

What was Margaret Thatcher's attitude towards the Miners' Strike of 1984-5 and how did she deal with the uprising?

The miners' strike of 1984-85 was a huge defining moment in British history of the 1980s. To answer the question and come to a fair conclusion, Margaret Thatcher's attitude and actions towards the miners, as well as how it impacted the British people, and the legacy of her policies must be assessed. To support any claims made, evidence from the Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive must be presented, which contains primary sources and will be referenced throughout.

Thatcher's position was clear from the beginning. She had given the miners a warning after threatening to go on strike and leaving the British people without coal and energy during the winter. After her warnings, the miners proceeded to threaten a strike. She had decided enough was enough and made the decision that she would not allow them to take the entire nation hostage over what she considered was a form of domestic extortion.¹ If the miners would not return to work Thatcher threatened that she would stop any and all financial support and let the free market determine the price of energy, even if that meant that all coal miners in the country would lose their jobs.² Margaret Thatcher acknowledged that the coal strike was not just about uneconomic pits, but it was very political.³ Thatcher brought the entire industry to its knees by cutting off financial support and closing mines, as well as putting a plan in place to keep the British people protected. She was determined that they would never be used again as hostages by any small group that controlled the nation's energy supply.⁴ One thing that can be said about Margaret Thatcher is that she stayed consistent with her position on the miners' strike of 1984-85 and never wavered. She refused to give in and followed through with everything that she had threatened.

The miners' strike was a result of the fact that Britain had failed to modernize like other countries, and coalmining was an unprofitable industry, taking too much money from the treasury and was only surviving due to the taxes levied on the British people.⁵ To change this and modernize the industry Thatcher appointed Ian MacGregor to the National Coal Board (NCB) in 1983.⁶ The reasoning behind this was because she had previously appointed him to take over the steel industry, which resulted in a complete transformation. They changed the industry from one of the least efficient sectors into one of the most efficient by reducing the payroll and putting in productivity improvements through modernization.⁷ This shows Margaret Thatcher and Ian MacGregor knew exactly how to deal with this kind of issue to modernize Britain and save industries, giving them experience on the topic. However, this did come with many unfortunate negative effects on miners, as MacGregor

¹ Kennon J, (2013). Margaret Thatcher and the British Coal Miners' Strike.

² Kennon J, (2013).

³ Mellor J, (2014). Mining the Meaning: The Legacy of the 1984-85 UK Miners' Strike. The London Economic.

⁴ Kennon J, (2013).

⁵ Kennon J, (2013).

⁶ Kennon J, (2013).

⁷ Kennon J, (2013).

announced in March of 1984 that twenty mines would close, meaning 20,000 workers would lose their jobs.⁸ This would add to the unemployment rate that was already rapidly increasing.

Eventually, the steel industry died and prior to the miners' strike, the Tory party had passed a succession of laws which made it illegal to call a strike without a ballot or organize a mass picketing.⁹

During mass picketing police brutality became an issue. The biggest picket of the strike was three months after it began, with at least, five thousand miners outside of Orgreave, near Sheffield.¹⁰ Police met miners with rioting gear, and 41 police and 28 strikers were injured in total with 81 people arrested.¹¹ Trouble broke out when miners spotted the first convoy of police men running towards them and others on horseback.¹² A statement from Arthur Scargill after the clash describes what the miners faced, "We've had riot shields, we've had riot gear, we've had police on horseback charging into our people, we've had people hit with truncheons and people kicked to the ground."¹³ He continues to describe how the miners felt about the collision with police, "The intimidation and the brutality that has been displayed are something reminiscent of a Latin American state."¹⁴

Arthur Scargill defied this law, which led to the NUM being heavily fined during the strikes of 1984 and 1985. In 1983, the same treatment was given to deal with the print union.¹⁵ The National Graphical Association (NGA) tried to use mass pickets to force Eddie Shah's Stockport Messenger Group of local newspapers to accept union-approved staffing at a new printing plant in Warrington.¹⁶ The combination of rising unemployment, changes in the law and tough actions on Thatcher's side, completely crippled the union movement of the eighties.¹⁷ The miners' strike is most definitely not inconsequential on both sides. For the miners, the strike was about trying to take power over their occupation and defend their livelihoods. For Thatcher it was about economic development and crushing the trade unions. The strike is still significant today as it socially changed Britain and ultimately affected the unemployment rate, which in turn affected the country culturally and politically.

