‘‘‘Seven shillings is not exactly the millennium”; economic liberalism and the campaign for a miners’ minimum wage in the Durham coalfield’

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Abstract

The Durham Miners’ Association (DMA) was one of the best established, wealthiest and largest trade unions in Britain. Yet economic liberalism, specifically that miners’ wages had to be determined by coal prices, dominated the thinking of the DMA’s leaders as well as many ordinary Durham miners. The minimum wage was an indispensable way for radicals to attack these notions. As the Liberal-dominated Durham leadership remained hostile, the task of winning converts to the minimum wage fell to the union’s radical activists. This article explores the rank and file movements that coalesced around advocacy of the minimum wage from their re-emergence in summer 1911, and considers the debates on the votes for national strike action on the issue in 1912. It charts the campaigns’ changing aims, achievements and weaknesses after the minimum wage was formally won.

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In March 1912, over one million British coal miners, co-ordinated by the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain (MFGB), held their first truly national strike for a minimum wage.[1] The MFGB had organized national strike action before,

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[1] There are good general accounts of the miners’ minimum wage campaign in R. Page Arnot, *The Miners: Years of Struggle, 1889–1910* (Allen and Unwin, 1949), pp. 80–1; H. A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Vol.2, 1911–1933* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1985),

against a proposed 25% reduction of wages in 1893. On that occasion, it did not have the support of the Durham Miners' Association (DMA), Britain's best-established and wealthiest miners' union. The Durham miners' non-involvement ensured an unsuccessful outcome and the union's very short period of affiliation to the MFGB (only begun in 1892) abruptly ended. Indeed, the MFGB's founding demands (1889) of a minimum wage (together with the eight-hour day) had kept the Durham miners out before 1892 and they were to remain serious obstacles to the DMA's involvement thereafter. Neither was popular in Durham, a district that had developed its own peculiar working practices (shared only by the smaller Northumberland coalfield), which were determined in considerable part by Durham coal's dependence on the highly fluctuating international market. Liberal economic notions were firmly embedded in the coalfield's complex and well-developed machinery for pay determination. Economic liberalism also informed the outlooks of the main DMA leaders, most

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pp. 45–52. For detail of 1912 strike and solidarity see R. Church and Q. Outram, *Strikes and Solidarity: Coalfield Conflict in Britain 1889–1966* (Cambridge University Press: 2002) ch. 7. Apart from these, George Askwith provided a first-hand account of the political context and high-level minimum wage negotiations; there is a short account of the minimum wage by Brian McCormick, and essential contextual material in Roy Church and Barry Supple's volumes in the *History of the British Coal Industry* series. See also James Thompson's recent discussion of the minimum wage. G. R. Askwith, *Industrial problems and disputes* (J. Murray: 1920); B. J. McCormick, *Industrial Relations in the Coal Industry* (Macmillan: 1979); R. A. Church, *The History of the British Coal Industry Vol. 3, 1830–1913: Victorian Pre-Eminence* (Oxford University Press: 1986); B. Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry Vol. 4: The Political Economy of Decline, 1913–46* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1987); J. Thompson, 'Political economy, the labour movement and the minimum wage, 1880–1914' in E. H. H. Green and D. Tanner (eds), *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate* (Cambridge University Press: 2007), pp. 62-88.

notably its general secretary, John Wilson, who consistently argued that coalowners and workers shared a common interest in maintaining mining's profitability.[2] The minimum wage had long been unpopular as it was expected to render Durham's pits (and especially the older mines in the west of the county often with very narrow coal seams) unprofitable.

The situation changed fundamentally with the 1906 Liberal government's legislation on the eight-hour day. Durham miners' MPs delayed its passage in Parliament, but the Coal Mines Act was finally enacted in 1908. The main reason for self-exclusion was now redundant, and Durham miners voted for the DMA to join the MFGB. Durham instantly became the federation's second largest section, with commensurate influence. This had important ramifications for the MFGB's other major policy, the miners' minimum wage, which took on new impetus after the bitter ten-month Cambrian Combine dispute in the south Wales coalfield (from November 1910). In short, for any truly national concerted action on the issue, the MFGB needed the DMA's support. It could not risk the kind of damaging split that had occurred in 1893. But, with economic liberalism apparently entrenched in the coalfield, it was by no means certain that the Durham miners would endorse MFGB action for a minimum

[2] Wilson's (Primitive) Methodism informed all aspects of his liberalism. In September 1912, for example, he argued that Christianity helped the miners to view their employers 'as men'. The single most important substantial critique of Wilson's attitudes and leadership of the Durham miners in this period was 'Does Dr. John Wilson MP, secretary of the Durham Miners' Association, Serve the Working Class?'. Its publication in pamphlet form saw its author, revolutionary industrial unionist George Harvey, successfully sued for libel by Wilson. *Durham Chronicle*, 27 September 1912; *Evening Chronicle*, 7 November 1912; *Times*, 25 March 1915; J. Wilson, *Memories of a labour leader* (T. Fisher Unwin: 1910).

wage. The DMA's rules required a two-thirds majority vote for strike action. With its main leaders still steeped in economic liberalism, opposed to the minimum wage in principle, and keen to use the rulebook to prevent members' action if they could, the responsibility to win a two-thirds majority vote for strike action in 1912 fell to the coalfield's radical activists. Facing an entrenched leadership and operating in a highly stratified, hierarchically-organized workforce divided along numerous lines of demarcation, these activists faced an apparently Herculean task.

None of the main histories of the Durham coalfield covering the early twentieth century have explicitly discussed the post-1910 minimum wage movements.[3]

[3] Of the published works specifically on Durham, Moore's provides the best account of the early rank and file campaigns, including that for the minimum wage before 1910, although it draws heavily on Gregory's (then contemporaneous) work, especially for the period after 1910. Beynon and Austrin provided a distillation of Lawson and Moore's work. Dave Douglass' brilliant studies of the Durham miners' rank and file movements concentrated more on responses to the eight-hour day in the coalfield after 1910 (for which also see McCormick and Williams' pioneering work). There is some useful material in Norman Emery's books and in masters theses by Craig Marshall and Ray Physick. R. Moore, *Pit-men, Preachers and Politics* (Cambridge University Press: 1974); H. Beynon and T. Austrin, *Masters and Servants: Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation* (Rivers Oram Press: 1994); D. Douglass, *Pit Life in County Durham. Rank and file Movements and Workers' Control* (Ruskin College, Oxford: 1972); D. Douglass, 'The Durham Pitman', in R. Samuel (ed.), *Miners, Quarrymen and Salt Workers* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1977), pp. 205–96; B. McCormick and J. E. Williams, 'The Miners and the Eight-Hour day, 1863–1910', *Economic History Review* 12:2 (1959), pp. 222–38; N. Emery, *Banners of the Durham Coalfield* (Sutton, Stroud, 1998) and N. Emery, *The Coalminers of Durham* (Sutton, Stroud: 1992); C. Marshall, 'Levels of Industrial Militancy and the Political Radicalisation of the Durham Miners, 1885–1914' (MA, Durham University: 1976); R. Physick, 'The Great Unrest, 1910–1914. An Analysis of the Strikes and the Role

What is published presents a disjointed picture of the Durham movement. Thus Jack Lawson's autobiography contains a brief account of the Durham minimum wage campaign to the point when the Liberal government legislated on the issue in April 1912, but nothing of the bitter struggles that came after.[4] Conversely, Hugh Clegg *et.al.* provided the only (and necessarily very brief) published discussion of the movement after May 1912, when it began calling itself the 'Durham Forward Movement' (DFM).[5] The most significant treatments of the minimum wage issue in Durham are in works by Roy Gregory and – more recently – Duncan Tanner. Both pointed to the apparent reluctance of Durham miners to embrace the minimum wage, arguing that they were relatively well remunerated and contented materially, and that their grievances were usually smoothed over by Durham's sophisticated conciliation machinery. In emphasizing the firm grasp that economic liberalism apparently had on the rank and file as much as their leaders, Gregory and Tanner argued that, on the economic plane as much as the more narrowly defined 'political' plane, by 1914 Durham miners remained some considerable ideological distance from the Labour Party.[6]

Puzzlingly, there remains no in-depth study of the ways in which campaigners for a minimum wage made their case in the district unions during these years,

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Played by the Rank and file Committees on Tyneside and Merseyside' (MA, Newcastle University: 1998).

[4] J. Lawson, *A Man's Life* (Hodder and Stoughton: 1944). Lawson's biography of DMA activist Peter Lee (Epworth Press: 1949) is also unrevealing on this.

[5] Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions,* p. 47.

[6] R. Gregory, *The Miners and British Politics, 1906–1914* (Oxford University Press: 1968); D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900–1918* (Cambridge University Press: 1990).

the movements they raised and maintained, the tactical dilemmas they faced, and their successes and failures. This is surprising as the implications of the minimum wage campaigns were wide: they were as much part of an internal labour movement debate over strategy and tactics as they were a means of persuading the Liberal government and coalowners that miners should be paid a guaranteed minimum wage. Durham is significant as one of the largest and most influential of the MFGB districts that was also apparently among the least susceptible to arguments for a minimum wage. That said, there are hints that similar forces were at work in many other British coalfields. Published accounts of the Yorkshire and Derbyshire coalfield districts, for example, certainly suggest significant tensions between district leaders and members over the minimum wage (among other issues) in these crucial years, though they are not explored in any depth.[7]

This article analyses the minimum wage's challenge to economic liberalism on both material and ideological planes, offering a case study in the genesis and development of a significant and hitherto under-appreciated Edwardian miners' rank and file movement. It charts the complex power struggle on the issue of the minimum wage between the union's Liberal-dominated leadership, its Independent Labour Party (ILP) inspired rank and file movements, the MFGB, the Minimum Wage Boards, the Durham coalowners and the Liberal government. It argues that, while the context was certainly very challenging for campaigners for a minimum wage in Durham, conditions became far more favourable after 1910. Indeed, the minimum wage became a potentially potent

[7] C. L. Baylies, *The History of the Yorkshire Miners, 1881–1918* (Routledge: 1993), pp. 367–97; J. E. Williams, *The Derbyshire Miners: A Study in Industrial and Social History* (Allen and Unwin: 1962), pp. 393–441.

weapon for ILP activists to galvanize a growing and increasingly militant section of the DMA's rank and file members and to undermine, on an ideological level, the central tenet of economic liberalism, that wages should be dictated by coal prices.[8] As well as doing this, DMA general secretary Wilson's opposition to the minimum wage allowed its advocates to draw a clearer distinction between themselves and him, at the same time undermining his position (and allowing him to discredit himself) as his oppositional stance alienated more miners. For their part, Durham coalowners demonstrated increasingly clearly that they certainly did not, contrary to Wilson's protestations, regard theirs and their workforces' interests as mutually constitutive. The minimum wage, before 1908 apparently a reason for the DMA to stay out of the MFGB, became after 1912 an issue on which the MFGB could intervene in support of Durham miners, thereby demonstrating the benefits of affiliation.

