Trams & Tragedy

The furore about the film ‘Three and Out’ continues

Tram trains on trial for the first time in UK
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LA ST year Network Rail told the union about its plans for publicity about safety at level crossings. It said it was intending to involve the union in an exercise which was to be a ‘sustained two-year advertising and information campaign’.

Network Rail didn’t contact us again until its posters were designed and its leaflets were printed. It was a shame because it means they missed an opportunity to have input from ASLEF members – the people who are literally at the sharp end of on-the-line incidents.

However, this didn’t prevent us from doing what we could to support and encourage the initiative.

My more significant complaint is the description of the campaign as being ‘sustained’. If that word means what I think it does – constant, non-stop and unrelenting – then Network Rail has let everyone down: public, passengers and rail staff. Because it has been as sustained as the life-span of the Cabbage White.

To be fair, I saw some advertisements last year which grabbed the attention. They showed a car being scattered along a track after a collision with a train. They were impressive. But they weren’t sustained. A one-off advert is only effective for a limited time. To really make an impression you need a series of images and messages that gradually seep into people’s consciousness. That’s what Network Rail hasn’t done.

The point of this article isn’t just to have a pop at Network Rail. It is to express my regret that we are no closer to dealing with the problems of fatalities at level crossings than we have ever been. We have seen great advances in technology. We have the ability, for example, to have CCTV camera film beamed directly into cabs to warn and alert drivers. We have devices to automatically block crossings and to assist with train braking. Yet every week of the year we have to replay the same tragedies, both for victim and train driver. People continue to die.

The rail unions collectively have come up with many sensible proposals that would radically reduce these incidents, from use of cameras on the track to ensuring stations are all manned to the construction of bridges and tunnels to eliminate crossings. Yet the only time they are discussed publicly is when it is too late for somebody: after yet another fatality.

Slapping out the occasional advert isn’t going to end the problem, but the ‘sustained’ campaign it promised last year would go a long way to prevent further unnecessary loss of life.

KEITH NORMAN
GENERAL SECRETARY
SWT DISPUTE GOES TO THE WIRE

A PROPOSED four-day strike of ASLEF members working for SWT, due to begin at the start of last month, was suspended following urgent talks just days before action was due to begin.

The ‘official picket’ armbands had been distributed, the company and media had been informed and the action looked set to begin when district organiser Graham Morris sat down for one last attempt to resolve the dispute. By the end of the day Graham and his team felt that sufficient progress had been made to suspend the action. After consideration by the executive committee, the new offer will be put to SWT members for a decision. At that stage the action will be re-imposed or called off. In the orginal strike ballot 73% voted in favour of industrial action.

Graham, speaking on behalf of the Company Council, explained what had been achieved in this statement:

‘We had our first meeting about a 2007 pay deal way back in August last year.

Since then, to be perfectly honest, we’ve had more meetings than I care to remember!

‘However we’ve now reached a position where we believe that our members should have their say on the offer that’s on the table. I know some people think you should have been offered the chance to vote on the previous offer by SWT – but I can only say that you elected us to get the best possible deal we could achieve by negotiation. Well, we believe that we’ve got to that point now. It’s up to the members to decide whether or not the proposed deal is acceptable.

‘The mandate we were given for industrial action was truly appreciated – and contributed hugely to our ability to achieve what we have. In brief this means

● A two-year deal – with effectively 18 months left to run

● 4% Clean Salary – back-dated to October 2007.

● a DCS Scheme as requested by us

which will be implemented as soon as the notice period with the current insurers expires

● a 9hr 30min maximum turn length to run from the December 2008 Timetable.

● agreement to completely review our T&C book (DRI 2) during the next 12 months

● from October 2008 – an RPI Pay Rise minus ½ % as a minimum. This may increase if we provide alternative funding to off-cost the 9hr 30day.’

Hold on to your hat – here come the public!

WHENEVER there’s the threat of industrial action, the union’s policy department opens its emails and letters with care! The messages from the public are seldom tasteful, inevitably irate and often abusive. People who support us don’t bother to write in (why should they?) – but those who object certainly make up for it!

What is rather sad is that most people tend to revel in their own misfortune.

● An apoplectic teacher complained at the threat of strike action when ‘after a lifetime in teaching doing up to 60 hours a week including preparation and no overtime, a train driver could be earning up to £10,000 more than I ever earned at the end of my career.’

● A gent from the Royal Navy was ‘disgusted’ that the union considered striking ‘over what would be seen as a fantastic pay offer to Public Sector workers like myself’. He went on to say, ‘The armed forces have no union representatives and have a pay award, which is invariably below the level of inflation, imposed upon them with little or no discussion.’ He invited us to ‘be ashamed of yourselves’.

● A policeman, who said he was himself ‘demonstrating for a fair deal in the Met’ was displeased at our ‘holding a gun to the head of the public’. He suggested instead we held ‘a good hearty demonstration’.

● Finally someone wrote thanking us for ‘Screwing the British Public again.’ Oddly enough, this was sent from a work email and the person’s job title was ‘Relationship Manager’!

MORE SENSIBLE COMPARISONS

Perhaps, rather than squabble jealously about fellow-workers, these people should get themselves organised into trade unions and seek to improve their working conditions. But if they are anxious to vent their anger in a negative way, we can think of better targets. For example

JOHN ARMITT, the Chief Executive of Network Rail until July last year who in 2007 received a total package worth £880,000.

According to the Sunday Times, this made him the highest earning public sector worker in the UK.

ADAM APPELEGARTH who oversaw the collapse of Northern Rock and was rewarded with a £760,000 ‘golden goodbye and a pension fund worth £2.6 million. In the five years before the bank crashed he was paid almost £10m and accrued a pension worth £304,000 a year.

