

## Emlyn Williams, President of the South Wales Area of the National Union of Mineworkers talks to Gwyn Williams.

Gwyn Williams writes: I grew up with the conviction that all miners were seven feet tall. It was therefore with immense relief that I first saw Emlyn Williams; he seemed a reasonable size. Until he started to speak. Then I thought, 'Oh God! The bums are all seven feet tall.'

Late in June, at a critical moment in the miners' strike, I went to the NUM HQ in Pontypridd, which was alive with stories of broken heads and fractured arms, phones ringing, people endlessly coming and going with sheets of picket-control sheets. 'Nobody here talks anything but politics' said Kim Howells. 'February', said one man, 'that's when I expect the victory celebration.' Emlyn Williams, President of the South Wales Miners, took time to give an interview to **Radical Wales**. Print cannot communicate that well-known voice, the dramatic shifts in tone and emphasis, the laughter, which made it memorable. Here, at least, are the words.

**This was put to Jim Callaghan - and set aside. He never had a liking for the Welsh people, particularly the miners.**

*What's at stake in this strike?*

This strike is basically over the survival of mining and also to some extent, of steel, in South Wales. The document which MacGregor issued after the March 6 meeting projected a de-industrialisation of this coalfield. It would be reduced, in my view, to around six collieries. The fallacy is that, within the energy set-up of the NCB, the only area with market availability is South Wales, because traditionally, we've had specialised coals. We find now there's a famine in coking coal, smokeless fuel, anthracite and to some extent the more volatile steam coals we are producing. Without a doubt, we either live or we die. There's no question of going back.

*The Coal Board is working to a fallacy?*

The situation in South

Wales, according to Home Office figures, is clear. The reserves are immense. Pits that have been closed over the years have not been closed for lack of reserves, but because of economics. Margam is a classic example. In 1977-78, the Board carried out all the feasibility studies. There was more coal in Margam, and the finest, than there was in Selby or even the Vale of Belvoir. And the surveys show quite clearly that it extends from Port Talbot right down to Neath, through the Baglan fault and then becomes anthracite. So the future for that part of the coalfield is immense. Yet, at the moment, as the result of the agreement of 1979, we find we've lost Caerau, Coegnant, Ogmere Valley, are likely to lose St. John's and there's a question mark on Garw. Not only are we not having Margam, but we are losing mining in its entirety over the Maesteg section of the coalfield.

*This is the hardest miners' strike I've heard of. How is it going?*

It is the hardest. I've been involved in industrial action more than any other past president. We've had brilliant presidents, but they've never become so involved in industrial action as I have since 1959. And the record has been mainly of resistance to pit closures. This one is the strike to end all strikes. It's going very well. We get our ups and downs. Some weeks I feel as if we've won. Indeed, after the Edinburgh meeting where the Board conceded everything, I thought, 'Well, we're now coasting home.' But, of course, Maggie Thatcher has intervened personally and she's told MacGregor exactly where he stands.

**Without a doubt, they are now almost a fascist-controlled police.**

I'd like to go into the background briefly with you, Gwyn, on the question of MacGregor. MacGregor was an import under the Callaghan government. Appointed first of all



to assist Edwardes with British Leyland. He did a good job there in the character assassination of Red Robbo and, of course, he went from there to British Steel. As a result of an understanding when a Labour government was in power.

*Good God, I didn't know that.*

That's right. He was appointed by Jim Callaghan. You're talking about the survival of the Welsh coalfield? The tripartite arrangement we had in 1979, sealed, signed and delivered under the chairmanship of Tony Benn, provided for investment, recruitment and capital for replacement in South Wales. This was put to Jim Callaghan - and set aside. He never had a liking for the Welsh people, particularly the miners. I must say this: in my experience as a member of the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party, I would blame him for the fiasco that has been created as a result of the introduction of MacGregor into

the industrial scene.

*Can I ask you about the police and the violence?*

Like yourself, I've read the industrial history of the working class movement all my life, but nothing compares with what's taking place at the moment between the miners and the police. Without a doubt, they are now almost a fascist-controlled police. If you'd seen some of the injuries that our chaps have had, particularly over recent weeks, it would make you sick. We've had young lads coming in here with broken arms, some brutally beaten up. Not even comprehending why they've been attacked; just been selected and hit about. Indeed at Orgreave, we were astounded at the way they were beating them up and even charging them when they were in hospital. This is something that has to be put right. It's traumatic. Terrible.

