

Sketches from the history of psychiatry

A state of insubordination and mutiny

A. D. M. DOUGLAS, Consultant Psychiatrist Emeritus, Nottingham; and E. G. ORAM, Consultant Psychiatrist Emeritus, Nottingham

A strike involving nursing staff prior to the 1948 National Health Service Act was almost an unheard of event. In 1922 nurses at Saxondale, an 800 bedded mental hospital at Radcliffe-on-Trent near Nottingham, staged what was termed a “sit in strike” lasting four days for refusing to work a 66 hour week and accept a wage reduction as ordered by the employing authority.

Official account

This is provided in the quarterly report of the Committee of Visitors responsible for the day to day management of the hospital and now in possession of the Nottingham County Archivist.

Although the report is dated 21 March 1922, it refers to the sequence of events in March and April that year. The Hospital Management Committee had proposed a reduction of 4 shillings per week for male and 3 shillings and 4 pence for female nursing staff. It was also intended to increase the number of hours worked to 66 hours by introducing a 5½ day working week in place of the existing five. The committee decided at the same time to continue to provide four weeks annual leave with full pay.

The notice of these alterations was posted on the 23 February 1922. On Saturday, 4 March 1922 the union (National Asylum Workers) instructed that the new orders must be withdrawn and notified their members to return their keys and not carry out the orders of their officers until the new conditions on hours of duty were cancelled. As there was no response to this demand the union representatives gave instructions to commence immediately what was termed “an indoor strike”. The House Committee reports that for four days a state of insubordination and mutiny existed in the hospital and on the evening of 6 March 1922 the night staff refused to go on duty. That night officers and voluntary helpers carried out the duties. The day staff refused to leave the wards that night and night staff did not come on duty. On 8 March 1922 the Committee again met the National Union representatives, Gibson and Shaw, who agreed

to restore discipline and carry out the Committee’s orders. The Committee after further deliberation said the proposed alterations in salaries and working hours were in the best interests of the institution and staff themselves.

The House Committee further report that on the 11 April 1922 all of the female staff but four, and all of the male staff but 17 adopted methods of an insubordinate nature and locked all officers out of the wards except medical staff. The laundry and kitchen staff joined the strike and the whole institution was brought to a state of chaos in which only the immediate and personal needs of the patients were attended to. The following day, the clerk, the medical officer and matron were allowed to go through to carry out the statutory parliamentary inspection.

The House Committee realised negotiations were impossible and decided to terminate the engagement of staff members guilty of insubordination and indiscipline and requested such persons forthwith to vacate the institution. As the staff persisted in their act of defiance written notice was served on members of staff affected, and after non compliance with the terms of the notice the decision of the Committee was acted upon and the members were ejected from the institution. Finally, the Committee had pleasure in reporting that very little damage was done either to persons or property and that at the present time everything in the institution was working satisfactorily with fresh and efficient staff having been engaged (Notts County Archivist).

The Union account

This most dramatic strike occurred in 1922 at Radcliffe Mental Hospital, near Nottingham when the authorities decided to achieve economies by cutting staff wages and lengthening their hours from 60 to 66 hours per week. The workers accepted the wage cuts but refused to work the extra hours demanded of them. Management response was to sack all staff and offer them re-engagement only so long as they signed the following form.

To the Clerk of the Committee
Nottingham County Mental Hospital
Radcliffe-on-Trent

I beg to make application for the post of
and hereby undertake to faithfully carry out all instructions of the Committee of Visitors and to loyally obey the officers of the Mental Hospital appointed by the Committee and to put their orders into operation.

Signed.

Staff were given until 5 April 1922 to sign the form; all the female staff stood firm and refused to sign, some of the married men signed, particularly those resident in hospital accommodation, but a majority refused. When it was clear the Visiting Committee were in no mood to compromise the workers prepared for a "sit in strike".

On the morning of 11 April 1922 the strike began among female nursing staff, supported by kitchen and domestic workers. The latter supplied patients and nurses with food, but not management. The union officials communicated with the wards from the lane adjacent to the hospital by means of field glasses and semaphore. On the evening of the same day a meeting of male nurses was held at which Herbert Shaw, the Assistant General Secretary, National Asylum Workers Union "shamed" most of them into joining the strike. The Visiting Committee met on 11 April 1922 and sacked the striking workers for unsubsordination. In the afternoon a bus load of female blacklegs was brought into the hospital and were accommodated in the main hall. Bailiffs and police enclosed the ward block, preparing to evict the strikers. The battle of Radcliffe Asylum was about to begin. Herbert Hough, a student nurse at the hospital and the Union Branch Secretary, revealed that the strikers barricaded themselves in by jamming homemade keys in all the locks. The beleaguered staff used water hoses and when the water was turned off at the mains the Bailiffs with the help of the artisan staff battered down the doors. The strikers then fought a rearguard battle through the hospital barricading themselves in each ward in turn. The female wards held better than the male wards. There were more women on strike and the wards were on the upper floor. They fought every bit as determinedly as the men, if not more so. Eventually the strikers were taken prisoner and escorted to the staff sitting room where they found their belongings waiting for them in a pile. The battle had lasted all afternoon and it was now about 5 p.m. The union official had paid a charabanc to escort them away from the hospital. A meeting was held in Radcliffe village and the weary strikers posed for a photograph outside the Black Lion Public House. They were given financial assistance by the union, and needed it, for those in the strike were blacklisted (Carpenter, 1988).