RUTH HARRISON, who was given a £140,000 ‘golden handshake’ to leave Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Buckinghamshire after 33 patients died after she presided over a superbug scandal

WILLIE WALSH, the man responsible for Heathrow Airport’s Terminal 5 debacle, who received a package worth £625,000 in 2007.

MOIR LOCKHEAD, Chief Executive of the First Group, who oversees the disaster known as First Great Western – and who last year received a salary of £461,000, a ‘performance related’ bonus of £254,000 and has a pension transfer value of £4,192,178.

BRIAN SOUTER, the Chief Executive of Stagecoach who last year ‘earned’ a total package of £1,045,000 and whose pension transfer value is £4,114,000.
ASLEF’s Pauline takes the Minister for a ride!

AT THE risk of sounding like a London taxi-driver, do you know who Pauline Cawood had in her cab last month? Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Transport.

Pauline, secretary of the union’s Leeds branch, collared the minister at last year’s Labour Party conference to remind her about the union’s concerns over 60-tonne lorries. At the end of their chat, Ruth Kelly said when she was in the north-east she’d like to see what train driving was like at first hand. ’I didn’t hear from her for a while,’ Pauline says. ’But I didn’t doubt that she’d turn up sometime.’

And she was right. Just after nine in the morning at the end of March the minister, surrounded by local media, marched up to the front of the train Pauline was driving from Leeds to Sheffield and, abandoning her civil servants and advisors, stepped into Pauline’s cab for the one hour and ten minute journey.

’I liked her,’ Pauline says. ’She was genuinely interested in the job and I think she was impressed by the skills and responsibilities that train driving involves.’

There was a good deal of maintenance on the line that morning and, as we’d expect, Pauline sounded the horn to mark the train’s arrival and was greeted by a wave from the first of the p-way staff to show they were aware it was on its way. After this had happened a few times, the minister remarked that everyone seemed very friendly on the railway!

’She was very friendly and pleasant, and seemed very interested in signalling arrangements and the train protection warning system (TPWS),’ Pauline says. ’I talked to her about overcrowding and I said it was especially important in the area of the university at Leeds. I think it’s important that students are attracted to rail travel rather than put off by it.

’Ruth listened carefully and politely – but she didn’t comment much. She said she was learning rather than talking.’

As they journeyed along, Pauline mentioned that her two-year-old grandson was a bit of a train-spotter – and Ruth said her daughter loved all sorts of transport. ’Well, you’re in the right job, then!’ Pauline said.

She says she feels quite sorry for the minister, who didn’t seem able to walk more than a few feet without a camera being pointed in her face. ’When she got out of the cab at Sheffield she was immediately whisked off to do a few radio interviews, but she made a point of coming back to thank me for the ride. She was a bit non-committal when I went on about flexible working and inequality but you expect a minister to be a bit wary about discussing policy with a union activist. But she said she now had a better understanding of driver training, and the need for it to be on-going.’

Pauline did a few radio interviews before she left the station, but stuck to the personal side. ’It wasn’t a political event,’ she says.

’I liked her. As she was ushered away, she said she’d have to go because, ’We’re both busy women.’ I liked that. She hasn’t got the airs that turn you off some politicians.’

Scotrail franchise exposes ‘sneaky Stewart’

Scottish Nationalist (SNP) transport minister Stewart Stevenson has extended the Scotrail franchise for three years, up to 2014. The SNP – after all its pre-election assurances about involvement and transparency – consulted no one before taking the decision.

ASLEF says this exposes not only Mr Stevenson, but also his party, as being ‘puffed up with power’. ’To take a decision of this importance without mentioning it to anyone except his own cronies is utterly undemocratic and authoritarian,’ said ASLEF general secretary Keith Norman. ’It is a warning to all voters of the dangers of the SNP.’

Scottish TUC leader Graeme Smith says Mr Stevenson promised ‘consultation and dialogue’ at a meeting last month.

The union’s officer in Scotland, Kevin Linsday, says this arrogance has prevented stakeholders from putting alternative plans to the minister. ’He says he has ‘revisited key terms’ in the contract, but doesn’t say what they are. He talks about being able to reinvest £70 million back into ‘public services throughout the country’. He was not prepared to even discuss putting that money back into transport – like financing the re-opening of the Edinburgh suburban line, which would cost about £38 million.

’He hasn’t even considered bringing the franchise back into public hands, a solution supported by more people than back the SNP!’

The union will be raising the issue at the STUC Congress. ’We may not be in a position to reverse this decision at present,’ says Keith Norman. ’But we will do all we can to expose the SNP’s authoritarian and pompous attitudes. It will not be hard to do.’
‘Tram-trains’ on trial in Yorkshire

‘Tram trains’ are to be trialled for the first time in the UK on the 37 mile Penistone Line, which runs between Huddersfield, Barnsley and Sheffield. The trial will begin in 2010 on the track on which Northern currently runs one service in each direction an hour.

Five of the new tram-trains, which can run on both railway tracks and tram lines, will replace conventional trains currently used on the line. They are lighter than conventional trains - and greener because they use less fuel.

The reduced weight reduces wear and tear on the track and should therefore decrease the need for disruptive maintenance works. It is also expected that because tram-trains have faster acceleration and deceleration rates they should be able to ensure more precise journey times.

The two-year trial will look at the environmental benefits, operating costs and technical suitability of the new vehicles, and test how popular passengers find them.

There is also an option for a second phase which would test the vehicles on the Sheffield Supertram system to see what additional benefits the vehicles can deliver when extended onto city centre tram lines.

