Energy workers against Thatcherite neoliberalism. Scottish coalminers and North Sea offshore workers: revisiting the class struggle in the UK in the 1980s

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ABSTRACT

This essay revisits two important British workers' struggles that took place in the decade of the neoliberal Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher: the coalminers' strike of 1984-5 and the offshore oil workers' industrial actions of 1989-90. Both involved energy workers, and – in the particular cases I examine – were based in Scotland. And both, in their different ways, still resonate today. This is particularly true, I argue, if the study of these events is understood as part of a critical discourse about the UK's neoliberal project and the collapse of its triumphalist phase in the global financial crisis that began in 2007-8; and if it is inspired by the need to recover, through critique rather than uncritical celebration, the sense of practical relevance and political optimism that underpinned the development of British labour history in the 1960s.

KEYWORDS

Thatcher, Coalminers' strike of 1984-5, Offshore oil workers' industrial actions of 1989-90, Scotland

This essay revisits two important British workers' struggles that took place in the decade of the neoliberal Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher: the coalminers' strike of 1984-5 and the offshore oil workers' industrial actions of 1989-90. Both involved energy workers, and – in the particular cases I examine – were based in Scotland. And both, in their different ways, still resonate today. This is particularly true, I argue, if the study of these events is understood as part of a critical discourse about the UK's neoliberal project and the collapse of its triumphalist phase in the global financial crisis that began in 2007-8; and if it is inspired by the need to recover, through critique rather than uncritical celebration, the sense of practical relevance and political optimism that underpinned the development of British labour history in the 1960s.

My linking of these two episodes in the class struggles during Britain in the socially divided 1980s is in part influenced by personal experience.[1] The offshore workers' onshore strike headquarters was in Aberdeen – Scotland's most remote major city, situated on the North Sea littoral – where I was lecturing in history at the UK's fifth oldest university. I knew a number of the strikers personally and was in contact with them regularly during their industrial action, contributing reports to a workers' newspaper. Several years earlier, as an occasional correspondent for a different paper,[2] I had reported when possible from the Scottish coalfield during the long and heroic miners' strike and gained the confidence of a number of rank-and-file militants. I have maintained contact with workers from both struggles and remain struck by the miners' conviction that the version of their strike that has entered the mainstream historical narrative corresponds only tangentially to their memory of what they did and why they did it, and provides an inadequate basis for others to learn the lessons of their defeat; and by the offshore workers' perception that the virtual absence of their action (which also failed to achieve its main objective) from the history that has since been being written is, likewise, damaging to a politically intelligent analysis of the Thatcher years.

My argument about the miners' strike against pit closures – that, although the headlines of the story are well-known, it is overdue for re-interpretation and that the story of the strike in the often overlooked Scottish coalfield provides an important starting-point – is less challenging now that when Simon Pirani and I advanced it at the time of the twentieth anniversary. [3] I refer below to a timely article by Jim Phillips opening up a

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[1] My interest in labour history began with research on the early twentieth-century labour militancy in Scotland ("Red Clydeside"). My experience in the labour movement includes a lay leadership role in the University and College Union Scotland (UCUS) and a brief spell on the General Council of the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

[2] The papers were *NewsLine* and then *Workers Press* (which ran from 1985 to 1996).

[3] Brotherstone, T. and Pirani, S. "Were There Alternatives?: movements from below in the Scottish coalfield, 1981-1985". *Critique*, nos. 36-37, Glasgow, 2005. For recent work on the miners' strike, see references in Phillips, J."Collieries and Communities: the miners' strike in Scotland, 1984-1985", *Scottish Labour History*, vol. 45 (2010) and more recently in his *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland, 1984-85*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012. Taylor, A. *The NUM and British Politics, Vol. II, 1969-1995*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005 offers a narrative stressing regional diversity, but its focus is on the high politics of the NUM and its relations with the state. The most recent general account, although it is not without some new material, sticks to the conventional thesis criticised below: see Beckett, F. and Hencke, M. *Marching to the Fault Line: the 1984 miners' strike and the death of industrial Britain*. London: Constable, 2009.

new phase in research on the strike in Scotland, now followed by his monograph, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland ...* – which however appeared too late to be fully considered in this essay. Phillips shows the value of incorporating careful empirical work on the Scottish coalfield into analysis of the strike as a whole. While he remains unconvinced by the Brotherstone-Pirani critique of the leadership of the Communist Party of the strike in Scotland, his is an important contribution, which deserves – along with his earlier book about the 1970s[4] – to inspire a new discourse about class struggle in Scotland's recent history.[5] And the miners' strike, decisive though it was, was not the endpoint it sometimes appears as in the literature. Such a discourse needs to encompass, amongst other lesser known struggles, the later offshore oil workers' campaign for trade-union recognition and enforceable safety standards – drawing it out from the specialist literature and locating it within the mainstream of historical interpretation.[6]

II

That "the Thatcher years" were a key period in the contemporary history of Britain is uncontroversial. A form of social-democratic "consensus" had underpinned national politics since the establishment of the welfare state in the latter 1940s and provided the logic for Labour governments to return to office in 1964, 1966 and again (twice) in 1974 – after, from 1970 to 1974, a highly problematic Conservative interlude under Edward Heath, whose attempts to bring the trade unions under greater legislative control ended with defeat in a general election the prime minister called in an unsuccessful attempt to mobilise public support in his government's battle against striking mineworkers. The ensuing Labour governments, first under Harold Wilson and then (from 1976) James Callaghan, temporarily stabilised relations with the trade unions through a series of agreements with their major leaders. But the government's acceptance, late in 1976, of an International Monetary Fund loan conditional on public-spending cuts led to a resurgence of the labour militancy that had played a major part in defeating Heath, and, in effect, marked the end of the post-war, welfarist consensus.

