

MR. MOUNT

RA

cc Mr. Scholar
Mr. Walters
Mr. Ingham

IMPRESSIONS OF THE NUR CONFERENCE

As you know, I attended part of the NUR Conference, as an observer, this week. I will not attempt a full report, because the main developments were covered by the media; but some overall impressions may be worth recording.

The Conference Atmosphere

It is a highly formal and structured occasion. A roll call is taken every morning and every delegate is present. The standing orders provide for any delegate who is late to pay a 5p fine; and for anyone who wishes to leave the meeting to obtain the Chairman's consent. Railwaymen whose normal working day consists of moving around are surprisingly willing to sit docilely for a 7 hour-a-day Conference. The agenda and rules of procedure are adhered to scrupulously.

There are two distinct categories of delegate. The majority are middle aged, with a working lifetime on the railways and as NUR members, constantly referring to their railway forebears (a grandfather is obligatory; a great-grandfather one better; and a relative killed on the railway, with his dependants looked after by the NUR, is the best qualification of all); and there is a younger and generally more militant minority, often to be seen in sinister huddles drafting threatening procedural resolutions. The most articulate representative of this latter group is Brother Whipp, a Brighton signaller and graduate of Warwick University, who sponsored (and was persuaded to withdraw) a vote of no confidence in the General Secretary.

The delegates speak only briefly, possibly because they are usually tightly mandated by their branches. I saw the mandate from the Bristol No.4 branch: on only about 10% of the agenda items - and those the least contentious ones - was the delegate

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given a free hand. But both Weighell and the Assistant General Secretary, Andy Dodds, speak at much greater - and unnecessary - length.

Bad feeling is not far below the surface. Weighell's habit of attacking delegates personally - he accused one of "spewing out claptrap" - is divisive; and one of the sub committees meeting in an adjoining room ended in a shouting match that could be clearly heard in the Conference room (to which one of the participants - the influential Brother Kettle from Neasden No.1, who speaks for the LT underground - returned, demanding a public withdrawal of an insulting word that had been applied to him: Kettle later revealed that the word was "schizophrenic").

The Extent of Militancy

The militants are still a minority. Repeated votes on typical militant issues - the strike itself, the Tebbit Bill, unilateral disarmament, distribution of militant literature, incomes policy, treatment of minorities - went against them, by between 2 to 1 and 3 to 1. But they are skilled at creating repeated trials of strength which put the moderates, and Weighell in particular, on the defensive - and they did win one procedural vote against the vigorous opposition of both Weighell and the Chairman. They will be much in evidence later in the Conference, when resolutions are debated calling for regular re-election of officers, and an increase in the number of delegates.

The few members of the NUR executive who are present are generally silent, unless defending executive decisions, so it was not possible to gauge their relationship with the Conference. But Weighell's own position seems secure: he can generally command the loyalty of two-thirds of the delegates.

The Prospects

As we saw, the Conference was not prepared to carry on the strike - probably because they realised it wasn't well supported.

/But

But they are united in a number of ways that spell trouble for the future. All forms of trade union law; any reduction of public transport subsidies; all attempts to hold down wages; and anything which can be construed as an attack on the traditional practices of the railway community will be fiercely resisted, even by the moderates. And, even allowing for the rhetoric of the occasion, the outlook for the pay/productivity dispute is not good. Weighell made clear his willingness to call further industrial action if the RSNT got nowhere ("I might get a stupid letter from the Board saying they're not going to the Tribunal, and we'd be taking action again next week") and, no doubt to protect his own flank, said that the NUR would never again go out of their way to help the Board, as they did over guard/conductors on the East coast route ("relations with Peter Parker from now on will never be the same", thanks to Parker's earlier letter to all railway staff - but Parker told me last week that Weighell had telephoned him to warn that he'd have to say some rude things).

