

“Three Days Down the Pit and Three Days Play”: Underemployment in the East Midland Coalfields between the Wars*

COLIN P. GRIFFIN

Summary: Conflicting interpretations of economic and social conditions in inter-war Britain are a staple diet of the historiography of the period. Can it be best characterized as one of social deprivation and economic decay or of social and economic improvement? The level of unemployment and its effects on those who experienced it is a critical element in the debate and this study will contribute to it in a number of ways. It will, through a case study of the East Midland coalfields, emphasize that underemployment (or short-time working) has been comparatively neglected in accounts of unemployment and the “real” incidence of the latter therefore underestimated. Moreover, the effects of underemployment were no less real in terms of depressing living standards than more permanent forms of unemployment. The traditional view of the relatively prosperous underemployed East Midlands’ miner compared to his fully employed Durham or South Wales counterpart is, therefore, no longer tenable. The view, popularized recently by Benjamin and Kochin, that this form of unemployment was voluntary in nature will also be questioned as will the generalization that miners’ trade unions preferred wage maintenance to maximising employment levels in their industrial relations strategies. Trade union officers gave a high priority to achieving an employment situation which combined work spreading and the receipt of statutory unemployment benefit by their members. The partial failure of these endeavours to mitigate the full impact of short-time working on miners’ income is further evidence of the need to qualify the “optimistic” interpretation of living standards in inter-war Britain.

The economic and social history of inter-war Britain has been the subject of major reinterpretation in recent years. It has now become commonplace not to highlight the derelict pit head and the queue of unemployed lined up outside the labour exchange but to point to the growth record and to the dawn of affluence as the majority of the workforce remained in employment and enjoyed a significant increase in real wages.¹ Moreover

*I would like to thank Noel Whiteside for helpful comments and advice on an earlier draft of this article.

¹ See, for example, John Stevenson, “Myth and Reality: Britain in the 1930’s” in A. Sked and C. Cook, eds. *Crisis and Controversy, Essays in Honour of A. J. P. Taylor* (1976), pp.

International Review of Social History 38 (1993), pp. 321–343

not only were the unemployed in most years a small minority of the workforce, but they were not so much the victims of deficient aggregate demand within a poorly functioning economy as a "largely volunteer army" opting to live off "high unemployment benefits" relative to their wages² The unemployed have also been cast in the role of the victims of trade union officials who were not the timeless champions of "the right to work" of trade union tradition but who were hard-headed men more concerned to maximise the wage levels of those in work than reduce the numbers without it.³

These challenges to popularly held views of these years have not been universally accepted⁴ and they will be further contested in this paper based on research into the experience of the East Midland coal miner. It will be argued that unemployment was an all-pervasive element in the coalmining labour market when underemployment is taken into account and not simply a feature of the exporting coalfields afflicted by long-term unemployment. It will be demonstrated, too, that its adverse impact on the miners' standard of living could be as severe. It will be argued, moreover, that underemployment was neither novel nor "voluntary", but a product of a long established managerial practice and industrial tradition. The reputation of miners' trade union officials and officers will also be restored through a detailed examination of their efforts to maximise both the employment and income of their members through negotiation with employers. The claim of that prince of optimists, John Stevenson, that "we need a much more detailed account of the electoral features of the period, rather than still more attempts of say something new about unemployment"⁵ is dismissed here as a smokescreen designed to conceal aspects of the mass unemployment between the wars that is inimical to his case.

I

It is well known that the British coalmining industry experienced high levels of unemployment between the wars which, along with the concomitant decline of other nineteenth-century staple industries, contributed

91, 108. The argument is expanded in John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *The Slump. Society and Politics During the Depression* (1979), particularly chapters 1 to 3.

² Daniel K. Benjamin and Lewis A. Kochan, "Searching for an Explanation of Unemployment in Interwar Britain", *Journal of Political Economy*, 87 (1987), p. 474.

³ Sean Glynn and Stephen Shaw, "Wage Bargaining and Unemployment" in B. Crick, ed., *Unemployment* (1981), pp. 123–124.

⁴ See, for example, Charles Webster, "Healthy or Hungry Thirties?", *History Workshop Journal*, 13 (1982), pp. 110–129; Margaret Mitchell, "The Effects of Unemployment on the Social Conditions of Women and Children in the 1930s", *History Workshop Journal*, 19 (1985), pp. 105–127; Noel Whiteside, "Counting the Cost: Sickness and Disability among Working People in an Era of Industrial Recession, 1920–1939", *Economic History Review*, 40, 2 (1987), pp. 228–246.

⁵ Sked and Cook, *Crisis and Controversy*, p. 108.

towards the making of the “derelict” areas of North-Eastern England, South Wales and elsewhere.⁶ Not all coalfields, however, suffered to the same extent as districts like the North East, and there has even been a tendency, indeed, to speak of the “more favourably placed” or “prosperous” coalfields of the East Midlands.⁷ If there is some truth in this viewpoint in relation to output, profitability and levels of long-term unemployment,⁸ nonetheless, these coalfields suffered to a much greater extent than the exporting districts from another great cause of hardship for the workforce and their dependants, that this underemployment produced by short-time working.⁹ Short-time working was not a novel feature of the 1920s and 1930s but was far more intense than hitherto and felt particularly keenly because of its elimination during the First World War and the restocking boom that followed. Between 1928 and 1936, for instance, the East Midland coalfields were generally working less than four days a week on average throughout the year, less than two-thirds of the time that they could actually have been producing, as Table 1 indicates.

Such annual averages tend, however, to obscure a most pronounced feature of this short-time working, its seasonal nature, since even during the best year for employment after the boom had petered out, 1923, the collieries were far from working fully during the summer. In 1932, perhaps the worst year for short-time working, the summer situation was appalling, and even during the winter the collieries were working less regularly than during the summer of 1923, as Table 2 shows.

Moreover, short-time working not only meant that the collieries were regularly “played off” for as long as a week or fortnight in summer, but also on days when they were working they only turned for a part of the normal shift. As A. R. Griffin explained: “The pit would start up in the morning and would carry on working until that day’s orders had been fulfilled. Then “loose-all” would be shouted, and work for the day would

⁶ B.P.P., *Ministry of Labour. Reports of Investigations into the Industrial Conditions in Certain Depressed Areas*, 1934, Cmd. 4738. Or as *The Times* put it in a series of articles on the Durham coalfield: “There are districts of England, heavily populated, whose plight no amount of trade recovery can ever cure, because their sole industry is not depressed but dead”, in *The Times*, 20 March 1934 quoted by Barry Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry Vol. 4; 1913–1946: The Political Economy of Decline* (1987), p. 328. The Supple volume provides an excellent account of the extent and consequences of conventional unemployment in the British coalfields between the wars.

