

# Britain at Work

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## Tony Benn, Mike Abbott and Bob Crow RIP

The three recent deaths, Tony Benn aged 88, Mike Abbott 74, and Bob Crow 52, whose life was cut so short as he had so much to give our movement, leave us with a great loss. But they also give us a sense of generations passing that knowledge from one generation to the next, and encouraging others to organise in our communities and workplaces for a better society for all. 'Remember our past, organise our future.'

Mick Gilgunn, Secretary Islington Trades Union Council

## Tony Benn Arguments for Socialism/The End of an Era

The Inheritance: The Labour Movement 'The history of the Labour movement cannot only be seen as the story of Christian philosophers or, for that matter, trade union leaders or Labour parliamentarians. For ideas without action will for ever remain as academic works, scholarly but sterile and leaders are only important in so far as they truly represent those whom they serve.... The real history of any popular movement is made by those, almost anonymous, who throughout history have fought for what they believe in, organised others to join them, and have done so against immense odds and with nothing to gain for themselves, learning from their experience and leaving others to distil that experience and to use it again to advance the cause.' Tony Benn, 'Arguments for Socialism' 1979

Tony Benn, Bob Crow and Mike Abbott RIP  
As I write this, tomorrow Bob Crow's funeral takes place. Two weeks ago the funeral of Mike Abbott, Justice for Shrewsbury Pickets campaigner was held in Wigan, and Tony Benn's funeral is yet to come. I think the paragraph above encapsulates the belief of all three of these people and many besides who are no longer with us. These are very sad times for our movement, but I chose the paragraph from Tony Benn's book 'Arguments for Socialism' as they give us a sense of people's history, optimism and hope for the future. 'Remember our past, organise our future.' Mick Gilgunn, Secretary Islington Trades Union Council

Tony Benn's 'The End of An Era' Diaries 1980-90 (Arrow, London, 1994) Thursday May 31 1984 Over the last few days there have been terrible scenes outside the Orgreave Coke Depot, where 7,000 pickets have been attacked by mounted and foot police with riot shields and helmets. It looks like civil war. You see the police charging with big staves and police dogs chasing miners across fields, then miners respond by throwing stones and trying to drag a telegraph pole across a road; there are burning buildings and road blocks. It is like a scene from Northern Ireland or central Europe. Yesterday Arthur Scargill was arrested.

Monday June 18 Hair-raising accounts of what happened at the Orgreave Coke Depot: 5,000 pickets and 5,000 police clashed, the police lines opened and the horses came charging through. The pickets threw stones in defence, then the riot squad went in with batons and just beat the living daylight out of any miners around. It was horrible. A kind of civil war is developing; there is no parallel that I remember in my lifetime.

Friday June 22 This sense of fear, of being under police occupation, is very strong. The fact is that in order to impose their will upon the populace the Government would have to put the fear of God into trade-unionists, jail them and ultimately, as in Chile, shoot them in order to get rid of the deeply entrenched commitment to trade-unionism.

## On losing Bob Crow obituary by Jan Pollock

When I heard of Bob Crow's untimely death at just 52, I suddenly remembered the party held to celebrate his becoming General Secretary of the RMT in 2002. We already knew his excellent practical record of supporting the grassroots membership against bureaucracy from the employers (and, indeed, from TU bureaucrats). He had, for example, supported the Friends of Pat and Ray, when two tube drivers were sacked by London Underground for their trade union activism in 1993; the employer had even banned any RMT member from circulating information which demanded the reinstatement of these victimised drivers. Hence, Carolyn Siddall, myself and other friends (all women and not RMT members) printed and circulated our own leaflets at LU stations. The campaign for their reinstatement proved successful (and Pat later stood successfully for election as Bob's deputy). At Bob's 2002 celebration party, Carolyn and I had each awarded Bob a red rose.

The new General Secretary also had a good record of acting in the interests of passenger health and safety. The Campaign Against Tube Privatisation (CATP), founded in the 1990s with the support of London RMT,

moved to become a passenger-run campaigning group. But CATP, which continues to distribute its own leaflets at any time passenger welfare is under threat on the Tube, was always proud that it maintained Bob Crow's support and good links with ordinary RMT members. Like the RMT, CATP has opposed the cutting of safety checks on the Tube over the Boris years. (If you wish to get involved in CATP, phone Dave on 07946 284089)

Bob's quiet but consistent support for Equalities groups both within and beyond the union certainly didn't appear to connect with the East End 'bovver boy' image, through which press barons portrayed him as the 'the enemy within'. More accurately, he effectively defended his members' pay and conditions, and this was often not an easy matter. For example, train and Tube cleaners, as the lowest paid, were the most vulnerable and difficult-to-organise group of workers in the union. Yet Bob actively encouraged cleaners to join the RMT. Their jobs had been outsourced to private companies and their employers were only too happy to use 'divide and rule' tactics to encourage drivers or other better-paid sectors within the railways to ignore the cleaners' demands for

## Transport/Miners Strike Doug Wright



### **Doug Wright second from left on a visit to Tilmanstone Colliery in Kent in 1985 alongside other London bus workers, miners and miners wives**

Everybody has an earliest memory, but what about the key memories/events that served to shape our views and opinions? I suspect that mine have laid the foundation for my lifelong interest in history and politics: One of my earliest reminiscences is sitting with my parents on a cold Sunday evening, watching the Royal Variety Show from the London Palladium and hearing John Lennon famously invite "those of you in the cheap seats clap your hands. The rest ; just rattle your jewellery." I can still recall a family discussion which developed and I believe that this was my first lesson in becoming aware of class divisions.

