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“THE SLAVES OF THE LAMP”—THE ABERDARE MINERS’ STRIKE 1910

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“The Slaves of the Lamp” was how the miners of the Aberdare District of the South Wales Miners’ Federation described themselves in a strike manifesto in 1910. The strike lasted from 20 October 1910 to 2 January 1911 and involved all of the 11,000 miners of the District. The events of late 1910 have come to be overshadowed by the course of the Cambrian Combine dispute which started on 1 November of that year and went on until 1 September 1911. The clashes between the army and the police and strikers in the first month of that strike has made “Tonypany” the symbol of the birth of an attitude of militancy and a tendency towards violent conflict on the part of the miners of South Wales.

The Cambrian strike played a vital part in bringing the issues of union reform and the minimum wage to the fore, and in stimulating the socialist and syndicalist movements. However, before the Tonypany events distracted the attention of the press, public and trade union leaders alike, the main threat, both to public order and to the existing union hierarchy, seemed to come from the widespread support for the “down-tools” policy and the use of the unofficial strike as a weapon. The biggest single unofficial strike in 1910 was the Aberdare dispute, and it consequently attracted the most publicity and concern until the riots in Tonypany occurred. Contemporaries mentioned Aberdare in the same breath as Tonypany, but it is the latter that has become so strongly implanted in people’s minds, and which has done so much to influence the historical accounts of the period. Looking back through the National Strike of 1912, historians have picked out the Cambrian strike and have neglected the unofficial strike movement, or have relegated it to the footnotes. The object of this article is not to devalue the specific importance of the Cambrian strike, but to set it in its context by examining the “Block Strike” in Aberdare as part of a wider rank-and-file discontent with pay, working conditions and union policy.

Aberdare was at the crossroads of changing conditions in South Wales—between 1891 and 1911 its population went from 40,000 to 51,000; it had seen, in 1897 and 1901 respectively, the foundation of Socialist Societies in Aberdare and Aberaman and in 1898 a Trades Council so that, with the stimulus of Hardie as one of its two MPs, steady inroads were made into local government by ILPers whilst, from 1909, there was a branch of the Plebs League in Aberdare itself.¹ Nonetheless it was abrupt industrial discontent that would prove more disturbing to the hold of older faiths before 1914 and, again, the Cynon Valley witnessed an early concentration of forces. The Powell Duffryn Coal Company had been established in 1864 and by 1910 employed over a half of the miners in the district. Under the dynasty of the Hann family it was to the fore in taking up new ideas in technology and management to combat falling productivity and rising costs. The Aberdare miners would have been the first to feel this new bout of “rationalisation”.²

The problem of increasing costs was accentuated in the 1900s by an increasing amount of mining legislation for safety precautions, etc. The Eight Hours Act of 1908, in particular, served to highlight tensions within the coalfield. The miners in the steam-coal district had the highest accident rate and one of the longest working days in the mining industry. While the South Wales miners were among the foremost supporters of the Act, the owners were among its most bitter opponents. They claimed that output would fall under the Act and made it clear that the consequent increase in costs would come out of the wages of the hewers and daywage men. While production fell only slightly in the first five years after the Act, productivity continued to fall.

For the miners, an eight hour day meant that the cuts in wages due to the withdrawal of allowances could not be made up by working overtime. This was accompanied by a general fall in wages of 12½ per cent in the first half of 1908,³ and a legal decision by Judge Bryn Roberts which made payment for abnormal places “a matter of gratuity”.⁴ This left the owners free to reduce allowances without the threat of legal action. The rank-and-file of the Federation made their feelings known by passing a motion calling for a minimum level of earnings for men working in abnormal places (4/9d. per day) at a coalfield conference in March 1909.⁵ An Agreement supplementary to the Conciliation Board was negotiated in July of that year which did not mention abnormal places and which allowed the owners to introduce any new method of working without being met by the objection that it was a breach of the Conciliation Board Agreement or of the established customs. The union leaders had achieved precisely nothing over this vexatious issue.⁶

Mounting discontent forced the Executive Committee (EC) of the Federation to draw up a list of amendments to the supplementary agreement in November,⁷ which included an extension of the minimum wage principle to the daywage men. Negotiations with the owners produced an agreement in April 1910 which again ignored the question of abnormal places.⁸ Significantly, for the first time since 1898, the EC was refused plenary powers of settlement and had to submit the new terms to ratification by ballot vote. While the coalfield as a whole gave a 60,000 majority in favour of acceptance of the terms, a number of Districts, Aberdare included, voted against acceptance.⁹ C. B. Stanton, the miners’ agent, was not allowed to sign the new agreement until he reported back to a mass meeting at Aberdare. Before giving him permission to sign, the meeting adopted a resolution condemning the terms and another proposing :

That the miners of Scotland, England and Wales be requested to meet their respective coal-owners and demand a fair living wage to be paid to all colliers working in abnormal places, failing to get which, that a National Conference be called with a view of further dealing with the matter.¹⁰

They also pledged themselves to demand a national strike on the question of abnormal places at such a conference. Stanton took this motion to an SWMF conference in May where it was carried “literally unanimously”¹¹ and to an MFGB conference in October where it was also carried unanimously.

