



The recent wages dispute at BL rapidly became one of the most important in recent times. In the end, Edwardes won. But this time it was far from decisive.

Interview with Jack Adams

With Edwardes' threat to close all parts of British Leyland affected by the recent pay dispute, some have seen that strike as the most dramatic since the war. Can you say why, after two years of accepting what was offered, this time the workforce wanted action?

I think we have gone through a process in British Leyland where at first the workers thought they at least had some choice in the matter. There was the original ballot on Edwardes' so-called survival plan, where workers were consulted, on a completely false premise in my opinion, and were asked if they agreed with the Edwardes plan. It became very apparent to the workers, and our workers are very intelligent people, that over the last two years it was becoming less a question of whether they had any involvement but more, were they prepared to accept management's impositions. The threat that was posed in the last wage dispute was becoming the norm: accept management imposition or face the sack. Workers saw that, in very clear class terms, as an attack on their right to strike, whatever the issue. I think that was the reaction of our members. They were determined to retain the right to have a say in wages, conditions and so on.

In the past being a Leyland worker has been a dirty word. This time there was wide popular support for the workforce. Why do you think that was?

I think that the general public has at last begun to realise that Leyland workers are not looking to bludgeon their way to a higher standard of living without deserving it. They are beginning to realise that we are quite low paid and are doing a tremendously hard job, particularly those pressured by production. People are also beginning to realise that you don't hammer out of existence industries like the car industry without it affecting them. I think there is a general realisation of that.

Another aspect is that the British public has begun to realise that the tactics used by Michael Edwardes and the Leyland management represent an anti-working class offensive by the employer. It is an attack on their rights, their wages and all the rest of it, rather than something that affects someone else and doesn't really concern them. I think that this kind of bullying, threatening attitude by Leyland management was at last picked up by the British public in a way that it probably hasn't been in the last twenty or thirty years.

I was going to mention this authoritarian and dictatorial style. It seemed to me that this was the focal point, if you like, where a lot of working people made contact with the BL workforce.

It could well have been. One thing that came out very clearly in the

recent dispute was that people who have worked in British Leyland for the last thirty, and in some cases forty years were, given the company's threat, prepared to lay their jobs on the line for the right to strike. It was clear that this kind of authoritarianism amongst the management was not acceptable to the members. I think it was put better than I ever can by a member in our plant who said: 'I came into this plant without a penny in my pocket 30 years ago, with my head held high and, if I go out the same way, well, so be it, but I am not prepared to be threatened and blackmailed as a way of life.' I think this puts it in a much better way than I can. This kind of threatening attitude with no involvement, no rights, will not be accepted by British workers and I agree that this could be one of the cornerstones on which we could organise a fightback and get general acceptance.

Yet in the space of two weeks, a 9 to 1 vote for strike action became a 6 to 4 in favour of the so-called peace plan. How did that happen?

It is quite complex. Over the past two or three years at Longbridge we have faced the brunt of the management's offensive against the trade unions within Leyland. We have had major disputes on parity, on the sacking of the convenor, Derek Robinson, on pay and several other issues where they sacked shop stewards within the plant. So our people are a very experienced workforce and I think the major contribution to the acceptance of the 3.8% was that there was a real doubt in the minds of the membership that the national union leadership were really serious about winning the fight.

OK, I think they accepted that the unions would pay out strike

I think that this kind of bullying, threatening attitude by Leyland management was at last picked up by the British public

benefit, but it needs a lot more to win a dispute of this magnitude than just plain strike benefit, and I think our membership picked up quite clearly that although they were supported in name, there was no real intention to prosecute the claim successfully. I think that had a very big bearing on the result of that second mass meeting.

There is a big difference between, say, 'we'll support whatever action the membership take', and directly saying 'we are convinced that our members are right and we will fully support the action'. There is a very big difference between the two statements. When the process of negotiations was climaxed with a meeting with ACAS for instance, it was decided by the general secretaries and the trade union negotiating committee to put the company's proposals (which were really a cosmetic exercise) back to the members without any recommendation at all. Now that isn't exactly firm leadership or firm support for the members. And our members are quite skilful; quite experienced in picking up these sort of things, especially in view of the experience of the past two years.

