

Michael ‘Mick’ McGahey: Miner, communist and trade union leader

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Abstract Michael McGahey was born in the Lanarkshire mining town of Shotts in 1925, a year before the general strike and miners’ lockout. He died in 1999, the year that the Scottish Parliament, which he was credited with playing a leading role in bringing about, was established. McGahey had come to public prominence in the preceding decades as President of the National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area (NUMSA) and a public face of British miners’ industrial action in the 1970s and 1980s. This paper is based on trade union and archival records, as well as oral testimonies recorded with close comrades of McGahey, including his son, senior Scottish Communists and NUMSA officials. It firstly assesses the foundation of McGahey’s worldview in the context of class struggle, personal and familial hardship and entering the mining industry as a young man. The second section overviews McGahey’s evolution from a colliery activist to a national trade union leader, underlining his willingness to build pragmatic broad left alliances between Labour and Communist affiliated miners. Section three explores the connection between McGahey’s commitment to Communism and his support for a Scottish Parliament within the United Kingdom.

Keywords McGahey, Communism, Scotland, coal, trade unionism, miners, nationalism

Introduction

On 30 January 2019, at a gathering to mark the twentieth anniversary of his death, it was revealed that the ashes of the former president of the

National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area, Michael McGahey, had been interred in the foundations of the Scottish Parliament building at Holyrood in Edinburgh.¹ The decision to place the ashes beneath the grounds of the new national parliament had been taken by Donald Dewar, Scotland's first First Minister and leader of the Scottish Labour Party. The *Daily Record* – Scotland's best-selling tabloid newspaper with an editorial line that accords with Dewar's politics – declared that this was a 'fitting tribute' to a principled trade unionist who had also been a leading advocate of devolution, or 'home rule' as it was commonly referred to in the Scottish labour movement.² At the gathering, nationalists joined Labour Party figures in paying tribute to McGahey. Claire Haughey, Member of the Scottish Parliament for Rutherglen (which encompasses Cambuslang, where McGahey grew up and worked – at Gateside colliery), lauded him as 'one of the most influential people to come from the area in recent times'.³

These plaudits would perhaps seem unremarkable if McGahey had been a member of the Labour Party, or if he had been prominent in a growing union during the 1960s and 1970s. Yet they must be seen as extraordinary and require explanation when it is understood that McGahey had been leader of an already much numerically-diminished mining workforce when he became the President of the National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area (NUMSA) in 1967, and, later, NUM Vice-President in 1973.⁴ What's more, McGahey was a stalwart Communist to his dying days. His membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) had extended for around half a century before the party was dissolved in 1991. The breadth and depth of his commitment is demonstrated by the roles he played in serving on the party's Political and Executive Committees and as its President. McGahey summarised his worldview by stating, even after the Soviet Union and the CPGB had dissolved: 'I was born a Communist. I have always been a Communist and I would like to die a Communist.'⁵

Scotland's most-read broadsheet, the *Herald*, had commemorated McGahey's 'grit and intellect' in an obituary published soon after his death.⁶ Vic Allen's assessment of McGahey's life in the *Guardian* had emphasised that he was an 'avid reader', who could 'recite Robert Burns endlessly, debate the merit of Lewis Grassic Gibbon quotes and

discuss working-class poets'. Commitment to self-education was a trait McGahey shared with the man he described as his hero, the Red Clydeside revolutionary John Maclean.⁷ Three years after McGahey's death, the then Scottish Labour MSP John McAllion wrote a tribute for him in the *Scottish Review* magazine which described his funeral: 'a packed crematorium, on a cold February day, in the rain, trying to sing those words of the "Internationale"'.⁸

There are obvious parallels between Michael McGahey and Jimmy Reid, the other Scottish Communist and industrial leader who enjoyed a UK-wide platform during the early 1970s. Both men were closely associated with struggles against deindustrialisation, specifically pit and shipyard closures, as well as the labour movement case for home rule.⁸ Reid was similarly regarded as a working-class intellectual, a status he augmented in his autobiography.⁹ Yet there are also important distinctions between the two men. During the mid-1980s, when he was leading the miners in their pivotal struggle for jobs, McGahey described Reid, who had formerly sat alongside him on the CPGB's Political Committee, as 'broken Reid', after he had criticised the conduct of the strike in the pages of the right-wing magazine, the *Spectator*.¹⁰ This ill-feeling was recomunicated after McGahey died and the *Herald* published an obituary written by Reid. A.I. Gordon wrote a letter of protest from Kirkcaldy in the Fife coalfields, decrying the broadsheet for committing 'a disservice' to McGahey, who, unlike Reid, was 'a man of principle'.¹¹

Whilst McGahey is reported to have joked that he was 'seeking a safe Communist seat in Scotland' following his retirement in 1987, Reid came as close as any Scottish Communist to Westminster since Willie Gallacher lost the West Fife constituency at the 1950 general election.¹² Knox and McKinley's recent biography details Reid's ultimately thwarted electoral ambitions in Dunbartonshire Central during the two general elections of 1974, and his departure from the CPGB soon after to (also unsuccessfully) pursue electoral politics through the Labour Party.¹³ Yet McGahey is not to be distinguished from Reid solely for his retained commitment to Communism. The explanation for their distinct paths rests, fundamentally, on McGahey's occupational identity, upon which was founded his commitment to the labour movement and Communism.

McGahey represented a now departed brand of self-educated Scottish

working-class political leadership. And he was mourned by a polity which had, for the most part, long since abandoned its promise. Yet the context of nation building under devolution gave figures like McGahey and Reid a symbolic importance in legitimating the new parliament.¹⁴ This was evident when McAllion nominated McGahey, alongside William Wallace, for the title of 'The Greatest Scot' in 1999, an initiative which accompanied the new parliament.¹⁵ Such tributes demonstrate the importance of understanding the meaning of McGahey's life in Scottish historical memory. They also underline the need to appraise his actions in the historical terms in which he understood them, including the growing importance of Scottish nationhood to his industrial and political perspective across the second half of the twentieth century.