The Penistone Line, a Community Rail Partnership, was chosen for the trial because it offers the chance to test the tram-trains on a route that in part passenger-only, and in part carries both passengers and freight.

Passenger Focus will lead on undertaking research into passenger perception of the tram train. The object is to establish whether tram-trains similar to those operating successfully in Europe are suitable for Britain’s railway network.

Northern Rail intends to lease the tram-trains and Network Rail is due to spend £15m in track improvements and alterations to stations as part of the trial. The Department for Transport will contribute £9m. NedRailways, who operate tram-trains in The Netherlands, will bring its experience to the trial.

ASLEF’s district officer Nicky Whitehead says the union welcomes any innovation in rail transport, especially, he says, into ‘the parts where other trains cannot reach’.

‘This form of transport may well prove popular and be extended to other areas, even other cities,’ he says. ‘It is important that the drivers are represented by ASLEF. The drivers and the service will both benefit from a specialised union organisation.’

UNION DEAL AT CROYDON TRAM LINK

FOLLOWING talks headed up by district officers Kevin Lindsay and Steve Grant, Croydon Tramlink has agreed to recognise ASLEF for negotiating purposes. This has been a union claim for some years but until now the company had resisted offering separate negotiations for drivers.

An early meeting will now be held to address outstanding industrial issues.

TRAVEL CAMPAIGN BOOST FROM LUL

THE union has made some inroads with London Underground in our campaign to secure free travel facilities across the UK network for all our members. Last month Transport for London agreed with First Capital Connect (FCC) to introduce discounted Standard Class annual season tickets for TFL employees. This will apply to TFL workers who have started since 1 April 1996 and so don’t have ‘Privilege’ facilities.

A driver living near a FCC station can now buy an annual season ticket at a quarter of the cost of full rate travel on FCC trains. Previously they had to pay the full cost, and then apply for a refund from LUL. A further benefit is that there is a tax benefit because the reimbursement scheme is subject to tax. However if members wish to remain on the reimbursement system, they can.

TFL is also proposing to approach other TOCs to reach similar agreements with them.

Steve Grant, the district officer, said, ‘This is a small but significant step forward towards ASLEF’s aim of free rail travel for all our members. We will be working for this to be extended to other companies as part of our national campaign.’
New Spanish rail link speeds along as UK plods

THE new Madrid – Barcelona high speed rail link completes its 410 mile journey in 2 hours and 35 minutes, with the train peaking at a speed of 217 mph.

It is the latest development in a 15 year project – which cost £83 billion. About 70% of this money has been spent on Ave (Alta Velocidad Española) which means ‘Spanish High Speed’. The aim is to have 10,000 km (6,200 miles) of high-speed track in Spain by 2020. This means that 90% of the population will be no more than 30 miles from a high-speed station. Other Ave lines include the Madrid-Seville corridor. This 290 mile journey takes 2 and a half hours and costs between £21.60 and £53.95.

**HOW DO WE MATCH UP?**
The table below shows a comparison between a Madrid-Barcelona trip and a journey from London to Edinburgh:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>Madrid – Barcelona</th>
<th>London - Edinburgh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journey Time</td>
<td>2 hours 35 minutes</td>
<td>4 hours 20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Speed</td>
<td>217 mph</td>
<td>125 mph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment and comfort</td>
<td>Audio system with four radio channels and two video channels. Reclining chairs which can be changed to face direction of travel</td>
<td>Free WI-FI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Each train has a bar with hot and cold food. In first and club class you can get a welcome drink, plus a meal served at your seat.</td>
<td>Sandwiches and hot drinks from the café bar or the trolley. Selected services also include an onboard restaurant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increased fines for safety breaches planned

NEW safety legislation is set to be introduced on the rather ominous date of Friday 13 June, with the support of the government and both the Health and Safety Commission and Executive. It was first introduced as a Private Member’s Bill by Streatham MP Keith Hill.

One effect of the Health and Safety (Offences) Bill will be to bring maximum fines under the health and safety legislation into line with those already available under comparable regulatory legislation like environmental and food safety legislation. It will also increase the maximum fine in the lower courts for specific breaches of regulations from £5,000 to £20,000 – and make imprisonment an option for most offences in both the lower and higher courts.

**MP backs proposed Kent freight site**

**JIM DOBBIN** MP has put an Early Day Motion to the House of Commons on a proposed new freight terminal near Maidstone in Kent. Jim says sites such as the Kent International Gateway are ‘essential in order to alleviate the growing pressure on the M20, the M25 and London’s main arterial roads in addition to the achievement of the Government’s own targets to shift more freight from road on to rail.’

Jim says, ‘I was delighted to see that a new Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI) has been given the go-ahead at Howbury Park and I see the KIG plan as a sensible extention of the policy. ‘I want to see a network of international rail freight facilities that link into major freight routes, seaports and other rail-served logistics parks throughout the UK and Europe.’

There is, however, vocal opposition to the scheme from local residents who are calling for a boycott of AXA insurance company because of its involvement as a major funder of the scheme.

‘There will never be a popular site for a freight terminal of this size,’ says Keith Norman. ‘But, regardless of the precise location, we are convinced of the absolute need for them to be developed.’
Hundreds mourn passing of driver Gourlay

ST LAWRENCE CHURCH in Worksop was filled to overflowing last month to mourn the passing of train driver and motorcycle enthusiast Bob Gourlay. Bob, who was 60, died when a car collided with his Triumph motorbike just yards from his home. As the hearse passed through the village it was followed by some 20 motorcyclists, including ASLEF vice-president Tosh McDonald.

Bob was a popular man – something reflected in the number of work colleagues at his funeral. He was known as a special person with a very individual sense of fun.

