BOAC: The Anatomy of a Strike

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POLITICAL INTERFERENCE IN A NATIONALISED INDUSTRY

In October, 1958 occurred a landmark strike. The entire fleet of the British Overseas Airways Corporation then at United Kingdom airports was grounded by an "unofficial" strike of engineering workers, all of whom subsequently received dispute pay from their unions. The strike was important because it Klieg-lit the political and industrial tensions in a nationalised industry. This industry was being manipulated by a Conservative Government torn between conflicting aims: the imperial necessities of maintaining a "chosen instrument policy", and at the same time providing for the expansion of the entrepreneurial interests in the industry.

An important aftermath of the strike was the Court of Enquiry appointed by Mr. Ian Macleod, Minister of Labour, which made an astonishing open political attack not only upon the strikers and their domestic organisation, but also upon officials of the unions. This shrewish report attempted to damage, in particular, Ian Mikardo, M.P. and me. It obviously based its criticisms on what a Times third leader of the 23rd December, 1958, called the "records" of the men concerned: this was clearly a generalised exhibition of spleen. Why was this? As one of the men concerned, it seems extremely simple to me: they were anxious to discredit the political-industrial views I had—perhaps most important—that the employees of the industry should have a say in the formation and execution of policy.

The flashpoint of the strike was the wages question. The engineering workers were angered by the evasive and prevaricating postures adopted by the employers' side of the National Joint Council for Civil Air Transport. The action taken by the workers to enforce a settlement of their claim included a restriction on overtime. They wanted a promise made about a retrospective date. They thought they had got it—but the employers later denied having made any commitment. This "breach of faith" brought about the final decision to restrict overtime. Did the employers make the promise? Did the trade union negotiators make an error? And pass ambiguous information to their colleagues? The generally-held view now is that the employers' spokesmen did give a guarantee, but whether they were mandated to do this is another (permanently) shrouded point.

In the meantime the engineers had been working overtime to get the Comet IVs first across the North Atlantic. But when they heard that the employers had repudiated the national understanding, the Shop Stewards' Committee recommended a work-to-rule on the 9th October, coupled with a reimposition of the ban. The employers still refused to budge at national level. The situation worsened, until five men were told on the evening of the 13th October that they would be dismissed at the shift end if they were not available for overtime. As the five men were only carrying out a decision arrived at by a mass meeting of workers, the whole shift walked out, as had been predicted at the earlier minor-management meetings; pickets were established and the B.O.A.C. strike was under way.

As Geoffrey Sinclair wrote in Tribune under the heading "Who is sabotaging the Comet":
"The strike is for the reinstatement of five dismissed men who refused to work overtime. B.O.A.C. say they didn't really dismiss them at all. "The shop steward asked them to repeat the sackings in his presence", said the Chairman of the Stewards' Committee, Sid Maitland, at Tuesday's mass meeting. They did so.

"He asked the staff manager if he had the authority to sack. He replied that he had been 'specially authorised'.

"The mass meeting decided 'we go back only, with the victimised members—and on the conditions that prevailed at that time'. The vote?—4,000 to nil.

"It is well known that Mr. Harold Watkinson wants to sack some B.O.A.C. workers and later divert traffic to the privately-owned companies. That is why he is believed to have told B.O.A.C. to 'get tough'."

Most of the unions have been in the machinery of negotiation since 1947, and this was only the second strike in which they had been involved: the earlier strike was due to the reluctance of electricians to work with certain non-unionists who were conducting militant anti-trade-union propaganda.

National Joint Council

The National Joint Council is a typical Whitley-type body. Out of the working of this orthodox instrument of the mixed economy—with the employers' side composed of four publicly-owned bodies and several private concerns—has come a large number of highly developed agreements. But the pace of negotiations has perceptibly slowed and staggered since the return of the Conservative Government in 1951, and the change in the policy of that Government towards the nationalised organisations which aims at "encouraging" the private operator.