Existing accounts tend to regard the 1912 votes to strike for the national minimum wage as the miners' final pre-war verdict on the issue. In fact, the campaign to win a majority vote in favour of national strike action was merely one stage of development. The efforts of activists to make the minimum wage one worth having and to extend it to all workers in and around the mines allowed for more effective propaganda, and further weakened the Wilson–liberal economic hegemony in Durham. This was in spite of the problems faced by the minimum wage movement in terms of articulating its appeal, making its demands felt and its ultimately poor record at securing actual material gains. In

[8] The best account of the ILP in the Durham coalfield to 1906 is D. Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888–1906* (Manchester University Press: 1983).

sum, the story of the battle for the minimum wage in the Durham coalfield is far more complex (as well as chronologically longer), and, for opponents of economic liberalism, more positive than has been recognized.

I

Economic liberalism had a firm grasp on the DMA from the time of its foundation in 1869. In its infancy, DMA leaders promoted sliding scale agreements linking wages directly to Durham coal prices, notoriously unpredictable as they were determined by fluctuating international rather than more stable domestic markets. A Conciliation Board replaced the 'sliding scale' after the economic depression of the late 1880s had made it highly unpopular among miners, though the successor institution operated in essentially the same way, making wage awards only in relation to coal prices.[9] From 1879, wage awards were calculated in terms of percentages on the basis rate, fixed at the lowest point in the cycle of coal prices. This mechanism also instituted a 3% differential in wages between underground and surfaceworkers. The latter lay at the bottom of the job hierarchy in Durham, which was integral to how the industry (and the union) worked, and the DMA was one of only two of the district miners' unions to organize them. At the top of the hierarchy were the

[9] J. W. F. Rowe, *Wages in the Coal Industry* (P. S. King: 1923), pp. 40, 42; H. S. Jevons, *The British Coal Trade* (Redwood Press, Trowbridge: 1969), pp. 354–64; E. Welbourne, *The Miners' unions of Northumberland and Durham* (University Press, 1923), pp. 165–6, 170–6, 190–1; J. Wilson, *A History of the Durham Miners' Association, 1870–1904* (J. H. Veitch and Sons, Durham: 1907), pp. 132–59, 178, 202–3, 297–316; H. A. Clegg, A. Fox, A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Vol.1 1889–1910* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1964), pp. 19–20, 23, 103–104.

hewers, the coalface workers, who usually earned piecework rates. Immediately below them were the 'putters', who filled and transported the coal tubs underground. That the interests of hewers dominated negotiations around wages and conditions is in part explicable because of the career structure in Durham mines, whereby most younger underground miners could anticipate becoming hewers in their working lives. This was in marked contrast to coalfields such as south Wales where there was no such clear career progression to the best jobs for younger miners, and has been offered as one reason for the greater industrial unrest in south Wales.[10] Nevertheless, the onus was on campaigners for a minimum wage to deal adequately with surfaceworkers' grievances, as well as those of higher-placed grades of underground mineworker, as the potential consequences of sidelining or overlooking any group were serious. Given this hierarchy and the differing needs and demands of the various grades of mineworker, formulating policy that would galvanize and maintain their support was a major challenge to the minimum wage movement. These divisions later allowed the statutory Minimum Wage Board to operate a divide-and-rule policy, making awards that represented advances for some select grades of miner but left the wages of many other grades as they were.

The Durham coalfield had briefly experienced an individual minimum wage between 1876 and October 1879. It ended when the owners demanded (further) wage reductions that the miners unsuccessfully resisted with a six-week strike. The new sliding scale dispensed with the minimum wage. Subsequently, Durham leaders, and especially Wilson, began arguing that the minimum wage

[10] See M. J. Daunton, 'Down the Pit: Work in the Great Northern and South Wales Coalfields, 1870–1914', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 34 (1981), pp. 578–97.

was an ‘evil’ that provoked many local disputes and should therefore be avoided in future. They consistently and successfully resisted subsequent demands for a new minimum.[11] Even after Durham joined the MFGB, Wilson sustained his implacable hostility. In January 1912, he denounced the minimum wage as ‘economically unpredictable’, just as the MFGB was engaged in a strike ballot on the issue.[12]

Another problem for campaigners for a minimum wage was that, as Durham’s coal seams varied widely in size and ease of working, so did miners’ piecework earnings. Consequently, two institutions developed early in the Durham coalfield to obviate a good deal of the potential for industrial strife. The first was the ‘County Average System’. Established in 1872, it was implemented by a joint committee comprised of representatives of the coalowners and unions empowered to adjust price lists in any coal seam where average piecework earnings were higher or lower than the County Average by more than 5%.[13] It thus acted, theoretically at least, as a minimum wage for every class of worker in Durham’s mines. This was not, however, an individual minimum as the County Average was ‘intended to equalize earnings across seams, not across individual workers.’[14] In dealing with the long-term (predictable) characteristics

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[11] Welbourne, *Miners' Unions*, pp. 185–6, 191, 193, 206–207, 213, 223; Wilson, *Durham Miners*, pp. 132–59, 164.

[12] *The Times*, 11 January 1912.

[13] Rowe, *Wages*, pp. 72–3. See also J. G. Treble and S. Vicary, ‘Equity, Efficiency and Insurance: Explaining the Structure of Miners’ Wage Payments in Victorian County Durham’, *Economic Journal* [*EJ*] 103:417 (1993), pp. 481–93.

[14] J. G. Treble, ‘Productivity and Effort: The Labor-Supply Decisions of Late Victorian Coalminers’, *The Journal of Economic History* 61:2 (2001), p. 427.

of changing coal seams, the County Average was relatively successful in avoiding numerous local difficulties (often stoppages) resulting from fixing or altering price lists in coalfields, such as occurred in south Wales.[15]

The Durham coalfield was almost unique in that, with 'cavilling' (an old practice the origins of which remain obscure), it had a second mechanism to overcome problems arising from the short-term and unpredictable variations in coal seams that the County Average could not address.[16] Cavilling was a quarterly ballot whereby work places were alloted to hewers in order to distribute fairly the better and worse coal seams. It helped to maintain miners' loyalty to the union, as well as being the main mechanism for workers to exercise considerable job control. It has been regarded as part explanation for the relative lack of industrial militancy in the Durham coalfield.[17] These mechanisms certainly suggest that that campaigners for a minimum wage in Durham worked in testing conditions. As argued below, however, both the County Average and cavilling were open to intelligent and biting critique by advocates of the minimum wage.

Finally, the complex effects of the passage of the Coal Mines Act had considerable significance for the subsequent minimum wage campaign. In response to the Act, the DMA leadership negotiated, without recourse to the lodges, the introduction of a three-shift system in order to allow the hewers to continue to work their shorter (seven-hour) day. Its introduction in January 1910

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[15] *Ibid*., p. 417.

[16] *Ibid*., Treble and Vicary, 'Equity', *EJ*, p. 492; Rowe for example, was unclear about when caviling came about, though he suggested it was a 'rough-and-ready but broadly effective method of doing justice' that had a long history: Rowe, *Wages*, p. 147.

[17] Rowe, *Wages*, p. 58; Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions*, p. 448.

was met by mass unofficial (that is without the DMA executive's approval) industrial action, demonstrating the militant mood and the anger of the rank and file. Although DMA officials narrowly survived a lodge vote of confidence, their reputations were severely tarnished. But the outcome had not helped the ILP either. While it had not extended hewers' working hours, the ILP's long-held and, in Durham, controversial eight-hour day policy had still proved itself unpalatable in practical application. Many regarded the three-shift system's application across the entire coalfield as a very high price to pay for an eight-hour day.[18]

II

By summer 1911, a demoralized Durham ILP needed a new campaign to galvanize the coalfield.[19] Paradoxically, the Eight Hours Act 1908 (EHA) had a positive impact on the origins of what was soon to become the Minimum Wage

[18] DMA council, 22 January 1910, D/DMA 30, Durham Record Office (DRO); W. R. Garside, *The Durham Miners, 1919–1960* (Allen and Unwin: 1971), pp. 19–26.

[19] There are no reliable figures available for ILP membership in the Durham coalfield (the coalfield was but part of a larger ILP organizational region). The closest approximation is the number of Durham coalfield branches, which reached around 100 by 1914. These were different in size, and varied considerably from the highly active to moribund. The status of individual branches could also change quickly dramatically, so reliant were some on the activities of a handful of energetic individuals. Equally, the numbers ILP members active in the rank and file movement is difficult to determine, though it is clear that all its main leaders were in the ILP. More importantly, there were very many members of specific lodges affiliated to the movement who were not likely to have been ILP members; the rank and file movements were far more larger than the ILP in the Durham coalfield.

Movement (MWM).[20] The rank and file dissatisfaction the EHA engendered became a resource to be tapped by campaigners for a minimum wage.[21] There was also a more widespread growing consternation in the Durham coalfield (as elsewhere) over rising prices that were squeezing miners' incomes and building pressure for large wage increases. Then, in July 1911, the national ILP co-ordinated a nationwide campaign to agitate for its 'living wage for all' national minimum wage of 30s.[22] Durham ILP branches began holding well-attended propaganda meetings; Chopwell's, for example, 'was one of the best meetings held for some time.'[23]

By the third week of July 1911 another external intervention steered the issue more firmly towards an organized campaign inside the DMA. This was the appearance in the Durham coalfield of miner 'missionaries' from south Wales propagandizing for national strike action in support of the miners' individual minimum wage. The missionaries spoke at such key coalfield centres as Stanley and Chester-le-Street and then appeared at the annual Durham miners' gala on 22 July. Denied an official DMA platform, the south Wales miners' message nevertheless had an impact.[24] At the gala, Wilson was persistently heckled when

[20] The term 'minimum wage campaigns' is used to cover the whole period to August 1914; minimum wage movement (MWM) denotes the campaigns in the period between summer 1911 and the end of the 1912 strike *only* while 'Durham Forward Movement' (DFM) is the movement's formally adopted name from May 1912.

[21] *The Times*, 27 September 1911.

