

# Colliery Deputies in the British Coal Industry Before Nationalization\*

PETER ACKERS

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**Summary:** This article challenges the militant and industrial unionist version of British coal mining trade union history, surrounding the Miners' Federation of Great Britain and the National Union of Mineworkers, by considering, for the first time, the case of the colliery deputies' trade union. Their national Federation was formed in 1910, and aimed to represent the three branches of coal mining supervisory management: the deputy (or fireman, or examiner), overman and shotfirer. First, the article discusses the treatment of moderate and craft traditions in British coal mining historiography. Second, it shows how the position of deputy was defined by changes in the underground labour process and the legal regulation of the industry. Third, it traces the history of deputies' union organization up until nationalization in 1947, and the formation of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS). The article concludes that the deputies represent a mainstream tradition of craft/professional identity and industrial moderation, in both the coal industry and the wider labour movement.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the vulgar Marxist model of capitalist economic development, popularized by the "Communist Manifesto", continuous deskilling erodes occupational divisions in the labour process, creating an increasingly homogenous work-force in a correspondingly polarized society. In turn, this unifies the working class, industrially and politically.<sup>1</sup> In British labour history, the 1889 "New Unionism" is widely regarded as a watershed between cautious nineteenth-century craft trade unionism, and a more expansive and political, general and industrial unionism, which will dominate the next century.<sup>2</sup> Coal mining historiography has been particularly influenced by this developmental perspective. Page Arnot's

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<sup>1</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Peking, 1968); E. Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism* (New York, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (London, 1976); S. Webb and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism, 1666–1920* (London, 1920).

history of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain parallels Braverman's orthodox labour process theory of the cumulative deskilling and degradation of labour. The emergence of a powerful, national industry union lent credence to the view that the old coalfield sectionalism was being superseded by a growing unity of purpose. This view survives the 1926 debacle and the ensuing successionist movements, and appears to be confirmed by the formation of the National Union of Mineworkers.<sup>3</sup>

This article challenges such an interpretation of coal mining trade union history, by exploring the case of the colliery deputies. It shows how, during the first half of the twentieth century, this group of employees developed a new supervisory/skilled occupational identity, which distinguished them from the ordinary coal miner, and how this stimulated a new form of sectional trade union organization. In some respects, the history of the deputies is unique. In others, however, it provides a glimpse of the deep occupational and ideological divisions which continued in the twentieth-century coal mining trade union movement. These differences existed both inside and outside the Miners' Federation, and some recognition of them is crucial to understanding 1926 and its aftermath. This fragmented reality counters the received wisdom that industrial unionism and militancy formed an unproblematic twentieth-century trade union agenda. Such an "upward and onward" approach can only account for the resilience of sectional and more collaborationist attitudes by recourse to conspiracy theories of employer "divide and rule", and by moralistics about "scabs", "betrayal" and "traitors".

The deputies' union represents the opposite industrial and political pole to the militant inter-war Miners' Federation leadership. It was occupationally based, sectional and moderate; and up until nationalization sections of the Miners' Federation made repeated efforts to destroy it and represent deputies themselves. Thus its history is some antidote to the heroic myth of "The Militancy of British Miners".<sup>4</sup> The article is organized as follows. First, it discusses the treatment of moderate and craft traditions in coal mining historiography. Second, it shows how the position of deputy was shaped by changes in the coal mining labour process and the legal regulation of the industry. Third, it describes the history of the deputies' union organization, and its distinctive industrial agenda. Finally the conclusion argues against the "industrial unionism" model, that there was a sound occupational and legal basis for separate deputies' organization, outside the Miners' Federation, and that their pragmatic and moderate inter-war posture was both logical and defensible.

<sup>3</sup> R. Page Arnot, *The Miners: 1889-1946*, 4 vols (London, 1949, 1953, 1961, 1979); H. Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism* (New York, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> V. Allen, *The Militancy of British Miners* (Shipton, 1981).

MODERATES, CRAFTSMEN AND OFFICERS IN COAL MINING  
LABOUR HISTORIOGRAPHY

## THE MODERATE MINER

For Page Arnot and others,<sup>5</sup> the aspirations of all miners are identified, unproblematically, with the industrial and political programme articulated by the leadership of the Miners' Federation and its successor, the National Union of Mineworkers. When, after the First World War, this leadership took a more radical turn, the rank-and-file are understood to have converted, *en masse*, to the new position. Thereafter, divisions within the mining work-force, based on occupation (expressed through the main union, or through smaller sectional organizations), the geological and economic character of different coalfields, or political ideology, are either ignored or dismissed in terms of "betrayal" and "collaboration". This is the classic, militant interpretation of mining trade union leadership. However, nineteenth-century British coal mining leadership is associated with Methodist religious belief, industrial moderation and Lib-Lab politics, and the Miners' Federation was the last major union to affiliate to the Labour Party, in 1908.<sup>6</sup> In that year, the South Wales miners "condemned strike action and urged men to abide by the conciliation agreement that had been negotiated".<sup>7</sup>

Francis and Smith,<sup>8</sup> in a characteristic account, acknowledge the achievements of the preceding period of self-help and industrial conciliation, but suggest that, in the next few years, deteriorating economic conditions rendered consensual, moderate trade unionism unworkable. In short, the new objective conditions dictated a crisis of reformism, for "the society was not to be rescued".<sup>9</sup> The only practical alternative was the syndicalist new wave. This perspective raises questions about how far the militant tradition emerging in South Wales can be generalized to other coalfields, and whether there really was "no alternative". Some historians are so mesmerized by the heroic saga of the inter-war syndicalist struggles, and the industrial unionist objective of "one big union", originating in the 1912 "Miner's Next Step", that they almost completely lose sight of alternative industrial perspectives or sectional patterns of organization. Davies,<sup>10</sup> for example, quotes uncritically the "Miners'

<sup>5</sup> Page Arnot, *The Miners*; Allen, *The Militancy of British Miners*.

<sup>6</sup> E. H. Hunt, *British Labour History, 1815-1914* (London, 1981). See also, J. Saville, *The Labour Movement in Britain* (London, 1988); and J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement* (Brighton, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> P. Davies, *A. J. Cook* (Manchester, 1987), p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> H. Francis and D. Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Davies, *A. J. Cook*, pp. 14-15.

Next Step" proposal for a union organization "constructed to fight rather than negotiate".

Even when, as in 1926, the strategy of militancy had disastrous consequences for the Miners' Federation and the mining community, there is little cool-headed evaluation of its wisdom, the alternatives available, or of the quality of union leadership displayed. If the catastrophic practical implications of the final "unconditional surrender" prove unavoidable, some compensation is found in heightened "political consciousness".<sup>11</sup> Instead of judging the efficacy of the action by trade union criteria, other commentators become embroiled in rather fanciful debates about the revolutionary possibilities of the period.<sup>12</sup> Coal mining undoubtedly had a high historical propensity to strike action.<sup>13</sup> Even so, there is a tendency to overplay the importance of industrial disputes by identifying mining labour history with strike history, as "a seemingly endless procession of strikes and lock-outs".<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically those accounts which dwell most on strikes, frequently neglect their deleterious impact on the lives of ordinary mining families. Bad industrial relations caused "suffering, despair, misery and poverty". Strikes created bitter family and social divisions, and were "a major cause of coalfield poverty". In addition, accounts of disputes too easily assume the moral and political character of a struggle between good and evil, at the expense of more mundane economic and industrial relations explanations. It needs reiterating that most industrial disputes had economic motives: higher profits for the employers, or better wages and conditions for the workers. And they were played out in external market circumstances, often of neither side's choosing.<sup>15</sup>

### CRAFT UNIONISM IN MINING

The neglect by historians of craft and other sectional traditions in the coalfield work-force has contributed to this false image of a militant and united proletariat.

We know only too little about those who did not join trade unions [. . .] (or) those classes of collier worker, such as surfacemen, deputies, shotfirers, overmen

<sup>11</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, pp. 78 and 66.

<sup>12</sup> J. Hinton and R. Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party* (London, 1975).

<sup>13</sup> R. Church, Q. Quinton and D. N. Smith, "Towards a History of British Miners' Militancy", *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 54(1) (1989).

<sup>14</sup> J. Benson, *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History* (London, 1989), pp. 204–205.

<sup>15</sup> J. E. Williams, "Labour in the Coalfields: A Critical Bibliography", *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 4 (1962).

and winding enginemen, which although of considerable significance have received scant attention in the past.<sup>16</sup>

This remains the case for the deputies. They are discussed in some miners' union histories, and in accounts of colliery managers and officers.<sup>17</sup> However, the eighty-year history of the modern National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) has not attracted a single academic book, thesis or article.

