

THE MAY 1974 UWC STRIKE A REVIEW BY THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

General

The essence of the Emergency was the action by the newly formed Ulster Workers Council in calling for an industrial stoppage. Their control of power station manual workers, and hence the level of electricity generation, swiftly followed by their control of oil and petrol supplies, provided the instruments they required.

Working class support for the strike was substantial in Protestant areas, especially in Belfast, and the number of absentee workers was swollen by those who were afraid to defy the strike call. Road blocks erected by strikers, most probably from paramilitary organisations, made getting to work difficult for those who wished to do so by private transport. Security forces made no attempt, in the initial stages, to remove the blocks or assist drivers and this form of intimidation was relaxed only after petrol began to be unavailable to motorists making journeys without UWC approval.

There is no doubt that security forces were inactive or ineffective in dealing directly with what undoubtedly was a politically motivated rebellion.

The Electricity Emergency

The use of electricity, oil and petrol as strike weapons at once involved the Department of Commerce which, through its Energy Division, has responsibility for these resources. The UWC claimed at the outset that the enforced reduction of electricity supplies would leave adequate supplies for the housewife and the farmer and create no hardship if industry complied with their demand for a cessation of production. Their ignorance of the needs of modern society and of the inability of the Electricity Service to direct supplies preferentially to homes and farms was apparent to the Department, which issued a statement to this effect after it had been approved by the Emergency Committee on 14 May 1974. The success of some industry in maintaining production as the effects of the electricity shortage began to inconvenience every sector of the community was supposedly seen by the UWC as cause and effect and they continued to lay the blame for the inadequacy of the electricity supplies to their approved consumers at the door of Government. If industry were ordered to close down, or deprived of electricity, all would be well. A television appearance by the Engineering Director of the NIES allowed the Service to give a factual explanation of the distributional problem but the UWC was either unable or unwilling to understand. Political initiative by Ministers was in little evidence in these early days of the strike and this situation contrasted sharply with the activity of the UWC which received full publicity.

Government was clearly in a dilemma. Having made the (proper) decision that it would not talk with or concede the demands of the UWC, there was an absence of constructive direction on remedial action to be taken at official level, indeed it was difficult to see what might usefully be done. The Department of Commerce prepared Orders on 19 May 1974 restricting the use of electricity by industry and other inessential users but these were not made. It was soon apparent that most major users of electricity had already been forced by the supply shortage to abandon production. The embarrassment to the Electricity Service caused by the demand made by one large consumer led eventually to an instruction from the Department that this firm's electricity supply was to be discontinued. The Department had set up an Information Room in Chichester House to monitor the electricity supply situation and to answer queries from the public. This service was operated from the 5th floor Conference Room which, having been used for this purpose during earlier emergencies, was equipped with additional telephones. This service was adequate to meet the demands made upon it and fulfilled a useful function until the accommodation was taken over by the team operating the Oil and Petrol Emergency Plan on 20 May 1974. The electricity load had by this time been stabilised at about 40 per cent of normal for the time of year, cycling of supply was in regular

operation and consumers had been forced to adjust to periods of black-out which for areas outside Belfast were longer than the periods when electricity was available. The electricity information service was, however, continued albeit less efficiently by the staff on this duty after they had dispersed to their own offices. The electricity shortage had a major effect on industry and some other essential users but the mildness of the weather and the long hours of daylight reduced the impact on the domestic sector. The farming community was suffering mainly because of the uncertainty about when electricity would be available. The farming community made many requests for the limited supply to be guaranteed for particular hours of the day and in doing so failed to recognise that because farming activity is dispersed throughout the country, this would mean that the whole distribution system would have to be activated during these periods. Farmers and others also asked if they could be informed in advance of what cycling of supplies they could expect, and perhaps did not understand that the cycling operation was as much an involuntary reaction to demand as a planned and regular time-table of supply sharing. The possession of standby generators enabled some consumers both in industry and elsewhere to avoid the worst effects of the strike. The Department of Commerce had undertaken, as on previous occasions, to co-ordinate demands for generators and to seek out supplies. Department of Finance approval for up to £100,000 to be spent on the purchase of generators was welcome but reliable equipment available in England could not be purchased because of transport handling difficulties.