[22] ILP Annual Conference Report, May 1912, ILP_12/1/2, British Library of Political and Economic Science (BLPES); Some ILP branches had held meetings on this theme in June. See *Labour Leader*, 9, 30 June 1911.

[23] *Labour Leader*, 14 July 1911. See also reports in *Labour Leader*, 21 and 28 July 1911.

[24] *Ibid*., 21 July 1911; *Durham Chronicle*, 21 July 1911; *The Socialist*, September 1911.

speaking against south Wales' proposed strike, whereas other speakers' calls for support to the Welsh miners drew approving gala cheers.[25] Wilson was left in no doubt of the south Wales missionaries' pernicious effect.[26] By the last week of July the ILP's minimum wage campaign was now firmly attached to the miners' demands; for example, at Beamish a large audience heard speeches on the minimum wage 'from a miners' point of view.'[27]

The speaker that day at Beamish was Jack Lawson. He had been an ILP member since 1904 and had been sponsored to attend Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1908. Lawson spent a year and a half at Ruskin, using his contacts there as referees for positions on his return to the coalfield. Lawson's 'good ability, industry and perseverance' made him an ideal candidate for a checkweighman's post,[28] which provided 'a position from which you can do effective work for the elevation of the miners.'[29] He was elected a checkweighman at Alma pit, near Chester-le-Street in 1910. A second key activist, Andrew Temple, presided over the same Beamish meeting. Like Lawson, Temple was a checkweighman and was to become a MWM leader (he was also a Ruskin student, in 1913).[30]

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[25] *Durham Chronicle*, 28 July 1911.

[26] Wilson's Monthly circular No. 187, July 1911, D/DMA (Acc: 2157(D)) 202(box), DRO.

[27] *Labour Leader*, 28 July 1911.

[28] The miners of individual pits voted for checkweighmen to ensure that the owners were not underpaying for the weight of coal sent up, and it was thus a position that commanded considerable respect. Lawson reference from Dennis Hird, 26 August 1908, LAW 2/1/5, Palace Green Archive, Durham (PGAD).

[29] William Moore Ede letter (and reference) to Jack Lawson, 13 January 1909, LAW 2/1/6.

[30] Lawson, *Man's Life*, pp. 74, 95–111, 116–120.

Lawson was quick to admit the south Wales missionaries' had done 'more than anyone' to sponsor a rebellious feeling among the Durham rank and file, 'for there is great indignation in the county as to the way in which these men have been treated by the leaders' (the MFGB stopped supporting the Cambrian Combine strikers in July 1911 and they were defeated soon after).[31] August 1911 saw the first rank and file demonstrations for the minimum wage, albeit at fairly localized meetings attended by only a handful of lodges. By this time the miners' economic position had worsened: Durham Conciliation Board cut wages by 2½% with immediate effect in early August.[32] Campaigners for a minimum wage noted that this coincided with reports of 'coalowners who had declared dividends of 20 to 30%.'[33] Durham miners' wages then stagnated and the increase in the cost of living made for good propaganda on MWM platforms. Strikes, like that of the railway workers in August 1911, meant an MWM activist could comment credibly that 'strike mania was in the air.'[34] For his part, Lawson was clear that 'the men of Durham have made up their minds to March. They are asking their leaders to lead. They will mark time no longer.'[35] The rank and file movement took on more coherence at a mass conference, convened by three ILP-dominated lodges, on 2 September 1911 in Pelton near Chester-le-Street, and chaired by W. P. Richardson (from 1898 secretary of Usworth lodge,

[31] *Labour Leader*, 11 August 1911; MFGB Annual Volume of Proceedings, 1911, MFGB special conference, 13–15 June 1911, Durham Miners' Association Offices, Redhills, Durham.

[32] *Durham Chronicle*, 8 August 1911.

[33] *Ibid*., 8 September 1911.

[34] *Ibid*., 1 September 1911. See 'Great Unrest', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 33 (2012).

[35] *Labour Leader*, 11 August 1911.

Washington, and chair of Gateshead ILP district by 1910).[36] The conference circularized all Durham lodges to maintain and extend the minimum wage agitation and there were at least sixteen (and probably more) mass MWM meetings throughout most of the coalfield before the 1912 national minimum wage strike.

The Durham movement's main aim was a hewer's individual minimum wage of 7*s*. (35p) per day (excluding accommodation allowance and free domestic coal), with other classes of mineworkers to receive a minimum commensurate with existing pay grades.[37] They initially envisaged calling on MFGB support if their coalfield campaign failed, but events overtook them when the MFGB annual conference voted unanimously on 6 October 1911 in support of a minimum wage for all men and juveniles working in British mines. Faced with the coalowners' continued opposition, the MFGB balloted members on strike action in January 1912.[38] Durham MWM activists endorsed national action, though they framed any potential stoppage in apocalyptic terms: Lawson warned that a national strike 'would lay the country to waste', but insisted it was the only way to bring the owners to a 'reasonable' frame of mind.[39]

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[36] *Durham Chronicle*, 8 September 1911; 12 April 1912; Marshall, 'Industrial Militancy', F4.

[37] John Lawson, 'A Minimum wage for miners. Answer to critics in the Durham coal fields' (ILP Publication Department, National Labour Press: 1912), p. 3, ILP/5/1912/20. Durham coalowners provided an unusually high degree of accommodation or a rental allowance for most of their key married workers, though Daunton claimed that they did not try to use this as a means of social control. See M. Daunton, 'Miners' Houses: south Wales and the Great Northern Coalfield, 1880–1914', *International Review of Social History* 25:2 (1980), pp. 143–75.

[38] MFGB annual conference, 6 October 1911; special conference, 20 December 1911.

[39] *Durham Chronicle*, 29 December 1911. See also *Durham Chronicle*, 8, 29 September 1911; 23 February 1912.

The Durham movement paid attention to the needs of other grades of mineworker. Elderly and infirm miners were particularly important as their wage levels had been factored in when the County Average was fixed, ensuring that younger, more energetic workers would always earn *more* than the County Average. A minimum wage excluding the elderly and infirm left the remaining workers in danger of suffering an effective wage reduction. Surfaceworkers' grievances were also considerable; they worked up to 10¼ hours per day with wages (including the lodging allowance) amounting to around only 4*s.* 4*d.* (22p). By late December 1911, the Durham movement was calling for the inclusion of all surfaceworkers' wages in the minimum. It expressed regret at surfaceworkers' (arguably very damaging) omission from the MFGB's demands.[40] At this stage, while the MFGB was applauded by Durham militants for taking a national stand on the minimum wage, it could still disappoint. What was the MWM's impact on DMA leaders before the 1912 strike? Certainly, the movement made serious and sustained criticisms, denouncing them for living on past reputations, condemning their apathy and unconstitutionality and calling for modernization.[41] By March 1912, the MWM was claiming that DMA leaders were actually *helping* 'the coal kings.'[42] The leaders were understandably antagonized. DMA treasurer T. H. Cann launched a personal attack on MWM leader W. P. Richardson, and Wilson himself also

[40] *Ibid*., 8 September 1911; 29 December 1911; 23 February 1912; 22, 29 March 1912; Rowe, *Wages*, p. 56.

[41] *Durham Chronicle*, 8 September 1911; 13 October 1911; 29 December 1911; 26 January 1912.

[42] *Ibid*., 1 March 1912.

condemned the movement's 'slanders', refusing to answer its charges.[43] But DMA leaders did not comply with many of the movement's demands. In December the executive began negotiating the exclusion of aged and infirm workers from the minimum, the very opposite of the MWM's explicit request. Movement leaders could only criticize this action, made worse as the executive had no lodge mandate on the issue.[44]

For over six weeks the Durham leaders ignored the MWM's demands for a special meeting of DMA council (the union's major decision-making body comprised of mandated lodge delegates) to consider its 7*s*. minimum demand. MWM claims that a special council meeting might pass a no-confidence vote in the leadership's neglect of elderly and surfaceworkers was hardly an incentive. When a special council meeting was finally called, it simply involved Wilson giving a lengthy address before answering questions from delegates. Surfaceworkers were overlooked again. Further, the meeting's decision that Durham delegates would vote against the exemption of the aged and infirm from any MFGB minimum wage demand was a short-lived victory for the MWM. In the event, the Durham contingent failed to push the inclusion of the elderly and infirm in minimum wage negotiations, because, Wilson claimed, the majority of miners' district unions were opposed and Durham wanted to remain loyal.[45] Again, the MFGB, as well as Durham leaders, had disappointed the militants. The MWM's 7*s*. minimum demand also received no support from the Durham leadership, which agreed with MFGB policy that minima in each coalfield

[43] Wilson's Monthly circular No. 193, January 1912, D/DMA 12a, DRO.

[44] *Durham Chronicle*, 29 December 1911; 12 January 1912; 2 February 1912.

[45] Special council on minimum wage, 10 February 1912, D/DMA 30, DRO; *Durham Chronicle*, 29 December 1911; 26 January 1912; 16 February 1912; 22, 29 March 1912.

should be commensurate with current average wages. Thus it demanded, in January 1912, a minimum rate of 6*s*. 1¼*d*. (36p) per shift for Durham hewers, the then County Average.[46] The MWM expressed regret that the DMA executive had not adopted its 7*s*. demand and that, as a consequence, the claim was not discussed at MFGB conference. Yet this probably would have made no difference. The MFGB agreed that affiliated districts could not secure a wage increase through minimum wage claims after hearing arguments that this would break existing Conciliation Board agreements in some districts. The MFGB did, however, stipulate that no district minimum should be under 5*s*. (and 2*s*. for juveniles) per day (except in the very smallest districts where such rates might mean job losses).[47] The MWM 'reluctantly' accepted this, remarking that nothing lower than the '5 and 2' claim 'shall be entertained' and pledging in February 1912 to continue pressing for 7*s*. and the inclusion of surfaceworkers in the minimum.[48]

There were further failures for the MWM. Its demand that no-one opposed to the minimum wage should represent the DMA in negotiations was ignored; this was particularly directed at Wilson, who led the Durham deputation. Could the DMA leaders ignore the MWM as it was too small? Fifty-three lodges (of sixty-four invited) attended the 2 September 1911 Pelton conference, with several uninvited delegates from eastern districts also present (totalling 156 delegates in

[46] *Ibid*., DMA Special council, 23 September 1911.

[47] MFGB Annual Volume of Proceedings, 1912, MFGB executive committee, 17 January 1912; 28–30 January 1912; MFGB special conference, 1– 2 February 1912.

