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Dear Mr Reynolds,

In recent articles in the Swindon Evening Advertiser Railtrack management have been quoted as saying that the RMT has been "scaremongering" in relation to your operation of signal boxes on strike days. This is not the case. Our local branch has raised legitimate concerns because you have operated these boxes to 'standards' which would not even be contemplated on normal working days. I list below some indications of the real situation on the ground.

1.) Swindon B panel has been manned by an individual working a 12 hour shift. This happened for instance on July 20th when Mr Thompson worked a twelve hour shift on his own **without a break**. I presume you are aware that in the IECC signal operators are supposed to have a break every two hours, since they are working on VDUs. There are two people on shift to facilitate these breaks. How do you justify breaking your own health and safety regulations? I need hardly say that it is not 'safe working' to allow one person to operate this box on their own. What happens if they are taken ill or they collapse?

2.) On Tuesday 26th of July when the shift finished and the strike began, Mr Richard Brown (Performance Manager, Bristol) took over the operation of Swindon A panel **on his own**. One of the signalmen present asked him if anybody else was coming on duty. Mr Brown admitted that one other person was coming later, but only to help him with the phones. When pressed he admitted (in front of witnesses) that he was working the two panel positions on his own. He was warned that this was not safe working. On a subsequent shift during the course of the two day strike Mr Brown once again worked both positions on his own. He has never worked in the signalling grades.

In addition Mr Ron Atkins worked similarly to Brown, the only difference being that whilst he was working both positions he was "training" another person!

I would like you to explain how you justify working the box with only one person? Imagine what would happen if in the normal course of working signalmen popped out and left one man working the box on his own. You would certainly discipline the people involved and they might even be sacked. Yet in order to try to break the strike you break your own operational norms.

3.) One of the managers working Bristol panel, was Mr Sutton, the Safety Manager, Bristol. We know for a fact - he has admitted this - that before the dispute he had never worked in a signal box in his life. When pressed he said he did not want to do it but he had been threatened with discipline. How do you judge such a person 'competant'? Merely on the basis that he knows his Rules & Regulations?

4.) We know that at the beginning of the dispute Mr Danny Martin, Production Manager Reading, was operating Slough panel. He has not come from the signalling grade. Yet on the very day when he was pressed into operating a panel he was passed out by a signalling inspector.

You know full well that it takes weeks of training for a signalman/woman to be passed out to work a new panel, because they need to be acquainted with local conditions, procedures etc. Yet here you were handing out certificates at a moment's notice.

How do you justify breaking your normal procedures in such a way?

5.) We have heard denials of any pressure being placed on managers, yet they have told us a different story (as in the case above). This has not only applied to managers however. At Slough panel we had the instance of Mr Heinz Winters threatening signalmen with the prospect of having to sign individual contracts or else being locked out. Have you encouraged your managers to carry out such threats or was Mr Winters acting on his own behalf. If he was, what action are you going to take to prevent such behaviour by him and any other managers?

These are some of the facts relating to the current dispute. There are many more incidents which I could list which show a lack of knowledge on the part of the people you have put into the boxes; people not knowing basic procedures, lacking local knowledge etc.

From your own standpoint it is entirely counter-productive to deny that standards are being operated on strike days which would not be tolerated normally. Our members are becoming increasingly angry with your denials because they know they are simply untrue. They know who is doing their work on strike days, what experience they have or haven't got. As a result, when the dispute is over, the signal operators will hold no trust in a management which can behave in such a way. By the methods you have been using you have created a bitterness amongst staff which will last years. So much for the "new era".

I would ask you to deal with the issues I have raised above.

Yours sincerely,  
Jimmy Stevenson.  
RMT Divisional Organiser.

## **Swindon Evening Advertiser - Letters Page.**

In the Evening Advertiser of July 27th Railtrack management accused the local branch of the RMT of "blatant scaremongering". However, the management have not dealt with the specific issues raised.

1) On July 20th, Swindon B panel was operated by one person working for 12 hours on his own without a break. Normally the signal box has two people on shift because the operators are supposed to take a break every two hours, since they work with VDUs. For an individual to work in this box for 12 hours without a break is against the health and safety rules. Moreover, what would happen if this individual was taken ill, or collapsed? How do Railtrack justify operating this box in such a manner?

This has happened again since then.

2) On July 26th as the final shift before the commencement of the strike, was about to finish, a single manager came in to operate the A box. He admitted that he was going to operate both the positions on the panel and that there would be a person joining him later, but only to help him with the phones. That is, he would be attempting to do the job of two people. He was warned by the signalmen that this was unsafe working. In subsequent strike breaking shifts he was again working alone.

On other shifts another manager was again working both positions and "training" another person!

How do Railtrack justify this? If signalmen popped out in the normal course of their work and left one person covering the panel management would take very severe disciplinary action against them. Yet here is another case of operating a panel box to 'standards' which would not be tolerated except in the situation where they were trying to break a strike.

Railtrack cannot justify such flagrant breaches of their own procedures.

Incidentally it was reported in a previous Evening Advertiser that on the first day Railtrack set up their 'hot line' that "40 swindon signalmen" rang it. There is a slight problem with this: there are only 25 of them in both boxes combined. Perhaps somebody should tell Railtrack.

The RMT has set up a fund for their signalling staff. Trades Unionists and sympathetic members of the public should make out cheques to **RMT Strike Fund**, and send them to: **Jimmy Knapp, General Secretary, RMT, Unity House, Euston Rd, London NW1 2BL.**

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