By contrast, the Miners' Federation of Great Britain and its nineteenth-century precursors have prompted a vast literature. Within this, it has often passed unnoticed that these "industry" unions were in fact dominated by hewers, and sometimes deliberately excluded surfacemen and craft workers. The dissatisfaction of the "forgotten two-thirds of the miners who did not work at the coal face",<sup>18</sup> led them to start numerous separate organizations from the 1870s onwards, and this coincided with a wider advance of white-collar trade unionism. South Wales, for instance, had organizations for "enginemen and surface craftsmen", "winding enginemen", "examiners" and "officials".<sup>19</sup> Such tensions between "open" and "closed", or industrial, general and craft patterns of trade union organization ran throughout British industry.<sup>20</sup>

Writers such as Francis and Smith<sup>21</sup> reflect too little on this. Under the label of "scab unionism", their partisan study of the South Wales Miners' Federation conflates the South Wales Industrial Miners Union, a breakaway "company union" for all miners closely linked to the Spencer union, with attempts to form an independent union of "enginemen, boilermens and craftsmen". When some craftsmen broke from the Miners' Federation in 1921, "the wheels of progress were reversed sharply".<sup>22</sup> These dissident organizations are lumped together with non-unionism, as instances of "craft sectionalism and coalfield parochialism",<sup>23</sup> obstructing the struggle for legitimate, exclusive Miners'

<sup>16</sup> R. G. Neville and J. Benson, "Labour in the Coalfields (ii): a Select Critical Bibliography", *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 31 (1975), p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> See J. E. Williams, *The Derbyshire Miners: A Study in Industrial and Social History* (London, 1962); P. Long, "The Economic and Social History of the Scottish Coal Industry" (Ph.D., University of Strathclyde, 1978); B. J. McCormick, "Managerial Unionism in the Coal Industry", *British Journal of Sociology*, 11(4) (1960); S. Tailby, "Labour Utilisation and Labour Management in the British Coal Mining Industry" (Ph.D., Warwick University, 1990), ch. 6, "Colliery Deputies and Overmen"; I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Colliery Managers and Nationalisation: The Experience in South Wales", *Business History*, 34(4), pp. 59–78 (1992); R. Penn and R. Simpson, "The Development of Skilled Work in the British Coal Mining Industry, 1870–1985", *Industrial Relations Journal*, 17(4).

<sup>18</sup> Benson, *British Coalminers*, p. 196.

<sup>19</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed.*

<sup>20</sup> H. A. Turner, *Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy: A Comparative Study of the Cotton Unions in England* (London, 1962).

<sup>21</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427.

Federation hegemony. Now craft trade unions are not a deviant product of the Welsh coalfield after 1926, but a central and enduring feature of British industrial relations history. The assumption that they have no rightful place in coal mining demands at least some justification. The deputies, who fall into this broad "craft" category, had already reached a *modus vivendi* with the Miners' Federation in some other coalfields. What seems to Francis and Smith an idealistic struggle against employers' divide-and-rule tactics, was regarded by the craft groups concerned as a brutal campaign against their representative rights. Moreover, they suggest that the deputies' union did not exist in South Wales before nationalization.<sup>24</sup> In fact, by 1933 South Wales formed their largest area, with 3,000 members, and provided their national secretary. Buried in the footnotes is a more candid reassessment of the appeal of the South Wales Industrial Miners' Union, from the 1930s South Wales Miners' Federation General Secretary, Oliver Harris.

It also appealed to that not inconsiderable section of the miners who question the ready and frequent use of the strike weapon as being the best way to secure improved conditions in the industry. It is now generally agreed that the prolongation of the general strike in 1926 was a colossal blunder of leadership for which the rank and file had to pay dearly, and in the reactions of the moment the ground was favourable for the propagation of the idea for which the Miners' Industrial Union professed to stand.<sup>25</sup>

### THE COLLIERY OFFICER

The distaste that some historians have for trade union moderation and craft identities can lead to a neglect and misrepresentation of these coalfield traditions. The deputies combine both elements with a third, still more controversial one. They were also officers, the bottom layer of the colliery management hierarchy. The failure of labour historians to consider "the evolution of the management function",<sup>26</sup> flies against the industrial relations commonplace that management is usually the key agent in setting the terms of industrial debate and the level of negotiation. It leaves trade unions boxing with a shadow whose objectives and behaviour we do not understand, except by inference. Since lower management plays a key role in production and safety, their absence can only accompany a vagueness about the labour process. Still today, "There is a dearth of research into the industry's professional occupational groups in general"<sup>27</sup> and, again, this probably arises from the utopian perspective of many commentators, for whom management *per se* is the problem.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 486.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 421.

<sup>26</sup> Neville and Benson, "Labour in the Coalfields (ii)", p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Colliery Managers and Nationalisation", p. 60.

But management, and particularly line management, had a tangible impact on the miner's daily working life, which at least some fictional reconstructions acknowledge. *Cwmardy*<sup>28</sup> provides a detailed, if highly jaundiced picture of the colliery management hierarchy, from the pit manager and undermanager, down to the overmen, firemen and examiners (see Figure 1). These lower officials are caricatured as backsliders with "airs and graces", bought by senior management. The overman's "function was supposed to be that of watching over workmen's safety but the colliery company regarded this as secondary to output".<sup>29</sup>

The fictional character gains his post by allowing the undermanager to sleep with his wife, and when the manager's son seduces the hero's daughter, this leads to her death. The equally unsavoury fireman helps to cause a pit death by negligence. During the strike, when the South Wales Miners' Federation tries to stop "safety men" entering the pit, the "officials" become "scabs". Yet, within this demonology, Jones does recognize the existence of officials, and their significance in the running of the mine. At one point, he suggests a more complex relationship:

The officials walked with their lowered heads between their uniformed escort. They were ashamed or shy, for they had worked among these people all their lives and it now hurt some of them that they had to act as open enemies of the strikers. But they could see no alternative. They had to obey instructions or lose their positions, while many of them felt the strikers should not have gone to the length of wanting to leave the pit to the mercy of the waters.<sup>30</sup>

Jones may exaggerate the social distance between the officials and some miners. For the house of the Miners' Federation agent's house sounds similar to the overman's "gaudy" residence, and hewers could earn more than firemen, though they lacked the prospect of advancement.<sup>31</sup>

For Jones, the officials' position is a product of "The subtle divisions deliberately developed between the colliery staff of officials and workmen".<sup>32</sup> Writers who do consider the management function often reach for similar explanations. Challinor<sup>33</sup> explains the growth of functional specialization in colliery management, from its early days, by a mixture of personal ambition, favouritism and divide and rule. In general, such unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of the management and supervisory function, underpins the moralistic attitude to independent craft and supervisory organization among those officers closest to the shopfloor. As Zweiniger-Bargielowska<sup>34</sup> argues, to view colliery managers as

<sup>28</sup> L. Jones, *Cwmardy*. See also, *We Live* (both London, 1986).

<sup>29</sup> Jones, *Cwmardy*, p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

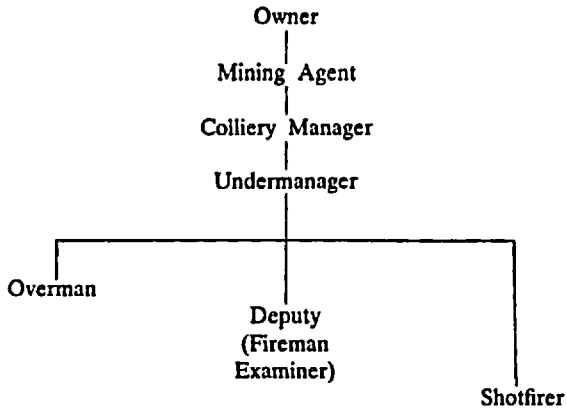
<sup>31</sup> Benson, *British Coalminers*.

<sup>32</sup> Jones, *Cwmardy*, p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> R. Challinor, *The Lancashire and Cheshire Miners* (Newcastle, 1972).

<sup>34</sup> Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Colliery Managers and Nationalisation", p. 60.

“simply agents of the employer” neglects the fact that they were also “employees”. This is doubly true for “officials” like the deputy, who occupied a contradictory and overlapping position on both the bottom rung of the management hierarchy and the top layer of the underground work-force.



The underground coal mining labour force

Figure 1. The three main branches of officer in the coal mining management hierarchy (an “ideal type” diagram)

## LABOUR PROCESS AND LEGISLATION IN THE GENESIS OF THE COLLIERY DEPUTY

The formative years of separate deputies’ union organization lay between the birth of the first, local associations in the North-East coalfield, from the 1870s onwards, and the creation of a national Federation in 1910. During this time, major changes in the British coal industry’s character and legal framework stimulated their growing occupational identity. One was an increase in business size and management sophistication similar to that which saw the arrival of specialist supervisors elsewhere in industry.<sup>35</sup> Another was growing statutory regulation, which departed from the British tradition of industrial *laissez-faire*, and bestowed on the coal mining supervisor a particular status and identity.

