

Former Labor MP and chairman of Yorkshire's National Union of Mineworkers, Ken Capstick is an outspoken and impassioned critic of Margaret Thatcher's government. He is a member of the Socialist Labor Party.

Speaking candidly, Capstick discusses the battle between Thatcherism and the mineworkers, and how the outcome of this battle has left an indelible impression on coal-mining communities across the United Kingdom.

The Grimethorpe Pit Closures

INTERVIEWER: When you got to a place like Grimethorpe, what did you think about?

KEN CAPSTICK: I felt devastated by what I saw. It's upsetting because I know that was a thriving community. I know that they had employment; I know they had tremendous skills, people who lived at Grimethorpe and still live there. I know that they were proud; they had pride in what they did. They were getting the nation's energy resources out of the ground. They were people who felt they were contributing to the nation. And so I feel really saddened when I see that community is being destroyed in the way that it has, especially when I think that it was destroyed for political reasons, not so much for economic reasons. Grimethorpe had considerable amounts of reserves of coal when it was closed, plenty of work for those miners to continue to do to keep their families and continue to contribute. It's sad to see an entire community like that destroyed in the way that it's been destroyed.

INTERVIEWER: How bad are things in Grimethorpe, and how many people are unemployed? Is there vandalism? What is happening to the kids?

KEN CAPSTICK: There is considerable unemployment in Grimethorpe. There's been no, or very little, regeneration. For the children that are coming along there are no prospects, no future, whereas at one time there was always a job; there was always a livelihood to be earned. But now crime levels have risen, there are drug problems, and we have people in despair because they can't find employment and the dignity that employment brings, the dignity that they once took for granted, because they could get up in the morning, leave the house, go out to work, and, as they would say, "earn their keep," come back home, bring back a wage, keep their families—just what everyone else wants to do. But at the same time, they worked in a

very dangerous industry, so there was tremendous comradeship and support for one another, support not only at work, but also support in the community. All of that has been threatened and to a great extent destroyed as a result of the closure of the pits.

"The Enemy Within": Margaret Thatcher and the Miners

INTERVIEWER: Who do you blame for [the miners' plight]?

KEN CAPSTICK: I blame the Tory government of 1979 right through to 1997, particularly Margaret Thatcher's premiership. There's no doubt in my mind they came into power in 1979 absolutely determined to pay the miners back for the two strikes of 1972 and 1974. And when you look at Grimethorpe, that is the price that miners paid for daring to resist Margaret Thatcher. It's a terrible, terrible price for anyone to have to pay because of pure vindictiveness. [Hers was] a government that was just out to seek its revenge on entire communities. I just fail to understand the mentality of people who could be so paranoid as to do that to ordinary people who throughout the history of this country have contributed enormously to the wealth of this country, to the stature of this country, to the energy resources, and done it at great danger to themselves, but also done it with a great deal of pride.

INTERVIEWER: Mrs. Thatcher once referred to the miners as the enemy within. How does that make you feel?

KEN CAPSTICK: Coming from Margaret Thatcher I treat that with utter contempt. It could make you feel angry if you were to half believe it. But of course we were not the enemy within. We were never the enemy of the people of this country. We represent a great part of this nation. We were faced with an enemy, and that enemy was out to destroy our livelihoods, out to destroy our pits, out to destroy our communities and what our communities stood for, our values. To consign us to unemployment, to consign us to social deprivation—that, to a great extent, was what was achieved. And when you look at Grimethorpe you can see the wastelands. You can see the social deprivation that it caused. That was the real enemy. Are you really looking at the people in Grimethorpe, these families, these children, their community, and regarding them as the enemy of the British people? It's a staggering

statement to make. I feel very upset when I think about it, and of course I treat it with contempt because of the person who said it, who had no concept of community whatsoever.

INTERVIEWER: You say that the Tory government were out to take revenge for the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974. The miners' strike was in the early '70s, and people said [the strikes] showed that the unions had become too powerful, that the unions were ruling the country, that Parliament [and] the elected prime minister couldn't call the shots anymore and [therefore] it was time to tame the unions.