As the strike wore on the Department of Environment reported that the lack of standby generators was affecting water and sewage pumping and towards the end of the strike this became a critical problem.

The lack of standby generators or sufficient fuel stocks in many locations where essential activities were being carried on was symptomatic of the lack of preparedness in both the public and private sectors for a prolonged reduction in the public electricity supply. The available electricity supply, although admittedly at a low level, was at least equitably distributed between consumers and the NIES Staff showed considerable initiative and skill in maintaining and managing the reduced load so well in conditions more severe than any before experienced by the electricity supply industry in the United Kingdom. An emergency plan existed for the industry. It was drawn up as a defence against a situation in which manual workers would refuse to work and depended for success on the use of troops to fill the vacancies for unskilled and semi-skilled jobs in power stations. It envisaged the continued working and co-operation of middle management technical staff. Early in the strike the use of the plan was considered at official level in consultation with the security forces who quickly arranged for the necessary troops to be available at 48 hours notice instead of the 7 day lead time envisaged in the plan. When the possibility of Army involvement in the power stations became a subject for public discussion, however, middle management at Belfast and Ballylumford power stations signed a declaration that if the troops moved in they would cease work. After the Belfast stations closed down the threat to Ballylumford remained.

The electricity supply position worsened suddenly as a result of an escalation of the manual workers strike in response to political events in the Assembly (the vote on the Sunningdale issue). At midnight on 22 May 1974 there was a walkout of the remaining manual workers at Ballylumford power station which was generating the greater part of the reduced supply. The middle management technical staff felt unable, for various reasons, to ignore the UWC call for a complete shut-down and only with some difficulty was the senior management able to persuade the staff to run down the machinery in a planned fashion to avoid damage to the equipment.

As the final crisis approached the use of the emergency plan, modified as necessary, was under continuous consideration at the highest level. The best advice of the Chairman of the NIES and the Engineering Director was that Army assistance, with senior management taking over the technical direction, would not be enough. The distributional problems could also not be overcome. It is thought that this was also the Army advice although the Army was ready to move into the power stations if directed. There can be little doubt that continued generation transmission and

distribution could not be guaranteed and the transmission and distribution systems were anyway extremely vulnerable to sabotage.

In the event, the political decision was not to use the troops and the run down to total black-out was well under way when the UWC strike was suddenly ended.

The lesson to be learned from this experience was that the existing plan was quite inadequate to meet the circumstances and the Army was not in a state of readiness to undertake so massive a commitment in such a complex and highly skilled activity as the electricity supply industry.

Since the end of the strike the possibility of preparing a plan which would call upon the Army to fill every vital role in the power stations and the transmission and distribution systems has been under consideration. The Department of Commerce and the NIES view is that such a plan is not a practical proposition because of the skills required and the dispersed nature of the system. Nevertheless the Army is anxious to carry out an investigation into its ability to train soldiers for this task and the NIES have provided lists of the jobs and skills required to be provided. The Army's preliminary view is that even if they were to embark on such a training programme it could not be completed in less than 2 years and might even then be unequal to the task envisaged.

THE OIL EMERGENCY

A significant feature of the distribution of oil and petrol supplies is that it is very easy to discriminate between consumers. The UWC, through its influence on the tanker drivers, its control of the roads and its ability to intimidate both filling-station staff and motorists, was very quickly able to impose its own pattern of priorities. Supplies of petrol were encouraged to filling stations controlled by UWC sympathisers and at most other filling stations the stocks of petrol were quickly exhausted. Where stocks were good they were sold only during limited opening hours because of the power cuts.

The UWC list of essential users was bizarre. Purporting to cater for essential needs they were patently not doing so and this was in some measure the direct result of their ignorance of the complex inter-relationships in the structure of society. For example, farmers were seen as essential users but no provision was made for the manufacture and movement of feeding stuffs. Doctors were also identified as essential users but their dependence for effective working on the mass of hospital ancillary workers was not understood. Whole areas of the economy were deprived of oil and petrol by the UWC without any consideration of the implications. It is not surprising, then, that this inequitable, far-reaching and amateurish attempt to control the working of the economy through the grip on oil and petrol supplies caused great concern to those who suffered its effects. Unlike the electricity supply problem, which was not amenable to the exercise of influence, the oil & petrol shortage could be remedied for those who were prepared to become supplicants at Hawthornden House.