### THE DEPUTY AND MODERN MANAGEMENT

Several interrelated changes were taking place in coal mining business organization and working methods. Like deputies’ unionization, these

<sup>35</sup> J. Melling, “Employers and the Rise of Supervisory Unionism, 1914–1939”, in C. Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations. Volume 2, 1914–1939* (London, 1987).



developed unevenly across space and time, reflecting “different geological conditions and historical traditions”,<sup>36</sup> as “best practice” spread from the advanced North-East coalfields.<sup>37</sup> A brief sketch of these changes illuminates the industrial dynamic underlying deputies’ unionization. The first group lay above the ground in “business organisation and management”.<sup>38</sup> Company and colliery size grew, as from the 1850s onwards limited liability legislation allowed private owners to forge huge “public limited” combines, like the Wigan Coal and Iron Company of 1865. By 1894, they were the fifth largest employer with 6,303 colliery workers. A decade later, in 1913, their labour force had grown to 8,928, but they had fallen to ninth. Between 1895 and 1913, average colliery size rose from 235 to 410 workers. As shallower coal sources became exhausted, firms sank large quantities of capital into deeper and larger pits. A growing separation of ownership and control created a new stratum of professional mine “viewers”, who increasingly became permanent, salaried colliery and business managers. Changes in the way miners were paid and their work was organized pointed in the same direction. The decline of the subcontracting “butty” system favoured more direct forms of management control and the extension of professional management, from colliery to line management. Undermanagers and deputies, who had previously administered the subcontract system, switched to direct day wages, once pits grew in size. Underground, there was the transition from pillar-and-stall to longwall mining, which by 1900 accounted for 75 per cent of United Kingdom output. Under the old system, in Britain as in the USA, the “early coal miner was [. . .] an independent craftsman who worked largely without supervision”.<sup>39</sup> He

<sup>36</sup> J. Winterton, “Technological Change and Flexibility in British Coalmining”, Paper to Conference on the Flexible Firm, Cardiff University, September 1988, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> R. Church, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Volume 3, 1830–1913: Victorian Pre-eminence* (Oxford, 1986).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Comparative note: this refers to K. Dix, “Work Relations in the Coal Industry: The Handloading Era, 1880–1930”, in A. Zimbalist, *Case Studies in the Labour Process* (New York, 1979). Another study of the Pennsylvania coalfield is H. W. Aurand, *From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers: The Social Ecology of an Industrial Union, 1869–1897* (Temple, Penn., 1971). Chapter 12 also describes statutory moves to legally regulate underground coal mining safety which echo those in the British industry, discussed below, both in timing and general approach. For instance, a Mines Inspectorate was introduced, followed in 1895 by a form of certification which, according to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, “made the foreman an agent of the state and not of the operator” (p. 153). However, there are obvious dangers in looking for similarities with the British experience. An inter-war commentator, H. M. Watkins, *Coal and Men: An Economic and Social Study of the British and American Coalfields* (London, 1934), was more struck by the differences between British and US coalfields. He found US safety regulations “hardly so exacting or so strictly enforced” (p. 119) and, like Aurand, noted the remarkable ethnic divisions in the American mining work-force, and the levels of violence that employers were prepared to use. Likewise, S. H. F. Hickey, *Workers in Imperial Germany: The Miners of the Ruhr* (Oxford, 1985) describes confessional and political divisions in

worked in small groups, with minimal division of labour and supervision, conducting the entire mining process, including "the placement and firing of the shot". Hence, in the Pennsylvania coalfield of 1890, over 80 per cent of the mining work-force were miners and their helpers, with, on average, about one foreman per mine. According to many commentators:

The adoption of longwall mining allowed increasing specialisation of function among larger teams of miners working longer faces, facilitated a higher degree of supervision by managers, and by requiring a more disciplined performance from the individual miner thereby led to a decline in his independence as an artisan.<sup>40</sup>

For others,<sup>41</sup> the next transition to longwall machine mining was more crucial. This further subdivided the facework process, leading to "the employment of shotfirers"<sup>42</sup> and other specialist workers. Whereas, under pillar-and-stall the overman often rarely saw the men at work, now he was closer to the face and required to allocate places. The increasing scale, depth and mechanization of mining demanded firemen and examiners to check for gas, and full-time, specialist shotfirers to set explosives.

As early as the seventeenth century, there were openings in the British coal industry for men who "aspired to join the aristocracy of labour",<sup>43</sup> such as the overman responsible for work not directly connected with mining, like "sinking shafts and attending sloughs". But, as mining operations grew in scale, "the echelons of management likewise became more extensive", creating more layers within the mining work-force. Altogether, this range of factors, above and below the ground, multiplied the number of specialist supervisors. As their numbers grew, their role increasingly converged into three specialities: general supervision (overman), safety inspection (deputy, fireman, or examiner), and shot-

the German coal mining trade union movement which went far beyond those in Britain.

None of these consider the position of mining supervisors in any detail. This suggests the scope for further comparative work on the occupational identity and trade union affiliations of coal mining supervisors outside Britain. There is the danger that a national study, such as this, suggests some inexorable, global trend in industrial structure, statutory regulation and professional identity, culminating in a separate supervisors' union. In reality, the historical possibilities are much more open: the management hierarchy may involve a less distinctive deputy role; the law may focus statutory responsibility elsewhere (for instance Pennsylvania legislated for "certified miners" in 1889); and, whatever the foregoing, supervisors may remain either non-union or within the industrial miners' union, depending on a host of factors. While certain structural dynamics, such as the "pig-in-the-middle" position of the supervisor and their ambivalent attitude to union organization are likely to recur, other sources of division, like religion and ethnicity may be more important in countries other than Britain, where they were of secondary significance.

<sup>40</sup> Church, *The History of the British Coal Industry*, p. 274.

<sup>41</sup> M. J. Daunton, "Down the Pit: Work in the Great Northern and South Wales Coalfields, 1880-1914", *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 34 (1981).

<sup>42</sup> Dix, "Work Relations in the Coal Industry", p. 164.

<sup>43</sup> Challinor, *The Lancashire and Cheshire Miners*, p. 19.

firing (shotfirer). A similar process took place in the USA, between 1890 and 1930. The number of foremen grew in line with the expansion of the industry, a "new category of shotfirer"<sup>44</sup> emerged, and "each mine had at least one fire boss whose job it was to test for gas in mines". The standardization of the deputy's role created from the myriad of local supervisory jobs a more cohesive and self-conscious nationwide form of sectional consciousness. This trend continued in the 1930s and 1940s, with "technological change in mining methods, the rise of large collieries and a tendency towards amalgamation and concentration resulting in larger colliery companies",<sup>45</sup> and the deputy's role continued to be "affected by changes in the degree of mechanisation, the alterations in payment systems and methods of work organisation".<sup>46</sup>

### LEGAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE DEPUTY ROLE

If changes in the character of the coal mining business and labour process formed the building blocks of the British deputy role, it was government legislation which cemented these together in a way which made a separate craft and supervisory union identity increasingly likely. The legislation of the later nineteenth century affected the whole management function, but none more so than the supervisor. The increasing statutory regulation focused on safety, reflecting both the industry's national prominence and its unique dangers. This further stimulated the formalization of underground supervisory and safety management. England<sup>47</sup> describes this transition:

In the early days of coal-mining, the forerunner of the present day deputy was a man who went into the workings carrying a pole on which was a lighted torch. This was for the purpose of lighting gas, hence the term "fireman". At a later date the "competent person" appointed by the manager was known in

<sup>44</sup> Dix, "Work Relations in the Coal Industry", p. 169.

<sup>45</sup> Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Colliery Managers and Nationalisation", p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> B. J. McCormick, *Industrial Relations in the Coal Industry* (London, 1979), p. 72.

<sup>47</sup> Note: Sources on British colliery deputies. The specialist material here on the colliery deputies is mainly from five internal trade union sources. G. Fellowes, *Historical Records of the General Federation of Colliery Firemen of Great Britain* (Barnsley, 1963) is a chronological summary of all the Federation's conferences and important executive meetings, compiled by a Yorkshire union President. The Trades Union Congress note, *Salient Points in the History of NACODS* (London, 1962) is a brief factual outline. J. W. England, *NACODS: Midland Area, 1908-1963* (Nottingham, 1963), and J. Crawford, *Brief History of NACODS* (London, 1963) are accounts by former Midlands and national union Secretaries, respectively, which duplicate much of Fellowes in a slightly more interpretative style. The former is easily the most rounded attempt at a history, this time concentrating on the Midlands coalfield. J. Lee, *Lancashire and Cheshire Colliery Firemen's Association: A Brief History from its Commencement up to June 30th, 1914* (Wigan, 1914), is an account of the early days in Lancashire by its first Secretary. All are in the author's possession. Specific references to these "histories" are made only when they add to the Fellowes narrative, which is drawn on widely.

some districts as an “examiner” and in others as a deputy, which explains the use of the terms in 1911 Coal Mines Act of “fireman, examiner or deputy”. Fifty years ago, the person appointed to be in charge on the day shift, which was the coal turning shift, was known as the “deputy”, but those on other shifts were known as “examiners” and generally received a lesser rate of pay.

Safety problems like explosions, roof falls and the presence of water, are endemic to coal mining. While the major disasters made the newspaper headlines, the day-to-day attrition of human life caused the greatest carnage. This was particularly evident in older British coalfields, like Lancashire and Cheshire, with poor working conditions, long hours and low earnings. For the period 1851 to 1853, deaths through explosions here were twice the national average. When, in March 1853, an explosion at Ince Hall colliery, near Wigan, killed 55 men, the Inquiry concluded, significantly, that “no qualified person was appointed to fire the shots”.<sup>48</sup> In general, such accidents were caused by a combination of lack of education among colliers, and poor supervision and management.