Bob’s son Lea, also a keen motorcyclist, said it was a terrible shock because his father was always ‘a safety-conscious and thoughtful driver’. He was well known in the bike racing community.

Bob worked on the railways since he was 15 and became a driver in the 1970s. He worked at Shirebrook and later settled in Worksop at the Train Crew Depot where he was a much-loved and popular colleague.

He leaves behind him his partner Sue, his children Dean, Lea and Melanie, and his seven grand-children.

It is intended to organise a motorcycle race dedicated to Bob’s memory. The family has asked that any memorial donations are made to the Classic Racing Motorcycle Club (CRMC) Benelovent Fund for the provision of a Rob Gourlay Memorial Fund. The contact address is CRMC Treasurer Joy Gill, 17 Central Avenue, Tipton, West Midlands, DY4 9RJ.

MP questions containers blown off rails

GORDON PRENTICE, the Labour MP for Pendle, has asked transport minister Tom Harris if the corner locks were engaged on the containers blown off the trains at Milton Keynes and Tebay on 8 March (see the report on page 5 of last month’s Journal).

Tom Harris said, ‘The five empty containers which were blown off a freight train near Tebay and the two empty containers blown off another freight train near Milton Keynes on 1 March 2008 were located on “UIC 517 type” spigots fitted to the freight wagons. Evidence indicates that each container was correctly located on four spigots. The spigots do not have any form of manually operated twist lock as fitted to some other types of rail wagons and road container carriers; instead they have a “mushroom” shaped head designed to provide vertical retention. However, in both incidents, preliminary findings indicate the spigots did not function as intended. The reasons for this and other factors which may have contributed to the incidents are currently under investigation by the RAIB.

‘Regarding the history of similar incidents, it has been reported to the RAIB that there have not been any previous incidents in the UK since the introduction of the spigots to the UK in the early 1990s. Reports of similar incidents involving containers blowing off trains in continental Europe are emerging but the circumstances of these incidents are not yet clear. On completion of its investigation, the RAIB’s report will be published on its website. During its investigation, urgent safety advice can be issued by the RAIB to the industry in the UK and other member states to bring any safety matter to their attention.’

HEAD OFFICE PENSION SEMINAR The General Secretary, District Secretaries, EC members, Company Council Reps and Pension Reps all gathered at Arkwright Road on 14 April to discuss where the union stands on the Railway Pension Scheme.

General Secretary Keith Norman started the meeting by emphasising that keeping the membership informed on the progression of this important issue was essential and that this was the reason for the seminar. The session gave EC President Alan Donnelly the opportunity to explain the EC position following the release of the Railway Pension Commission Final Report. It was also an opportunity for ASLEF reps to ask questions to the President and also to former union president Dave Tyson, who has vast knowledge of pensions in the industry.

We will keep members informed on all developments on pensions issues.

FOR SWT, READ M15! A rail passenger got in touch with us last month over an exchange he had with SWT’s Customer Relations department. When the union was threatening strikes, the company slapped the salaries of drivers onto its website. So our correspondent contacted SWT to enquire about the remuneration of its Managing Director.

On 8 April he received a reply from Customer Services saying, ‘I regret that I am unable to give details of the salary of our Managing Director.’

Unable? Or unwilling?

Rail moved 1.2 billion people last year!

IF PROOF were needed about the importance of rail to the United Kingdom, it came with last month’s revelation that a record number of people took the train in 2007.

In all, British railways carried 1.213 billion passengers over journeys that added up to 30.1 billion miles! This was an increase of 7.8% over the previous year - and means that the UK’s use of the railways is at the highest-ever level in peacetime Britain.

Between 1919 and 1995 rail travel remained constant around 20 billion passenger miles a year, but the past decade has shown continual growth.

WHAT THEY SAY…

Jim Fitzpatrick, transport minister, on 6 April: ‘Disruption is an unfortunate and unavoidable consequence of maintenance work that is essential for the continuing drive to deliver a safer, faster and more reliable rail network.’
Taking from the poor, giving to the rich

The article on page 4 referred to some of the vast salaries taken home by UK Boardroom Boffins. But that’s not the end of the story according to TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber. There’s also the question of tax …

EW research by the TUC shows that tax avoidance by big companies and the super-rich is costing the country £25 billion a year – around £1,000 for every UK household. This appears in the first of a new TUC pamphlet series called TOUCHstones that aim to inject a trade union voice into national political debate. The tax authorities do not dispute this figure – indeed they estimate that it could be even more.

Because this big tax gap has to be paid for, taxes for ordinary people are higher than they need to be. Vital public services don’t get the resources they need and progressive government pledges like the promise to halve child poverty are under threat.

LOOKING FOR LOOPHOLES
What do we mean by tax avoidance? This is not about breaking the law (although that goes on too – the TUC thinks that nearly £4 billion worth of tax is lost by people illegally hiding money in tax havens like Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man.) Nor are we complaining about tax breaks meant to encourage sensible behaviour such as saving for a pension – although even these always benefit the better off more than average earners or the low paid.

Our objection is to clever accountants looking for loopholes to cut tax bills that - while legal - are not fair to ordinary tax-payers. This is not the politics of envy – we simply say the rich should pay a fair share. We don’t have penal tax rates in the UK, and those with the biggest incomes can afford to pay more than ordinary taxpayers.

TAXES FALL FOR BIGGEST COMPANIES
Take the biggest companies. Business lobbyists complain that paying 30 per cent of their profits in corporation tax is too much – although that is a pretty average rate across similar countries to the UK. But TUC research (which involved going through seven years’ worth of annual reports) shows the top 50 companies now pay on average only 22.5 per cent of profits in tax, and that this figure has been falling year on year.

