

Conference report

‘By the People, for the People’: The Nationalisation of Coal and Steel Revisited

Jörg Arnold, University of Nottingham; Jim Phillips, University of Glasgow; Natasha Vall, Teesside University; First Conference of the Coal and Steelworkers’ Study Group

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No other industries have shaped modern Britain and the industrialisation from the 19th century onwards like the coal and steel industries. Seventy years ago, the coal industry was nationalised in the hope of making it more productive and providing better conditions for the people working in the industry, with the steel industry following in 1949. This has been commemorated with an exhibition titled “By the People, for the People” in the *National Coal Mining Museum for England (NCMME)*. Furthermore, it has been picked up by historians and scholars from neighbouring disciplines across Britain. JÖRG ARNOLD (Nottingham), JIM PHILLIPS (Glasgow) and NATASHA VALL (Teesside) have brought together a diverse group of academics to form a coal and steelworkers’ study group that will continue to examine the influence the coal and steel industries have had on the past 150 to 200 years of British history. The NCMME, the Economic History Society, and the University of Nottingham have helped to fund the conference.

Jörg Arnold opened the conference with an overview of the coal and steel industries’ nationalisation processes, which were both privatised again later on. The steel industry has received less attention from scholars in the past, leading to the study group’s dual focus on the intertwined industries. Furthermore, it aims to enable an international comparison for the transnational experience of coal and steel, to critically question what has happened during industrialisation and what is coming to pass in the current phase of de-industrialisation.

CHRISTOPHER MASSEY (Teesside) opened the first panel with a talk about the effect nationalisation had on national policy. He named steel nationalisation as the greatest challenge the 1945 – 1951 Labour government had to face. Massey depicted several steps in Labour’s term of government, which had the aim of domestic redistribution. The legislative change also caused a conflict within the Labour party that resulted in further “socialisation” of the industry being delayed. As a consequence, even though the industry itself could have been described as causing little problems and strikes, government had to battle against its own ranks and opposition when it came to nationalising an important British industry.

JIM PHILLIPS argued for the importance of generational change in understanding the introduction and subsequent trajectory of nationalisation in the Scottish coalfields. He emphasised the human aspect of how nationalisation increased security for coal workers at the workplace and beyond. In doing so, he identified three distinct generations of coal miners with important formative experiences in the 1920s, the 1940s and the 1960s. These experiences included industrial conflict, workplace mobility and union activism, and structured different orientations to the nationalised industry across generational boundaries..

A third British mining area was examined by BEN CURTIS (Cardiff) who addressed the South Wales miners' attitude towards coal nationalisation. In his view, the workers envisaged a better future through nationalisation. He agreed with Phillips in the observation that younger generations tended to push for change more than their seniors, and added that nationalisation did bring about security, even if some of the high hopes workers had were disappointed.

Generally, miners appear to have been more concerned with their working conditions, carrying the memory of their work over generations. Steel workers in contrast seemed to have been less militant which could suggest a higher contentment with their workplace. The nationalisation of both industries led to improvements in workplace security and health care, leading most workers to support the change.

EWAN GIBBS (West of Scotland) examined how the nationalisation of coal changed coal workers' lives in terms of work place mobility, first in a Scottish, then British migration experience. He named the example of the Rothes colliery and the town of Glenrothes in Fife, which was planned in the late 1940s specifically to house coal miners moving eastwards from the shrinking Lanarkshire coalfield. This early experience of restructuring after nationalisation in the late 1940s and early 1950s shaped miners' responses when facing the closure of pits in the 1960s. For younger men especially the "chance tae move anywhere in Britain" because of colliery closures was highly valuable. Others, especially those who had already migrated within Scotland since 1947, resisted the entreaty to move again.