It was the willingness of a section of the public to abase themselves before the UWC, in order to obtain supplies, that established the authority of the junta, but it was the readiness of many people in responsible positions, acting selfishly or misguidedly, to instruct the UWC in the workings of the economy, and to help them to improve their identification of essential users, that began to establish the credibility of the UWC as an effective body. Principles were subordinated to expediency and the authority of the Government was undermined.

As this unwitting assistance of the UWC increased day by day the supply of oil and petrol improved but the unacceptable fact had to be faced that, not only were many categories of users denied a supply but, more important, the power of Government was seen to have been arrogated by the UWC.

The Plan

A contingency plan for circumstances not unlike those now existing had been drawn up two years earlier and immediately before the UWC strike a modification of this plan was agreed to meet a threatened national strike of tanker drivers over a pay dispute. Neither of these plans provided for a take-over of the bulk store of oil products held by the oil companies and after the experience of the first week of the strike, when it was seen that the Government was determined not to negotiate with the strikers, a revised plan was prepared on 21 May 1974 by the Department of Commerce, The Army, NIO, and two key figures in the Northern Ireland Oil Industry Emergency Committee, a standing committee with wide powers to act for the industry in various circumstances of national emergency. When the full OIEC were later given details of the plan they were against the idea (as were the Army) in principle. Government solicitors defined the necessary powers and drafted the requisitioning documents.

The plan envisaged the take-over of the BP refinery in Belfast in order to secure its stocks of oil products, the associated Shell Mex & BP terminal with its loading facilities, a number of road tankers from each of the several oil companies and the SMBP terminal and stocks in Londonderry. In addition 21 filling stations were to be requisitioned throughout Northern Ireland. These were to be designated as Government Approved Filling Stations which would supply only those essential users previously

identified by Departments. Opening hours were to be from 11am to 3 pm and special coupons, already printed, were to be distributed by Departments.

The plan relied upon the Army to secure the premises and vehicles and on the Department of Commerce to operate the scheme. Army assistance and security protection were guaranteed.

The following day 22 May 1974, the plan was agreed by the Emergency Committee chaired by NIO and submitted to the Minister of Commerce. He at once accepted it and immediately submitted it to the Executive who approved it and passed it to the Secretary of State with a recommendation for action.

A meeting was called on 23 May 1974 of officials from all Departments to explain the operational requirements of the plan and to ask the Departmental representatives to recruit volunteer staff to man the filling stations. On Friday 24 May 1974 coupons were sent to Departments for distribution to essential users in the community.

Difficulties were experienced at the outset. Some members of the Emergency Committee criticised the plan as unworkable. Others doubted the desirability of interfering with UWC control of supplies since the plan might in fact result in less product being distributed and anyway "the UWC were doing a good job". The majority accepted the plan as a positive contribution to the re-establishment of legitimate authority.

Coupon distribution on the Friday before a Bank Holiday weekend was said by at least one very large Department to be beyond its power and in fact this Department's coupons were never distributed. The number of volunteer staff from other Departments was totally inadequate and the short notice given was the common complaint but the same large Department did nothing to encourage recruitment. As far as I am aware it provided no assistance throughout the subsequent days although it was quick to criticise.

Department of Commerce recruited volunteers for the manning of the BP refinery and SMBP terminal, for all the Belfast filling-stations and for at least one other. Many more Commerce staff were earmarked for Control Room duties and for a telephone answering service.

On the Saturday and Sunday preparations went ahead. All the necessary sets of instructions to staff were completed and sealed in envelopes ready for distribution, but there was still no information about the Government's intention to implement the plan or not.