The best-known scam for rich individuals is the ‘non-dom’ tax break. This allows people who live and work in this country to claim to have their main residence elsewhere, even if they never leave the country. It opens up many ways to legally reduce your tax bill. The government’s modest proposal to charge ‘non-dom’s £30,000 a year after seven years of ‘non-dom’ status provoked howls of outrage from the City and the CBI. Too many of the super-rich think that tax is only for the little people. Yet ending the ‘non-dom’ tax break for good would raise around £4 billion – enough to pay for halving child poverty as the government has pledged to do by 2010.

Although the Government should have gone further, they have made efforts to tackle poverty. The minimum wage, tax credits and more jobs have all made a difference. But at the other end of the income scale the top few per cent of the population have been doing very well indeed.

BOARDROOM BLITZ
Boardroom pay has gone up faster than employee pay, and city bonuses have reached stratospheric levels. I worry that this growing group of the super-rich have little connection with the rest of society. They float free in a bubble of affluence where they don’t think they have any obligations or responsibilities to the rest of society. At the very least they should pay their fair share of tax – and government should make sure that they do.

Closing tax loopholes inevitably involves lots of complicated small print. But there are two straightforward ideas the government should adopt.

First they could put into law what is called a general anti-avoidance principle. That would allow the tax authorities to close accountants’ schemes simply set up to avoid tax.

Secondly, the Government should introduce a minimum tax rate for the very well paid. This would limit tax breaks for those earning over this limit. In The Missing Billions – the pamphlet in which we published this research which is available on the TUC website – we suggest that those earning more than £100,000 a year should pay a minimum of 32%, those earning more than £150,000 could pay 37% and those earning more than £200,000 could pay 40%.

THEY WOULDN’T MISS IT!
This would make little, if any, difference to even relatively well off people who pay PAYE and don’t look for every opportunity to avoid tax, though it does make the tax system a little more progressive for those in the top few per cent. But its real advantage is that it stops much tax avoidance dead in its tracks as there’s a floor below which tax bills cannot be reduced.

Too often political debate in this country has been between those who want to cut public services so that they can cut taxes, and those who think the price of a civilised society is that we pay reasonable taxes to provide good services.

It is time for a new debate about tax justice – which includes asking whether those at the top are getting away with paying far less than their fair share.
Well notes can be sickening!

IT’S NOT the principle that employers should do more to promote the health and welfare of their staff that annoyed me about Health Secretary Alan Johnson’s recent comments about getting sick employees back to work. It is always better to find ways of helping people back to work after injury or illness. Indeed the injured or sick person has a duty to mitigate their loss.

But the hype about the government seeking a ‘work-health balance’ and calling on GPs to issue ‘well notes’ rather than continuing to sign them off sick missed the point.

Many people on sick leave are there because their employers injured them. And many remain on sick leave because employers fail or refuse to make the necessary adjustments to enable them to work again. They don’t stay off because their GPs continue to sign them off without encouraging them to try to return to work, or because doctors won’t advise employers what tasks the worker can perform.

This is especially true when someone is not formally disabled within the meaning of the Disability Discrimination Act.

A CASE IN POINT

Thompsons had a client who worked as a Ministry of Defence stores assistant. She spent much of each day lifting very heavy boxes containing spent munitions and other pieces of heavy metal. It was an unsafe system of work and the MoD was unable to produce evidence of any safe system of manual handling operations.

Not surprisingly she hurt her back and was off sick for seven weeks. Her GP wrote to her employer’s Occupational Health Department saying she should be placed on light duties to prevent aggravation of her injury.

She was nevertheless returned to heavy lifting duties.

A further letter from her GP some months after her return, which again advised that she be put on to light duties, again failed to make her employer act. It was nearly two years after the initial injury that she was eventually taken off heavy lifting. She continues to suffer back pain and recently received £60,000 compensation from the MoD.

NO ADJUSTMENTS

Another client, a benefits assessor at a local authority, was desperate to return to work despite a serious stomach condition following the birth of her first child. She said this when she was asked about her absence.

Specifically she asked her employer to help her to return by making reasonable adjustments to her work. These included working from home or a phased return on light duties.

But the council failed to respond to her request. Instead they sacked her - after a disciplinary hearing that neither she or her union rep could attend. The council made its decision without waiting for a new medical report from her specialist. We took the council to court for unfair dismissal before they agreed to pay damages.

ASLEF members will recall the case of Martin Hazelhurst who drove for Virgin Cross Country. When Virgin failed to make reasonable adjustments to enable him to return to light duties after a knee operation, an employment tribunal awarded him £41,000 compensation. And it ordered his managers to attend disability rights training.

That was a humiliating and costly lesson for Martin’s employers.

NOT REALLY SO SHOCKING

Headlines about the cost of sick leave to British industry are designed to shock. Add the cost of compensation paid to those who employers, such as those above, have failed to help return to work and employers’ attitudes to sick leave are harder to fathom.

The government’s new work-health slogan must focus on the employer’s duty to help people back to work. As with rehabilitation, it cannot be used as a stick to beat the sick and injured with. The Disability Discrimination Act requires employers to make reasonable adjustments - but clearly they need encouragement to be more flexible in their attitude to helping absent workers who are not yet on the scrap heap or labelled disabled.
In June 2006 I was hit and injured by a builders lorry at a roundabout whilst on my motorbike. My insurance company just took the £200 excess off me and paid for the repairs. Because the lorry driver denied it was his fault the insurance company didn’t bother trying to reclaim it so the buck would have stopped with me. I could have lost my no claims discount and never seen my excess again.