Discontent was obviously mounting in Aberdare in 1910. A dispute over a price list for the Gellideg seam in the Aberaman Colliery had led to a ten day stoppage of the whole District in January, and to demands for a general stoppage.¹² The Conciliation Board inquiry into the situation lasted well into 1911.¹³ This illustrates the inadequacy of the Conciliation Board mechanism in dealing with local disputes. Over the period 1903-1910 it failed to resolve 231 out of the 391 disputes brought before it. The principle behind the Board could not accommodate the changing situation.¹⁴

Non-unionism was increasing and notices to stop work were tendered on 18 separate occasions in 1910.¹⁵ On 8 July they were tendered due to the formation of a new "Hauliers and Timbermen's Association" which became part of the "South Wales Wagemen's Association".¹⁶ This was formed under the influence of Tom Eynon, a checkweigher from outside the District, who was a member of the "Industrial Union". He claimed that the Federation was in too great a state of decay to be reformed and advocated the establishment of a new union alongside the existing one. Although the new union in Aberdare had adopted the preamble of the "Industrial Union", it had also advocated the complete re-organisation of the Federation. In the event, only a minority of the daywage men had split and so the strike notices were withdrawn.¹⁷ However, they were still treated as non-unionists and the "District Joint Committee" held a conference on non unionism in August.¹⁸

At the conference, Stanton put forward a scheme for reorganising the Federation that smacked heavily of Tom Mann's influence. The agent called for the whole coalfield to tender notices on non-unionism at the same time; for a conference to improve the Federation's constitution and to "decide on a fighting policy"; and for all EC members to ratify their personal positions by going to a ballot. Mann had been speaking to meetings in Aberdare all through the summer and he eventually spoke for these proposals at the District Annual Demonstration on 12 September, where they were carried overwhelmingly.¹⁹ Stanton had used his position as an Executive member of the Federation to canvass support for these proposals at the Rhondda miners' Annual Demonstration in August.²⁰ By the summer of 1910 the gulf between the chief Federation officials and the rank-and-file had become apparent. The Coalowners' Association had recognised it and had set up an "Emergency Committee" to deal with unofficial stoppages, and with the power to indemnify any colliery that suffered losses in an unofficial dispute.²¹ The storm broke at Maesteg where the men stopped paying their union dues in protest against Federation inactivity over redundancies. In Mid-Rhondda the men at the Cambrian Combine pits gave notice to strike on 1 September. A ballot of the coalfield over this dispute gave 76,978 votes for financial support for a localised strike, to 44,868 for a general stoppage of the whole coalfield, a significant minority.²² The Aberdare men had voted 3,301 to 2,432 for a general stoppage.²³

The beginning of October saw 23,000 colliers idle and 15,000 under notice to come out, many of them on the non-unionist question. The Powell Dyffryn men came out on 20 October, and the Cambrian men on 1 November. By the beginning of November, a total of 27,609 men were out, one-sixth of all those

employed in the coalfield. 11,700 of them were out without giving notice, i.e., on unofficial strike.

On 16 October a mass meeting of the colliers of one of the Powell Dyffryn (PD) pits, the Lower Dyffryn, had decided to draw up a list of complaints to give to the manager, E. M. Hann, and to prosecute the company for contravention of the Eight Hours Act.²⁴ They were not given chance to do this because the manager went on the offensive and prohibited the men from taking home "blocks" of waste wood for firewood. The police were called in to supervise the men because this was a forty-year-old custom and they had not been warned that it was about to end.²⁵ At a meeting of the Coalowners' Association "Emergency Committee" on 25 October, Hann had said :

The men in Aberdare have broken their contracts and it is now open for the company to keep the men out and there is no better opportunity for doing so.

The other owners agreed and voted to indemnify him for all losses during the strike.²⁶ Clearly, the owners had wanted a showdown and now leapt at the opportunity to defeat the "down-tools" policy.

At Lower Dyffryn, after the night shift had come up to find the firewood notices and the police at the pithead, they promptly held a meeting at Mountain Ash and resolved to down tools. The colliers then formed a procession of 6-700 and marched to the nearest PD colliery, Lletty-Shenkin, and brought the day shift out. The strikers then split up and marched to the five other PD collieries and brought them to a standstill. In a matter of hours, seven collieries employing 6,600 men were on strike without consultation with the District Joint Committee or the agent, let alone the Conciliation Board. It was in fact conceded that Stanton had played no part in it by F. L. Davis, the head of the Coalowners' Association, at the Conciliation Board meeting on 21 October. At a mass meeting at Aberdare on the same day, the Lower Dyffryn grievances were accepted as common to all the PD pits. The Joint Council was instructed to tabulate these grievances and to enter into negotiations with Hann.²⁷ The Committee drew up a list of 18 complaints with abnormal places, the firewood question and the introduction of machinery at the top of the list. Although many of the complaints were local, the grievances over withdrawn customs and allowances put the PD men in a position of practical sympathy with the Cambrian men. It was the issue of abnormal places which rapidly came to the fore.

At the meeting on 21 October, Stanton had decided to resign from the Conciliation Board and identify himself with the unofficial strike. He went along with a delegation to Hann on the 26th. The grievances were rejected and Hann said he would not discuss them until a later meeting.²⁸ It was on the night of the 27th that Stanton, hearing that coal was being wound to the surface at one of the pits, sent his "infamous telephone message" to Hann. The crucial words were : "I would like to say that if there is going to be any blacklegging over this there is going to be murder." Hann and the owners seized upon the literal interpretation and, aided by the daily press, blew it up into a major scandal as a threat on Hann's life.²⁹

After an exchange of letters, the manager refused to negotiate any further with the agent whilst a mass meeting of the men on the 30th decided that they were not entering negotiations without their agent.³⁰ The issue allowed the management to refuse to discuss the grievances and still appear in a "reasonable" light in the face of "wild threats". On the men's side, it ruled out any immediate possibility of conciliation and strengthened the case for a general stoppage. This was reflected in the more violent rhetoric of Stanton's speeches at the mass meetings. On the 31st he outlined the need for a conference of the whole coalfield to deal with the issues involved, and went on to say that "Something more of a revolution was necessary in the coalfield. Rebellion was in the air and they were going to have more rebellion, more warfare." However, in the same speech he added "If the men were treated properly, there was a chance for the capitalists to make a fair profit, and the workmen to earn a living wage."³¹