Implementation

In the event, the news was given to senior officials of the Department at 5.30 am on Monday 27 May 1974 that the Army had moved, as planned, to secure all the installations and would await the arrival of the civil servants, who would effect the requisitioning. Staff were mobilised and sent out to their posts.

Further difficulties quickly became apparent. At the terminals the Army arrived before the 6am shift and when the workers arrived to find the Army in possession they would not start work and soon left, many never getting past the Army guard. There was, therefore, an unplanned loss of the goodwill and assistance hoped for from the technical and clerical staff and the operation became more difficult.

Filling Stations

At the filling stations, normally closed during the night, many of the tenants failed to appear. Others refused to co-operate. The Army dug in to await the civil service volunteers.

It was part of the plan that the volunteers should telephone in twice daily at 9 am and 2 pm to see if the plan had been implemented. They were to be operational by 11 am and this gave them either 2 hours or 21 hours notice. In fact the notice was 2 hours. Before the 11 am start the Minister of State, Mr Orme, made a quick tour of the Belfast area, found the troops in possession of the filling stations and some normal staff on duty, but idle, and motorists queueing. A political direction was given to the Commerce representative at Stormont Castle that petrol must be seen to be being sold and that all-comers were to be allowed to purchase £1 of petrol. This decision was given publicity and so before the plan began to operate the intention to serve only essential users was set aside. To the difficulties of acquiring the know-how of operating a filling station and taking an inventory was added the sudden influx of large numbers of cars, queueing back for considerable distances. Traffic and security problems were created by the long queues and in many cases the troops began arbitrarily to weed the queues on their own system of priorities, even turning away one of the few motorists who displayed the official coupons, but some action was necessary if the situation was not to get out of hand.

At several stations no civil servants appeared on the first day for want of volunteers and the troops undertook the task of running the stations, sometimes taking money, sometimes giving credit. Those civil servants who worked with the troops at filling stations were unanimous in their view that the Army gave ready co-operation and assistance but tended to act on their own initiative to the detriment of civil service control and agreed procedures.

Volunteers afterwards expressed the view the preliminary briefing and instructions were inadequate, especially those staff from outside Commerce who did not attend the Commerce briefing session on Friday 24 May 1974. More technical instruction on the use of pump-meters, tank dipping, inter-connection of fuel tanks and similar matters would have been welcomed.

Cash handling was one aspect not properly planned in advance and a system devised by DoC accountants became available too late for use. Cash lodgements in banks was difficult because of opening hours and lodging money at police stations meant double-counting. Lockable bags or the use of night safes where available would have helped in many cases.

The electricity shortage meant that emergency generators were needed. These were provided by the Army but some proved difficult to operate.

The personal safety of staff worried some volunteers and in an ideal world some thought might have been given to ensuring that staff were posted to areas where they would not be recognised and become liable to intimidation. There were also indications that staff did not much care for the political implications of the job and a feeling that an ex-gratia cash payment would have been appropriate, taking everything into account.

The bulk storage depots, vehicles and distribution

The possession of the premises in Airport Road West and the attendant security exercise together with the confusion of workers arriving at the Harbour Estate caused considerable traffic delays in the area and the DoC staff found difficulties in getting to the BP refinery to carry out the requisitioning and take-over the control. They had to be air-lifted from Holywood by the Army.

Until late afternoon no product could be pumped into vehicles because of difficulty in operating the stand-by generator. In order to avoid further delay, the Army operated through the night, making deliveries which were not adequately controlled or recorded since no provision had been made for night working by DoC staff at either the refinery or the filling stations. This commendable Army initiative eased the supply problem but at the expense of good record keeping and with a loss of DoC control that was never fully regained in spite of the decision to appoint higher grade staff to take charge.

The Army imposed their own procedures for routing and dispatching tankers and the fact that the unit responsible for this activity was based at Lisburn was impractical, causing delays, especially since the Army at the refinery would accept amendments and take their instructions only from Lisburn. DoC staff had little information about tanker availability or whereabouts and could handle enquiries for product less efficiently.

