

Submission to the Independent Review of Policing During the Miners' Strike

This submission consists of excerpts from *Polmaise: The Fight For A Pit*, by John McCormack, who was NUM delegate at Polmaise colliery during the miners' strike.

The background is as follows. In the 1980s I lived in Glasgow and worked as a journalist for the *News Line* newspaper, which closed in 1986. Between 1983 and 1986 I visited the Stirlingshire and Fife coalfields on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis, and wrote reports about the fight against pit closures. John McCormack was one of the people I came to know best as a result. The newspaper was not neutral; it was published by the Workers Revolutionary Party, it took a pro-strike stance, and I considered it my job to give voice to mining communities and rank-and-file mineworkers' union officials.

After the strike John and I decided to write a book, *Polmaise: The Fight for a Pit*. He was the author and I the “ghost writer”. I assembled the text from interviews recorded at John's home, articles he had written, and citations from the Polmaise branch and Scottish Area minutes of the NUM. John read everything through, edited it substantially, and approved the final text. The book was published in 1989. (I have the recordings in my personal archive.)

I think the excerpts below reflect faithfully John's view of the policing of the miners' strike. I presume that he will not give evidence directly to the inquiry, due to his illness, but his comments made in 1989 deserve consideration.

You asked for submissions of under 2000 words, and this is a bit longer. Due to John's illness, it has not been possible to consult him on this submission. I therefore feel stuck in the middle: I want to communicate his comments to you, but don't feel it is my job to cut things out. However, if you wish me to produce a shortened version of this submission, please let me know.

Note that *Polmaise: The Fight For A Pit* was published on the internet in 2015 and is therefore available for your consideration.

There are three types of relevant passage: (1) descriptions of police actions during the strike; (2) descriptions of how these actions were perceived by mineworkers at the time and shortly afterwards; and (3) comments that contextualised the police action as part of a broader political and social offensive against mining communities.

1. Descriptions of the police action during the strike

This is John's description of picketing in Scotland in the early weeks of the strike (p. 30 of internet edition of *Polmaise: The Fight for A Pit*):

At the start we picketed mainly Bilston Glen colliery, some small private mines, and then Ravenscraig steelworks and Hunterston ore terminal in Ayrshire. [...] Bilston Glen was a sore point. Some of the men there scabbed all through the strike and this was the main attraction for pickets. There were quite a lot of scuffles, men arrested, buses turned back ... more of this happened at Bilston Glen than anywhere else in Scotland. Because a few miners there were working almost from the start, they got maximum publicity from the press who weren't in favour of the striking miners.

At the start of chapter 7, John gave a long description of pickets' experience of police action, which started (p. 34):

We found out that the police were involved in the miners' strike right at the start, when we sent a car-load of pickets down to Ashington pit in Northumberland. James Armitage, the Polmaise branch secretary, was driving. The pickets got to the English border, and were stopped by police and turned back home again.

After discussing the Polmaise miners' initial reaction to this treatment (see below), John continued (p. 35):

Whether you were right or whether you were wrong, if the police approached you and you were a miner, you were wrong. They wouldn't speak to you properly or discuss anything with you. You couldn't explain anything. They had their minds made up.

On March 25th 1984 a bus-load of football supporters were going from Fallin to the Scottish League Cup final which was played that day. There they were with their scarves and flags when they were stopped by the police. One or two were recognised as miners, and the police kept the bus waiting, on the grounds that they were checking for pickets.

You made your complaints about this kind of thing but it didn't make any difference: nobody was interested.

Polmaise, like every other pit, had our share of arrests on pickets. Alex McCallum was lifted, and fined £200 for breach of the peace, for simply standing on a picket line – at Longannet over in Fife, where a scab [...] was going into work.

I went to court with Alex, and, when the judge came in, I didn't stand up because I was having trouble with the cartilage in my leg at that time; I was drawn aside and I was warned that I could get fined for contempt of court. The witnesses for the police were a constable and an inspector, with two conflicting stories. McCallum's lawyer said she thought the case should be thrown out; the judge said that although the stories were conflicting, he believed the inspector. The fact was that, on picket lines such as these, the police had to lift their quota of men. If it was peaceful they would lift people anyway.