The discovery of oil in the North Sea in 1969 and the encouragement to produce it rapidly engendered by the world oil-price crisis of 1973 seemed to offer the possibility of revenues that could finance social-democratic renewal; but in the event, the oil came

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[4] Phillips, J. *The Industrial Politics of Devolution*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

[5] Interest in contemporary Scottish history is currently substantially inspired by the politics of parliamentary devolution (a Scottish parliament and government with authority over most domestic policies was established in 1999) and independence from the UK (a question to be decided by a referendum in 2014). There tends to be an interpretative overemphasis on re-emergent "national identity", to which Phillips' class-focused approach provides a useful, less inward-looking counterpoint.

[6] For offshore actions in the North Sea, see particularly Woolfson, C., Foster, J. and Beck, M. *Paying for the Piper: capital and labour in Britain's offshore oil industry*. London: Mansell, 1996 and Gourlay, D. Industrial Relations in the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry 1965-1995. Unpublished PhD thesis, the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, 1998. I am grateful to Dr. Gourlay for the loan of his thesis and other papers and encouragement to quote from his work.

substantially on stream only after the 1979 election that brought Thatcher to office. Rather than being devoted to industrial and social renewal, the oil revenues helped to sustain the first Thatcher government as it felt its way towards the implementation of a full-blown neoliberal agenda as its prescription for reversing national "decline". From being a model of a capitalist society sustained by welfarist social democracy, Britain became the western European pioneer of aggressive neoliberalism.

The oil revenues, I have argued elsewhere, played a key part in this process.[7] Without this "windfall",[8] the Thatcher governments' programme of "liberalisation" of the financial sector, industrial closures, privatisation, and attacks on trade unions – involving mass unemployment, the destruction of working-class communities and declining relative (and for many absolute) living standards – would have been very much harder to proceed with even than it was. In the early 1980s, oil revenues were almost exactly commensurate with the burgeoning social security bill.[9] Yet the importance of North Sea oil – while it of course features in specialist economic histories – remains largely absent from the narrative of contemporary British history currently being established. In Jackson and Saunders' recent, and much-praised essay-collection, *Making Thatcher's Britain*,[10] "North Sea Oil" is indexed only three times, the most substantial reference, ironically, being to the observation that "as Andrew Marr has noted, [Thatcher] barely mentioned North Sea oil in her memoirs"![11] Jackson and Saunders (and their fellow-authors) are far from alone amongst historians of contemporary Britain in following Thatcher's example and passing over in virtual silence this key element in the story of Thatcherism's origins and thereby drawing attention away from the stories of the workers who, inadvertently, helped made her project viable – and then had to fight a bitter struggle against the anti-union outlook that was fundamental to it.

All this leads me to think that there is a more-than-usually sharp contradiction between how rank-and-file participants understand their involvement in the miners' strike and the offshore workers' action and the way historians are now interpreting them; and this idea also underpins the decision to look at them in tandem, and within a Scottish frame. For me, it is an important opportunity to revisit recent history, not just to ensure that the workers' story is told, but also to assess the part their perceptions can play in critiquing what is becoming the received version of recent history. The Establishment narrative of such events is often an apparently authoritatively documented, top-down account. It provides an important part of the story, but tends to rationalise what happened and close it off from the challenge of memory, which is often raw and imperfect but which

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[7] Brotherstone, T. "A Contribution to the Critique of Post-Imperial British History: North Sea oil, Scottish nationalism and Thatcherite neoliberalism". In: McNeish, J-A. and Logan, O. eds., *Flammable Societies: studies on the socio-economics of oil and gas*. London: Pluto Press, 2012, p. 70-97.

[8] "Wasted Windfall" was the title of a British Channel 4 TV series about UK North Sea oil in 1994, with an accompanying book also with a disillusioned title: Harvie, C. *Fool's Gold: the history of North Sea oil*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994.

[9] Brotherstone. 'A Contribution ...', Op.Cit.,p. 82.

[10] Jackson, B. and Saunders, R. *Making Thatcher's Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[11] Ibid., p. 40; Marr, A. *A History of Modern Britain*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008, p. 435. On p. 210 of the former there is a brief reference to Henry Kissinger's view that North Sea oil was all that stood between the UK and terminal stagnation; but it is not followed up.

is also indispensable if the object is to draw political lessons from those who fought for a different outcome. Thatcher's notorious slogan, "There is no alternative" (to neoliberalism) – even when it is criticised as underpinning harsh and socially destructive policies – has, in essence, been widely accepted by historians who see their task as to explain developments from the standpoint of when they occurred rather than to produce a theoretically-informed critique with the benefit of hindsight. But hindsight – with due respect to the often-expressed opinion of archive-bound historians – *is* a benefit; and the history of 1980s Britain and the triumph of Thatcherite dogma looks very (and importantly) different in the aftermath of the explosion of the financial crisis at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Some of the evidence in what follows, particularly with regard to the offshore workers' actions, derives from my involvement in a major exercise in oral history, the Aberdeen University's *Lives in the* [UK North Sea] *Oil Industry* archival project.[12] The theoretical discourse that has in recent years taken oral history from a documentary focus on "filling in the gaps" that conventional evidence-gathering leaves, to one of interrogating the role of memory in penetrating more acutely into the *significance* of "what actually happened" convinces me that the time is ripe for a critical revisiting of 1960s "history from below".