The fiction of DoC control was further eroded when the Army unilaterally decided to seize all available tankers and even after the vehicles actually required had been chosen, the remainder were impounded and most of these were immobilised. The plan had been that a small number would be requisitioned from each oil company to ensure equity of treatment and the remainder would be left for the use of the other oil companies not requisitioned. In this way it was hoped that the industry would be able to function alongside DoC and the Army, operating from other terminals, and thus substantially increase the volume of product distributed. Without vehicles this could not happen although there must be doubt about the willingness of company drivers to have operated in the circumstances obtaining, even if the vehicles had been relinquished. It did, however, create the impression of a lock-out of drivers.

Delays and difficulties were caused by the problem of correctly identifying the wide range of different fuels and of determining the equivalents as between companies. Orders were sometimes less than explicit for staff with no technical knowledge. Access to company records would help to identify the fuel normally delivered but this is never likely to be a practical possibility.

Lack of knowledge about conditions at the tankers' destinations created uncertainty about the appropriate size of tanker to dispatch and the best means of getting access but the extent of this problem is thought to be small.

Calor-Kosangas

The Calor-Kosangas plant nearby the refinery was not listed for requisitioning in the Plan but the Army appear to have decided it should be taken over apparently to gain access to the stocks of bottled gas. DoC staff were sent to man the installation but no suitable vehicles were ever provided with which to make deliveries. No attempt was made to fill cylinders but some ten tons of gas was collected, much of it for hospital use. This small trade was thought to indicate that the LPG plant should not have been taken over but had the emergency lasted longer trade might have picked up and bulk deliveries to gas-works would have been necessary.

Gas

The anticipated domino-effect of the requisitioning of the oil installations included the decision of the employees at the nearby Belfast gas manufacturing plant to cease production for consumer use. Pressure was reduced to a level consistent with safety and consumers were told to avoid using gas at a time when the electricity supply was intermittent.

A contingency plan for the gas industry provided for Army assistance if manual workers refused to work but relied on the continued co-operation of the technical staff. This was not forthcoming and because of the special skills required and on the advice of the Gas Manager, it was decided not to implement the plan. Investigation revealed that few essential services would be affected.

LIMITING FACTORS AND UNFORESEEN CONSTRAINTS ON THE PLAN

(i) Escort Strength

DOC expected the Army to provide 50 tanker drivers and assumed that this implied 50 tankers would be operated. However, the escort strength was sufficient in the Army's view for only 25 tankers and this was the number that operated. At the end of the strike the Army felt that the ease with which deliveries had been effected would probably have justified escorts of half the strength used. Nevertheless in subsequent review the Army have indicated that for future planning purposes a limit of 450,000 gallons per day should be the maximum amount that could be moved. This represents 75 deliveries and with some tankers on short runs this might imply little or no improvement in tanker numbers. Some thought should be given to using the RUC for escort duty. This would perhaps allow a much greater amount of product to be moved and make use of local knowledge. It could also be thought to be better for long-term planning.

(ii) Communications

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the inability to communicate by telephone was the worst feature of the whole exercise. If planning is to be meaningful there will have to be a drastic review of the provision of switchboards and telephones and better arrangements for passing messages between operating centres. Field staff were out of contact for long periods and lack of intelligence about what was happening was a serious impediment to the efficiency of working. Inability to get a line out, engaged tones, unavailability of the person required, lack of understanding between staff about functions and duties, additions to the teams without notification, failure to report back with answers to queries, were all symptoms of an overworked staff and an overloaded communications system. Some confusion was to be expected in such abnormal working conditions but with longer to plan, many of the difficulties could be removed. Instructions could be clearer and duties better defined. This is one of the areas where confidentiality in advance of implementation conflicts with efficiency in operation. If every emergency is a one-off operation using staff with little or no previous experience there are bound to be uncertainties. If this state of affairs is compounded by inability to resolve doubts and pass information, then the outcome will be less than ideal. Something must be done about this problem.

(iii) Staffing

DOC Establishment Officer has very strong feelings about the repeated demands on staff made by a series of emergencies extending through the winter and spring and all involving some aspect of the work of the Energy Division. The UWC strike was the latest and largest of these emergencies and it is clear in retrospect that it was unfair in a province-wide emergency, involving every Department, that DOC should have the responsibility for finding so many volunteers. The succession of emergencies is interfering with normal working to the extent that it has to be done during short intervals between one crisis and the next.

