

• KEEP ON TRUCKIN'

The newspaper laden trucks thundering out of Rupert Murdoch's Fortress Wapping provide a nightly reminder to sacked print workers that he no longer needs their skills - and a potent image of the lorry driver as strike-breaker.

It is not a new role - as footage of the pit strike testifies. Scenes of coke-laden lorries rolling out of Orgreave and the brief Midlands road haulage coal delivery bonanza, ferrying fuel from pithead to power stations, made regular prime time news bulletins.

By delivering the Murdoch titles, lorry drivers are playing a key role in News International's carefully laid plans to rout Sogat '82 and the NGA. But they are also providing their own union - the Transport and General Workers Union - with a glaring instance of its inability to make a national instruction stick.

In the pit strike the TGWU only urged its members not to deliver coal, albeit passionately. In the Wapping conflict, Ron Todd, the union's general secretary, has laid his authority on the line and instructed his members not to cross print picket lines.

TNT (UK), a subsidiary of the Australian-based road haulage group which has corporate links with the Murdoch empire, has a closed shop agreement with the TGWU.

The existence of an alternative distribution system to replace the traditional rail and Sogat-dominated channels was vital for News International's strategy of switching

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production to Wapping. Without it, successful printing operations - carried out by an alternative production workforce at an alternative plant - could prove abortive.

Despite Ron Todd's instruction the papers are getting out. Its flouting exposes both the reluctance of workers to take solidarity action in a dispute which is not their own - and notable weaknesses in both the authority and structure of Britain's largest union.

Lorry drivers are notoriously difficult to organise - those in the hire or reward sector, who deliver goods for a range of companies, more so than 'own account' drivers who work solely for the firm whose goods they ferry. By definition it is a solidarity job fostering independence rather than notions of solidarity - as adpeople have picked up in the Yorkie bar advert.

But, when galvanised as in the lorry drivers' strike in the winter of discontent, industrial muscle-flexing can have a swift and drastic impact on the economy. It was the lorry drivers' strike which brought secondary action into the popular language - and arguably played a key role in formulating Tory thinking on the tranche of union-curbing legislation which is hampering the print unions in their dispute with News International.

For while the public sector disputes - garbage in the streets and queues outside hospitals turned public opinion against what was seen as excessive trade union power - the lorry drivers' strike hit the Conservatives' business allies. But such pay-based militancy, ending in a 2.1% rise is far removed from the solidarity calls now being ignored by TNT drivers.

In the intervening years the effects of the recession and the reality of mass unemployment have further eroded traditional notions of solidarity. In the Commercial Road transport trade group alone, T&G membership has haemorrhaged from over 208,000 in 1980 to under 154,000 now.

Politically Ron Todd's instruction showed to the TUC general council that he was not prepared to 'duck and dive', pledging solidarity with the print unions even if it could put his union's funds at risk. But Eric Hammond, ever eager to point up the failure of Left-led unions to reflect their members' views, jibed when attempting to justify his union's actions over Wapping to the general council - it's one thing promising, another delivering support.

TNT is emerging as aggressively expansionist. It has invested in good industrial

relations with its workforce paying good rates and holding regular consultative meetings. In the Wapping conflict it has even given the union a written assurance that no driver would be disciplined for refusing to cross a picket line - but still the instruction is flouted. 70% of the 700 workers involved in the Murdoch distribution contract are raw recruits - many fresh from the dole queue.

TNT has signed a five year contract with News International to distribute the titles, and is actively seeking more contracts in the field. Discussions are well advanced with at least one existing national title. Meanwhile British Rail has publicly aired its concern over the implications of the loss of the Murdoch contract which represents roughly a third of its £30m annual revenue from newspaper distribution.

The TGWU is not champing at the bit to discipline its TNT members but argues that the company's standing will be tarnished by association with News International if the dispute is not resolved. If TNT secures more Fleet Street contracts, an area of work traditionally carried out by railway workers could pass to the TGWU. The parallels between electricians taking over print workers' jobs could then pose a dilemma to the TGWU. Other unions would argue that the time to discipline TNT drivers had come - but the tug of new members in an atmosphere of decline would also be a factor.

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