*But you've had support?*

Oh! the support has been fantastic, particularly from the

grass roots. I was referring only recently to the assistance we've had from our friends in North Wales, for example the old quarry town of Blaenau Ffestiniog. They've been really active. They've been down here, not only assisting with food, but assisting us to organise as well. The women! I can't say enough about them! I was a chauvinist pig at one time, but the women have been astounding. They've taken over the organisation, they've seen to the food, they've given succour to their men and they've been a bulwark of bloody strength. No argument. I'll say this - on Saturday, we've got Margaret Thatcher coming here. And this time, we're not going to welcome her with masses of pickets. We're going to knock her with masses of women.

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**I was a chauvinist pig at one time, but the women have been astounding.**

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(The phone rang. Emlyn Williams said 'I'll do it now, I said now!'. George Rees and Des Dutfield appeared from nowhere and what had to be done was done).

*Emlyn, you were born in 1921, the year of Black Friday, when Jimmy Thomas sold the miners and the Triple Alliance broke down. How are the alliances working today?*

Let's be candid. As far as the alliance is concerned, it consists mainly of the NUR, ASLEF and the NUM. As far as ISTC is concerned, all they do is give lip-service. Sometimes, they don't even give that. As far as the T and GW is concerned, whilst I know George Wright is trying hard, the response has not been as good as we had anticipated and when you realise that a miner has been killed by transport drivers, I think that indicates the depth of the situation. As far as the loyalties are concerned, between the miners and the railway workers, this time, very differently from the time of Jimmy Thomas, they've been solid, really solid. Not only solid, they've been encouraging us and they've been giving us ideas about things that, of course, we didn't know as miners. They've been really good. I would say that they are going to go down in industrial history as being the bulwarks of this struggle.

*I get the impression that you've had more support outside the trade union movement than inside it?*

Absolutely! We knew if we went to the TUC it would be the kiss of death. And we don't intend to go that road. So we had to motivate the grass roots and we've worked hard on that. There's a lot been said about miners - they are able to project themselves, they are articulate and the education standards must be good within the NUM.

*They seem to be very conscious of their own history, they seem to feel themselves part of a tradition. Would you agree?*

Absolutely! It's our education system, which goes back many years. It seems to be coming out in them. I'll give you an example - the question of these scabs in Nottingham, and they are scabs, no argument about that. Our lads went up there when the strike started, because there was no zoning then, we just jumped in. We reduced the output in Nottingham to thirty per cent - only on persuasion. I say that one of the errors of this strike has been the fact that the South Wales miners should have been left in Nottingham. Nottingham would have been out by persuasion. Once you got those Yorkshire boys in there, their backs were up. I believe that persuasion is the only way you'll ever get anyone out.

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*This sense of tradition, how recent is it? Was it there when you first went into the pits?*

Ah no! Although we had a left-wing leadership in South Wales, the local leadership was right-wing. And not even articulate at the time. You were elected on a general meeting basis. As the youngsters developed, particularly after the War, with the education, - ah - the ballots came in for positions within the pit and that brought out the best in people. The education system was set up at that time by Dai Dan Evans and, of course, continued by Dai Francis. Today's miner is more articulate, more convincing, knows his history, knows his political background - and knows what he wants.

And what's more pronounced Gwyn is this fact.

When you read history it was only the few. But now, I don't care where you go, we send two hundred pickets out and you can interview any of them and they've got a basic understanding of what it's all about, not only within the mining industry, but generally.

*That sounds as if the NUM has carried on the old tradition of the NCLC?*

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**Today's miner is more articulate, more convincing, knows his history, knows his political background - and knows what he wants.**

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That's right, that's right! I was going to bring that out. That seems to be flowing through. The stuff they want to read is that kind of stuff.

*Were you ever involved in the NCLC?*

Oh yes! I paid my little contribution every week. Ah, my father was a great man for the NCLC. Of course, he was a Marxist. All my family had that background. My uncle Tom was full of silicosis at that time, but he was an avid reader and he could debate, by God, he could debate!

*That's Trecynon? Remarkable even by South Wales standards?*

Oh yes! I was born in Harriet Street. In a house actually - because they all say I was born in the Swan Hotel, that's why they call me Em Swan! I went to live in the Gadlys, an area which was predominantly Welsh-speaking and they had a basic understanding. It was a pleasure to go into the public houses then. It was different from today, mind, you had to debate then. Your had to know your stuff to get up and talk then.

*You're Welsh-speaking, Emlyn?*

I was. I've lost a lot of it. I can converse in Welsh but I wouldn't like to project myself on the media in Welsh.

*And this atmosphere of debate was in Welsh? It was a Welsh Marxism?*

Oh yes! Aye, of course, good God aye! I could name many great characters from that time. Look, when they decided on the integration, or the salvation of Horner, by sinking the Mardy pit on the Mardy side, there were a lot of objections. All the engineers were of the view that it should have been sunk on the Cynon valley side, with the coal

going straight into the Furnace by belt. But I realised - and this is important in the way in which you've been brought up to think - that the broad movement was more important than, say, one colliery. And I agreed against terrific opposition in the Bwllfa colliery, to the integration scheme which meant one pit in the Rhondda and the egress, of course, on the Bwllfa side.