Despite McGahey's importance to modern Scottish political history and British Communism, there has been relatively scant published biographical research on him. Unlike Reid, McGahey never wrote an account of his own life. His commitment to unity within the NUM led him to abandon an autobiography that would have compelled him to broach the subject of differences with the union's President, Arthur Scargill, over the conduct and aftermath of the 1984-5 miners' strike. Shortly after his death, Scottish journalist Arnold Kemp described McGahey as a 'reticent revolutionary' who 'carries socialist secrets to the grave'.¹⁶ These themes were also mentioned by Willie Doolan, a former CPGB and NUMSA comrade of McGahey's, during an oral history interview with me in 2019 when he explained that:

McGahey sat down with Graham Ogilvie who was at that time the Scottish editor of the *Morning Star* ... with the anticipation of doing a book. And he did, I think it's thirty-four A4 sized pages. I've got them Ewan, and it's double-sided pages. He said to Graham, 'I can't do it'. He says 'I would have to tell lies. And I'm not prepared to do it.' Not prepared to do it.¹⁷

Whilst the strike remains an emotionally charged subject, growing historical distance and the emergence of a Scottish coalfield historiography that assesses the twentieth century as a whole, provides an opportune moment to reinvestigate McGahey.¹⁸ Existing literature that

specifically focuses on McGahey is confined to two entries in dictionaries of biography. This article expands upon these important overviews. Both focus heavily upon McGahey's relationship to the Communist Party. Taylor's necessarily brief entry for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* concludes that 'McGahey never attempted to distinguish between his roles as a union leader and as a Communist'.¹⁹ Campbell and McIlroy's *Dictionary of Labour Biography* is more substantive, and highlights tensions between McGahey's political and industrial affiliations, underlining the subservience of the former to the latter during Britain's 'trade union century'.²⁰ Unlike these earlier dictionary entries, this article benefits from archival research in the records of both the NUMSA and the nationalised coal industry, in which McGahey features prominently. It also draws on interviews with McGahey's comrades, including former Scottish Communists, miners and his son Mick, who followed Michael into the mining industry and the CPGB.

McGahey's rise to prominence and his political outlook, including his role as a prominent advocate of home rule, which are not a feature of earlier appraisals, are addressed here through three overlapping spheres. The first section focuses on his occupational identity. Growing up in a mining household before undertaking twenty-five years of underground work conditioned McGahey's worldview, shaping both his radicalism and commitment to workforce unity and political accommodations. Section two addresses McGahey's role as a union leader and activist, concentrating on his involvement in industrial affairs from his time as a representative at Gateside colliery through to his emergence as a national leader within the NUM. A final section discusses how McGahey's increasingly pronounced support for home rule was shaped by Communism, underlining that McGahey's industrial activism was enthused by his commitment to the party, but also that his Communism was grounded in his occupational and national identities.

Family background and occupational identity

Michael McGahey was born on 29 May 1925 at Stane Place in Shotts, a coal and steel town in the east of the Lanarkshire coalfields.²¹

Lanarkshire was located at the centre of Scotland's industrialisation during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. McGahey matured in an atmosphere conditioned by disunity within the mining workforce, which was related to the competing perspectives of Labour Party and Communist-affiliated miners, and the impact these divisions had within Scottish mining trade unionism in the 1920s and 1930s. In the years preceding McGahey's birth, the Lanarkshire Miners' Union (LMU) experienced internal conflict and acrimony. A young generation of miners affiliated with the Lanarkshire Miners' Reform Committee went on to join the CPGB. They were swept into officialdom in the build up to and following the 1926 general strike and lockout, the outcome of which marked a decisive defeat for the union.²²

Michael McGahey was a product of this environment. His father, Jimmy McGahey, was a founding member of the CPGB and a miner employed by the Shotts Iron Company.²³ Jimmy and his family, including the infant Michael, experienced the brutalities of class conflict during and after the 1926 dispute. Margaret Morris's account of the nine-day general strike and subsequent six-month miners' lockout estimates that up to a quarter of the CPGB's pre-strike membership may have been imprisoned, with miners who were integral to the organisation of picketing proving prominent targets.²⁴ Jimmy was gaoled and separated from his young son, Michael, who turned one year old around the beginning of the dispute. Subsequently, the family were evicted by the Shotts Iron Company, who were also their landlords. In the aftermath of the miners' defeat, Jimmy McGahey was unable to find work in the Lanarkshire coalfields following blacklisting by local coal-owners. His family relocated so Jimmy could work at Chisley colliery in Ramsgate, Kent, in the South-East of England. A move back to Scotland followed, firstly to the Stirlingshire coalfields, before the McGaheys settled more permanently in Cambuslang, an industrial settlement towards the South-Eastern edge of Glasgow.²⁵

These events have lived long in family memory. During an oral history interview in 2014, Mick McGahey, Michael's son, recalled his grandfather being victimised and the resultant uprooting of his family from Shotts:

My father was born in Shotts, my family was born in Shotts, and they moved fae pit tae pit cause miners were like gypsies. At that time the pits were owned by coal owners, werenae nationalised. So, in my grandfather's day, they moved when they were victimised. My grandfather was involved in the 1926 general strike, he got sent to jail, he did six months in the jail. My grandmother got evicted, family oot the pit owner's hoose, and they ended up in Kent, and they moved about the coalfields in England, and eventually came back to Scotland and settled in Cambuslang.²⁶

These experiences, along with growing up surrounded by miners in a mining household, were fundamental influences on the young Michael McGahey. Willie Doolan recalled Michael discussing working alongside his father at Gateside colliery. Jimmy was a stern taskmaster who reprimanded his son for perceived shortcomings and taking health and safety risks with mechanical equipment:

His old father, old Jimmy. I remember Mick telling me they were working in the pit. And at that time it was the coal cutter machine, the old coal-cutter machine operated with a chain. And Mick was working wi his da, old Jimmy. And Mick was trying to turn this machine to take it back down the face. And old Jimmy says 'you wouldn't be even to turn that in fucking Hampden Park'. He says 'ma da used to ridicule me for ma mining skills'.²⁷

These developments demonstrate another important dimension of the Scottish mining industry in the interwar period: its modernisation. By the late 1930s, Jimmy and Michael McGahey were working at collieries in which coal cutting and conveying were overwhelmingly mechanised within a rationalised Scottish coalfield, in which production was dominated by just twenty firms.²⁸ These technological developments were associated with enhanced dangers. Tragic familial experiences made Michael highly aware of the human costs of coal mining. Jimmy Reid's obituary told of an incident in Jimmy McGahey's working life that had a powerful impact on his son, and explained Jimmy's attitude towards Michael's operation of coal-cutting machinery:

To him the class struggle was not a theoretical concept but a hard fact of everyday life. He once told me of how Old James had come home from the pit absolutely shattered. One of his workmates had been killed by the new coal-cutting machine. Part of his clothing had got snared on a chain link and dragged him through the whole cutting process. James McGahey scraped his remains from the teeth of the machine and brought them to the surface in a bag. If you don't understand these things you have no chance of understanding Michael McGahey, and what made him tick.²⁹

In addition to his father's memories of danger below ground, Michael also lost a sibling whilst his father was imprisoned in 1926. The vindictiveness of the state was taught to him at a very young age, when, despite the petitions of a local Catholic priest, his father was not permitted to attend the boy's funeral.³⁰ John, Michael's elder brother, who was also a Communist and trade union activist, later died from an industrially-related condition. John had been involved in establishing a CPGB branch at Cardowan colliery, where Michael also worked for a period. Willie Doolan recalled growing close to John as a young miner during the 1970s, before he had fallen ill and died.³¹

Everyday experiences of danger, hardship and loss shaped McGahey's political commitment and his striving for unity among miners. That imperative was also a response to deep-running divisions within the Lanarkshire coalfields. Abe Moffat, the Fife miner and CPGB activist who rose to become the first President of the NUMSA when the NUM was established across the UK in 1944, recalled in his autobiography that Shotts had been a stronghold both of trade unionism and Communism and of Catholicism.³² The power of the church was such that Catholic miners would depart from demonstrations when a priest approached.³³ Although the McGahey family had moved away from Shotts, they shared this dynamic: Jimmy's Communism was balanced by the Catholicism of his wife – and Michael's mother – Rose Ann, an Irish migrant who was originally from Derry.³⁴ Michael became an altar boy for a short period when he was a young teenager, but followed the path set by his father after he began working alongside him at Gateside.³⁵

These were difficult binaries to navigate in a polarised atmosphere.

Michael McGahey publicly repudiated any religious affiliation, viewing it as a divisive feature of coalfield life and a political obstacle to working-class unity. Hugh McIlvanney, the celebrated Fleet Street sports journalist who came from an Ayrshire mining family, interviewed McGahey during the late 1990s for a programme that examined the deep roots of three great Scottish football managers with mining origins – Matt Busby and Jock Stein from Lanarkshire and Bill Shankly from Ayrshire. During the interview, McGahey explained that he was rejected by both Protestant and Catholic miners, due to his membership of the Communist Party. He acknowledged the significance of the divisions associated with Glasgow’s Old Firm football rivalry, but was keen to underline his view that whilst miners may have been divided over a local derby weekend, they were also reunified underground come Monday morning.³⁶ McGahey’s sentiments are broadly consistent with the trade unionism of the NUMSA, which was dominated by an alliance between CPGB activists and left-wing Labour Party members. However, it does perhaps obscure some important dimensions of struggles within the union. Michael McGahey’s son, Mick, recalled that Catholic and Protestant factions operated within the NUMSA, and were opposed to its Communist orthodoxies.³⁷

McGahey’s outlook was shared by other Scottish Communists, who appealed to the distinctive occupational experience of miners to understand their place at the forefront of the British labour movement. During an oral history interview in 2014, John Kay, who worked full-time for the CPGB from the mid-1960s until 1991, and served as the party’s Scottish Industrial Organiser, explained these distinctions in occupational terms. Kay, who was a time-served engineer, recalled a conversation with Guy Bolton, who was a CPGB activist and miner in the Clackmannanshire coalfields:

[Guy] would say ‘you could be goin up the road to the pit on, say, the back shift, and the day shifts comin doon and they’re sayin to you “go home we’re on strike”’. Obviously, day shift had taken a decision. And big Guy says, ‘you didnae say to them what it’s all about, you just turned back, and the guys’d say “you’ll hear all about it later on”’. Total trust. I remember Guy says, ‘I couldnae imagine it happening in an engineering factory’. In the pits, Guy

would say, you just said 'aye, we'll hear all about it later on if boys are on strike and the union says aye that's it'. You needed that discipline.³⁸

These comments point to the occupationally-rooted nature of McGahey's Communist politics. They are redolent of the connections between locality, workplace, the union and the CPGB that Stuart Macintyre explored in his study of radical politics in mining villages within Fife and South Wales.³⁹ In Ad Knotter's terms, McGahey was part of 'occupational communities' in Shotts and Cambuslang, where the 'associational activities' of trade unions were central to Communist activism – which were also common features of other interwar European coalfields.⁴⁰

These sentiments were tempered, however, by an overarching emphasis on the importance of workplace unity. They were shaped by experiences of fractious conflict in coalfield communities. The Fleet Street reporter, Terry Pattinson, recalled McGahey telling him that the same year he was stabbed with a broken glass whilst selling the *Daily Worker* in a Cambuslang pub when he was just fourteen years old.⁴¹ In same year, 1939, McGahey began working at Gateside and joined the CPGB. McGahey started his work at Gateside three years after the party had abandoned the short-lived United Mineworkers of Scotland (UMS), its fateful experiment in 'red unionism'. (The UMS had been established under the auspices of the CPGB's 'class against class' policy during the ultra-left turn by the Communist International during 1929, but the policy came to an end with the switch to the Popular Front period in the mid-1930s.) In 1936, the UMS re-joined the county unions affiliated to the National Union of Scottish Mineworkers.⁴² Abe Moffat was general secretary of the UMS from 1930, but was keen to distance himself from the union in his autobiography, claiming 'I was only a member of the local committee when the split took place'.⁴³ During an interview with Paul Long in 1974, Moffat further underlined that, 'I developed the idea of bringing the miners together and carried on a consistent campaign for that. The door was blocked by the reactionary leaders but eventually we succeeded in 1936'.⁴⁴ The political lessons Moffat and his cohort of Communist cadres drew from these experiences were passed down to

McGahey, giving a strategic and political expression to sentiments that stemmed from personal and familial experiences.