John then made this comment about the police forces in Scotland:

The police in Central region were not the worst we came across. I was asked by the regional council once for any complaints we had about them and there were none. The Fife police, and the Lothians police in particular, were a different story. There was no understanding from them. They would lift you as soon as look at you. Facing them on picket lines turned you against the police as a whole.

In the next section of the text (pp. 35-36), John described "the biggest battles with the police in Scotland", at the Ravenscraig steelworks and the Hunterston terminal. After commenting on the NUM's interaction with the steelworkers' union and the transport union – to whom the miners appealed to take solidarity action – John continued:

On Thursday May 3rd, 15 lorries ran into Ravenscraig loaded with coal and this was the start of picketing there. [...] Many miners thought that the answer to this was to stop Ravenscraig completely, but that idea just seemed to be pushed to one side.

The next target for the pickets was Hunterston, where the coal was being landed from foreign ships. It turned out to be a miniature Orgreave. [...] On Tuesday May 8th about 1,500 pickets there faced 1,000-plus police. The miners lined up and the police horses simply went right into them. I was surprised no-one was actually killed.

My brother James was among the 65 miners lifted at Hunterston. He was flung into jail and kept there for ten hours, and ended up being fined £150 for breach of the peace. His “crime” was that he was standing there, when the horses charged, and was knocked down. It was the police who picked him up off the ground and that was that. Another Polmaise man, an engineer, Geordie Richardson, was also arrested.

It was rumoured in the press that we would go back to picket Hunterston the following day, Wednesday May 9th. There were people sitting up on the banking: they had come out in their cars, with picnics, to see if there would be a further confrontation between the miners and the police.

On the day after that, Thursday May 10th, we were all arrested trying to get to Hunterston, in the biggest mass round-up in the miners’ strike.

We were going through Stepps, in Glasgow, with six bus-loads of men – nearly 300 of us all together. A single police car came along, with an inspector in it, a man who was just ready for retirement. He stopped the first bus and asked where we were going. I was in charge of that bus, and I said, “We’re going to Largs for the day, for a picnic.” And we actually had hampers of food and cartons of lemonade in the back of the bus. But of course he didn’t take any notice. He told the driver to turn the bus round.

We all got out and sat on the road. Police reinforcements were called, and they shoved us all back on the buses – dragged men by the hair, by the ears, and let their knees bump along the ground. They took us all to different police stations around Glasgow, took our names, and charged a total of 292 of us under Sections 17 and 41 of the Police Act for failing to comply with a request to go home. They put us all in the wrong buses for getting home: they put men from Stirlingshire on the Fife buses, men from Fife on the Stirlingshire bus, etc.

These sorts of tactics provoked an uproar. Even the coach companies protested, because their drivers – who had never left their vehicles – were lifted along with the rest of us. A special shop stewards’ meeting was called by the Scottish TUC to protest at this particular mass arrest.

John then described the failure in May-June 1984 of the miners' efforts to prevent coal imported at Hunterston from reaching Ravenscraig. In the next section of the book he described the Polmaise miners’ participation in the “Battle of Orgreave” and other pickets and demonstrations in England, as follows (pp. 37-38):

On June 19th 1984, the second “battle of Orgreave” took place, this time with contingents from Scotland, Wales and elsewhere in attendance. Straight away when they arrived, our men were rattled by the police attitude. They soon realised that the police were all organised to deal with the miners. At the height of the battle, police horses chased them through General Stores, through housing schemes and across people’s gardens, everywhere. Some miners came back to Fallin, men who had been working in the pit more than 40 years, and said they had never experienced anything like it in their lives. These were men who had been in many a strike, but Orgreave was

the worst of the lot.

The English police were extremely hostile to any miners who were down there demonstrating for whatever reason, including in Sheffield where our national union headquarters was. If there were five or six of you walking along the pavement and you were miners, you were in trouble. You would get driven out of town.