What you've just described seems to reflect a considerable tension between the official trade union movement and the plant and shop floor organisation.

I think there is a tension in British Leyland at the moment between the national leadership and the shop stewards movement. There shouldn't be, and we are hoping that whatever disagreements there are between us at local and national level should be eliminated, because we are all clearly faced with the same offensive.

In my opinion, the biggest offensive against the trade unions in the last two years has taken place against union organisation at the point

of production. Take my position as a full time convenor, I would regard that as first stage removed from actively being involved with the people on the job, experiencing day by day the difficulties that they have to cope with. When you go to the second stage, local officials, you get a further stage removed. But when you get to the national level, you are quite a way away from the problem. And the kind of identification that you get with local trade union organisations is sometimes lost at national level.

You can afford to be quite philosophical about problems if you are that third or fourth stage removed. A shop steward or a convenor or a plant organisation cannot afford to be. That identification with the members is a real and living thing, something which even the employer recognises. That is why the employer in the past two to three years has tried to move things away from that direct influence at the point of production to national level where they hope to get this kind of second or third stage removed from the actual problem.

This idea has been a major part of the offensive of this government and I think Leyland's has truly reflected the government of the day. Certainly when the Labour Party was in, there were big moves for worker involvement at Leyland. Whether this involvement was real or illusory, nevertheless it was carried out. When you had the election of the Tory government the Leyland management took the anti-union line and acted as a kind of vanguard for British capitalism. I think the intensity of the attack on the trade unions is something that most trade unionists outside British Leyland find hard to imagine. But being involved at the sharp end, within Longbridge, which tends to take the brunt of the attack on the unions, we know very well. It has been a quite vicious, quite strategic attack against unions at their most effective point.

It is the view of many people that the Labour Party should play a more active role in supporting and assisting the mass struggles of working people. How do you assess the Labour Party's contribution to the British Leyland dispute?

I think the Labour Party tended to confuse the situation rather than assist. It was a source of great disappointment to me that there were stronger statements in defence of Leyland workers by Tory MPs in marginal seats than from Labour MPs, certainly in the Midlands. One trap they all seemed to fall into was 'ah, so we've got a problem, now how do we resolve it?' rather than 'how do we resolve the problem to bring some kind of satisfaction to the workforce in Leyland?' A lot of sympathy was expressed for Michael Edwardes in the job that he is doing in British Leyland, rather than for the people who have made all the sacrifices there over the past two to three years. And I think that it was this lack of identification with the workers in British Leyland that left a lot to be desired in the Labour Party and Labour MPs.

There has been a question mark about the significance of the meeting between Michael Foot and Michael Edwardes in the House of Commons on the Thursday prior to the dispute. What is your feeling about that?

I think the meeting you refer to was anything but helpful at the time. It seemed to me the biggest wish of Michael Foot was that somehow the problem would go away and we would get back to work whether there was any justice achieved for the workers or not. That was the impression I got, and I am certain that it was the impression our workers got. There was no real difference between the attitude of the Thatcher government, the acquiescence of right wing trade union leadership and the position taken up by Michael Foot, which was

The interview was conducted by Pete Sheppard.

regrettable. Michael Foot has always been a kind of working class hero of mine and I was, to say the least, disappointed with the kind of role that he played in this dispute.

Now on that Tuesday morning, when the vote to return to work was taken, some people, notably the ultra-left, accused you of being 'too fair and too honest' about the 'peace plan' and the prospects for continuing the strike. What was the thinking behind your presentation?

My presentation was based on the facts as I saw them. And I will never try to mislead the workforce that I am elected to represent. I think it is absolutely crucial that we are honest with the people who elect us and that we do not try to use them for our own ends. My presentation, in my opinion, was absolutely fair and honest. I told them exactly where we were in the dispute and, after presenting the facts to the members, I strongly urged that they continue the dispute. Now I know of no other way of doing the job that I am elected to do. I don't think it's part of my job either to mislead the members or to get the members out on a false premise. Our members deserve to know the facts, deserve to know the truth and deserve to have our recommendation. That is what I did. The day we start using our members, misleading our members, to get the results that we wish they would take, is the day when we lose their respect and their hearts and minds, which is more important than the other things involved in this dispute. I think in our relationship with our members they should be respected as being able to analyse the situation. It is no good them acting out of some kind of blind loyalty to me, to the trade union or anybody else.