⁷ J. E. Williams, *The Derbyshire Miners. A Study in Industrial and Social History* (1962), p. 752; Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann, *Britain in the 1930s* (1971), p.100.

⁸ Statistical tables in Supple, *The History of British Coal Industry*, pp. 21, 180–199, 318, 446–447, 450–451 and Paul Turner, “Wage Determination in the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Coalfield 1919–1938”, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield (1985), pp. 16, 328.

⁹ Short-time working was endemic in all the so-called inland coalfields to a greater or lesser extent. In 1933, for instance, the average weekly number of days on which mines wound coal was less than four in Yorkshire, Cannock Chase and the Forest of Dean, in addition, of course, to the four East Midland counties cited in Table 1 (Secretary of the Mines Department of the Board of Trade, Annual Report, 1933).

Table 1. Average number of days per week on which coal was wound in the East Midland coalfields 1897–1938

Year	Leicestershire	South Derbyshire	North Derbyshire	Nottinghamshire
1897–1906 (average)	4.53†			4.53†
1911–1913 (average)	5.04†	5.29‡	5.29‡	5.04†
1914–1918 (average)	5.44†	5.69‡	5.69‡	5.44†
1921	4.67	4.64	4.79	4.42
1922	4.70	4.42	4.92	4.78
1923	5.34	5.24	5.40	5.15
1924	5.03	4.96	5.09	4.93
1925	4.60	4.42	4.88	4.78
1926	*	*	*	*
1927	5.03	4.13	4.13	4.12
1928	3.81	3.35	4.40	4.10
1929	3.95	3.83	4.02	4.29
1930	3.76	3.83	4.12	4.17
1931	3.60	3.66	4.01	4.11
1932	3.22	3.15	3.66	3.76
1933	3.28	3.11	3.42	3.86
1934	3.39	3.28	3.54	4.02
1935	3.78	3.93	3.71	3.97
1936	4.05	3.81	3.87	4.21
1937	4.30	3.76	4.25	4.70
1938	4.19	3.65	3.95	4.26

* Coal dispute – no statistics

† Actually Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire

‡ Actually North and South Derbyshire

The statistics do not indicate that coal was wound for a whole shift or that the full workforce was employed for the day.

Source: B.P.P. *Report of the Departmental Committee on the Miners Eight Hour Day* (1907), Cd.3426, 130. Annual Reports, Secretary of the Mines Department of the Board of Trade.

be at an end. In some cases, the men would have made half or three-quarters of a shift, but there were times when they made only two hours.¹⁰

The reasons for the degree of underemployment experienced by the collieries and their workforce are numerous but are generally related to the market for coal and colliery management's response to it. There was a continuation of the pre-war problems of the seasonal demand for coal. East Midland coal was heavily dependent on the domestic house market which was comparatively buoyant in winter and slack in the summer.¹¹ Moreover, customers who used coal in the production process, such as the gas and electrical generation industries, were affected by the same seasonal

¹⁰ A. R. Griffin, *Mining in the East Midlands 1550–1947* (1971), p. 269.

¹¹ See, for instance, C. P. Griffin, *The Leicestershire and South Derbyshire Miners*, Vol. 1 1840–1914 (1983), pp. 63–3; Roy Church *et al.*, *The History of the British Coal Industry*, Vol. 3: 1830–1913 (1986), pp. 50–62.

Table 2. Average number of days per week on which coal was wound in the East Midland coalfields in 1923 and 1932

		(monthly averages)											
		January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
1923	1	5.44	5.50	5.23	5.13	4.99	5.49	4.74	4.56	5.13	5.33	5.42	4.86
	2	5.69	5.79	5.43	5.40	5.20	5.73	5.13	4.78	5.46	5.55	5.66	5.04
	3	5.61	5.79	5.44	5.48	5.16	5.73	4.12	3.90	5.37	5.48	5.72	5.09
	4	5.74	5.89	5.56	5.54	5.16	5.87	4.75	4.10	5.27	5.49	5.60	5.22
1932	1	4.36	4.10	3.65	3.78	3.79	3.58	3.34	3.13	3.38	4.02	3.98	4.09
	2	4.32	4.02	3.77	3.61	3.61	3.43	3.28	3.05	3.27	3.92	3.71	4.00
	3	3.63	3.82	3.46	3.07	3.04	2.66	2.58	2.24	2.66	3.52	3.39	3.79
	4	3.73	3.98	3.47	3.67	3.04	2.62	2.52	2.52	2.69	3.44	3.37	3.75

1 - Nottinghamshire 2 - North Derbyshire 3 - South Derbyshire 4 - Leicestershire

Source: Annual Reports, Secretary of the Mines Department of the Board of Trade.

fluctuation in the demand for their product and generally resisted the colliery owners' blandishments to stock up during the summer.¹² These basic difficulties were compounded by others, such as the use of alternative sources of energy and increased efficiency in the utilisation of coal. Of particular importance was the fierce competition with the traditional exporting districts which attempted to offset declining exports by invading the markets of the inland producers.¹³ These districts took advantage of the high levels of unemployment to work the collieries more regularly with cheap labour, thereby cutting costs of production and selling prices, as Table 3 – comparing the Leicestershire and South Derbyshire coalfields with that of Northumberland – illustrates.

Fierce competition between coalfields persisted despite repeated attempts by the government and by colliery owners to mitigate it by output restriction and price fixing, most notable under the terms of the 1930 and 1936 Mines Act¹⁴ Unfortunately for the East Midlands, schemes for a nationally organised cartel were rejected as unworkable, and output quotas and minimum prices were fixed on a district-by-district basis by boards which arranged the conditions of the schemes subject to approval by the Mines Department. The exporting districts were allowed to arrange generous quotas and low minimum prices to boost seaborne trade, while the output of the inland districts was held well below productive capacity by a restrictive quota. Each producer in the Midland district was allotted a standard tonnage which was not to be exceeded. The effect of this output restriction at the colliery level is well illustrated by a Nottinghamshire company working six pits in 1935 and where “The standard tonnage has only permitted work on four days a week at one pit, two and three days at others, and one and two days an another. Before the November and December rush for coal the last named pit had only made 21 shifts in 13 weeks, and was in danger of being closed.”¹⁵ Competition between districts eased somewhat after 1936 when an effort was made to enforce price co-ordination between the inland and exporting districts, and there was an increasing general demand for coal created by rearmament.¹⁶

At the colliery level the incidence of short-time working was also increased by other occurrences, such as the breakdown of machinery, management failure to supply an adequate amount of equipment to men

¹² Leicestershire C.R.O., Leicestershire Colliery Owners' Association Minute Records, 19d 55/1, “Minute Book Mining 27”, June 1922.