Those inconsistencies represent the political, and probably the personal, influences of Tom Mann and Keir Hardie respectively. As a member of the ILP, Stanton had played a large part in Hardie's election campaign in 1906.³² He first came into contact with Mann when he became adviser to the "National Democratic League" in the early 1900s, when Mann was its full-time organiser.³³ Mann used this contact to spread his syndicalist ideas in the summer of 1910. As well as directly influencing Stanton, Mann probably also provided a point of contact with the Rhondda syndicalists. It is clear that the syndicalist influence was becoming dominant, both before and during the strike. Stanton was becoming more militant and more dissatisfied with the ILP who were not catering for this changing situation. During the strike the mass meeting became the authoritative body. At the height of the strike these meetings attracted up to 10,000 of the strikers, a turnout of more than 90 per cent.³⁴ Virtually every move that Stanton and the Strike Committee made was subject to the ratification of such a meeting.

The mass meeting on 30 October had resolved to widen the strike movement by asking the men in the PD pits in the Rhymney Valley to down tools, and by asking the Cambrian strikers to make common cause with them. Given the number of men on strike by 1 November (over 27,000) the possibility of a general stoppage in the coalfield seemed very real. On 31 October deputations were sent to the four pits that were still working in the Aberdare District. These collieries were individually owned and were tucked away in their own small valleys leading off the Aberdare Valley.

These local men were persuaded to attend a mass meeting of the whole District but refused to come out after Stonelake and Prowle (a checkweigher at one of the collieries) spoke against the move for joint action. Needless to say, these two had a very hostile reception from the PD men.³⁵ These moves to broaden the strike movement were taken very seriously by the leaders of the Federation. On 2 November, Mabon, Richards and Onions (the President, General Secretary and General Treasurer) issued a manifesto to the lodges urging them to ignore this "irregular method of bringing about a general stoppage", which, "if entered upon in such a sudden, unconstitutional manner must end disastrously for all concerned."³⁶ Stanton responded with a personal attack on

Mabon's leadership and the two continued to snipe at each other through the pages of **The South Wales Daily News**.

In Aberaman on 2 November the first major scenes of violence had occurred. This, plus the appeal by the leaders, made the Aberdare strike headline news,³⁷ even **The Times** devoted a long article to it on the 4th.³⁸ The overtly hostile coverage of the strike by the **Western Mail** was attacked by Stanton, and on the 3rd a **Western Mail** reporter was chased off the railway station by a crowd of strikers.³⁹ The violence at Aberaman had happened when a train carrying about 100 labourers who were still working at the pits was stormed at the Tonllwyd Crossing and several of the occupants were "badly mauled". Later the same day, the houses of many colliery officials who were still working were stoned. By the 4th every colliery and most of the officials' houses were being picketed. Two days previously the Merthyr magistrates, feeling that the situation was escalating, had written to the War Office for advice and had received a reply citing the "King's Regulations" regarding the use of the military forces in assisting the civil power. This was done in respect of Aberdare, but a critical situation was now developing in the Rhondda. On 4 November the owners requested increased protection for blacklegs from Capt. Lindsay, the Chief Constable. Lindsay in turn had requested military aid from the Home Secretary, Churchill. After some initial hesitation, five companies of troops were sent to the coalfield along with two squadrons of Hussars. These troops, under the command of General Macready, were to back up the 980 Foot and 120 mounted police under the command of Lindsay. The total number of police in the Aberdare Valley was 341, with one company of troops stationed at Aberaman.⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, the situation was dubbed "The Coal War" by the press.

By 4 November the attempt to spread the strike to the rest of the district had been successful and a total of 11,000 men were out in Aberdare. Only the 400 men at the Blaenant Colliery were still working. It was the oldest pit in the district and the owner claimed that it would have to close if the men came out. This was received with a degree of sympathy by the strikers, who continued to picket the pit but who showed little hostility to the men still working there. On the 7th, the PD and Cwmaman members of the "Enginemen, Stokers and Craftsmen's Association" resolved to down tools, and only the colliery officials were left to maintain the underground workings. Hann reacted to this situation by trying to intimidate the craftsmen; they were each sent a letter pointing out their liability to prosecution under section 5 of "The Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act 1875" if they came out on strike and so exposed life or property to serious injury.⁴¹ This threat was never carried out.

The fact that the craftsmen came out was valuable for morale, but it did not have the same effect as it did in the Rhondda. The pits in Aberdare were not so wet and so were not threatened by flooding. Gas was more of a problem but this could be left to accumulate until the strike was over. Thus the PD management did not need to import scab labour to keep the pumps going. This accounts in part for the less violent history of the Aberdare strike. Nevertheless, the colliery officials were still blacklegging and they became the target of the violence that did occur.