Hence, from the late nineteenth century onwards, legislation simultaneously improved mining conditions, and gave statutory support to the deputy. These efforts to improve safety encouraged the emergence of a distinctive deputy role. The 1850 Mines Act appointed four inspectors, rising to 83 in 1911.<sup>49</sup> The 1872 Mines Act required the certification of colliery managers and made them responsible for safety in their mine and this encouraged professionalization, as did the spread of mining engineering education and organization. The 1887 Mines Act required the appointment of competent persons to make mine inspections, and to assist them in these duties, though the standard of competency was left to the colliery manager. The 1911 Coal Mines Act introduced a crucial change in the status and duties of the fireman, examiner or deputy. Instead of management merely having to appoint “a competent person”, it further required a Certificate of Competency, and hearing and eye tests every five years. Workplace inspections were increased to twice during each shift, compared to once previously. Finally, it was stipulated that the deputy should be devoted full-time to these statutory duties, except when involved in firing shots or measurement of the work done. Thus deputies gained “an official status for the first time”,<sup>50</sup> cementing an already growing sense of identity and union organization. This, in turn, caused an immediate “alteration of opinion”<sup>51</sup> on the status of deputies amongst their union leaders. Beforehand, they had merely sought wages parity with the day-wage loader: “The deputy now required a certificate and statutory responsibility had been placed on

<sup>48</sup> Challinor, *The Lancashire and Cheshire Miners*, p. 52.

<sup>49</sup> Church, *The History of the British Coal Industry*, p. 424.

<sup>50</sup> England, *NACODS*, p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

him, so the aim was now at least 50/- per week, one week of Annual Holiday with pay, free coal and pay for overtime". As McCormick<sup>52</sup> points out: "The problem of supervision is one that affects not merely the relationship between the miner and deputy but also the deputies' relationship to undermanagers and other officers".

The statutory responsibility for safety added a singular twist to this more general dilemma of torn loyalties and responsibilities, depicted in Jones's fictional portrait. On the one hand, they were supervisors, paid by the employer to control the underground miner, and expected to display complete loyalty in exploiting productive time to the full. On the other, they were workers and trade unionists, recent graduates from the coal face, who lived and worked alongside ordinary miners. Here the pressure could be contradictory: officially to protect the health and safety of their workmates; unofficially to "turn a blind eye" to fast and dangerous working practices. They had also become statutory safety officers, responsible to the law at accident enquiries, and expected to carry the safety ideal against the economic exigencies of the day-to-day labour process. Hence, their aspirations for a neutral "civil servant" status and for a separate union, free from the interference of both employer and miner.

### **THE GENERAL FEDERATION OF FIREMEN'S, EXAMINER'S AND DEPUTIES' ASSOCIATIONS OF GREAT BRITAIN (1910-1947)**

Although the deputies' occupational identity emerged and solidified through changes in the nature of coal mining and its legal framework, it was not preordained that they should seek separate representation in the way they did. Deputies "suffered the general problems affecting foremen in industry",<sup>53</sup> and at the same time, engineering supervisors were separating from their old craft unions. The coal mining situation, however, was different. First, the deputy was not always distinct from other management and skilled support groups. Second, while the Miners' Federation had a reputation for hewer dominance, it remained a heterogeneous, industry union, not a tight-knit craft organization. Whereas deputies have maintained a separate union to the present day, many similar skilled groups eventually affiliated to it. As elsewhere, the "pig-in-the-middle" position of the deputy, in a highly conflictual industry, seems to have precipitated separation. The pressure for a national deputies' organization followed the establishment of an effective national miners' union and industry bargaining. The statutory emphasis on safety placed a special premium on professional neutrality and independence.

<sup>52</sup> McCormick, *Industrial Relations in the Coal Industry*, p. 72.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

## THE STRUGGLE FOR SEPARATE UNION REPRESENTATION

Early this century, unionized mining supervisors were likely to belong to the Miners' Federation.<sup>54</sup> However, independent local deputies' organization had commenced. A strong Durham association began in 1876, before the formation of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. Derbyshire started the next wave, in 1908.<sup>55</sup> As elsewhere, the formation of the Lancashire and Cheshire Colliery Firemens Association was prompted by deputies' exclusion from eight hours legislation, and it began with a meeting of Pemberton colliery firemen in 1909.

The first meeting of the General Federation of Firemen's, Examiners' and Deputies' Associations of Great Britain (the Federation) was at the Punch Bowl Inn, Blossom Street, York on 18 June 1910. Five local associations were represented – Durham, Northumberland, Lancashire and Cheshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, and North Wales (Table 1) – with Scotland and South Wales notable absentees. Those present had only a minority of their deputies in membership, totalling 4,080. The second, August, meeting elected officers and established a Federation paralleling the Miners' Federation. They were joined by South Wales at the third, January 1911, meeting in Wigan. When they met next, in London on 8 March, to form a deputation on the Mines Bill to Winston Churchill, the Mines Minister, the dominance of the North-East coalfields was clear. Of the 29 delegates, 19 came from Durham and Northumberland, the remainder scattered between Lancashire and Cheshire (2), the "national" (Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire) (4), South Wales (3) and North Wales (1). The summer 1911 conference welcomed the Yorkshire association.

During the Federation's early years, membership rose rapidly, as more local associations affiliated. The January 1913 conference reported the withdrawal of the past President's large Durham association. They

Table 1. *Affiliated Federation membership 1910*

Area	Number employed as deputies	Number deputies in an association	Union density
Durham	3,000	1,900	63%
Northumberland	1,500	1,360	91%
Lancs and Cheshire	2,500	450	18%
Derby and Notts	4,000	250	6%
North Wales	300	120	33%
Total	11,300	4,080	36% (of affiliated areas)

<sup>54</sup> Lee, *Lancashire and Cheshire Colliery Firemans' Association*.

<sup>55</sup> England, *NACODS*.

returned for the 1914 summer conference, by which time there were nine affiliates, including Scotland and North Staffordshire. Membership reached 12,450 in 1914, a trebling since 1910. By the January 1915 conference, Cumberland had affiliated, raising this to 13,083 out of an estimated 25,000 deputies nationally, a density of 52 per cent. The Midlands "National" appointed a full-time secretary in 1914, followed by Lancashire and Cheshire and Yorkshire the next year. The summer 1917 conference lauded itself as a "vital force" in the industry, incorporating twelve area associations, including Cumberland, Forest of Dean and Somerset for the first time. By the next summer, Bristol and East Kent had joined. January 1919 marked another highpoint, with fourteen areas present, membership at 20,205, and Lanarkshire seeking affiliation. Another Scottish association, East and Mid-Lothian, joined in the summer.

The Federation endeavoured to increase its coalfield coverage, without duplicating affiliates, and while maintaining a clear occupational logic. It took a hand in filling gaps and settling demarcation disputes, as at Nuneaton and Manton collieries in 1916, where the Midlands "National" was vying with North Staffordshire and Yorkshire for representation.<sup>56</sup> The rank-and-file were unionizing spontaneously at a local level, and the distinction between deputies and other colliery officers was still blurred. This early complexity and fluidity of officer's representation is illustrated by the January 1913 affiliation moves from the "Notts Undermanagers and Deputies Association", the "Derbyshire Undermanagers and Deputies Institute" and the "North Staffordshire Underground Colliery Firemen's and Shotlighters Association". The last soon joined, but the others were rejected because the local deputies' associations were already affiliated. The January 1920 conference refused South Staffordshire's application, since they were a breakaway from the affiliated "National". The following year, they became the fifteenth affiliate. In 1926, Leicestershire, another secession from the "National", was rejected only to join later. The Derbyshire deputies association was preceded by two competing unions: a "Nottinghamshire Under-Managers and Deputies Association" and a "Midland Mining Officials Association".<sup>57</sup> Yet its leaders remained convinced "that no union could adequately protect the interests of the deputy if it also catered for the undermanager".<sup>58</sup> The summer 1919 conference rejected an application from the "Federation of Colliery Undermanagers", because this would blur the distinctive deputy identity. Likewise, in January 1922 they rejected an amalgamation overture from the "Clerks Union", designed to resist the owners' anti-union benefit scheme.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

During 1922, membership fell dramatically by around 3,000, in the face of employer and Miners' Federation hostility, and rising unemployment. Henceforth, it declined until the Second World War, though there were new affiliations, such as Leicestershire in 1928 and Snowdown in 1932. Only with nationalization did the Federation begin to approach full coalfield coverage. The spring 1945 conference recorded 1,800 new members, making a total of 25,000 nationally. The recognition problems with the Yorkshire owners and the Scottish Miners' Federation, were nearing (partial) resolution. For the first time, a fully representative deputies' union was in sight. During the inter-war years, however, the Federation waged a grim struggle for survival against the coal owners and the Miners' Federation (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Affiliated Federation membership 1933*

Associations (17)	Members
Scotland	1,160
Cumberland	290
Northumberland	—
Durham	1,820
Yorkshire	600
Staffordshire	650
The National (Midland counties)	850
Lancs and Cheshire	1,400
Cannock Chase	380
Leicestershire	80
North Wales	—
Somerset	100
Bristol	30
Gloucestershire	41
South Wales	3,000
Kent (Chislet)	20
Snowdown	25
Total	10,456