¹³ British Coal Archive, South Derbyshire District Colliery Owners' Association and South Derbyshire Amalgamate Miners' Association, “Minutes of Joint Meeting”, 23 May 1935. See also Supple, *The History of British Coal Industry*, pp. 185–187.

¹⁴ The most thorough recent discussion of the attempts to rationalise the industry and mitigate competition is to be found in M. W. Kirby, *The British Coalmining Industry 1870–1946: A Political and Economic History* (1977), particularly chapters 6 to 9.

¹⁵ G. A. Spencer, “Problems of the Coal Industry”, *Service in Life and Work*, 5, 17 (Spring 1936), p. 24.

¹⁶ Supple, pp. 298–300; Williams *The Derbyshire Mines*, pp. 560–563.

Table 3. Average earnings per shift, number of shifts worked, cost of production and selling prices in the Leicestershire and South Derbyshire coalfields and Northumberland in selected years from 1927 to 1937

Year	Earnings per shift		Number of shifts worked		Cost of production		Selling Prices					
	Leicestershire & Derbyshire s d	Leicestershire & Derbyshire s d	North-umberland s d	North-umberland s d	Leicestershire & Derbyshire s d	Leicestershire & Derbyshire s d	North-umberland s d	Leicestershire & Derbyshire s d	North-umberland s d	Leicestershire & Derbyshire s d	North-umberland s d	
1927	10 6	10 6	8 7	8 7	242	252	16 5	13 7	14 3	12 7		
1929	9 8	9 8	7 4	7 4	237	270	14 2	11 2	12 8	11 8		
1932	9 8	9 8	7 7	7 7	224	260	14 9	10 10	13 4	11 4		
1937	11 5	11 5	8 11	8 11	255	280	15 0	13 3	14 6	14 0		

Source: Annual Reports, Secretary of State for Mines Department.

working on the coal face, a shortage of railway wagons into which output had to be wound and the perennial problem of management succumbing to the temptation to reduce handling and stacking costs by completing current orders and then ceasing work.¹⁷

It was also costly to close and then re-open coal faces and underground roadways, so management preferred to spread work more thinly over them when demand was slack. Work spreading rather than unemployment also prevented a leakage of the workforce to rival colliery companies or neighbouring industries.¹⁸ Colliery companies that owned several mines might also prefer to spread output over them all rather than close the least efficient of them for as George Spencer explained:

There are many difficulties in the shutting down of pits. In the first place it would be a costly business to re-open them when the necessity arose, and there is also the important point that the life of so many of the pits is so limited that it would be very unwise to close them until they have been worked out. Then there is the human side which must not be lost sight of [. . .] this pit is in a district where tradesmen have put their life's work and savings into small businesses. It was the only pit in the parish, and the men would probably never be absorbed into another pit because of age.¹⁹

The Moira Colliery Company preferred work spreading to unemployment because it helped to maintain the "paternal atmosphere" in which management and men "knew, trusted and respected each other". The policy was also consistent with management's philosophy of "the best employer got the best men" and ensuring that the large number of colliery houses remained occupied and producing rent.²⁰

Benjamin and Kochan argue that "The army of the unemployed standing watch in Britain at the publication of the *General Theory* was largely a volunteer army [. . .] with the exception of the first spell of unemployment of his career, judicious timing could ensure a worker of eligibility for benefits beginning with the first day of any unemployment".²¹ This claim that underemployment was "benefit induced"²² is clearly fallacious, since it simply ignores management practices pursued in their self-interest and to which employees were obliged, for the most part, to conform. Moreover, these practices very largely predate the national

¹⁷ See, for instance, A. R. Griffin, *East Midlands*, p. 270.

¹⁸ C. P. Griffin, *Leicestershire and South Derbyshire Miners*, p. 62 and Turner, *Wage Determination*, p. 279

¹⁹ Spencer, "Problems", pp. 24–25.

²⁰ Interview with John Turner, the managing director of the Moira Colliery Co. (South Derbyshire) during the inter-war period, September 1980.

²¹ Benjamin and Kochan, "Searching", pp. 447–448 and 474.

²² This is the terminology employed by Whiteside and Gillespie in their highly effective, general refutation of the Benjamin and Kochan thesis. Noel Whiteside and James A. Gillespie, "Deconstructing Unemployment: Developments in Britain in the Interwar Years", *Economic History Review*, 44, 4 (November 1991), p. 681.

insurance legislation, since the economic fluctuations to which they were a response were a traditional characteristic of the East Midland coalmining industry. In reality, the judgement of an underemployed Leicestershire miner is much nearer the mark:

They [the management] could work you when they wanted. You know, they'd work on a Monday and play Tuesday; they'd work on a Wednesday and play Thursday or they'd work Monday and Tuesday and play Wednesday and Thursday; but they'd get you there Friday to fetch your money. All these things [. . .] and the varying shift move, I don't know whether it was for sheer devilry or whether it was system; I've come to think it was system, it was symptomatic of the approach to mining in those days.²³

Whatever the cause, short-time working had a seriously depressing effect on the income of the workforce and it is this matter which forms the substance of the next section of the paper.

II

In 1924, George Spencer, then a leader of the Nottinghamshire Miner's Association and Labour MP, told the House: “In the summer time it very often happens when it is a brilliant summer, warm and hot, that some of the pits for 10, 12, 14 or 15 weeks will not be working for more than two days a week [. . .] but the men are not able to get any insurance benefit simply because they had to make four half-days a week.”²⁴ A decade later, similar complaints were still being voiced, for Herbert Buck, general secretary of the South Derbyshire Miners' Association, informed delegates to the Miners' Federation 1935 annual conference:

during 1934 the average number of days made in South Derby was less than three days a week [. . .] It may be argued that if the men make less than three days they are entitled to unemployment benefit [. . .] i have known my men go [. . .] to the pit six times in the whole week for less than two and a half days' work [. . .] The men in one of the largest pits worked one hundred and fifty nine and a half shifts; of the remainder of the days in the year our men at that pit lost seventy one days unemployment benefit [. . .] under these conditions our men have been receiving by way of wages considerably less than the men who were totally unemployed and even less than men on Public assistance relief pay.²⁵

Moreover, in November 1937 Herbert Buck told Capt. H. Crookshank, secretary of the Mines Department, that short-time working and particularly broken shifts had produced for over four years

appalling hardship for the men at the collieries [. . .] a scandalous state of affairs where men are robbed of wages and women and children are starved [. . .] It

²³ Interview with Frank Smith, Whitwick, Leicestershire, September 1981.

