

CONTRADICTIONS

'What do we want?'

'Change!'

'When do we want it?'

'Now!'

Came the chant from the picket line. My grandfather, who was a shop-steward in his day and a staunch Labour supporter (he would probably have joined the Communist ranks given half a chance), was adamant in his advice the evening before... 'Do not cross the picket line.' However, I had no personal quarrel with my employer; I wasn't a union member; and I had no zeal for demonstration. I simply couldn't square the debate as to why colleagues would strike demanding more pay and yet stood to lose pay by striking? What was also going over in my mind was whilst colleagues took strike action, the rest of us were left carrying the can work-wise – the business still had to continue – our customers would still expect a service.

Surely the answer was, the union members needed to convince their union reps to negotiate the ground with the employers? Not inconvenience themselves, their colleagues, and our customers? It all seemed hap-hazard and illogical.

'But it is solidarity for your fellow workers that's important, Ian. Not your politics!' barked my Grandfather. 'You cross that picket line and it is a grave thing you do...'

In the event on the first day of the strike, there were only ten union activists (i.e. my colleagues) manning the picket line as wave upon wave of other colleagues crossed the line.

I crossed the picket line.

The consequences were hard-hitting at the time. My grandfather, clearly annoyed at my "turning" as he called it, never discussed the matter again, nor did he give me any further advice and guidance in life.

In the office, although those who crossed the picket line far outweighed those who manned the picket line, I was singled out by a colleague as a "scab" and he wasted no time in letting me know how he felt about my action – time and time again, I was an easy target. My Line Manager, who also crossed the picket line, did nothing to stop the tormenting. When I complained to my Personnel Director, nothing was done. It was at times, tiresome, stressful and unprofessional, but on and on it went on until eventually I could take no more and put in a request to be seconded to another department, which subsequently, was agreed. The matter then was laid to rest.

Years later, talking to different colleague in a different business, the matter of strikes arose again.

'I agree with the strikers. Why should we work for little pay? I'm on the side of the strikers and everyone who crosses picket lines are "scabs" ...'

'So you would man a picket line?'

'Yes'

'Really?' I said.

A few minutes later, my colleague returned to staff kitchen very angry. 'I can't get to London on Saturday. The match! And I have an appointment next week in Milton Keynes and the bloody trains aren't running.'

'Why is that?' I quizzed. I knew the answer of course.

'No trains. They're on bloody strike. On match day of all days! Football is a working man's game not one for the hob-knobs. I've had my match tickets for months. Cost me over hundred quid to take the boy. I don't get to go to home matches very often.'

'You mentioned an appointment next week?'

'Yeah at the hospital. The bloody doctors who get paid thousands are on strike. This country is in a f**king mess!'

'So you don't agree with strike action, then?'

'Well... yes I do. We should all get a pay rise. I'm not being paid the right money but I can't strike as there is no union here. Besides, my work would mount up or you'd store it up for me!'

'Actually, I wouldn't store it up. If you want to strike, go ahead, be my guest. But we're talking about the train drivers and doctors...'

'Why does it have to be on match day? I mean, it is a big match in London. It means we have to pay the congestion charge and then probably an arm or leg for parking!'

'So, it's ok to strike as long as it doesn't affect you? Sounds a bit contradictory to me.'

'What do you know about it. You're a toff!'

At Victoria Station last Tuesday, one train an hour was departing to the south coast and I was delayed an hour. In the coffee shop I overheard the following discussion.

'Look John, I agree with people taking strike action. I mean after all the country's on its knees with the cost of living crisis, but I can't understand why the action has to impact on the transport infrastructure. I mean I'm going to be late for my meeting this morning.'

'Yep, it's a bloody nuisance. I mean just one train an hour and no chance of getting back before six tonight. Shouldn't be allowed!'

I turned away laughing into my cappuccino.