Union activist and leader

Between the 1940s and the 1980s, Scottish mining trade unionism was characterised by struggles over workplace improvements, health and safety, pay and conditions, and preserving economic security through resisting colliery closures. These were the matters that most consumed McGahey's time and energy as an NUMSA official. He shared those commitments with the generation of leaders that preceded him but was less deferential than older miners' leaders were towards the consensual structures of the nationalised coal industry established by the Labour government in 1947.⁴⁵ Rather than an end in itself, for McGahey and his cohort the publicly-owned industry was a terrain of struggle from which significant improvements could be obtained. From these conclusions, Campbell and McIlroy's view that trade union concerns and not party politics dominated McGahey's approach to industrial politics appears to be valid.⁴⁶ However, as is discussed in the next section, where these related to arguments over energy policy and devolution, a clearer contribution of Marxist thought is apparent to McGahey's industrial politics.

McGahey was introduced to trade unionism early and had already risen to become a union branch secretary at Gateside colliery when he was eighteen years old. He had earlier taken part in perhaps the last official strike of Scottish miners before the onset of war, when he was a fourteen-year-old pony driver in 1939.⁴⁷ As noted earlier, McGahey's trade-union perspective was strongly moulded by his early life and the experience of his father as well as the guidance of other Communist miners. Campbell and McIlroy discuss the 'tutelage' that he received from officials such as the Lanarkshire NUM District Secretary, Jimmy McKendrick. The influence of these figures on the young McGahey was such that Abe Moffat, and his brother Alex, who succeeded Abe as the NUMSA President between 1961 and 1967, were successful in persuading McGahey not to pursue what had initially been his ambi-

tion to become a full-time worker for the CPGB.⁴⁸ During the 1960s, McGahey became an increasingly prominent figure within the Scottish and British structures of the NUM.⁴⁹

Throughout his time as a union leader Michael McGahey reflected on the lessons he had learned from the earlier generation of miners' leaders. Thus, for example, when the National Coal Board (NCB) withdrew a list of around fifty colliery closures in February 1981 following a walkout across the British coalfields, McGahey referred to the experience of 'Red Friday' in 1925. On that earlier occasion, a Conservative government had retreated in the face of the miners by providing a temporary wage subsidy, only to prepare for the dispute that began the following year.⁵⁰ Under McGahey's leadership, the NUMSA was attentive to the importance of not being politically and industrially isolated, especially as coal employment shrunk. However, he also articulated frustration and disappointment with the leaders of unsupportive trade unions, referring to the 'triple alliance' of miners, steel and railway workers as 'the cripple alliance', owing to the reluctance of the leader of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation to commit to back the NUM in opposing pit closures when the miners' strike began in 1984. These comments were perhaps encouraged by the parallels with his father's experience during the 1920s, when an earlier iteration of the triple alliance between miners, dockers and railwaymen had also failed and resulted in miners being abandoned.⁵¹

There were important distinctions between McGahey and the men who tutored him though. Jim Phillips's assessment of Scottish coalfield politics underlines how changes in production contributed towards shifts in generational attitudes among trade unionists. In Phillips's typology, McGahey can be understood as a member of 'the new mine' generation associated with work in the larger mechanised collieries that developed during the interwar period.⁵² Cardowan, where McGahey worked under nationalisation before he became a full-time union official during the mid-1960s, was dug during the 1920s, and typically employed around 1500 men between 1929 and its closure in 1983.⁵³ McGahey's cohort were also less defined by the defeat of 1926 than their fathers, and used the nationalised industry's joint-bargaining structures to negotiate improved conditions. An early indication of McGahey's

combative approach to industrial relations was demonstrated when he joined an unofficial walkout during 1943. He was condemned for this by union officials as well as by his brother and father, who saw striking during wartime as a luxury that could not be afforded in the context of the grave threat German Nazism presented to British workers and their Soviet allies. The teenage striker was sacked by his employer and briefly exiled from his family; he then worked for a time in the Lothians, before returning 'home' to Lanarkshire.⁵⁴

Tommy Canavan, a former Cardowan NUM representative, recalled that McGahey was sceptical about the extent of change brought by nationalisation: 'McGahey always said "aw, it was the management just changed their jerseys"'.⁵⁵ He demonstrated this attitude throughout his union activities under the Moffat brothers' leadership in the years after the Second World War. For example, McGahey's role in supporting a strike at forty-three Scottish pits during 1950 helped bolster the NUMSA's position in negotiations, whilst the Executive maintained their opposition to unofficial action.⁵⁶ His appearances in the NUMSA's records from this period demonstrate similar motivations. McGahey moved a resolution as a delegate from Gateside colliery at the 1957 Area conference that demanded a 'full enquiry into the retraining and re-employment of disabled miners', arguing that this was the 'minimum responsibility accepted by the NCB towards these men who have sacrificed their health in the mining industry'.⁵⁷ Willie Doolan recalled McGahey's abiding emphasis on the wages and conditions of the NUM's members: 'McGahey, he always cared about people. And if you listened to Mick, Mick would always turn round and say "ma miners, I'm a miner and I want tae help ma miners".' Willie rationalised that outlook with memories of growing up in Lanarkshire during the 1950s and 1960s:

... conditions were poor for the miners and their families. Finance was poor for the miners and their families. And I think it became instilled in the miner that if they were going to get anywhere in life that they had to stand up for their rights. And a big part of their rights was safety in the workplace and also wages in the workplace.⁵⁸

McGahey's son later remembered that his father's major achievements had included the issuing of self-rescuer masks to miners, which provided important protection for miners endangered by underground fires or gas explosions:

My faither was the person who campaigned rigorously within the NUM, and within the coal industry, for self-rescuer masks ... up to the mid-sixties you didnae have anything like that. So, the self-rescuer mask. You just slipped it on and you could breathe and get oot o the pit, and it was ma faither that drove that.⁵⁹

This success came after a number of Scottish colliery disasters between the late 1950s and late 1960s that demonstrated the dangers presented by productivity pressures in highly mechanised pits.⁶⁰

After McGahey became the NUSMA President in 1967, he successfully instituted a change in attitude towards NCB management, which was perhaps most visible over pit closures. During March 1967, just months before he stepped down from the Presidency, Alex Moffat convened an NUMSA delegate conference which passed a resolution accepting the need for pit closures in the context of competition with oil and nuclear fuels. Moffat frankly told the delegates that 'whether we liked it or not, the Mining Industry was going to contract'.⁶¹ Soon after, Moffat retired as Area President due to illness and passed away later in the year. Just three months later, when McGahey stepped in to deliver the Presidential address at NUMSA's annual conference in Moffat's absence, he put forward a strident opposition to colliery closures: 'I reject the present approach taken in many quarters which would make the cost of coal the sole criterion for determining the future size of the mining industry.' By 'refusing to co-operate in the total rundown of the industry', the union aimed to 'guarantee coal its proper share in the energy market, and to protect the long term interests of the people we represent'.⁶² McGahey viewed coal as the essential raw material for an industrial society, which government was duty-bound to steward. His 1967 conference speech was also a criticism of nationalisation in terms of the limited protections it afforded miners from energy market competition.

The new NUMSA President's combative attitude was visible during

the late 1960s and early 1970s during a series of jeopardy meetings regarding the future of Cardowan colliery. At a meeting in June 1972, McGahey made his stance clear: 'his Union was opposed to the closure of any pit on economic grounds'. He further accused the Scottish North Area of the NCB of having maliciously 'endeavoured to prove that Cardowan was finished'.⁶³ The future of Cardowan was emotionally charged for McGahey: it was his own former workplace and was at that time his brother's.

Just months before, McGahey had led the Scottish Area in the 1972 miners' strike, and had been kicked by a police officer whilst involved in an official picket of Longannet power station in West Fife. Thirteen pickets had also subsequently been arrested and charged with mobbing and rioting.⁶⁴ Isobel Lindsay, who was then a member of the Scottish National Party's executive, recalled in an interview almost fifty years later that, later on the same day, McGahey had been one of the main speakers at a Scottish Assembly of trade union, business and cross-party representatives in support of home rule: 'I remember Mick McGahey came into make a speech and he was limping and he said, "I have just come off the picket line." It's certainly a very dramatic entrance.'⁶⁵

Although McGahey was unsuccessful when he stood as a candidate in the 1971 NUM Presidential election, he became a UK as well as Scottish household name during the two major mining disputes of the early 1970s, and was elected as NUM Vice-President in the period between them.⁶⁶ At the 1972 NUMSA conference, McGahey put forward an explanation of what that year's national strike had achieved, through an implicit criticism of his predecessors: 'For too long in the past our members were conditioned to believe that the contraction of the mining industry was an inevitability and that pit closures and the stockpiling of coal had weakened the bargaining power of the miners.' Pessimistic perspectives had been 'blasted sky high' by the success of picketing during the strike, and the solidarity shown towards the miners by other workers, as well as through the mobilisation of miners' wives.⁶⁷

These developments reveal the lasting foundations of McGahey's politics: the importance he ascribed to political frameworks and resolutions in energy policy; the pursuit of home rule; and the value he saw in community mobilisation and support. Those motivations shaped

McGahey's outlook across his period as a major figure in British public life. And they were apparent in his attempts to build a pro-strike coalition within the Scottish coalfields during the early 1980s, in advance of the 1984-5 strike.

Over the course of the early 1980s, a crisis had swept the NUMSA. The new Coal Board Scottish Area Director, Albert Wheeler, had instituted an anti-union regime that destabilised the comparatively consensual relations which the Moffats and McGahey had built with his predecessors. Wheeler had aggressively pursued closures and provoked confrontations, abandoning the consultative machinery of the nationalised industry in favour of taking steps to divide the workforce.⁶⁸

There were several moments of resignation and disappointment during this period. Most dramatically, miners at Kinneil colliery in West Lothian staged a stay-down strike during December 1982 to oppose the closure of their pit. At an Area delegate conference called between Christmas and New Year, McGahey praised the 'heroic' actions of the Kinneil miners, which he sadly contrasted with the 'lack of response from the Scottish coalfield', after miners had filed past pickets to report for work at several pits.⁶⁹ The closure of Cardowan during 1983 was another fraught affair, coming just over a decade after McGahey had spearheaded a successful campaign to save the colliery. At the closure proceedings, McGahey had insisted that his former workplace was not 'a clapped out pit', emphasising its mechanised coal cutting machinery, and conveying systems as well as its eight years of proven reserves and the potential for thirty-five years more work. He also highlighted that Cardowan was the last colliery in the Lanarkshire coalfield, a status that can only have had personal implications, given it was where he had worked alongside his father and late brother.⁷⁰ Ultimately, the NUMSA was forced to accept closure, after a majority of miners at the pit failed to support strike action in a ballot of union members.⁷¹