[48] *Durham Chronicle*, 1 March 1912.

attendance).[49] This was out of a total of over 200 lodges with some 110,000 members. Furthermore, this was by far the highest turnout at a single minimum wage-meeting before the 1912 strike.[50] Nevertheless, the movement certainly enjoyed the overwhelming support of Durham's largest lodges: at least fourteen of the twenty largest DMA lodges with over 26,600 members between them definitely supported the MWM.[51] By March 1912, the MWM itself was claiming majority lodge support; the two 1912 national strike votes were soon to test the hold the minimum wage had gained on individual DMA members.

III

How effective was the MWM in convincing rank and file miners? Naturally, activists called for a vote in favour of national strike action on the minimum wage . In the January 1912 vote, 66.8% of Durham miners duly obliged. This

[49] Meeting attendances were not always given in press reports, especially as press representatives were not always allowed access. By contrast, some reports not only gave a total for lodge attendance but named every lodge present. Unfortunately, this was not the case for the 2 September 1911 meeting. Forty-one lodges (with a total of around 44,000 members) actively supporting the movement before the end of the 1912 strike can be definitely named. *Durham Chronicle*, 8 September 1911.

[50] The next largest meetings were in Sunderland (October 1911) with twenty-five lodges attending and, shortly before the strike, on 23 February 1912 in South Shields when twenty-six lodges (representing 25,000 miners) attended. More representative of these pre-1912 strike meetings was a Seaham Harbour meeting of September 1911 with fourteen lodges attending (of nineteen invited) representing 1,500 miners. *Durham Chronicle*, 15, 29 September 1911; 13 October 1911; 15 December 1911; 12, 26 January 1912; 1 March 1912.

[51] Marsden Lodge minutes, joint meeting, 17 December 1911, D/DMA 327/3, DRO; Joint Meeting, 8 December 1912, D/DMA 327/4,; Oxhill Lodge minutes, ordinary meeting, 31 August 1911, DRO, D/DMA (Acc: 2157(D)) 230 (vol); *Durham Chronicle*, 1, 22 March 1912.

just exceeded the DMA's rule requirement of a two-thirds majority in favour of striking. Indeed, Wilson had succeeded in getting the MFGB to adopt Durham's two-thirds majority rule in voting on this strike issue.[52] The vote was undoubtedly a blow to Wilson. It is certain that, given his continued opposition to the minimum wage, antipathy to the MFGB, and propensity to use the rulebook to his advantage, Wilson would have ensured that Durham miners did not join the minimum wage strike in 1912 had the two-thirds majority not been reached. Then, as in 1893, the MFGB's planned national strike action would have lacked Durham's considerable numbers and influence. It would not have been 'national' at all. Still, the Durham vote was the lowest margin in favour of all the major coalfields, belying some neutrals' predictions.[53] Duncan Tanner claimed the result showed that the DMA approached the strike 'without enthusiasm'; that Durham miners remained wedded to their economic liberalism.[54]

Yet the immediate context casts the result in rather a different light. The minimum wage on offer was regarded as lacking by minimum wage campaigners in several different ways. First, it was widely (and correctly) understood that the minimum being voted on excluded elderly, infirm and surfaceworkers, a considerable proportion of any colliery's workforce. Indeed, there were around 200-odd surfaceworkers per colliery in some of the larger east Durham concerns (between 10% and 15% of the workforce). In openly opposing the minimum wage and the strike, Wilson exploited these omissions to breed inertia. A Durham executive circular urged all miners, 'not merely the moderate

[52] MFGB Annual Volume of Proceedings, 1911, MFGB special conference, 20 December 1911.

[53] *The Times*, 19 January 1912; *Durham Chronicle*, 29 December 1911; 12 January 1912.

[54] Tanner, *Political Change*, p. 210.

men but also the most ardent promoters of the minimum wage', to consider the full implications for those excluded from any minimum.[55] Thus a significant proportion of Durham miners were either hostile or indifferent to a minimum wage that excluded them. This partly explained the particular ambivalence to the minimum from lodges in the Spennymoor area in the south of the coalfield. At a MWM meeting there soon after the first vote was announced, John Bell (checkweighman of Dean and Chapter lodge), speaking from the audience, claimed that his lodge (one of the largest in the county) returned a majority of only three for striking because the minimum only applied to a small proportion of miners. Bell suggested that increasing the basis wage would be a greater gain than the minimum, as this would include surfaceworkers, though his other comments suggested that he was ideologically opposed to a minimum. While they received strike pay, surfaceworkers complained during the strike that they were still being ignored.[56]

Second, some who stood to receive the minimum were unhappy with the demand for the County Average, suggesting instead a minimum that would represent a wage advance. Third, that the minimum would vary considerably between grades of miners, reflecting existing pay structures, was a source of consternation. In November 1911, John Storey, a prominent coalfield ILP leader, asked how campaigners for a minimum wage expected to 'be seen as consistent when they did not demand a minimum wage of 7*s*. for all workers in

[55] DMA Minimum wage circular, January 1912, D/DMA 12a.

[56] *Durham Chronicle*, 12, 26 January 1912; 29 March 1912; 5 April 1912; *The Times*, 20 May 1912.

mines. He thought the owners might easily concede a minimum wage of 7*s*. or 8*s*. a day and make larger profits than they do now.'[57]

Fourth, campaigners for a minimum wage also had to deal with the issue of 'shirkers', who apparently would take advantage of the minimum wage to work as little as possible and take the minimum. 'Cavilling' made this particularly acute as it meant that Durham miners worked with very little direct supervision. Consequently, the Durham coalowners expressed the strongest concerns of all owners over this issue, claiming that the impossibility of close supervision meant they could not ensure that hewers not reaching the minimum on piecework rates were working their hardest. Movement activists repeatedly assured audiences that there would be no 'malingerers' with the minimum wage. At one meeting, W. P. Richardson's remark that working-class 'shirkers' were as big a parasite as shirking owners received generous applause.[58] Lawson took a different tack, admitting that 'in every mine some will skulk and not work; probably they have some aristocratic blood in them and live up to the reputation of the idle class.'[59]

In addition to union leaders' opposition, the *Durham Chronicle*, the self-proclaimed "miners' friend", indulged in more general scaremongering, claiming that the DMA's funds could only last three or four weeks of a strike and, by then, money would be worthless anyway as there would be nothing to buy with it. It also quoted a 'northern mine owner' calling the strike a disaster

[57] *Durham Chronicle*, 10 November 1911.

[58] *The Times*, 26 December 1911; *Durham Chronicle*, 29 December 1911; 12, 26 January 1912; Page Arnot, *Miners*, p. 82; Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions*, p. 448.

[59] Lawson, *Minimum wage*, p. 11.

for an industry that would not regain some of the foreign markets any strike would lose them.[60] Indeed, this consideration had prompted the Durham coalowners to accept, albeit grudgingly and belatedly, the minimum wage in principle before the strike began, presumably in an attempt to avoid it. This last minute concession was also very likely to have worked against those wanting a big majority in favour of striking.[61]

Consequently, interpreting the Durham minimum wage vote is complicated. Strong MWM-supporting lodges generally returned heavy votes in favour of a strike (several MWM lodges made public their large majorities for a strike and were reprimanded for this by the executive). But some lodges, such as Redheugh (which certainly supported the movement after the strike), returned their ballot papers without voting, demonstrating that the issues had been confused to some extent. The generally weaker support for the minimum wage in southern and western parts of the coalfield was also related to fears for the economic future of local pits, especially the smaller ones, working thinner seams sometimes of only two feet or less depth. Yet, in spite of all these considerations, a requisite two-thirds majority of Durham miners still voted against Wilson's wishes (and this was a ballot of all members, rather than a lodge one) and in favour of striking for a minimum wage.

The minimum wage strike began on 26 February and was to last for thirty-seven days.[62] Detailed local press reports on miners' attitudes to going on strike in 1912 suggested no lack of enthusiasm. The local press tended to stress the

[60] *Durham Chronicle*, 19 January 1912.

[61] Page Arnot, *Miners*, pp. 94, 100; Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions*, p. 46.

[62] *Durham Chronicle*, 26 July 1912.

holiday aspect of the strike, with miners organizing leisure activities (marbles, gardening, football) and enjoying the time off. Pit ponies brought up from below, entertained many. Attitudes differed as to how long the strike was anticipated to last; some, thinking it would be over in a matter of days, left their gear down the pit, while others were more pessimistic. Many lodges emphasized they would not cause trouble while on strike (as the MWM had itself), but there was no sign of consternation or apathy in any of the press reports. Many had taken precautions in stocking up on house coal and food stuffs (such as the woman who had bought in 50 stones of flour), though an early and orderly raid on coal wagons at Ryhope showed that miners could readily get hold of coal by other means if necessary.[63] It is highly likely that had the minimum wage on offer been closer to its most ardent advocates' demands in Durham, more would have voted to strike to secure it in the first ballot.

On 29 March 1912 the Minimum Wage Act became law. The MFGB was dissatisfied as the legislation had no wages figures in it at all (the MFGB had demanded that it should have the '5 and 2' and also rates for hewers in all districts). Instead, *all* minimum wage rates were to be agreed at district level in new joint district boards. In fact, the MFGB had asked Labour MPs to oppose the bill on its third reading, and decided to hold a second ballot of all miners over whether to accept the new law and end the strike, or to stay out for the '5 and 2' claim.[64] In Durham, the same anti-strike forces went into action before the second ballot. The local press increased the tension; the *Durham Chronicle*

[63] *Ibid.*, 26 January 1912; 8, 15, 22 March 1912; *The Times*, 1 March 1912; Lawson, *Man's Life*, p. 118.

[64] MFGB Annual Volume of Proceedings, 1912, MFGB special conference, 20 March 1912; 25–26 March 1912.

stoked up fears of revolutionary syndicalists, warning that if continued, the strike could destroy civilization 'in one devastating maelstrom of disaster.'[65] More importantly, Wilson argued that the choice was 'to accept the law of the land or strike against it'; naturally, he endorsed the former.[66] He also highlighted the plight of workers in dependent trades who were laid off when the miners struck and claimed, rather disingenuously, that the Act was what the miners had asked for. In advising miners against continuing the strike, Wilson acted in contravention of an MFGB decision that leaders should offer no advice on how their members should vote in this ballot. Leaders in Derbyshire acted similarly, and in both districts their actions provoked rank and file anger.[67]

The second strike vote was surprising. The two leading areas (Yorkshire and Lancashire) both lost almost 10% support from the first vote and Scotland lost over 25% support for staying on strike. Previously militant south Wales voted heavily for a return to work. Stoic Durham, by contrast, maintained a 66.6% majority to stay out on a good turnout (74.5%). Exhaustion from the Cambrian Combine strike and depleted funds explained south Wales' collapse. Scotland, however, did not share south Wales' problems and Durham's fighting funds were not significantly superior to the Scots'. Unlike their Scottish counterparts, however, the Durham miners had won the minimum wage in principle from the owners *before* the strike. (The owners in south Wales and Scotland had been most opposed to the minimum wage.) This partly explained why Durham wanted to stay out; to make the strike yield a prize it had not already won before

[65] *Durham Chronicle,* 15 March 1912.

