



Remembering the big winter strike

This January marked 30 years since the landmark all-out strike in BT. **Charlie Pullinger** explores the legacy of a bitter four-week showdown which arguably paved the way for a transformed industrial relations climate that has persisted ever since

Just two years after privatisation, and well before the commencement of one of the biggest redundancy programmes in UK industrial history, it's interesting to reflect that the last truly 'national' strike in BT began with the company's rejection of the NCU's demand to reinstate engineers who had been suspended during a dispute over pay and a subsequent nationwide overtime ban.

British Telecom - which in 1986 had declared pre-tax profits of over £1bn - had offered a broadly inflation-based 5 per cent pay rise to engineers, rejecting a 10 per cent demand that had been lodged by the union in the belief that the workforce deserved a better share of the company's burgeoning profitability.

The overtime ban that followed and the suspension of workers for their action started one of the largest walkouts in the industry's history.

SOLID FROM THE START

There was overwhelming support for the strike from the outset, with mass meetings being held to express anger and outrage over the suspensions and hundreds of clerical workers walking out in solidarity.

The effect on the infrastructure of the UK was evident right from the start, with the newly computerised City of London witnessing a near complete breakdown. Domestic telephone lines were out of order, people



Braving the snow in solidarity



NCU lobbying British Telecom Centre over the pay claim

were unable to dial 999 for emergency services and police stations were cut off.

BT began advising customers not to use their phones unless it was 'completely essential' and, with international calls starting to be impacted, it was clear the network was teetering on the brink.

January 1987 saw some of the coldest temperatures and heaviest snowfall of the decade and this added to the impact of the dispute, as snow and strong winds pounded parts of the UK.

With picket lines across the country gathering in strength and the network starting to buckle, BT tried to blame the

union for the dispute, accusing the NCU of trying to 'damage' the reputation of the newly privatised company and placing its own members' jobs at risk in the process.

But the union rejected the company's stance, insisting that the dispute was not solely over the suspensions or pay, but was part of a wider issue involving the protection of jobs and maintaining services to the public.

'BLOODY NOSE'

NCU leaders warned that the network would face a "total breakdown" unless BT agreed to re-open talks and famously claimed that BT management "wanted a roughhouse" but

that the dispute would leave them with a "bloody nose."

Reflecting on the dispute in *The Independent* some seven years later, Mike Bett - managing director of BT's UK operations at the time of the strike - admitted to "making mistakes", particularly in underestimating how quickly the public perception would change towards BT.

"The problem for us was that we hadn't had any engineers working for about four weeks, and with 110,000 engineers that was a lot of work that needed to be done," he wrote. "We just didn't have the resources to carry out maintenance and installation work. We found that, after the strike, the tide turned against us. BT was talked about as the most reviled public institution in Britain. In our defence, we'd lost around 6,000 man years of engineering time, but the public did not appreciate that."

LASTING LEGACY

Reflecting on the significance of the dispute deputy general secretary Andy Kerr said: "It's fair to say that the union's strong stance against the hardline approach taken by the newly-privatised BT, and the gravity of the action taken, resulted in far more than simply a resolution to this particular dispute.

"The lasting legacy, which still resonates today, is the way the union and BT negotiate and continue to negotiate. The union maintains its strong voice, membership base and negotiating position within BT and this is due to the strong position we took three decades ago." **V**