



Bad News

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Sue Sparks

This is a timely book, not merely because it appears on the 25th anniversary of the Wapping dispute, but also because we find ourselves again with a Tory government bent on cutting living standards and privatising public services, and threatening to restrict even further the rights of members of trade unions to take action to defend their jobs and incomes.

In essence Wapping was a fight to save jobs. Media magnate Rupert Murdoch secretly transferred his newspaper business overnight to new premises, in an attempt to shed jobs and undermine the powerful newspaper unions. In effect the strike amounted to a year-long lockout. The course of the dispute and its ultimate defeat was heavily conditioned by the anti trade union laws and the response of the union leaderships to the threat those laws presented.

As well as giving a narrative of the dispute, the book captures the voices of strikers themselves. The lives of the strikers were transformed during the course of the dispute, especially women who had never spoken in public before: "I have to say I really enjoyed the speaking engagements, although I was absolutely terrified at first ... It got to the point where if I saw a microphone, I wanted to get up and make a speech."

However, the book omits some important parts of the story. It doesn't draw a clear distinction between the national leadership of the EETPU electricians' union which supplied scab workers to Murdoch and the traditionally militant Fleet Street branch of the EETPU. The authors rightly point out that although the national leadership of the NUJ journalists' union took a good position, they didn't do enough to prevent many of their members from going to Wapping.

The crucial argument was about spreading the action to the rest of Fleet Street. All the national union leaderships opposed this on the grounds that it would help Murdoch if his papers were the only ones available. That seemed a powerful argument at the time, but it seems far more likely that the other proprietors would have pushed Murdoch into a deal if their profits were on the line.

Murdoch's victory paved the way, as other proprietors reaped the benefits. Without necessarily derecognising the unions, they destroyed their power. The union leaders were terrified of calling strikes that would have amounted to illegal secondary action. For the bureaucracy of the unions, in the end it was the protection of their organisations – against sequestration by the courts and derecognition by the employers – that counted, not the protection of members' jobs and conditions.

That is a very important lesson for today. When the chips are down, we cannot rely on our union officials to have the stomach for a fight. They will have to be pushed.