



BRITISH RAIL

1980 has not been a good year for British Rail and clearly it will be even worse for the workforce. Like most other industries BR is feeling the effects of the recession and, as the 'conditions of service' ably demonstrate, it is not one of the most progressive of employers; nationalised or not! During the early part of the year BR tried to sell the reason for the plight of the railways as being the fault of either the steel strike or embargos placed by the railway unions on the movement of certain kinds of traffic. Either way, the unions were being held largely to blame.

In 1979 the Public Service Obligation Grant (PSO), which is the government grant given to BR to run passenger services, was £538m. Compared to the grant given in 1975 this represents a 17% cut in real terms. The crisis which now affects the industry as a result of this cut in the cash ceiling is deliberate Tory policy and is part of their overall strategy of cutting public expenditure. Although we should not delude ourselves that the previous Labour administration was any better when it was under the influence of Bill Rodgers, the member of 'that other triumvirate'.

Liquidity is such a problem for BR that it has inevitably turned the screw on its employees. An immediate ban on recruit-

ment was the first turn of the screw and it is important to remember that, despite the 2 million on the dole, there are, and have been for some time, over 10,000 vacancies on the rail system as a whole. So in many ways the recruitment ban is a ban operating on top of the one which has been covertly applied over the last few years anyway. It is also a major factor in understanding why railway workers work so much overtime and so many of their rest days.

The second indication of the depth of the problem is indicated by the willingness of the BR Board to sell off assets such as British Transport Hotels, Sealink and the BR Property Board, all of which either broke even or made a profit last year. Not only does this myopic response provide no real answers to the problems of the railway industry, it also poses a major threat to the security of employment of NUR members in the hotel and catering side of the industry. As a writer in a recent edition of *Investors Chronicle* pointed out, the fact that the hotels are fully unionised is a positive disincentive for any potential buyers. No doubt, however, Sir Charles Forte would not let such an inconvenience deter him from making a bid and levelling down the conditions of service to those that exist in other hotels owned by his group.

The freight carrying side of the industry is

the other area which is being particularly hard hit by the reduction in cash available to the railways. Plans are afoot to reduce dramatically the number of freight and parcel handling depots with the inevitable loss of jobs.

Taken together the above three reactions to the crisis pose serious problems for railway and allied workers. This depression is not the usual run of the mill cyclical type of capitalist recession affecting the railways because overlaying it is the general application of advanced micro-technology especially in the area of signalling; train to signal box communication and the introduction of VDUs into many offices. The unions are still working out their policies in relation to new technology but fundamentally they revolve around a principled acceptance of it provided the benefits are equitably distributed in the form of a reduction in the working week to at least 35 hours, longer holidays and better working conditions generally.

The recession is now so deep that its severity has permeated all ranks of railway management, not least the top, which produced a detailed paper entitled *The Challenge of the Eighties* which comprises 28 pages of general proposals for solving the railway's problems by 'streamlining' and 'rationalising' the system and its allied businesses. Divided into 10 sections the last

one is devoted to the 'The Manpower Element'. No prizes for guessing its principal aim.

The crisis of cash limits which the Government has forced onto the BR Board is calculated to strengthen their bargaining arm in selling this document to the unions. For their part the NUR and TSSA have collaborated to produce a counter proposal for increasing productivity entitled *A Railwayman's Charter*. The ASLEF have categorically refused to become involved or even associated with the *Charter*. Both papers talk of the need dramatically to improve productivity although the *Charter* spells out in cash terms what it would mean in terms of increased costs. It also lists areas in which the union leaderships believe changes can take place. The introduction of continental rostering (any 5 days out of 7 as opposed to the present system which treats any time worked on a Sunday as overtime), and 4x10 hour shifts where management consider it appropriate, are just two examples.

There is unanimity between the unions, however, over the need to collaborate with the Railway Board in making a joint approach to the Government to plead for more money for the system; almost as if the Government has had no hand in creating the situation in

the first place. This reaction to finding a way out of what appears to them to be an impasse, though, is likely to have but one outcome. The paper industry is a few months ahead of the railways in adopting the same tactics of a joint union-management approach to bale the industry out from drowning in a sea of imported newsprint. Predictably, the Department of Industry does not appear to be very impressed and there is no reason to believe that their colleagues over in Transport will be any more favourably disposed to the arguments from the railway camp.

The practical effects of the cash limits and the crisis which it leaves in its wake does not, of course, simply affect railway workers but the travelling public also. The main consequences of starving an industry dependant on large cash injections for re-investment and maintenance of track, signalling and rolling stock, is that the system becomes reduced to having the strength of its weakest link.

A highly technological train, as embodied in the Advanced Passenger Train, is useless if its maximum speed is reduced from 150mph to 70 or 80mph for long stretches due to the deteriorating quality of the track. The same fact applies in reverse; there is little point in having fully maintained track and a modern

signalling system capable of safely transporting people at speeds of 150mph if, due to cash starvation, rolling stock is so uncomfortable and antiquated that any speed in excess of 45mph becomes rather like taking a ride at the fun fair. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that people look for alternative forms of private transport even if it is more expensive.

Clearly then, the future ability of the railway system to be able to provide a first class service at a price which everybody can afford, will not materialise *simply* by leaving development to technological forces. Despite the diminishing supply of oil the future viability of the railways is a long way from being assured. Unless there is a fusion of effort between railways workers, (through the unions), commuter groups and other organisations which reflect the needs and aspirations of the travelling public, then the Left will find that it has missed the train. The way forward for the Left, therefore, is to organise around the greatest degree of common interest which unite those who either work for or travel by, the railways.

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