Though the strike had spread in the District, there was less success further afield. The Cambrian men had agreed on the need for a national stoppage, but the PD men in the Rhymney Valley had refused to come out in sympathy. Also a number of the disputes over non-unionism had ended and the situation had reached a plateau in the coalfield as a whole.⁴² On the 7th, Stanton had gone with a delegation from the Strike Committee (as the Joint Committee now called itself) to the EC meeting in Cardiff where they made two proposals: firstly, the immediate convening of a delegate conference to consider a proposal for a ballot on a general stoppage; and secondly, that the Aberdare men be granted lock-out pay pending the decision of the conference. A majority of the EC decided against the first proposal on the grounds that the ballot taken in September had rejected a general stoppage. Despite the fact that the numbers out on strike had risen, they had decided that the situation had not substantially changed. The second demand was rejected on the grounds that the EC had no power under the Federation rules to grant lock-out pay to an "irregular and unconstitutional campaign". The Council agreed to Stanton's suggestion that the matter be brought up at the next Conciliation Board meeting on 15 November. Stanton claimed that "they were not afraid of arbitration because of their just cause."⁴³

The need for financial aid was becoming apparent in Aberdare. The Education Committee of the District Council had begun to give free meals to schoolchildren and a "Relief Fund" was set up.⁴⁴ The situation was offset slightly by the strength of the local Co-operative movement. The Cwmbach Co-operative Society was formed in October 1859 and had been the first Co-op in South Wales.⁴⁵ Since then, two other Societies had sprung up and their combined membership was 6,700, the vast majority of whom were miners.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, as the strike wore on the funds diminished and the hardship grew. Soup kitchens were opened up and processions marched the length of the valley collecting food and donations for the Fund. A large number of shopkeepers gave generously to the Fund fearing perhaps that their shops would be looted or burgled. There was an appeal for donations through the press, and a benefit concert, including a singing competition and a baby-show, was organised at Aberdare. Eventually the Fund was providing a midday meal for every child at the elementary schools. The appeal brought much sympathy for the people of Aberdare. Donations were accompanied either by exhortations for the miners to be "reasonable" and return to work, or by expressions of solidarity with the strikers. There is no doubt that the hardship served to bind the community even firmer together, just as it had in 1898.

Another parallel with 1898 was the invasion of the coalfield by socialist speakers, except that this time they were accompanied by a number of syndicalists. As the ILP had already established themselves, the main thrust of the invasion came from the SDP. In October the SDP had sent down a speaker called Greenwood who held a few meetings in the District.⁴⁷ In November, Mrs. Bridges Adams was touring the valley lecturing on the need for a compulsory "Provisions of Meals Act" for schoolchildren.⁴⁸ Tom Mann had of course been active, but although he was in the SDP he was busy promoting the monthly "Industrial Syndicalist" which first appeared in July 1910.⁴⁹ Other syndicalists travelling the coalfield included Big Bill Haywood of the IWW,⁵⁰ and Madame Sorgue, who

arrived on 11 November to attend a meeting of the Strike Committee at Aberdare, and who was promptly banned from speaking on the 14th.⁵¹ The Aberdare strike featured heavily in the pages of **Justice** at the end of 1910. The SDP presented the issue as Stanton versus the EC.⁵²

It was after one of Mrs. Bridges Adams' meetings that the biggest riot occurred. Her meeting on 8 November, at the Miners' Institute, Aberaman, had passed a resolution calling for the compulsory feeding of schoolchildren and had then assembled in front of the Institute where their numbers swelled to about 2,000, including many women and children. A contingent of 500, in a diversionary move, proceeded to attack the Aberaman Colliery where they were kept at bay with fire hoses. The rest of the crowd, preceded by an advanced guard of 200 youths, marched to the colliery power station and washery at Cwmbach, which were still in operation, and began to stone the buildings. Several attempts were made to storm the power station, but the 29 policemen inside kept the crowd at bay by electrifying the perimeter fence and by hosing the rioters with hot water from the boilers. As the demonstration was breaking up in confusion, the police charged, injuring 60 and pushing many into the nearby canal.⁵³

The secretary of the Strike Committee, Idris Davies, in a letter to Keir Hardie, accused the police of rampaging through Cwmbach, attacking people in their homes, and of drunkenness.⁵⁴ Hardie visited the area on 14 November to collect the statements of some of the injured parties. He used these in the House of Commons to demand an enquiry into the conduct of the police. Churchill refused saying that "a savage war between two forces was going on" and that "the people of South Wales owed a great debt to the police because the police enabled them to conduct this serious labour struggle without coming into contact with the lethal weapons which the troops possessed."⁵⁵

Somehow, the people of Aberdare did not appreciate what the police were doing for them. The following day a train was stoned and there was a disturbance at Aberaman when two mounted police tried to disperse a crowd of women and children by riding into them. Attacks on colliery officials and their houses became daily occurrences. The following Sunday, a chapel service was interrupted by the congregation and a colliery official was removed from their midst. There were further riots on 22 November when a crowd gathered to look for blacklegs coming home from work. 1,500 people, mainly women and children, followed one blackleg on to Aberaman railway station and "shouted uncomplimentary remarks," struck and kicked him, and eventually allowed him to go home only to smash his windows once he had got there. Other officials were caught and tarred. The following day, a furniture van was held up by pickets and the contents were left strewn across the road in the pouring rain. The owner had been supplying the troops with provisions.⁵⁶ These incidents were not on the scale of the Tonypany riots, but they demonstrate the involvement of the wider community in the attempt to prevent any blacklegging.

The effect of the first bout of disturbances was enough to bring the Blaenant colliers out on 9 November, thus leaving no pit working in the entire District. The day after, the rest of the craftsmen came out. At a meeting of 1,500 in

Aberaman on the 13th, Hardie revealed his intention to demand an inquiry in the House. He supported the demand for a minimum wage in his election campaign in December. He did not actually condemn the unofficial strike, but recommended that the issue of abnormal places would be best settled by national negotiations rather than a sectional strike.⁵⁷ Stanton had a different viewpoint; his reaction to the riots had been to call for the formation of an "Emergency Fighting Brigade", sworn to himself to "protect the unarmed and defenceless crowd": "The qualifications for the first rank are, one man, unarmed, must require six policemen to take him to the station".⁵⁸ As there were no practical moves made to actually form such a Brigade, we must assume that it was another example of Stanton's demagoguery. It cannot, however, be entirely written off as idle chatter; when Stanton put his proposal to a meeting, every person present volunteered for the Brigade.

