



WAPPING WAR

Could you outline what you think your objectives are in this dispute?

Our objective is to get our 4,500 members re-instated. If that's not possible, because of job reductions with the new technology in Wapping, then we want decent compensation for those who will not be going back with the company. The titles that they worked on have been transferred to Wapping, and we would maintain that they've a right to transfer with those titles. We're not talking about the *London Post*, now we're talking about the four Murdoch titles they all worked on. They have a right to follow those titles.

If we turn to the tactics that the unions have adopted in the dispute, how do you think that the level of solidarity action by other unions could be increased?

The transport union men could begin by responding to the instruction from their own union. I understand the pressure, indeed intimidation, that's being applied to people, we're having it in the wholesale area where we've issued instructions and some of our members are not carrying them out. We know that they've been intimidated by their own management. We know that in some areas our members are not handling the titles, but the management and the wholesalers are handling them. We've had members sacked because they wouldn't handle titles and then taken back into employment and sacked again.

What could be done in overall terms would be for the movement generally to give us support, to make sure that the EETPU carry out not only to the letter but also the spirit of the directions the TUC gave them, and also for the British people in large numbers to boycott News International titles - the *Sun*, *News of the World*, the *Times*, and the *Sunday Times*.

Do you feel that while Eric Hammond was clear about carrying out to the letter those instructions, they're unlikely to carry out the spirit?

We'll have to wait and see. When I say the spirit I mean the part of the direction which says that they should inform their members that they are doing work normally carried out by members of another union. It was couched in those terms

because the TUC felt that they didn't want to be vulnerable in law for either issuing illegal instructions or indeed as is now the case for possible contempt, so therefore they used that kind of wording. But that wasn't the intention. The intention was that electricians stop blacklegging on fellow trade unionists, stop crossing picket lines and stop working on the printing machines on work that belonged to employees of Mr Murdoch who have been sacked by him.

Have you learned anything from the NGA dispute at Warrington and the miners strike? On two issues particularly, on police activities around picketing, and on the importance of influencing public opinion and explaining your case, being seen to be conducting it in a democratic and open way.

Yes it's been a very interesting and important aspect of this whole dispute. We tried to be realistic, and came to the view we couldn't kid ourselves that Fleet Street workers were the most popular working group in the United Kingdom. The public has been very much seduced by the media itself into believing the image that's projected of the Fleet Street worker, so public opinion was going to be against us from the very beginning. So what we decided to do was to try and explain our case in a very calm and logical way to the public, to demonstrate very clearly that we are a democratic union, that we did ballot our members in accordance with the law. We weren't seeking to breach the law, we didn't welcome breaking it and we still don't welcome it, we find it quite painful. So we actually did, if you like, learn from the previous disputes.

Now on picketing, one night of violent picketing on the television can undo weeks and weeks of really hard work in trying to get your message across. We made it clear from the beginning that we didn't want violent picketing. There have been incidents on the picket line, quite naturally. I don't know how long I could hold my temper seeing lorries pushing through, taking out papers that I'd been working on two weeks ago, but equally, we didn't want to subject our people to the beating up and the physical attacks that there would have been had we had mass violent picketing.

Why have the leaderships of other trade



Uremia Dean, Sogat general secretary

unions, particularly the transport workers and the journalists, apparently failed to deliver the support of their members?

It is partly, I think, because of the emergence, especially since 1979, of militant management. We've heard the term militant trade unionism, but we're seeing now militant management. In the case of the Wapping journalists, for instance, the management made it quite clear that if they didn't go, they'd be in breach of their contracts and would be dismissed. The intimidation was such that they felt that they couldn't risk that. It's somewhat similar with TNT, where the management quite clearly have intimidated the workers.

To what extent is the failure of trade unionists to respond part of a more general ideological shift in society?

Change in society must have something to do with it, and also the style of Mrs Thatcher, which is an aggressive 'let the top poppies grow tall' attitude, in which it's not a case of meeting the needy but giving to the greedy. The mainstream view of how life should be is that you are part of a house-owning democracy, that you've really not made it unless you've got two cars and you're part of a nuclear family. If you're not fulfilling that kind of stereotype, then you're out there amongst the stigmatised group, the unemployed. Mrs Thatcher has divided our society far more than it ever has been, not between



**Interview with SOGAT
general secretary Brenda Dean**

working class and middle class, but between those in work and those out of work. And because of high unemployment, those in work have been reacting in a far more selfish way than they would have done, say, 20 or 30 years ago.