## THE SEARCH FOR RECOGNITION AND INFLUENCE

From the first Federation meeting the organizational obstacles were clear. There were great variations in district wage rates and daily working hours, with some areas receiving housing and coal allowances. They discussed the eight hours legislation, and supported the North Wales Mining Officials Association's proposals that all firemen, examiners or deputies should be statutorily qualified. To pursue such issues they required recognition from government and industry regulators, and, above all, from the employers. The first came quickly, and the union became very quickly part of the industry's regulatory furniture. They met the Mines Ministry to discuss the 1911 Coal Mines Act, and were



later invited to the Special Conference on the 1915 Mines Act. There was no such welcome from the employers in the Mining Association of Great Britain, and the union failed to gain national recognition until nationalization. However, employers were often prepared to negotiate with local associations at pit, company and local levels.<sup>59</sup> Thus in the Midlands, "As the union grew in numbers, it was able to assist deputies to obtain reasonably good agreements with individual colliery companies." In 1917, that association had negotiated only one pit agreement, but the next year it "succeeded in making agreements with the coal owners association in each wages district".<sup>60</sup>

### HOSTILITY FROM THE MINE OWNERS

In some coalfields employers went beyond a passive refusal to recognize the Federation and challenged the union's existence. Several early Lancashire secretaries were victimized for their efforts.<sup>61</sup> In 1916, the "National" secretary counselled deputies against being drawn into a management-dominated colliery union.<sup>62</sup> Later, the worst area was Yorkshire, where from 1916 the employers formed a "Colliery Officials Mutual Benefit Society", which provided superannuation and other benefits, on condition that deputies left their union. This strategy resembles that described by Melling in engineering, and was highly successful. By 1923, large numbers had left the union for the scheme. Yorkshire membership, having risen to 3,200 by 1922, plummeted to 1,000 two years later, and to 600 in 1929, and did not regain four figures until 1945. The summer 1923 conference heard reports of the Wheldale and Maltby colliery disasters, where all the deputies had left the union for the scheme. The Yorkshire-based national president, Carney, resigned at the 1923 summer conference because he was unemployed and could not find work anywhere in the county as a deputy.

These problems were not restricted to Yorkshire. In the northern coalfields, owner hostility formed an unholy alliance with Miners' Federation resistance to independent deputies organization. The 1924 summer conference heard that the Durham secretary had been sacked for attending and recorded that persecution was rife. After 1926, even previously "easy" areas, like the Midlands, suffered a dramatic membership fall, as:

Individual colliery companies offered private agreements, some conditional upon withdrawal from the union and others which allowed union membership, but destroyed the collective bargaining with the local coal owner's association. Some

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>61</sup> Lee, *Lancashire and Cheshire Colliery Firemans' Association*.

<sup>62</sup> England, *NACODS*, p. 22.

pits could have a private union, some sold their freedom for a blue suit (value £3 per year), others were offered a small pension – anything to persuade deputies to become disorganised, and the membership figures reveal how many fell for the bait.<sup>63</sup>

The 1932 summer conference returned to the serious position in Durham, where the owners were demanding that deputies do facework in addition to their duties and work overtime without payment under the threat of dismissal. The owners' scheme also spread to North Wales and Northumberland, who both left in 1927/1928 in response to handsome offers from the employers. Northumberland returned at the summer 1930 conference, only to leave again and return in the summer of 1935. The 1938 summer conference reported that Kent deputies had signed an agreement with owners against Federation rules. By 1941 the owners' schemes had spread from Yorkshire to the East Midlands and were keeping an estimated 7,000 members outside the Federation.

The tide turned in the 1940s. Yorkshire membership rose to 900, as the union gained recognition at employer strongholds, such as Hatfield in 1942 and Bentley in 1943. The same was true at Snowdown and Betteshanger in Kent during 1942. That year, the Federation met with the "Colliery Officials Staffs Associations" to decide on a policy of co-operation against the owners' scheme. However, a new Yorkshire threat emerged in 1946: the creation by J. Hunter, the General Manager of the Amalgamated Doncaster Collieries, of a new non-political management union covering the Executive Group, General Manager, Agents and Managers, Clerical and Administrative Staff, and under-officials up to and including undermanager. Once more, deputies who refused to join were victimized.

## HOSTILITY FROM THE MINERS' FEDERATION

The miners' union resisted independent deputies' organization in many areas until nationalization, and did not concede full representation until 1973.<sup>64</sup> The deputies faced these problems from the first and they encouraged national organization. During 1911 and 1912, the Federation complained to the Home Secretary and the Trades Union Congress about the Miners' Federation's attempts to intimidate and absorb the Northumberland and Lanarkshire deputies' associations. These difficulties coupled with employer hostility caused internal conflict. Durham withdrew for three years in 1911, and other areas, such as the Midlands "National", countenanced affiliation to the Miners' Federation, as a

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>64</sup> A. Marsh, *Trade Union Handbook* (3rd ed., London, 1984). There is now a 1991 5th edition. See also A. Marsh and V. Ryan, *Historical Directory of Trade Unions: Volume 2 – Non-Manual Unions* (London, 1980).

solution to their recognition problems. The Northumberland association rejected such an invitation from the Northumberland Miners' Federation on 24 June 1916. Durham was an early Federation stronghold, with 1,900 out of 3,000 deputies in 1910, but it became a trouble spot. Conference resolutions from Durham for affiliation to the Miners' Federation were heavily defeated by the leadership in 1918, 1919 and 1920. The Federation Secretary, W. Frowen, cited persecution by the miners' union and argued that deputies's interests required protection by a deputies' union led by deputies.

As with the employers, hostility was not universal. The 1914 summer conference received a conciliatory response from the Miners' Federation of Great Britain General Secretary, Thomas Ashton, to their attempt to recruit firemen, examiners and deputies. He submitted letters from local miners' agents and bodies, which said they had no objection to the Federation organizing these groups, and that the Miners' Federation would help them. However, the same conference heard of the Scottish Miners' Federation's attempts to coerce firemen into their ranks. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain had limited powers over its local affiliates, and when the two national union leaderships met on 17 March 1914, the issue was simply referred back to the Scottish miners. Their Secretary simply refused to recognize the existence of any Scottish Firemen and Shotlighters' Association.<sup>65</sup>

Conference delegates were indignant over the miners' tyrannical attitude, and other small coalfield unions felt the same pressure. In 1911 the Miners' Federation of Great Britain had claimed all workers in the industry. The South Wales Miners' Federation recognized "sectional" cards until 1915, when it began to treat them as non-unionists. Their 1920 rules laid claim to "all workers and officials" employed in the coalfield,<sup>66</sup> and violent intimidation became a feature of the inter-war years. A deputation from the National Federation of Enginemmen, Stokers and Kindred Trades Association brought their concerns over the Miners' Federation "absorption threat" to the summer 1916 Federation conference. They called for an alliance around organizing efforts, legislative lobbying, resistance to absorption, and canvassed the development of a "counter unity" to the miners. Concern with Miners' Federation hostility in the northern coalfields persisted through the inter-war years. In 1923, miners at Hebburn Colliery, Durham, struck because their deputies would not join the Miners' Federation. The strike lasted ten weeks, but failed when the miners returned to work and the deputies remained in their union. The Federation levied its members to support their Durham brothers.

<sup>65</sup> Long, "The Economic and Social History of the Scottish Coal Industry", pp. 350-357, discusses the Scottish miners' perspective.

<sup>66</sup> Francis and Smith, *The Fed*, p. 66.

Well into the 1940s, the Scottish miners' union continued to resist all independent deputies' organization. In 1943, they persuaded employers to stop a pay increase for deputies outside their union. The following year, Scottish deputies struck for recognition, without Federation financial support, as did 1,700 Durham deputies. However, as with colliery managers,<sup>67</sup> war and nationalization were a major spur to stronger organization (see Table 3 for Federation membership up to nationalization). In 1946, the newly-formed National Union of Mineworkers did support the Yorkshire deputies against the maverick managers union. None the less, the Scottish and Durham problems persisted, and the miners still had unwelcome plans for a merger. The deputies restated their independence by forming a centralized national union in 1947, the current National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS). By then, the National Union of Mineworkers had conceded full negotiating rights for the position of deputy, though it insisted on joint negotiations for shotfirers and overmen, of whom 80 per cent and 50 per cent respectively were in the deputies' Federation. Again the main resistance came from the Durham and Scottish miners. Deputies' wages still varied considerably in the first national agreement negotiated with the National Coal Board.

Relations with the Miners' Federation varied from coalfield to coalfield. As the 1929 Federation President, W. T. Miller, said, some miners' leaders realized early on that "there was a divergence of status which was beyond their scope". In Lancashire and Cheshire, demarcation agreements had been reached between the Miners' Federation and other unions by 1918. In Derbyshire, relations were "very good"<sup>68</sup> by 1914, and the Miners' Federation supported the deputies' demand for state employment, and even helped them to gain recognition in 1917. By 1918, a pragmatic agreement had been reached that all deputies, firemen, examiners, shotfirers and overmen should be in the Federation, except for current Miners' Federation members who wished to continue membership to secure their union pension. The summer 1938 Federation conference stood in tribute to the recently deceased Yorkshire miner's president, Herbert Smith. He was described as a "friend" who had helped the Yorkshire association maintain its autonomy in face of employer aggression.