²⁴ *Hansard*, Vol. 169, 14 February 1924.

²⁵ Miners' Federation of Great Britain MB 15 July 1935. The “genuine seeking work” clause of the unemployment benefit regulations prevented the miners from becoming voluntarily unemployed. Benefit would have been refused at the labour exchange.

robs our men, in hundreds of cases of an opportunity to qualify for Unemployment Pay. Workmen on 2.5, 3, 3.5 days a week on the wages prevailing in the mining industry, with no Unemployment Pay, are infinitely worse off than men totally unemployed or people chargeable to the Public Assistance Committee. There are family men taking home as little as £1 and 17s. 4d. a week.²⁶

In January 1937 the *Colliery Guardian* reported that many of the 800 men working at Donisthorpe were taking home only about £1 per week for 2.5 shifts spread over five working days and “even totally unemployed men with no children have an income of 25s. a week”.²⁷ Similarly the *Coalville Times* reported in February 1929 that several of the pits in the area were working short-time and that the Ibstock relief committee had received 317 applications for assistance in the last three weeks. “The average income of the households relieved was £1 3s. 9d. and the average number of children in such households of school age or under was 4.5. The average rent paid per family was 5s. 9d. a week.”²⁸ Indeed reports of miners “going home with as little as 30s. a week which is not sufficient to feed and clothe themselves and their families”²⁹ became a commonplace and certainly provided a general impression of the poverty, hardship and frustration experienced by the miner and his dependants during most of the inter-war period, which was succinctly summarised by a Coalville miner thus: “Big strong men cried like babies for sheer want and frustration. The women did not cry. They suffered in silence. But what a silence! It cut through a man sometimes. As if it were all his fault there were a few coppers to show for a miserable few days of ‘piece work’!”³⁰ These circumstances even led to a degree of envy by those working short-time of miners who were fully unemployed and in receipt of both unemployment insurance benefit and out-of-work pay given by the union.³¹

This general impression is confirmed by evidence derived from other sources, such as government reports, colliery account books and trade

²⁶ South Derbyshire Amalgamated Miners' Association (SDAMA), “Minutes of the Deputation to the Mines Department on the Railway Wagon Shortage Question”, 25 November 1937.

²⁷ *Colliery Guardian*, 1 January 1937.

²⁸ *Coalville Times*, 1 February 1929.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11 December 1925. Albert Martin (interview, Mapperley, Derbyshire, March 1981) recalled that the majority of miners working at Shipley and Mapperley collieries seldom earned more than 30s. a week for months on end during the early 1930s. See also the extensive reports in the *Coalville Times* of 29 May 1925, 30 April 1926 and 9 September 1929.

³⁰ Gerald Noel, *The Great Lockout of 1926* (1976), p. 206.

³¹ *Coalville Times*, 11 December 1925. Members of the Leicestershire Miners' Association (LMA) were complaining that they were working for 3.5 days a week for 30s. or less whilst a fully unemployed member of the union was receiving £1 for himself and his wife and 2s. each child from union funds plus 18s. for himself, 5s. for his wife and 2s. each child from national unemployment benefit or typically “£1 a week more than many men that were at work”. Union benefit ran out after twenty-six weeks and was only paid for involuntary unemployment.

union records. The increased incidence of short-time working, particularly after 1927, exerted a strong downward pressure on average earnings, as Table 4 shows.

Nonetheless, miners in receipt of the annual average earnings or above were enjoying a somewhat higher standard of material existence than if they had been fully unemployed and drawing benefit.³² The same could not be said of the lower paid miners with “typical” families, such as those who were in receipt of the minimum wage rate per shift, at least not until all miners received the flat rate increase of 1s. a day in 1935, as Table 5 indicates.

Nor could it be said of the bulk of the miners working at collieries which were exceptionally badly hit by short-time working, such as Ireland Colliery (North Derbyshire), where average earnings were consistently below £1.18s. a week, between December 1927 and November 1930, as can be seen from Table 6.

Indeed the danger of placing too much weight on coalfield averages is further indicated by a survey for 1934 undertaken by ten of the Butterley Companies’ older collieries which revealed the following breakdown of the workforce:

Type of worker	Number employed	Average earnings per shift
Men engaged on the surface	1,190	8s. 6d.
Boys under 21 on the surface	177	4s. 7d.
Day wage men underground	3,395	10s.
Boys under 21 underground	300	5s. 8d.
Contractors	1,938	15s. 1d.
Total	7,000	

Since average earnings per shift in 1934 in the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire coalfield was almost 10s. 6d. then 72 percent of the workforce were working below that rate. Indeed, since the average number of shifts worked per year in the coalfield in 1934 was 219, average earnings for the adult mineworkers on the surface (17 percent of the workforce) and day wage men underground (46 percent of the workforce) would have been £93.2s. and £109.10s. respectively, if these collieries were fairly typical, though it is likely that they were somewhat lower, since owners preferred to concentrate production in their newer, more efficient collieries.³³

Particularly badly hit, too, were miners on short-time who were bedeviled by unemployment benefit regulations which insisted that miners take

³² Compare the information on average annual earnings in Table 4 and annual income from unemployment benefit in Table 5.

³³ Interview with John Turner in September 1980; R. J. Waller, *The Dukeries Transformed. The Social and Political Development of a Twentieth-Century Coalfield* (1983), pp. 37–43. Spencer “Problems”, p. 24.

Table 4. *Average earnings per shift and per year in the East Midland coalfields 1927-1938*

Year	Average Earnings per shift		Average number of shifts worked		Average earnings per year		North Derbyshire & Nottinghamshire		Leicestershire & South Derbyshire		North Derbyshire & Nottinghamshire		Leicestershire & South Derbyshire		North Derbyshire & Nottinghamshire					
	s	d	s	d	s	d	£	s	d	£	s	d	£	s	d	£	s	d		
1927	10	6	11	10			242	215	127	10	3	127	14	2	110	2	7	119	18	4
1928	9	9	10	4			226	218	110	2	7	113	0	3	115	1	5	117	13	2
1929	9	8	10	3			237	233	114	1	11	117	13	2	114	1	11	114	3	4
1930	9	9	10	4			233	227	113	3	5	109	1	7	108	10	5	104	9	6
1931	9	8	10	4			234	220	110	8	7	112	16	3	110	8	7	112	16	3
1932	9	8	10	4			224	211	110	8	7	112	16	3	110	8	7	112	16	3
1933	9	7	10	5			217	210	115	15	2	114	14	3	115	15	2	114	14	3
1934	9	9	10	5			237	219	110	8	7	112	16	3	110	8	7	112	16	3
1935	9	8	10	5			228	216	110	8	7	112	16	3	110	8	7	112	16	3
1936	11	0	11	4			250	228	137	8	3	129	13	10	137	8	3	129	13	10
1937	11	5	12	8			255	249	145	15	10	158	12	8	145	15	10	158	12	8
1938	11	10	13	3			250	232	148	9	9	153	14	10	148	9	9	153	14	10

Source: *Annual reports*, Secretary of the Mines Department of the Board of Trade.