Why is this? There seem to be several main reasons: the Government has advised the Boards of the Air Transport Corporations to slow up their wage negotiations, to avoid embarrassing the engineering employers. There has also been a desire to "have a crack" at the unions, who are holding up Government policy for the diversion of traffic to private companies. Several successful disputes have enraged some of the private companies, and there is no doubt that they have urgently signalled to their friends in the Government. Top civil servants have been overheard reflecting Ministerial views; one of them has said, indiscreetly, that one of the reasons for "building up the private companies, was that the unions generally speaking did not have many members in the private companies, and it was a good thing to cut them down to size a bit."
Much of what was said, officially on behalf of my union, at the subsequent Court of Enquiry dealt with difficulties since the Conservative victory of 1951. Here is part of what I said myself:

"Over the past few years the settlement of issues raised through the formal negotiating machinery has become more difficult. The situation has been made worse by the differing degrees of authority granted to representatives by their higher managements. On many occasions they have been given so limited a mandate that they have been quite unable to negotiate, incapable of foreseeing the more difficult. The situation has been made worse by the subsequent Court of Enquiry dealt with difficulties

"This has caused considerable difficulties in reaching early and mutually satisfactory settlements, as Union officers normally attend at these meetings clad in the authority of their Executive Councils, while the management representatives only too often have been of middle or junior rank and quite unable to do more than attend the meeting in question and provide a note to the responsible Departmental Managers, who have to bear any financial burdens on their agreed inner-Corporation budgets: these are the men the Union negotiators never meet . . . . The Employers' Side for mutual protection, sails like a wartime convoy—as fast as its slowest member . . . . This requires to be said in this Court as, otherwise, the actual detonation within B.O.A.C. might obscure a more fundamentally serious position".

**Support from other Unions**

This statement received remarkable—and unsought—corroboration in the statements made by other trades unions. The British Airline Pilots' Association, for example, through its Secretary, Mr. Follows, said:

"Negotiations at national level have never moved very fast but they have tended to move even more slowly during the past year or so . . . . Delays in negotiation have become so frequent that the Association on one occasion has been constrained to observe that the Employers were attempting to be deliberately provocative.

"It is difficult at times for the Association to explain to the rank and file member the reason for the delay, and even more difficult to get him to accept it. Direct action is frequently advocated by those who do not think too deeply about the course of action they are advocating, indeed it is sometimes advocated by those who do when the frustration becomes intense".

Mr. Follows was followed by the Secretary of the Aircraft Section of the Radio Officers' Union, Mr. Lamb, who said in part:

". . . A detailed claim was made . . . on June 3rd, 1958. It was 3 1/2 months before the Employers met us to give a reply. We would suggest that a delay of this length was quite inexcusable. It was bound to cause, and did in fact cause, a sense of frustration amongst our members".

After him came Mr. Gregory, the Assistant General Secretary of the Merchant Navy and Officers' Airline Association, who commented:

". . . There are invariably long, tedious and frustrating delays in effecting settlements. These delays in negotiations so far as our members are concerned, not only cause resentment and frustration to those charged with the negotiations, but place the Association in an invidious position in trying to explain to sensible, reasonable men, the reasons for these delays taking place . . . ."

"But why was there a strike? There is folklore in the industry which says that a tiny activist group of employers' representatives wanted to "face up to a strike" at an earlier date. This story goes further: it is alleged that a dispute of some kind did not come to a head in the autumn because of the imminence of the Labour and Conservative Party Conferences, where all the issues might have got an airing. It is also said that a Minister "warned-off" the managerial "activists" for a while.

If it is true that any group of the Employers' Side was pressing for a pre-set combat with the Unions in order to soften them up for redundancy, this might be thought to be a disgraceful attitude: even worse, it is moronic. A former President of the American General Electric Company once discussed a similar situation by describing to his executives a little girl who began painting a picture of God. Her mother said: "Honey, God is a spirit and no one knows what he looks like." Firmly replied the little girl: "They will when I finish." There is quite clearly a need for more long range development of decent industrial relations mechanisms inside B.O.A.C. even on the lowest technical level, as gambles are still being undertaken to see what happens when "I finish".

