



Public service: Civil servants feel their work is undervalued

Unloved And Underpaid

The most disruptive action Britain's nurses had to take to get their recent pay award of 9.5% was to charter a boat on the Thames and upset the river police. With MPs waving dutifully from the Commons terrace, the vessel went round in circles off Westminster Pier while a captive audience of journalists on board was fed chilled white wine, chicken drumsticks and the merits of the nurses' case.

Not that the media needs much convincing to produce its annual, and quite excep-

tional, support for a big rise for the 'angels'. Nor, as it turned out, did Mrs Thatcher need much persuading to honour the nurses' pay review body recommendations in full in a fit of pre-election generosity. But the relative success of the nurses' propaganda-based pay campaigns of the past five years had not passed unnoticed in the wider labour movement.

In a new book, *Nurses - Politics and Power* Royal College of Nursing general secretary Trevor Clay goes as far as to claim that it is his

union - not the so-called new realists of the EEPTU or the new image-builders of the GMBU - which is setting the trend for the labour movement. These days, he argues, industrial struggles are won and lost not on the picket line, not even across the negotiating table, but on what he calls the balance sheet of public opinion.

The present civil service dispute suggests that unions in other spheres are beginning to take this argument to heart. For the first time in a national pay dispute of any kind, the three unions involved have retained consultant advisors, Epic Industrial Communications, to orchestrate publicity for the duration. The resulting Campaign for a Better Civil Service has deliberately played down pay issues and played up the decline in the standard of service of government departments.

The campaign is aimed partly at uniting the three unions' 250,000 members behind a common banner. Although their pay *claim* is a common one of 15% or £20 a week, their pay *rates* vary widely from the £5,499 top-of-the-scale salary of an administrative assistant in the CPSA clerical union to the £14,629 of a senior executive officer in the middle managers' SCPS.

Apprehension about joining the 'bosses' union' has so far held CPSA members back from the logical step of merging with the SCPS. On the part of SCPS members, meanwhile, there is evident distaste at the antics of the young Militant Tendency and SWP activists of the CPSA. Throw in Nipsa, the Northern Ireland union which makes up the third arm of the alliance, and you have a truly mixed bag fighting the dispute.

Epic has plugged two common themes in its numerous leaflets, newspapers, posters and gimmicks. First, it has stressed an overall fall of 20% in civil service pay rates since 1980, relative to the private sector. Second, and more significantly, it has dwelt upon how essentially rotten life in the civil service

has become under Thatcher, how - like the nurses - civil servants are constantly struggling to cope with inadequate resources and how they get no thanks for it.

And this does seem to have touched a nerve: union members in the most unlikely places, such as Finchley, are saying they are fed up with what is perceived as the government's constant denigration of public servants; support for the selective strikes has been impressive, particularly as the government's varying and mostly staged pay offers are actually worth more overall than the Treasury's 4.6% costing.

Yet the Epic campaign appears to have made little impact on the wider public, which was its primary target. The main aim was to win national media coverage, but the press has not bought the rather forced campaign theme that it is seven years since civil servants last had a decent pay rise. (Hence seven low paid workers were brought to a press conference; and leaflets distributed on picket lines set out seven reasons for striking.) Nor, more importantly, is there any hard evidence of the public clamouring for better services.

It is tempting to conclude that Thatcherite Britain cares little about the state of the civil service and less about the people who staff it, that everybody loves a nurse and nobody loves a civil servant, that the Clay strategy is therefore one of very limited relevance.

That would be hasty. Epic's campaign for the civil servants was probably started too late and too cheaply to make a real impact on Clay's balance sheet of public opinion. As the nurses have demonstrated, it may take several years of propagandising to register a cause or grievance on the public consciousness.

For this year, though, the harsh lesson remains that while a nurse may not have to take it out on a patient to get better pay and conditions, a DHSS clerk still has to take it out on a claimant. •

David Brindle



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sentation and conduct their own defence. And in the vast majority of cases no charge is ever brought.

A sample of former detainees aged 11-18 were questioned by women representing 14 voluntary organisations. Of the 40 children, no fewer than 24 had been kicked, punched, caned, slapped or sjambokked. Eight had been forced to exercise for long periods, and beaten for showing tiredness.

Torture by electric shocks, until recently reserved for adult political detainees, has now been extended to include 12-year-olds.

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Alfred Nzo
Alfred Nzo
Secretary General,
African National Congress

The African National Congress, PO Box 38, 28 Penton Street, London N1 5PR.

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