In its origins, in the 1970s, modern oral history was closely associated with the boom in labour history that had begun a decade or so earlier, but, as the political certainties of that period dissolved in the 1980s and later, the two disciplines increasingly separated – the latter in decline, the former (quantitatively at least) on the upsurge. In the 1960s and 1970s, the central subject of British labour history seemed obvious – the documentation of the evolution, and struggles, of an industrial working class which was the force holding the socialist future in its grasp and which had to be made conscious of its power. Oral documentation could assist in creating a class history to contribute to that consciousness. Since the deindustrialisation, and defeats, of the Thatcher years, however, it has become clear that history, and historical theory, have to engage not simply with the working class as it had come to be in the third quarter of the twentieth century but with how, in its external character at least, it has changed. If it remains – as the Marxist political philosopher István Mészáros (to whose work I return briefly in conclusion) argues – the structural antagonist of capital and the essential agent of transformational social transition "beyond capital", the task confronting socialist historians must be to grapple with this change.[13] A remarriage of labour and oral history should play its part in furnishing the

[12] For the Aberdeen University research project to which this essay is in part a small contribution, see Brotherstone, T. and Manson, H. "North Sea Oil, its Narratives and its History: an archive of oral documentation and the making of contemporary Britain", *Northern Scotland*, vol. 27 (2007), p. 15-44. This describes the *Lives in the Oil Industry* oral-history archive, available in Aberdeen and at the British Library in London, which contains many interviews of relevance to the history of labour in UK offshore oil and gas.

[13] Particularly relevant to a theoretically informed rethinking of contemporary history is Mészáros, I. "The Rise and Fall of Historical Temporality". In: Brotherstone, T. and Pilling, G. (eds.), *History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism: essays in memory of Tom Kemp (1921-1993)*. London: Porcupine Press, 1996, p. 251-92, recontextualised in his *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness* (2 vols.) New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010, 2011), vol. I, chap. 5. For the totality of Mészáros's project in

method through which the struggles of the past generation or two can be re-analysed in a way that the participants in them can tell their stories usefully in the greatly changed – and changing – circumstances of today.

This argument is not made in a vacuum. There is a demand for new thinking about history from a class standpoint – certainly from outside, or the fringes of, the Academy. In Britain the campaigners Iles and Roberts have called for the critical re-examination and revival of the "history from below" that achieved much in the 1960s and 1970s before arguably running into the academic sands. They conclude their *All Knees and Elbows of Susceptibility and Refusal*, a stimulating critique of some of historiographical issues addressed by past exponents of this approach with the observation that:

> To submerge oneself in historical material is to raise the prospect of one's own confrontation with the forces of the present, and work through its contradictions beyond the limited scope of a book. History from below cannot rest peacefully on its achievements, but must be disinterred, exposed to new perspectives and pored over again and again, finding new readers and new forms of activation according to the demands of the present and future. Re-reading the past opens previous struggles to contingency, and this in turn animates the forms of contingency available to the present.[14]

And the journalist Paul Mason's *Live Working or Die Fighting*, I have suggested elsewhere,[15] also foreshadows a resurgent, globally engaged, labour history, concerned to rethink the continuities that make the working class an international class and in analysing what is new about the class now in the much-changed global economy. Mason argues that, in Europe's Welfare-State period, consciousness of the labour history that made welfarist "socialism" possible has been all but eliminated. Since that welfare-based social settlement now faces brutal destruction, this surely implies that the generation of a new mass, historically-literate, socialist consciousness, not simply to defend past gains, but to assist in actualising humanity's immanent historical need for radical social transformation, is urgently required.

Mason's comments on the school of labour history inspired by "the British Marxist Historians", particularly E. P. Thompson, and their social-democrat colleagues like Asa Briggs, are provocatively relevant to a discussion between academic labour historians and labour-movement activists. The "'official' labour history" in place at the end of World War II, he writes, was essentially "devoted to rationalising the deal made in 1945 between employers and workers on both sides of the Iron Curtain".

> Only at the edges did academics begin chipping away at the monolith. Edward Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* initiated a school of labour

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the refoundation of Marxism – including historical materialism – see his series of major works that begins with *The Power of Ideology*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989 and *Beyond Capital: towards a theory of transition*. London: Merlin Press, 1995.

[14] Iles, A. and Roberts, T. *All Knees and Elbows of Susceptibility and Refusal: reading history from below*. Glasgow: The Strickland Distribution with Transmission Gallery and Mute, 2012.

[15] Brotherstone, T. "Labour History Resurgent?". *Variant* (Glasgow), no. 33, Winter, 2008, pp. 6-7.