During the 1984-5 dispute, McGahey was a leading figure in the most significant industrial dispute in postwar British history. He was an early critic of 'ballotitis', insisting on the validity of nationwide action being called on an Area by Area basis under Rule 41 of the NUM rulebook.⁷² NUMSA officials carefully established the democratic and legal basis of this action, in a distinct Scottish context where half the coalfield work-

force was already in dispute with local management by March 1984.⁷³ The path taken in 1984 was also an outcome of McGahey's approach to industrial action, which we can trace back to 1939. He balanced broadly supporting miners taking action (on an official basis if possible and an unofficial basis if necessary) with the need to build the necessary support to do so. In 1969 he had acted on these impulses by using a Scottish delegate conference to make official a strike by 15,000 Scottish miners in support of surface workers, when the same action remained unofficial across other British coalfields.⁷⁴ The logic pursued in 1984 was not fundamentally different from the hopes that had fired the eventual successes of the early 1970s, but the stakes were far higher: it was a battle for the survival of the NUM and the retention of a significant mining workforce. At the Area conference the preceding year, McGahey had used the term 'deindustrialisation' to describe the loss of unionised manual working-class jobs at the behest of Conservative government policy. He viewed this confrontation in terms of 'the Scottish people in struggle against the Tories and to save the economy of Scotland'.⁷⁵ These understandings, which became dominant in Scottish politics and collective memory, owe much to the efforts of McGahey and his party comrades over successive decades.

As discussed above, controversies related to the 1984-5 dispute led McGahey to cease writing his autobiography due to his reluctance to criticise Arthur Scargill. Younger NUMSA officials, such as McGahey's successor as Area President, George Bolton, more openly criticised Scargill in the immediate aftermath of the dispute, emphasising the weakness of pursuing a strategy predicated on muscular picketing in the context of Thatcherism.⁷⁶ Pat Egan was an NUMSA activist and a young miner during the 1984-5 strike and remained in the industry until the closure of Scotland's last colliery in 2002. During an interview in 2014 he remarked that:

McGahey was pragmatic and he knew what a good deal wis. Whereas Scargill was aw or nothin. And every time, if you check Scargill's record, he never done anythin for the miners, not a thing. Never negotiated any pay deals. Every pay deal we had during his tenure wis imposed.⁷⁷

McGahey's open expressions of frustration were reserved for strategising during the aftermath the strike. In an article for *Marxism Today* in 1987, which accompanied the end of his presidency of the NUMSA, Donald Macintyre described McGahey as 'a voice for unity' within the NUM. This followed his attempt at the NUM's 1987 conference to push a policy of rapprochement with the Union of Democratic Mineworkers, the breakaway union centred on the Nottinghamshire coalfield that was primarily made up of miners who had opposed the 1984-5 strike.⁷⁸

Marxism Today's favourable stance towards McGahey is notable, given it was the CPGB publication associated with Eurocommunism, and was highly critical of 'Scargillism', as well as the orthodox Marxist view of class struggle. Yet, as Peter Ackers's examination of the Eurocommunist perspective on the miners' strike underlines, McGahey 'never fully articulated' this position, unlike Bolton and the leadership of the NUM South Wales Area.⁷⁹ In the aftermath of 1985, he was not willing to further imperil the already fragmented union. McGahey's position was explained by Willie Doolan's assessment of his comrade, friend and mentor's worldview: 'Always be loyal to your class. That was McGahey's philosophy in life.'⁸⁰ In McGahey's view, class unity was fragile, and much suffered for. He had learned about the danger of disunity first-hand in the 1920s and 1930s, and his mentors had impressed this on him during the 1940s. These principles instilled lifelong loyalty to two institutions, the NUM and the Communist Party, as well as a committed defence of the Soviet Union.

Communism and national identity

Despite his youthful ill-discipline in 1943, loyalty to the CPGB and lifelong support for the Soviet Union have been dominant features in assessments of Michael McGahey. Taylor's *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry criticised McGahey's support for successive Soviet regimes, emphasising the ease with which he transferred partisanship from Stalin to Khrushchev despite the revelations of the 1956 'Secret Speech'.⁸¹ Personal connections and occupational dimensions underlay the esteem with which McGahey held the Soviet Union and

other Eastern Bloc countries. Exchanges of visitors became a common practice between the NUMSA and miners' unions from coalfields in the Comecon. When McGahey made the Presidential address at NUMSA's 1972 annual conference in Inverness, a delegation of Soviet miners was present in the room alongside him, whilst at the same time a number of NUMSA officials were on an exchange with the German Democratic Republic (GDR). These relations were a source of pride for McGahey, who referred to his union's members as having been 'reminded time and time again by their fathers and grandfathers before them of the Soviet miners' support given to British miners during the 1926 strike'.⁸²

At the 1972 conference, G. Suhoveyev from the Soviet Coalminers' Union praised the NUM for their recent industrial action: he and his comrades had 'rejoiced with the British miners' when they had achieved major wage rises earlier in the year.⁸³ McGahey saw the Soviet Union as a model to aspire to. He reported that he had visited Soviet coalfields on a delegation in 1971 and met miners from Eastern Europe at the sixth International Miners Trade Union Conference in Sofia, Bulgaria. Soviet miners were the best-paid industrial workers in a country where mining was treated as 'a profession'. In contrast to Britain, the miners' union played 'an active role' in industrial planning, whilst the underground working week was limited to thirty-six hours.⁸⁴ These were lasting personal connections. During the late 1970s, McGahey attended an East German convalescence home following an illness.⁸⁵ McGahey's commitment to the Soviet Union demonstrates his admiration for rapid industrialisation, which facilitated the defeat of fascism in the Second World War, and privileged the status of miners in society.⁸⁶ These motifs chimed with his experience of modernisation in Scotland, and his sense that collieries of the late twentieth century were viable mechanised units, as demonstrated in the case of Cardowan.

His strong connections with allies or members of repressive regimes, and the esteem with which McGahey held the planned economies of Eastern Europe, cannot be downplayed in any serious assessment of his worldview. It is essential, however, that they are understood through the prism of an international brotherhood between miners and the experience of class struggles within Scotland.