It would not seem unreasonable that CSMD with its knowledge of staffing strengths and its easier access to staff in all Departments should take on board the job of recruiting volunteers for emergency work.

Ideally each plan should have its separate list of staff earmarked and trained in appropriate technique, undergoing familiarisation training, meeting the other members of the team, learning the whereabouts of certain relevant installations, studying plans of the layout of equipment, accounting procedures and taking part in dummy runs

(iv) Information

The value of a good information service to decision takers is high and there is room for improvement in the performance and structure of committees formed for this purpose.

The normal Emergency Committee which meets at intervals before an emergency develops to the stage where an initiative is required, lacks the necessary urgency to command sufficient attention from Departments faced with an overload of day to day work. This can lead to inadequate consideration being given to ideas, proposals and plans put forward by another Department and this might sooner or later have unfortunate consequences.

The identification by Departments of essential uses of oil and petrol, requested by DOC two years ago, was found to be very different from the reality they claimed to have found during the UWC strike. It was said that a bus strike had not been expected but bus drivers could well have joined the UWC strike.

The NIO Emergency Committee chaired by Sir Harold Black during the strike met regularly to collect information for NIO Ministers but only after several days was it found necessary to have a similar committee to brief Executive Ministers.

Departmental Committees should meet during an emergency to collect and refine information on Departmental aspects and to brief the Permanent Secretary or his nominee and a small committee of Permanent Secretaries should bring this information together for the purpose of making policy recommendations.

An information officer within a Department should be a member of his Departmental Committee and be the medium through which information passes to the Government Press Office to ensure that the relevant facts being presented are official and reliable.

All committees benefited from the Situation Reports produced twice daily during the strike and a similar service should provide reliable information to a Public Information Service if only because the public should be kept supplied with factual information so that misinformation and rumour can be countered swiftly. It is important that the Public Information Service number should be well publicised so that staff on emergency duty do not have to answer unnecessary calls which interfere with their given tasks. Filling station staff reported much time lost in this way.

(v) Feeding of Emergency Staff

There was little recognition that an army marches on its stomach. In some quarters good provision was made for some people whilst others in the same building went without food through long hours of duty.

An essential part of any plan should be the provision of an adequate catering facility. It is not a solution to provide a cash float since one is seldom in a position either to buy or to cook the food. Especially is this true for staff posted to other buildings or field stations. At the very least stocks of food should be maintained for emergency staff use, perhaps in association with the staff canteen, when stock turnover can be organised. Emergency means of cooking should be available and in winter stand-by heating will be necessary.

(vi) Control of Operations

There should be no confusion about who is in charge. The posture that the DOC was operating the Oil Plan with the assistance of the Army was hardly recognised by many of the troops who took orders from their own HQ. Within a plan the hierarchical structure should be specified and departures from the agreed chain of command should be reported to the Central group for action or clarification.

(vii) Record Keeping and Compensation Problems

The aftermath of the strike and the implementation of the plan has left a substantial volume of work to be done on compensation for damage.

Difficulties are arising over who to pay and at what price for the product requisitioned and sold. The product DOC requisitioned was in BP storage tanks but it normally passes from the tanks through a meter before going into Shell Mex and BP tankers. BP do not want to raise a charge but prefer that we should deal with SMBP, whose prices are, of course, higher.

Dealing only with SMBP is to presume that no other companies who would have had a share of the market will object. We are investigating this matter in some depth. A cross-over of fuel types (paraffin for petrol) at one filling station requisitioned has led to minor claims to be followed in due course by compensation payments.

At two other filling stations the tenants have not returned for fear of intimidation. This is a difficult problem yet to be faced. DOC are asking the RUC to ascertain if there had been any record of intimidation, before the strike, which had contributed to the decision not to take back the filling stations after de-requisition.

Early decisions before requisitioning on the prices to charge and the costs to pay by DOC might have simplified the problem and good record keeping would certainly have done so.

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3 July 1974