The Press account

The *Nottingham Journal* noted that "staff barricaded themselves in the wards and continued to carry out their usual duties of dressing, washing and feeding patients. After three days staff were rushed by force including nearly 100 police and bailiffs who used crow bars to break down doors and barricades. When the medical superintendant approached a window a fire hose was directed at him. A female charge nurse knocked out a policeman, thought she had killed him and fainted on top of him. Lunatics got out of control, smashed windows, pictures and anything else within reach. Hand to hand struggles took place between officers and patients in the course of which Superintendent Smith of the Notts County Constabulary was bitten on the hand while others were scratched and buffeted. Once the water was turned off the Bailiffs began to make headway, causing staff to fight a rearguard battle through the hospital" (*Nottingham Journal*, 1922).

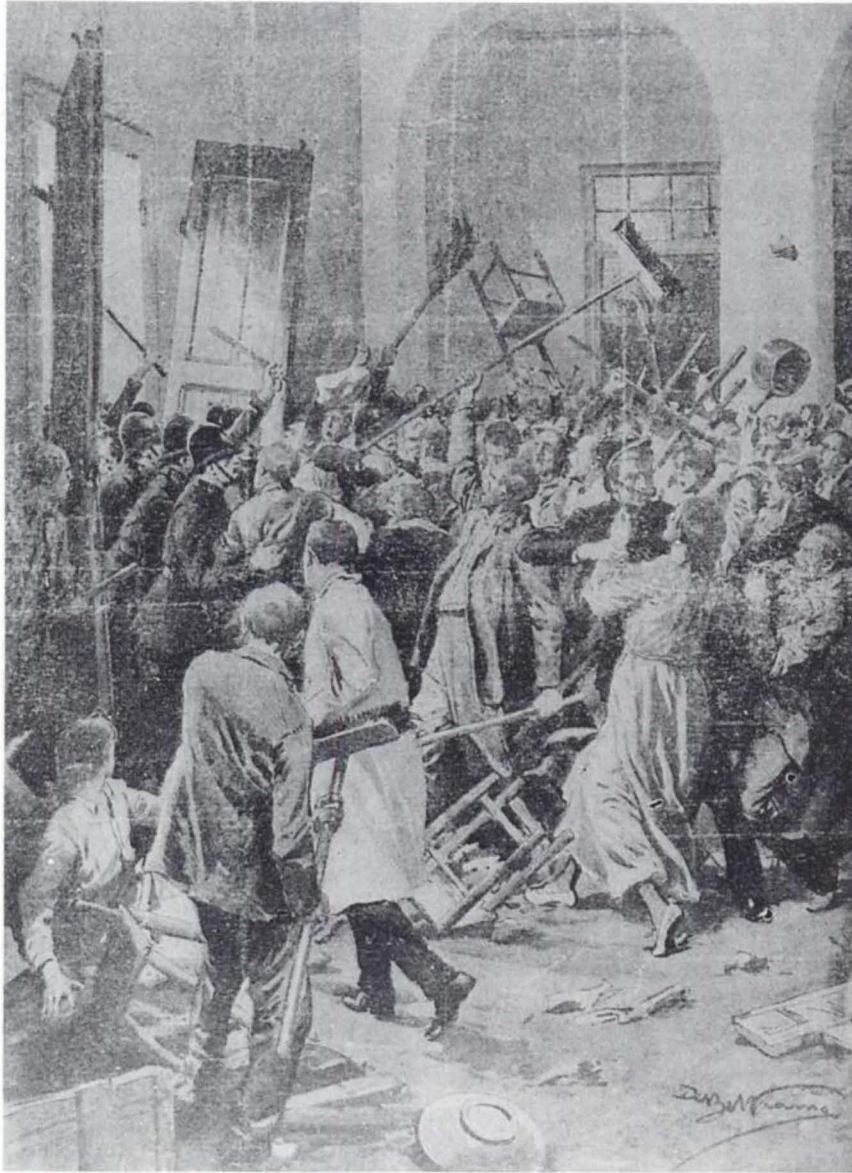
The Italian account

An extract from the *Domencia del Corriere*, Milan, dated 30 April 1922, reports a battle of a new kind at a lunatic asylum near Nottingham, England. Several infirmarium attendants of the lunatic asylum went on strike in league with insane persons, and defied the police, who wanted to take possession, for four hours. The picture is an artist's impression of the conflict, from the same paper.