Table 5. Annual average earnings of miners on the minimum wage (underground) compared to income from national Insurance Benefit*

	Minimum wage rate per shift		Annual earnings†		Income from N.I.B.
	1	2	1	2	
1928	s d	s d	£ s d	£ s d	£ s d
1928	7 6	7 11	84 15 0	86 6 8	98 16 0
1930	7 6	7 11	87 7 2	89 17 9	98 16 0
1932	7 6	7 11	84 0 0	83 12 0	90 6 10
1934	7 6	7 11	88 17 9	86 14 4	98 16 0
1936	8 6	8 11	106 5 0	102 0 10	98 16 0

1 Leicestershire and South Derbyshire

2 Nottinghamshire and North Derbyshire

* Assuming a family comprising husband wife and three dependent children receiving £1.18s. a week benefit

† See Table 4 for number of shifts p.a.

Source: *Annual Reports*, Secretary of the Mines Department of the Board of Trade. B. Swann and M. Turnbull. *Records of Interest to Social Scientists. Unemployment Insurance 1911 to 1934* (1925), p. 184

Table 6. Average earnings per week at Ireland Colliery 1927–1930

Month and Year	Average earnings per day	Days worked per week	Average earnings per week
December 1927	12s.	2.75	£1.13s.
March 1928	11s.8d.	2.75	£1.12s.
September 1928	11s.9d.	2.75	£1.12s.3d.
December 1928	11s.8d.	2.6	£1.10s.4d.
May 1929	11s.8d.	2.6	£1.10s.4d.
September 1929	12s.1d.	2.7	£1.12s.7d.
January 1930	11s.9d.	2.6	£1.10s.6d.
May 1930	11s.7d.	2.5	£1.8s.10d.
November 1930	11s.2d.	2.6	£1.9s.

Source: Turner “Wage Determination”, p.250

any work offered by management.³⁴ The miners at Number 1 Pit at Donisthorpe in South Derbyshire, for instance, only worked 153 of the 294 shifts that they were available for work between October 1933 and September 1934, but were only able to draw 63 days benefit for the 141 days lost. Similarly at the Number 2 Pit over the same period the miners worked 162 shifts and received 64 days benefit. The effect which this work pattern had on the income of the average married miner can be tabulated as follows:

³⁴ See note 59 for a case of the consequences of refusing work.

	No. 1 Pit		
Income from wages (9s. 8d a shift)	Income from benefit*		Total
£ s d	£ s d		£ s d
74 6 8	18 18 6		93 6 4
	No 2 Pit		
Income from wages	Income from benefit*		Total
£ s d	£ s d		£ s d
77 13 6	12 7 0		90 0 6

*Assuming a family comprising husband, wife and three dependent children. Source: Swann and Turnbull, *Records of Interest to Social Scientists*, p. 184, SDAMA, *General Report on the Wagon Shortage, Moira Colliery Co. Ltd. November 1934*

Since the income which a miner with a “typical” family could have derived from benefit for forty-nine weeks was £86 it meant that – as Donisthorpe employed more than 800 miners, and if the structure of its workforce was similar to that of the Butterley collieries – it is likely that there were several hundred families living on or below an income which approximated to the amount which they would have received if the breadwinner had been completely unemployed.

It is well known that prolonged periods of unemployment on less than generous social benefits in the depressed mining communities of Durham, South Wales and elsewhere resulted in a situation in which “the mass of residents were inadequately supplied with clothing, footwear, household furniture and personal possessions generally; good food was in short supply, the average diet was unbalanced and inadequate, and people were often very hungry; housewives with young children neglected themselves in favour of their families.³⁵ It can now for the first time be asserted with some confidence that underemployment in the less depressed East Midland coalfields was having a similar effect on the material standards of a substantial proportion of mining families. If, as Herbert Buck claimed, “these conditions are starving and degrading the men and their families in our coalfield”,³⁶ then South Derbyshire’s experience was typical of the East Midland coalfields as a whole. It was a situation which caused great concern among the district unions who fought long and hard to mitigate its effects, as the next section will demonstrate.

III

Sean Glynn and Stephen Shaw have recently argued that the dominant attitude of the leaders of the miners’ trade unions was that “wages were to be held at all costs”,³⁷ even if that cost was the unemployment of their

³⁵ *Supple, The History of British Coal Industry* p. 467.

³⁶ SDAMA Wagon Shortage Deputation (see note 26 above).

³⁷ Glynn and Shaw, “Wage Bargaining”, pp. 123–124.

members. Simple to maintain, as they do, that "the primary objective of trade union action was the protection of wages"³⁸ implies a startling degree of indifference and heartlessness among the miners' leaders that is quite unjust and totally misleading. Miners' leaders were in fact well aware that the industry suffered from a high level of underemployment which dramatically reduced earnings and which therefore made it vital to resist cuts in basic wage rates.³⁹ Moreover, the leaders, supported by their members, also pursued a strategy of work spreading with lower take-home pay for those employed rather than unemployment for a proportion of them.⁴⁰ This tactic was also combined with a policy of attempting to persuade the management to introduce and maintain work patterns which would enable their members to obtain unemployment benefit in addition to their earnings, as was the practice in other casualised occupations such as dockwork. In these occupations arrangements had been introduced in which the weekly work pattern was to work for three days and to get unemployment benefit for three days, a system which, as Whiteside explains, suited management and unions alike.⁴¹ The miners' unions in the East Midlands attempted to convince management of the practicality and justice of introducing a work pattern which, in the words of a high ranking official in the Ministry of Labour "spreads the work over a larger number of work people than is required and has almost come to treat unemployment benefit as part of the income of the industry from which wages are paid".⁴²

In June, 1992, for instance, the Leicestershire Miners' Association (LMA) asked the owners to introduce "arrangements for pits to work in a way that will enable the men to claim unemployment benefit, to work

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ The point was forcibly made by the M.F.G.B. officials attending the so-called Buckmaster Inquiry in 1924 (Ministry of Labour, Court of Inquiry, re the Wages Position in the Coalmining Industry, April 1924).

⁴⁰ Noel Whiteside, "Social Welfare and Industrial Relations 1914-1939" in Chris Wrigley, ed., *A History of British Industrial Relations*, Vol. 2: 1914-1939 (1987), p. 215.