In assessing the consequences of the return to work, it seems to me that the effect on the broader labour movement was different from the effect it

had on the workforce. What is your assessment?

I would agree with that assessment. I think that the defeat of Leyland workers on wages was a disaster for the labour movement without any doubt. I think it was a well thought out plan by government and employers. Leyland has been in a very weak position for three or four years and trade unions at all levels, national and local, have gone to extraordinary levels to ensure that British Leyland survives. I think that both the Government and employers more widely have taken advantage of this defensive position of the unions. They see British Leyland as some kind of cripple that they can kick and use as a kind of public showpiece for the rest of British industry. It is unfortunate that we were not able to succeed in our claim because employers everywhere will use British Leyland and the defeat of British Leyland against their workers.

It is important to make the point that you cannot build a wall around a firm like British Leyland and expect it to be something different from the rest of British industry. Employers will never build that sort of wall and what has been conceded at British Leyland will be demanded by the employers throughout the length and breadth of the country because there is no distinction from their point of view. 'If concessions of this magnitude can be made to ensure the survival of British Leyland, then what is different with our company?' the argument goes. Likewise you can't build a wall and isolate British Leyland workers from the rest of the trade union movement. To that extent I think it is a tragedy.

Talking from the point of view of Longbridge, there is a difference, in my opinion. We have suffered major defeats and there is no way that I would attempt to hide that fact. However, there has been a tremendous fightback by the workforce, the trade unions and the shop stewards within Longbridge. For the past few months I have

SHOW YOUR SOLIDARITY WITH THE UNEMPLOYED

War on Want stands for solidarity with the poor — not hand-outs.

We support practical and progressive projects in Zimbabwe, Grenada and Bangladesh.

In Britain we are backing workers' research, co-ops and now unemployment centres. In Nicaragua we help a brick-making factory which is a part of the reconstruction programme.

We work alongside trades unions and groups fighting for a fairer society.

Unemployment marchers, trades unions and organisations like War on Want can be united against poverty and unemployment. Together, we can fight back through projects and publicity.

But for this we need YOUR support now.

Send one hour or more of your pay towards the Campaign. And send off for our free campaign materials.

Join us in the War on Want!

JOIN THE WAR ON WANT

I/We enclose a donation of £ tick for receipt
 Please send.....Campaign leaflets:.....Campaign guides

Name
 Address

WAR ON WANT *The practical and progressive charity.*
 ROOM MT4, 467 CALEDONIAN ROAD,
 LONDON, N7. Tel. 01-609 0214 (24 HOURS)



WORLD MARXIST REVIEW

December issue includes

A Worldwide Referendum
Károly Toth

Realism, Optimism, Staunchness
Ramesh Chandra

Why We Study History
Willi Gerns

New Escalation of the Big Lie
James West

Single issue 40p Subscription (1 year) £6.00 for 12 issues

Apply to WMR, Central Books,
14 The Leathermarket, London SE1 3ER

noticed a greater degree of unity, a greater appreciation of the problems that we face as workers, begin to develop amongst the workforce at Longbridge and a confidence that has not been apparent amongst the workforce for the past three or four years. Although our workers voted narrowly, and it was quite close, to return to work, there is not a feeling of demoralisation amongst the workforce at Longbridge. And I think some proof of that is, that when the company tried to attack conditions immediately on the back of the acceptance of the 3.8%, we were faced with another major reaction by our workers who refused to accept further cuts in their conditions. Indeed, it led to a three week strike and significant concessions

The day we start using our members to get the results that we wish is the day when we lose their respect

by the company. I am now quite hopeful about the morale and the ability to fight impositions by the company at Longbridge.

During the dispute I felt there were several very positive features that give a good basis for this processing of rebuilding.