Socio-economic factors

After 1920 unemployment rose dramatically, and remained high through the inter-war years. The response of some employers to this changed economic condition was to seek to win back some of the advantages they had conceded to their staff. The first signs of this attitude appeared at St John's Mental Hospital, Lincoln, in September 1921 when the Visiting Committee withdrew from wage agreements and then reduced male staff wages by 6 shillings a week and those of females by 4 shillings and 11 pence. Only a determined "stay in strike", i.e. occupation, forced the employing authorities to change their minds. During the following year staff at psychiatric hospitals in Carmarthen and Lancashire accepted wage reductions. The difference at Saxondale Hospital was that the House Committee were seeking not only a cut in wages but an increase in the working week. The staff at Saxondale accepted the loss in earnings but not the increase in the working week.

Their stand was actively encouraged by the national leadership of their union, which pointed out that if one authority were permitted to scrap the 60



Extract from Domenica del Corriere Milan, 30 April 1922

*Una battaglia di nuovo genere. Nel manicomio di Nottingham, in Inghilterra, parecchi infermieri scioperanti, alleatisi coi pazzi, tennero testa per quattro ore alla polizia che voleva occupare i locali.
(Disegno di A. Beltrame)*

A battle of a new kind. At a lunatic Asylum in Nottingham, England, several Infirmary Attendants of the Lunatic Asylum went on strike in league with insane persons, and defied the Police who wanted to take possession, for four hours.

hour week, other authorities would quickly follow suit and the final outcome would be a return to the pre-First World War working week of 84 hours. Because the strike at Saxondale failed, the working week was increased to 66 hours, and it was not until 1934 that the union was able to negotiate a return to the 60 hour week, and this was achieved by promising no more agitation for a further reduction would take place until a period of five years had elapsed (Carpenter, 1988).

Comment

Cronin (1979), in his *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain*, captures well the institutional ideological context within which striking workers operated. In support of this he quotes Allan V. L. "strikes take place within a hostile environment even though they are common every-day phenomena. They are conveniently described as industrially subversive, irresponsible, unfair, against the best interests of the workers, wasteful of resources, crudely aggressive, inconsistent with democracy and in any event unnecessary." The same author notes that workers go on strike because sometimes they succeed in their aims. Stagner & Rosen (1968) state that "every industrial dispute has a background of conflict, tension and hostility. There is no such thing as a 'sudden' or spontaneous strike. In the long run therefore every manager and union leader who honestly wants to reduce the frequency of conflict in industry must take account of the perceptions, goals, frustration of workers".

The two factors present were the committee's determination to reduce wages and increase the working week, and the union, equally determined that whereas they would accept a wage reduction, they were afraid that if they agreed to an increase in the working week this would have a domino effect on other employing authorities. The fact that notice of altered working hours and wage reduction was posted on 23 February 1922 allowed a period of 47 days for "conflict, tension, and hostility" before the actual eviction.

Although the House Committee report referred to a state of insubordination and mutiny among their staff, other than that observation the event appears to have been deliberately trivialised and reduced to an account of the successful eviction of the strikers and their replacement with "fresh and efficient staff". Little or no damage to fabric was admitted and there was no inconvenience to the administration of the hospital. No mention is made of the fact that staff had accepted the wage cut. In contrast again to the statement of the committee, a witness to the strike recalls "a local clergyman was instrumental in

recruiting new staff from the Lincolnshire villages, many were untrained and a difficult period followed" (Priestland, 1989).

The union and press versions described a much more traumatic sequence of events, particularly noting the forcible ejection of the striking nurses. The successful tactics of the "stay in strike" adopted by the union and staff at St John's Hospital, Lincoln, in the September of the previous year had failed at Saxondale. With the defeat of the strike the union had no option but to negotiate a wage reduction and an increase in the working week to 66 hours. As the union noted, "some semblance of nationally negotiated pay and conditions was maintained in an extremely difficult circumstance, and a good deal of credit for this must go to the spirit of resistance shown by the striking nurses at Saxondale" (Carpenter, 1988).

In April 1985 the Confederation of Health Service Employees which in 1946 replaced the Asylum Officers Union paid tribute to the striking nurses of Saxondale by a commemoration meeting at the hospital. Attending this, in his 85th year, was Mr Hough, the Branch Secretary of the Union at the time of the strike. (Not only had he been black-listed but warned in writing never to present himself at the hospital again.) At the meeting the Saxondale management rescinded this decision, and Mr Hough was given written authority to visit the hospital at any time he wished. This personal triumph was short-lived as Saxondale ceased to function on 31 December 1988.

The nurses of Saxondale may have lost the strike but they earned their place in the history of British Trade Unionism. The "Gibson" referred to in the House Committee report later became a Governor of the Bank of England in the post-war Attlee administration (Quick, personal communication).

Acknowledgements

Thanks are expressed to the Nottinghamshire County Archivist and to the East Midlands office of the Confederation of Health Service Employees.

References

- CARPENTER, M. (1988) *Working for Health*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- CRONIN, J. E. (1979) *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain*. London: Croom Helm.
- MS held by Notts County Archivist.
- Nottingham Journal* (1922) 15 April.
- PRIESTLAND, P. (ed.) (1989) *Radcliffe-on-Trent: A Study of a Village*. Radcliffe-on-Trent: Ashbracken.
- QUICK, B. Personal communication (COHSE).
- STAGNER, R. & ROSEN, H. (1968) *Psychology of Union Management Relations*. London: Tavistock.