On an official level, the dispute was brought before the Conciliation Board on 14 November. Both the owners and the union leaders agreed that conciliation could go ahead once the strikers had gone back to work and Stanton had apologised to Hann.⁵⁹ The strikers were keeping their options open. On the one hand they agreed that the apology should be made and they expressed a willingness to meet the manager. On the other, they refused to go back to work before they met him. They also made overtures to the Cambrian strikers to call an "unofficial conference of the whole coalfield" to discuss the situation.⁶⁰ The Cambrian men agreed to this and the conference was set for Monday, 21 November. In the week before the conference the alternative path of conciliation was further explored when the Strike Committee met General Macready and the Stipendiary Magistrate, Sir T. Marchant-Williams, at Aberaman, to discuss relations between strikers and the police. After Macready had left the meeting, the magistrate discussed the dispute with the Committee and promised to go to Hann and "lay the matter before him."⁶¹

Clearly, the situation was getting desperate for the strikers. Stanton had gone to the EC meeting on the 17th to ask for financial aid, but was turned down. It was claimed that if the Executive granted aid an injunction could be made against them, tying up union funds. The EC also urged the lodges to ignore the unofficial conference.⁶² The hardship created by the strike in Aberdare had opened the door to conciliation as an alternative policy, should the moves to widen the strike fail. This created a situation in the following weeks where a general strike policy was pursued alongside the overtures made to Hann for some form of discussions.⁶³

Further meetings with Marchant-Williams followed, and Stanton eventually apologised to Hann for the telephone message. Hann accepted the apology and mentioned the possibility of consultations. These tentative probings were overtaken by wider events when the unofficial conference went ahead on the 21st. 141 delegates, representing 62,000 miners had answered the call for a conference which the EC had claimed was not needed. There was no EC member present and so, in the absence of Stanton, John Prowle put the Aberdare men's case for a stoppage of the whole coalfield. Commenting on the situation within the union he said :

I think it is the commencement of a new era, and I can find nothing but an expression of dissatisfaction at the methods adopted by our leaders in their peace-at-any-price policy. I am confident myself that the time has arrived when their influence as leaders must be considered of no value . . . on the ground that their tactics have become absolutely obsolete.

He had obviously come a long way since the beginning of November when he had spoken against the strike along with Stonelake. After receiving reports from each of the areas on strike the conference stood adjourned until 29 November "with a recommendation to the whole coalfield for a down-tools policy". The delegates were instructed to obtain a mandate from their lodges for a general stoppage in the coalfield. The "Western Valleys Miners' Council" met the same day and expressed a unanimous vote of sympathy with the Aberdare strikers and called on the EC to convene a conference to discuss the strike.⁶⁴

The level of support for the unofficial movement obviously took the EC by surprise. They asked the Strike Committees from the Rhondda and Aberdare to meet them on the 25th to arrange discussions with the Conciliation Board and to call an official conference.⁶⁵ The EC offered to take the disputes out of the hands of the Committees and undertake negotiations with the owners which would be reported to a general conference. Once the Aberdare delegates realised that this would mean the abandonment of the unofficial conference they refused and suggested that the EC should adopt the adjourned conference, make it official, and abide by its decision. As this entailed the recognition of the authority of the unofficial movement, the EC refused, leaving no change in the situation.

At this meeting the connection between the Aberdare and the Cambrian strikes was clarified. The previous day, Stanton had confidently declared that: "The Cambrian men are not going back to work until the Aberdare men are, nor are we going to return until the Cambrian dispute is settled." This was formally repudiated by the Cambrian men at this meeting. They explained that an agreement was reached only to convene an unofficial conference, and that they would only make common cause if the conference decided on a general course of action. Like the Aberdare men, they had left the door open to conciliation and were prepared to return to work if the original dispute over the Bute seam in the Ely Colliery was settled.⁶⁶

The unofficial conference was re-adjourned on the 29th with 72,919 miners now represented. In the discussion it was agreed that the complaints of the Aberdare and the Rhondda men were prevalent throughout the coalfield, and the "autocratic" attitudes of the EC were condemned. The vote on the down-tools policy went against by 67 to 56, and as an alternative a delegation was sent to the EC to demand a general conference and financial support for Aberdare. They also advocated sending "missionaries" into the other coalfields to make abnormal places a national question. The EC meeting the following day seized the opportunity and called a conference for 7 December and granted £2,000 to the Aberdare Relief Fund.⁶⁷ The first financial aid came only when the strike movement had collapsed for the EC could have donated money earlier but had waited until the down-tools policy was defeated.

The Executive was now free to hold the conference on their own terms. The proposal put before the 284 delegates (representing 152,559 miners) at the official conference was that the Aberdare men should return to work as recommended on 14 November, and that anyone who was not re-employed would receive lock-out pay. The calls for a general stoppage were repeated, but as the EC had avoided making any proposals on the wider situation the question of policy was left and the conference was adjourned. They only managed to agree on condemning "the action of the Home Secretary in refusing to grant an inquiry into the conduct of the police and military forces", and on granting another £2,000 to the Aberdare Relief Fund.⁶⁸ The re-adjourned conference on 14 December decided to adopt the EC recommendation for a return to work by 1,815 votes to 921. The vote against represented 46,050 miners, slightly more than the number who had voted for a general stoppage in the September ballot.⁶⁹ Clearly, the old divisions between the different coal-producing districts remained strong enough to prevent the strike movement from spreading beyond the steam-coal district. Assuming that those who voted for a general stoppage in September did so again in December, it is also clear that the discontent had not waned, if anything, it had consolidated.