[66] Wilson's Monthly circular No. 195, March 1912.

[67] MFGB special conference, 27 March 1912; Williams, *Derbyshire Miners*, p. 430.

it began.[68] This must explain Redheugh lodge's almost 70% vote to stay out in the second ballot after its refusal to vote in protest at the minimum wage actually on offer in the first ballot. A Scottish delegate also suggested that a lower turnout in his district was in part a result of disgust at the officials' failure to offer a lead. Wilson's anti-strike 'leadership', by contrast, may have had something of a galvanizing effect, though his arguments challenging the now legally-instituted minimum wage must have kept some from voting to continue on the strike.[69]

The second strike vote also provided an opportunity to test the MWM's possible influence. Soon after the first ballot results were announced the movement held a meeting in Spennymoor, admitting its aim of converting local miners to the minimum wage. Its impact was at best limited. None of the six lodges in the area known to have voted against the strike in the first ballot voted in favour of staying out in the second. In only two lodges did more miners actually vote in the second ballot. Yet the MWM's message may have had some impact. In five of the six lodges the vote to stay out either held up or increased, albeit often beginning at a low level. Furthermore, at Dean and Chapter, the majority of three for striking in January increased to 312 in March, turning a 50.1% majority to a more convincing 63.8%. Here, the pro-strike vote held up far better with a lower turnout.[70] But, while the MWM made only limited propaganda advances among the lodges during the strike, it had helped to create a determined majority in Durham who wanted a minimum wage and one that was worth winning. Thus

[68] *The Times*, 5 April 1912; *Durham Chronicle*, 15 March 1912; 5 April 1912; Jevons, *British Coal Trade*, pp. 542–3.

[69] MFGB special conference, 6 April 1912.

[70] *Durham Chronicle*, 19, 26 January 1912; 5 April 1912.

the second ballot can be regarded as a two-thirds' majority against the minimum wage as outlined in the Minimum Wage Act, and in favour of a something akin to the minimum wage advanced by the MWM from autumn 1911. But the MFGB as a whole did not return a two-thirds majority to continue the strike, which was over by 6 April 1912. Nevertheless, the result of the second ballot, and its context, further qualifies claims about Durham miners' lack of enthusiasm for the minimum wage. Indeed, it demonstrates clearly that already liberal economic notions were rejected consistently by the majority of rank and file Durham miners.

Duncan Tanner's explanation of the (supposedly unenthusiastic) Durham strike votes emphasized long-existing structures and especially cavilling, which apparently allayed grievances about 'abnormal places' by allowing hewers working poor seams the possibility of improving their workplaces every quarter.[71] This echoed Roy Gregory, who argued that the Durham coalfield's conciliation machinery worked uniquely well, providing a barren socio-economic environment for the fledgling Labour Party.[72] Indeed, some contemporaries agreed; the Yorkshire coalowners even suggested introducing cavilling there, instead of a minimum wage, an idea the Yorkshire miners rejected outright.[73] In March 1912, *The Times* argued that if all Britain's mining districts shared Durham's conditions, there would be no clamour for a minimum wage.[74] In Durham, as in Derbyshire (where it erroneously claimed that the district's miners were indifferent to the minimum wage strike), *The Times'*

[71] Tanner, *Political Change*, p. 210.

[72] Gregory, *Miners*, p. 64.

[73] Baylies, *Yorkshire Miners*, pp. 373–4.

[74] *The Times*, 1 March 1912.

interpretation was inaccurate.[75] In reality, cavilling was not uniformly popular among Durham miners, not least because there was no guarantee that individuals working poor cavils would eventually secure a good workplace. Activists recognized this and criticized cavilling when making the case for the minimum wage. In January 1912, for example, W. P. Richardson remarked that if minimum wage opponents 'were put on a 3s. per day cavil for two quarters they would soon become full fledged minimum wagers (laughter).'[76]

Indeed, the Durham system of wage bargaining was more open to acerbic critique than has been recognized. Lawson claimed it was 'common knowledge' that the County Average was 'one of the most perfect devices for pitting man against man that was ever conceived' and that some miners worked for a year without ever managing to earn it.[77] In his brilliant pamphlet, Lawson eloquently condemned the Durham average system, which wrung 'the last ounce of energy from the worker at the least possible cost.'[78] Lawson recognized that some miners earned very much more than the County Average theoretically allowed for, but that this was no satisfaction for miners consistently drawing poor cavils. He claimed that in one colliery about 40% of the workforce earned below the County Average for three quarters consecutively, with some taking home less than half of it.[79] But coalowners' profits, Lawson pointed out, had increased

[75] Williams, *Derbyshire Miners*, p. 430.

[76] *Durham Chronicle*, 26 January 1912. See also Lawson's comments in *Durham Chronicle*, 29 December 1911.

[77] *Labour Leader*, 11 August 1911.

[78] Lawson, *Minimum wage*, p. 4

[79] *Ibid*., Academic studies support the claim that miners' earnings varied as much as 20% above or below the County Average, rather than the 5% officially allowed for. A. L. Bowley and M. H.

beyond belief. Thanks to increasing productivity, coal prices (and hence wages) might stagnate but profits still rose, all the more since the single colliery (and often precarious) concerns had long since been replaced almost entirely by large amalgamations of collieries run by millionaire owners.[80] In sum, campaigners for a minimum wage mounted sophisticated arguments that challenged the wages system in Durham. The national strike votes were a measure of how far they had come by early 1912. But their battle did not end with a two-thirds' majority in favour of their movement's minimum wage demand in spring 1912. There was plenty of good propaganda, and much more headway, to be made, and in this the coalowners, the government, and its representatives on the district boards were to prove the minimum wage campaigners' unwilling accomplices. Durham Liberal leaders, too, acted in such a way as to undermine further their authority and that of their economic liberalism.

IV

Under the Minimum Wage Act, retired lawyer Sir Robert Romer was appointed chair of the Durham Joint District Board (JDB). As Durham owners and the unions failed to agree the minimum, Romer announced the minimum rates by 17

Hogg, 'Wages and Production in a Durham Colliery', *Economica* 9 (1923), pp. 229–35; J. G. Treble, 'Intertemporal Substitution of Effort: Some Empirical Evidence', *Economica* New Series, 70:280 (2003), pp. 584–85.

[80] Lawson, *Minimum wage*, pp. 6–7. See also BLPES, COLL MISC 302(1), Thomas Richardson and John A. Walbank, *Profits and Wages in the Durham Coal Trade, 1898–1910* (Newcastle: 1911).

May 1912.[81] No class of Durham boy fell below the MFGB's 2*s*. (10p) lower limit. But the hewers' minimum was set at only 5*s*. 6*d*. (27½p) per shift, 7¼*d*. less than the DMA/MFGB request for the County Average, which itself had been dismissed by angry minimum wage campaigners who wanted 7*s*. (35p) This was also contrary to the legislation which stipulated that JDB chairmen should take average earnings into consideration when setting the minimum. Several classes of underground day-wage men secured minimum rates at or above 5*s*. (25p); but others were awarded a meagre 4*s*. (20p). Romer's explanation for these comparatively low rates was that accommodation and domestic coal benefits for married miners were to be continued.[82] These allowances were commonly valued at 1*s*. (5p) per shift, though *The Times* claimed that their real value was considerably more. No sooner had the minimum been set than the Conciliation Board awarded a 3¾% wages advance.[83] This reduced opposition to the low minimum rates just awarded; but it also inaugurated a process that made the minimum wage look increasingly inadequate.

Some of Romer's rules around operating the minimum wage were also contentious, particularly that stipulating that miners forfeited the minimum if they were 'absent from work without leave or without reasonable excuse' (the '100% rule'). In most other districts, miners could have one day's leave in a

[81] The Minimum Wage Act empowered the chair of each joint district board to set the minimum rates if the district's coalowners and union failed to agree them first. This is what happened in Durham.

[82] Coal Mines (Minimum Wages) Act, 1912: rules of the Joint District Board, minimum rates of wages and district rules (Durham Coalowners' Association, Newcastle, 1913), DRO, D/Sho 82.

[83] *The Times*, 17, 20 May 1912; 19 July 1912.

working week of fifty hours and still qualify. But Durham's working week was only forty-one hours. In all districts now miners had to work about forty-one hours to qualify for the minimum wage; it happened in Durham that this was a full working week. Still, this offended Durham hewers' jealously guarded freedom to decide when they worked. Furthermore, Romer imposed other restrictive rules. All piece-workers had to give notice of the cause of any failures to perform work equivalent to the minimum wage to the correct official before the end of their shift (if practicable, or as soon as possible thereafter). Miners forfeited the minimum if they 'unnecessarily' delayed in going to their workplace at the proper time or if they left their workplace before the proper time.[84] A movement activist was soon claiming that no other district than Durham had a worse settlement under the Minimum Wage Act.[85]

Revealingly, the Durham owners welcomed Romer's 'fair' attempt to 'split the difference' between them and the miners. MWM activists were far from satisfied. Indeed, they established a more permanent rank and file organization – soon known as the 'Durham Forward Movement' (DFM) – *before* Romer had announced Durham's new minimum. This came as the result of a circular of mid-April 1912 entitled 'Durham Miners and Progress', calling a conference at the Shakespeare Hall, Durham, on 4 May 1912. The circular claimed that the recent Minimum wage campaign had achieved 'good results that needed to be improved upon'.[86] Up to sixty delegates attended on 4 May, with the key activists Lawson and W. P. Richardson prominent. Richardson outlined their ideas for an educational campaign of conferences and meetings. The conference

[84] Joint District Board minimum rates, D/Sho 82; *The Times*, 10 September 1912.

[85] *Blaydon Courier*, 18 July 1912.

[86] *Durham Chronicle*, 26 April 1912.

elected a provisional committee which soon convened and set the campaign in motion.[87] The DFM began regularly circularizing lodges, inviting attendance at its conferences and for lodges to affiliate to the organization and nominate candidates for its officers and committee. (It is unclear if lodges were afforded representation inside the DFM in accordance with their often very varying memberships).

