

A Tale Of Wapping Woe

From the outset, the printworkers faced enormous obstacles. **Mike Power** and **Helen Hague** assess the dispute that lasted a year

Fleet Street history was made on January 24 1986, when Rupert Murdoch's News International printworkers at *The Sun*, *News of the World*, *The Times* and the *Sunday Times* took strike action following overwhelming secret ballot majorities. The new features were that all 5,500 workers were instantly dismissed, and uniquely all four papers continued to be printed and distributed.

Murdoch had secretly prepared the transfer of the papers to his new Wapping plant where the whole job could be undertaken without traditionally unionised printing and distribution staff. The Wapping plant contained the most modern direct input typesetting equipment to enable journalists to bypass NGA printworkers, and there existed an agreement with TNT road haulage to avoid Sogat distributors. The ground was also laid to act against secondary solidarity action by setting up a network of subsidiary companies through which injunctions could be issued and damages claimed against union funds.

The unions centrally involved had acted too late, even Murdoch admitted¹ that the strike would have been effective had it happened before Christmas, as preparations then were less advanced at Wapping and pre-Christmas advertising in his papers had been heavy. However it was not Murdoch's preparedness or the initially slow union reaction that ultimately lost the year-long struggle for jobs and union recognition in the new plant. The defeat was undoubtedly due to the failure to deliver inter and intra union solidarity in a hostile legal, political and economic environment. Equally the campaign for a reader boycott of the four papers had little effect and the police were able confidently and brutally to break any effective picketing.

Differences between the NGA, Sogat and the NUJ prior to Wapping were widening. Attempts to create one industrial union by various amalgamation combinations had broken down and instead fratricidal, internecine warfare had broken out between them about whose members had the right to 'follow the job' into new technology. Disputes in the provincial press in Portsmouth, Kent and Wolverhampton had witnessed union members crossing each other's picket lines in order to take over their former colleagues' jobs.

Five months before the dispute began the Sogat executive had sanctioned its negotiators to seek the transfer of *The Sun* and *News of the World* to the new plant even if the other unions were opposed. However a shotgun marriage between the unions occurred as Murdoch's intentions became clear and his demands for a legally binding agreement, no closed shop, unfettered managerial authority and a no-strike deal were revealed. The unions responded with an unprecedented eleventh hour offer to Murdoch which gave practically all he wanted, but it was too late.

Common cause in the face of Murdoch's deunionising and deskilling did not extend to the EETPU. The militant Fleet Street EETPU press branch members were ignored by their leadership and were replaced by provincial members who were also trained to take over printers' jobs. The collusion between the EETPU and Murdoch and the subsequent failure by the TUC general council to act against the electricians in February 1986 was an early and major setback in the dispute. The later condemnation of the general council at congress in September was not followed up in time to impose any discipline on the EETPU.

Meanwhile another setback was suf-



Uphill struggle

fered when the NUJ failed to get more than an initial 30 or so journalists to join the strike, although a steady despondent trickle did gradually leave Wapping in the next few weeks. These defectors were often replaced by other union members who had ignored the appeals of their leadership to back the strike and gladly accepted the increased wages offered by Murdoch. Also the NUJ's sporadic picketing efforts were generally limited to a few dedicated strikers and their supporters. At the same time the TGWU was unable to get its members not to cross the picket in their TNT lorries.

Extending solidarity by the two key unions involved also proved to be difficult. NGA members who typeset and printed Murdoch's supplements could not be convinced to stop: both the supplements were typeset a mile from Wapping. Only in Merseyside and Clydeside did Sogat distribution members refuse to handle News International's papers and then only for a short time. The failure to win action in editorial, production and distribution or spread the dispute to the supplements was crucial. As a result other



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Murdoch's increasing redundancy pay offers. When the dispute ended after a full year, 3,000 had stood by their unions and had not applied individually for their payment as News International had invited them to. This doggedness was responsible for the length of the dispute as it was clear that a large majority of the officials of all unions involved would have wrapped it up months earlier before the final injunctions and sequestrations were threatened.

From the beginning the reader boycott campaign gave purpose to local support groups and a means whereby sympathetic individuals and organisations could give help. However the theme of the campaign remained narrow, asking for a boycott because Murdoch was a bad employer who had sacked his workforce after they had made him millions. The content of his newspapers went unmentioned and their monopoly and editorially unfree nature was largely ignored. This was in contrast to the outstanding efforts to gain rights of reply by the local chapels before the dispute when production workers challenged editorial distortions.

