

(From mtg. notes)

ME MINISTER

WATER STRIKE - REGIONAL PRESENTATION

The COI's regional return shows negligible regional water authority activity; unions generally making the running; editorial opinion on the whole against the strike; and declining editorial interest in the strike.

Extracts from returns are set out below:

North East

Waterworkers are reported to be hitting back after the National Water Council announced the results of a poll claiming the majority of the public feel that the workers should accept the latest pay offer. According to the story, strikers in the North East took to the streets with thousands of leaflets setting out their side of the controversy. Mr Peter Gannon, spokesman for 1400 workers in the North, is quoted: "The Water Council has gone into the propaganda business so we have had to take steps to counter what they are claiming."

CBI regional director, Mr James Cran, is reported to have said: "At present the strike has had very little effect but there's no doubt about it, if water is cut off, or contaminated, there will be lay-offs of a very high order.

Yorkshire and Humberside

Still no sign of any local campaign to encourage acceptance of the pay deal, though the Yorkshire Evening Post carries an interview with the new YWA chairman in which he gently chides the waterworkers for their action and warns of the knock-on-effects of the strike for employment prospects generally.

Scarborough Evening News carries a leader critical of the industrial action and ends with a plea for a new rewards system for the industry to be coupled with a 'no-strike' agreement.

The Sheffield Morning Telegraph quotes a YWA spokesman as saying that unless demand is reduced immediately water supplies will dry up - even in hospitals.

Halifax Courier and Huddersfield Examiner report more warnings from union leaders that emergency cover will be withdrawn if management continues to perform manual tasks.

East

Again there are no Anglian Water Authority 'management' statements on the industrial dispute. Unions are quoted at length.

There is less water strike coverage in the region's main papers today (Wednesday). In Suffolk waterworkers have ignored strike leaders and have repaired two pumps to stop raw sewage from flowing into the River Gipping at Needham Market. Not so in Ipswich where untreated effluent is flowing into the River Orwell.

Southend Evening Echo quotes an Essex Water Company spokesman as saying that water supplies can be maintained indefinitely in South East Essex.

Colchester Evening Gazette reports that waterworkers have voted in favour of maintaining emergency cover for hospitals and kidney patients.

London and South East

At Reading a local union leader has said that 'management provocation' is making his members 'very angry', reports the Evening Post. He said: "Management provocation which involves doing the jobs of the lads on strike, is making them angry."

Midlands

Water strike stories have left the front page of some of the regional dailies in the Midlands, and there are fewer column inches devoted to the strike.

The Chesterfield Star leader: "Waterworkers do have a real grievance in that their levels of pay have fallen well behind other public utility workers, but in the present circumstances their claim of 15 per cent appears unrealistic, while the offer before them of 5.8 per cent is hardly a serious acknowledgement of their case."

South West

For the time being at least, leader writers in West Country papers have mostly turned to other topics.

Gloucestershire farmers have said that the Government should bring in troops to keep supplies going.

The Wessex Water Authority reports that Dorset continues to be free of any major problems, with the public using less water.

A Somerset waterworker who has returned to work is reported by the Bristol Evening Post as saying: "The union should never have allowed the strike to reach this stage. For one thing, we should all have been balloted ... and we would not be fighting a hopeless battle for a large jump in wages."

North West

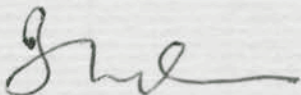
NW Water Authority chairman made no statement to press or media yesterday (he was in London), nor did anyone else. NWWA spokesmen quoted were confined to detailed effects of the strike.

Manchester Evening News blames Norman Tebbit's suggestion that union rules had been broken at a time when waterworkers were voting on 7.3 per cent offer, and says unions are also to blame for stubborn refusal to accept binding arbitration. In future, says the paper, arbitration should take precedence over industrial action.

Lancashire Evening Post columnist says strike is disgraceful and deceitful - disgraceful because of hardship imposed on elderly and deceitful because unions believe the public sector has a God-given right to more money whereas private sector has both insecurity and are settling for small increases.

Liverpool Echo publishes several indignant letters calling the strike "moral blackmail" and pointing out that many redundant and elderly or disabled pensioners paying high water rates would be happy with a fraction of the waterworkers' wage.

I am copying to the Home Secretary and to the Secretary of State for the Environment.



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2 February 1983