**General Lack of Confidence**

There seems little doubt that in most of the nationalised industries, and the Airways Corporations are no exception, although profit-making employer-owners do not exist, their moves are as lively and virile as they ever were. Every large-scale organisation needs a certain amount of confidence amongst and between the people who work within it, if it is to operate at as high a degree of efficiency as is possible in a mixed economy governed by a Conservative administration. The minimum amount of confidence in the short term future of B.O.A.C. ceased to exist from about January, 1958. From then on it was inevitable that one or more disputes of a critically important character would take place. The creation of a mood of scepticism amongst the workers towards the Board of B.O.A.C. germinated and blossomed under the influence of these factors:

(i) A disappointment at the lack of opportunities to take part in the close analysis which precedes the announcement of a decision at a joint consultative meeting.

(ii) An awareness that very few persons were progressing from the shop floor to senior positions in the 12 years since Labour Government nationalisation.

(iii) A feeling of dismay and bitterness about the structure of the industry and the defence by substantial sections of the management of rejected and outworn laissez-faire employer attitudes.

(iv) And, most importantly, a belief that the Conservative Ministers, starting with Mr. Lennox Boyd and continuing to Mr. Harold Watkinson, were stuffing the Board of B.O.A.C. with persons closely reflecting their own doctrinaire attitude. One of the Conservative Ministers of Transport and Civil Aviation, Mr. Boyd Carpenter, is said to have threatened to "chop the Corporation into bits" unless his plans at that time were accepted. As a result of that, some senior executives who had been devoted to the principle that Britain needed a "chosen instrument" to compete—mainly with the Americans—took fright. They decided to offer to a hungry Minister bits and pieces of their business so that these might be handed to the feverishly agitating private airline companies.

[By this stage some of these were being backed by extremely powerful shipping interests such as Blue Star, Furness Withy, Clan and the immensely influential P. & O. Group.]
Some B.O.A.C. Managers said they were satisfied with what they called a balanced "partly-socialised" industry. I pointed out in one meeting that the term "partly-socialised" was as unnatural as terming a girl-friend "partly-pregnant", and just as confusing.

B.O.A.C. people who work at London Airport are deeply involved in the minutiae of the industry. They study the aviation Press; are eager to go on training courses; and in the words of one of them, "the heavier-than-air flying machine is here to stay, and we happen to like it..." This results in a heightened awareness of the interplay of factors involved in the industry. They study the results of B.O.A.C.'s financial results. If there is a civil war in Indonesia, B.O.A.C. is affected. If the Australian Government cuts down on imports from the United Kingdom, business houses send less mail and B.O.A.C. sees its first-class mail revenue slump.

Other Major Problems

Added to this, there have been two other major problems. As colonial territories gain independence, the British public air carrier constantly finds that it does not have an automatic prescriptive right to the traffic: newly independent Governments often want their own airline and, while they may be prepared to do a commercial deal with B.O.A.C., it usually means that formerly guaranteed revenues become much more speculative.

Another persistently formidable hobble to B.O.A.C. has been the use of British aircraft. The clamour of the aircraft manufacturers' lobby has made itself felt in the Ministries and as a result of this, B.O.A.C. and B.E.A. have had similar problems. The development costs that both Corporations have had to face because British firms have provided machines still full of technical "bugs", now run into millions of pounds—which represent a hidden subsidy to the British aircraft manufacturing industry. Ian Mikardo, M.P., Chairman of the Trade Union side of the National Joint Council, mentioned this in his statement to the Court of Enquiry, saying:

"... It has seemed to me that during the course of your proceedings... the word 'political' has sometimes been used naively, as though it were a dirty word; but the hard fact is, whether we like it or not, that the boundary between the political and the industrial is an imprecise and shifting boundary, because the job security of the workers is often directly affected by political decisions.

"Let me give some examples. After the war the Government, both Governments that we have had since the war, decided that the Corporations ought to make do for most of the time with British aircraft types even when better ones were available from America. That may well have been, probably was, the right decision to make in the wider national interest, but there is no doubt that that decision lowered the employing capacity of the Corporations and lowered the earning capacity of the workers..."