KEN CAPSTICK: I think that people who say the unions were too strong didn't understand the nature of the society that we live in. The unions were faced with big multinational companies far stronger than trade unions could ever be. We were faced with a nationalized industry run by the state. There was no way any trade union was as strong as the state. That was propaganda that was used against us. In 1972 and 1974, we were fighting for a decent wage increase. We had seen our wages erode throughout the '60s. Miners used to say when they used to take their wage packet home and throw it on the table, it used to take it half an hour to float down and land. We fought for a decent wage increase for people who were working in the bowels of the earth, doing a very difficult and dangerous job. In 1972 and 1974 we demonstrated the worth of the miners to the nation—not their power, but what happens when there's no coal. As a result, we managed to achieve two very good wage increases in 1972 and 1974. But the Tories never forgave us for that. People say that the miners brought the government down. It just isn't true. There was an election in 1974, and the people of this country brought the Tory government down.

What Was Capstick Fighting For?

INTERVIEWER: Moving on to the main struggle in the Thatcher years, you've already made it plain you think they were out to get you. What were the values and beliefs that kept your morale up, and what did you feel you were fighting for?

KEN CAPSTICK: First of all, we were fighting over pit closures. It was quite clear that the government had a massive pit-closure program. They denied it, but you've only got to look at the situation now to see that what we were saying in 1984 was true. A massive pit-closure program was planned. But if the pits were to go, then of course our livelihoods would go. With

that we would see our communities decimated, and we would see the kind of things that you see in mining communities now such as Grimethorpe. The social fabric of the entire community is destroyed. Miners and their families had a set of values that I don't think Margaret Thatcher could understand. We cared about people. We provided for the community. We maintained the community in many, many ways. We supported hospitals, and we built hospitals. We supported and built sporting facilities, and we built social clubs. And we funded them. The whole community was built around the miners and the way that miners thought of the community. All of that was threatened, and the social cohesion of the community was threatened because of Thatcherism.

Thatcher believed that we should all be individuals greedily trying to serve our own. We couldn't relate to people who thought in that way, because at work we had to take care of one another; we had to look after one another. We had to take care of one another's safety; we had to take care of one another's health. We did so to the best of our ability. We couldn't understand a philosophy that said "Think about yourself and yourself alone." We couldn't understand the "me now" philosophy. We had a totally different way of life. That's what we were fighting for. That's the reason why we saw the women join in so forcefully during that strike. They knew that they were also fighting for a self-supporting community that was built on values of socialism and Christianity. The two things went hand in hand in many ways. Many people had very strong Christian beliefs. And you see that in many mining communities today—the choirs in South Wales, for instance—mixed with those strong socialist beliefs of caring and sharing for one another.

A Brotherhood of Miners: Pit Closures Become an International Cause

INTERVIEWER: The miners' strike became an international cause. How much support were you getting from abroad?

KEN CAPSTICK: We had tremendous support from abroad. We had support from places like the United States of America, where many unions supported us financially, particularly the United Mine Workers of America. In Canada, I went all around Canada, was flown from one place to another collecting money for the miners' strike. Miners went to Australia, to Greece, the Soviet Union, Poland, Germany, West Germany, and France. We went to collect money, and we were supported. That sustained us through the difficult times.

INTERVIEWER: Why did so many foreigners see this as an especially significant strike?

KEN CAPSTICK: Miners in other countries—America, Germany, Poland, and Australia—identified with us. I think also many trade unionists throughout the world saw that Margaret Thatcher had a clear agenda to attack trade unions. Trade unionists were eager to help [us] to survive and to win the struggle, because they had a vested interest in us winning it. We hadn't seen a government as right wing as that for a long, long time. We'd been used to one-nation Tories the likes of Harold Macmillan and Ted Heath. Now we had this vicious right-wing government, led by an absolutely determined leader, Margaret Thatcher. We hear people talking about class war and class conflict. She knew which class she was representing.

From their point of view, I suppose she was an extremely powerful leader. But what happened in 1984, '85 was that we had a leader equally as determined on our side.

INTERVIEWER: Arthur Scargill.

KEN CAPSTICK: Arthur Scargill, yes. Someone once said during the miners' strike, "Yes, Arthur Scargill is a bastard, but he's our bastard."