When men from Polmaise lobbied the NUM executive in Sheffield on April 19th 1984, for example, three of them – Charlie Simpson, Jim O’Hare and John Rennie – were arrested just for sitting on a wall. Charlie was charged with assaulting a police officer, and all three with being “drunk and disorderly”. They strongly denied these charges, which, after several costly trips to appear in court, were dropped. “The police would appear to be acting as the strong right arm of this fascist Tory government”, our minutes secretary noted, when this incident was reported to our strike committee.

One of the hardest experiences the Polmaise pickets went through was at Wivenhoe docks, near Colchester. Our pickets arrived down there late one night, and although the local miners’ support group were there to meet them, there was no accommodation fixed. They were about to turn around and come back to Scotland. But one of the activists went away and came back with five school-teachers from Brightlingsea, which is nearby, and they were prepared to put the pickets up for the night! They were very hospitable and I believe some of the lads are still in touch with them to this day.

In the morning the miners went down to the docks to try and stop the coal lorries. The port was right next to the train station, and pickets gathered in the road leading to the station. Thousands of police poured out of the station and blocked the road. They were as aggressive as ever, and they were all wearing these cover-all waterproofs, which meant that none of their identification numbers were visible. Our men were outnumbered, and decided to get in their cars and block the road with them.

The Polmaise picket van, which was part of the convoy of pickets’ cars, stalled. A number of police jumped into it: that was how they split the pickets’ convoy. A police pick-up truck arrived with a block and tackle, and lifted the Polmaise van up, with the pickets still inside it. Some of our men insist that that truck was driven by a soldier.

A few paragraphs further on (p. 38), John again referred to the rumours, that were rife in Fallin and other mining communities during the strike, that the police had covert support from the armed forces:

When our pickets came back from England and said they were sure they had seen soldiers on the picket lines, I don’t know whether this was right or not. But looking back now, it wouldn’t surprise me if Maggie Thatcher had gone to those lengths.

I did not have a view about the veracity of those rumours. If any evidence that they were true has come out in the meantime, I have not heard about it. But obviously these rumours spread, because people in mining communities were trying to find explanations for the viciousness of the police action. This might be something the inquiry could consider.

2. Descriptions of how the police actions were perceived by miners, during and shortly after the strike.

In 1989, John expressed the following view about police actions (pp. 34-35).

As the strike went on, Maggie Thatcher and her government made up their minds that the miners were not going to win – so they started using the heavy artillery. First it was the police, then the courts.

In September 1984, our minutes secretary recorded his thoughts about this: “I heard a news report that the Home Secretary, Leon Brittan, told the judiciary that they were not being savage enough with miners who had been charged with various offences. He stated that for mobbing and rioting some should receive life sentences. This man was trying to undermine the judiciary.” The minutes also noted that, even before Brittan’s statement, miners were receiving far greater fines and sentences than others convicted on similar charges.

Note that, during the strike, the Polmaise branch minutes secretary was Jock Perrie, who was himself a Justice of the Peace (see p. 28).

John summed up his own thoughts about police attacks on pickets as follows (p. 38):

On Friday June 15th 1984, a picket named Joe Green was killed outside Kellingley power station, and we sent a full bus-load from Polmaise to his funeral. Before that, another miner, David Gareth Jones, had been killed on the picket line in Nottinghamshire. When people get killed on picket lines it makes you wonder, it makes you think more carefully. Maggie Thatcher was out to beat the miners, to win that strike whatever it cost.

On Thursday July 19th 1984, Thatcher spoke at the Scottish Tory party conference and compared the miners to the Argentinians. She described us as the “enemy within” – all because we were part of a trade union. This was diabolical. It’s your right to be part of a union if you want to be; it’s not a crime, you’re in it to make sure you get a fair crack of the whip. We have seen in the past, in my father’s days, the conditions they had when they had no unions – and the conditions in the pit were 100 per cent better after the war as a result of the unions.

