Theatre review

**Dust: Scargill’s dreams, and reality, Britain 1984-2012**

By Malcolm Day
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*Dust* (*Scargill’s dreams, and reality, Britain 1984-2012*), written and directed by Ade Morris, received its English premiere at the Barnsley Civic Theatre March 15-17. It was performed once before at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival last August.

*Dust* employs real and fictional characters to deal with issues arising from the national miners’ strike of 1984-85. Very little honest appraisal of that struggle has been made in the almost three intervening decades, which makes this production, however limited, worthy of some consideration.

The actors are outstanding and show all the emotions of those involved, from anger to desperation, and at times, humour. Having been a miner myself throughout the 1984-85 strike, I know that all these emotions were in play in that difficult and exciting period.

The play has many insights into the thought and conduct of former National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) president Arthur Scargill, who led the strike, but lacks political coherence. The dialogue reflects his views on many things, and he often comes off badly. However, certain fundamental issues are not touched upon.

Scargill is a life-long defender of Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy’s nationalist policy of “socialism in one country”. This not insignificant fact, which has determined the NUM leader’s political course and fate, is never discussed in the play.

As a result of this omission, Scargill’s admiration for miners’ leader A.J. Cook (1883-1931), who led the miners during the 1926 General Strike, as well as his championing of the “Plan for Coal” during the 1984-85 strike—which are touched on—are hard to understand. This plan had nothing to do with the interests of the miners and their families, but was a protectionist defence of the British coal industry against its major competitors.

Michael Strobel plays Scargill, while Stewart Howson plays his old friend Lawrence Davies. The latter is used to criticize Scargill from a militant perspective, which is both refreshing and accurate. Many miners were far to the left of Scargill, contrary to the official mythology of both the right and the ex-left groups.

A number of heated confrontations between the main characters speak indirectly to the devastating defeat suffered by the miners (and workers generally) and partly indicate Scargill’s critical role in this.

Scargill’s publisher, Barbara (Jacqueline Naylor), who is assisting the former miners’ union leader as he writes his memoirs, has a skeleton in her cupboard and this plays an important role in the drama. It is one tragedy used to illustrate the thousands of tragic experiences made by many, both during and in the aftermath of the strike.

Sean Carlsen, who plays both Chris, in the present-day, and A.J. Cook, speaks very forcefully and movingly at times. Chris is married to Maggie (Alice Bernhard). He is a retrained former miner who is facing redundancy from his health care job. The couple struggle to make ends meet. Things deteriorate as it becomes clear that Chris is suffering from a mental breakdown triggered by a traumatic event he experienced at a coal site.

*Dust* has had good reviews since it was last performed at the Edinburgh Fringe festival. Written and directed by Ade Morris, *Dust* was originally conceived of as a radio play based loosely on a series...
of interviews conducted in 1979 with Scargill by the play’s producer, former Radio Hallam FM journalist and documentary maker, Ralph Bernard.

Scargill still asserts that the miners’ strike was a victory. He justifies this by claiming that the victory was in the “struggle itself”. But the international working class struggles every second, every minute, and every hour of every day. Anyone who argues that the 1984-85 miners’ strike was a victory is either deluding him or herself, or lying. I would hate to see what a defeat looks like!

Thousands of families suffered and communities were decimated by the strike’s defeat. There were 170 pits in the UK when the strike began, employing over 181,000 men and producing 90 million tonnes of coal. Today there are 15 pits employing around 6,500 men. Around 3,000 more are employed in surface mining. Membership in the NUM, which once boasted one-third of a million members, has collapsed to around 1,700.

A series of recent deaths, near misses and injuries of miners at surviving coal pits testifies to the increased levels of exploitation that are a direct result of the defeat of the strike.

Scargill and his cronies in his pro-Stalinist Socialist Labour Party (SLP) have made careers over the past 30 years attempting to justify their roles in the strike at public meetings and associated events. So the fact that this play is critical, and deals with the fate of the mining communities, is important.

For example, on entering Scargill’s Barbican flat in London, Lawrence comments that the former NUM leader has fared quite well since the strike, and points out in passing that the remaining miners are contributing £6 per month each to keep him in his present residence.

Lawrence notes that for many miners and their families the aftermath of the strike meant the loss of jobs, homes and marriages. He says that Scargill “didn’t see it through to the end,” and accused him of “playing it safe.” He emphasises that many miners were willing to fight on when the NUM decided to terminate the strike.

The play has Scargill respond, “I was let down by my comrades on the left.”

What “left” could this be a reference to, other than Scargill’s fellow Stalinists and Labour Party and trade union bureaucrats, who isolated the miners and refused to mount a struggle against the Thatcher government? But this is not followed through.

A series of critical events in the 25 years or so since the strike under the Tories and then New Labour are mentioned, such as the decline of pay and conditions, wholesale privatisations, the MPs’ expenses scandal and last year’s inner-city riots across Britain—leaving the audience to reflect on the wider effects of the strike’s defeat.

An indication that these are living issues and unsettling for those defending the official view of the miners’ strike came during a March 16 performance. According to the BBC, the cast of the play were disrupted “by loud arguments breaking out in the audience.”

An SLP supporter shouted out that the Scargill’s character “was not being allowed to defend his actions during the miners’ strike.”

*Dust* has now embarked on a national tour of small theatres in former coalfield areas of the country.

There are many comments from leading figures in the play’s programme, including Neil Kinnock, former leader of the Labour Party, who attacked miners for defending themselves against police brutality, along with Conservatives Norman Tebbit and Bernard Ingham, the latter of whom was Thatcher’s press secretary. But workers do not need any lectures from these parasites. For a comprehensive analysis of the miners’ strike, I would recommend:

Britain: 25 years since the year-long miners’ strike [6 March 2009]


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