He added:

"... Then, of course, there is the political decision which refused to allow B.O.A.C. to tender for troop contracts, which would provide a good deal of work in the off-peak periods.

"There has, too, been the whittling away of part of the Corporation's activities by the growth of colonial coach services to East Africa done by some of the Corporation competitors who have been sheltered for the purpose; and more recently, the giving to one of the Corporation's competitors of an arbitrary percentage of the Corporation's traffic to West Africa, and this, Sir, mark you, at a time when the Corporation was beginning to talk about large-scale redundancy amongst its engineering staff. Nothing could more clearly illustrate, it seems to me, the imprecise nature of the boundary between the political and the industrial in this industry.

"Gentlemen, there was this great loss of the worker's confidence in the B.O.A.C. top management at the time of the Board reorganisation, and I certainly cannot put this point better than it was put at the time by the Labour Correspondent of The Times newspaper, who said at the time, on 5th May, 1956, this:

"The watchful and suspicious attitude now taken up by union leaders and members alike in the air transport Corporations is a marked change from the co-operative spirit which, up to now, has contrasted with the less happy relations existing in some other nationalised industries.'

"I am very sorry to have to say that the fears which were then felt have turned out to be only too well justified."

This, of course, is a reflection upon Government policy, which poured £400 million into the development of engine and air-frames by direct subsidy in 9 post-war years, without ever creating a situation where planned families of aircraft could be produced with one generation replacing another, as is done in the great American companies of Douglas and Lockheed. Instead, the subsidies have been spread amongst too many firms: the technicians have been too finely dispersed. There has been no real month-to-month check on how the money was being spent. The result? A highly impressive yearly display of prototypes at Farnborough and only one truly economic production aircraft—the Viscount.

The Comet IV

While the Comet IV is a delightful aircraft in which to fly, it represents—still—a marginal commercial operation. This is easy to see when it stands alongside the large Boeing 707 on the apron at London Airport. In one development engineer's office, there used to hang a cartoon which showed an aero-dynamically impressive 12-engined aircraft outside a spectacular hangar with a brisk but bland salesman saying to the purchasing airline's manager: "Of course, we have still got a few bugs to iron out in this one. Currently the difficulty is getting it off the ground..." After a while the engineer concerned took it down, as he said it worried him too much.

But leading the column of separate distrusts amongst the workers was one fused with anger. This was the policy of encouragement of private carriers. They identified the changes in the Board of B.O.A.C, which occurred in 1955, with a further extension of the policy of permitting private companies to fly on routes pioneered by the public corporations (which had been accomplished with the aid of massive State subsidies). At the Court of Enquiry into the strike, I spoke about this, because there had been considerable discussion and commotion at the engineering base around this point. I said in part:

"Since 1951, the changes in Government policy towards the nationalised airlines have led to constantly developing frictions. The members of my Association within B.O.A.C. firmly believe that it is the intention of the present Government progressively to divert traffic away from the Corporation and into privately-owned profit-making airlines. They, together with other sections of the staff—and the Trade Union side of the National Joint Council—viewed with some concern the appointment of the present Chairman of B.O.A.C. It is well known that he—during his
term of office in B.E.A.—did not get along with the unions and there were a number of sharp exchanges arising out of reorganisation and redundancy. Following the change of Government policy towards the two publicly-owned 'chosen instruments' for civil aviation, the present chairman of B.O.A.C. (then a private citizen) became the deputy chairman of the Air Transport Advisory Council, which advises the Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation on applications by privately-owned companies to fly as compulsory associates of the two State airlines.

"The recommendations of this body are not published; however, the private companies have grown extensively from that time to this and, it is submitted, demonstrate a basis for the underlying concern of the public corporation workers who fear that the continued encroachment of these companies on to the lucrative routes, and the loss of traffic or slowing up of the rate of expansion of the public corporations, will result in their dismissal. On his appointment to the chairmanship of B.O.A.C, Sir Gerard d'Erlanger of course relinquished his deputy chairmanship of the Air Transport Advisory Council. However, in the eyes of my members he is identified with this policy of traffic diversion..." My Association also organises workers in the private airlines. Some companies maintain sub-standard wages and conditions, and resist trade union organisation...