I went over there at the time and met great people, Charlie Jones Coch, in particular, always to my mind, a great leader, a great miners' leader. We formed the first joint committee and Dai Dan Evans was very interested, because it was a test for the coalfield. Indeed, we forgot personalities, the movement was more important.

But there again, we made our mistakes, because to me the policy of the NUM was absolutely wrong. To my regret, I say this. They believed in large schemes, large units. In fact, it didn't work out in that way. The large units were the first to be closed.

*This Mardy amalgamation was critical?*

Good God, I think I've spent more of my life in Mardy than anywhere. I was associated with Mardy from the first day. We agreed on the amalgamation on a staggered basis. Indeed, when I was elected Miners' Agent, that was my first task. I was elected Agent for Aberdare, Rhondda and Merthyr. When I was elected in 1959, there were 32,000 miners there. Now we haven't got that many in the whole coalfield.

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**Had it not been for the strike, I can tell you they wouldn't have taken Maes-yr-Haf off us.**

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*You grew up through the struggles of the Depression?*

I went into the pits when I was fourteen, left school and started on the Monday. Not long after, we had the fall of France. We were going to work and being sent home, going to work and being sent home. Until, out of frustration and obviously with my background, I decided to join the army. I went into the army in 1940 and was immediately transferred overseas. I was in the Second Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery, an armoured regiment with SPs. I served in the Middle East and right through. I was on the inva-



sion of Sicily, Italy and ended up in Austria.

When I came back, I became deeply involved and within six months, I was elected Chairman of the Bwlfa Lodge. I decided to dedicate myself first of all to education, by whatever means I could. I found I could become articulate. I knew I was dedicated, at that time obviously, you had to be. I became involved in Mardy, got to know Mardy, to understand the people of Mardy and I was elected a Miners Agent in 1959, against some very prominent trade unionists like Tom Evans Spurgeon. In 1966, during the Aberfan disaster, where I was in control of the NUM, I was elected vice-president. In 1974, I became president.

*Aberdare and Mardy, two places which are almost myths in our history?*

I was also closely associated with Merthyr. My father used to march me over the mountain to Aberfan to listen to Aneurin Bevan. But the education consciousness of the miners developed as a result of the strategy of the union. I know background is important, but to bring it out is the really important thing. There was tremendous resistance to education in

the South Wales coalfield. Many were opposed to the thinking of people like Dai Dan; we shouldn't be spending money on education. But the people who were aware of the need became so dedicated that they convinced the remainder. I believe that the young lad going on the picket line today is a vindication of that policy.

*Its great triumph - it's unique in Britain - is the South Wales Miners' Library at Swansea.*

Ah yes! Maes-yr-Haf is internationally known now and it's a credit to the miners. I think that even the academics agree it's unique.

*They above all, I'd say.*

But they, now, are cutting back down there, using every excuse they can, blaming the Tories. But the case they put over was terrible. They've no idea of how to manage these places. They may know the academic, how to teach people, but when it comes to running things, they're useless. We told them so, anyway. Of course, we had to face the inevitability of the strike. Had it not been for the strike, I can tell you they wouldn't have taken Maes-yr-Haf off us.

*I hear that you said that if they closed it down, you'd light such a*

*fire in Wales that nobody would put it out?*

That's right. They didn't like that!

*You see yourself, quite consciously, as part of this tradition. You quote Dai Dan. He was a Communist. So was Dai Francis. You're not though?*

No I'm not. Socialist. I was a member of the Young Communist League, of course, as thousands were, but I came to the conclusion in the end that I was a voice in the wilderness. You know, I often read . . . well not the *Morning Star*, there's too much difficulty in reading that at the moment . . . but I've read the resolutions to be debated in the Communist Party Congress annually and I read the ones in the Labour Party and they're identical. I felt the only party I believed had sufficient strength to change society was the Labour Party.

*I understand that, but you've quoted to me examples of Labour people letting you down.*

Absolutely! That's been so in the Labour Movement all our lives. You can go back as far as you like. Take the days of Gaitskell, the era of the mixed economy, the enthusiasm for bringing nuclear weapons into operation. So many of them . . .

the Wilsons, the Callaghans. I remember the 'great days' of the Labour Party, when they expelled Zilliacus and all those great socialists. Unfortunately, I'm like the young militants. We've got to try and change the Labour Party.

