le peuple de la nuit. Mines et mineurs en France (XIXe-XXIe siècle)*, Paris, Perrin 2011, p437.

^{xxviii} *L'Humanité*, 3 March 1984.

^{xxix} *L'Humanité*, 18 March 1984.

^{xxx} *L'Humanité*, 20 March 1984.

^{xxxi} *L'Humanité*, 20 June 1984.

^{xxxii} Archives of the PCF, Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis, Bobigny: 261 J 7/41. 'Gueules noires' translates as 'black faces', a French term for coal miners.

^{xxxiii} Granville Williams, *Pit Props. Music, International Solidarity and the 1984-85 Miners' Strike*, Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (North), 2016, p49.

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- xxxiv Archives of the CGT, Montreuil, 7 CFD 158.
- xxxv For an anthology of press coverage of international solidarity during the miners' strike, see: www.nicholasjones.org.uk/articles/categories/trade-union-reporting/314-untold-story-of-international-help-in-1984-85-miners-strike.
- xxxvi *The Times*, 15 October 1984.
- xxxvii Archives of the CGT, Montreuil, 7 CFD 158.
- xxxviii *The Times*, 15 October 1984.
- xxxix *Morning Star*, 15 October 1984.
- xl *The Evening Standard*, 15 October 1984.
- xli Archives of the CGT, 363 CFD 32.
- xlii *Ibid*, 7 CFD 158.
- xliii Archives of the PCF, 242 J 821.
- xliv Archives of the CGT, 13 CFD 15.
- xlv *Ibid*, 362 CFD 33.
- xlvi *La Vie ouvrière*, 3 December 1984.
- xlvii RATP: Autonomous Parisian Transportation Administration.
- xlviii Archives of the PCF, 242 J 821.
- xlix *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 1985, p1.
- l Archives of the CGT, 7 CFD 158.
- li Archives of the CPGB, CP/CENT/INT/06/01.
- lii *L'Humanité*, 4 March 1985.
- liii *L'Humanité*, 5 March 1985.
- liv *Libération*, 5 March 1985.
- lv *L'Humanité*, 5 March 1985.
- lvi *Ibid*.
- lvii *L'Humanité*, 29 May 1985.
- lviii *L'Humanité*, 19 March 1985.
- lix Archives of the PCF, 261 J 7/41.
- lx Archives of the CPGB, CP/CENT/INT/07/05.
- lxi Seumas Milne, *The Enemy Within. The Secret War Against the Miners*, London, Verso 1994.