I remember the General Election of 1964 ( I was 7) and how it seemed everybody I knew were so enthusiastic about a new Labour Government. At school, we learned about the electoral process and around that time my parents, during a visit to London, took me to Downing Street. In those days there were no gates or railings at Downing Street, therefore at a young age I was allowed to walk up to number 10. I can still hear a 'Dixon of Dock

Green' type copper saying to me "Young man, one day I might be guarding you in here". Simple events like these most certainly encouraged me to take an interest in history. But I suppose the biggest effect on me in this respect was my parents' recollections from the Second World War. This was always being talked about and it stimulated my boyhood enthusiasm for warfare and then looking at the Nazi regime. I can contrast this enthusiasm for history with the drivel we were spilled in school about kings, queens and historic empires. What a turn off. Current issues of the time ( Vietnam, Ireland, etc.) were always being discussed at the dinner table. I remember that the dockers always seemed to raise voices and tempers and I certainly recall Jack Dash being mentioned.

Looking back, as I am, a turning point in my life was when I was about 13 or 14 and the novel 'Animal Farm' was on our English syllabus, our teacher suggested that those interested should seek out other Orwell writings. I did. I consider that these youthful experiences have served to make me the person I am. OK that's it, but it pretty much is the truth. Other more significant events happened in my life which most definitely influenced my political outlook, but hey that's another matter.

(Bob Crow obituary continued) improved pay and conditions. Many of the cleaners are black, many are women, yet, as they themselves began to organise within the union, their General Secretary was happy to insist that all RMT members show solidarity with the cleaners' strikes—in one form or another. Bob could always see beyond the immediate context within which his union had to operate—existing political parties which failed to offer political solutions to the problems faced by his members in a privatised mainline railway network. The part- privatisation of the Tube ended in several companies' bankruptcies due to the need for company shareholders to make a profit—just as Bob Crow had warned. Bob was not only a principled and imaginative trades unionist who never forgot whose side he was on; he was also a skilled and practical negotiator in an imperfect society, who knew how to use strike action to

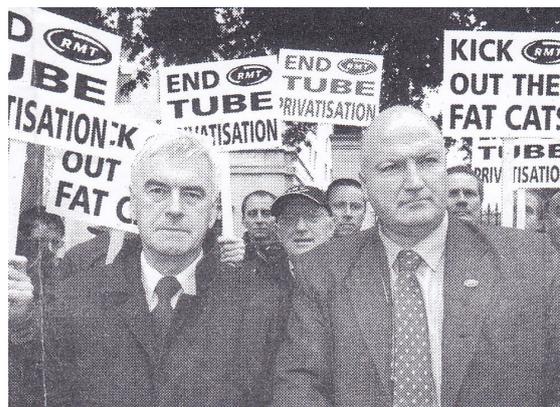
push the employers into making concessions without damaging his members' pockets too much. During the time of his leadership, the RMT increased its membership substantially whilst defending members' pay and conditions beyond any other union's ability and drawing in enthusiastic groups of passengers onto his side (including on 'Question Time' on TV). Now he's gone, London Underground think they can deny his members and their passengers any concessions in their planned, devastating cuts of 953 jobs to frontline station staff. But this underestimates Bob's living legacy—a united union and a wide alliance of passengers (including the National Pensioners' Convention, Disabled People Against the Cuts, Transport For All and the Campaign Against Tube Privatisation) which all demand to keep our Tube ticket offices and station staff there for the passengers. We campaign on!

# The Inspiration of the Miners Strike by John McDonnell MP

The media and the right have seized upon the anniversary of the miners' strike as an opportunity to promote a number of key messages on behalf of the establishment. The first is that the working class as it existed over the last two centuries up to the 1980s no longer exists. The second is that class solidarity if it existed at all in the past is now an anachronism. The third therefore, is the conclusion that any current attempt by the working class to fight back against the inevitable evolution of capitalism is futile. It has become vitally important for capital to ensure that this anniversary is certainly not used to inspire present day struggles by workers to resist attacks on wages and conditions at work. The last thing the coalition government wants is for the miners' strike to be seen as an example of how working class people can fight back.

That is why there has been a defeatist emphasis in most of the media coverage and the vast majority of talking heads on TV and radio programmes have been people who opposed or betrayed the strike and who now spout self justificatory bile. The reality is that despite this slag heap of typical media bias, the anniversary of the miners' strike has been a welcome reminder that in all the essentials the hard facts of class and class struggle have not changed. Inequality in Britain has actually increased since the miners' strike in the 1980s. The upward redistribution of wealth and power during this period has exacerbated the gap between working class people and the rich. The composition of the working class may have changed since that period. The decline of manufacturing has meant that the occupational profile of the working class has noticeably changed. Manufacturing workers may have been replaced by call centre workers but the exploitation remains the same and, if anything, may be seen as intensifying.

Just as the working class has not disappeared, neither has class struggle. In the recent period the determination of working people to fight back against this exploitation has been demonstrated time and time again. Teachers, college lecturers, rail workers, bakers, firefighters, probation officers, and even lawyers have all been out on strike in recent months. Even cleaners who are in the most precarious employment have fought back and achieved significant victories in securing a living wage and better conditions of employment. Far from being a deterrent to workers taking action, the anniversary of the miners' strike has been looked on with pride as an example of the vast solidarity and courage that working class people can display. The message that people have taken from the miners is not the defeatist one that the right and the media try to palm off on us.



John McDonnell with Bob Crow. Orgreave 1984 TUC Library Collections

Instead it has been what PCS' Mark Serwotka has often cited. When you go into a fight you can never be sure of winning but the one thing that is certain, is that if you never fight you will always certainly lose. So let's fight back.

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[www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork](http://www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork)



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