Unlike Alex Moffat and Lawrence Daly, a Fife miner of the same

generation with whom McGahey sat on the NUMSA and NUM Executive, McGahey was unwavering in his commitment to the CPGB following the exodus of party members after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956.⁸⁷ He did later criticise Soviet foreign policy, however. McGahey voted with the majority of the CPGB's Political Committee to oppose the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968. Jimmy Reid recalled that McGahey was filled with trepidation about his father's likely response, and that he was indeed met with a hostility similar to the time when he had led industrial action during the Second World War, twenty-five years before. Reid remembered McGahey's words over twenty years later: 'I went to see Auld McGahey and he wouldn't let me in the door. All he would say was, "So you and Jimmy Reid condemned the Soviet Union".' According to Mick, he said this in the most derisory fashion, and then shut the door in his face.'⁸⁸ Willie Doolan underlined the occupational dynamics within Communist miners' political discussions. He recalled 'industrial party meetings' in Edinburgh that were formally dedicated to labour movement strategising but also spilled over to debates over international politics. At one such meeting, McGahey espoused opposition to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, clashing with his own son, who supported the invasion. Willie understood McGahey's opposition to the invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan in the light of his support for home rule, commenting that 'Mick believed that a country should have its own say'.⁸⁹

The Scottish national dimensions of McGahey's politics were observable at a relatively early stage. During the 1957 NUMSA conference, the year before he joined the Area Executive, McGahey, then a thirty-two year old colliery delegate, moved a resolution on unemployment. It included a diagnosis of Scotland's economic structure and made the case for 'an overall Scottish plan for industrial development to offset Scottish dependency on the heavy industries'.⁹⁰ As McGahey matured, he articulated a case for home rule centred on Scotland's status as an autonomous national political community. His increasingly pronounced support for devolution has to be understood in light of the growing frustrations experienced by Scottish trade unionists with the actions of successive Labour governments, especially under Harold Wilson during the 1960s. Scottish Communists had sought to develop an appeal to democratic

politics through a recognition of national distinctiveness since the turn towards the Popular Front in the 1930s, but during the 1960s a more concerted effort was made to develop an economic and political agenda around home rule. This reversed the labour movement's 1920s shift towards support for a centralised British state, which was now seen to be failing to deliver on promises of economic security and democracy.⁹¹

At the 1968 Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) annual conference, the new NUMSA President had contributed to the Scottish labour movement's shifting constitutional politics by moving a motion in support for a Scottish parliament, which was remitted rather than rejected. McGahey appealed to the political benefits of economic decentralisation as well as Communist sympathies for self-determination: 'he firmly believed, and his union firmly believed, that Scotland was a nation. Not a region of Britain, not a district, but a nation in its own right and entitled to demand a right to nationhood.'⁹² McGahey made important qualifications to these demands, which never amounted to a call for independence from Britain, and were grounded in a retained support for class unity. He defended the integrity of the nationalised mining industry as well as a Britain-wide federated NUM.⁹³ The case for a decentralised Union and Scottish political autonomy was seen as a shift in the British state towards a structure that more closely resembled his trade union's jealously guarded decentralised Area organisation.

These concerns enmeshed with the future of energy policy as discussions over devolution developed during the 1970s. In the pages of the CPGB's Scottish journal, *Scottish Marxist*, McGahey put forward a critique of conventional understandings of energy markets, which were compounded by a form of commodity fetishism, mistaking fuel sources for the social relations that lay behind them: 'Inanimate matter does not compete – it is the pecuniary forces behind various fuels which are in competition.'⁹⁴ McGahey repeated this line of thinking at a conference organised by the UK Government's Department for Energy in 1976, when he explained his view that 'there is no competition in the energy field. It is a question of harmonising the energy available.' It was the contradictions of capitalist economies which were the problem, and led to a devaluing of coal, which was central to national welfare: 'If market forces were the only determining factor, the UK would freeze. We must

plan. If you close down Scottish pits, you close them down forever. No generation is entitled to deny future generations their inheritance.⁹⁵

Devolution became a growing part of McGahey's solution to preserving the coalfield inheritance. Home rule was a means to impose a planned logic onto the anarchic market forces and to reinforce a national polity that he viewed as sympathetic to miners. At a tripartite meeting between nationalised industry officials, the Department for Energy and trade union leaders during 1976, McGahey explained that 'you can't have devolution in Scotland without, in my opinion, the need [to have] within a [British] national energy plan a Scottish energy plan'.⁹⁶ This was a stance he pursued within the Scottish trade union movement too. At the 1979 STUC annual conference, McGahey spoke in favour of amending a Commercial and Public Services Association (CPSA) resolution for a five year moratorium on civil nuclear power by affirming the union federation's 'integrated fuel policy'. Although the CPSA resolution was for a policy which would favour coal, McGahey's perspective was that class unity was a price worth paying for limited industrial concessions.⁹⁷ When McGahey addressed the 1983 NUMSA annual conference, the 1984-5 strike was looming, following a landslide Conservative victory across the UK, though Labour remained the most popular party in Scotland; he made a call to 'all democratic forces in Scotland to unite around a programme of demands to ensure the development of our vital industries of steel, coal, shipbuilding, and advance the interests of our people'.⁹⁸

The NUMSA prosecuted the 1984 strike as part of a struggle for the preservation of Scottish industry. Their strategy acknowledged the symbolic importance of Ravenscraig, Scotland's largest steelworks, when pickets targeted it early in the strike. They were ultimately only thwarted by a mobilisation of police officers, non-union lorry drivers and recalcitrant steelworkers – who rejected the overtures of pickets to support the struggle for jobs.⁹⁹ Police action against the strikers was vital and likely directed by the UK Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal – symbolising the combination of oppositional class and national forces identified by McGahey.¹⁰⁰ The resolution to inter-union differences through the apparatus of the STUC, and support from Scottish local government and civil society, including the churches, affirmed the

logic of the NUMSA's home rule position.¹⁰¹ After the CPGB dissolved, McGahey confirmed this direction of travel when he briefly joined the pro-independence Communist Party of Scotland.¹⁰²