Dissatisfaction was partly a result of the DMA leadership's conduct of the strike: allowing some men to work during the strike was regarded as too conciliatory (though the MFGB had agreed that enough should work to keep the mines operational, but not to draw coal).[88] Then Durham delegates voted at the MFGB conference for a return to work, *contrary* to their own coalfield's second ballot. Wilson claimed this was in response to a call from the MFGB president for unity on the vote, though Lancashire and Yorkshire districts' delegates voted against returning to work in line with their mandates.[89] Lodges such as Oxhill asked the executive to resign over this issue.[90]

The same Durham officials had appointed themselves to the JDB, instead of allowing the membership to elect their own representatives as the MWM demanded. As Jack Lawson argued, 'their officials and executive were against them at every stage of the minimum wage agitation, and it was ridiculous to think they would be for them while acting as the men's side of the Wages

[87] *Durham Chronicle*, 10, 17 May 1912.

[88] MFGB special conference, 28 February 1912.

[89] *Ibid*., MFGB special conference, 6 April 1912; *Durham Chronicle*, 8 March 1912; 12 April 1912.

[90] Oxhill Lodge minutes, special meeting, 10 April 1912.

Board.'[91] A lodge resolution to this effect was ruled out of order at the July 1912 DMA council, with Wilson condemning the lodge activists concerned for ignoring the DMA's rules stipulating that officials were to be members of any board related to mining in the county.[92] The executive won endorsement for its actions only very narrowly, with large lodges such as Marsden still expressing disapproval of officials sitting on the JDB.[93] This whole episode further weakened an increasingly discredited Wilson and his economic ideology.

The DFM continued the work of the MWM, putting considerable energy into miners' bread-and-butter issues. First, it called for improvements in wages and conditions outside the Minimum Wage Act, demanding an eight-hour working day and an immediate advance of 20% on surfaceworkers' wages (who were excluded from the minimum wage). The DFM also drew attention to pit-firemen's conditions, with a working day of twelve hours for a wage of about 4*s*. 10*d*. (24p). Second, with regard to reforming the Minimum Wage Act itself, the DFM called for the inclusion of aged and infirm and surfaceworkers in any future legislation.[94] Third, it agitated against Romer's minimum wage awards and rules, particularly the '100% rule.' Fourth, it began a sustained criticism of the growing gap between the 5*s*. 6*d*. minimum and the County Average. Rising wages meant that by May 1913 the difference of 7¼*d*. between the minimum and the County Average had grown to 1*s*. 5¾*d*. (7p). Interestingly, rising wages did not affect activists' pre-strike rhetoric, which attacked owners' profits and

[91] *Durham Chronicle*, 12 April 1912.

[92] DMA council, 20 July 1912, D/DMA 30, DRO; Wilson's Monthly circular No. 196, April 1912, D/DMA 12a,.

[93] Marsden Lodge joint meeting minutes, 21 April 1912, D/DMA 327/3, DRO; Result of slip vote on executive actions, April 1912, D/DMA 12a.

[94] *Durham Chronicle*, 17 May 1912; 6 September 1912.

highlighted the rising cost of living. Finally, the DFM protested over how some Durham owners were applying the Act, and their 'harassment' of miners over the minimum. There was a growing catalogue of ingenious ways that owners found of reducing their costs in operating the minimum wage. By summer 1913, a new 'pooling system' in some pits combined the wages of several hewers, with earnings from the better cavils effectively making up those of the poorer cavils to the minimum. This neutralized the appeal of caviling; that is even if a hewer drew a good cavil he would not take home all of his earnings. Furthermore, some owners sought to minimize costs by altering the grades of workers due bonuses over and above the minimum wage, in direct contravention to Romer's ruling.[95]

The DFM certainly attracted most (if not all) MWM-supporting lodges, but also drew the support of many more before August 1914. Indeed, at the very least, seventy-six lodges with almost 60,000 members (over half the DMA's membership) supported the DFM at some point between May 1912 and August 1914 (and it is likely that many more were sympathetic). While the DFM was therefore bigger than the movement before the minimum wage strike, was it any more successful regarding its demands? It could try to intimidate the owners and Romer with angry mass meetings, but it really needed the DMA leadership to take its grievances to these two sources of power. Naturally, getting the DMA to act did not necessarily mean a successful outcome. This was the case for surfaceworkers' grievances which, given the anger in the coalfield, seemed most likely to yield a quick victory. In July 1912, DMA council endorsed the DFM's call for a 20% increase in surfaceworkers' pay and the executive began

[95] *Ibid*., 7 June 1912; 6 December 1912; 23 May 1913; 15 August 1913.

discussions with the owners.[96] August 1912, however, brought disappointment at the owners' offer of a mere 2*d*. advance on surfaceworkers' wages. The DFM urged the executive to push for at least 6*d*. per day (itself about 2*d*. short of a 20% increase). Frustration continued, as by late September 1912 the owners had still not met the DMA to discuss the 6*d*. claim. A DFM conference on 12 October agreed lodges should demand that the executive call a special council meeting on the 6*d*. surfaceworkers' claim.[97]

While there was no special council meeting, the scheduled DMA council meeting of 9 November 1912 sent a claim regarding surfaceworkers' pay and conditions to the Conciliation Board, a development the DFM endorsed.[98] The Board, however, ruled for 2*d*., and DFM activists condemned Wilson's statement on the decision which apparently gave the impression 'that when the Durham miners asked for 6*d*. and got 2*d*. they were satisfied.'[99] The owners had, however, also agreed to make up the 3% discrepancy with day-rate underground workers, which allowed the executive to announce that it had negotiated effectively an extra 4*d*. in surfaceworkers' daily pay packets. While this development took some of the sting out of the issue, DMA officials continued to recognize that the 'serious matter' of surfaceworkers' wages still needed a solution.[100]

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[96] DMA council, 20 July 1912, D/DMA 30,.

[97] *Durham Chronicle*, 16 August 1912; 4, 18 October 1912.

[98] DMA council, 9 November 1912; *Durham Chronicle*, 18 October 1912.

[99] *Durham Chronicle*, 23 May 1913.

[100] *Ibid*., 25 July 1913; 22 August 1913.

The executive's apparent concern was no doubt in large part a response to the DFM's mass meetings. Indeed, in summer 1913 the executive held mass meetings of its own on surfaceworkers' grievances, aping the DFM in an evident desire to appear dynamic and active.[101] This development to some extent vindicated William Lawson's warning to his brother Jack that 'your opponents are now becoming your friends … Mind that they don't take your programme at the last minute.'[102] It certainly forced the DFM to justify its continued existence. Yet both the executive and the DFM began vesting all hope of addressing surfaceworkers' grievances in the MFGB (which had taken up the issue in autumn 1912) and in parliamentary revision of the Minimum Wage Act, due in 1915.[103] Hopes of parliamentary redress appeared dashed in March 1914, when an MFGB deputation failed to convince the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, to include surfaceworkers in an amended Minimum Wage Act. But the DFM continued, apparently undeterred, to demand surfaceworkers' inclusion in the amended Act or in separate legislation.[104]

Similarly, the DFM struggled to influence Romer on the JDB. Its opening move through the DMA was abortive: a resolution requesting a strike ballot on the issue of Romer's minimum wage rules was declared out of order in July 1912.[105] The executive deemed demands for amending Romer's minimum wage award

[101] DMA council, 22 March 1913; *Durham Chronicle*, 15, 22 August 1913.

[102] William Lawson letter to Jack Lawson, 21 October 1912, LAW 2/1/14/1, PGAD.

[103] MFGB annual conference, 2 October 1912.

[104] Wilson's Monthly Circular, No. 219, March 1914, North East England Mining Archive and Research Centre (NEEMARC), NUMDA/1/6/39; *Durham Chronicle*, 10 April 1914; 12 June 1914.

[105] DMA council, 20 July 1912.

'extremely futile' as the Minimum Wage Act stipulated any award could only be amended if the employers agreed; otherwise it was to stand for fifteen months.[106] Yet this stance could not hope to placate sentiments such as Marsden lodge's 'strongest indignation' at the DMA executive's acceptance of Romer's 'tyrannical, undignified and unworkable rules', in place of providing 'a spirited condemnation' and stirring 'the county up to the point of revolt' against them.[107] Again, the DMA leaders' supine stance in relation to the minimum wage exposed it to severe criticism.

Romer himself remained unmoved by the DFM's calls for an increased minimum and amendments to the rules. Indeed, on 20 October 1913 Romer maintained the minimum wage at 5*s*. 6*d*. even though the County Average had risen by 1*s*. 9*d*. (9p) to 7*s*. 2*d*. (36p) since his first award (and Romer himself had accepted that under the Act any award must be made in relation to the County Average).[108] Furthermore, there was no alteration in the '100% rule.' The only improvements for the miners were that Romer raised rates for juveniles a little and introduced a new rule providing for disputed minimum wage cases to be dealt with in seven days.[109]

[106] DMA 'Appeals to the Members', 5 July 1912.

[107] Marsden Lodge minutes, committee meeting, 8 June 1912.

[108] *The Times*, 3 November 1913; *Durham Chronicle*, 15 August 1913; 31 October 1913; 28 November 1913.

[109] Wilson's Monthly Circular, No. 217, January 1914, NUMDA/1/6/39, NEEMARC.

Romer's new award provoked widespread outrage, evident in the letters pages of the regional press and the minutes of miners' lodges.[110] It looked particularly willfully (and indeed inexplicably) ungenerous in comparison with that of the chair of the South Wales Joint District Board's new award.[111] DFM protest meetings in October and November attacked the award for not providing a 5*s.* per day minimum that even Asquith and the House of Commons had declared 'a reasonable demand.'[112] There was momentary accord with DMA leaders who also condemned the Romer award. But the President of the Board of Trade, Sydney Buxton, rebuffed the executive's request for an urgent interview on the subject, claiming that it had no legal power to intervene in the JDB's decisions. The executive took the matter to the MFGB. The Federation's complaint about the October 1913 award had, by April 1914, precipitated Romer's resignation as JDB chair.[113] Yet his unpopular award and accompanying rules remained. A DFM circular of June 1914 contained essentially the same demands around the minimum wage as its launching statement in May 1912: the campaigners for a minimum wage in the Durham coalfield had clearly made negligible material gains.[114]

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[110] Oxhill Lodge minutes, ordinary meeting 6 November 1913. See for example letters on Romers' award to the *Evening Chronicle*, 21, 25, 28 October 1913, 1, 3, 4, 6 November 1913.