The Federation faced greatest resistance where it was strongest and most deep-rooted, especially in the northern coalfields. Here, three factors coalesced into Miners' Federation hostility:

The recruitment of under-officials from the ranks of miners, the instinctive tendency of any union to follow the line of advancement of its members and the ideological impetus of industrial unionism and syndicalism.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Colliery Managers and Nationalisation".

<sup>68</sup> England, *NACODS*, p. 19.

<sup>69</sup> McCormick, *Industrial Relations in the Coal Industry*, p. 71.

Table 3. *Federation membership up to nationalization*

Year	Federation	Yorkshire	"National"	(Midlands counties)
1910	4,080			(1)*
1911	4,080			(2)
1912	7,000		350	(10)
1913	9,000	1,500		
1914	12,540	1,250		
1915	13,083	1,800	1,454	(37)
1916		1,800		
1917		1,300		
1918		1,200		
1919	20,205	2,500		
1920		2,500	3,303	(48)
1921		3,200	3,087	(50)
1922		3,200		
1923		2,000		
1924		1,000		
1925		1,000	2,139	(46)
1926	16,000	1,000	1,893	(48)
1927		1,000		
1928	13,000	750		
1929		600		
1930	11,000	800	978	(38)
1931		600		
1932		600	861	(36)
1933	10,456	600		
1934		600		
1935		600	877	(40)
1936		600		
1937		600		
1938		650		
1939		900		
1940		900	1,538	(42)
1941		900		
1942		900		
1943	13,000	900		
1944		900		
1945	25,000	1,098	2,753	(52)
1946	20,000	1,300		
1947†	25,000	1,300		
1948		2,850		
1949		3,855		
		4,979		(66)

\* number of Branches

† nationalization and formation of NACODS

To this must be added the bad nineteenth-century experience of local sectionalism in coalfields like Lancashire. As a post-war deputies' national Secretary records,

For many years the attempt to organise deputies was met with hostility and in the northern areas in particular the miners considered that any union other than theirs' was incompetent to represent this grade. It was to combat this dual act of threats, intimidation and obstruction on behalf of the coal owners and the miners that created the agitation for combination through federation. Some areas had achieved recognition and it required the strength of these areas to form a combined authority which would result in obtaining national recognition and securing improvements in wages and conditions.<sup>70</sup>

### RELATIONS WITH THE TRADES UNION CONGRESS AND THE LABOUR PARTY

From the outset, the Federation saw itself as part of the wider labour movement. It first applied for affiliation to the Trades Union Congress in 1912, and tried again in 1917, when it was refused because some local associations were already affiliated. A year later it was accepted and had a resolution passed, for all deputies to become state employees. However, from the outset, relations with the Congress were bedevilled by the problems with the Miners' Federation. During 1917, meetings were held with the miners, Congress's Parliamentary Committee, the Coal Mines Controller and Members of Parliament to overcome these obstacles. Congress conceded that deputies should be separately organized, and several fruitless meetings were held with the Scottish Miners' Federation. The Federation hoped that Congress would halt the "tyranny" in northern coalfields. However, the Miners' Federation were a giant force in the British trade union movement, and in 1924 the Congress Disputes Committee decided in their favour over the Hebburn strike and Scottish dispute.

The January 1925 Federation conference heard that they had been excluded from the Congress, apparently due to their behaviour in a local dispute and because there were too many unions in the industry. By the summer Congress had rescinded this decision. Meetings with the Congress on representation rights continued through the 1920s, but with little success and by 1930 there was a growing mood for disaffiliation. Two years later, however, they welcomed the Congress proposal for statutory Joint Advisory Councils to deal with union organization in the coalfields. A year on, with the Scottish problem much worse, and Congress's attitude unsatisfactory, the executive was considering withdrawal. Harris from the Congress General Council attended the summer 1933 conference and asked the Federation not to leave. They did so,

<sup>70</sup> Crawford, *Brief History of NACODS*.

nevertheless, only returning in the summer of 1940. Even then, discontent with the situation in the northern coalfields led to further, unsuccessful pressures to disaffiliate.

Affiliation to the Labour Party was first proposed on 6 January 1920, but continually rejected by conference. Local unions in Durham, Yorkshire, Northumberland and Scotland did affiliate, however, and national leaders, such as W. T. Miller,<sup>71</sup> were lifelong Labour members. Dissatisfied with the support its campaign for recognition rights was getting from the Trades Union Congress and various government departments, the Federation considered sponsoring its own Member of Parliament. The January 1924 conference talked of linking industrial and political activities thus, and at the 1931 summer conference, Miller returned to the need to be allied to a political force in order to survive. Deputies' leaders like Miller also supported the labour movement call for nationalization, in contrast to their immediate superiors in the National Association of Colliery Managers, who took a "neutral stance".<sup>72</sup> Today, the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (NACODS) affiliates to the Labour Party, the Trades Union Congress and the Miners International Federation.<sup>73</sup>

#### 1926 AND ALL THAT: SUPERVISORY TRADE UNIONISM UNDER STRAIN

Industrial conflict had a cathartic effect on relations between the miners and the deputies. Their different conceptions of trade unionism were crystallized by the major industry conflicts of the 1920s. Whenever the Miners' Federation took industrial action to improve wages and conditions, the deputies were placed in an invidious position. They risked being swamped by the concerns and tactics of the larger union, and its temptation to use "safety" as the ultimate weapon in an industrial dispute. Thus the difficult relations with the Miners' Federation worsened during the 1921 and 1926 coal disputes, when working "safety men", from the Federation and other unions, became a bone of contention. The Miners' Federation generally allowed safety men to work and even draw coal, where this was necessary to keep a mine open and safe. However, there were constant disputes over whether deputies had overstepped this mark and were undermining the effectiveness of the strike.

<sup>71</sup> W. T. Miller is the author's great-grandfather. This article arises from a biographical doctoral study, "Christian Brethren, Union Brother: A Study of the Relationship between Religious Nonconformity and Trade Union Leadership, in the Life of the Coal Mining Deputies' Official, W. T. Miller, 1880-1963" (Ph.D., Wolverhampton University, 1993). See also, "Miller, William Thomas", in J. Bellamy and J. Saville, *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Volume 11* (Oxford, 1993).

<sup>72</sup> Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Colliery Managers and Nationalisation", p. 68.

<sup>73</sup> Marsh, *Trade Union Handbook*.

In addition, whenever the militant wing of the Miners' Federation wished to escalate the action, the issue of withdrawing all safety men came to the fore. Since many were Federation members, and the deputies refused to join or accept the authority of the Miners' Federation dominated local safety committees, a growing distrust of the deputies' independent organization was inevitable.

The Federation's 1921 spring special conference on the "Coal Crisis" anticipated an employer drive to cut the wages of all mine workers. The June executive reported a mixed response to the dispute. Many areas, including Lanarkshire, Fife, Northumberland, Durham, Yorkshire, and Lancashire and Cheshire were "all out". A second group of areas had mainly stopped work. In Cumberland about 50 deputies were working pumps. In North Staffordshire only 8 firemen and a few overmen were working. In North Wales 69 deputies were doing their own work and 39 doing other work, as against 391 who were not working. In South Wales 718 out of 900 members were receiving local out-of-work grants, with the remainder working as safety men. The Somerset deputies were almost equally divided between 68 working and 55 not. A third group of areas were largely working, including practically all those in South Staffordshire, Bristol, Gloucestershire, and East Kent, and most in the Midlands "National" area. There was no enthusiasm for the conflict anywhere, and two areas, Cumberland and "National", mention Miners' Federation coercion as the reason for striking. Generally, the union felt itself embroiled in a dispute which was outside their control, and the summer 1921 conference called for the leadership to secure recognition with the employers, so that they could make their own bargaining arrangements at district and national level. Where they did participate, the deputies also shared in the employer backlash. In North Wales, for example, the owners would now only negotiate with individual branches.

Prior to the 1926 strike, the Federation leadership met with the Miners' Federation to agree that safety men should remain at work, but that no coal should be produced. Later, on the ground, the response was more mixed. England,<sup>74</sup> writing from the perspective of the Midlands "National" association, describes the General Strike, as "a disastrous period" for the deputies, who were confused and divided, some working, some striking, with no say in the conduct of the dispute.

At some pits the whole of them were on strike, some owners allowed those to work who were willing to produce coal and at some pits they were all working. Some members of the executive were working, and naturally this caused discontent among the strikers.

In this coalfield, many deputies joined the Spencer "industrial" union.<sup>75</sup> Others were victimized, while the union's funds were exhausted.

<sup>74</sup> England, *NACODS*, p. 29.

<sup>75</sup> A. R. Griffin and C. P. Griffin, "The Non-Political Trade Union", ch. 5 in A. Briggs and J. Saville, *Essays in Labour History, Volume 3, 1918-1939* (London, 1977).