The Battle of Orgreave

INTERVIEWER: How rough did it get in Orgreave [a South Yorkshire mining community]?

KEN CAPSTICK: It was horrendous at Orgreave, frightening. To be there in shorts and trainers and a singlet, because it was hot weather, [and] then suddenly to see the mass ranks of police open up and be confronted with a cavalry charge—police on very, very tall horses with batons coming straight at you at a gallop. There was no way that if you'd stayed there they were going to avoid you, so you had to get out of the way, and quick. We all ran. We all ran for our lives. It was frightening to see it, to see it happening in front of your eyes. I was there with my son, and so you can imagine how I felt. Frightened for my own safety, yes, but far more frightened for my son, at the time. You know, it was a terrible, terrible thing to be involved in. It was the next thing to a war. We were unarmed: We didn't have batons; we didn't have horses; we didn't have riot gear; we didn't have helmets. We were in a position where we were there to stop the movement of coal. We were there to protect our jobs. That

was what we were fighting for; that was what we were there for. We were confronted with a police force, a massive police force. Where have all these police gone? I have no doubt whatsoever the army was used and were given police uniforms, because we don't have that many police. When they came at us it was frightening.

INTERVIEWER: What does that really tell you about the nature of that strike or the nature of the government, that they used that amount of force?

KEN CAPSTICK: They'd been prepared to have gone a lot further if it had been necessary. They were determined to use all the state's apparatus to defeat the miners, even if that meant police in riot gear, mounted on horseback with batons. If it meant police charging around in armored vehicles, if it meant using buses [covered] up with mesh in order to take strike breakers to work, under police guard, then so be it. How much further would they have been prepared to go had we shown any signs of bringing the country to a standstill? Had we had power cuts, had the coal reserves run out, then I think we would have seen just how far Thatcher was prepared to go. Whether she would have used the army, we'll never know, but I suspect that she wouldn't have hesitated to do so.

We were the enemy within. By that statement she was preparing the country to see us as an enemy that had to be defeated at any cost. I don't think she would have hesitated to use armed force against the miners if that's what it would have taken to defeat us.

The Cost of Coal Mining—Human and Otherwise

INTERVIEWER: I just think Americans don't know necessarily the cost of those kinds of fights. You say there were a lot of people were killed in the miners' strike, plus a lot of people probably ended up in hospital.

KEN CAPSTICK: A lot of people ended up being in the hospital.

INTERVIEWER: The Conservatives would say the world price of coal is half, or anyway much lower than the coal that we were digging up here. In other words, reading the inevitable forces in history, it was an inevitable force of history that coal was cheaper elsewhere and inevitable that our mines were no longer [economically sound].

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KEN CAPSTICK: There are a number of points to make about that. First of all, it wasn't always the case. What they would say was that in America, for instance, coal produced at the pit head was cheaper than coal produced at the pit head here, and that the American miners' productivity was higher than ours. But by the time you'd transported coal from America to a power station in Britain, we were far more competitive with coal from abroad. In some cases it was cheaper, and in some cases it wasn't, but there wasn't that much of a difference. Secondly, if we're talking about getting coal from the cheapest possible place, if you follow that through to its logical conclusion, then we start buying coal from places like Colombia, where they use children in coal mines, children 7, 8, and 9 years old to mine coal. My belief is that coal mined by children 6, 7, 8, 9 years old, if it was a penny a ton, it would be the dearest possible coal that you could buy anywhere. ... It's the most expensive coal that anyone could buy because it's mined by children, and there's children's blood on that coal. We shouldn't be asking civilized people to compete with that. That's not competing in the marketplace.