NUR's relations with ASLEF are at an all-time low. Only one delegate spoke up for ASLEF: the remainder were scathing. The railspeak codeword for the subject is "federation" (of rail unions) and I should say that federation died in Plymouth. Weighell said that the ASLEF dispute had cost BR the equivalent of a 9% pay increase for all staff, which was helpful.

Postscript

It was refreshing to witness a Conference of people whose lives are normally devoted to working in the industry they represent, unlike the TUC where the delegates spend all their lives representing. Realism occasionally shone through like a beacon in a storm - as in the case of the guard who said that in his area the guards were asked to work out their own flexible rosters because the white collar staff couldn't understand them, or the black delegate who spoke against a meaningless resolution of the militants on eradicating inequalities affecting ethnic groups. And I regret not being able to stay to witness the fate of resolution 101, calling for all uniform trousers for male staff to be fitted with zip fly; or 156, under which Croydon No.1

/Branch

Branch appeal against the General Secretary's decision not to pursue damages for Brother Niles, who was cleaning a toilet door when a splinter entered his left thumb: reminders that much of the work of any union is a good deal more mundane than the high industrial dramas played out on our television screens.

J.M.M. VEREKER

1 July 1982

Mr Whitmore

To see. John's presence in Plymouth may be noticed - we

MICHAEL SCHOLAR (from John Vereker in Plymouth) cc. Mr. Mount *Spoke*
Mr. Walters *about*
Mr. Ingham *Mis.*

THE RAILWAYS: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

You may wish to know of today's developments as seen from here. *MCS 30/6*

The issues are threefold:

- (i) whether the ACAS intervention has brought about a lasting return to work on LT;
- (ii) whether BR would agree to go to the RSNT over the NUR pay/productivity dispute;
- (iii) whether NUR will come out in support of the ASLEF strike.

The LT dispute

The ACAS discussions lasted until 2.30 this morning. I was not of course involved, but I believe my D/Transport colleague was in touch with them (and he shares my view that, with the prospects of a lengthy strike on BR, it is essential to get the tubes back to normal). The outcome, to refer the new timetables to the Railway Negotiating Committee and to reinstate the former timetables in the interim, is not a solution. But it should buy peace for a few weeks and does provide a mechanism for a compromise.

The NUR dispute

Clifford Rose came down here at lunchtime for discussions with Weighell. They agreed the following statement which has just been released to the press:

"The NUR has conveyed to the Railways Board its intention to refer all the matters relevant to the dispute to the RSNT, under the terms of the industry's machinery. It has the right to do so and, as a party to the machinery, the Board will appear before the Tribunal. Steps will be taken to set up the necessary arrangements and the other parties to the machinery will be informed."

/Rose and Weighell

Rose and Weighell then gave an impromptu press conference, which I penetrated. The main points to emerge were:

(a) Neither the NUR nor the press appears to have considered the possibility of raising short-term borrowing, but they both assume that BRB has not only the power but the obligation to stop paying the NUR when it runs out of money. We must be careful to say nothing to destroy that impression.

(b) Rose gave no indication at all that BRB is considering escaping from the machinery, apart from making clear its refusal to be bound by the RSNT. But it cannot now be long before BRB must seriously consider giving notice of their intention to do that, and to get out of the 1919 agreement as well.

(c) Rose said that BRB is considering sending another letter this evening to all railwaymen, and I have heard subsequently that they will in fact do so.

(d) Rose again made it clear that the pay offer will depend on what BR can afford, and not on the Tribunal's recommendation.

The ASLEF dispute

The feeling here is that NUR drivers, of whom there are only about 2,000 out of 18,000, will refuse to cross ASLEF picket lines (because in general ASLEF did not cross theirs), but that the bulk of NUR members will turn up for work. But there could still be developments on this: Weighell has just told the conference that he cannot make a recommendation about what they should do when ASLEF strikes, but he still has not had any communication from ASLEF about their intention to start a strike. The terms of any further letter from Peter Parker could also affect the outcome, and this may all come back to the floor of the conference later this week.

30 June 1982