A mass meeting of the Aberdare strikers on 15 December discussed a resolution calling on each colliery committee to meet its management to obtain a guarantee of no victimisation before the men returned to work. The meeting eventually broke up in disorder, revealing the demoralised mood of the miners. Despite the fact that the unofficial conference had voted against a general stoppage, the strikers had obviously expected the official conference to support them against the EC and had failed to see the limitations of the unofficial movement. The Strike Committee carried the resolution on victimisation into effect (the first time it had acted without the mandate of a mass meeting) but the PD management refused to give them a guarantee of no victimisation. A mass meeting on the 16th resolved that the other collieries should go back to work in line with the conference decision, but expressed "its astonishment at the insolent reply" given by Hann to the Strike Committee. The PD men resolved to stay out and passed the following motion :

We, the PD men, independently express our determination to stand by our agent and our cause and not to accept the tyrannical conditions sought to be imposed by this tyrant, and further, we appeal to the coalfield, now that the Hann spirit is revealed to realise the urgency of striking a blow once and for all for the right to just conditions and for the right to live.⁷⁰

After receiving assurances from the EC that any victimisation would be a breach of the Conciliation Board agreement and that the Federation would assist any victimised men, the PD strikers decided to return to work at a meeting on the 23rd.⁷¹ A large section of the PD men had wanted to continue but the prospect of carrying on without the other pits was enough to deter them. Because of the need for repairs to the workings, the actual return to work was delayed until 2 January 1911. Only about half of the PD men had their jobs back, immediately. As further repairs went ahead more men had their jobs back, but by the end of 1911, 1,000 were still out of work, still on lock-out pay. Hann had

taken the opportunity to cut his production costs by closing down one colliery and some of the more unproductive workings in others.⁷²

The result of the strike was the temporary defeat and demoralisation of the labour movement in Aberdare. As might be expected, the victimisation of the PD men led to an increasing level of non-unionism in 1911. Divisions opened up between PD and non-PD lodges over the conduct of the Strike Committee in appealing to the men over the heads of non-PD lodge committees.⁷³ Political divisions also emerged. Nevertheless, the majority of miners remained within the Federation and both PD and non-PD lodge committees retained their militant outlook, uniting to vote for a national strike at the SWMF Conference in June, 1911, and at the MFGB conference in April of the same year.⁷⁴ The Aberdare District became an active source of agitation in support of the Cambrian strikers, and for a minimum wage. In the run-up to the National Strike in 1912, a series of meetings were held by the District Committee to achieve :

the unification of the workers of the various grades with a view to their preparedness for the great struggle which in all probability awaited them.⁷⁵

Just as the 1898 strike had led to the establishment of the ILP in the District, so 1910 led to the establishment of the SDP. By August 1911 the local branch had a regular column in the local newspaper,⁷⁶ and was eventually to join the BSP.⁷⁷ Stanton was very much the moving spirit behind the growth of the SDP and also played a large part in sustaining the militant industrial attitude in the District. His personal political stance became more radical after the strike. He broke his connections with the ILP and appeared on SDP platforms alongside Tom Mann and Hyndman⁷⁸ before the approaching war turned him into a jingoist and bellicose imperialist. He also played a part in the movement to replace the older leaders. Along with Hartshorn and Barker, he was elected to the MFGB Executive. He beat Mabon into second place for the seat on the International Committee, and Tom Richards for a place on the American delegation.⁷⁹

Thus Aberdare was to the fore both in the general trend of political and industrial radicalisation after 1909, and in the specific agitation to settle the abnormal places problem and obtain a minimum wage. The Aberdare men asserted their leadership as early as 1909, as their demands on the Executive and their resolutions to conference show. When the storm broke, late in 1910, the tension that had been building up was suddenly released and the District was catapulted into a violent, unofficial dispute. Aberdare became the hub of an unofficial movement that threatened, through the unofficial conferences, to provide an alternative leadership in the coalfield. By agreeing to support the unofficial conference, the Cambrian strikers gave this movement a tremendous boost, but the inspiration initially came from Aberdare and it is probable that the conference would have gone ahead without the support of the Rhondda men. Once a course of conciliation had been denied to the Aberdare Strike Committee, the survival of the strike turned on their ability to spread the unofficial strike movement beyond the valleys of mid-Glamorgan to the rest of the coalfield. The logic of the process was devastatingly simple : the attempt to spread the strike

failed, hence the strike collapsed and the leadership of the struggle over abnormal places passed to the Cambrian men.

What we are dealing with in Aberdare and Tonypany in 1910 are fundamentally similar situations: not simply two industrial disputes which happened to “get out of hand”, but a temporary assertion by two communities of the right to exercise control over their work and their lives—an assertion that created a serious social upheaval. It was the ability of men like Ablett in attempting to draw the political conclusions from such an upheaval that has made Tonypany such an overpowering symbol of change. The importance of the Block Strike in Aberdare lies in its similarity with the Tonypany experience. More than anything, this shows that, far from being a freak or a conspiracy, the upheavals that took place were the product of a process of social and industrial change which went on to engulf the whole coalfield and shape its post-war history.