The Federation leadership was clearly unhappy about the dispute. They were industrial moderates, committed to their president, W. T. Miller's view that union influence increased, "By joint reasoning, and fair consideration of all parties concerned [. . .] not by the application of brute force." However, they did not ally themselves with those forces who wished to undermine the Miners' Federation. At their January 1927 conference, Miller criticized the "non-political" illusions of the breakaway Spencer union, but bemoaned the intrusion of "Party politics" into trade unionism, and hoped for a restoration of "unity". He further commended the Mond/Turner talks, and called for industrial co-operation "in the settlement of industrial difficulties". This was the policy the Federation had "always stood for". That summer, he went further, advocating mediation and machinery, "For investigating all labour troubles, compulsory arbitration and settlements if need be, with strikes and lockouts made illegal". In a pacifist vein, he coupled industrial disputes with warfare as destructive social evils. In practical terms, it would not be long before the Miners' Federation leadership was articulating a similar collaborationist agenda, under force of circumstance. For the deputies, however, this was a statement of long-held principle, which was challenged and reinforced by the strike-torn 1920s. "Like other managerial and professional trade unions",<sup>76</sup> the deputies suffered from the dilemma of a "conflict between professional ethic and trade unionism". In times of industrial warfare, this dilemma was most painfully tested.

#### THE INDUSTRIAL AGENDA OF THE COLLIERY DEPUTIES UNION: CO-OPERATION, SAFETY AND RESPONSIBILITY

After the 1911 Mines Act, the Midlands "National" Secretary, Herbert Gill, put five questions to non-unionists:

- 1 Are you satisfied with your conditions of employment?
- 2 Are your wages satisfactory?
- 3 Can you carry out the Act to your satisfaction?
- 4 Dare you make your report when things are not as you would like them, without consulting your undermanager?
- 5 Are you subject to the possibility of being fetched from home, and being made to alter your report, after having made what you consider to be a true report?<sup>77</sup>

His proposals included certification of the three types of officer (the deputy proper or examiner or fireman, the shotfirer, and the overman) a place on the Board of Examiners for Mine Certificates, state-paid, full-time deputies and inclusion in the eight hours legislation.

Throughout the inter-war years, the deputies pursued two linked policies. The first was to define and secure their "status", as a distinctive

<sup>76</sup> Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Colliery Managers and Nationalisation", p. 67.

<sup>77</sup> England, *NACODS*, pp. 18-19.

craft/professional group with a particular set of skills and responsibilities, which set them apart from ordinary miners. Against the industry's background of statutory regulation, they aspired to a "civil servant" status. The second was to find a "voice" in the industry, recognized and consulted by employers, government and its agencies. The two were soldered together by the issue of underground safety. Their status was bolstered by a special claim to expertise, neutrality and statutory authority, which was legitimized and publicized at conferences and regular meeting with the mining inspectorate. Industrial co-operation was a prerequisite for this ethic of responsibility, and was promoted by their leaders as a panacea for industry safety and prosperity. Wages received a relatively low prominence, especially at Federation level. In part, this was due to their failure to gain bargaining recognition at this level, but it also reflected their desire for an ethical "professional" image of "service".

## STATUS

Self-interest in enhanced status and public interest in mining safety coincided in the Federation's struggle for legal recognition and definition of the deputy's role. One dimension was the refusal to join the Miners' Federation and the selective attitude to aspiring affiliates. Fundamental to this stance was a need to consolidate an identifiable national position of "deputy" from the confusion of coalfield diversity. Hence, there was a 1914 deputation to the Chief Inspector of Mines on the "illegal" employment of "assistant firemen" in Yorkshire. He agreed to stop this immediately, thanked them for making the mines safer, and promised to consult them in future. Moreover, he confirmed that the terms fireman, examiner or deputy (as variously used) had the same legal meaning. This required that they spend all their time on deputy work, and that they should not be used as workmen, other than to fire shots and to measure the work done in their district. Suitably encouraged that they were a "vital and necessary" factor in the industry, the Federation resolved to meet him again to consider "raising the status" of the firemen's certificate with the "only objective" of obtaining the best class of mine workers as firemen.

Three resolutions submitted to the 1918 Trades Union Congress all aimed to further delineate the deputy's position. A motion on the eight hours legislation sought to reduce and standardize their working week. The second (and long-running) resolution on the "state employment of colliery deputies", argued that this would reduce the number of mine accidents, if

The Official who is responsible for the daily inspection of a district of a mine was so placed as to enable him to make an unbiassed report as to the condition of the district.

The third called for a statutory "Board of Appeal", when deputies were dismissed by the employers, to ensure that this was justified. Again this was designed to protect the deputy's impartiality and to allow him to make decisions on safety without fearing repercussions from his employer.

Tightening control over shotfiring, on highly legitimate safety grounds, also served to draw this second category of worker more clearly into the deputy fold, and to emphasize their distinctive craft skills. The 1919 summer conference discussed "uncertified" shotfirers (the lowest tier of officer), and this issue recurred almost annually, in different guises up until nationalization. In 1926, the "National" secretary insisted that the 1913 Explosives in Coal Mines Order meant that shotfirers' qualifications should be "the same as the fireman, examiner or deputy".<sup>78</sup> They also wanted the "overman" (the highest grade of supervisor, though the least formally qualified and the least likely to share their full identity) to sign a statutory report, thus enhancing safety and drawing them into their professional ambit. In 1935, they sought to lay down the number of shots a deputy or shotfirer could fire. Two years later, they proposed that prospective deputies or shotfirers should spend a four-week probationary period with an experienced officer. In 1939, they deprecated the practice of shotfirers being employed and paid by contractors.

There were, of course, more transparently self-interested demands, like the 1919 proposal for a 30 per cent wages increase and shorter hours. Their 1925 "Five Point Policy" included a five-day week, proper consultative and representative machinery, a reorganization of all staff grades, the cessation of all new sinkings for five to ten years, and compulsory industry retirement at 65. When, in 1928, conference called for a uniform rate of pay and conditions for deputies, they were once again trying to forge a single occupational identity. In 1940 they agreed, "that the Federation decline to accept members other than bona-fide overmen, deputies, firemen, examiners and shotfirers". The final capstone of occupational identity was Federation's 1946 demand that membership should be a condition of employment for all deputies, shotfirers, and overmen.

## VOICE

There are dangers in highlighting the Federation's "political" activities, rather than the more central and mundane organizing and bargaining work carried out by local associations. The main bargaining levels remained the local area, the colliery company and the individual pit. The Federation had no national office or full-time National Secretary before nationalization. None the less, the policy of "winning friends and

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

influencing people" did pervade their whole trade union style. Failing national recognition from the employers, they looked to government and the industry's statutory regulators as the mainspring for national recognition, enhanced status and improved safety. This meant a regular procession of delegations to the Mines Ministry and Inspectorate. These lobbied for bargaining rights, new legislation, and representation on colliery disaster enquiries and the industry's consultative and regulatory bodies. The result was a close relationship with the Mines Inspectorate, at all levels, from the Chief Inspector addressing national conference, to local inspectors giving talks on safety to local branch meetings. The "National's" 1913 rules required that a lecture be given at every branch at least once a year.<sup>79</sup> In 1915, the Federation demanded more inspectors in Yorkshire, and a year later the Secretary claimed "good understanding" with the Chief Inspector.

In 1918, a Federation deputation asked the Mines Controller for full representation on all committees alongside the Miners' Federation, to no avail. From the Ministry of Labour, they obtained the reinstatement of the sacked Yorkshire leader, H. Carney. A ministry spokesman also addressed the summer 1917 conference on the Reconstruction Committee and government plans for Industrial Councils, including deputies' representation. During 1922, there were meetings with the Labour and Mines Ministries over amendments to the Explosives Order, unemployment pay and compensation for members, and the Miners' Federation problem. Over that year, there were five meetings and two deputations with the Home Office and Ministry of Mines. This pattern continued in the depressed 1930s, though "often nothing really tangible emerged".<sup>80</sup> The Mines Minister, Foot, thanked the January 1932 conference, for help in framing safety legislation. A decade later, they welcomed Ministry plans for District Advisory Committees, including them, to deal with accidents from roof falls. When, in 1943, the Miners' Federation again obtained national bargaining, the Federation called for similar machinery. A year later, they censored the Ministry of Fuel and Power, for still excluding them from negotiations on the wages and conditions of deputies, shotfirers and overmen.

The Federation became a constant presence at disaster enquiries, as at Senghenydd, South Wales, in October 1913, where the 439 dead included seven firemen. Conferences heard detailed enquiry reports, and passed resolutions on the issues involved. The inter-war President and Lancashire Secretary, W. T. Miller, like other officials, represented them at numerous mining disaster enquiries into causes of explosions, including: Haigh Pit, Whitehaven, Bentley, Wath Main, Lyme Pit, Garswood Hall, Wharncliffe-Woodmoor, Valleyfield (Scotland), Mossfield Colliery,

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Longton and Gresford. In 1936 he was appointed to the Coal Commission, and two years later he represented the union of three important mining committees: the Holland Committee of Enquiry into the Qualifications of Colliery officials, the Holidays with Pay Committee, and the Royal Commission on Safety in Coal Mines. The last set standards for the post-war nationalized industry, and England<sup>81</sup> regards it as "one of the most important enquiries in the mining industry".