Surely we weren't going to resort to that. But if you follow that through and we're going to compete with coal like that, then we might as well tell our children to come out of school and get down the coal mines and start digging coal. It couldn't have been the economic argument; it couldn't have been because in this country we were subsidizing nuclear power to the tune of £2.3 billion a year. ... So it was one set of rules for the miners and another set of rules for other people. In 1992, when they announced 31 pit closures, resulting in some 30,000 job losses in the mining industry, at that time coal was 30 percent cheaper than gas and as much as 350 percent cheaper than nuclear power. No one was suggesting that we should close down the gas fields. In fact, we were going out of our way to support the nuclear power industry. But we were destroying the coal industry. So whilst they used this spurious economic argument against us, it didn't hold water. And furthermore, as any monetarist will tell you, if you can get coal cheaper from abroad than you're producing it at home, if you then close down your coal industry, do you honestly believe that these people abroad are going to sell it you as cheap as they have been doing when they had to compete? Of course they're not. The price of coal then from abroad is going to rocket because you haven't got a mining industry to compete with. We had vast coal reserves, blessed with vast coal reserves in this country, with coal beneath our feet. And they were destroyed, isolated forever because of a vindictive

government whose only purpose was to destroy the mining industry and the miners that worked in the industry.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to follow up on what you said about children in the mines. Some Third World people say it's easy for us to say, that we've sent our children down the mines in the past.

KEN CAPSTICK: It's not a case of us coming down to their level. We should be bringing them to our level. If we're asked to compete at the lowest possible level, then yes, we will, we will employ children. Those were the very arguments that were used in the last century when we were saying that we didn't want children working in the mills, we didn't want children working in the mines. We stopped that in 1842. And the people who opposed it used that very argument. It isn't a civilized argument. We shouldn't be leveling down; we should be leveling up. We should be making sure that children, wherever in the world, wherever there's children who are being exploited in that way, that should be stopped. It's a basic principle of human rights, [and] it should be stopped.

Tony Blair and the Miners

INTERVIEWER: We have interviewed Tony Blair, and he was very active in the miners' strike. Tell us how involved. A number of Labor politicians supported the strike. How involved was Tony Blair in particular? What did he do for the miners?

KEN CAPSTICK: Tony Blair during the miners' strike was totally committed to the miners' cause, as were others, such as Dennis Skinner. They never stopped, tirelessly working, public speaking all over the country, raising money for the miners. In Parliament, they were putting the miners' case in debates. We have tremendous respect for Tony Blair, tremendous respect for such as Dennis Skinner. They were tremendous supporters of our cause.

INTERVIEWER: What does it mean when a guy like Tony Blair is given a miners' lamp?

KEN CAPSTICK: He deserved it. We were proud to give it him. We were proud that he was proud to accept it.

"Me Now" vs. the Miners: The Outcome of the Strike

INTERVIEWER: At the end of the strike who won, and who lost?

KEN CAPSTICK: I don't think we're going to know the answer to that question for a long time to come. We lost the industrial struggle, because we lost the pits. We can't argue against that. They've basically gone, most of them gone forever, because you wouldn't be able to reopen those pits and access those coal reserves. But there's another level to it. That is the political level, the kind of values that you want in society. I think that there's a lot of water to go under the bridge on that one. There are a lot of signs that we won that one. People turned against Thatcher; they turned against what she stood for. She didn't believe in society; we do. She didn't believe in community; we do. She didn't believe in people helping one another; we do. And we will continue to believe in that.

There was a time in the '80s when people were swayed by Thatcher and her "me now" society. I think people turned against that quite violently in the '90s, when Labor was elected with a massive majority in 1997, although people didn't get what they were voting for. I believe they were voting for a complete change in the kind of values that had been pursued. They want a better health service; they want better education for their children. They realized that those things were never going to be provided by [a] pure individualistic "me now" approach.

INTERVIEWER: What have we learned from the miners' strike? Would you change things? Did Thatcher win in the end?

KEN CAPSTICK: Well, [it was said in the aftermath of the French Revolution] it's far too soon to say [what its effects would be]. I think you can apply that to the miners' strike.

If you could have gone with your microphone and your cameras to one of the Tolpuddle Martyrs [18th-century farm laborers who became heroes of the labor movement], when he was in chains on a ship bound for Australia away from his family and everything that he knew for seven years, and asked him if it was a defeat, he would have said, "Well, if this is victory, I wouldn't like to suffer a defeat." That's what he would have said. Of course, we all know that they won a magnificent victory, but it took time.

Coal Miner's Son

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me to what degree you come yourself from a family of miners?

