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TIME MINISTER

WATER STRIKE - REGIONAL PRESENTATION

Use of contractors brings reaction from waterworkers whose representatives threaten to continue industrial action beyond a settlement.

Evidence of a little more advocacy from Water Authority chairmen.

Editorials strongly in favour of return to work and critical of unions for not doing so.

Details of reports are as follows:

North East

Waterworkers in the North East have threatened to continue their industrial action after the national dispute is settled. Reports reflect the unions' bitter mood after what is seen as provocation by management in doing the jobs of strikers.

Mr Peter Gannon, regional leader of the Joint Strike Committee, is on record as saying that some workers would refuse to return to work and others would not do overtime or standby duty. The management have continually broken through the men's picket lines to do their work.

Comments follow the latest incident in which the Sunderland and South Shields Water Company stepped in to replenish chlorine supplies at a treatment works near Consett, to safeguard public health for 700,000 consumers.

Meanwhile, confirmation that the Northumbrian Water Authority plans to increase its charges by about 15% has been described as a 'stunning blow' by North East industrialists. The NWA blames the decision on the recession and the fact that industry is using less water than had been expected. Regional CBI's reaction is: "It could be the last straw for some firms that are fighting a losing battle against the recession."

Yorkshire & Humberside

Overall coverage of the dispute is again reduced though the worsening plight of consumers caused by the withdrawal of emergency cover is highlighted by most papers.

Yorkshire Post quotes the YWA chairman's appeal to strikers to return to work now that the inquiry is under way but regional union leader Mike Fisher has rejected the plea.

The front page lead in the Halifax Courier suggests that a bitter row has broken out between craftsmen and manual workers in the industry. Craftsmen could go ahead with industrial action at the weekend even if the manual dispute is settled.

Leader comment in the Huddersfield Examiner appeals to the strikers to call off their action now that the inquiry is under way.

East

For the first time since the dispute started, Anglian Water Authority chairman, Bernard Henderson, has spoken in public. He said he thought there would be a settlement this weekend. East Anglian Daily Times quotes Mr Henderson, "We have had many inquiries and telephone calls from all over the region saying they (the waterworkers) would like to come back to work."

He agreed that the effects of the strike had not been as bad as many thought. "I think water authorities might have under-estimated the sense of responsibility of many of our men who, confronted by health or safety risks, willingly turned out and repaired bursts or whatever else was necessary to restore the supply."

Same paper quotes Mr Peter Bray, chief executive of AWA, who said that once there was a settlement he thought it would take a week to repair all the bursts and that the sewage works would be operating fully in that time. Asked the position of consumers applying for rebates he said, "We shall have to wait and see what the Government decides. As far as AWA is concerned we are not unsympathetic." There had been few approaches thus far.

Colchester Evening Gazette says let us hope both sides in this damaging dispute can make the inquiry's findings stick.

A Cambridge Evening News leader compliments the waterworkers of Cambridge Water Company for voting in favour of maintaining emergency cover. It shows that they have not lost their responsible approach. It is a pity however that they and their fellow workers elsewhere had not agreed to return to work instead.

London and South East

Editorials in two regional evening papers say that with the committee of inquiry into the water dispute being set up watermen should now return to work. Kent Evening Post says their decision to carry on with the strike seems to have been made out of "sheer bloodymindedness." Like the Water Council's negotiators before them, the waterworkers themselves are now in danger of losing their credibility.

Argus also reports unions have criticised Southern Water Authority chairman, Sir Godfrey Taylor, for being out of touch with his workforce following his call for a return to work. Local NUPE official is quoted as saying that Sir Godfrey "is yet again misjudging the men's grievance over pay as they will not go back without concrete assurances on a pay rise."

South West

Western Daily Press which quotes Wessex Water Authority as saying that more employees in Somerset went back to work yesterday, bringing the county's services virtually back to normal.

Midlands

Birmingham Post said in a front page story today that the water dispute in the Midlands could go on even after a national settlement. Strikers warned that a settlement would be difficult to reach after management staff from STWA and outside contractors had restored the efficiency of a Midland treatment works. Coventry Evening Telegraph said last night in a leader that it was "maybe fitting that the dispute should draw to an end as enigmatically as it began. From an unjustified claim, appallingly handled by the employers, to 12 hours of talks trying to make words mean something else - and now a continuing strike about nothing. Lessons are clear ... but the most important is that calamity was never as near as everyone imagined. Learning them may mean the unions won't have the same strong hand in future."

Holland-with-Boston MP Richard Body was quoted in Lincolnshire Free Press as saying that he had received several letters from discontented strikers. "I am sure that they are not strike happy and that most of the workers in this area want arbitration."

Birmingham Post's second leader today comments on Mr Tebbit's view that the Government might be forced to conclude from recent events that there was a case for further legislation directed at those in the essential services, by possibly removing from them the immunity to civil claims, might not be as provocative as it first sounds.

Strikers' action could leave the Government little choice but to remove the immunity from unions involved with essential services. It could, however, be used as a bargaining tool in the present dispute.

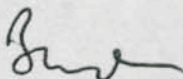
North West

NWWA chairman appeared on Granada Television urging watermen to get back to work without delay, particularly now that liming is essential in Tameside to prevent lead levels in some homes rising too high. Chairman also on three local radios with same message and chief executive appeared on BBC Television similarly.

Bolton Evening News in an editorial comment wonders why the water-workers cannot return to work forthwith since they have said they will honour the committee of inquiry's findings: "Why prolong both theirs and the public's agony?" Similar editorials in the Blackpool and Oldham evening papers.

Liverpool Echo reports that striking watermen restored water supply to a children's hospital and donated their pay for the job to charity, according to union policy. But because they were paid wages, DHSS cut their supplementary benefits. "We've learned our lesson" said an angry strike committee member.

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



B. INGHAM

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