

JOURNAL

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MARCH 1987

'The Union has come out stronger'

By
General Secretary
John
Golding



1987, the Union's centenary year, saw the Union's first indefinite national strike in 100 years. One hundred days separated the clear Engineering and Clerical decisions in November to reject BT's offers from the decisions in February — by the Engineers to accept and return to work, and by the Clerical Group to start their consultative exercise. This JOURNAL, and the Clerical LINK newspaper now being printed, reports on this historic dispute.

THE LAST few months have been historic for both the Clerical and Engineering Groups, writes General Secretary John Golding.

The Engineering Group has settled after a nationwide strike and the Clerical Group — after prolonged industrial action — has negotiated an offer which now will be subject of consultation with the members.

I congratulate the Clerical Group on the stand it has taken and their negotiations for the offer that is on the table. Now, as it was in the Engineering Group, it is for the members to decide.

There are three distinct verdicts on the Engineering Group strike.

● The first is held by outsiders, who see the strike as a success for the Union against a very bloody minded management. Following the failure of the miners, printworkers and Silentnight workers, it is welcomed particularly by those in the Labour Movement as a turning of the tide.

For the first time a Union has come out of a strike stronger and more united than when it went in. The Press and TV coverage was highly favourable to the Union and the reputation of the NCU is enhanced.

It was seen as a model, non-violent, justifiable strike, fought for purely industrial objects. We have kept politics well out of it — and this has broadened the support for us.

● The second view contrasts starkly with this. It is the view of many of our "activists" who worked so hard during the strike — particularly on the picket lines.

Many feel disappointed and let down, angry even that so little was gained from the strike. They believe that we should have held out for '10 per cent without strings' — at the very least that BT made too few concessions.

They are also upset by the attitude of BT local management on the return to work — their blatant attempt to break firm agreements. On this I share their concern.

I issued a statement with the return to work agreement that all proposals to change the Shorter Working Week Agreement and starting and finishing times should be resisted in local negotiations — but in many areas BT management 'conned' our local negotiators into believing

that the Return to Work Agreement authorised this.

Yet a third view is held by many other members. It expressed relief that the strike ended when it did. Many were about to return to work — *The Guardian* reported members ringing up to say so — and many more would have done so.

These members are pleased to have returned with honour and with heads held high after a ballot. They wanted to take action, but were not prepared for a long drawn out struggle.

What is my view? I share the belief of outsiders that the Union has come out stronger. We could have been smashed by a management determined to do this, and we were not.

Additionally I do believe that, compared with the offer we rejected on the 7th January, big gains were made. Although not enough, the money we were offered in the two year deal was higher than that on offer on the 7th January — a permanent £138 a year extra by the end for a TO.

Unfortunately, the UCW and STE settlements made getting bigger increases in 1986 impossible.

The most important gain in connection with the money, however, was that cash bonuses were replaced by fully consolidated percentage increases.

Cash bonuses are once and for all — percentage increases not only help for the future, they also are important from the point of view of pensions, allowances and overtime payments.

Overtime payments were also protected with BT's withdrawal of the proposal to extend the normal working day.

We were unable to get the withdrawal of all the strings attached to the pay offer.

Unfortunately, we were committed to the '1985 accords' — grades repatterning, locally determined TO pools, planning team ratios and computer programming for TOs.

BT kept pointing out that these were committed by the last Executive as part of the 1985 wage settlement and there was no way we could dodge away from them.

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Clerical consult on offer

'NO HOURS CHANGE'

TOP, a London Tower member registers to vote, Feb 11, on the engineering offer at the National Union of Teachers' HQ. ABOVE RIGHT, Jan 30. Clerical picket outside BT International's building in Holborn Circus, London, during the 3-day Clerical strike.

BELOW, Feb 11, the media and the microphones cluster round General Secretary John Golding after the engineers' ballot is announced. Photos by Stefano Cagnoni, REPORT.



CLERICAL Deputy General Secretary Jeannie Drake reports: During the period 16th February to 2nd March, Clerical Group Branches have been asked to consult members as to their views on the two year pay offer detailed in Letter to Branches 1920.

That pay offer provides for an increase of 11.33 per cent on existing pay rates paid out over two pay years as follows:

- a consolidated pay increase based on a 5.02 per cent factor, effective from 1st July 1986.
- a further consolidated pay increase of 0.7 per cent effective from 1st May 1987.
- a further consolidated pay increase of 4.75 per cent effective from 1st July 1987.
- a final consolidated pay increase of 0.5 per cent effective from 30th June 1988 without prejudice to the July 1988 pay round.

Associated with the pay rises are corresponding increases in allowances and improvements in annual leave.

Although the settlement of 1987 pay is unconditional with no associated items for change, there are efficiency measures attached to the two year pay offer that have arisen in respect of the 1986 offer.