*Well, the best of luck. But now, you're giving an interview to a Plaid Cymru journal?*

I know, I know . . . Yes, Plaid Cymru has changed. Not as much as I'd like. As a matter of fact, I was for the old type of Plaid Cymru. Indeed, I had some thoughts about it at one time. Like Dafydd Elis Thomas. He's projecting himself during this strike. Never misses a march, always on the platform by me, always, if I go to the House of Commons, prepared to show me every avenue to get my case over. I know there are many thousands of people in Plaid who are dedicated socialists.

*Did you know S.O.? He was a Welsh socialist and a Welsh nationalist combined?*

Ah, S.O., a great old friend of mine! So was Dai Francis to some extent. I always found with Dai Coety and Dai Francis, that they could quote the Scriptures. God in heaven, they could run on for hours on them! And talk about singing hymns! They knew every Welsh hymn there ever was! And S.O. was a character . . . Duw! Duw! I remember when Tal Lloyd ran against him as the official Labour candidate in Merthyr.

*I've seen us, with these youngsters, getting anything up to 2,000 on the road within two hours.*

He was saying some terrible things about Tal Lloyd, but I loved every one of them! When I had to speak for the Labour candidate, you know, S.O. used to call out, 'You don't believe what you are saying, Emlyn bach!' That knocked me bloody right off, that did!

*What about young miners? We hear they're terribly militant but they're supposed to be unlike the older ones. Has this tradition been broken?*

Ach, the media and everyone were saying, the mortgages, the luxuries of living, they'd never take action. But they've really dedicated themselves. They've become militants overnight.

Even here, you just have a look around here. These lads now, Tony here, a young boy - control officer! In charge of hundreds of miners! He knows exactly where they are. If I called him now, he could give me where every picket is, where he intends to transfer them, what he intends to do, where he's accommodating them. Every control centre in South Wales is manned by young men. Young lads! You just want to see the messages going out here! I've seen us, with these youngsters, getting anything up to 2,000 on the road within two hours.

**I can't even talk anywhere else unless I talk about Wales! And I don't think they like that, see, Gwyn . . .!**

(The phone rang. Emlyn Williams barked into it - 'That's a pack of damned lies' and let out a deafening bellow - 'Kim'. Kim Howells came in and the lies were refuted).

*Are you going to win this strike?*

Absolutely! We can't go back! We've got to win! I've nothing to go back for. MacGregor comes out with this, out with that, out with the next. But that document of March 6, which was handed to the media and which has never been in the hands of the public, only through the NUM, tells you what he intends to do. He intends to destroy the mining industry like he did the steel industry. There's more imported steel coming in now than steel being produced. But, of course, he's part of a multi-national company which specialises in coal production. Obviously he's got a vested interest in America, and other parts of the world - South Africa. Imported coal, as far as he's concerned, is a good investment. Close the mining industry here and he's on a bonanza!

*Emlyn, miners are today only two per cent of the working population of Wales. Nearly a half of those workers today are women and two-fifths of them are part-time. Wales has been turned upside down. Is there a future for Welsh miners and their union?*

Gwyn, if I can go back to 1979. We were eighteen months drafting a policy statement on South Wales. Tony Benn's last

words were - 'With Cabinet approval, this will become reality and a future for South Wales.' Of course, it was shelved. Deliberately. And I say Jim Callaghan because I mean Jim Callaghan.

But the future of the South Wales coalfield is an expanding future. That plan is clear. We need ongoing investment, for additional replacement capacity, capital for recruitment and, obviously, day-to-day capital to maintain the pits and production. Apart from this, Margam in the plan was a large project which should absorb the manpower in the Maesteg area. We've got Carway in the West Wales area. The largest amount of anthracite is in Glynneath. All this ongoing would mean additional manpower in the mining industry, particularly young people, and a future that all the youngsters desire - security for them and their families and building up the villages and towns of South Wales.

*When you go, they say it will be the end of the great tradition in South Wales.*

That's true! People say I'm the end of an era! That they don't throw them up any more like that. Be that as it may, the miners are unusual, they've got a knack of picking the right leadership. I've worked with the miners, I've lived with them, I shall never forget them. I've got a lot to thank them for. I've always projected the cause of the miners to the miners and the general population.

*You've also projected the cause of Wales. I've heard you on platforms . . .*

Absolutely, absolutely! I'm dedicated. I love Wales. I can say this, my experience, my association have been such that I'm steeped in it. I can't even talk anywhere else unless I talk about Wales! And I don't think they like that, see, Gwyn . . .!

*Emlyn, you've reached the age of indiscretion. A final word?*

I hope that when I retire, it will be as the result of this victory. Sincerely, I hope that there is security and a future for the mining industry in Wales.

NATIONAL UNION OF MINEWORKERS (South Wales Area)

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