The Northern part of Wales was examined by KEITH GILDART (Wolverhampton) in the following talk. He referred to the often-mythologised coal industry in national historiography before giving an overview of the different analyses of nationalisation, ranging from support to criticism. After pointing out how strongly the perception varies, he concluded that the nationalised world was then turned upside down by the changes in the political economy of coal driven by the Thatcher government and its allies in the management of the coal industry in the 1980s. Gildart is currently undertaking a three-year Oral History project about the coal mining industry, aiming to widen the available documents and perception of coal miners, also touching on de-industrialisation and the diversification of the British economy.

HELEN BLAKELY (Cardiff) took up the trait of looking at individual biographies and focused on the legacy of the nationalised coal industry in Wales in the 2010s, where union density in service sector occupations – retail, the care professions – is significantly higher than the norm in other areas of the UK. She had set out to identify the different factors playing into trade union membership in contemporary society and had found history, place, and kinship to be of importance. Blakely portrayed how everyday practices, the commitment and loyalty to both family and community, and experiencing comradeship had been decisive in maintaining high numbers of trade union membership in Wales.

Social aspects of nationalisation were further explored by DIARMAID KELLIHER (Glasgow) who examined translocal networks in his work. He emphasised the mutual learning experience from different social groups like women, people of colour, and coal miners.

Equality and socialism could thereby only be reached with the inclusion of all groups, leading to a lasting solidarity from the 1984/85 strike onwards.

Making the connection to another important strike in British history, CHARLIE MCGUIRE (Teesside) looked at the discussion in and around the journal “Steelworkers’ Banner” during the steel workers’ strike in 1980. He identified the discourse of decline prior and during the strike, which had been triggered by a pay dispute and a related threat of significant production and job cuts. During this divide between employers and trade unions, the Steelworkers Banner had challenged the managerial prerogative from the British Steel Corporation and offered an alternative strategy for the industry. McGuire highlighted the importance of newspapers for future research.

STEVEN DANIELS (Liverpool) introduced a rather controversial thesis about the Thatcher government and how it purposefully supported the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) in order to weaken the National Union of Mineworkers’ (NUM) standing. In a thorough analysis of the Conservative government from circa 1985 to 1992, he pointed out different backs and forths between government and unions, including Thatcher’s advertisement for moderate union membership in form of the UDM and offering “their” collieries a delay on closures.

Further personal aspects were explored by REBECCA SAUNDERS (Teesside) in her study about Teesside’s steel women. She put emphasis on how both women workers and the wives of steel workers experienced the decline of the steel industry, and the solidarity following it. Giving an outlook on Teesside’s current structural change, Saunders strongly advertised the inclusion of women’s voices to form a more thorough understanding of the region’s industrial heritage.

JOAN HEGGIE (Teesside) was in charge of working with the British Steel Collection and creating a now well-organised archive. She presented the challenges as an archivist, curator and historian, pointed out the most memorable finds and argued for a new focus when working with the collection. There is far more to it than just coal and steel and she suggested drawing from the material a study about society from shareholders to ordinary people. Heggie supported Saunders in the call for a broader look at the coal and steel industries.

Including not only scholars in the discussion, PAUL HARDMAN (NUM) and PAUL DARLOW (Barnsley) shared their own memories of life in the coal industry, giving their view on both nationalisation and the subsequent decline of the industry. They told their stories of being part of the coal-mining world from a young age, joining a trade union naturally and experiencing the solidarity coming along with it. Both pointed out increased safety as an important advantage introduced with nationalisation, as well as the promise of “a job for life” when joining a pit – that was not to be fulfilled with the closing of the last colliery in 2015.

In the following discussion, it was pointed out that the term “decline” might not be the correct description of what happened to the British coal industry, rather an “annihilation” might be certified. “Decline” is more likely to refer to a natural process that is inevitable while

“annihilation” has the sense of a conscious decision that is not inevitable. The comparison to the end of the German coal industry was made, a transnational comparison to illustrate how the British government had not played fairly in the eyes of the NUM representatives Hardman and Darlow. The de-industrialisation of the British steel and coal industries appear to be a very sensitive subject for both former workers in the industries and British historians.