> history based on the micro-story, not the macro-narrative. Much of the insight we now have into the Bund, French syndicalism and Chinese workers in the 1920s [all subjects visited by Mason in his own book from the standpoint of their relevance today] comes from work by scholars following Thompson's approach. But in this 'new' labour history what gets lost is often story and significance. In reaction to the narratives superimposed on facts by Moscow, modern academics tend to avoid 'big truths' within the life stories of those they have rescued from oblivion.[16]

Academic historians in the UK interested in labour movements – though often politically committed – usually write as though they see their role *as historians* simply to describe, explain and analyse what is done to workers and what they do, while the workers' part is to do and be done to. But the new crisis of the twenty-first century calls for a labour history, still based on the conviction that class struggle remains central to social progress, but recognising that the working class has changed profoundly as a consequence of capitalist globalisation. Much that once seemed comprehensible (and of practical political value) when studied within a national framework, now requires to be understood as part of an international process, as part of the making of an international class. It is a transition neatly symbolised within British labour history by the way in which, in the 1980s, the methods of class struggle traditionally located within the quintessentially nineteenth-century energy industry – coal – were passed on to those producing the global fuel of the twentieth – oil.

III

The miners' strike is conventionally described as a titanic struggle between the neoliberal Thatcher and her socialist antagonist, NUM President Arthur Scargill. This approach can make Scargill's self-centred obduracy the main question, drawing attention away from the bigger story of the part played by the defeat of the miners' union in the onward march of neoliberalism and in the conversion of the leadership of the Labour Party to the neoliberal cause (a process culminating, from 1997 to 2010, in Tony Blair's and Gordon Brown's "New Labour" governments). Serious socialist historians, on the other hand, can only despair at the failure of the undoubtedly courageous (and at the time hero-worshipped) miners' leader subsequently to reflect critically on one of the most momentous struggles in British labour history. His reiterated complaints of unfair and illegal attacks by the state and betrayal by other labour leaders, however justified, were to become increasingly barren. But other less prominent figures have been forced to rethink the lessons of the defeat not simply as an abstract question, but within the context of the very concrete reality of their changed lives.

Study of the reality of the strike from a rank-and-file point of view – in this case one taking the Scottish coalfield as its empirical base – can help shift the focus of

[16] Mason, *Live Working ...,* Op.Cit. p. 297.

historical discourse.[17] And going on to look at the later industrial action by UK offshore workers allows us to see a very different labour force – also in energy but in the globalised, twentieth-century, oil industry – wrestling in new ways with essentially similar problems born of the new, but still only dimly perceived, period capitalism had entered. In the offshore case there were limited gains; but little progress towards the main aim, which was to break the culture of anti-unionism in an industry that it was thought could have funded national socio-economic revival.

Phillips' work, now fleshed out and developed in *Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland ...,* argues for a focus "on the manner in which [the strike] originated in pit-level tensions and [on] the different pattern of colliery and community factors that produced variable degrees of strike commitment across the Scottish coalfield".[18] The study of the (relatively small) Scottish coalfield, giving full weight to a rank-and-file perspective, he shows, can afford a counterpoint to the high-politics, UK, view of the strike. This tends to view the strike primarily as a heroic battle lost by the NUM because the government's ruthless use of state power and propaganda, though it often alienated middle opinion, ultimately prevailed over Scargill's flawed tactics, which allowed the action to be portrayed as undemocratic and too political.[19]

As Phillips writes, such an approach can obscure the "course and character of the actual events".[20] Viewed from Scotland, it can be argued that the miners' strike did not begin in Yorkshire in March 1984 – as conventional accounts have it – but as early as Christmas 1982 when there was a seven-day sit-in at Kinneil colliery, a few miles west of Edinburgh on the Forth estuary. In July 1983, came a lock-out, unprecedented since World War II, at Polmaise, a mid-Scotland, Stirlingshire pit (then, on the edge of the small community of Fallin, the only remaining village pit) against the Coal Board's breach of an agreement concerning the transfer of miners from another pit resisting closure – with ongoing action against the victimisation of union officials. In September, a seven-week strike against management harassment at Monktonhall, a modernised colliery on the outskirts of Edinburgh, began. In December, the announced closure of Polmaise met with resistance, endorsed by the NUM Scottish Executive on January 23, 1984. The flooding of Bogside (West Fife), despite NUM offers to provide safety cover during a national overtime ban, heightened tension between the Scottish miners' leadership and the threatened members, who feared that their fight against closure would be downplayed as they believed had happened at Kinneil. At a pit delegates' conference in Edinburgh on February 13, the Polmaise and Bogside branches (the latter now represented by a Communist Party member opposing his own party's bigwigs in the Scottish NUM leadership) moved for a Scotland-wide strike. The conference broke up in

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[17] For my earlier thoughts on this and the relevance of Scottish-based offshore workers to it, see my "Neither Parochial nor Soothing: Aberdeen and the future of labour history". In: Brotherstone, T. and Withrington, D.J. eds., *The City and Its Worlds: aspects of Aberdeen's history since 1792*. Glasgow: Crithne, 1996.

[18] Phillips, 'Collieries and Communities ...', Op.Cit. p. 31.

[19] e.g. Beckett and Hencke, *Marching* ...Op.Cit.