⁴¹ Noel Whiteside, "Welfare Insurance and Casual Labour: A Study of Administrative Intervention in Industrial Employment 1906-26", *Economic History Review*, 32 4 (November 1979), p. 521. It should be explained that unemployment benefits were payable for periods of unemployment as short as one day, provided that a waiting period subsequent to the official start date of the period of unemployment had been taken. From June 1921 to March 1937 the waiting period was six working days, though the regulations incorporated the so-called "continuity" rule under which any three days of unemployment during any six consecutive working days were considered a period of "continuous" rule under which any three days of unemployment during any six consecutive working days were considered a period of "continuous" unemployment. It was this regulation that the unions sought to use to benefit their members through negotiating a so-called OXO arrangement, that is, alternating days of work (O) with days of unemployment (X), most commonly three days of each per week. There is a more detailed account of unemployment benefit regulations in, for instance, Benjamin and Kochan, "Searching", pp. 447-448.

⁴² Whiteside and Gillespie, "Deconstructing Unemployment", p. 679.

two days and play two days". The Leicestershire Colliery Owners Association (LCOA) gave a negative response, because although "the representatives from several collieries expressed their willingness to endeavour to comply with the request, others stated that it would be impossible to do so".⁴³ It was not until 1932 that a formal arrangement was agreed and even then the owners reserved the right "to work the pits as economically as possible".⁴⁴ Similarly the Nottinghamshire Miners' Industrial Union (NMIU) pressed the owners on the same issue, and in December 1931 it was agreed "that facilities be given as far as possible for enabling the workmen concerned to qualify for the Dole".⁴⁵ As a consequence of this agreement Ollerton colliery, for instance, worked on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays so that the miners could claim benefit for the other days of the week.⁴⁶ In South Derbyshire it proved impossible to negotiate a district agreement but the SDMA were alive to the problem and dealt with each case on an *ad hoc* basis, such as in October 1929 when they made an arrangement with the Moria Company "to enable the men at Gresley Colliery to qualify for unemployment benefit for those days in which the pit is not turning."⁴⁷ Likewise in October 1933 SMDA successfully appealed to the same company "to adjust their turning times at all the collieries to allow the men to draw unemployment benefit".⁴⁸ The Derbyshire Miners' Association (DMA) adopted a similar policy of negotiating *ad hoc* arrangements, such as in March 1928 when the Staveley Company introduced a scheme whereby the men worked one week in two which would "allow the men to obtain unemployment pay for the week they were not at work. If they had been put on a three days a week they would not have been eligible for unemployment benefit".⁴⁹

A similar policy was introduced by the Moira Company and the SDMA "had to take up the matter of "playing off" from Monday to Saturday in cases where the pit was "playing" for a week, instead of "playing" from Wednesday to Tuesday".⁵⁰ Initiatives to obtain the most favourable arrangements came from branch as well as district level; for example the Rufford branch of NMIU resolved "to see if it could be arranged for the pit to work so that all the men at Rufford should get signed up to around the six working days so that unemployment pay could be obtained" which

⁴³ LMA MB, 16 June 1922.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 24 March and 3 June 1932. LMA were still complaining in 1936 that broken shifts were leaving members financially worse off than if they had been fully unemployed and in receipt of only national insurance benefit (*Coalville Times*, 28 February 1936).

⁴⁵ Nottinghamshire Area Wage Board MB, 30 December 1931.

⁴⁶ *The Sphere*, 23 April 1932. A feature by Charles Graves on Ollerton Model Village.

⁴⁷ SDAMA MB, 29 October 1929.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 30 October 1933. Despite the arrangement, though, Graville colliery, for instance, worked for only thirteen days in October 1937, eight of them on short time, SDAMA Wagon Shortage Deputation (see note 26 above).

⁴⁹ Williams, *The Derbyshire Miners*, p. 735.

⁵⁰ SDAMA MB, 23 May 1935.

resulted in the owners “agreeing to holiday on such days as will qualify the men for the dole as has been their practice”.⁵¹

The unions made strenuous efforts to enforce these arrangements but they frequently broke down. One of the most notable cases occurred in South Derbyshire and for reasons which were not entirely the management’s fault, as Herbert Buck explained in December 1934:

The problem we face today broke out with startling suddenness at the beginning of October last year (1933) [. . .] There have been occasions before last October when broken time had made it necessary for us to request the Moria Colliery Co. to play off the men at various pits so as to give them the benefit of Unemployment Insurance pay, but never before October of that year has conditions been so bad at each and all the Moria pits. Never had it appeared that broken time was so systematic and methodical as since last October [. . .] The men are being called to the pits five or even six times a week, and are being sent home again, almost every day, after a few hours work. The result is that although they can only make about three shifts per week, they cannot qualify for Unemployment Insurance benefit.⁵²

Table 7 reveals the full extent of the irregular work pattern and its effects on unemployment benefit.

Management’s initial response to SDMA’s request in October 1933 to maintain their previous arrangements was that

they were entirely in the hands of the Railway Co. and that in order to fulfil the monthly quota allotted to them by the central selling agency they were obliged to fill wagons if and when they were available even if there was an insufficient number of wagons to ensure a full day’s work. To work the collieries at the men’s convenience would endanger the fulfilment of the quota and could lead to its reduction, a situation that they were not prepared to contemplate as it would be both against the owner’s and the workforce’s interests.⁵³

Further pressure from SDMA and the threat of a strike persuaded the management “to do whatever possible to arrange the turning time at the different pits so that the men could qualify for benefit” but only because they had persuaded the Midland Railway to redirect wagons from neighbouring collieries, such as Granville, thus producing a consistently shifting

⁵¹ C. P. Griffin, ed., “The Nottinghamshire Miners’ Industrial Union ‘Spencer Union’: Rufford Branch Minutes, 1926–1936. District Minutes 1926 to 1927”, *Thoroton Society Record Series*, Vol. 38 (1990), Rufford MB, 8 July and 30 October 1931. At neighbouring Ollerton colliery adult miners were earning between 10s. and 25s. a shift in April 1932, and working three shifts and drawing three days’ unemployment benefit (*The Sphere*, 23 April 1932). At Bretby colliery (South Derbyshire) average earnings per shift on the coalface were 10s. 6d. and the miners were working for three shifts and drawing three days’ benefit (SDAMA Report on Wages at Conveyer Faces at Bretby colliery December 1933). For the lower paid in particular unemployment benefit on this scale amounted to a substantial wage subsidy that would in Whiteside and Gillespie’s phraseology “have made Edwin Chadwick spin in his grave”, “Deconstructing Unemployment”, p. 676.