[111] *The Times*, 3 November 1913.

[112] *Durham Chronicle*, 31 October 1913; 28 November 1913.

[113] DMA executive committee, 28 October 1913 and 19 November 1913, NUMDA/1/6/38, NEEMARC; *Durham Chronicle*, 31 October 1913; 10 April 1914; *The Times*, 3 November 1913.

[114] *Durham Chronicle*, 10 May 1912; 12 June 1914.

Why had the DFM been so ineffective in winning its material demands? The explanation partly relates to tactical problems over propagandizing in a rapidly changing economic context. Durham wages, which had stagnated after being cut in August 1911, began to rise in May 1912. By August 1913, they had reached a new post-1900 high of 60% above the 1879 basis. Faced with suddenly rising wages, the DFM struggled to find a minimum wage figure that it could realistically advocate (and which would appeal to many miners). Worse, it could not settle on a consistent mechanism for how the minimum wage should be calculated (see below). Furthermore, the altering emphases of its propagandizing meant it struggled to channel all the coalfield's discontents. Its June 1912 decision to give prominence to surfaceworkers' grievances in future meetings came at the cost of its erstwhile emphasis on old and infirm miners. By August 1913, surfaceworkers' grievances were replaced by a new concern for the low wages and conditions of juveniles.[115] While these also soon fell off the agenda (thanks to Romer's October 1913 award that was comparatively generous to juveniles), the old and infirm did not return to the forefront. In a workforce that remained highly stratified in terms of roles, status, pay and conditions, the DFM understandably struggled to address consistently all the main grades of mineworker. Its task was made all-the-more difficult as some grades of mineworker were relatively better off under the new minimum wage. Take, for example, 'stonemen', who were among a class of skilled underground workers who built and maintained tracks and pathways and were often elderly, performing an arduous task that included loading stones into tubs. They

[115] *Ibid*., 24 May 1912; 7 June 1912; 15 August 1913; 8 May 1914.

averaged just over 5*s*. (25p) per day and could earn as little as 3*s*. (15p) a shift. Romer's first minimum wage award gave them a guaranteed 5*s*. 6*d*. per day.[116] A second major problem was what action the DFM was able to take when Romer, the owners or the DMA executive ignored it. When should it urge a strike and how could it make such action effective? Rank and file activists certainly threatened drastic action, as Lawson did in April 1912, promising that, if they were not satisfied, the miners 'would light the flames of revolt … they would "down tools" at twenty four hours notice, and take with them the railway men and transport workers.'[117] When Romer's first unsatisfactory minimum wage award came, an activist suggested ('without posing as a firebrand') to a mass meeting that 'a well engineered strike' over the award 'could be won in a fortnight.'[118] Furthermore, by September 1912, considerable rank and file dissatisfaction with the minimum wage was evident, according to the *Times*, in a rash of local strikes, many in Durham's largest pits.[119] A rulebook change of December 1911, allowing lodges to strike and retrospectively appeal for funds to a DMA council meeting, had initiated a disturbing trend (for the leadership) of unofficial action.[120] In 1913, at least nineteen lodges struck unofficially (and,

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[116] *Durham Chronicle*, 8 September 1911; *Times*, 17 May 1912; 19 July 1912; Rowe, *Wages*, p. 56.

[117] *Durham Chronicle*, 12 April 1912 (apostrophes in the original).

[118] *Blaydon Courier*, 18 July 1912.

[119] *The Times*, 10 September 1912. There was some evidence of this discontent from other sources: South Pelaw colliery, for example, struck against the operation of the minimum wage in June 1912 (*Durham Chronicle*, 28 June 1912). That said, confusingly the *Times* also quoted from a Wilson circular to the effect that many of the largest collieries had not experienced 'the slightest difficulty' with implementing the minimum wage as managers ('all praise to them') avoided too rigid an interpretation of Romer's rules.

[120] DMA annual council, 16, 23, 26 and 27 December 1911.

according to Wilson, illegally), in a total of twenty-eight separate disputes (though their causes were not always recorded).[121] But, while militant rhetoric resonated on the platform, the DFM was often more cautious in practice. When, in December 1912, the Conciliation Board found against DFM demands over surfaceworkers' wages, the movement's threatened 'drastic action' was merely increased propagandizing; there came no threat to strike.[122]

Caution remained evident even when the 'great indignation' expressed at a DFM conference of 25 October 1913 over Romer's new award, which had defied the most pessimistic predictions, seemed to demand a militant response. Indeed, DFM leaders seemed to damp down possible industrial action. Several conference delegates claimed that 'all over the county great difficulty was being experienced by the local leaders to prevent their men from striking against the award.'[123] Lawson, convinced that the award was a gross violation of the Minimum Wage Act, suggested a legal response. If DFM leaders had been

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[121] Wilson's Monthly Circular, No. 217, January 1914; *The Times*, 22 April 1913. In his monthly circular (No. 217) Wilson provided a table of 'collieries which stopped illegally during the year. It is inserted for the purpose of drawing attention to what is not merely an unconstitutional, but an unbusiness-like and unprofitable action. We need not use many words to prove those propositions. They are self-evident, as must be clear to even those who institute the illegal stoppages'. In fact, after 1906 almost all disputes were 'lawful'; either Wilson was knowingly dissembling here (entirely possible) or 'illegal' here means against the DMA's rules, though some of these disputes might well have entailed individuals' breach of contracts. See J. Saville, 'The Trade Disputes Act of 1906', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 1 (1996), pp. 11–45 and K. W. Wedderburn, *The Worker and the Law* (Penguin, third edn.: 1986). I am grateful to Paul Smith for this point.

[122] *Durham Chronicle*, 6 December 1912.

[123] *Ibid*., 31 October 1913.

working to avoid unofficial lodge strikes against the new Romer award they were not entirely successful; at least five lodges struck unofficially in late October and early November 1913, likely in direct response to it.[124]

By late November 1913, however, DFM leaders and militant lodge opinion seemed to be more at one. Speaking at Dawdon, Lawson 'felt the injustice of the Romer award so keenly that … if it came to stopping the pits for some weeks it would be money well spent.'[125] The DFM began arguing that the executive taking the issue to the MFGB was insufficient and that 'deliberate resistance' was justified. But strike action had to be effective. The DFM therefore needed a county-wide and ideally official strike; and for this there had to be a favourable lodge vote. But the executive ignored the DFM's calls for an immediate special council meeting and to hold a ballot on tendering strike notices 'to enforce better conditions than the award gives.'[126] Then the executive prevented a lodge proposal for a ballot on the Romer award (presumably about strike action against it) from appearing at the 1913 annual meeting. Instead, unofficial localized action continued. By 17 June 1914 there had been at least seven unofficial disputes involving six lodges that year (four of which had not struck unofficially in 1913).[127] Two of the worst offending lodges, Hetton and Heworth, were also among the most active in the DFM (and among the twenty

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[124] *Ibid*., Copy letters regarding unofficial minimum wage strike at Chopwell, Superintendent at Felling to Chief Constable of Durham, 23 November 1913–15 December 1913, Tyne and Wear Archives Service (TWAS), Newcastle, T148/1; Wilson's Monthly Circular, No. 217, January 1914; *Manchester Guardian*, 9 December 1913.

[125] *Durham Chronicle*, 28 November 1913.

[126] *Ibid*.,

[127] The disputes were normally only a few days in duration. The collieries striking in 1914 were Mainsforth (February and May), Blaydon burn (February), South Moor (March), Framwellgate Moor (April), Hetton and Heworth (both June).

largest DMA lodges). In total, at least ten of the twenty-three known lodges involved in unofficial action after the minimum wage had been introduced were active in the DFM (and it is likely many more).[128] While the DFM welcomed Romer's resignation in April 1914, it pointed out that discontent with the legacy of his award was rife and it again threatened a strike 'if stern necessity should force this upon us.'[129] There remained militant voices on DFM platforms too; the Horden lodge chairman told a DFM meeting in April 1914 that 'I don't believe in strikes but I say this, if we cannot get on constitutionally, I would say "Strike, men, before we starve" (applause).'[130] But a DFM-inspired strike against the minimum wage award did not materialize. Indeed, while the DFM promised to vocalize the continued rank and file discontent, its attention was actually turning *away* from challenging the current Romer award through industrial action to ensuring that the Minimum Wage Act improved when it came up for parliamentary amendment in 1915.[131]

There are several reasons for the DFM's failure to co-ordinate industrial action against the minimum wage award. Crucial was, of course, the continuing influence of Wilson and the more moderate DMA officials against any kind of industrial militancy. In January 1914 Wilson condemned the trend toward lodge

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[128] Copy letters regarding unofficial minimum wage strike at Heworth, Superintendent at Felling to Chief Constable of Durham, 17 and 18 June 1914, T148/1, TWAS; executive Committee Meetings, 25 November 1913; 2 December 1913, NUMDA/1/6/38, NEEMARC; DMA executive Committee Meetings, 2 February 1914; 11 March 1914; 7 April 1914; 28 May 1914; 17 June 1914, NUMDA/1/6/39; *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 17 July 1914.

[129] *Durham Chronicle*, 10 April 1914.

[130] *Ibid*., 1 May 1914.

[131] *Ibid*., 10 April 1914; 12 June 1914.

unofficial industrial action. While recognizing anger over the Romer award, Wilson still claimed that it was an improvement in some areas. Launching a veiled attack on the DFM for trying to precipitate a strike over the issue, Wilson remarked on the 'pleasing' way lodges patiently accepted that a strike against an Act of Parliament 'would be the height of indiscretion to say the least, and that the Executive Committee had done all that was possible for a body of men to do'.[132] This argument legitimated the executive ruling's 'out of order' requests from lodges for a ballot on strike action over the minimum wage. But it was spurious; the Yorkshire Miners' Association struck over minimum wage rates in spring 1914, winning some concessions (but not complete victory).[133]

Yet even had a Durham ballot gone ahead there was no guarantee that there would have been majority support. First, a rulebook anomaly meant that DMA's largest lodges, most of which were among the most militant (and most likely to be involved in the rank and file movements), did not have voting power on DMA council commensurate with their size of membership. Second, strike action was of course generally regarded as a drastic response, even more so given that many DMA lodges had expended considerable funds engaged in or in supporting those striking unofficially against the three-shift system in 1910 and then spent even more during the (official) 1912 national strike. Few lodges could boast, as Chopwell did in 1913, that they had the funds to go it alone regardless of receiving (retrospective) central DMA support.[134] Indeed, that more lodges did strike after the 1911 rule change offered the possibility of clawing back funds from the central DMA's coffers further suggests this. There were various other calls on lodge finances too; indeed, the DFM itself offered

[132] Wilson's Monthly Circular, No. 217, January 1914.