Although efficiency items are attached to the pay deal, the number of items is far less than that originally proposed by BT, and in particular there are no changes to the Flexible Working Hours Agreement of attendance patterns.

Those efficiency measures that

remain have been significantly amended following detailed negotiation. The primary efficiency measures attached to the pay deal are the revisions to the CA, CO and Commercial Officer

grade descriptions.

As advised to Clerical Group Conference in 1986, the NCU (C) had given principled agreement to BT plc to enter into negotiations

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to revise the grade descriptions. With the exception of the Commercial Officer grade in Sales & Marketing, the CO and CA grade descriptions were those originally drawn up many years ago to apply generally in the Civil Service.

The existing descriptions bore little or no relevance to work currently being undertaken in BT plc and the current duties of CAs and COs were based in large part on the custom and practice that had been built up over many years.

In respect of the Commercial Officer grade, the NCU policy was to negotiate a new grade descrip-

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tion to extend the grade beyond sales.

In addition to wanting grade descriptions that accurately reflected the situation within BT plc, the NCU (C) wanted to negotiate grade descriptions that ensured that the clerical grades had a strong long term occupational position within BT.

With the many changes taking place within BT plc the CGEC was concerned that the Union did not lose control of the work undertaken by the clerical grades.

The new grade descriptions of Co and CommO are detailed in Letter to Branches 1920. The CommO grade description now provides for the wider introduction of that grade outside the marketing and sales area.

In respect of the CA grade, the new proposals apply only to new recruits, existing CAs are unaffected.

BT originally proposed an Office Junior grade undertaking a sizeable proportion of the CA duties on a pay rate ranging from

approximately £50 to £99 per week. This proposal was withdrawn by BT.

Under the pay offer the new CA grade description provides for a very limited range of CA work to be designated basic level duties (BLD). CAs newly recruited specifically to CA BLD posts will share the same pay scale for the CA grade as a whole up to a pay maximum of £6,562 p.a.

After two years satisfactory service such recruits will be eligible to transfer to the main range of CA

duties carrying a pay maxima of £7,410 p.a.

The efficiency measures attached to the pay offer are far less than those originally proposed by BT, and those that remain have been significantly amended following detailed negotiation.

After lengthy and protracted negotiations and direct industrial action by members themselves, the CGEC believe that the revised offer received from BT was fair and reasonable.

The Executive Council believe that it was right to consult members on the new offer, and to recommend that offer as a settlement.

'The Union has come out stronger'

From front page

Additionally, the Engineering Group negotiators accepted the condition of working in mixed hierarchies when this is appropriate. In the Engineering Group Executive's view this will mean better promotion prospects for engineers.

Another big gain over the 7th January offer was that the new offer gave the Allied Grades in BT plc equal increases — albeit for some hierarchies with similar strings. Yet another big gain was that BT abandoned its plan of making payments District by District.

There has been criticism about concluding a two year deal, but it has enabled us to re-establish (against strong management opposition) the principle of an annual increase without strings, and to avoid the attack on national pay which will be a central Government policy if the Conservatives are elected again. And incidentally it is a two year deal — the increase on the 30th June '88 will be followed by another on the 1st July.

At the same time I do understand the bitter disappointment of those who stood on the picket lines. Unfortunately, it was imperative that we put an offer to our members last week — and give them a chance to call off the strike.

Many of our members were near the point of going back to work. This was related by Branch Officers and more strongly by individuals telephoning Head Office.

All outside experience tells us that a trickle back, would very quickly have become a flood. This would not only have made it impossible for us to gain any concessions from management, but would also have split the Union wide apart.

As this was the main aim of management, we had to avoid this at all costs.

Two factors undermined our ability to get total victory. Firstly, it became clear that for the network to collapse would take many weeks, if not months.

The STE settlement had put us back to the 1983 situation when managers maintained the network and the Union suffered a humiliating, expensive defeat. Additionally managers, with the few who worked, were finding ways of solving the problems of the major customers.

National Communications Union Journal

March, 1987

Yes — the domestic customers and small businesses were suffering — but BT was very prepared to see them suffer.

Indeed BT management made it absolutely clear that they would rather the strike go on than to make an improved offer, and for the strike to go on for so long as the network held up and major customers were looked after.

My judgement was, and is, that the strike could not continue on a united basis for weeks. I respect the minority who would have stayed out for ever — as committed as the miners, Wapping pickets and Silentnight strikers but, unfortunately, they would have seen colleagues cross

● A good example of cross Branch co-operation between Met. North West and London North West Engineers. The brazier and coffin were donated by the London Fire Brigade; soup was supplied by Shop Stewards at Heinz (only problem was there were no labels on the tins!). Ken Barnes, London North West, had the job of mixing it all up and dishing it out. Roy Routledge.



their picket lines before long.

Why? Partly because some members were facing great financial hardship.

Had there been a Union call a national strike with so little money in the coffers before? Our not being able to afford strike pay has put great strain on many families.