"To return to morale within B.O.A.C.: the appointment of Sir Gerard d'Erlanger was complicated by the Minister's decision to make his appointment a part-time one and also to appoint a civil servant as a full-time deputy chairman. The Board of B.O.A.C. subsequently exercised its rights to appoint a full-time managing director. This curious split-management control at the top has, in our view, led to some of the frictions and difficulties with which we are faced today.

"These changes convulsed both management and trade union opinion and had a very considerable effect upon morale because they tended to underline the fact that the principal posts within the industry were not to be filled by workers qualifying themselves and advancing up a defined promotion ladder..."

[Figures extracted from the annual reports of the Air Transport Advisory Council show that, whereas B.O.A.C. has had an increase for 1956-57 over 1953-54 of 41.6% passengers carried and 28.4% load short ton miles, and B.E.A. 48.6% and 66.8% respectively, independent companies operating scheduled services as associates of B.O.A.C. or B.E.A. have had increases of 190.3% and 212.1%].

Some of Mr. Mikardo's comments on this issue provoked a statement from Mr. d'Erlanger, who first used the word "mischievous" in connection with Mr. Mikardo's evidence. However, he made the following interesting admission in discussing the duties of the Deputy Chairman of B.O.A.C. in respect of B.O.A.C.'s "subsidiary and associated companies". He said: "...I would like to make it clear that the Associates to which I refer above are not the Independent Companies to which I referred earlier, but the Corporations, under the operation of the Government in 1952 granted associate agreements, a policy which has caused difficulties and frictions." This is an interesting statement coming from the Chairman of B.O.A.C. who had been politically labelled "chosen instruments" for civil aviation, the present chairmanship of the Air Transport Advisory Council. However, in the eyes of my members he is identified with this policy of traffic diversion..." My Association also organises workers in the private airlines. Some companies maintain sub-standard wages and conditions, and resist trade union organisation...

The report went on to comment wapsishly:

"107. We think it right, however, to refer to certain of the views put before us by Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Mikardo, who is Chairman of the Trade Union side of the National Joint Council and a former Chairman of the Council. Both these gentlemen spoke of a lowering of morale in the industry and attributed this in the main to an alleged change in Government policy with regard to civil aviation, together with a change in personnel at B.O.A.C. In particular Mr. Mikardo referred to the appointment of Sir Gerard d'Erlanger as part-time Chairman of B.O.A.C. and Sir George Cribbett as full-time deputy Chairman. These changes, we were told, caused 'widespread consternation'."

Astonishingly, in spite of what had been said to them about the adverse impact of these policy changes upon the industry, they blandly stated, "it is not our concern to pronounce on the wisdom or otherwise of alleged changes in Government policy". This was in spite of the corroboration of Mr. d'Erlanger! But, having said that, they proceeded to give the following opinion:

"Much of what Mr. Mikardo said was mischievous and much of what Mr. Jenkins told us was both mischievous and irrelevant. We find it difficult to understand the reference to 'widespread consternation'..."

The Court of Enquiry obviously thought these matters were not important. They said:

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matter which was concerned with Government policy and that meeting was addressed by certain of the Trade Union side of the National Joint Council, including Mr. Mikardo, who was then its Chairman. This is indicative of a trend of behaviour on the part of certain groups which have been active in the industry. We feel that there is insufficient recognition among certain members of the Trade Union side that the intrusion of political issues into the field of industrial relations with the possible use of industrial action to promote political ends is not compatible with the development of harmonious industrial relations and the smooth working of constitution procedures."

The Court does not mention—perhaps it did not know—that the mass meeting on the 26th July, 1957, concerned itself with the criticisms of B.O.A.C.'s Board, and marked the beginning of a loss of confidence in and suspicion of the motives of the Board as far as the private operators were concerned. This attitude of judicial ignorance is most curious against the background of the Press controversy at the time of Mr. d'Erlanger's appointment.