⁵² SDAMA Report on the wagon shortage at the Moira collieries, December 1934.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Table 7. Working time and unemployment benefit in Donisthorpe colliery 1933-34 (49 weeks) and October to November 1937

Date	No. of full shifts men available for work		No. of shifts men actually worked		No. of shifts lost		No. of days men in receipt of benefit		No. of days benefit not available		No. of days men attended work	
	Pit 1	Pit 2	Pit 1	Pit 2	Pit 1	Pit 2	Pit 1	Pit 2	Pit 1	Pit 2	Pit 1	Pit 2
1933												
October	24	24	15	18	9	6	None	None	9	6	22	19
November	24	24	13	15	11	9	3	None	9	9	18	18
December	24	24	13	15	11	8	None	None	11	8	21	21
1934												
January	30	30	19	22	10	8	None	None	10	8	23	25
February	24	24	17	18	6	6	None	None	6	6	21	20
March	24	24	14	17	9	6	None	3	9	3	19	19
April	24	24	12	11	11	12	8	7	3	5	13	13
May	30	30	14	10	16	19	10	13	6	6	16	15
June	24	24	7	8	16	15	16	15	0	0	8	9
July	30	30	13	11	16	18	12	12	4	14	17	17
August	24	24	7	7	16	16	11	11	5	5	11	11
September*	12	12	5	5	7	6	3	3	4	3	8	8
Total	294	294	153	161	141	134	63	64	78	70	197	195
1937												
October to November†	14	14	9	10	6	3	None	None	6	3	11	13

* Two weeks only † Actually 27 October to 12 November

Source: SDAMA, Deputation to the Mines Department on the Wagon Shortage Question, 25 November 1937 SDAMA, General Report on the Wagon Shortage, Moira Colliery Co. Ltd, November 1934

burden of misery throughout the coalfield.⁵⁴ Even so continuity of benefit was never achieved at more than two out of three of the Moira pits at any one time and during 1934 a series of negotiations produced the following impasse:

SDMA Proposal

1. Alternative “play days” as between colliery and colliery in the district.
2. Purchase of privately owned wagon.
3. A joint deputation to LMS or the Mines Department.
4. A stoppage of all the pits as a protest to alert the public to the situation.
5. Why did the Moira Collieries find it so difficult to alternate full days?
6. Every other argument that we could adduce from members or branches.

Moira Response

Alternative turning days would not of necessity secure more wagons.
They had bought as many wagons as they could afford, the LMS had previously persuaded them to sell off their wagons.
They had had a voluminous correspondence with all the officials of LMS that mattered.
Would only endanger future quotas and not impress the public.
The technical reasons were fully explained and examined.
They explained the increase in costs of production to themselves by the shortage and their anxiety to eliminate it.

In November 1934 men working at Donisthorpe refused to work unless they were guaranteed a full shift and “cursed” Buck “because he had not done anything to alleviate their hardship”.⁵⁵ This attitude was hardly fair since Buck had been negotiating constantly with his opposite number in the colliery owners’ association, J. Stanleigh Turner, who admitted that “the men do take home a deplorably low sum of money at the end of the week. I know many cases where the men have my very real sincere sympathy [. . .] We are only striving to maintain the livelihood of the men from the Chairman of Directors to the smallest boy at the pit somehow and at some level until conditions improve”.⁵⁶ Buck remonstrated with the Donisthorpe men who were persuaded to abandon their stoppage but broken shifts continued to be a problem over the next few years because of the wagon shortage which LMS continued to claim “is largely brought about by circumstances over which they had not control”. As the rearmament boom gathered pace, SDMA applied pressure to the Mines Department to act on their behalf and induce LMS to supply the coalfield with an adequate wagon and locomotive supply. In the summer and autumn of 1937 there were five stoppages of work and the threat of “a complete cessation of work in the coalfield before Xmas unless something can be done to avert the terrible conditions [. . .] the men will lose confidence in any of the efforts we have tried and are trying to put towards a solution,

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ SDCOA MB 34 May 1935.

and take the situation into their own hands".⁵⁷ A meeting between a joint union/management deputation and the LMS at the Mines Department enabled the coalfield "to get more or less through our troubles of wagon shortage" without the projected strike.⁵⁸

IV

The Donisthorpe example clearly indicates the difficulties of maintaining arrangements which were commonplace in other industries which employed casual labour; the whole question of short-time working became a nightmare for union officials who were compelled not only to negotiate with recalcitrant colliery management, but maintain union discipline by trying to prevent spontaneous, unofficial stoppages of the kind that plagued Donisthorpe colliery. Moreover, even when successful arrangements had been negotiated, district officials found themselves representing their members in disputes with officials of the labour exchange who did their utmost to economise on the payment of unemployment benefit, since as the Nottinghamshire Miners' Association noted in 1939: "We in this county have very few, if any, able-bodied men totally unemployed but many not working full-time [. . .] There have been many cases of unemployment pay in dispute at the local Unemployment Exchanges. Many cases have been settled satisfactorily without going before the Court of Referees, whilst 90 per cent of cases taken before the Court have been successful for the men concerned."⁵⁹ Branch officials also spent a considerable amount of time negotiating with benefit officers, and it was not unusual for them to "receive half a shift lost through attending the test case on the dole question".⁶⁰ The Rufford branch secretary of the NMIU was even instructed on one occasion to "get all information possible 're'

⁵⁷ SDAMA Deputation to the Mines Department. The deputation pointed out that the wages of the lower paid men underground and on the surface were 8s. 8d. and 7s. 10d. a shift and that after the deduction of stoppages they were drawing 19s. 6d. and 17s. 4d. respectively for a week of 2.5 shifts spread over five days" employment. Table 7 emphasises the scale of the problem in October–November 1937.

⁵⁸ SDCOA MB, 4 February 1938.

⁵⁹ Nottinghamshire Miners' Association (NMA) MB, Annual Report 1939. Moreover, SDMA took 21 cases before the court of referees in a single month of 1930 and NMA 253 during the whole of 1933, for instance (SDMA MB, 28 May 1930 and NMA MB Annual Report 1933). A typical case is that of three miners who worked at Bagworth colliery, Leicestershire, who "were disallowed the one day that the pit was turning because the management told the men in question that the pit would be open and there would be a few tubs for them to fill if they went to work". The men had refused to work "for the two hours or so" of work that was offered by management (LMA MB, 5 December 1924). A miner was deemed to be working once he had passed through the lamp cabin and occasionally they were sent home again without going down the shaft.