During the year *The Sun* and *News of the World* lost 150,000 and 300,000 copies per issue respectively, which is a small proportion of four and five million in each case. Many expressions of support gave genuine encouragement; this included the local authorities that banned Murdoch's papers from their libraries, the Scottish dockers who boycotted newsprint supplies and postal workers who would not deliver bingo cards. These small but heroic efforts could not, in themselves, have had a great effect, but all were subject to legal restraint, damage costs and union sequestration. The trade union movement must campaign widely to expose the growing authoritarianism represented by the current union laws.

The dispute was called off finally not because those involved were not prepared to continue - they were not actually asked - but because, with threats of injunctions and sequestrations, both the NGA and Sogat considered that their organisation would be destroyed. This is a chilling conclusion, the consequences of which would repay study by those who argue that unions are too powerful.

Finally those who have claimed that new printing technology would herald a breakthrough for political plurality in the media have had their answer. Murdoch now boasts that his vastly increased profitability will underwrite his growing world media ambitions. A small, effectively organised, largely unskilled staff can produce four national newspapers, but the technology is not cheap which means that old technology monopolies simply become new technology monopolies. •

Mike Power

¹ Interviewed by the *New York Times* March 2, 1986.

areas of the struggle became more prominent.

The striking unions' officials were initially reluctant to seek wide support for the picketing and demonstrations. But a fear of isolation and the desire for a successful reader boycott of the papers helped to relax that attitude. Extensive picketing and effective demonstrations to stop the movement of the papers clearly needed more people than the striking unions could mobilise.

Three-stage pickets were organised firstly at Wapping and its satellite Glasgow plant at Kinning Park, secondly at the TNT depots and finally at the wholesalers. This gave a national character to the effort and allowed many more people to be involved. During the early weeks of the dispute it was optimistically believed that a mass picket which blocked the Wapping Highway could stop the papers. On May 3, after an enormous build up, tens of thousands of supporters joined the strikers in Wapping but the destruction and violent breaking up of the demonstration by the police marked a turning point in the dispute. It was graphically demonstrated, and reconfirmed on the anniversary, that the police could

prevent effective mass picketing.

Appeals which came from some leftist rank and file elements to extend the strike by closing the rest of Fleet Street found no echo. The consequence would have been that Murdoch would have had a free hand with only his papers coming out, while the enormous sums of money being raised weekly to sustain those on strike would have come to an end. In any event morale in national newspapers was and remains low as proprietors step up their demands for more redundancies (10,000 in the past 18 months), extended working days and weeks, less holidays and wage cuts as new technology is introduced.

Organisation and discipline among the strikers remained at a high level, and in spite of the inability to sustain an effective mass picket, a constant day and night presence was kept up throughout. When Murdoch applied last summer for injunctions to restrain the pickets his affidavits revealed that additional security and distribution costs were amounting to over £400,000 monthly. The deep sense of grievance felt by the strikers was shown by the ever-growing ballot majorities to reject

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Wapping Sunset

The effects of Rupert Murdoch's ruthlessly executed coup against the print unions have rippled rapidly through the British national newspaper industry. After meticulous planning, Murdoch broke free of traditional Fleet Street culture in one brazen bound late last January.

He slashed his cost base, sacked 5,500 printworkers and began producing News International's four titles from behind the gates of a razor wire fortified factory in Wapping. He thus created a benchmark of efficiency which other rival newspaper proprietors aspired to. And while they may publicly express distaste for his tactics, they have not been slow to capitalise on the fallout from Wapping.

No other national title is in a position to 'do a Wapping' - even if they could stomach it. No other newspaper publishing house has an alternative workforce, distribution system and plant on hand.

But in the post-Wapping climate - with the balance of negotiating power ratcheted strongly in the employers' favour - a spate of deals have been struck with the print unions which would have been deemed unachievable by employers 18 months ago.

The unions are eager to demonstrate that they can negotiate change - including radical changes in working practices and substantial demanning. Last year, the *Daily Telegraph* slashed its production workforce by 62% - and cut its wage bill for the area from £40m to £16m. Redundancy packages of up to £45,000 helped smooth the way to change.

A new, if constrained, form of print unionism in national titles is emerging out of the maelstrom - characterised by a reduction in the number of bargaining units, the setting up of joint consultative committees and company level bargaining.

The industrial processes in the national newspaper sector have been effectively preserved in aspic. Wapping has acted as a catalyst - spurring a long-stalled industrial revolution in the sector. The pace of change resembles a speeded-up video when set against the stasis of the last 100 years. The process of change is being telescoped into a tight timescale.

