

WATER STRIKE - REGIONAL PRESENTATION

Not much coverage, except reportage of inquiry and bursts.

Difference of opinion between employers and unions on likely effect of craftsmen's strike.

Militants will try to prolong strike as long as possible to allow men to be "consulted".

Useful leader in East Anglia Daily Times on comparability, leap-frogging etc and its potential consequences.

Details from the reports are as follows:

South East

Water strike coverage noted today is confined to factual reports about the Committee of Inquiry meetings and local effects of the dispute. A Southern Water Authority spokesman is quoted as saying that craftsmen's strike action will not affect supplies in Sussex.

South West

Western Daily Press says that the Bristol Waterworks Company shut off 29 mains to stop millions of gallons pouring into drains through bursts and leaks. This is described as a dramatic turn-about by the Company, which previously maintained a policy of letting burst pipes run.

North East

Union leaders in the North East are insisting that the findings of the three-man water inquiry team must be put to a national ballot of the striking membership.

In front page stories both the Journal (Newcastle) and the Northern Echo (Darlington) report that hopes of a quick solution to the dispute vanished last night.

Northumbrian Water Authority is allowing water to pour out of 160 burst mains rather than disconnect supplies.

Shields Gazette (21.2.83) said the situation in the region had been worsened by the walk-out of 200 craftsmen pursuing their own pay claim. This means, says the paper, that even if the strike is settled today (Tuesday) repairs to burst mains and maintenance at key treatment works would not be carried out.

Midlands

Leicester Mercury reported in a page one lead last night that county strikers were disappointed and angry about the delays in publishing the inquiry report. Men on a picket line said they were anxious and ready to return to work.

Strikers in North Staffordshire claimed they had been stabbed in the back over an emergency cover agreement when private contractors were brought in to repair bursts.

Wolverhampton Express and Star's second leader said the 11th hour machinations of the water dispute were not being helped by the demonstrations of picket power at ACAS - an unnecessary contrast to the sensible negotiations taking place indoors.

There were fewer water stories yesterday.

North West

No broadcasts by Water Authority spokesmen yesterday (Chairman was in London).

Burnley Evening Star reports strikers in the North West were still demanding a vote on any back-to-work recommendation. Two-thirds of the 500 craftsmen in the region had already been out for the duration of the strike by refusing to cross picket lines and yesterday they began their own official stoppage. NWWA spokesman said it would not make a lot of difference. But the Blackpool evening paper quotes NUPE leader John Dempsey: "This new strike will have enormous impact."

East

The wage gap between waterworkers and other utilities is the theme of an editorial in today's East Anglian Daily Times. The waterworkers were given a big wage increase four years ago to bring them into line with electricity workers. The electricity workers were then given a similar wage award which opened the gap once again.

By processes of this kind, says the paper, workers throughout the public sector achieved enormous increases in the early years of the present Government. In two years their wages rose until they were 10% higher than the wages of their counterparts in the private sector. At the same time public sector prices and charges rose much faster than anywhere else.

It was this that converted Mrs Thatcher and Sir Geoffrey Howe to the need for an incomes policy in the public sector. After a number of tough battles, they have more or less got the problem under control.

Even so, prices in the public sector were still being increased by 15% last year, at a time when inflation was only 5%.

Easily the most worrying feature of the waterworkers' claim this year has been that anything that they won would automatically be demanded by other public sector workers.

This is a possibility which is of concern not only to the Government but to the country as a whole; it should particularly disturb trade union movement whose members' jobs and living standards would be at stake.

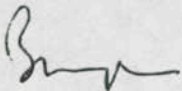
South Evening Echo, in a front page lead story, reports that South East Essex will face another fortnight of water problems even if a peace formula is announced today. Rebel workers could defy any call for a return to work, unless they are first given a chance to vote on it.

Elsewhere the region's papers report few problems.

Yorkshire and Humberside

Very little of regional interest in today's newspapers.

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



B. INGHAM

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