Thompsons took up my case, free of charge. all part of my ASLEF benefits and I not only got my £200 back and my no claims bonus re-instated, they got me a cheque for £3,000 from the lorry drivers insurance company, for my injury.

Thompsons provided me with a free claims service and 100% of my compensation. Me? I’ll stick to ASLEF and Thompsons.
CALLOUS LAUGHTER P
SPOTLIGHT ON RAIL D

THE furore about the film ‘Three and Out’ continues. The film, made with cooperation from London Underground, is about a driver whose train has run over two suicides. It claims to be a comedy.

The General Secretary made his views clear in the editorial of the March edition of the Journal. Keith Norman had two major reservations. One, ‘I can’t find anything amusing about people so distressed that they are driven to suicide’ and two, that ‘These incidents can mean life-changing traumas’ for drivers who have been involved.

‘I don’t want ASLEF to look like some sort of kill-joy organisation – because we’re not,’ Keith says. ‘But there are issues which we shouldn’t ignore – and this is one of them. I want the public to be aware of how distressing it can be for a driver to discover a body under the wheels of his or her train.’

Last year 249 dead bodies ended up under trains. Of these, 194 were classified by the Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB) as suicides or suspected suicides. Behind each of these is – undeniably – a terrible and tragic story of loneliness and despair. It is no coincidence that these incidents increase dramatically just after the New Year, for example. But – and this is the union’s specific concern - in each of them as well is a ‘secondary victim’ – and that is the driver.

Keith Norman says he still recalls most vividly a fatality that occurred decades ago when he was a second man. ‘Every time I drove along that stretch of rail I remembered what had happened,’ he says. ‘It is something that is impossible to forget. ‘Everyone has a different way of dealing with a fatality when driving. Many drivers won’t talk about it – they from the memory the incident or visit it. Others humour’, pretend. But the fact is that such a tragedy – that is why they made there can be no work.’

In this feature, the General Secretary has indirectly considered the reaction of others on the evening news programmes of both the BBC and ITV.

PUBLIC SUPPORT
Perhaps the most heartening aspect was the reaction of the public, which were universally in support of the union’s position. One letter sent to us read, ‘I have just watched the news item on London Tonight regarding the film which is to be released called ‘Three and Out’. ‘I feel compelled to write to offer my sympathies to your members for the way they are being portrayed in this film. I am disgusted

GOING PUBLIC
When ASLEF voiced its concern about ‘Three and Out’ the reaction of its makers was predictable. It was claimed that it ‘raised the issue’ of dying on the railway in a ‘sensitive’ way.

So how sensitive exactly? Well, this is what the publicity material has to say: ‘British comedy Three And Out is a compelling mix of sharp dialogue, comedic capers, painfully funny, and often painful, truths about how far we would go to change our lives.” Not a word about ending life.

And it is based on a blatant untruth. Again, the publicity says, ‘You’re a London tube driver and you’ve had two ‘one-unders’ in as many weeks. Then you’re told about the ‘Three and Out’ rule; three fatal accidents within a month and you’re out of a job... but with a huge pay off! What do you do? Take trauma counselling and drive very, very carefully? Or do you seek out a third ‘one-under’, take the cash, pay off your debts and retire to a Scottish idyll to write your novel?’

This is nonsense. There are no such arrangements. It gives a false impression of train drivers and their profession. We set out to counter these misleading impressions.

ON THE BOX - AND PUBLIC REACTION
The producers of the film contacted the union after reading Keith’s editorial in the March Journal. They invited us to ‘see the film first’ before condemning it. This rather missed the point. We didn’t want to assess it for style, casting or script. We objected to a misrepresentations of train drivers and their profession.

In the end, Keith arranged for EC member Simon Weller to attend a screening and following this Keith handled radio interviews while Simon put over the union’s views on the evening news programmes of both the BBC and ITV.
That such a subject would be considered suitable to be made into a ‘comedy’ film. I lost my brother to suicide on the railways five years ago and witnessed the effect his death had on the driver of the train at the inquest. I am in no doubt my brother’s death had a profound affect on not only the driver, but his family, work colleagues and friends and it is something I carry a sense of guilt over every day.

I am sure you have many members who will suffer the painful reminder of an experience they would rather forget when this film is released in the same way families such as mine will be forced to relive unpleasant events again.

I want to thank ASLEF for speaking out about the film and at least sparking a debate which will alert the general public to a subject which is clearly not a joke for anyone involved.

‘Please thank your members for the work they do and thank you for listening.’

THANKS FOR ‘SKILLED HANDS’

Another woman told us in an email, ’I am as shocked about this film as I am impressed by Simon Weller’s dignified protest on television yesterday. The film’s theme is the most tasteless and insensitive media concoction for a very long time. I admire and respect train drivers not least on the London Underground which I use frequently.

‘Drivers hold the lives of hundreds of people in their skilled hands and I am glad that I live near enough to a terminus (Hammersmith) to be able to occasionally say ‘thank you’ in person.’

Brian Cooke of passenger group London Travel Watch said, ’To try and make money out of a film like this is disgusting. Tube passengers should boycott this film.’ The Samaritans also had harsh words to say about the handling of such a subject.

CURRENT ADVICE

The RSSB says that all staff should be educated about the potential impact of traumatic experiences such as suicides and the union is involved with research work into what methods of support actually work. This is not an easy task because everyone reacts differently.

Ruth Harrison, the expert Forensic Social Work consultant who helped the union draw up its current policy, says that there are a mass of reactions that often result from traumas of this kind. Among them she numbers anger, rage, sadness, guilt, fear, helplessness and shame.

But the fact is that people react in different ways. For some, talking is the answer, revisiting the events and coming to terms with them. For other people this could be the worse thing to do.