[20] Phillips, 'Collieries and Communities ...', Op.Cit. p. 20.

disorder when the best-known and most respected of all the CP leaders, Scottish NUM President Mick McGahey, tried to limit the demand to a one-day protest.[21]

There are at least two reasons for looking on at least some of these events as part of the national industrial action rather than simply background to it. First, the Communist-Party-led Scottish NUM leadership was under constant pressure from miners' branches to call Scotland-wide action and campaign for a UK strike against closures, but, no doubt fearing they might be unable to mobilise sufficient support, thought it expedient to try to hold such action back until the lead came from a major coalfield south of the border, probably Yorkshire.[22] And, second, that by early 1984, clashes between industrial militants and aggressive local managers meant that, when the national strike proper began with the NUM Executive's endorsement of area actions in March, more than half of the 14,000 miners in Scotland were already on strike, or in disputes additional to their participation in a UK-wide overtime ban. This calls into question the approach of historians who suggest that Scargill himself called the strike, wilfully refusing a national ballot. There is ample anecdotal evidence – and Phillips deals with this in some scholarly detail – that a ballot would have been seen as a betrayal of those already acting over issues that had been building up over two years, and not only in Scotland: there was also widespread anxiety in threatened coalfields that those in areas that believed their pits secure (wrongly as it was to turn out in the medium term) might be allowed to "ballot" others out of a job without a struggle.[23]

Starting from a rank-and-file standpoint leads to a narrative in which the national strike and its conduct were products of pent-up pressure to which Scargill and his co-thinkers were struggling to respond, rather than of ill-considered and politically inspired leadership militancy. Of course Scargill's response was conditioned by his belief that militant leadership (especially his own) could inspire British workers to bring down a Conservative government as they had in 1974, when a miners' strike – during which Scargill first came to national attention – helped provoke the general election Heath failed to win. But the leadership of the British trade-union movement (including those influenced by the now-divided Communist Party: Scargill was close to the pro-Moscow wing, while McGahey was a leader of the "Euros") remained immersed in welfare-statist social democracy and was ill-equipped theoretically to understand the profoundly destructive change in capitalist political economy taking place.

In 1974 the global neoliberal wave had yet to gather force, making the election of a Labour government – albeit one lacking anything like the programme of its 1945 or even 1964 predecessors – a credible social-democratic alternative, which, with the support of trade-union leaders, could paper over cracks in social control. By the mid-

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[21] For further documentation for this section, see Brotherstone and Pirani, 'Were there alternative? ...' Op.Cit.

[22] Phillips, who interviewed a number of former Communist Party members for his book, does not follow the critique implied here and made in Brotherstone and Pirani, "Were there alternatives ...?" Op.Cit. There is scope for more work on this issue if understanding of the political insights to be gained from the defeat of the miners is to be further enhanced.

[23] Phillips, *Collieries, communities* ..., Op.Cit. pp. 3-6, 9, 62, 73-4, 83-4, 103, 144-5, 154, 172-3.

1980s, with social democracy deeply divided and its dominant wing hesitatingly resetting its compass in the neoliberal direction, that had changed. The miners' action, which Scargill wanted but did not originate, put on the agenda the need for new theoretical thought, which neither he nor other social democratic and "Communist" labour leaders were equipped to initiate. In their defeat, despite the heroic determination of their struggle, the miners placed on those revisiting the story of the strike, the obligation, not to indulge in what-might-have-beens, but to dig much deeper into what these events meant for understanding the period of history in which they took place.

IV

The action of UK offshore workers in 1989-90 following the Piper Alpha disaster of 1988 in the North Sea, in which 167 men died – has, as I have argued, yet to enter the general historical narrative of the Thatcher years.[24] At the centre of the story is the establishment of a new organisation, the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee (OILC).[25] Its origins lay in a perceived imperative to create a body that would mount more effective opposition to anti-union employers than the official trade unions, and its focus was on the need for action on the safety regime.

The most decisive impact of North Sea oil on the British economy had come in the early 1980s when its revenues, it is widely accepted (though not by most Thatcherite politicians) made a vital contribution to funding the Thatcher governments' early economic reforms – on the basis of which their neoliberal programme was launched.[26] Previously, the 1970-74 Conservative government (particularly in the wake of the 1973 oil-price crisis) had encouraged rapid exploitation of the resource, which, in the light of the state of British industry, meant the granting of licences to multi-national corporations with "American" attitudes to industrial relations. Only minor social-democratic adjustments to this trajectory were made by the Labour governments of the later 1970s, even when (from 1975) the leftwing Tony Benn was Energy Secretary and aspiring to a greater degree of state control.[27] Anti-union attitudes prevailed, dovetailing with (and encouraged by) the prejudices of the Thatcher government elected after the 1978-79 trade-union actions referred to as "the winter of discontent".[28] Safety – to which legally-

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[24] This section of the essay draws on Woolfson, Foster and Beck, *Paying for the Piper*, Op.Cit. and Gourlay, "Industrial Relations ...", Op.Cit. There is now also a two-volume history – by an economist – of the UK North Sea oil and gas industry: see Kemp, A. *The Official History of UK North Sea Oil and Gas*. London: Routledge, 2011.

[25] Gourlay shows that the name originated from the initial relationship between the official unions and the rank-and-file movement, and reflected the fact that the union officials thought they could make use of such an arms-length 'liaison committee'. But in so far as OILC was the creation of the official unions it was soon to turn, for them, into something of a Frankenstein's monster.

[26] See Brotherstone and Manson, 'North Sea oil ...', Op.Cit. esp. section 3.

[27] Information from participants in the author's files.

