

Emotions still raw 25 years after Wapping

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With the launch of the much anticipated novel *Bad News: The Wapping Dispute* on the 25th anniversary of one of Britain's worst industrial disputes, the authors report that anger towards News Corporation and Rupert Murdoch is as vivid now as it was on the day 5,000 workers were laid off.

Co-written by John Lang and Graham Dodkins, the novel charts the story of ordinary men and women and how they were caught up in a moment of history that was to entirely change the face of the British printing industry and fatally undermine the power of its unions for ever.

Lang, an administrative worker for News International in 1986, talked to *Print Monthly* following the novel's publication. He explains the impact of Murdoch's choice to set up a secret state-of-the-art printing factory in Wapping, staff it, and then fire all his former workers in one fell swoop.

"I attended the book launch and the print exhibition in London at the Marx Memorial library and it was visited by a lot of older print workers, who are now in their 70s. I have been surprised at how almost all of them have really carried around the fallout around the Wapping dispute for the last 25 years."

Lang continues: "They still have real anger, not only at Murdoch, but also at their own Union. We just became more and more isolated about what was happening down at Wapping, and between union heads and management they cobbled deals together but management really had the upper hand. That isolation caused real bitterness and when they chose to call off the dispute there was no ballot, and that caused a great deal more animosity."

Lang points out that since the end of the 13 month dispute in 1986, print and journalism unions have never again been recognised for any length of time by News International, and membership numbers have fallen from 40,000 to 4,000.

"A lot of people lost houses and friends – there were suicides and all kind of terrible things that went on. Some of those people who had worked there had done seven-year apprenticeships and worked there all their lives," explains Lang.

"It was a big family community, and the business used to pay for social gatherings," he adds. "In fact one of the first things Murdoch did when he bought the *Sunday Times* was to say, 'If you want to do stuff like that, you can pay for it yourself'; he broke that communal feeling even before Wapping started. For the newspaper and printing industry it was the end of an era and the start of a new one, and 25 years later the print industry is undergoing another major change and again these are testing times for it," concludes Lang.

Indeed, only two years ago and going almost unreported, Murdoch closed down the Wapping plant itself, making 650 redundancies and moving the printing operation to a new state-of-the-art automated facility in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire.