Mick McGahey retires from the leadership of the NUM this month after a lifetime as one of its key activists. Here he talks to Charlie Leadbeater about his experiences

What are the important changes in the working class and the labour movement that you've seen? It seems more sharply divided than it used to be. Do you think its character and political orientation has changed markedly?

I entered the pits in 1939 when I became a pony driver. It was a backward, antiquated industry. In those days there were 80,000 Scottish miners. In Britain there were about 850,000 miners. If you check back you'll find that Lenin referred to the 1912 strike of British miners when there were one million miners on strike for six weeks to establish a minimum wage. And a million miners, with their families, was 20% of the British population. Lenin described it as the biggest army of the proletariat ever to take to the streets of Europe.

All my life, it's been 'united you stand, divided you fall'. A great slogan. Which I don't dismiss and which I still hold to. 'United we stand, and divided we fall', oh yes. We must never, never disregard our past. But how do you get unity? There's an old American slogan: Can you spell union? If you take 'u' and 'i' out of union, what is left? It's 'non'. So unity is union, coming together.

Of course there'll be tremendous changes - tremendous changes in, for instance, size. There were not only 850,000 miners in 1939; there were 700,000 railwaymen, 600,000 steelworkers. So the character of the working-class has changed. Of course it's changed. If Neil Kinnock had 800,000 miners, 700,000 railwaymen, and 600,000 steelworkers, he'd have won the election. And there are people today who would not claim that they are working-class - they have a house, a mortgage, a car. But at the same time they have no good security, they still face the problems of capitalism. So the working class has changed. But those workers have to recognise that they still haven't got the security. And the old demands of the movement are still relevant - job security, unity, defence.

I couldn't work in the pit now. Those young miners are skilled engineers. They're not pick and shovel, they're not driving ponies. One coal face now is worth £3m. Miners, skilled young engineers, are handling it - and handling it in the knowledge that they can control it. I recommend you should read Paul Lafarge's The Right to Be Lazy, in which he was dealing with new technology in the first industrial revolution. And what was he arguing for? He was arguing for what Mick McGahey's arguing for - longer educational periods, shorter working hours, early retirement, increased payments and things like that. The arguments we're using today. But he argued for the right to be lazy. Where today we're arguing for the right to work. It's a nice contrast.

With that change in the working class how does socialist politics, the Communist Party, have to change? Can socialism still be a central powerful force in British politics?

Shall I put it this way - the class conflict will always be there, the class struggle will always be there. I noticed Mrs Thatcher was speaking about taking socialism off the agenda. Now with due respect Mrs Thatcher must recognise that as long as we have a system of society which is social production, people coming together in order to produce, the question of social ownership will always be there. So she can't take it from the agenda. If there's social companionship, social relationships in producing the necessities of life, the question of social ownership will always be there. She can't take socialism off the agenda. That's an economic and philosophical fact.

As I look back at our Communist movement, and the Communist Party - I've been a member of the Communist Party since I was 18, a member of the Young Communist League since I was 14 - I'm proud to be a Communist and proud to stand as a Communist. I look back on the mistakes of the past, but I'm not blaming anyone. It was a lack of experience. In 1929, for instance, our Communist Party was nine years old. What was the slogan of the Communist Party in 1929? 'Class against class'. In 1931, what was the programme of the Communist Party? 'For a Soviet Britain'. Now, goodness. It demonstrated our immaturity. But please remember these courageous, courageous men and women of our Communist Party who were building something, an alternative to MacDonaldism. And I must say if anybody wants to know about class reductionism, that was an example. We didn't have the broad appeal, the wider appeal to the labour and democratic movement.

Do you think the working class, British society, has fundamentally turned away from notions of social solidarity, social obligation? How could these be rejuvenated?

I think we've got to approach it from the point of view that the Conservatives under the leadership of Thatcher have won certain major advances. Now I want to say quite frankly that the labour movement must concede defeats in order to learn how to succeed. There has been, too, an element of depoliticisation of the British workers. I walk through my housing scheme or down the housing schemes and I see that door with number 10 on it, which belongs to that family, and the car's standing in the carriageway, and he's got a job, and he feels that he's secure. He feels 'well what's wrong with Maggie Thatcher'. I don't accept that, but there's an element there, which we've to analyse.

The reason for that, of course, was that the labour movement was not outside his door explaining our position. The British working class has to some extent been depoliticised, and accepted what they think are the virtues of Thatcherism - Jack got on with it, and 'man mind thyself'. I think that's happened. It's an element of the total scene. But I reject it as the central element, because I still believe that the British working class - not only the British working class, but the British people - have got a wider opinion. We are humanitarians. Look at that assembly at Wembley (Live Aid), young people singing love to one another. I was proud. They weren't knocking one another with bottles over the head, they were singing love to one another. But they were also singing love to Ethiopians, to Africans, to their black fighting sisters and brothers.

But closer to home, the National Union of Mineworkers faces tremendous change. It does not seem to yet have a coherent response to British Coal's strategy to introduce flexible shifts, change working...
practices and all the rest of it. How should the union approach that strategy?

It was McGahey that raised it in the National Executive. I said right, let's have a face to face, word to word discussion with British Coal on their strategy in terms of the new technology - how they see it. And that we would collate and prepare our strategy on the new technology and then would have a discussion at our annual conference. I object strongly to some of the things that have been said - not to being called Luddite, because I would have been a Luddite: the Luddites had nothing else to fight with, and that is why they had to do what they did - the destruction of the cottage industry, things like that. The NUM is not Luddite. Miners are looking at new technology and miners unions in Britain will look at new technology. We Communists are in the miners union fighting for a positive policy on new technology - yes - but making sure that that new technology comes from the needs of miners and their communities, and the people in Britain.

You think that you can maintain your goals of job security, and better conditions but engage with British Coal's agenda?

Of course we can maintain a coherent union strategy. I remember 1948 when they brought job flexibility into the steel industry and continental shift working. At that time, by the way, social life was not as today - you didn't have football matches Wednesday nights and the television was not developed in people's homes as they are today - ah, but they went for flexibility. Now if it's a question of job flexibility, shift flexibility, you should ask the miner - this is my point - about listening. Listen to the miner and pose the question - you can have a week in every month in which you can be off your work and your wife and family can enjoy themselves. A full week every month - but to do that you will have to go into job and shift flexibility. I don't know, the miner might say, 'hey, I am for that'. Payment for change is an important question. Yes, we have got to be thinking. If you never move an inch, that is not a movement - that's a monument.

Can I ask you a different question - about the interests of miners in Nottinghamshire, who are members of the UDM. How do you move towards dialogue with them?

The United Mineworkers of Scotland was a breakaway union in 1928. People talk about Spencerism and the UDM ... we've also got to learn that we had other sections in the past but Abe Moffat (the Scottish miners leader in the 1920s) learnt the lesson and we built one union in Scotland. And I am proud to sit with one Scottish union here... The question of unity - unity is an easy word, but how do you develop it, how do you practise it, how do you bring it about? And unity is a question of how you talk to people, but it's not only...
talking to people, it’s also listening to them. You’re listening to what they’re saying, rather than always answering. Jumping on a bus before it arrives is a very dangerous practice. It’s better if you wait and listen to what they’re saying, get the benefit of their contribution, and have the dialogue. Dialogue is a good thing.

I think we are moving forwards. But, I have often said, and I will say again, if you have several thousand miners - and their wives and families - you can’t treat them as untouchables. They are my people. They are wrongly directed. The UDM was created by McGregor and the Tory government; Lynk and his associates played the part of Judas Iscariot. They betrayed the miners by playing that part. But those miners, like those Christians, are not untouchables. How do we bring them back? I don’t think we bring them back by just shouting scab, scab, scab... Forgive-ness is not the monopoly of the Christians. Why can’t we stop talking about blacklegs, scabs and things like that and say, ‘Brother, our interests, your interests, my interests, need one union’.

What do you think the prospects are for a leadership emerging which would provide a different kind of political and industrial trajectory for the union, different from that laid out by Mr Scargill?

Well, first of all let me say that I believe that Arthur Scargill will be president of this union for many, many years to come. More important than being a great speaker and orator, I think he has got a dedication to the working class movement. That is more important than anything. In the future, the NUM will have to devise a strategy in which they recognise that the mining industry does not belong to miners ... and the mining industry does not belong to the Coal Board. And it doesn’t belong to the government. The mining industry - this wonderful seam of energy - belongs to the people of Britain. The miners union needs to develop a strategy to say to the British people, 'Please help us to develop this tremendous asset that belongs to you. Not to us, but to the British people ... and please give us the best possible wages, conditions, service and hours, and all the rest of it, for those who produce that coal. It is your industry; it is your asset. We want to develop that.' If we produce a policy along these lines we will take the British people with us.

What is it about Scotland and its culture which has sustained the labour movement here as a real force?

You must first of all start from the premise that Scotland is a nation. We are a nation, we have a distinctive legal system, a distinctive educational system, we did have a distinctive language. Scotland is a nation, and we feel as a nation. In the labour movement we have built up a unity - Donald Dewar, the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, and Mick McGahey can sit down and have a nice chat. And Mick McGahey is a Communist. So Malcolm Rifkind has now found himself in the position in which - he may protest - he really does not speak for Scotland. The labour movement speaks for Scotland. Why? Because of that unity. We have got more rank and file involvement in Scotland. We have a rich heritage - the Scottish radical movement. Edinburgh was a rich Chartist city. So we have got all that tradition. But most importantly - our Communist Party in Scotland right from the early stages worked in the labour movement in such a way that they were able to draw together broad alliances. I never refer to it as just the broad alliance of the trade union and labour movement. It is the trade union labour movement and democratic movement. Look at the churches in Scotland - we have a wonderful relationship with the churches, of all denominations. Communists in Scot-land and the labour movement in Scotland. We have developed further than the narrow concept of class against class. We don't argue for a Soviet Scotland. We talk about the need for opening up and creating the conditions in which we might talk about a socialist Scotland as the next stage of development. Even in the light of the last general election. So Margaret can't take socialism off the agenda. •