[28] For the "Winter of Discontent" refers to the spate of public service strikes in 1978-9, vilified in the popular press, which played a major part in the rhetoric of 1979 Conservative election campaign.

secure trade-union representation could have contributed substantially – was a secondary consideration.

At the first landing ceremony for UK oil in mid-1975, Caroline Benn, the Energy Secretary's wife, clashed with the owner of the Texas-based company responsible, Frederic Hamilton, because he would not even discuss her anxiety about the lives lost in the achievement: celebrating the economic benefits oil offered; Hamilton was at a loss to understand what, to him, seemed a relatively trivial concern. And when Armand Hammer, owner of Occidental Oil, sensed the tremors on his Piper Alpha platform in the mid-1980s, he cheerfully interpreted them, not as danger signals, but as the rumbling of "those dollars flowing underneath": a few short years later the rig exploded in much the worst of many North Sea disasters.[29]

The various unions trying to organise offshore workers in difficult circumstances made worse by inter-union rivalries in a period of declining membership were, by the mid-1980s, threatening industrial action. The aim was to secure "post-construction" agreements for ongoing collective bargaining over the whole industry – with safety representatives free from the fear of being "NRB-ed" ("not required back", or sacked). But the employers, encouraged by the Thatcher governments' ongoing anti-union legislation, and strengthened by the decline in employment opportunities during a slump in 1986-87, remained intransigent. Trade-union successes in securing agreements of any sort were sporadic at best.

The Piper Alpha tragedy changed the terms of the discussion, not least between the workers and their official union leaders. Safety in the North Sea was for a while headline news. The unions had to increase the fight for meaningful agreements.[30] The employers' organisations continued to treat the union leaders as impotent, but underestimated the angry and aggressive fear gripping much of the workforce. This left open the door for the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee (OILC). Led initially by a militant with a facility for handling the media, Ronnie McDonald, it was at first privately encouraged by union officials trying to find a way round Thatcher's anti-union laws.[31] After Piper Alpha, a mass meeting on one installation where there were elected shop stewards pressed the unions to reject further short-term "hook-up" agreements that did not involve full recognition, and OILC – formed in February 1989 – was publicly launched on the first anniversary of the disaster, July 5 1989.

It supported several offshore "sit-ins" and held many onshore meetings leading to a "summer of discontent", with action on many platforms and some rigs. The disparity in

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[29] See Brotherstone and Manson, 'North Sea Oil ...', Op.Cit. esp. pp. 34-6 and Brotherstone, "A Contribution to the Critique ..." Op.Cit.

[30] The collection of funds for the Piper Alpha bereaved highlighted further the demand for equality: shop stewards queried giving money to the Aberdeen Lord Provost's [mayor's] Disaster Fund, because it was dispersed regardless of whether or not families were entitled to death-in-service benefits.

[31] Earlier in the 1980s McDonald and others had been helped to form local groups, in Aberdeen and Glasgow, to facilitate union recruitment. A short-lived publication, *"Bear" Facts* was distributed to construction workers. See too the interview with McDonald in the *LOI* archive.

wages and conditions for the indirectly employed remained a major grievance. Some wage-and-conditions gains came, but in the form of "bribes" (as McDonald said) to head off trade unionism rather than steps to establishing it. One participant remembers workers "being aware that the oil companies were desperately trying to do what they could to avoid the strike" with offers of increased pay, improved pensions and even private healthcare.[32] But promises to facilitate platform ballots on union representation proved hollow. Marathon Oil UK resorted to legal action against the sit-ins, arguing that OILC (itself constituted to avoid anti-union legislation) was effectively acting as a proxy for the engineering union.

OILC's aim was to transcend inter-union rivalry. It asserted its role as an organising body and, when industrial action petered out in late 1989, began to prepare for the following year. Its organisation was extended geographically. It established an HQ in Aberdeen, financed by voluntary contributions which also supported *Blowout*, a vigorous journal that echoed earlier militant workers' newspapers rather than the staid trade-union magazines by then the norm.[33] A *One Union Discussion Document* stressed the need for unified action across the industry.

The main OILC-led action was in 1990. It is a reflection on the effect of the anti-union culture and difficulties of organising in the industry without a measure of employer and government support that this was the one year since the oil had come fully on stream that the oil companies in the UK sector of the North Sea faced concerted industrial unrest.[34] Rank-and-file pressure meant that the unions held back from concluding another unsatisfactory agreement, producing a hostile reaction from the employers, who cut off all consultation and almost certainly took steps to infiltrate OILC, now seen as the real voice of offshore workers.[35] Shell and BP, aware that Lord Cullen's enquiry into Piper Alpha, soon to be published,[36] would shine a light on the whole industry, including its industrial-relations culture, tried to head off action with wage increases and improved conditions for *all* offshore workers – forcing others to follow suit. The unions formed a National Offshore Committee (NOC) to work with OILC – a rare moment when there appeared to be the possibility of united action. A Continental Shelf agreement, not more money, was the issue. "Working to contract", building towards strikes hitting the autumn maintenance programmes, was called for by OILC, with some thirty installations responding by June.

The success was limited. Some workers, lacking a tradition of solidarity, still feared reprisals or resented the loss of the earnings that had attracted them to the industry and to some extent blunted their opposition to unreasonable working conditions. Memories of the previous major action in the early days of the UK North Sea in 1978-9,

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[32] Information from participants in the author's files.