McGahey's understanding of the coalfield inheritance to be passed down to future generations combined the material gains of labour movement struggles and colliery employment along with Communist political perspectives. In his 1972 article in *Scottish Marxist*, he had generalised upon the arrest of pickets at Longannet power station and the mobilisation of police against the recent miners' strike. Perhaps reflecting on his father's experiences in 1926, he argued that these developments 'showed the iron fist which is more commonly shielded in its velvet glove' within democratic societies. The arrests were 'a classic example of an endeavour on the part of the ruling class to take retribution for the success of a workers' struggle'.¹⁰³ During an interview in 2014, Nicky Wilson, the present NUM President, who was formerly an electrician at Cardowan colliery, explained that 'the old NUM Scottish Area had a big influence of Communists through people like McGahey and aw that. He was one o ma mentors.' He went on to state that 'they definitely believed in political education.'¹⁰⁴

Willie Doolan remembered both the fraternal and the intimidating aspects of these demands from elders and superiors in the NUMSA. He first spoke to McGahey on the way to a conference in Rothesay on the Isle of Bute during the late 1970s. To the twenty-three-year old Willie, McGahey – who had tasked him with addressing the conference as Chair of the Scottish Miners' Youth Committee – was 'an icon' and a source of inspiration.¹⁰⁵ Willie recalled that youth events were educational but also pressured environments, where he felt under the gaze of senior officials: 'you had to perform when they were sitting there'. Another experience of McGahey's mix of encouragement and forcefulness occurred when Willie was set to move a Scottish Area resolution arguing for socialism and against capitalism at an NUM conference. After finding out the Yorkshire Area was opposing it, Willie 'went away out at dinner time and I couldnae get ma head in ma dinner or that. Next thing McGahey sat a glass aw whisky in front of me. And he says down it. I reluctantly did it.' In Willie's memories this incident was part of a story of tutoring, and confirmation of McGahey's commitment to

arguing for ideological positions within the labour movement; and it was an episode that saw McGahey reciprocating the tutoring he had himself received from older miners: 'Encouragement, second to none. And guidance that he gave you also. You couldn't buy these things. You couldn't buy them. He came over as a scarfaced hardline Communist. Anyone that thought that in McGahey they didn't know him. He was such a kind, warm caring person.'¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

Michael McGahey's commitment to a politics of class struggle grounded in the sensibilities he learnt in the Lanarkshire coalfields remain a source of inspiration within Scottish political and trade union circles. On Sunday 12 September 2021, the annual memorial which commemorates the Auchengeich colliery disaster of 1959 was held in Moodiesburn, North Lanarkshire. McGahey was emblazoned on both an NUMSA banner and another from the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers that also includes his quote, 'If you don't run they can't chase you'.¹⁰⁷ Neil Findlay, who was a Labour MSP from 2010 to 2021 and a leading voice in the successful campaign for a pardon for Scottish miners convicted of offences during the 1984-5 strike, has recently released a book about activist campaigns for social justice that uses McGahey's line as its title.¹⁰⁸ Willie Doolan, who serves as the Secretary of the Auchengeich Miners' Memorial Committee, proudly reflected during 2019 that in the Lanarkshire coalfields 'we produced people like McGahey'.¹⁰⁹ These were terms redolent of the words McGahey used to describe himself: 'a product of my class and my movement'.¹¹⁰

In this article, McGahey has been assessed in that framing. He was a figure whose heritage lay in the radical miners of early twentieth century Scotland, but whose lifetime and political influence stretched to the founding of a Scottish Parliament at the century's end. McGahey's political world was first shaped by his father's role as a Communist activist during the violent class struggles of the 1920s, during which his family experienced painful loss, uprooting and deprivation. He came of age in a different environment – of wartime national unity followed

by the newly nationalised industry. McGahey cuts a complex figure in this regard, as a loyal Communist who worked under the guidance of the NUMSA's leadership, but also as an activist and then union leader who was substantively more conflictual towards the publicly-owned coal industry. He pursued policies that pressurised the structures of the official labour movement, whilst remaining attentive to the need to build coalitions within and beyond the workforce that could deliver substantive gains for miners.

Marxism was formative to McGahey's worldview. His perspective on energy markets and Scottish nationhood, which were crucial to the NUMSA's politics, demonstrate the influence of historical materialism and Leninist orthodoxies. McGahey's support for the Soviet Union was embedded in familial experience and personal bonds with Soviet miners and their union. For him, early life experience and the tutorship of his father, including memories of 1926, coalesced with his own experience of struggle in the mining industry, and made his Communism one that was thoroughly grounded in coal. His youthful reading of Burns and Grassie Gibbon, as well as later experiences of building a distinctive profile for the NUMSA within the NUM, encouraged his belief in the capacity of a progressive Scottish national polity. These conclusions were furthered by the shrinking of the coal industry during the second half of the twentieth century under the auspices of an increasingly centralised Coal Board, and energy markets dictated by UK government policy.

McGahey lived through the end of the world that made him. As a union leader he fought for the retention of jobs at Cardowan colliery where he had worked underground, at first successfully, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but then unsuccessfully during the early 1980s. His death in 1999 preceded the final closure of Scottish deep coal mining by just three years.¹¹¹ A painting of McGahey behind a Soviet miners' banner that was gifted to the Scottish miners in 1929 hangs in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. It was painted by Maggi Hambling in 1988 at the NUMSA's headquarters on Hillside Terrace in Edinburgh as they were being dismantled.¹¹² McGahey has entered the historical imaginary as a symbol of a crumbling culture – a culture that was produced by the symbiosis of coal miners and Communism, through struggles for dignity and justice across a fraught century.

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