Our concern is that every possible avenue and alternative is offered to any driver involved in such an incident. This means that every manager must be aware of the variety of options.

We must also ensure that whatever assistance a driver wants is exactly what he or she gets. In this, there have been no differences between ourselves and management. They are aware of the effect of these incidents. It is also why the union was so disappointed to discover that London Underground provided facilities and locations to make the ‘Three and Out’ film.

And one of the most important reactions we have had from drivers is when they have spoken about it to you – to fellow ASLEF members. You don’t just offer a sympathetic ear – you have the experience to be able to talk about these things with knowledge and sensitivity. You can be the most important counsellor of all.

WHERE DO WE GO NOW?

The union has a ‘best practice’ policy for supporting train drivers involved in traumatic train incidents, but the executive committee has now asked Simon Weller and Nigel Gibson to look again at this document to see if it can be improved. If you have any suggestions based on your experiences, please contact us – we will be grateful for your input, and who will guarantee confidentiality.

Either write to them at the union’s head office 9 Arkwright Road, London NW3 6AB or send something by email to the union’s health and safety advisor Dave Bennett at dbennett@aslef.org.uk

LUL MEMBERS GO TO THE PREMIER

Members of ASLEF employed as LUL drivers were planning to go to the premier of the ‘Three and Out’ film on 21 April to hand out a letter explaining that we’re not kill-joys or miseries – we’re just concerned human beings. We’ll report on the event and the public’s reactions, in the next issue of the magazine.

PUTS DEATHS

they simply try to put it aside, erase it from memory. Others talk about it a lot, turning it over in their mind and needing to revisit the events try to cope by the use of ‘gallows pretense’ it hasn’t affected them at all. The fact is that all drivers are touched by these deaths, so one is so callous as to be unmoved by tragedy.’

by there is such strong feeling about this Keith says, ‘Of all the subjects in the wake into a ‘light entertainment’ film, be few more insensitive than a death at such a subject would be considered suitable to be made into a ‘comedy’ film. I lost my brother to suicide on the railways five years ago and witnessed the effect his death had on the driver of the train at the inquest. I am in no doubt my brother’s death had a profound affect on not only the driver, but his family, work colleagues and friends and it is something I carry a sense of guilt over every day.

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SCOTTISH LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE REPORT

Private rail at public expense

I ATTENDED the Scottish Labour Party Conference in Aviemore for three days along with my colleague Alan Moir, Polmadie Branch and District Organiser, Kevin Lindsay.

We attended a couple of fringe meetings where Kevin explained to Des Brown MP exactly why we should take the First ScotRail franchise back into public ownership. Kevin’s speech was warmly welcomed by all.

Public ownership is important not only for Scotland’s railways but also for Britain’s railways as a whole. They should be taken back by the government. The cost to the taxpayer now exceeds £6 billion per year, so surely our case must be argued not only for Scotland’s railways but also for Britain’s railways as well.

The speech was warmly welcomed. Kevin seconded a motion on railway safety that was proposed by our delegate at conference, Thanks also to Kevin Lindsay, District Organiser for his leadership, and Alan Moir, Polmadie Branch, for buying me and Kevin (exactly) one pint!

Rab Wicksted – Secretary - Edinburgh No.2

TUC WOMEN’S CONFERENCE REPORT

Equalities boosts ASLEF’s reputation

ASLEF sent a full delegation consisting of Pauline Cawood, Wendy Hurst, Anne Johnson and Gillian McVitie to the 78th TUC Women’s Conference in Eastbourne. They moved motions on Honour Killing and Post Natal Depression and seconded an emergency motion on the funding crisis at Southall Black Sisters.

Anne Johnson from District 6 who was at her first conference, seconded a motion on railway safety that was proposed by our sister union the TSSA. All the ASLEF motions were successfully carried.

It was a very busy conference for our delegates who were inundated with requests from other unions to second their motions. Regrettably with such a small delegation we were not able to assist everyone that asked.

It is apparent that year after year ASLEF’s reputation for its equalities work has grown and grown. We were very aware of the respect in which the union is held, especially for our willingness to raise challenging subjects and issues that other unions might balk at. We are proud of our achievements.

Sometimes members aren’t aware of the work of ASLEF’s Consultative Committees and the work that we do building the union’s reputation and gaining kudos for all our members. There is no doubt that we are respected and listened to by the wider labour movement.

I would like to thank all of this year’s delegation for their hard work, commitment and professionalism. I would also like to thank Equalities Adviser, Sharon Allen and National Organiser Andy Reed for their invaluable support.

Pauline Cawood – National Secretary – ASLEF Women’s Consultative Committee

Union labours to good effect in Wales

I WAS fortunate to attend this year’s Wales Labour Party conference in Llandudno on behalf of ASLEF, and I can report that the conference was a great success. It began with a powerful address by Prime Minister Gordon Brown. His main message to a packed conference was the need for the Party to be ready for the attacks it will face as we move towards the next General Election, and the need for members to engage closely with the voters.

There are 21 constituencies with fragile majorities of less than 1,000 and we must use every opportunity to deliver the Party message by leafleting, door knocking and other canvassing methods.

Further key-note speeches were delivered by Harriet Harman the Deputy Labour Leader and by the leader of the Welsh Assembly Rhodri Morgan.

A warm and pleasing tribute was paid to Peter Hain by many conference speakers. It isn’t possible in this short report to express the gratitude that we in Wales owe Peter for his work.

We hope to see him return soon to the heart of government.

To our members who decry the involvement of our union in politics, I would stress how working at conferences like this enables us to get the Society message across. We make contacts with MPs and AMs that will hold us in good stead in the future both in Wales and in London.