Margaret Thatcher was determined to bring Britain into the modern age and did not appear to care whether that damaged the common person as she never created or provided any extra welfare as a safety net for the British people. The Trade Union Act of 1984 introduced the law that all trade unions had to hold a secret ballot before calling a strike.¹⁸ Unions were

⁸ Kennon J, (2013).

⁹ McSmith A, (2013). Margaret Thatcher's Legacy: Spilt Milk, New Labour, and the Big Bang – She Changed Everything.

¹⁰ BBC News, On This Day 1950-2005. 1984: Miners and Police Clash at Orgreave.

¹¹ BBC News, On This Day 1950-2005.

¹² BBC News, On This Day 1950-2005.

¹³ BBC News, On This Day 1950-2005.

¹⁴ BBC News, On This Day 1950-2005.

¹⁵ McSmith A, (2013).

¹⁶ McSmith A, (2013).

¹⁷ McSmith A, (2013).

¹⁸ MTFA, (April 1984 - January 1985). Prime Ministerial Private Office files. Industrial Policy Part ii

required to now elect a general secretary every five years and validate funds every ten years.¹⁹ All economic assets were privatised.²⁰ In 1987 Thatcher introduced the Coal Industry Act which changed the NCB into the British Coal Corporation and then later in 1994 it was changed again to the Coal Authority, before it completely dissolved in 1997.²¹ Those devastated the most by Thatcher's policies of trade unions and the coal industry were areas like the South of Wales and in the North of England like Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Leeds and Liverpool. Today, coal mining would not survive with our environmental laws as they simply would not allow the pollution being pumped into the air.

Key changes that were brought about by Margaret Thatcher's position on the Miners' Strike included the privatisation of British industry and the realisation of income inequality.²² The privatisation of industry by Thatcher was soon known as Thatcherism. Along with the coal strike situations, Thatcher decided to begin to have government assets become privately owned, which would raise money for taxpayers to pay and would also invite competition.²³ This can be said to be a positive decision by Thatcher as the manufacturing output increased between 1958 and 2007, the greatest being not long after her decision to privatise assets, which in turn saved the British economy from complete failure and collapse.²⁴ When it came to income inequality, Thatcher did not attempt to fix this and the rising of tax made her very unpopular. In her policies and ideas, if the overall level of living standards rose, and everyone was slightly better off, she would not correct it.²⁵

Thatcher got what she wanted with respects to coal mining. Her goal was to make cuts and modernise the mining industry to catch up with the rest of Europe and America who had already modernised their industries. Although her decision to appoint Ian MacGregor to the National Coal Board to change the mining industry, as he had done previously with the British steel industry, caused the outbreak of a great mining strike, Margaret Thatcher achieved her end goal. This was to control the coal mines and energy, save money, decrease the power of trade unions, and modernise industry for the sake of the British economy and the British people.²⁶ The only thing that obstructed Thatcher's principal goals to modernise the mining industries was the miners themselves, and the strike of 1984-85. Since Thatcher wanted to make cuts, miners would have to have a decrease in pay, as well as others losing their jobs altogether, because MacGregor wanted to close twenty mines. This obviously outraged miners and their families, causing strikes across Britain.²⁷ The strikes prolonged the inevitable: the change of industry that came with the change of the times.

In terms of legacy, for Margaret Thatcher personally, she claimed in her resignation speech that one of her greatest achievements in office had been defeating the strikers.²⁸ Politically,

¹⁹ Moher J, (2008). Trade Unions and the Law – History and a Way Forward?

²⁰ Coal Industry Act 1994, Archived. 2016, Wayback Machine.

²¹ MTFA (1987). Economy: 1987 Budget (Lawson 4). Hansard HC (112/15-828).

²² Kennon J, (2013).

²³ Kennon J, (2013).

²⁴ United Kingdom Office for National Statistics. Manufacturing Output Between 1958-2007.

²⁵ Kennon J, (2013).

²⁶ Kennon J, (2013).

²⁷ Kennon J, (2013).

