

Barbara Castle video clip – transcript

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So this was what I believed and I wanted the trade unions not to abandon their sectional interest but to fit them in to a wider economic, national strategy pursued by a democratically elected government, their government, which they had financed and voted for.

And the strife you're talking about at the time?

Well, it was the absolute rash of unofficial and unconstitutional strikes. We called them unconstitutional because they were not, they were in breach of agreed procedures. They had not given proper notice. I mean workers, were just down tools - like that. And they were about 1.8m of these unofficial strikes compared with some 600 of the official ones, the great big ones.

Car industry, engineering?

Well, that I, you see, and employers used to say we don't mind the major strikes as much as this chaos. Because if you know you're going to have a great show down with a big union, you can prepare some defences. But, if suddenly, as happened at Girtings Brakes Works, a dozen key men down tools, without warning, and walk out. They're helpless and so are the rest of the staff. That brake liners, I think they were, strike left some 2,000 workers out of work. And they wrote to me saying what sort of chaos are you going to go on tolerating. It's our livelihood and we've had as much right to a livelihood as these chaps have.

What about their union leaders? They can't have been happy about that.

Well, I had at the Department of Employment some very shrewd, experienced and liberal minded conciliators. Conciliation officers. They knew their trade union movement through and through. And they used to say to me, if there is a strike of this kind and we immediately tried to get hold of say the regional organiser of the union, if it's a localised strike, they'd run to ground. They don't want to know. And we suspect that in some unions, at any rate, they don't altogether mind these unofficial strikes. Because, you see, it means the workers are doing the job for them without any strike claim. So there's no run on the union funds. And all these and I used to find that I remember the job I had getting hold of one union organiser - I think it was from Wales. I forget the details. But we had an enormous job tracking him down. I wanted him to come and talk, discuss solutions. He didn't want to know. Now that is - this chaos was doing great harm to industry and Ted Heath, then leader of the opposition, was, you know, having - making a meal of it, you know, enormous attacks on Labour for its weaknesses and of course, behind Ted Heath was a little band of Conservative lawyers who had produced a little document, I think it was called Fair Deal at Work, in which they proposed a legal framework for the trade unions, tying them hand and foot by law. And the last thing I believed in, or Harold Wilson believed in, was this legal framework, because you can't solve human problems in the court of law. You can't do it. It's got to be done with beer and sandwiches around the table. Of course, it has. Unless you're going to have a sort of legalistic dictatorship. And so Harold Wilson, who could see the Heath line of argument gaining ground, set up the Donovan Commission under Lord Justice Donovan with George Woodcock, General Secretary of the TUC on it and playing a very influential part. And so that landed on my desk when I was moved into the department.

Carry it forward, he said.

I had to pick it up to, just as I had to pick up the Prices and Incomes policy which I thought was a very unlevelled playing field because I knew that there was great justice in the union complaint that if they forewent wage increases, through voluntary restraint or statutory restraint, that increased the profitability of the company, in which they had no share. So I got one of the economic advisors - I brought in Derek Robinson, to work out for me a scheme for capital sharing, now that all these ideas, were our ideas, were innovative. And we had to do the educating work of the Treasury, of the rank and file, everybody. And so the smugness New Labour saying we've got to turn

our backs on this, cast off this ideological old baggage. I think they were referring to me. They um - you know even though I found it irritating, we had done the pioneer work, we'd done the rough work, and done a very great educational work.

Anyway, it caused a furore. I touched on the I dared to challenge the principle of my trade union, right or wrong. I said - I won't say that about anybody. I won't say my government's right or wrong, I won't say my trade union, right or wrong, I won't say my church, right or wrong. You can't take from me my judgement. You couldn't take it from anybody. You shouldn't do. Well, I did cause a bit of a furore. And I tell you what I used to urge upon: look, if you go on unchanged, you're going to let in the Ted Heath and his Tory lawyers, you know. You're going to be in grave danger if you abuse the right to strike, it can be taken away from you by a Tory government. No, it made no effect. Though I think it did in a way, and I always said, you see, before the Secretary of State should act, the TUC should be given the opportunity to act first. Because I wanted it to become a real sort of ... what's the word? Not controller of the trade union, but leader of the trade union. And so they were to try. And we asked for a change of rule to enable them to step in. And another, one of the most frequent thoughts of dispute was the inter-union dispute. I remember when we nationalised steel. It's what they'd been asking for but immediately trouble started as to which union should be recognised. And I remember ... what's the chairman's name? Do you remember it? Robert something came to see me. The newly nationalised industry, he said "Secretary of State we'll recognise whomsoever they want". But he said "we've been warned if we recognise the T&G, then the little smaller specialised unions will down tools. And vice versa. So we've got a strike whatever we do. You tell us what we do". And I thought, and I still think it is the responsibility of the government to provide a solution for that situation. So we set up the Commission for Industrial Relations which Donovan had recommended and gave it the right to solve these cases, but if whichever union, and when it had made a ruling, because somebody had to unless you went to have a fight to the finish, over the dying body of this national economy, when they had reached a decision and more than half of the members of that Commission would have been trade unionist, then the unions were under law obliged to accept the verdict, with a fine pm the union that didn't. Now we just imposed that fine but of course if you refused to pay a fine, it's contempt of court and you're in a criminal offence situation. Well, this was, you know, to murder all the heroes of the trade union movement, their memory. And it was therefore a great upheaval. And I remember going around the country and I used to talk to so many working people and the trade union rank and file. There was not the hostility to me or my proposals that you would have imagined from what the leadership said. Jack Jones saying I was totally politically discredited, I mean such an idea, but I remember going to the Scottish TUC, and that's a pretty militant body, annual conference. And on the ferry boat going over, I - we'd been told there might be a strike of the ferryboat people, the workers on the ferry, to stop you getting there. So they said, "well do you want, you still want to go Secretary of State". I said, "yes of course". I always march towards the sound of gunfire. And when we had gone on the boat, far from downing tools, they all asked to be photographed with me as if I was a lifelong pal. And I remember going after the conference, well I'd had a bit of a

stormy ride as you can imagine. But there was no real sourness in it. Heat but not malice.