

Swindon RMT Bulletin

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Government Pulls Railtrack's Strings.

"The dispute...has been aggravated by the incompetence of senior management, aided and abetted by a government desperate to keep public sector pay increases around the level of inflation.

Railtrack chief Bob Horton was employed on the assumption that he had the skills to avoid such ugly situations. Yet last week he chose to take a holiday when critical negotiations were taking place. So did his personnel director. Then ...it emerged through a leak that 5.7% had been discussed. Horton's explanation was an economical version of the truth. No one could or should respect such shoddy tactics.' - 'Today'.

Railtrack management appears to have acquired John Major's midas touch in reverse - everything he touches falls apart! Even the Tory press is questioning their competence (e.g "Railtrack appears to have committed an industrial cock-up of the most elementary and indefensible kind" - Telegraph). In an amazingly inept performance, Railtrack offered an increase for signalmen of 5.7% . As ususally happens in such negotiations, the management negotiators said they would confirm this in writing the following day. However, they did not do this. What happened?

Initially Railtrack and the government both denied allegations that they had intervened. However, the Cabinet Office has now admitted that Transport Minister McGregor met senior managers and "reminded them" of government wages policy. This is Whitehall-speak for telling them not to pay out.

Railtrack management's attempted cover-up made them look stupid. When leaked internal documents showed that 5.7% had been on the table a spokesperson blamed the 'confusion' on a 'junior manager'. This turned out to be the second in command in the South West zone who had issued a circular letting the cat out of the bag. He obviously was not aware that Railtrack 'senior' managers were about to do a quick somersault when His Masters Voice issued his instructions. Horton

said that the 5.7% had not been sanctioned by him, therefore it was not a formal offer. If that is true, how come he allows negotiators to make offers not sanctioned? Perhaps if he worked a five day week he might know what his managers were doing! It is difficult to believe that Railtrack's negotiators would put an offer that they had not consulted him about.

The Guardian suggested (on the basis of 'inside sources' within Railtrack) that Horton had been so confident of a settlement that he was on holiday. He and other Directors had to fly back from foreign parts for a special Board meeting to deal with the crisis!

As Jimmy Knapp said, it is impossible to negotiate with people who make an offer one day, only to withdraw it the next. British Rail management previously had assisted the government in easing the way to privatisation. Now Railtrack has shown that they are spineless pawns doing the government's bidding.

In some quarters a picture is being painted of RMT leaders pressuring the signalmen into taking action. In fact the reverse is true. The signalmen have pressured the leaders. The signalmen's grade conference voted unanimously for action. The strength of feeling was reflected in the unprecedented 80% return on a postal ballot, and the 4 to 1 majority in favour of action. It was reflected in the success of the first day's strike.

This group of workers, considering the very great responsibility they have in relation to the safe carriage of trains and

passengers, are very poorly paid. Their basic rate ranges from £146 to £225 a week. True they earn a lot more through overtime, but as with many others in the industry, they have to work long hours to earn a living wage. The government's attempt to mobilise public

opposition to this "selfish" group of workers appears to have back-fired. It has been clear to everybody that a possible settlement was sabotaged by the government's intervention and the refusal of Horton and co to stand up to the government.

Part-Time Bob & The Boys & Girls.

The illustrious leader of Railtrack, Bob Horton, earns £120,000 for a three day week. Much has been made of his drop of salary from his job as head of BP. Mind you, just in case he should struggle to survive he had a little leaving present of £1.5 million. Horton presided over 30,000 job cuts and a £352 million loss - the first in BP's history.

Interviewed by Forbes magazine in 1992, this quiet, retiring chap said:

"Because I am blessed with a good brain I tend to get to the right answer rather quicker and more often than most people. That will sound arrogant but it is true."

Perhaps this will have to be reassessed after his performance in relation to this dispute.

Over the past few years the railways have been inundated with whizz-kids who knew nothing about the industry and treated it like any commercial enterprise. The Railtrack Board includes - a broadcaster, an ex-chair of the ASDA supermarket chain, and ex-chief executive of English Heritage. These people are supposed to encourage 'commercial discipline' in the glorious future of the privatised railways.

You Sue Me, I'll Sue You?

Under the new private regime the train operators (part of BR) will be claiming compensation for the lost revenue resulting from the strike. If ASLEF take strike action (they are balloting their members) the situation will be reversed, Railtrack will be claiming money off the train operating companies which have not used their train paths. This is because the government insists that they have a 'commercial' relationship.

BR has to negotiate with Railtrack over the level of compensation. If they disagree it could provide a field day for the lawyers, possibly ending up in the courts. Privatisation - you know it makes sense!

This situation will surely make private firms even less enthusiastic they they already are over the possibility of taking over franchises.

Swindon Branch Calls for Renationalisation.

Swindon branch has the first resolution on the agenda of the union's AGM. It welcomes the commitment from John Prescott that a Labour government would renationalise the privatised rail network. It calls for a campaign at every level of the union to expose the practical results of privatisation. Bearing in mind a previous AGM decision calling for the renationalisation of the privatised bus industry, the resolution calls for this campaign to be directed towards the need for an integrated and sustainable transport system which aims for a fundamental shift from road to rail.

The branch has also forwarded a resolution on the need for a campaign against the governments attacks on Health & Safety legislation. This is especially relevant to the railways, where privatisation has led to financial pressures which will undermine safety. Despite their assurances that "safety will not be compromised", there are already signs that management is cutting back on safety in order to cut costs.

The AGM takes place on the week beginning June 27th. We will give a full report of its proceedings in a future bulletin.