

THE BRISTOL CITY EIGHT

Unlike most industries, football's industrial relations, and indeed its organisation, cannot be explained simply by capitalist economic laws. One law, though, is proving to apply to football just as much as to any other capitalist industry — that when things go wrong, it is the workers who suffer.

The first people to discover this were the 'Ashton Gate Eight', eight members of Bristol City football club who, as the club's disastrously inept management brought it face to face with liquidation, were left to take the responsibility for maintaining the club in existence. Clubs previously had maintained the inviolability of contracts, and were often to be heard, usually in the form of their chairmen, complaining bitterly about the lack of loyalty in the game.

As Geoff Merrick, the club captain and players' spokesman discovered, loyalty only ran one way. The directors' answer, when the club got into trouble, was to face the players with an ultimatum: either they accept £58,000 to be split among the eight and tore up their contracts worth between £250,000 — £290,000, or the club went into liquidation. For players who had mortgages, families and responsibilities based upon their contracts, it was an impossible situation. Some, like Merrick, had turned down lucrative moves in previous years out of loyalty to the club and a desire to stay with the colleagues they had grown up with. Now they were faced with losing their livelihoods

Geoff Merrick



or taking the responsibility for closing the club and costing their other colleagues their jobs too.

Significantly neither the Football League nor the Football Association made any move to help. The Professional Footballers' Association, however, immediately acted in defence of their members. As Gordon Taylor, the PFA secretary remarked 'We couldn't afford to have such a bad settlement, not only for the sake of the players concerned, but for all our other members'.

PFA accountants studied the books, and although the deal that was finally negotiated was far from perfect, they did succeed in rescuing something from the wreckage. Instead of the club going into liquidation, which would have left the players waiting for up to two years before they received a penny, or accepting the 'take it or leave it' offer, the PFA succeeded in protecting the players' contracts. They are now protected along with the other creditors of the old Bristol City Football Club Limited — management has passed into a new company, Bristol City (1982) Ltd — with first claim against the proceeds from a new share issue and from the sale of assets of the old company, the most valuable of which is the grounds and its facilities. A second consequence of that agreement was that at the same time the jobs of other PFA members employed by Bristol City were protected.

It was, perhaps, the best the PFA could get in the circumstances. Yet it is hardly surprising that Geoff Merrick should be left to say bitterly 'loyalty is a complete and utter waste of time. Loyalty is a dirty word'. For during the week's negotiations far from getting the public support they deserved, the players were often treated as the villains of the piece. Merrick's reward for rejecting a move to Arsenal in order to help the club he had supported as a boy reach the first division was public abuse. Some of his colleagues received threatening phone calls. All were treated as if they were holding the club to ransom, rather than the other way round.

In the current economic plight of football, a grossly mismanaged declining industry, their experiences are unlikely to remain unique for long. Although Brian Winston, Orient chairman and one of the more progressive voices on the Football League management committee, admitted that the problems of football stemmed from the top, even he saw little alternative to hammering the players. Interviewed on television, he forecast a 25% redundancy among professionals at the end of the season.

If that is so, then a lot more clubs are going to be trying to tear up players' contracts. For

the PFA estimate that only around 25-30% of contracts will come up for renewal in the summer. To meet Winston's estimated figures, that would mean virtually all of them would not be offered new contracts. That is unlikely to say the least. For among that group are leading stars, and a large number of good first and second division players, few if any of whom are likely to be given their cards by their clubs.

The alternative will be clubs trying to renege on contracts. The PFA are committed to resisting that, but they will also be facing other threats. Among the suggestions down for discussion at the recent Football League Chairmen's Seminar were proposals to reintroduce the maximum wage and to introduce a limitation on the number of players each club is permitted to employ. Worrying also, the PFA were not invited to send a spokesman to the seminar.

With a short career expectancy and a rough average wage of £175 a week (obviously top first division stars get much more, but a young player on the fringe of a fourth division team may only get £50 a week), footballers are hardly to blame for the economic mess the game finds itself in. The transfer system, a failure to adapt to changing social patterns and a failure to provide either the facilities or the entertainment to attract audiences are more culpable. But the evidence of the Ashton Gate Eight suggests that it will be the players who have to carry the can.

Peter Ball