[33] See in particular the interview with Neil Rothnie, founding editor of *Blowout* in the *LOI* archive.

[34] This observation created an amazed reaction from some colleagues at the 2011 Lisbon conference. There have of course been other industrial actions, notably in the early years of the industry, but nothing comparable to the systematic campaign of 1989-90.

[35] See Gourlay's thesis for this probability.

[36] Lord [Douglas] Cullen, *The Public Inquiry into the Piper Alpha Disaster* (1990).

which had resulted in considerable victimisations, weighed heavily in the calculations of some older workers: there was, participants remember, a perceptible generational split in levels of enthusiasm for action.[37] Employers delayed maintenance programmes – their moments of maximum vulnerability. Inter-union rivalry persisted. Militants wanted strikes rather than an overtime ban, especially when further fatal accidents, and the sacking of trade unionists for highlighting platform safety, drew attention again to the regime. The NOC's registration campaign with a view to official industrial action was met again with implacable employer opposition. OILC came under rank-and-file pressure to act; and the first twenty-four hour action was called, some argued prematurely, for August 2. Taken to court, OILC argued that the employers' case fell as it was based on a charge of trespass, a concept foreign to Scots law; and that the occupiers were in any case involved in an industrial dispute not a violation of property rights. The judgement was a compromise leading workers to claim a moral victory but also to the calling off of the sit-ins.

The intention here is not to retell the full story of the action, only to draw attention to the value of studying it, and thereby giving it a proper place in contemporary history. In the short term, the offshore workers' movement petered out; the Cullen Report on the Piper Alpha disaster led to some changes in the safety regime, soon perceived by many (especially in the light of the 1990s "Cost Reduction in the North Sea" programme) as more cosmetic than real;[38] and the trade union leaders cut OILC adrift, fearful that the tactic of using industrial action to pressurise the employers would backfire and that all negotiation might be terminated. Their leaders – notably the Communist Party former hero of the famous Upper Clyde Shipbuilders "work-in" of the early 1970s, Jimmy Airlie – now denounced OILC as a doomed challenge to "the official movement".[39]

OILC survived, first as an independent, "unofficial" but legally registered organisation, and now as a section of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers Union (RMT). However one assesses that outcome (and it remained a subject of controversy amongst workers themselves) OILC created an important historical legacy through the surviving records of its early struggles and its debates about their lessons – notably in two publications, *Striking Out: New Directions for Offshore Workers and their Unions* (1991) and *The Crisis in Offshore Trade Unionism* (1992), in which McDonald and his colleagues assessed the lessons of the industrial action and set out to build a new union, and, even more interestingly, in the uninhibitedly democratic correspondence columns of

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[37] Information from participants in the author's files.

[38] See for example, Woolfson, C. "The Continuing Price of North Sea Oil: business organisation and risk transfer mechanisms in the North Sea petroleum industry". In: Brannigan, A. and Pavlich, G. (eds.), *Governance and Regulation in Social Life: essays in honour of W. G. Carson*. Abingdon: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007.

[39] A biography of Jimmy Airlie (1936-97), co-leader of the 1971-2 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in with the better known Jimmy Reid (1932-2010), would provide a fascinating case study of the role of Communist Party politics in the Scottish trade union movement in the second half of the twentieth century.

the early issues of *Blowout*, put together by a very independently minded, politically aware editor.

V

In conclusion, the twin narratives of strikes and conflict in this essay rest on three essential arguments. First, the Thatcher years are overdue for reinterpretation from the point of view of those who were on the receiving end of the social consequences of neoliberalism. The purpose is not simply to do retrospective justice to the defeated oppositions to Thatcher and Thatcherism, but to contribute to a more profound theoretical understanding of the period transcending the idea that – however brutal the policy may have been – "there [was] no alternative". Nor is this relevant for a revived, politically conscious, historical agenda in Britain alone, since – as Naomi Klein has argued – it was the Thatcher project in the UK that made neoliberalism a practical proposition for Western democracies.[40] It was crucial to the new period of the globalisation of capital. Second is the need to respond to demands – most particularly from outside the Academy (including the surviving participants in the struggles of the 1980s) or writing on its fringes (for example Iles and Roberts, and Mason) – for a revival of "history from below" and for a twenty-first-century labour history not frozen in the assumptions of the 1960s. And finally, historical work of the sort I am arguing for has to re-engage both with a developing consciousness within the forces of potential transformational change today and with theoretical ideas that can most practically inform such consciousness.

The miners' strike was not simply a catastrophic defeat marking the end of an era. The offshore workers were only one of a number of sections of the working class for whom militant struggle against the effects of Thatcherism continued. The immanent lessons of these events remain to be brought fully into daylight and into the consciousness of those grappling with the seemingly intransigent political problems of radical resistance to neoliberalism in the twenty-first century. If the miners' strike foreshadowed the end of an era of traditional industrial struggle, it lives on in communal memory, most notably in NE England, where the annual Durham Miners' Gala – in an area where there are now no miners – grows in popularity as a focus for working-class assertion. The neoliberal economy has been unable to replace the communal culture of a region of community pits; and it was the strike itself – sustained for a year by a social solidarity based on mutual support rather than commodity-exchange and money – that gave a small pointer to a real alternative future. Revisiting the strike as it was actually experienced by the rank-and-file opens up the possibility of contributing to new thinking about what is needed politically, not simply to resist capitalist destruction but to begin to contribute to a practical vision of a radically transformed future.

