

PRIME MINISTER

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Ms 1/2

WATER STRIKE: REGIONAL PRESENTATION

After a more encouraging report yesterday, the COI's return today makes dismal reading.

There is no evidence of an employer offensive - let alone a sustained one - in the regions.

Their activity is largely confined to commenting on the effects of the dispute which seems not to be very disruptive.

The unions are shown to be reacting unhappily or aggressively to employer comment - eg. in London and the South East.

On the whole editorial opinion is with the Government.

Below are extracts from the regional reports:

North East

"Northumbrian Water Authority spokesmen continue to comment in stories on the effects of the strike."

Yorkshire and Humberside

"Still no evidence of any efforts to sell the pay deal to the unions or to consumers."

"There has been a marked absence of leader comments about the strike - which is perhaps surprising considering the inconvenience and potential damage a prolonged strike will cause."

"Warnings from the unions that escalation of the industrial action will occur if there are any further attempts by management to perform waterworkers' functions or to call in the troops."

"The only condemnation of the strikers which I have seen today is in a Halifax Courier report of a local Conservative MP addressing a meeting of a neighbouring Conservative association."

East

"Again, Anglian Water Authority is saying nothing about its side of the industrial dispute. A press conference will be held today (Tuesday) but I understand that no 'management' statement will be issued."

"Main coverage in Eastern Region's papers today concerns the threat of a polluted water supply.

"Cambridge Evening News reports that the sewage treatment system is breaking down and there is now a real threat that the River Cam will be badly polluted."

"Southend Evening Echo reports that the attitude of strikers is hardening. No news of hardship as a result of the industrial action. An Essex Water Company spokesman is reported as saying that a publicity campaign to get the public to cut consumption is working. Consumption has dropped by ten per cent.

London and South East

"The Evening Argus, Brighton reported officers of the National Union of Public Employees had condemned as 'deplorable' comments at the weekend by Southern Water Authority chairman Sir Godfrey Taylor in which he said if the 1,700 manual workers won more than the present 7.3 per cent offer redundancies could be possible."

"Newspaper said the officers claimed Sir Godfrey was using his position to make political statements and appeared to be acting under instructions from the Government against the legitimate claim from low paid workers. Officers said his comments had done more harm than the strike ever could."

"Elsewhere Sir Godfrey said the South Coast was faring a lot better than most parts of the country. He laid much of the blame for the troubles with union leaders and not rank and file members."

South West

"A pro-national Water Council editorial in the Western Morning News suggests that the failure of the unions to ballot their members could prove to be a tactical blunder."

"Another leader in the Dorset Echo suggests that disruption of services had been kept to a minimum 'largely due to the strikers themselves'. It concludes that arbitration is the answer."

"More examples in the South West of waterworkers producing their pay slips to the press in support of their claim that their earnings 'approached nowhere near the figure of £134 bandied about'."

Midlands

"Northampton Chronicle and Echo leader said the Government seemed anxious to raise the temperature of the strike. Some pronouncements by Ministers had been provocative. This suggested their tactics may be to break the strike by a quick confrontation."

"The indications were that the Government was taking a very hawkish attitude which must strengthen the conviction that Mrs Thatcher and her Ministers intend to add the waterworkers' scalps to those of the health workers and civil servants."

"Coventry Evening Telegraph: STWA management were planning a new bid to persuade striking waterworkers to restore the emergency cover in Coventry and Warwickshire."

"The Managing Director of Corah, the big Leicester knitwear firm, said: 'People do not realise the seriousness of the strike. Ultimately, the whole company, which in Leicester means about 2,000 employees, depends on pure water supplies'."

North West

"George Mann, chairman of NWWA, has been interviewed on the telephone by Radio One and said that effects of strike were slow deterioration - 700 homes were now without mains supplies. He gave no other interviews yesterday."

"Lancashire Evening Post says it is time for arbitration in the dispute. Similarly, the Bolton Evening News says every effort should be made through arbitration to seek an early solution - for everyone's sake."

"Several papers, including Blackburn, Burnley and Oldham Evenings, report that freezing weather may force the Government to intervene in the strike."

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

B. INGHAM 1 February 1983