The conference ended with a roundtable discussion with the aim of defining the goals and further proceedings of the coal and steel workers’ study group. DAVID AMOS (Nottingham) argued in favour of a shift towards a comparison between the coal and the steel workers’ strike that might replace the sole emphasis on the 1984/85 strike. SEAN MCLOUGHLIN (NCMME) agreed with him, speaking as a participant of the 12 months strike, that the strike had received too great a deal of attention academically. He also put forward the need for education about coal, as many people today would not know what the rock that had shaped their lives looked like. The idea of a follow-up conference was brought forward by NATASHA VALL (Teesside), strongly supporting the notion of further connecting the two key industries of coal and steel. GRACE MILLAR (Wolverhampton) picked up Vall’s idea of a study network for PhD students and pointed out how fruitful the creation of such a network might be. Last but not least, MARION HENRY (Strathclyde) gave a plea for opening up historical studies into the cultural area, using a wider array of sources and looking at all actors to deepen the understanding of the coal and steel industries.

The conference ended with a note on the bigger theme of industrialisation and de-industrialisation, suggesting taking the results from the analysis of the coal and steel industries to other areas. A special focus should be put on the dynamics of the process, and how nationalisation affected different industries. For the further study of the coal and steel industries, the study group has agreed to remain loose and open, and to put its view to including new perspectives and a wider range of sources from all backgrounds. Historically, the time after the 1984/85 coal strike proved to be of interest and offers potential for further research, as well as cultural and language aspects. The first conference of the coal and steelworkers’ study group proved to be the profitable first instalment for a continuing deeper study of the British coal and steel history, offering new insights into past and on-going projects.

Conference programme

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Welcome and Introduction: Jörg Arnold (Nottingham)

PANEL ONE: ‘By the People, for the People’ - Nationalisation as aspiration and promise, ca. 1912-1947/1951

Chair: Jörg Arnold (Nottingham)

Christopher Massey (Teesside):

'A Challenge to the Citadel of Capitalist Power' – Steel Nationalisation 1945-51

Jim Phillips (Glasgow):

Generation and Nationalisation in the Scottish coalfields

Ben Curtis (Cardiff):

'The Dawn of a New Era': South Wales Miners' Attitudes Towards the Nationalisation of the Coal Industry

PANEL TWO: The nationalised industries, the economy and employment, 1947-1993

Chair: Jim Phillips (Glasgow)

Ewan Gibbs (West of Scotland):

'The Chance Tae Move Anywhere in Britain': Scottish Coalfield Restructuring and Labour Migration c.1947-1974

Keith Gildart (Wolverhampton):

The National Coal Board and Pit Closures in North Wales

Helen Blakely (Cardiff):

A collective memory of collective action: biographies of unionism from the South Wales coalfields

PANEL THREE: The nationalised industries, their social worlds and industrial politics, ca. 1947-1993

Chair: Natasha Vall (Teesside)

Diarmaid Kelliher (Glasgow):

Translocal networks of solidarity: the British coalfields and London, 1972-1992

Charlie McGuire (Teesside):

'Going for the Jugular': The role of the Steelworkers Banner during the 1980 national steelworkers strike

Steven Daniels (Liverpool):

Conservative Governments and the Union of Democratic Mineworkers, c.1985-1992

PANEL FOUR: Legacies and representations

Chair: Matthew Beebee (Cambridge)

Rebecca Saunders (Teesside):

Preserving the varied experiences of industrial decline through the voices of Teesside's Steel Women

Joan Heggie (Teesside):

The challenges of working with a large industrial collection: archivist, curator or historian?

Paul Hardman (NUM) / Paul Darlow (Barnsley):

Memories of coal: a personal view

ROUNDTABLE: establishing a study group – format, goals & objectives

Chair: Jörg Arnold (Nottinham)

Discussants: David Amos (Nottingham) – Shaun McLoughlin (National Coal Mining Museum for England) – Natasha Vall (Teesside) – Grace Miller (Wolverhampton) – Marion Henry (Strathclyde)