3. Comments on the police action as one part of a broader political and social offensive against mining communities

In a number of passages, John referred to the police action in the context of a wider set of obstacles perceived by mining communities, including (a) the hostility of government, judiciary, National Coal Board and other branches of the state, and (b) the isolation many miners felt from e.g. trade unions, the Labour Party and other organisations from whom they had expected more support. Obviously the inquiry is focusing on police action. But I think that to address “any continuing effects on communities” (the Call for Evidence), the way that the police action fit into this wider picture is important.

In one passage (p. 39), John McCormack related that violence to condemnations of violence on the part of miners by leading figures in the labour movement, as follows:

At Polmaise branch, we always believed that the union should get right into the TUC, asking them for support. They were hanging back – I don’t know why, but I think it was because they were afraid of getting a refusal.

From the start, we knew we could not rely on the TUC. The TUC leaders, and the

Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock too, were going out of their way to condemn what they called the miners' picket line violence. But from all I know, I would say the majority of violence on the picket lines was caused by the police. They would use a situation simply to lift people: we would be standing on a picket line and the police lines would suddenly open, and they would drag nine or ten miners through and charge them with breach of the peace. Kinnock – especially coming from a mining family in Wales, and having been brought up among miners – should have come out and sided with the miners. But he never did.

Then John referred to the mineworkers' lobby of the TUC in Brighton in September 1984:

Down in Brighton, we had a conversation with Bill Sirs, leader of the ISTC, and asked him why his members wouldn't give 100 per cent backing to the miners. He said the same sort of thing as the TUC itself was saying: about legal difficulties and all sorts of other things, to excuse his position. He wouldn't come out and say to our faces that he wasn't supporting the miners.

We didn't go to the TUC expecting other workers to come out on strike. We were looking for them not to cross picket lines, we wanted them to black the movement of fuel and we wanted them to refuse to handle fuel which had been transported by scabs. This was all in the resolution moved by Scargill – and it was passed. But the TUC added a statement to it, that the General Council would be in charge of organising this solidarity – which was like somebody taking the reins of the horse.

This passage concluded with a description of the TUC General Council as "people paying lip service", to Labour and trade union conferences as "talking shops", and a complaint about members of other unions crossing miners' picket lines.

Another example, where John expressed his opinion about the cumulative effect on mining communities of injustices, including at the hands of the police, is in the chapter about the return to work, where he said (p. 46):

As a result of the miners' strike, people know that as long as the Tory government is in, they can go on strike for as long as they like, but they are not going to win. This government was prepared to use any means, any means at all, to beat the miners. I have already stated how they flooded and sabotaged pits. It wouldn't surprise me if, in a future miners' strike, they passed legislation forbidding people to go down the pits once the strike began, whether there were firemen there or not.

It doesn't matter what you do, and how apparently straightforward your case, they have the full weight of the country's judges and police against you. Thatcher won't give an inch. And if you do go on strike – and this can be seen with the nurses, with the teachers, the railwaymen – these people will be out to hammer you into the ground. And their main object is to do away with unions. That's why they were so bitter against the NUM, because they knew if they could beat the NUM, they could take anyone on.

They have taken all the power away from the unions. At one time, if you made an agreement with the bosses, it was down in black and white, it was signed for – and it was adhered to. Not now.

Another example of the cumulative effect of state hostility to the strike was felt by miners sacked during the strike. John described at some length the difficulties the sacked miners at

Polmaise had in taking their cases to an industrial tribunal – a case that was contested in court, and in which their right to a tribunal hearing was eventually upheld by the law lords (p. 52). He also referred to their isolation when trying to find work after the strike. Although all younger Polmaise miners struggled to find new jobs, “the sacked miners have had it hardest of all” (p. 55).

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In conclusion, please again accept my apologies for going over the word limit, and let me know if you wish me to produce a shortened version of this submission. I hope it is helpful.

Simon Pirani.

15 November 2018.



Polmaise miners in Perth after lobbying the NUM national conference, 7 July 1983