

THE TIMES

An uneasy peace reigns once again at *The Times*. But as the redundancy volunteers collect their cheques, those who stayed behind to continue working for Mr Rupert Murdoch are counting the very different cost of Fleet Street's latest — and most successful — dawn raid on trade union organisation.

The February crisis at Times Newspapers was precipitated by the proprietor's ultimatum to close all six titles unless the union chapels accepted several hundred redundancies. It was reported almost entirely in the orthodox business-cum-cultural context of 'Will *The Times* close?'. The media gave little serious attention to the impact of the 'dispute' on labour relations generally.

The last inverted commas are appropriate because there were no production problems at the Grays Inn Road plant. Indeed, there has been minimal disruption since the Murdoch takeover in February 1981. Any threat of industrial action immediately drew a pre-emptive strike from management. In the case of the *Sunday Times* NGA machine managers last autumn, it took the form of dismissal and the suspension of all other staff without pay — an act described by the supposedly-libertarian *Times* editor Harold Evans as 'immoral, illegal, necessary and right.'

That was the backdrop to the manufactured confrontation that was widely expected within the building as 1982 began. Murdoch's style has been to fly in, summon the print union general secretaries for a hectoring about manning levels and the huge drain on the parent company News International (bankrolled by *The Sun* and *News of the World*) and jet out again.

Figures of £15 million losses were banded

around but never explained in detail. The papers were 'bleeding to death' while actual earnings at more than £100 million a year were at an all-time high, despite a deliberate policy of depressing the cover price to win readers from the *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph* and even more down-market titles. In the original sales prospectus prepared by previous owner Lord Thomson, the price should have risen from 20p to 25p in April 1981, and to 30p this spring.

By maximising the intimidatory effect of the cash flow problems (which were at least partly due to the week-long close down last autumn, and management's own action in dismissing many marketing and advertising staff), the company induced a feverish sense of crisis in which the unions felt compelled to be seen to be making some concessions both for the public good and in the interests of the majority of their members.

It was a smart move, and to a degree it paid off. Murdoch had learned the lesson of the abortive Thomson lock-out of 1978-79: don't attack hard on all fronts simultaneously. Little was asked of some tough chapels. The company went for the Natsopa chapel that was at once the soft under-belly of the workforce and the symbol of militant shopfloor leadership — the clerical staff, led by Barry Fitzpatrick, a regular Left contender for national office in the print union. No less than 490 of the proposed 600 full-time job losses were demanded from his people.

Fitzpatrick was an important target. His only serious political rival, Reg Brady, one-time scourge of the Thomson owners as father of the *Sunday Times* Natsopa machine chapel, had earlier been appointed by Murdoch as a £25,000 a year industrial relations executive, in the classic Fleet Street tradition of 'if you can't beat them, hire them'.

Every stroke in the book (and some that

are not) was pulled. When the clerical workers proved unexpectedly obstinate, TNL sought to by-pass the chapel; firstly, by reaching an understanding with the national leadership that redundancy volunteers would not lose their union card (and with it their livelihood in the industry); and then by approaching staff directly at their homes with an invitation to accept tempting lump sums by applying direct to a Post Office box number. There was even a threat that the chapel would be run directly from Natsopa head office.

Under that kind of pressure, the chapel gave way and negotiated redundancies, though the company got less than half it asked for. There were compromises in other areas, too. Harry Evans was eased out with a golden handshake said to be worth £263,000, and his assistant editor, Dr Bernard Donohue, one-time head of premier Callaghan's think tank at Downing Street, was summarily dismissed. Top management was rearranged but if anything Murdoch tightened his grip.

In retrospect, the latest Battle of New Printing House Square revealed some ominous gaps in trade union organisation. Murdoch resuscitated the old tactic of divide and rule, and played one group off against another. The shopfloor TNL All-Union Liaison Committee, which functioned fitfully but adequately during the big lockout, was never mobilised to provide a common front against the policy of job cuts. In the case of Natsopa particularly, there was a divided response between national and shopfloor leadership.

The so-called 'national' directors appointed to the senior Times Newspapers (Holdings) Ltd board — their Lordships Dacre, Roll, Greene and Robens and Sir Edward Pickering — did, however, finally reassert their paper authority. Their intervention, plus the publicity occasioned by persistent NUJ questioning, got the papers' titles restored to TNL from the parent company News International, where Murdoch had salted them away — presumably to secure them to himself if he liquidated Times Newspapers. Any liquidation was the key threat in the whole paraphernalia of management by ultimatum.

Having stripped the company of its most tangible asset — the six-storey office block at 200 Grays Inn Road — Murdoch was in a position to close down TNL and with the titles under his belt, try a restart later on his own terms. That option is not now so readily available.

Looking ahead, it seems that Murdoch will continue his job-cutting programme



that has sliced employment at Times Newspapers from 3,500 at the time of the takeover to around 2,000. Accelerated development of the new computerised photocomposition system will do away with copy holders and readers shortly, and the company is then poised to go for the biggest prize of all — direct input into the computer by journalists.

Talks have already begun with the NGA on the siting of three visual display units in the editorial area, and *The Times* seems set to be the first national newspaper where journalists get their hands on to live keyboards. It will be a modest start, but Bill O'Neill, Murdoch's Australian responsible for getting the system on full stream has made it clear that, 'This is the thin end of the wedge'.

The mood at New Printing House Square is one of relief mixed with apprehension. Relief that the horrors are over and apprehension that they will start again before long. Murdoch does not belong to the old-style Beaverbrook school of proprietors. He is more interested in profits than propaganda (though he doesn't see why he can't have both) and with alleged losses running at £4 million a year even after the last round of cuts, the temptation to cut and cut again must still be there.

Elsewhere in Reel Street, there is understandable anxiety that other proprietors faced with recession-induced cash problems will seek to copy Murdoch's strategy. Economies are already being demanded at Express Newspapers with management blaming the impact of the Aslef strikes on circulation costs. The NPA has held down the annual wage rise for the industry to 5% and unemployment in the industry is higher than for many years. Chapel power as we have known it for the last two decades may not be on the run, but it is certainly on the defensive.

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