FOOTNOTES

1. Consult E. Stonelake **The Autobiography of Edmund Stonelake** (unpublished Ms. in University College, Swansea, Library); Minutes of the Aberdare Socialist Society (in Aberdare Public Library); **Souvenir of the Twentieth Annual Conference of the ILP** (Merthyr Tydfil, 1912).
2. **Powell Dyffryn Review** Nos. 50-54, April 1942-April 1943.
3. E. W. Evans **The Miners of South Wales** (1961), p.196.
4. **South Wales Daily News**, 29 January, 1908.
5. SWMF EC Minutes, 22 March 1909.
6. R. Page Arnot, **South Wales Miners** (1967), p.152.
7. SWDN 14 December 1909.
8. *Ibid*, 8 April 1910.
9. Page Arnot, *op cit*, p.162.
10. **Aberdare Leader**, 16 March 1910.
11. SWMF Annual Conference Report, 1910.
12. SWMF EC Minutes, 14 October 1910.
13. Conciliation Board Minutes, 4 March 1911.
14. E. W. Evans, *op cit*, p.200.
15. Coalowners' Association Records, **Notices to terminate Contracts and Strikes on the non-unionist Question** (statistical compilation from 1899).
16. **Aberdare Leader**, 9 July 1910.
17. *Ibid*, 30 July 1910—The “Industrial Union” probably refers to the “British Advocates of Industrial Unionism” set up by the De Leonist Socialist Labour Party in 1906. A few branches of the BAIU were established in South Wales, but dual unionism was quickly abandoned in favour of other forms of syndicalism.
18. **Aberdare Leader**, 20 August 1910.
19. *Ibid*, 17 September 1910.
20. *Ibid*, 27 August 1910.

21. Coalowners' Association Minutes, 23 July 1910.
22. Page Arnot, op cit, p.178.
23. **Aberdare and Mountain Ash Weekend Post**, 1 October 1910.
24. SWDN, 17 October 1910.
25. Ibid, 22 October 1910.
26. Coalowners' Association Minutes, 24 November 1910.
27. SWDN, 22 October 1910.
28. Ibid, 27 October 1910.
29. Ibid, 31 October 1910; **Western Mail** 31 October 1910.
30. Ibid, 1 November 1910.
31. **Western Mail**, 31 October 1910.
32. **Aberdare Leader**, 20 June 1906.
33. Entry on C. B. Stanton in Bellamy & Saville (eds.) **Dictionary of Labour Biography** Vol. 1.
34. **Western Mail**, 3 December 1910.
35. **Aberdare Leader**, 5 November 1910.
36. See Appendix II for a full transcript.
37. SWDN, 3 November 1911.
38. **The Times**, 4 November 1910.
39. **Western Mail**, 4 November 1910.
40. David Evans, **Labour Strife in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-11** (Cardiff 1911) pp. 38-39.
41. **Aberdare Leader**, 12 November 1910.
42. David Evans, op cit, p.36.
43. SWDN, 8 November 1910.
44. **Aberdare Leader**, 19 November 1910.
45. Ibid, 2 July 1910.
46. SWDN, 9 November 1910
47. **Justice**, 29 October 1910.
48. Ibid, 12 November 1910.
49. Bob Holton, **British Syndicalism 1900-1914** (1976), p.56.
50. **Justice**, 26 November 1910.
51. **Western Mail**, 15 November 1910.
52. **Justice**, 20 November 1910. This features a large picture of Stanton with the caption : "The Champion of the Aberdare Colliers."
53. **Aberdare Leader**, 12 November 1910.
54. Ibid, 19 November 1910.
55. SWDN, 16 and 23 November 1910.
56. **Aberdare Leader**, 26 November 1910.

57. Keir Hardie's Election Address in **The Merthyr Borough Labour Pioneer**, December 1910.
58. **Aberdare Leader**, 19 November 1910.
59. Conciliation Board Minutes, 14 November 1910.
60. SWDN, 15 November 1910.
61. **Aberdare Leader**, 19 November 1910.
62. SWMF EC Minutes, 17 November 1910.
63. See Appendix III for the strike manifesto of 19 November 1910.
64. **Western Mail**, 22 November 1910.
65. SWDN, 26 November 1910.
66. Ibid, 25 November 1910.
67. Ibid, 1 December 1910.
68. Ibid, 8 December 1910.
69. Ibid, 15 December 1910.
70. **Aberdare Leader**, 24 December 1910.
71. **Western Mail**, 24 December 1910.
72. David Evans, op cit, p.133.
73. **Aberdare Leader**, 21 January 1911.
74. Ibid, 17 June 1911.
75. Ibid, 14 October 1911.
76. Ibid, 19 August 1911.
77. BSP First Annual Conference Report, 1912.
78. **Aberdare Leader**, 25 March and 28 April 1911.
79. David Evans, op cit, p.202.

APPENDIX 1

The generation gap was quite apparent in the 1900s and the strike movement in 1910 served to heighten it. A vital part of the propaganda which surrounded any strike at this time was the number of hymns and poems printed in the newspapers offering advice to the strikers. Below are two examples printed in the 1910 strike, both of which reveal the division between young and old. The first is taken from **The Western Mail**, 15 November 1910, and is against the strike movement. As well as exploiting the divisions between young and old, it uses the appeal to nationalism to make the strike, and indeed all strikes, appear alien to the Welsh temperament.

Another Word in Season.

You senior colliers kindly take
A little friendly hint from me—
It isn't wise for your own sake
That you're content to let things be
It spells red ruin in the air
Your policy of laissez-faire.

The sad events that have occurred
Have brought disgrace on good old Wales
No doubt, disgusted, you have heard
The English journals' lurid tales
And how the Welsh have earned a name
That fills your countrymen with shame.

'Twas foreigners who made the row
The younger bloods who did the work
Here is your lesson here and now
Do not the situation shirk
'Tis yours to lead and not be led
Nor leave the tail to wag the head.