Employers invoke commercial imperatives and competitive pressure as hastening the need for new technology systems and new manning agreements: the unions' instinct for self-preservation is breaking down resistance to change.

The knock-on effect of Wapping on rival titles has been swift and dramatic: radical deals were being struck while Sogat '82 and the NGA were still locked in a dispute which looked unwinnable

from its early days.

From the night the newspaper laden TNT trucks first thundered out of Wapping, the unions have been unable to dent News International's success in getting its products out on to the street. The company's ability to carry on functioning has remained a constant throughout.

Offers, ballots, rejections, the unmasking of the disreputable role of the electricians union EETPU, splits and tensions between Sogat's leadership and its London branches: although they fleshed out the sub plots in the Wapping narrative, they never seriously challenged the immutable core of the 13 month conflict.

Starkly, the unions were unable to have any impact on News International's production cycles. Mass demonstrations provided an outlet for sacked workers to protest against their treatment - but also underscored the union's impotence. Any hope of stopping the lorries through a human blockade was written off weeks into the conflict.

The EETPU played a key role in ensuring News International's success in routing the print unions: by supplying the company with labour to replace sacked printworkers. Confronted with calls for direct penalties against the union for colluding with an employer, the TUC general council issued a series of directives which the EETPU could actually be expected to obey. The prospect of expulsion - and a TUC split - was averted.

The union - which had made it clear it was prepared to go to the High Court to restrain the TUC from issuing an unlawful instruction if it came to it - is aggressively expansionist.

TUC disciplinary procedures are geared towards securing compliance from affiliates who breach rules - not precipitating splits. The TUC is also keen on ensuring that the collective voice of organised labour does not lay itself open to a legal challenge.

The EETPU is still in the fold - but even among its rightwing allies within the TUC, its behaviour in the dispute is seen as reprehensible. And one important factor which emerged is that it cannot formalise a recognition agreement with News International for the members it recruited to staff the plant without risking expulsion.

The EETPU's ambitions within national newspapers have been effectively checked even though both Murdoch and Eddie Shah were attracted by the union's market-based philosophy and its persistent championing of single-union, single-status, strike-free deals.

The print unions can take some comfort from Lonrho's decision not to follow through Eddie Shah's enthusiasm for a single union deal with the electricians for the *Today* newspaper. The NGA - which has built up a significant membership at Today's

printing plants - is confident of securing a bargaining and recognition agreement there in the near future.

The EETPU have other potential enemies, apart from the print unions. Its success in concluding single-union deals with Japanese companies in South Wales is prompting concern from the Transport and General Workers Union and the General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union. At Orion (UK) four unions 'bid' for a single-union agreement. The EETPU believe they have clinched the deal. Mr John Edmonds, general secretary of the GMBU, is keen on pressing the TUC to establish 'minimum standards' for such deals, to guard against possible down-bidding by some unions to secure an agreement which would not do employees justice. The GMBU is likely to argue for this at congress later this year.

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Without the tranche of union-curbing employment legislation framed by the Tories, Rupert Murdoch's Wapping victory might have been more muted.

He enthusiastically embraced the employment laws of the early 80s which effectively inhibit any form of secondary action and allow for the creation of 'buffer companies' which render solidarity action illegal.

Although an employer's right to sack employees who break their employment contracts by taking industrial action pre-dates the Thatcher years, News International's use of the tactic has brought it to public attention.

British workers are quite frequently 'sacked' by employers in the heat of a dispute - but taken back on again once it has been settled. News International received legal advice from its lawyers Farrar and co, that the cheapest way to dispense with unwanted workers was to dismiss them when they were engaged in a strike.

The secret balloting provisions fleshed out in the 1984 Trade Union Act will be retained in a modified form if Labour takes power. Both Sogat and the NGA are enthusiastic supporters of secret ballots in strikes. But the Wapping dispute has brought the lesser used 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts to the fore: the company has used them more vigorously than any other since the legislation came on the statute book.

The print union leaders - and others on the general council - hope one lasting knock-on effect of the dispute will be to discredit some of the present laws. This could usher in a new legal era enshrining the right to strike - and the right to take some forms of sympathy action.

That is, if the public can be persuaded that the laws are currently weighted too much in the employer's favour. But the chances are, the abiding memory of Wapping for those not directly involved will be violent picket line clashes on prime time tv. •
Helen Hague