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The Two-Hundred-Million Pound Strike: The 2003 British Airways Walkout

By Ed Blissett

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On Friday 18 July 2003, slightly fewer than 500 customer service agents (CSAs) employed by British Airways (BA) walked off the job in protest over its decision to fully automate attendance management, shift rosters and holiday allocation on the following Sunday. “The CSAs were predominately young women from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds” (p. 3). Their walkout constituted an unofficial strike and was called without a legally required secret ballot. In addition, unions and their officials, both fulltime and lay, were legally required to denounce such unauthorized strikes and order the workers to return to work. By refusing to do so, the union officials could be prosecuted and the lay officials in particular could be dismissed.

BA decided to introduce its new system at the busiest time of the year: the beginning of the summer holidays. The CSAs returned to work the next day, after BA gave an assurance it would temporarily withdraw its new system and enter into negotiations with the unions to resolve the dispute. Operationally, BA took four days to get its flight schedule back to “normal,” losing an estimated £200 million and three senior executives, who, in what is known as “management speak,” were allowed to find “new opportunities.” Negotiations were conducted over the next ten days, with BA eventually agreeing not to introduce its new system. Though illegal, the CSA walkout proved to be an overwhelming success.

Ed Blissett was a fulltime union official with the GMB Union (formerly the General,

Municipal and Boilermakers Union), which represented CSA members at Terminal 1 at London Heathrow Airport. The Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) represented CSAs at Terminal 4. Terminals 1 and 4 were approximately equal and relatively large in terms of CSA representation. CSAs also worked at the smaller Terminal 5, where they were represented by the Amicus Trade Union (Amicus).

Several years afterward Blissett pursued a PhD and became an academic. In 2014 his PhD dissertation was published under the title *Inside the Unions: A Comparative Analysis of Policy-Making in Australian and British Printing and Telecommunication Trade Unions*.³ This study broke new ground in documenting disagreements and disputes within unions. His methodology was to interview, on strict condition of anonymity, over 220 officials about various internal struggles and disputes over how to respond to pressures on their respective unions. Blissett was a highly regarded (former) union official and could thus gain the confidence of his interviewees in both countries.

In 2018, he decided to conduct research and produced an account of the 2003 BA dispute, a dispute in which he had played a major part in its ultimate settlement; his involvement, as we will see, was viewed by some as being somewhat controversial. Besides drawing on his records of formal and informal meetings, as well as documents and secondary sources, Blissett decided to replicate the method he had employed in *Inside the Unions*. He sought permission from various persons involved in the dispute to obtain their recollections of the causes, events and eventual

3. Ed Blissett (2014) *Inside the Unions: A Comparative Analysis of Policy-Making in Australian and British Printing and Telecommunication Trade Unions*, Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, New York, Wein: Peter Lang.

resolution of the dispute, on strict condition of anonymity. Not all those he approached agreed, but most did. He interviewed 48 unionists, ranging from fulltime to part-time officials and lay members, and 15 BA managers. Though he does not say so, these individuals probably enjoyed the chance to reminisce about that major event in their respective working lives.

Blissett is aware of the problems of providing an account of a dispute in which he was a major participant. He says:

... while my participative role in the dispute raises the possibility of this study becoming a simple exercise in self-justification, the manner in which participants from all sides of the dispute have contributed provides this work with considerable balance and objectivity (p. 20).

His method and his being a “Johnny on the spot” give his narrative an extra human dimension that is not usually available with such studies. His analysis highlights the delightful role played by serendipity and the innovative manoeuvring of the parties in the playing out of the dispute. His major contribution is his examination and explanation of the tensions not only between but also within organizations involved in the dispute.

There was disquiet within BA over the reasons why senior management decided to introduce its automated system when it did, why it downplayed the negative reaction of CSAs and why it had no backup plan if they decided to walk out. Both the GMB and the TGWU were riven with internal disputes about whether to back up the CSAs or agree to BA’s demand for an automated system. The two unions also fell out over both substantive and procedural issues during the dispute. Amicus played an important role behind the scenes in overcoming differences between the two by bringing the Trade Union Congress in as a conciliator.

BA is a 24-hour seven-days-a-week operation. Its CSA workforce operates on a rotating shift. CSAs were mainly women who had family responsibilities, especially for children at school and older relatives who require care. Other workers had other regular commitments, such as sports and social functions. A practice had developed where CSAs would swap shifts and organize holidays around these responsibilities, which BA duty managers would process. This work allocation flexibility took up a lot of time of duty managers. Senior BA management saw an automated work allocation system, which it had introduced for other workers, such as ground staff, as a way to reduce managerial time and costs.

The CSAs believed that an automated system would reduce the flexibility they had previously enjoyed and would have a detrimental impact on their family responsibilities and lifestyle. Hence the walk-out. Blissett’s account is essentially an examination of getting the leadership of the GMB, the TGWU and BA to understand the concerns of the CSAs. Blissett was in this process a strong advocate for the CSAs. He saw his function as one of fearlessly advocating on their behalf within GMB, in meetings with other unions and in negotiations with BA.

The leaders of both the TGWU and GMB experienced problems in understanding what the dispute was about. The TGWU’s general secretary was experiencing an attack of Michels’ Iron Law of Oligarchy⁴ on his way to a seat in the House of Lords. The GMB was in the middle of a major dispute between its national and London branches, the latter of which represented BA members. At one stage, both the unions and BA saw Blissett as the fly in the oint-

4. Robert Michels (1959, first published 1911) *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchic Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. New York: Dover Publications.

ment in his steadfast advocacy on behalf of CSAs. Blissett reports that both BA and the TGWU began briefing journalists that he had played a leading role in organizing the unofficial strike (p. 117), which he had not; it was a rank and file affair.

Blissett attracted the attention of the press, who did not only camp outside his home—a photographer was arrested for being in his garden; stories were published of him being “militant” and “hardline”; he was followed; he received death threats, and journalists started interviewing persons in his neighbourhood and his former girlfriends, looking for dirt. The highlight of the result of these investigations occurred on 26 July 2003, when the *Mail on Sunday* published an article entitled “Red Ed.” It contained the following paragraph:

A senior GMB London organiser, Mr. Blissett lives a frugal lifestyle compared with many of the union barons who surrounded him at last week’s talks. He is single, works long hours, lives in a semidetached house ... and drives a silver Ford Mondeo (p. 136).

It seems the only real impact of the article was to induce mirth amongst Blissett’s GMB colleagues over his “frugal” lifestyle (p. 137).

BA turned away from its proposed automated work allocation system because of the risk of the potential costs of unofficial strikes. Blissett documents how in negotiations over the next fifteen years, which introduced increased workforce flexibility, BA was not prepared to put an end to the practice of CSAs swapping shifts to fit in with family and lifestyle commitments.

Blissett has provided a concise and engaging account of how rank-and-file workers at BA organized and successfully employed an unofficial strike to preserve an allocation of work model that met their needs. He provides valuable insights into the battles and struggles that occur both between and within organizations. *The Two-Hundred-Million Pound Strike: The 2003 British Airways Walkout*, with its combination of documents, participant observation and extensive use of interviews, provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of strikes and industrial relations. Its great strength is the way it gives voice to the various participants who were involved in the dispute.

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