They recommended that the deputy should be responsible for all operations carried on in his district: that the district should be of such a size that it can be examined in one and a half hours, that there should be a general report in addition to the pre-shift report; that he should be able to see the gas cap from one and a quarter per cent upwards, and that deputies' hours as determined by the 1908 Act with subsequent amendments were now eight and a half.

Once again, concern for safety and a desire to gain the deputy proper "status" marched hand in hand.

It also became the practice to hold high-profile discussions on key safety issues and to have demonstration of new inventions. The January 1928 conference witnessed a demonstration of the internal lighter on the flame lamp and they proposed meeting the Mines Ministry to promote this. The summer conference reported meetings between the executive and Ministry on the Ringrose Detectors and a new Report Book for Shotfirers, and was addressed by a Ministry spokesman on first aid in mines. In January 1931 they criticized Ministry regulations on small airways, bad ventilation, shotfiring, size of districts, management negligence, and requested inspectors be given more power. In June 1933 they were impressed by a demonstration of the Cardox Shell for shotfiring, at the factory where it was produced, and agreed to lobby the Ministry. A growing concern, raised in January 1934, was the impact of mining mechanization on accidents, and again they turned to the inspectorate for better controls and training. To this day, the deputies union is "opposed to any attempts to lower the standards, responsibilities and qualifications of Her Majesty's Inspector of Mines".<sup>82</sup>

The Federation leaders set a high moral tone, and were quite prepared to damn any members exposed as failing in their duty at disaster enquiries. The two leading national figures, the South Wales Secretary, W. Frowen JP (National Secretary, 1914–1939), and the Lancashire Secretary, W. T. Miller (President, 1926–1939; National Secretary, 1939–1943) each received the OBE. Miller was a member of the nonconformist religious group, the Churches of Christ. In 1943 he resigned, to join the wartime Ministry of Fuel and Power inspectorate. In his departure speech, he insisted that: "The aim of the Federation should not be trying to make life easy for its members, but striving to make members

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>82</sup> Marsh, *Trade Union Handbook*, p. 166.

great enough for their life's work." Herbert Gill was the first "National" Secretary and Federation President in 1921. He was "an ardent Methodist"<sup>83</sup> and "a capable speaker, forthright and trustworthy". He claimed their "only incentive was the righteousness and justice of our cause", adding, on the theme of service:

Somebody denied themselves to make the world better for us to live in; let us follow in their footsteps and if necessary deny ourselves, in order that the world will be better for our kiddies and everyone to live in.

Such men and the values they espoused were characteristic of the deputies as a trade union. Their officers may have been "labour aristocrats", but their Federation looked well beyond the mere regulation of trade conditions, to the whole future of the industry. A paramount concern for safety dovetailed with the union's watchwords of co-operation and duty, and their determination to carve out a distinctive occupational identity, which combined craft and supervisory elements. Some of their lobbying achieved little, yet it did lay the basis for their unique place in the nationalized industry. There were three elements to this industrial ethos. First, it continued a nineteenth-century tradition of mining trade unionism, before the advent of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain in 1889, with its more aggressive bargaining posture, and recalled Alexander MacDonald's twin emphasis on Parliamentary lobbying to improve industry safety and conditions, and pacific alternatives to industrial conflict, such as conciliation and arbitration. Second and related, it expressed the Lib-Lab protestant nonconformist virtues of service and discipline. Finally, there were familiar elements of a more general secular supervisory ideology,<sup>84</sup> which equally valued industrial co-operation.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the coal industry before nationalization, deputies were at once the top stratum of working miners and the bottom layer of the management hierarchy and, consequently, their trade union style was an amalgam of both. Like colliery managers, above them, they acted as a "pressure group" and sought to improve their "status".<sup>85</sup> Unlike the National Association of Colliery Managers, they were legally free to pursue normal trade union activities, though not without incurring their employers' displeasure. Compared to the half million or more members of the Miners' Federation, the tens of thousands in the deputies' Federation may seem an historical irrelevance, worthy of no more than the footnotes they have been accorded. Yet, as the introduction argued, they were representative of a wider fragmentation of mining trade union con-

<sup>83</sup> England, *NACODS*, p. 11.

<sup>84</sup> Melling, "Employers and the Rise of Supervisory Unionism".

<sup>85</sup> Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Colliery Managers and Nationalisation", pp. 60-61.

sciousness, which persisted beneath the surface of the great national union. As its official historian notes, in an appendix:<sup>86</sup>

No percentage rate of trade unionism can be shown, as many thousand wage-earners were in unions other than those comprising the Miners' Federation.

A "National Council of Societies representing colliery workers other than miners", which met the Controller of Mines on 8 June 1918 to discuss wages, comprised thirty delegates representing nearly 100,000 men. Add to these the craft, local and political divisions within the Miners' Federation, and the heroic myth becomes something of a gloss, on a much more complex and pluralist pattern of trade union organization.

This study of the deputies' occupational genesis and trade union organization shows that they fit none of the customary stereotypes of life outside the Miners' Federation. First, they were neither an artificial creation, wilfully obstructing the path to greater trade union unity, nor an archaic hangover from the sectional past. The consolidation of their distinctive union identity was a modern phenomenon, in line with the emergence of supervisory trade unionism in other industries. It was a natural outcome of growing business size, the spread of professional management, and an increasingly specialist division of labour in the coal mining labour process. Consequently, its earliest local organization and initial strongest base was in the more advanced Durham and Northumberland coalfields. Like supervisors elsewhere, and unlike other skilled and white-collar workers, the deputy operated at the heart of the day-to-day conflict between management and labour in this troublesome industry. Hence, the desire for representation independent of both continues to the present day. Moreover, the key statutory responsibility which deputies gained for pit safety reinforced both their occupational identity and desire for independence: from the employer as a government-paid "civil servant"; from the ordinary miner as a separate "association".

Was the Federation a "yellow union", a creature of the employers? Judging by the Scottish Miners' Federation's determination to destroy it, this might appear to be the case. But in reality such aggression was the product of a rather blinkered species of industrial unionism, which refused to recognize important differences of function and responsibility. The new deputies' organization was scarcely welcomed by the coal owners, let alone sponsored by them. National negotiations were refused even before the 1926 collapse of national bargaining, activists were victimized, and the Yorkshire "benefit scheme" pushed thousands of deputies out of union membership. This may, in part, be a testimony to the backwardness of the colliery owners, but it reflected too a wider

<sup>86</sup> Page Arnot, *The Miners*, vol. 3, p. 434.

employer suspicion of union organization among its lower management levels.<sup>87</sup>

How did the Federation approach industrial relations? To be certain, it was not a militant force, for its whole industrial and ideological constitution predisposed it to the peaceful settlement of differences. Throughout, it placed great store on gaining influence in the coal industry, by courting the inspectorate and government ministers for safety improvements. This approach was not dissimilar to that of the Miners' Federation, once its teeth had been drawn in 1926. The deputies were uneasy about the conduct of that dispute, over which they had little or no say. Yet they did not side with either the employers or the breakaway Spencer union. Nor were they a narrow-minded craft guild. Their conferences resounded with a wider concern for industry safety and prosperity, even if they believed, quite naturally, that improving the deputy's status would best advance these aims. Given the wider recognition accorded to the deputy's crucial safety role in the nationalized industry, this belief was not entirely misplaced.<sup>88</sup>

Did their pursuit of a "closed" identity, and their reluctance to link up with undermanagers and other officers, hold back the cause of white-collar trade unionism in the industry until the 1960s as McCormick has suggested?<sup>89</sup> Possibly, but from a safety perspective, independence from management was even more important than freedom from the control of ordinary miners. The Federation did seek wider labour movement contacts. They joined the Trades Union Congress, and only left temporarily, when it failed to restrain the Miners' Federation. Leading figures and local associations affiliated to the Labour Party, and within the industry it liaised with other union bodies, including the Miners' Federation, and supported plans for nationalization.

Overall, the deputies' Federation represented a brand of hard-fought, pragmatic and sectional trade unionism, characteristic of British industrial relations history. They were part of the complex "diversity"<sup>90</sup> and pluralism which has always characterized this country's working-class experience and its trade union movement. Their mundane yet important struggle for representation, for better wages and conditions for its members, and for safety, are an essay in practical trade unionism, shorn of militant socialist rhetoric.

<sup>87</sup> Melling, "Employers and the Rise of Supervisory Unionism"; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Colliery Managers and Nationalisation".

<sup>88</sup> T. Pattinson, "Thatcher Out to Smash Pit Safety Union", the *Daily Mirror*, 13 April 1989; S. Milne, "Lives at Risk in Pit Safety Deregulation", *The Guardian*, 24 August 1993.

<sup>89</sup> McCormick, *Industrial Relations in the Coal Industry*.

<sup>90</sup> Hunt, *British Labour History*; H. A. Clegg, A. Fox and A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889* (Oxford, 1964).