At that time, the workers were taking similar views, and a delegate conference at London Airport of the 1st May, 1956, unanimously carried a long resolution which included these views:

"... The recent Board changes have caused great dissatisfaction and unrest amongst our members, because of his attitude to public ownership, we view with extreme disquiet the appointment of a man who, in the past, has proved to be unsuitable in a similar position in B.E.A."

This neglect or deliberate abstention of the Court led to its report being built upon the wind: at a meeting of the Trade Union side of the National Joint Council for Civil Air Transport held on the 6th February, 1958, its report was rejected as "failing to provide any solution to the problems of the industry."

But the lessons of the Court are still being learned: the distinction between official and unofficial strikes is largely a post-war Labour Government-atmosphere frame of mind. And it was complicated by the fact that the strike took place in a nationalised industry where a conciliation and consultative machinery was, on paper, well developed, with a wages and salary structure comparable with other industries, but where the trade union officer tended to see their separate responsibilities submerged into a large anonymous trade union "Side".

In this situation the Government decided that it was strong enough to undertake a Court of Enquiry and this was announced brusquely to the unions without asking for their views. However, the strike went on until the terms of settlement were agreed which protected the retrospective date (a prime factor in the dispute). Obviously the Minister of Labour hoped to confuse together in the public mind myths of "communist domination" of the strike, with the activities of a number of Left-Wing Social Democrats whose activities he was much more concerned about.

Did anyone plan the strike? Some managers were spoiling for a fight: the Government were not averse to a challenge being thrown down to the unions. In this sort of situation the only doubt was the length of the time-scale to the opening of the battle.

Not every executive in B.O.A.C. wanted a dispute: most of them did not. Some worked hard to avoid it, but failed.

The responsibility is that of the interfering Ministers. What were they up to? Even Trevor Evans criticised the Minister of Labour in a Daily Express features headed "This Awful Shambles at Midnight... . . It set off a devastating idea, Mr. Macleod—that you were 'doing a deal'."

It may well be that Mr. Macleod was influenced by the four-shilling pamphlet advocating measures of restriction on the activities of the Trades Unions, entitled A Giant's Strength: Some thoughts on the constitutional and legal position of Trade Unions in England. This was prepared by the Inns of Court Conservative and Unionist Society, and urged (among 13 recommendations) that:

1. A "strike for a purely or predominantly political purpose" should be illegal.
2. That strikes in breach of union rules should be illegal.
3. That, in essence, all strikes must be preceded by an "independent" Tribunal into the "facts and issues" of the dispute.

This suggestion is impossible to prove: it might be illustrated by the reply of a polite etymologist on the B.B.C. who was questioned about his talk on the mating habits of crickets along Southern French roads. Was he speaking from direct experience and observation, the questioner wanted to know. Regrettably, he replied, he was not. But, nevertheless, he was convinced that male and female "at certain times achieved a finely-adjusted spatial correlation". So it is with the Minister, the Conservative Party programmers and certain elements in B.O.A.C.

The workers returned to the hangars with an intact organisation: ready to resist any arbitrary redundancy. The Court of Enquiry evidently underestimated the political and industrial understanding of the trades unionists in this great public Corporation. They did not realise that the very real identification they feel with nationally-owned air transport has led to a heightened awareness and understanding of the industry's problems.

This was a strike in which pickets, by agreement, went into the strike-bound plants without pay to prevent damage to vital equipment. Clearly, the workers were more stable and long-sighted than the instigators of the situation, in which a strike had almost become an inevitability, due to basic job-insecurity. They will expect an incoming Labour Government to trust them with some power—not just joint consultation.

The full restoration of the "chosen instrument" policy will be demanded, too. Their intelligent work deserves to be crowned by these achievements.

What of the Tories and their plans for hobbling the unions in civil aviation and further traffic-diversions to the under-cutting private operators? In the words of a Spanish proverb: "Have patience and you will see your enemy's funeral procession."