⁶⁰ C. P. Griffin, ed., NMU Rufford Minutes, 25 May 1930.

unemployment pay and holidays and send all participants up to Mr. Spencer so he can get in touch with the Minister of Labour”.⁶¹ Occasionally it was the union officials that were on the defensive, as when a member of SDMA employed at Cadley Hill was prosecuted for fraud for claiming benefit when “he had deliberately absented himself from work when work was available”.⁶²

The unions also had to try and find a method of assisting distressed members without bankrupting the organisation. Following the crushing defeats of 1921 and 1926, the unions had a constant struggle to increase membership and funds, and their “back to the union” campaigns emphasised the financial advantages of membership.⁶³ Among these was out-of-work benefit, such as the provision “for relief for distressed members through depression of trade, breakage of machinery, or other causes not provided for in these rules” (Rule 32 LMA, Rule 36 NMA), which could be awarded at the discretion of the union council. Given the straightened financial circumstances of the unions, there was much heart-searching over the interpretation of the discretionary powers.⁶⁴ In Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire it was generally conceded in cases in which pits had been “played off” for a week at a time and no earnings had been drawn from the colliery office, though exceptions were occasionally made as at Nailstone in 1932 and Moorgreen in 1921 when three days out-of-work pay was granted “as a result of the pit working short-time”.⁶⁵ The same situation prevailed in South Derbyshire until 1930 when Rule 30 was tightened, which meant that even an application for benefit in cases where the union had negotiated work spreading “the men affected being required to take their turn” as an alternative “to discharging a proportion of the men outright” was rejected.⁶⁶ Apart from South Derbyshire, although there were investigations after 1927 into the desirability of amending or scrapping the rules on temporary out-of-work benefit (which applied to short-time rather than longer term unemployment), the rules remained unchanged though each case was treated on its merits, and applications

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15 June 1930. The Rufford branch committee also proposed that all the lodges at the Bolsover Colliery Company collieries should approach management *en masse* if management failed to stop whittling away at their “holidays and the Dole” arrangements, *ibid.*, 24 July 1932.

⁶² SDAMA MB, 27 November 1933.

⁶³ C. P. Griffin, *The Leicestershire Miners Vol. 2: 1914–1945* (1988), pp. 108, 211.

⁶⁴ For examples of the financial difficulties faced by the district unions, see A. R. and C. P. Griffin, “The Non-Political Trade Union Movement” in A. Briggs and J. Saville, eds., *Essays in Labour History 1918–1939* (1977), p. 157; Williams, *The Derbyshire Miners*, pp. 588–593; C. P. Griffin, “The Leicestershire Miners and the Mining Dispute of 1926” *International Review of Social History*, 22, 3 (1977), p. 311.

⁶⁵ LMA MB, 22 April 1932 and 8 March 1935; NMA MB 5 February and 28 November 1921.

⁶⁶ SDAMA, 12 December 1930.

for benefit were frequently rejected. That the rules remained unchanged largely stemmed from fears of the possible effect such changes would have on recruitment when unions were struggling to regain members following the losses incurred as a result of events in 1926 and their aftermath. Moreover, in Nottinghamshire there were two rival unions seeking members, which resulted in the NMIU resolving in May 1927, for instance, "that owing to the Nottinghamshire Miners' Association paying 5s. out-of-work pay at the Annesley and Bentinck Collieries that we pay our members at these pits also at the rate of 7s. 6d. per member and 1s. for each child".⁶⁷ The use of benefit partly as a recruiting device had its limits, however, in times of financial crises, since it was resolved later in the month that "in the event of the NMA not paying the Hucknall No. 2 men [that] this union do not pay".⁶⁸

V

It is well known that the miners of the traditional exporting coalfields, such as Northumberland and Durham, suffered from mass unemployment and economic and social deprivation, particularly after the mining dispute of 1926.⁶⁹ It is also a commonplace, and one reinforced in writings on the miners' industrial struggles of the mid-1980s, that the miners employed in the "sheltered" inland coalfields like the East Midlands, where mass unemployment was less in evidence, were a part of that section of the population that shared in the steadily rising living standards of the period.⁷⁰ The evidence presented here suggests that this vision of the prosperous East Midland miner must be heavily qualified, if not actually dismissed. Although conventional mass unemployment was absent, mass underemployment was omnipresent, and as Whiteside and Gillespie have recently reiterated:

The unemployment suffered by the casual or short-time worker on a three or four day week (or its equivalent) was no less "real" than that of his "unemployed" colleague, who was out of work for two weeks in every four. The vagaries of official continuity regulations made it easier for the latter to claim state benefit, but there is no reason to argue that he was "really" unemployed while the short-time and the casual worker were not.⁷¹

⁶⁷ C. P. Griffin, ed., NMIU District Minutes, 7 May 1927.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 May 1927.

⁶⁹ W. R. Garside, *The Durham Miners 1919–1960* (1971), chapter 7; Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed. A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (1980), chapter 1.

⁷⁰ Garside, *The Durham Miners*, p. 267; Branson and Heinemann, *Britain in the 1930s*, pp. 100, 106, 139 and 146 who talk about the "prosperous Nottinghamshire miner" earning as much as £3 19s. 6d. a week in 1938 which made them amongst the highest paid manual workers in the country. Supple, *The History of British Coal Industry*, p. 445 refers to their "fairly good wages" on the basis of average earnings per shift. A good example of the 1980s writings is Michael Crick, *Scargill and the Miners* (1985), particularly chapter 8.

⁷¹ Whiteside and Gillespie, "Deconstructing Unemployment", p. 681.

It has, indeed, been demonstrated that underemployment significantly depressed material living standards, in the worst cases to a level below those experienced by the fully unemployed. At best, East Midland miners struggled to achieve the average national income for coalminers which itself compared badly to that of most other occupational groups except agricultural labourers.⁷²

Certainly trade union officials were in no doubt as to the threat posed by underemployment to the living standards of their members and expended a vast amount of time and energy trying to persuade colliery management to introduce “a more ordered scheme of partial employment”⁷³ which would give their members “three days work and three days play” to enable them to maximise their income during a period of endemic short-time working dictated by the market for domestic coal. It has been demonstrated that these officials were only belatedly and partially successful in this endeavour, and it must be concluded that the evidence presented here constitutes a further challenge to the optimistic interpretation of working-class living standards in the inter-war period which has been in vogue for more than a generation.

⁷² Between 1927 and 1938 average earnings per year were below the national average in seven of them (Annual Reports, Secretary of the Mines Department of the Board of Trade 1927–1938). On national earnings, see John Stevenson, *British Society 1914–1945* (1984), pp. 119–123.

⁷³ Whiteside and Gillespie “Deconstructing Unemployment”, p. 687.