And, when the BT revised offer became known, they would have not been able to resist the temptation to go back.

It is because I sensed the reluctance of many members to face a long strike that I was confident that a substantial majority would vote "yes" in the ballot for the return to work.

BT has learned a stern

lesson — that 3 or 4 years of bullying has got to stop. But the Union has learned too. We now know that the Clerical and Engineering Groups must work closer together, and that we face a brick wall when the STE and UCW have settled separately.

Above all we must build up our finances — there is no way we can conduct a long strike without a substantial Fighting Fund.

We have learned our lessons. But we have also obliterated the humiliating and debilitating defeat of 1983 from our minds. Let us now hope that BT has learned that they cannot dictate, and that they must deal with us round the negotiating table.

Subsidiaries: Talks go on

SETTLEMENTS of our 1986 pay claims, writes Derek Bourn, Assistant Secretary and Officer to the Engineering Pay Committee, are still outstanding for many Engineering and Clerical Group members employed in British Telecom subsidiaries. Consumer Electronics: Against a background of a serious threat of closure, complex and difficult negotiations throughout most of 1986 and early 1987 on behalf of Engineering Group members employed at the Cwmcaru factory have not yet resulted in a final offer being made by Consumer electronics.

Every effort is being made to bring these negotiations to a satisfactory conclusion. Negotiations with the Clerical Group members are continuing, and a

formal offer has not yet been made. Fulcrum Communications: Joint Engineering/Clerical Group negotiations continue in the Fulcrum Communication subsidiary. This company also associates its offer of increases in pay with a demand for restructuring and other changes.

The company's offer is not satisfactory and urgent improvement is being demanded on behalf of our members in both Groups.

Other Subsidiaries: Following settlement of pay in British Telecom plc for both 1986 and 1987, demands for comparable increases in both years are now being pursued on behalf of our members in the Manx Telecom and City Business Systems subsidiaries.

Feb. 25: Stop Press — BT's Shorter Working Week Agreement with the NCU is contractually binding, legal experts have confirmed to the Union today.

It would be a breach of contract for the company to impose any changes in the agreements either locally or nationally. Any changes could only be introduced legally if agreement was reached after negotiations, the lawyers have said.

They also confirmed that the return to work formula does not allow BT to make unilateral changes in members' contracts of employment, contrary to what some District Managers have tried to argue.

"Counsel has advised that the return to work formula does not have any such effect," said Jim Moher.

"Any proposal to make permanent any temporary conditions agreed for the weeks following the return to work would have to be the subject of local negotiations and agreements with the Union."

"If Districts and Branches refuse to agree to the continuation of variations to local agreements then the original local agreement stands."

The Union will take immediate legal action of BT make any attempt either nationally or in any District to change the SWW agreement without Union agreement.

The latest advice comes after counsel studied documents sent in by Branches. A meeting of the Engineering Executive will consider the latest position on Tuesday.

RETURN TO WORK

UNTIL such time as the results of the Clerical consultative exercise of pay offer are known the Clerical Group Executive Council are not in a position to or otherwise the 1987 dispute.

In anticipation of a settlement the following "Return to Normal Working Agreement" has been included between NCU(C) BT plc, reports Derek Drake: General Secretary John Drake:

"On the assumption that NCU(C) consultative exercise its membership endorses the Union's CGEC recommendation to accept the negotiated pay offer the following agreement apply:

I — All forms of industrial action including working to rule or overtime ban are withdrawn. There will be no blacking of work, goods or equipment.

It is agreed that employees will work fully in accordance with terms and conditions of employment.

II — There will be no victimisation on either side, and there will be no harassment tolerated from individuals or groups.

III — Pending the outcome of NCU(C) consultative exercise gestures of goodwill.

a) BT is prepared to take into normal working conditions NCU(C) Members who are currently absent because of industrial action.

b) All normal facilities will be restored for Union representatives.

IV — There may be industrial cases where, because of industrial action representatives' behaviour during the dispute, BT will discuss with the Union H appropriate action."

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	£4,750	38.52	26.64	21.76	18.35		
	£4,500	36.50	25.24	20.61	17.38		
	£4,250	34.47	23.84	19.46	16.41		
	£4,000	32.44	22.43	18.32	15.45		
BORROW	£3,750	30.66	21.30	17.46	14.80		
	£3,500	28.61	19.88	16.30	13.81		
	£3,250	26.57	18.46	15.13	12.82		
	£3,000	24.53	17.04	13.97	11.84		
	£2,500	20.44	14.20	11.64	9.86		
BORROW	£2,000	16.54	11.57	9.21	8.13		
	£1,750	14.48	10.12	8.06	7.12		
	£1,500	12.41	8.67	6.91	6.10		
	£1,250	10.34	7.23	5.75	5.08		
	£1,000	8.27	5.78	4.60	4.07		

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