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“Striking miners during the Great Labour Unrest, 1910-1914: already the 'enemy within'?”

The notion of community is of particular interest to study British miners and their mobilisations between 1910 and 1914. In those very last years of the long nineteenth century, the national community seemed on the verge of implosion, due to the troubles in Northern Ireland and to the Suffragette movement, but also (and perhaps mostly) to an unprecedented wave of labour unrest. Most sections of the working class embraced work stoppages to push forward their claims over hours, wages and trade-union recognition, but the miners certainly stand out as one of the most restless groups. In 1912 especially, the first general strike ever affecting British coal mines made the country break the record of the greatest number of working days 'lost'.

Between 1910 and 1914, did the miners act as a community with claims of its own, different from the rest of the labouring class? Or should they be seen rather as a conglomerate of pit, village or valley communities, shaped primarily by local solidarities? Did miners in Wales and Scotland identify themselves as belonging to a national (Welsh or Scottish) community first, or as members of a wider – British or even international – community of producers? The way the miners perceived their unity and expressed their grievances can of course hardly be separated from the way the mine owners and the privileged classes represented and treated them, i.e. very often as a danger for the cohesion and stability of the national community, a gigantic and threatening body to be contained and if necessary repressed.

In 1984-85, the government and most of the tabloids denounced the fighting miners as 'the enemy within'. One of the aims of this paper will be to ask whether similar characterisations were commonplace 70 years before, and why.