[133] Baylies, *Yorkshire Miners,* pp. 390–96.

[134] *Times*, 22 April 1913.

this relative lack of funds as one reason why more lodges did not attend its meetings or affiliate to it.[135] The pressure on central funds to subsidize unofficial lodge strikes further threatened the DMA's already relatively precarious finances. The 1912 national strike cost the DMA £332,360, about two thirds of its total funds: it could have afforded less than three weeks' strike pay of an official coalfield dispute before completely exhausting its accumulated resources.[136]

VI

The minimum wage campaigns from summer 1911, inspired by ILP activists , were of considerable significance in terms of the ideological challenge to liberal economic notions in the Durham coalfield, as in other British coalfields. Before 1911, the ILP's challenge to economic liberalism in Durham had two platforms. First, was the abolition of the Conciliation Board, because it only made awards based on coal prices. The second was the minimum wage, which the ILP agitated around inside the DMA from at least 1898.[137] In the years immediately preceding 1911, the radicals had concentrated their efforts campaigning inside the DMA to end the Conciliation Board. This campaign peaked in 1909, when Wilson ruled 'out of order' no less than thirty-five lodge resolutions calling for the Conciliation Board's abolition.[138] With the reinvigorated MWM after summer 1911 the ILP effected a change of tack, shifting its emphasis from the

[135] *Durham Chronicle*, 26 July 1912.

[136] Wilson's Monthly Circular, No. 217, January 1914; *Durham Chronicle*, 15 March 1912; 26 July 1912; 18 July 1913; *The Times*, 10 September 1912.

[137] Marshall, 'Industrial Militancy', p. 206.

[138] *Ibid*., pp. 80–1, 316.

(essentially negative) abolition of the Conciliation Board to the (positive) advocacy of an individual minimum wage. The shift was not instantaneous, but the Conciliation Board clearly dropped down the radicals' agenda, warranting only three mentions at MWM meetings before the 1912 strike and none after.[139] On a theoretical level the minimum wage was a potentially powerful weapon for, as Jack Lawson recognized, it 'cut right at the root' of the Durham wages system, breaking the traditionally accepted link between coal prices and miners' wages.[140] It allowed Lawson to argue convincingly against the notion that if wages rose, then the cost of living would follow and assert that 'the principle of wages following prices must be abandoned. We claim that henceforth wages shall be the first consideration.'[141] The growing receptiveness that ordinary Durham miners displayed towards the minimum wage in summer 1911, in straitened economic circumstances, explained the change in emphasis, augmented when the miners won the individual minimum wage in 1912. As a DFM circular put it in November 1912; 'The owners know quite well the great value of the principle which has been wrung from them'.[142] It was now up to the movement to wring as much as possible from this principle. But the rank and file movements were also reacting to the changing economic environment. With the Conciliation Board delivering rising wages after May 1912, it became more

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[139] *Durham Chronicle*, 8, 15, 29 September 1911; 5 April 1912.

[140] Lawson, *Minimum wage*, p. 4.

[141] *Ibid*., p. 13. It is telling that Tanner deployed Lawson's minimum wage pamphlet only to illustrate the claim that liberal economic notions were strong in the Durham coalfield, neglecting all the arguments in that self-same pamphlet that were already undermining these notions as never before. Tanner, *Political Change*, p. 210.

[142] *Durham Chronicle*, 6 December 1912.

difficult to attack it directly and appropriate to shift emphasis to the minimum wage.

Yet rising wages also posed a problem for the DFM, as it had to modify how it argued for the minimum wage. In doing so, it (perhaps inadvertently) reduced the minimum wage's immediate propaganda impact. Initially, the 7*s*. (35p) minimum demand before the 1912 strike was 10¾*d*. *above* the then County Average. The movement was effectively trying to use the minimum wage as a mechanism for winning wage advances. More importantly, advocates of the minimum wage did not relate their demand to the County Average in any way. But, with the minimum wage won and the County Average beginning to rise from May 1912, the DFM stopped arguing for a minimum separate from (and higher than) the County Average, and instead suggested there should be no discrepancy between the two (the MFGB's position before the minimum wage strike). Then, when the minimum was frozen as the County Average continued to grow, the movement conceded more ground in arguing that the discrepancy should not be allowed to widen from that originally set by Romer (in May 1912). In June 1914, the movement reverted to demanding a minimum wage for hewers of 'not less than the County Average', but not, significantly, back to a figure higher than, and, more importantly unrelated to, the County Average.[143]

Arguing for pegging the minimum wage to the County Average seemed a good tactic for maximizing the minimum at a boom time of rising wages. It was, however, surely dangerous to advocate too close a link between the minimum and the County Average as, when wages began to fall, they would drag the

[143] *Ibid*., 12 June 1914.

minimum down with them. A direct link, then, between the minimum wage and the County Average really meant a continued link between wages and coal prices. The real test for the minimum wage would come in a period of declining wages. Wages did begin to fall again (by 2.5% in May 1914) but it is unclear if (before war broke out), activists responded by ceasing to advocate the pegging of the minimum wage to the County Average, and instead agitated for a totally separate figure that could act as a brake on decreasing wages. Clearly, while the minimum wage in principle was a direct attack on liberal economic notions, strategic reasons (getting as much out of the owners as possible) in a period of rising prices meant that its full ideological impact could not be brought to bear. More widely, both Roy Gregory and Duncan Tanner have deployed wage levels as a key plank of their case that the economic circumstances of the Durham coalfield were not conducive for either the minimum wage or, indeed, an independent Labour Party, to make much headway against economic liberalism in these years. Tanner echoed Gregory's claim that high wages bolstered the Durham miners' liberal economic outlook.[144] Yet Gregory's own figures showed that, even in the good times, Durham miners were not particularly well paid, nor were they compritively especially well off compared to miners of other coalfields. In 1914, Durham hewers' average wages per shift were only mid-table in a ranking of all mining districts (and this included the lodging allowance).[145]

Notwithstanding this, that the rank and file movement, in the form of the DFM, grew after the minimum wage was won, testified to its increasing popularity,

[144] Gregory, *Miners*, p. 64; Tanner, *Political Change*, p. 210.

[145] Gregory, *Miners, p.* 55.

even during a time of rising wages. This coalition of lodges in favour of the minimum wage was also significant in terms of debates about the distribution and strength of liberal economic notions in different types of colliery in the coalfield. Whereas most of the DMA's largest lodges supported the DFM (if not the MWM before it), the rank and file movement continued to be led by smaller lodges. This throws some doubt on Tanner's ostensibly reasonable suggestion that liberal economic views seemed more valid in smaller and older pits that tended to be more dependent on individual colliery owners or firms.[146] Tanner referenced Jack Lawson's description of the differences in culture when he moved from the bustle of the large, modern colliery at Boldon with no social relations between managers and miners to the smaller, more settled community at West Pelton where lodge officials and managers addressed each other by their Christian names.[147] Yet this very example was telling. Lawson moved as he had been elected checkweighman at Alma, when he was already a well-known ILP activist. His new pit should have been more liberal and disinclined both to his politics and to the DFM, as should very many of the other leading or active DFM lodges of smaller collieries. Clearly, there was a far more complex relationship between economic and social contexts and miners' attitudes to economic liberalism and the minimum wage. Relatively harmonious industrial relations in individual collieries certainly did not necessarily equate to a popular endorsement of economic liberalism there. Poor industrial relations, by contrast, seemed almost always related to support for the minimum wage campaigns. Indeed, as argued above, the minimum wage provided, for a number of reasons, a new source of industrial unrest in many Durham pits.

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[146] Tanner, *Political Change*, p. 220.

[147] Lawson, *Man's Life*, pp. 113–4.

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The campaigners for a minimum wage in Durham between 1911 and 1914 failed to make many immediate material gains, but their efforts were far from wasted. Through energetic agitation, combined with rising prices and wages struggling to keep pace, they achieved a consistent two-thirds' majority in favour of their 'radical' (that is more encompassing and larger) minimum wage by spring 1912. The link between wages and coal prices had been broken, a monumental achievement in a coalfield where liberal economic notions had been as engrained in the wage negotiating machinery as they were in the minds of most Durham miners and certainly their Liberal leaders. In helping to secure this two-thirds' majority, Durham activists denied Wilson and other minimum wage opponents an opportunity to refuse support for the national strike, when their record suggests they would surely have used any that presented itself to break the solidarity of the MFGB in 1912. Thus a repeat of 1893 was avoided.

The delicate balancing act inside the MFGB, seeking to find a minimum wage demand that would satisfy its very distinctive constituent unions, could not hope to meet all the Durham militants' demands. But its stance on the minimum wage and the ways it would later intervene on behalf of the DMA against Romer demonstrated its practical utility to Durham miners. Activists in Durham had built an impressive degree of solidarity between those who did and did not benefit from the actual minimum wage in the face of a largely hostile DMA leadership and scaremongering local press. That they subsequently increased and consolidated this support after the minimum wage was won was no mean achievement and testament to the further undermining of economic liberalism among Durham miners between the end of the strike and the outbreak of war.

While a 7*s*. minimum was, as Lawson claimed, 'not exactly the millennium', for the owners and Durham miners' leaders it might as well have been.[148] Campaigners for a minimum wage had undermined Wilson, allowing him to appear increasingly out-of-touch and unsympathetic to his members' interests, as well as autocratic. That the coalowners attempted by various means to prevent miners from claiming the minimum wage, what the majority now felt was their entitlement, threw into even greater doubt Wilson's shibboleths about shared interests between miners and owners in the coal industry. Jack Lawson wrote that the 'facts' drew him into public life and the MWM: 'I preached no abstract economic theory not even that of Marx. I knew the problem better than any theorist and had plenty of material at hand from day-to-day experience to point the moral.'[149] The minimum wage movement is testament to how effectively Lawson's 'moral' hit home. He, and his fellow campaigners, clearly made considerable headway in undermining the liberal economic hegemony and those who espoused it during these years. In making such progress in a stronghold of economic liberalism, the miners' minimum wage suggested that, in the hands of dedicated and intelligent activists, it was a potent ideological weapon throughout the nation's coalfields.

[148] Lawson, *Minimum wage*, p. 7.

[149] Lawson, *Man's Life,* p. 117.