

PRIME MINISTER

PA

WATER STRIKE - REGIONAL PRESENTATION

Today's COI return contains no surprises and follows the well-established publicity pattern. But there is one cause for concern - the regional and local press appear to be going a little sour.

It may be surprising they have stood up so well for so long, considering the lack of effort in the regions by the Water Authorities.

Extracts from the COI report are as follows:

North East

A growing number of stories in North East newspapers about individual cases of hardship brought about by the water dispute.

One farmer is quoted as saying that the only thing he can do is to drive his animals to the nearest fresh water, which is two miles away from his farm.

In Newcastle almost 1,000 pupils are missing lessons as a result of a burst main at a local comprehensive school.

Sunderland Echo reports that overnight frosts had pushed up the number of North East homes without water well past the two thousand mark. The first major industrial complex to be affected by the water strike is Blyth Power Station which is now operating at reduced capacity. Middlesbrough Evening Gazette (9.2.83) says that security at water treatment plants throughout the North East was being tightened after fears that local strikers might copy fellow workers elsewhere.

Amid the growing concern about the situation, there was at least one ray of hope. Hartlepool Evening Mail (9.2.83) reports the managing director of the Hartlepool Water Company as saying: "We are continuing to lead a charmed life".

Yorkshire and Humberside

For the first time since the strike began the papers have more on the industrial relations aspects of the dispute than the effects on consumers.

A leader in the Bradford Telegraph and Argus says that all three parties to the dispute - Government, employers and unions - bear some responsibility for the muddle which has developed, but suggests that arbitration should now be used to end the strike.

Sheffield Morning Telegraph leader says it is time for the strikers to accept economic reality and supports the Government's position as custodian of the public purse.

East

Little coverage of the water strike in the region's papers.

Only report of hardship is in the Colchester Evening Gazette which carries a front page picture of residents of Elmstead Market, Essex, who have been on stand-pipes for two weeks.

In an editorial the same paper describes the dispute as "a national disgrace". The Government, which is the puppeteer pulling the National Water Council's strings, has hardened attitudes by its interference ... the unions have conducted their campaign with discipline and compassion - until now ... the National Water Council's handling of the dispute has been inept, bordering on the incompetent.

London and South East

Editorials in two regional evening papers are critical of employers and Government as well as unions, using words such as "ineptness" and "pantomime" to describe Government and employers' actions.

Brighton Evening Argus (9.2.83) says Government, employers and unions must all share the blame for the muddle of the water strike. In the "potentially catastrophic" dispute all concerned had drifted "from the inept to the downright farcical".

Evening Post, Kent (9.2.83) says the present situation could have been different but for a "boob" on the employers' side.

It all comes down to simple mathematics that a child of ten could handle. But it seems that the bosses are not too hot on their sums. Union representatives are justifiably annoyed at what they see as a gross mishandling of the negotiations by the employers. There must now be serious doubts about the credibility of the Water Council's negotiating team.

Oxford Mail reports that union bosses and workers are angry with Sir Hugh Fish, Chief Executive of the Thames Water Authority, following his personal letter in which he asked them to return to work. Move was an "ultimatum" and a "management con trick" which would not weaken the strikers' resolve.

Sussex Weekly 'Eastbourne Gazette' (9.2.83) in an editorial on the water strike and a planned one-day strike by local busmen says both are "stupidly unnecessary". Both reflect the greed of trade unions grabbing for bigger slices of cake while nearly four million of their fellow citizens are grubbing along on dole pay.

South West

Western Daily Press leader column, commenting on the strike says, "Public sympathy for the strike is already being flushed away. The public is now rapidly coming to the view that the water strikers' claims don't add up and that the employers can't add up. The time has come to knock their heads together.

Midlands

Coventry Evening Telegraph last night described the 8.5% plus productivity elements pay deal as a very good one. But the negotiations were handled so appallingly badly by the employers that they now have the worst of both worlds - a strike they cannot end even by paying out more than would probably have kept the peace in the first place.

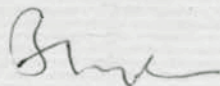
North West

No broadcasts yesterday by NW Water Authority and none planned.

Several papers quote CBI President's statement that the water-workers wanted to climb over anyone's back to the top of earnings league without saying who should be relegated to make room for them.

According to a GMBU official reported in Liverpool Daily Post, the Government is steering towards a bitter head-on dispute with workers in water, gas and electricity.

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



B. INGHAM
10 February 1983