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[40] Klein, N. *The Shock Doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism* . London: Allen Lane, 2007. For a critical argument about the relevance of Klein's chapter on the UK, see Brotherstone, "A Contribution to the Critique ...", Op.Cit. p. 70-1, 83.

Some of those I knew during the offshore workers' action thought that they had the opportunity to succeed where the miners, a few years earlier, had failed: coal, they thought, was a declining industry capitalist society could survive without, certainly in Britain, whereas oil was indispensable, giving oil-workers greater power. But they found that – while North Sea oil had indeed been essential in the early 1980s to the Thatcher project – the anti-union culture Thatcherism had assisted the offshore employers in the UK to embed could not be overcome by the old methods. Theirs was a global industry, and while they were able to point to better-served countries, especially nearby Norway, and while they did secure some wage concessions, they could not achieve the more radical change in control over the industry and its safety culture that – especially after Piper Alpha – they demanded. As their action is rescued from the condescension (or deliberate Thatcherite ignorance) of posterity, the question needs to be asked: does the failure, at least in its strategic aim, of their struggle demonstrate that what was required was not more trade-union actions of the old type (though of course they will continue), but rather a rethinking of the nature of working-class action and organisation?

Both the miners' strike and the offshore workers' action involved more than the traditional, limited trade-union demands for improvements in wages and conditions.[41] They were, in their different ways, about the conditions of human life itself, the life of communities in the former case and of individuals at work in the latter. They faced a new phase in the history of capital and its socio-political hegemony, one at the time only dimly perceived, far less understood. They fought – courageously – as their traditions directed them to fight. But in failing they created the challenge, in a way no abstract theorising could do in itself, to rethink the point in history that had been arrived at, and how social opposition can be reconstructed in this new period in a way in which it can pass from, at best, temporarily successful defensive actions into an offensive that can point the way to radical social transformation.

The challenge facing trade unions today is now the subject of a growing literature, inspired by work such as Moody's *Workers in a Lean World* – a book productively read together with Mason's labour-history essays and Mészáros's historically-conscious political philosophy.[42] For Mészáros, the late 1960s and early 1970s mark the point at which the capitalist system entered a historic, structural crisis, qualitatively different from the cyclical upturns and downturns capitalism had experienced before. This concept cannot be discussed in detail here, but it is, at the very least, particularly in the light of the post-2007/08 global crisis, a hypothesis historians who align themselves with Brecht in seeking to show that "what happens all the time is not natural" should regard as a

[41] Carson pointed out that nineteenth-century factory legislation tended to take health and safety issues "out of the fraught ... arena of industrial conflict" into one of supposedly class-neutral state regulation; Woolfson et al. suggest that Piper Alpha was the moment at which, 'in the mass consciousness of the workforce, this artificial and ideologically-sustained separation evaporated ... The unofficial movement which was formed, partly in response to the tragedy, returned to elemental industrial demands which questioned the totality of the established workplace regime rather than seeking incremental gains.' Woolfson, Foster and Beck, *Paying for the Piper* ..., Op.Cit., Conclusion; Carson, W.G. *The Other Price of North Sea Oil: safety and control in the North Sea*. London: Robertson, 1981.

[42] Moody, Kim. *Workers in a Lean World: unions in the international economy*. London: Verso, 1997.

challenge. And, facing up to the reality that this new period (however theorised) has given the lie to simplistic ideas about inexorable working-class progress from formation through trade-union consciousness to socialism, Moody both reasserts the importance of struggles such as those discussed in this essay and points towards trade unionism's future.

> The ups and downs of trade-union organization and conflict [he writes], along with other kinds of social struggle, are an important part of the history and development of any working class. In times and places where there is no mass socialist movement, these rudimentary forms of struggle are those that shape the thought of the most organized and active elements of the working class.[43]

But what is needed now are "social" or "community" unions, organised on the basis of human need defined beyond as well as within the workplace. And such ideas are even acquiring traction in practical trade-union discussion.[44]

Revisiting the problems of trade unionists in struggle during the years of neoliberal advance and trade-union decline is important for the development of this discourse. Trade unions – if they are not to be simply overtaken by different forms of working-class, and cross-class organisations – have, through struggle, to become vehicles for the development of mass socialist consciousness, without which the radical social transformation essential for humanity's future cannot take place. I hope that a new labour history, focused on strikes and social conflicts, can make its contribution in a way that the labour history which inspired many scholars in the 1960s ultimately failed to do. I have tried to show that there are also important experiences in the recent British working class, which, studied critically from the point of view of those involved on the front line, not only fill gaps in the record, but also provide inspiration for rethinking what labour history is and what its aspiration should be.

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[43] Ibid., p. 303.

[44] For the literature, see for example Tattersall, A. *Power in Coalition*. Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2010 and McBride, J. and Greenwood, I. (eds.), *Community Unions*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Even from the conservative circles of the British TUC there has emerged Wright, Chris. *Swords of Justice and Civic Pillars: the case for greater engagement between British trade unions and community organisations*. London: Trades Union Congress, 2010. The major UNITE union has recently begun to recruit beyond the workplace.