Is the traditional right/left divide that people apply to the trade union movement to distinguish between different unions and different personalities relevant to this dispute?

We don't see it that way, we see it as a straightforward industrial problem. We didn't want to challenge the law, the Tory legislation was such that it forced us into that position. I suppose that the print unions have been known as left-wing, the EETPU has been known as right wing. I think there may have been some truth in that concerning the EETPU's attitude to the deals that they might strike with Mr Murdoch, and indeed with other employers, which by the way their own members in Fleet St were not prepared to agree to.

Where do you put yourself within the political spectrum of the TUC and the Labour party?

I'm not in any clique on the TUC general council. On some issues you would regard me as being right wing, on other issues as left wing. I represent a very pragmatic union. I don't personally categorise myself at all because if you do that, then you compartmentalise yourself, and if you then react in a different way you've sold out. Now I'm sure some people enmeshed in either right or left would regard that as very naive. In this issue people are saying I've taken a left view. I don't see it like that at all. I see that our members are under attack and we're responding to that in the way that you'd expect any trade union worth its salt to do.

In contrast to the NGA dispute at Warrington and the miners' dispute, the government now seems weaker. Is that affecting the dispute?

The government has lost a great deal of credibility over recent months. The starting point in my view was the Ponting affair, and this process has started to grow and grow, most recently with the Westland affair. The government itself has suffered a number of body blows, it is now flawed,

and it won't recover from that ever. That's the reason for the cries for her to go as leader. Our attitude in this dispute was that, although we don't like the Tory anti-union laws, we should operate them, and ballot our members. We got a 90% return in a secret ballot, and there was" no-one in Mrs Thatcher's government who could actually criticise us for that.

Yet, having carried out the ballot, those people have been dismissed. Now the majority of working people never really realised that could happen. The particular law that allowed the dismissals, piggy-backed on to the 80 act, the 82 act, the 84 act, has made it absolutely impossible both for individual workers and for trade unions to move. The individual worker, even when complying with the law, can be sacked without compensation, and individuals or trade unions can't respond with solidarity because they're then in the trouble that we were and that led to our sequestration. I think all those factors, coupled with the demise of Mrs Thatcher's cabinet in the public's eye, have made public opinion look at this in a little bit more of a pragmatic way.

Are you saying that Murdoch has, in a very unBritish way, taken the Tory employment laws too far, and that he may turn people against those laws or the way that they have been operated in this dispute? Is that one of your hopes of persuading the public of your case?

It is actually a reality. You can't say that Murdoch's taken the Tory laws too far, because if the laws weren't there he couldn't have used them. What has happened is that Murdoch has used the laws in the way that they were intended to be used, whereas British management hasn't. In the miners' dispute it wasn't the Coal Board that took the union to court, it was its own members. So he has used the laws in the way they were intended, and having done that has revealed just how vicious they are. People are now saying, well, perhaps that's not the kind of law we should have on our statute book.

Do you think the laws passed in the past few years will be repealed and we will return to the position we were in prior to 1980?

We won't return to the position prior to

1980. I don't believe that a Labour government or a Labour party would go to the people in a general election seeking to repeal the right to have a ballot before trade unionists are called out on industrial action. We've always done that as a union, but I can't see that it would help to get a Labour government elected if they were to say, 'we're going to repeal that.' If one accepts that is a reality, one has to couple with it repeal of the aspects of Tory legislation which diminish beyond recognition individual and trade union rights, and perhaps move from what has previously been trade union law based on immunity to trade union law based to some degree on positive rights.

I personally believe in a mix of the two, some immunities with some positive rights. One of the areas of positive rights that I would strongly advocate, and hope that Sogat will be able to advocate at the TUC special conference in March, is that if you ballot your members and go through the procedure, then they have a positive right as employees not to be dismissed while they're on official strike.

What do you think of the Labour party's response to this dispute? Are you satisfied with the kind of solidarity you're getting?

The support we've had from individuals in the Labour party has been very good. We've had a lot of MPs on the picket line, we've had a lot of MPs write to us with support. We would like to see the Labour party move now in a more positive way, particularly after the statements by Kenneth Clark, the employment minister. Really he's invited them in.

I'm not criticising Neil Kinnock or the shadow cabinet, they've been most helpful, but now is the time to make a decisive move in the House of Commons because the party is not burdened with violent picketing, it's not burdened with the argument that we haven't balloted our members, because we have. The fact that the government is lying low shows that it feels quite vulnerable, so now's the time to speak out on the dispute in the House itself.

The interview by Charles Leadbeater and Paul Webster.