“Idris”

On the other hand, the local press was much more sympathetic and printed a number of hymns by a local writer, Norman Evans. The one below appears in **The Aberdare Leader**, 12 November 1910. The strong, religious imagery of hardship and injustice sets the scene. The older men appear in Verse II, urging the young to arise and defeat the oppressor. It is an appeal for solidarity between young and old and between the community as a whole.

Awake !

Song of the Strike

Mothers with despairing eyes
See the homely cupboards bare
Children too with wailing cries
Feel the sting of mad despair
Oh my brother ! Still you sleep
While grim want knocks at your door
Far above sleep's peaceful deep
Still your fancies ever soar.

Aged men with hoary hair
Bid you now like lions rise
Faces lined with stinging care
Rouse you now with thund'ring cries
Burst indifference's chains
Fling them far into the past
Then, together o'er the main
Send one joyous swelling blast.

Dark injustice's sharp thong
Cuts and gores your careworn brow
Tyrants rain the blows of wrong
And, in ruin, comrades throw
Mammon's mantle which they wear
Stained with blood of trampled men
Trails through many a bitter tear
Flowing down life's dreary glen.

Freedom now with winged feet
Flies like lightning through the air
With the trumpet Truth she greets
Fallen slaves with thrilling cry
Rise a conquering swelling band
Turn upon your tyrants now
Who with power's flaming brand
Writes "Despair" upon your brow.

APPENDIX II

The following is taken from **The South Wales Daily News**, 3 November 1910:
To the members of the South Wales and Monmouth Miners' Federation.

Fellow Workmen,

Having seen it reported in the press today that there is a desire by the workmen of the Powell Dyffryn pits, Aberdare, that the whole of the miners of South Wales should join them in stopping work, we feel it incumbent on us, as the chief officials of your Federation, to urge upon you not to become parties to attempting a redress of grievances by this irregular method of bringing about a general stoppage of the collieries, which, under any conditions, could only be successful when carefully thought out and properly organised and controlled.

In doing this we are acting in accordance with your direct instructions recently declared in a ballot vote when, by an overwhelming majority, you decided against a general stoppage of the collieries of the South Wales district at the present juncture.

We also ask you seriously to consider whether there is the remotest chance of a proposition, as suggested, for a general stoppage of the whole of the collieries of the United Kingdom having one moment's consideration at the conference of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain.

Having had no opportunity of discussing the merits of the grievances complained of by the Powell Dyffryn workmen, we cannot at present offer any opinion on their action in stopping work. In the interests of the whole of the

members of the Federation, including the Powell Dyffryn workmen, and especially the 12,000 Cambrian Combine workmen, the 3,000 Cwmtillery and Roseheyworth workmen, the Cilely and Gelli workmen, who are at present on our funds, and whom we are obliged to support, we are urging the members of this Federation to refuse to consider any proposition for a general stoppage, which, if entered upon in such a sudden, unconstitutional manner, must end disastrously for all concerned.

W. Abraham, President.

T. Richards, General Secretary.

A. Onions, General Treasurer.

APPENDIX III

Strike manifesto issued by the Aberdare Strike Committee. Taken from **Justice**, 3 December 1910 :

To our Fellow Slaves of the Lamp.

The South Wales coalfield has been full of unrest for the last twelve months. The employers in their unscrupulous greed for dividends took advantage of the Eight Hours Act, which came into operation on 1 July 1909, to pursue more drastically than ever the policy of squeezing down the workmen in their employ. At every turn we have been met with loud lamentations on the part of the colliery owners over losses caused by the Act. Every chairman of a colliery company has regarded it as his duty to deplore the passing of the Act, and to ascribe to it any reduction in profits. Where the profits happened to be more, the chairman could still say that, but for the disastrous Act, they would have been greater, coupled with this attempt to make the workers regret the granting of an eight hours day, there has been an insidious campaign to undermine the established price lists and customs. Items of dead-work that used to be paid for have been done under another name for nothing, and privileges which have been established by custom have been taken away.

In addition to this, Judge Bryn Roberts has given the employers a handle that they have not been slow to seize for further attack on the wage-earner Since then the miner has been more harshly treated than ever in the matter of allowances. "Take your tools out"—the alternative to accepting the employers' terms—has been the lot of many a hard-working miner.

Following this increased stringency on the part of the employers came the negotiations for the new Wage Agreement. The agreement which the men's leaders ultimately signed was unsatisfactory to the men. It was, undoubtedly, unsatisfactory to the men's leaders also, for we find that, at the Special Conference of the MFGB held on 29 and 30 March 1910, to consider the position in South Wales, the South Wales leaders gave expression to strong remarks on the matter. Every speaker emphasised the importance of abnormal places, and also laid stress on the unsatisfactory position of the lower paid daywage men.

Here then is our position, men. The workers in the coal mines are being screwed down more and more, and the employers are combining and piling up huge funds to make the oppression greater; an unsatisfactory Wage Agreement has been forced upon us, and since its establishment things have been worse. Coupled with all this are the facts, as indicated elsewhere, that the miners' calling is one full of danger, and that machinery is being introduced in a way that militates against the welfare of the worker. Humanity does not count—profit is the god. If we continue dumb and submissive, things will become worse.

Arise then and assert your manhood. Twenty-four thousand men are already in revolt, and demand a **LIVING WAGE**. We call upon you, our Fellow Slaves of the Lamp, to join us. Rise before we are completely crushed. Fight for the sake of your manhood. Fight for the sake of humanity.

“UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL.”

Men of South Wales! When a Conference is called, BE READY!

Men of Great Britain! When the call comes, DOWN TOOLS with us and SMITE A BLOW for THE RIGHT TO LIVE!