

# **Fatally Divided?**

***An analysis of the role micro-political divisions played in the unions' loss of the 1986-87 News International dispute***

**Presenter**

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# Fatally Divided?

- In February 1987 the SOGAT NEC and the NGA NC voted to end their year 13 month dispute with News International.
- It brought to a close one of the most bitter and acrimonious industrial disputes of the twentieth century, which had lasted over a year and seen the dismissal of over 5,500 union members.
- The end of the dispute also heralded the derecognition of the 2 print unions by many other newspaper employers and the loss of the unions' considerable control of the labour process in the printing industry.

# 1987-87 News International Dispute



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- Various explanations have been put forward for the print unions defeat:
- Some authors have asserted that the dispute was unwinnable, whatever tactics the unions had deployed (Melvern, 1986; Gennard, 1990; Gennard and Bain, 1995; Dean, 2007).
- Other scholars (Richardson, 2003; Bain, 1998) take a different view, focusing on tactical errors and divisions within and between the printing unions.
- Cockburn (1991) differs, asserting that gender segregation and misogyny caused disunity within the print unions, that contributed to their defeat

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- Cohen (1990) blames the unions leaderships for ceasing secondary action after the courts ordered the sequestration of their assets.
- The role played by *micro-political* factors, such as personal friendships, enmities and loyalties (Bain, 1998; Richardson, 2003), is mentioned by some authors, but is not credited with a significant contribution to the loss of the dispute.
- This paper challenges these explanations and puts forward an alternative hypothesis. It asserts that *micro-political* factors played a central role in the unions defeat.

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## **Methodology:**

- To test the hypothesis a qualitative, interview rich, comparative, 17 year study of the British printing unions was undertaken (see Blissett 2014).
- In doing so I was acutely aware that union officers are extremely reticent of admitting to external third parties how micro-political influences, particularly personal enmities, affected their behaviour and policy choices.
- To counter this no tape recordings were ever made of interviews - instead only short hand notes were taken.
- The interviews were also conducted over more than a decade - which helped to build up the participants trust that confidences would not be betrayed.

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## Key Findings

- The internal micro-political divisions between Dean and the News International FoC's played a key role in undermining any unofficial strike action in September 1985.
- Action which, according to management interviewees, would have led to a transfer of production staff to Wapping and the recognition of the print unions.
- This antipathy also undermined the coordination of the Wapping picket line and strike pay to members.

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- The personal loathing Dean had for Robert Maxwell clouded her judgement and led to her taking too positive a view of the assurances given to SOGAT by Rupert Murdoch before and during the dispute.
- The deep personal antipathy provincial SOGAT NEC members had for London NEC members made them resistant to instructing their members to undertake secondary industrial action to assist the News International chapels.
- The dislike and distrust that Dean and Dubbins had for one another undermined all efforts to properly coordinate the News International dispute and the negotiations with Murdoch.

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*“Tony and Brenda were very different people. Unlike Joe and Bill who would be able to sort out their differences, Brenda and Tony were always so uncomfortable in each others company and they never trusted each other... this placed placed a distance between them, a distance that never existed between Joe and Bill or Tony and Bill. It was a distance that proved to be disastrous in the Wapping dispute”*

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- Conclusion:
- That whilst tactical choices made during the dispute were influenced by a rich mixture of occupational, geographical, technological, ideological and institutional considerations, key decisions were significantly affected by micro-political factors, such as personal friendships, loyalties and enmities.
- That these micro-political factors contributed significantly to the unions failure to at least gain recognition and a transfer of production members from Bouverie Street to Wapping