

ONE of my strongest memories growing up in Cullercoats was sitting in the dining room, with its hideous red flock wallpaper, in the flickering light of three altar candles. As a child of the late 1970s, I've since concluded that that's my only real memory of the Winter of Discontent.

If I don't remember the 1970s, the Miner's Strike is etched into my memory.

When unrest flared around the picket lines, the ten-year-old me was too easily taken in by the official government line, of mutinous union barons trying to bring the country to their knees.

The so-called Battle of Orgreave, which saw almost 100 miners charged with rioting and violent disorder, made it easy to portray the Government as in the right.

The Battle allowed the Government to manipulate a public sense of revulsion and arguably drove the miners' ultimate defeat.

But since then the truth about what happened that day, has been emerging, along with the truth about the government's aims in confronting miners.

Only a few years later, investigative journalists challenged official accounts, and dogged campaigning by wrongly-arrested miners and their families has led to a grudging acknowledgement of the extent of official provocation.

The Battle of Orgreave is a scandal because a Government violently confronted striking workers with the sole purpose of discrediting the union movement. But arguably more galling is that this injustice became a rationale to victimise an industry, close down the mines, and ultimately eviscerate the North East's economy.

Although by the 1980s coal was no longer the dominant regional industry, it remained a bedrock of many regional villages and towns.

Coal mining had been starved of investment by the state for decades since its nationalisation, but it remained world-leading in terms of the quality of engineering in sinking shafts and extraction.

The only real reason to kill off the industry in the 1980s was to undermine an important political support for the Labour Party. But the consequences for the region of the defeated miners' strike were horrendous.

Former mining villages and towns were devastated with the disappearance of these highly skilled and respected jobs, which no amount of semi-skilled factory work could replace.

Industrial disputes can reveal long-simmering tensions in society and may represent critical moments of change. So it is interesting to see a strike in recent weeks of one of the industries that replaces mining.

University staff have been striking, with Newcastle and Durham universities being brought almost to a standstill. These actions were triggered by attempts to plunder their pensions.

The strikes have been highly successful, and what drove solidarity and militancy was a sense that higher education today stands at a crossroads.

Tory-led austerity has sucked money out of universities, jacked up tuition fees and slashed government grants.

The real agenda of this is to let weaker universities go bankrupt, letting more money go to Oxbridge and less to the underserving peripheral regions. Since the 1980s, the North East's universities have been at the forefront of building a new knowledge economy.

Destroying our region's higher education base would be incredibly damaging, as was the closure of the coalmines, the steelworks and the shipyards.

The university strikers in the North East are striking to preserve not their privileged way of life, but the right of the region to have universities, and for all our rights to live lives that are more than just cheap labour for the South East.

If you see the picket lines, be proud they are fighting for our rights to have a happy, prosperous and independent future!

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