KEN CAPSTICK: My grandfather was a coal miner; my father was a coal miner; my father's brothers, my uncles, [were] coal miners; my own brothers were coal miners; [my] nephews—yes, an entire family of coal miners, stretching back to the beginning of this century when my grandfather started working the pits.

INTERVIEWER: How easy was it to get work in the mines in the old days, for example, when you yourself started at 15?

KEN CAPSTICK: In a mining community you had no difficulty whatsoever in getting a job. I left school at Easter in 1956, on Friday, full of the joys that we all have when we finish with school. By the following Wednesday I was working in a coal mine. I didn't know what had hit me. It was absolutely horrendous. But I had no difficulty in getting a job. My father said, "Right, come on," took me down to the pit, saw the training officer, had a few words with him, turned around and said, "If you're going to be as good as your father, lad, start on Wednesday." And that was it. I had a job, and so did everybody. So did every other lad who left school that year. And that's how it was; we all had jobs. Miners used to say—and I can remember them saying it—"While ever I've got these, I'll always have a job."

Now, unfortunately, I don't think that's the case anymore. Society has changed; the workplace has changed. The ability to push, pull, lift, shove, doesn't guarantee you work. You've got to have better skills than that now—new skills, different skills for the workplace. We've seen now where most jobs now go to women in part-time jobs. I'm not against that. I don't have any complaints about that. I have always thought that women have a great deal to contribute to the economy and haven't been allowed to contribute enough in the past. But men have also got to realize that the world has changed, and is continually changing. The workplace has changed, and is changing, and will continue to change, and they've got to adapt.

INTERVIEWER: You said you didn't know what hit you when you were 15. What was it like to be a miner? The work was dangerous, and there was a great sense of community there.

KEN CAPSTICK: When I first started in the pit, it was extremely difficult. You were suddenly in a completely different world, a dangerous one, one where you were suddenly having to do extremely difficult manual labor. But there was a tremendous sense of comradeship. Miners did look after one another, watch one another's back, as we used to say. That comradeship extended beyond the workplace. It extended into the community; it extended into the social life, and back to work again the next day. They socialized together; they went back to work together. They were tough, rough, and ready—there's no doubt about that. They wouldn't tolerate people who didn't pull their weight. You had to be able to pull your weight when you were working with them. They were kind to you if you were what they would call a good worker, and then you couldn't wish for better friends anywhere in the world.

When the Mines Became Safer

INTERVIEWER: [Mining] was a dangerous job, and at the time of nationalization there was something like five miners being killed every week in this country.

KEN CAPSTICK: Of course. Sometimes you have explosions that would kill hundreds of miners at one go. And you can imagine what a devastating effect that would have on a community when you know so many of the men of the community would be gone in a flash. After nationalization, the mines did become safer. I'm not one of those people that says that management didn't care about safety in the coal mines. They did care. Our job as a union was to make sure that safety standards were maintained, because management had other things. They were under an enormous pressure, in terms of productivity and so on. But all miners care. Anyone who had ever worked in a mine cared about safety.

And a lot of the ill health that miners suffered from as a result of working in the coal mines—bronchitis, emphysema ...—a lot of those things were eradicated. Not all of them, but a lot of them were. So we did make tremendous advances on the safety front. A lot of it was the result of the joint efforts in the industry of everyone concerned.

A Miner's Song

KEN CAPSTICK: "What, I wonder, will your memories be
And the effect of the strike on you three?
When you look back at your grass roots

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Will you remember your marching boots?
The miles that you walked, come rain or shine
To fight for the future that was yours and mine.
Will you remember the songs and the cheers
Or will you remember the tension and the tears?
Will you remember how you played your part
And how with pride you filled my heart?
Will you remember how I stood on the picket line
And how you had so little of my time?
Will you grow up feeling bitter
Because you were left with a baby-sitter?
Or will you remember with affection and pride
When Mummy stood by Daddy's side?
Will you remember how I felt so bad
Because I couldn't give you what others had?
Will you remember as you grow older
How you cried upon my shoulder?
Or will you remember how you managed to laugh
When the Bobbies and Tories thought us daft?
Will you remember how you made me smile
And made my struggle all the more worthwhile?
But will you remember the traditions I've taught
Or in vain have I fought?"