



EXCLUSIVE

CONRAD LANDIN SATURDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2017

John Major Asked Scab Unions How to Break Up Industry

The Morning Star uncovers memos proving Major, energy minister Tim Eggar and UDM leader Roy Lynk met before British Coal announced that it would axe most of the remaining pits



JOHN MAJOR met secretly with the strike-breaking Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) while formulating plans for pit closures, the Morning Star can reveal.

Newly declassified government documents show that, in 1992, the then prime minister invited UDM leader Roy Lynk to Downing Street.

The disclosure follows the Star's revelation last year that Margaret Thatcher held several secret soirees with Mr Lynk.

The UDM was formed when the Nottinghamshire and South Derbyshire divisions of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM)

voted to break away after the 1984-85 strike, which was not joined by many workers in those areas.

In 1988, Mrs Thatcher wrote in a memo to her private secretary: “We have to keep the UDM satisfied. We (and the country) owe a lot to their members.”

Now, documents from the administration of her successor Mr Major have been released to the National Archives. Among the files, the Morning Star has uncovered memos proving that Mr Major continued to have a close relationship with the scab “union.”

Responding to the revelation of the meeting, current NUM leader Chris Kitchen told the Star: “This is evidence this close relationship between the UDM and the government continued to 1992.

“Some people thought the NUM were paranoid. We might have been paranoid, but that doesn’t mean they weren’t out to get us.”

Downing Street minutes detail a meeting between Mr Major, energy minister Tim Eggar and Mr Lynk on October 1 1992. This was just under two weeks before British Coal announced that it would axe a large proportion of the remaining pits. The industry was privatised shortly after those closures.

The minutes state that Mr Lynk favoured a “phased programme closing down 12 to 18 [pits]” and argued that the remainder could be made profitable. He said he wanted miners “to be given 10 per cent of the new industry’s shares... with the opportunity to buy perhaps 15 per cent more in instalments.”

But Mr Lynk’s pet project would require closures, he told Mr Major, because “if you were going to amputate a leg it was better not to do it toe by toe.”

Mr Major sought the UDM leader's advice on the impact of pit closures on small communities dependent on mines. He replied: "Horrific."

Mr Lynk recommended that miners' hard-won benefits, including concessionary coal and clothing allowances, should be "cut out" as they "drained the industry."

He also suggested that Nacods, the overmen, deputies and shot-firers' union, which did not join the strike, should be "abolished" and he appears to have suggested that safety costs were too high.

The minutes of the meeting show Mr Eggar suggesting that, "if safety rules were cut, might that not make Mr Lynk's job and the acceptability of privatisation more problematic?"

The UDM leader responded by claiming that there were "too many outdated regulations" and that "more flexibility was needed."

He did, however, repeatedly raise concerns about whether he could hold onto his post — fears that proved well founded, since he was ousted as UDM president two months later. His victorious opponent Neil Greatrex opposed the plan for miners to take on part-ownership of the coal industry.

Mr Lynk told the Tory ministers that his opponent was saying he was a "puppet of the government" and he complained that he was "losing ground because he had not been given enough information" by the Major administration.

The then PM was so concerned by the issues raised by Mr Lynk that he asked for ministers to be given a detailed presentation addressing the question of whether "more pits might be being closed than was entirely necessary."

The government was still concerned about the risk of another miners' strike. A paper from September 15 1992 notes that "a

sense of betrayal, particularly in Nottinghamshire,” could be created by the pit closures.

Michael Heseltine, then president of the Board of Trade, warned that “strike action supported by the managers would cause deep mines to deteriorate to the point where they could not be privatised.”

A Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) paper concluded that “work-ins, sit-ins and colliery takeovers are also possible.” It said the preservation of the coal industry through the 1984-85 strike had only been possible due to the government having “the full co-operation of management and the UDM”.

And if, this time, members of Nacods and the British Association of Colliery Managers took action, “it could take between nine and 12 months to get collieries back into production.”

In a paper dated September 11, Mr Heseltine argued that redundancy terms must be kept generous because offering less “would be to treat those who have remained loyal to the industry worse than those who have left.”

He said the UDM would be “hit harder than the NUM.” As well as strikes, less generous redundancy terms could provoke “possibly industrial vandalism and perhaps civil disorder.”

An accompanying list of collieries earmarked for closure specifies for each pit whether the majority of miners are members of the NUM or UDM.

Nigel Lawson, the chancellor at the time, said that redundancies should be “more generous than the statutory minimum” but “well below” British Coal’s proposed terms.

Mr Lawson appears to second a suggestion from junior treasury minister Stephen Dorrell for the paltry sum of “£10,000 per miner” to be paid.