I think that's true. In this dispute, for the first time ever in my experience, there was general sympathy from the public at large for the BL workers. And when one looks at the kind of press and media attention on BL, I think that was quite extraordinary. One of the more positive aspects of the dispute was the real involvement of wives and families of the strikers who came forward quite spontaneously and offered to help in the running of the strike. We were inundated with offers.

As well as that, there was a large number of people prepared to picket the plant and take an active part in the dispute rather than playing a passive sort of role at home. People were actually volunteering to get involved. So there were very positive aspects to this dispute. I am full of confidence that the workers in British Leyland will be strengthened rather than weakened and demoralised by the dispute.

My impression is that the idea of a strategic alternative for the British car industry is catching on. How does this strategic perspective relate to the day-to-day struggles like the recent dispute over relaxation time?

It is very difficult if you switch. You can talk about things that at the minute affect workers at the point of production and you can talk about other things in a more strategic way which at the minute do not affect workers, and it is very difficult. The only way that we can really influence the long term strategy of the industry and the fight to retain our industry, as a viable expanding industry, that could become the powerhouse for the rest of British industry rather than the means of running industry down, is that we must accept and support members on things that really affect them on a day-to-day basis, as well as on the more general strategic arguments that we put forward within the trade unions. Now, there is without any doubt at all a better realisation that we should have a voice within our industry. There is also a rejection that this industry belongs to somebody else outside of us, the workers, and that we are just a by-product of it. There is a greater realisation that this industry belongs to us as much as anyone else. That is one of the more hopeful signs that I have noticed in the past few months.

And what about the alliances for such a strategic perspective?

Well, the main alliance must be with the Labour Party. I mean the Labour Party is the federal party of the working class. Certainly there should be an alliance between the Communist Party and the Labour Party. The Communist Party has always had a clear perspective about the British motor industry and British industry in general. Unfortunately, in my opinion, that has not always been so with the Labour Party. What we need is to develop and strengthen these alliances so that we fight on behalf of our workers regardless of our politics. When I say regardless of our politics, I mean from a socialist point of view that we fight on a political basis as well as on an industrial basis to build the kind of society that our workers deserve.

In view of the effects on the West Midlands of losing BL, could you say something about the sort of alliances that would have to be and could be forged to build the fight to retain the company?

Well, the effects of the closure or the loss of British Leyland would be tremendous. We could have a real technological powerhouse created in British Leyland. The reverse would produce the reverse result. It would absolutely decimate the industrial base for the West Midlands. All kinds of alliances could be forged in that kind of situation, and would be forged. There are the alliances with county councils, local councils, small traders who seem to have done particularly badly out of this Tory government. Almost all aspects of society would be affected by the closure of British Leyland, quite apart from the tremendous human sacrifices in terms of unemployment directly. Certainly on the social and industrial well being of the West Midlands, the effects would be dramatic and the alliances could be very broad indeed.

The latest dispute over relaxation time. How do you see that as fitting into the overall feeling at Longbridge?

I think that the dispute over relaxation allowance was just a continuation of the struggle at Longbridge. It's about the kind of management we have to face, the kind of conditions that we have to work in. Here we had a group of people who immediately after the wage dispute, were prepared to enter into struggle with the management

the loss of British Leyland would absolutely decimate the industrial base for the West Midlands

because they thought that it was really important. It was a really important condition that they were struggling for. As usual the media trivialised the dispute into being about a cup of tea. But the facts are that our people on tracks or in conditions where they are tied to the process, have achieved productivity increases almost unheard of—40% in two years. Every minute of the working day is accounted for. They are timed to within one hundredth of a minute and it's a basic human right as they see it to have minimum relaxation periods. And the people from the media who ask me the question and try to trivialise it — I ask them a very simple question. Have you ever timed yourself during the day when you were actually subject to the kind of physical conditions that our workers are? You get a strange reaction when you ask that question. Our people are very hard working, they are in an industry where, if there were not three million unemployed, you'd get very few takers, who would even look to it as an option. It is a very hard industry and they are very hard working. The reason they were in dispute is that they really need it. It is a basic human right in our opinion to have this kind of minimum break from the job. It is absolutely essential.