²⁸ Mellor J, (2014). Mining the Meaning: The Legacy of the 1984-85 UK Miners' Strike. The London Economic.

her legacy affected members of the middle and upper classes with a good education and a great job in a positive way, as they benefited massively from Thatcher's policies.²⁹ Life tended to be much simpler for those who already had money and therefore had greater and wider choices. The upper and middle classes had freedom and more opportunities than other classes under Thatcher and her Conservatives. Thatcher's economic policies were devastating in the way that it was hard to overstate for lower classes with little education and manual working occupations as they relied on government financial backing.³⁰ Those who lost their jobs and homes were trapped in an endless stream of welfare checks, with no job opportunities, left to be forgotten about, and this was the case for many miners after the strikes.³¹

The legacy of Margaret Thatcher's policies and the way she dealt with the mining strikes across Britain could be viewed as both good and bad. Thatcher restructured the national industrial core for the best intentions for the country but the strikes of 1984-85 were the biggest in the history of Britain since the 1926 General Strike.³² The miners also brought about the discussion of class politics and set an example for strikers in 2003, when the language and politics of the coal miners was revived to describe the fire-fighters, postal and baggage handlers' dispute.³³ Now thirty-six years after the strike, it remains a huge cultural, social, and political interest due to its legacy of cultural unemployment, social damage, and community initiatives.³⁴ The miners' strike of 1984-85 was influential in establishing a range of debates that came to define the following decades and remains the most troublesome dispute in recent British history.³⁵

In conclusion, Margaret Thatcher's attitude towards the miners' strike of 1984-85 and how she dealt with the uprising was with an iron fist, not allowing her power and opinion to waver. It can be said that she had no sympathy for the miners, but Thatcher did what she had to do to modernise the industry. Therefore, it would potentially save the British economy, and Margaret Thatcher would have power over trade unions and bring British industry into the modern age. However, despite promises of reduction rather than extinction, the miners' strike of 1984-85 would be the beginning of the end for the British coal mining industry and add to the ever-growing unemployment rate of the eighties. Thatcher appeared to lack compassion and understanding for the common person as they did not fit into her idea of the perfect Britain, Thatcherism, and the opinions of her Conservative party. To summarise, Thatcher's attitude and actions were for the best for British economy and modernisation, however, the way she went about it lacked understanding and caused a chain reaction of strikes across the country which led to the loss of jobs, uprisings with an alarming amount of police brutality towards the miners, especially when they were picketing, and the blatant discrimination of the common person.

²⁹ Kennon J, (2013).

³⁰ Kennon J, (2013).

³¹ Kennon J, (2013).

³² Mellor J, (2014). Mining the Meaning: The Legacy of the 1984-85 UK Miners' Strike.

³³ Mellor J, (2014).

³⁴ Mellor J, (2014).

³⁵ Mellor J, (2014).

Bibliography

BBC News, On This Day 1950-2005. *1984: Miners and Police Clash at Orgreave*.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/29/newsid_2494000/2494793.stm

Coal Industry Act 1994, Archived. 2016, Wayback Machine.

Kennon J, (2013). Margaret Thatcher and the British Coal Miners' Strike.

<https://www.joshuakennon.com/margaret-thatcher-and-the-british-coal-miners-strike/>

Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive (1987). Economy: 1987 Budget (Lawson 4). Hansard HC (112/15-828).

Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive (MTFA). April 1984 - January 1985. Prime Ministerial Private Office files. Industrial Policy Part ii, PREM19/1542.

McSmith A, (2013). Margaret Thatcher's Legacy: Spilt Milk, New Labour, and the Big Bang – She Changed Everything. The Independent Press.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/margaret-thatcher-s-legacy-spilt-milk-new-labour-and-big-bang-she-changed-everything-8564541.html>

Mellor J, (2014). Mining the Meaning: The Legacy of the 1984-85 UK Miners' Strike. The London Economic. <https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/politics/mining-the-meaning-the-legacy-of-the-1984-5-uk-miners-strike/22/04/>

Moher J, (2008). Trade Unions and the Law – History and a Way Forward?
Historyandpolicy.org

United Kingdom Office for National Statistics. Manufacturing Output Between 1958-2007.