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MR SCARGILL AND THE TUC

The moderate leaders of the TUC are understandably and rightly worried about the consequences of the miners' strike for the trade union movement as a whole. The central body of the TUC, the finance and general purposes committee, have therefore asked their general secretary, Mr Len Murray, to seek Mr Arthur Scargill's agreement to a TUC initiative of some sort, both in respect of the handling and purposes of the strike and also, presumably, to assist a return to peace in the coal industry. Mr Scargill's immediate response to this suggestion has been cold to the point of hostility. What he wants from the TUC Congress when it meets in less than a fortnight's time is a simple commitment to back the striking miners with money (secured by a 10p levy on all union members) and by an undertaking not to cross picket lines. He wants TUC help, but he wants it unconditionally. The other unions are invited to produce the money for his campaign but they are also required to leave the conduct of the campaign exclusively in his hands.

That, however, is hardly an attractive proposition to the other unions, and Mr Scargill's intransigence only enhances the significance of the TUC's approach. What the TUC leaders fear has been made quite plain by both Mr Terry Duffy, leader of the engineers, and by Mr David Basnett, of the General Municipal and Boilermakers' Union. Mr Duffy has been very frank about the "tremendous danger" that the coming TUC Congress will be taken over by the NUM's campaign. As Mr Duffy chose to express it, the government has systematically weakened the unions, which are now weaker than ever before, and if the Congress were now to agree to undertakings of support for Mr Scargill which they could not deliver (because other unions could not, for instance, impose a levy without a ballot of their members) the TUC would be weakened further. What this means in plain language (which even so blunt a union leader as Mr Duffy could hardly be expected to use) is that the unions have progressively weakened themselves by the militancy which has been so prevalent in recent years, and which has proved to be wholly unacceptable both to the general

public and, in the end, to most rank-and-file union members who are not, given a chance to choose, prepared to sacrifice either jobs or lawfulness to assist politically motivated strike action.

Increasingly, therefore, the militants have weakened the unions and if Mr Scargill could now entrap the whole TUC into underwriting his malign methods and his refusal to accept a reasonable solution to the coal industry, that (as Mr Duffy and Mr Basnett perceive) would weaken it still further. If Mr Scargill wants the TUC's help, he must as Mr Basnett has suggested, allow the TUC to coordinate support and the methods of the campaign. Mr Duffy at least has made no bones about the fact that this would mean some surrender of sovereignty by the NUM for the sake of assisting the settlement of a dispute in which emotion has been allowed to triumph over logic.

It is an approach which makes sense for trade unionism and, depending on the nature of any proposition the TUC might advance for the settlement of the dispute, for the coal industry and the public good. But, of course, it also carries some risks for the TUC and for industrial peace more generally. To be acceptable to the Coal Board, any propositions produced by the TUC for settling the dispute (and if it is to coordinate the unions' campaign it must presumably say what its objectives are) must have as their basis the concept that only pits that are economically viable should be kept in operation, with those that are not so viable being phased out. That is essential for the future health and stability of the industry.

Any other approach would and should be unacceptable and, of course, there is the additional danger of disagreement between the two sides about the extent to which any proposition from the TUC did or did not meet this criterion. For the NCB and the government, the principal risk would lie in the possibility that the TUC might advance proposals that purported to accept the criterion of economic viability but in fact did not do so sufficiently to be acceptable. If the NCB had no option but to reject suggestions which had TUC support, the outcome could be to deliver the TUC to Mr

Scargill as allies, which could carry the risk of widening the dispute. But this would carry a still greater danger for the moderate union leaders since it would put them in the hands of Mr Scargill, which is precisely what they are most anxious to avoid because of the known attitudes of their own rank-and-file.

That provides a powerful incentive to the TUC to act responsibly and for this reason the case for TUC involvement carries more weight than the case against. Not the least of its advantages would be that it would not only give the TUC grounds for intervening against the violent picketing which has been the basis of Mr Scargill's tactics but would presumably make it virtually impossible for the TUC, if it values public opinion, not to do so.

When Mr Ian MacGregor spoke yesterday (in the context of stressing the extent of new investment in the coal industry) of an "orchestrated conspiracy" of violent picketing, he said no more than most people (watching their television screens) assume must be the case. When furthermore, he described such picketing as criminal, that too is no more than a statement of the obvious: any picketing that is not peaceful offends the criminal law. It may be new for the chairman of the Coal Board to speak so bluntly but what he says is news to nobody. As for his suggestion that the police and legal authorities should consider the position of Mr Scargill in the orchestration of violent picketing, that of course, must depend on the availability of sufficiently clear evidence.

What should not be in doubt is that this is not a conflict between the government and NCB on the one side and the trade unions on the other. Still less is it a fight between the government and the trade union rank-and-file. It is, in essentials, a struggle between the law and an unlawful militancy which is increasingly seen by sensible trade union leaders as the greatest threat to the real purposes for which unions exist. The anxiety which Mr Scargill so plainly shows to exclude the TUC from this dispute is both evidence of the weakness of his own position and of the good sense of more moderate union leaders in trying to limit the damage he is doing to the unions for which they are responsible.