

1988-1989: P&O seafarers' strike



The history of P&O shipping workers who struck against wage and job cuts for 16 months. The company tried to break the strike, the government requisitioned the union's funds. The union eventually ordered the strikers back to work, defeated.

In March 1987 the ferry 'Herald of Free Enterprise' overturned in the Belgium Port of Zeebrugge and 191 passengers and crew members lost their lives. The owners, P&O plc, expressed regret but pushed on with trying to maximise their profits by cutting jobs, lengthening the remaining workers hours and cutting their pay.

In December 1987 the company told the workers' trade union, the National Union of Seamen (NUS), that they intended to reduce the annual wage bill of £35 million by £6 million by cutting 500 out of 2,300 jobs and reducing earnings by an average of £25 a week. Furthermore they would make seafarers work an extra one month a year and impose, in some cases, a work rota where some people would be working for 72 hours continuously.

The 2,300 seafarers refused to accept these ultimatums, voted to strike and stopped work on 6 February 1988; many felt betrayed by a company to which some family members and friends had literally given their lives.

Some workers also asked why a company which had just announced record profits, including £51.7 million from its European Ferries Group, needed to act in such a fashion. Sadly they missed the point. P&O, as a capitalist enterprise, needed to maximise its profits in order to prevent being taken over and in order to take over other companies. This mad rush for profits is essential for capitalism, it is capitalism!

It was thus ironic to find P&O seafarers continuously selling T-shirts during the strike with the slogan: 'Beware P&O: Profit before PEOPLE', as if other capitalist ferry companies would actually put people before profits!

Mass picketing by the seafarers, and some supporters (mainly ex-miners led by the late Terry French) initially had some success and a number of lorries booked on rival ferry operator Sealink were 'turned back'.

However, the deployment of very large numbers of police soon assisted the scab lorry and bus drivers to break the lines. The Transport and General Workers Union, who do have a

large number of lorry drivers as members, did not call upon them to respect the seafarers picket lines.

No attempts were made by the NUS officials to organise the pickets into a militant disciplined grouping who could have defended themselves against the police attacks and it is likely that any 'outside' attempts to do this would have been strongly resisted by the pickets themselves.

The NUS also later disassociated themselves from the small teams who moved away from the police on the picket line and began stoning and bricking P&O Ferrymaster lorries on the major roads to and from Dover.

The picketing did stop people going to work and for almost 2 months P&O ferries lay idle. They only sailed after an elaborate operation involving the flying of scabs to the continent, a brief training programme for new crew members, and the sailing of ferries with a skeleton crew.

It was to be some considerable time before the strike breakers felt confident enough to walk past the pickets. The NUS estimated that the financial damage caused to the company by the dispute was over £40 million. It was a sum that P&O Chairman and personal friend of Margaret Thatcher, Sir Jeffrey Sterling, was willing to spend in breaking the seafarers organisation and working class resistance.

Two bosses are sitting on a bench. One says:

"Do you know there are hundreds of ways of making a profit, but only one honest one"

"What's that one?"

"How should I know!"

Key moments

During the strike there were 2 key moments, the first when a proposed ballot of the NUS's 21,000 members was cancelled in the wake of a court injunction threatening sequestration of the union's funds. This climbdown, in the face of the Tories' anti-trade union laws, signalled a determination by the NUS leadership/bureaucracy of Sam McCluskie to remain within the law.

The forces opposed to such a strategy were weak and unorganised, few felt strong or confident enough during the strike to openly challenge McCluskie. Those that did tended to be those influenced by activists who had set up P&O Support Groups throughout the country.

Then at Easter 1988 the company announced that it had de-recognised the NUS and was pulling out of the Industry's National Maritime Board agreements. Sealink NUS members in Dover, recognising that this was an attack on the union in general and the rights of seafarers to defend themselves, decided not to cross the P&O picket lines.

It was thus Sealink management who took the NUS to court for secondary picketing as NUS Sealink members across the country escalated their actions and all Sealink ships came to a standstill. The key now was to stay out and get others out. Flying pickets were needed to take the message to all ports throughout the country.

The courts ordered the sequestration of the NUS assets, its offices were seized, staff pay was stopped and investment funds frozen. At first, with his members supporting him, McCluskie threatened defiance and the potential for mass defiance of the anti-trade union laws opened

up.

But after just 9 days, and only 3 days after a 2,000 strong supporters' march in Dover, the union purged its contempt and ordered Sealink workers back to work. Sealink workers reluctantly agreed, leaving P&O workers on strike on their own. The workers were not prepared or able to disobey their union leadership. (Incidentally the union did not, at this point, get its assets and funds back as the injunction by Sealink was lifted, only to be replaced by one from P&O itself.)

Ultimately this was the key point in the strike, a threat to all ferry operators in Britain became replaced by a dispute between an increasingly isolated workforce and a confident anti-union international employer supported by the Government, Police, Media and Courts.

Strikers continued picketing, money continued to be raised for families and to maintain the support kitchens operating in the Dover area, speakers continued to raise the issues at meetings and demonstrations. Yet the strategy to win the dispute remained absent, indeed many strikers seemed reluctant to even ask 'how to win?' as the dispute dragged on until it was formally abandoned by the NUS after 16 months.

Some lessons

For future strikes, it is worth bearing in mind the following lessons:

- Trade Union Officials are not prepared to organise and defy the anti-trade union laws
- The key to winning disputes is organising flying pickets and going directly to workers in their workplace
- Workers in struggle [and preferably before it] need to adopt a policy of organisation and action independent of the full-time officials
- Where workers are not prepared to break the anti-trade union laws when used against them then they are defeated.
- There must be established a network of rank and file workers organisations, in this case amongst seafarers, which can and will operate independently of the full-time officials.
- The defence of the picket-line from Police attacks is vital and proper stewarding is needed, legal monitoring needs arranging and sympathetic solicitors need to be on hand to help anyone arrested.

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