My thanks are due to our members in Wales for allowing me the opportunity to attend the conference, and to district organiser Stan Moran for his company and assistance in meeting and expressing ASLEF’s view in the many meetings we were able to attend.

John Boreham – Carmarthen branch
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‘CELEBRATE STEVENAGE!’
SAYS DRIVER MAYOR MICK

IT’S very easy to talk to Mick Patston, the train driver and active ASLEF member who this month becomes Mayor of Stevenage. One word he uses frequently is ‘open’ and it rather sums up his outlook on life. He is in favour of open books, open buildings, open minds, open politics. ‘I don’t do ‘underhand’,’ he says. ‘I don’t think I’d be any good at it. What you see is what you get.’

It’s a refreshing approach to politics at any level.

Mick has been the Labour councillor for the Martins Wood ward of Stevenage Borough Council for the past 12 years. When he was offered the opportunity to become the town’s Mayor, he says he ‘jumped at it’. He is an enthusiastic spokesman for the first of the post-war ‘new towns’. It is currently home to 80,000 souls but Mick has a vision of that increasing by another 50% and ultimately receiving ‘city’ status. It is just beginning a £5 billion regeneration programme.

‘I always stress that I am a working train driver,’ he says. ‘Being Mayor is not about elitism or hierarchy. I am the proof that anyone can aspire to being the mayor of their town.’

He says he was drawn to local government for three reasons. He had become confident of expressing his opinions and representing people as an ASLEF representative, he wanted to play an active role in his community – and he knew all about the work. ‘Both my parents-in-law served as councillors, and my late father-in-law had been the town’s Mayor,’ he said.

But he still found it daunting to put his name forward as a councillor. ‘I’d canvassed for candidates in the past – but suddenly seeing my name up there was quite scary! But I was a local lad, I knew the issues and I was committed to what I was doing.’

Mick’s energy is quite remarkable. He had started the day I met him by driving the 0505 First Capital Connect train to London and he was getting ready for an evening engagement when I left. ‘I suppose I spend up to 20 hours a week on council business,’ he says. ‘When I get home my wife frequently asks, ‘And you are – who?’ Yet despite this he finds time to take an interest in photography, gardening, aviation and sport.

Mick enjoys the full council meetings partly because of their openness. ‘Anyone can come along and ask questions,’ he says. ‘It’s important that people have that right and the sense of ownership that goes with it. You can’t impose a regenerated town – people have to want it and believe they can help to create it.’

So what sort of thing will Mick be doing in his year ‘on the chain gang’ (as he expresses his wearing of the town’s regalia)? ‘Apart from the normal things you’d do as a councillor like holding surgeries and canvassing, it’s a very mixed bag. I saw off three bike events recently. I’m booked to go along to police liaison meetings and visits to refugee centres and air scouts. There’s charity dinners and auctions, tree plantings, open days – and we’re being visited by the Prime Minister of Kashmir. I’m not going to get bored!’

‘The good thing about these visits is that they’re not just ceremonial. The organisations we visit get publicity and hopefully interest and involvement. That’s what I’m hoping for from my charities this year. One is a home for pre-school autistic children called Tracks. I hope to raise its profile a lot this year.’

Mick says that the sociable side of working on the railways has always been a pleasure to him. ‘I love the banter in the mornings, the reunions and even the branch meetings,’ he says. ‘I ask if he thinks people have a full understanding of local government, and he shakes his head. ‘I don’t think they do. I had a go at remedying that when I visited a junior school recently wearing my ‘bling’. After I’d spoken the kids had a chance and the first question was from a dear little girl who wanted to know if I had a castle!’

There’s also an international aspect to the job, as Stevenage has links with towns in Germany, France, Russia and Zimbabwe. ‘It’s good fun, it’s sociable and you learn something. That’s three pretty good reasons for twinning in my book.’

Mick is getting ready for another meeting by now, and walks me down to the lobby of the Town Hall. ‘I’d encourage anyone to get involved in their communities at work or at home,’ he says. ‘You have to give up a few hours on the couch watching the telly, but you get a lot in return. It enriches your life, opens you to new ideas.

‘And in my case it shows people that a train driver can do anything!’

● Would you be prepared to be featured in future editions of this column, or know someone who would be a good subject? If you do, please let us know at the ASLEF Journal, 9 Arkwright Road, London NW3 6AB or journal@aslef.org.uk

Mick in his ‘bling’ – ‘one of the chain gang’, he says!
Edinburgh’s Polton packed for Pushy

EDINBURGH No.1 Branch chose St Patrick’s day to say farewell to Gordon ‘Pushy’ Craig: rather apt given Gordon’s love of Glasgow Celtic and more importantly... Guinness!

The Polton Inn was jam-packed with drivers and friends who came to raise a glass to ‘The Legend’. District Organiser Kevin Lindsay kindly attended to present Gordon with a scale model of his beloved Class 08 Locomotive. The fact that so many turned up on a Monday afternoon shows the high esteem that Gordon is held in. He seemed especially pleased to see the retired members who managed to attend - and it wasn’t long before they were reminiscing about the good old days.

A branch collection provided funds for a holiday to Fuerteventura for Gordon and his wife, Janet. Branch opinion was that, given Gordon’s love of sunbathing, a holiday was the most appropriate gift...just remember the factor 20 though!

Gordon began his railway career in December 1973 as a second man at Millerhill Depot, before being promoted to driver in 1986 following 10 years as a passed man. He retired on medical grounds in March this year, after being diagnosed with Sleep Apnoea.

Gordon has been a proud and vocal ASLEF member for nearly 35 years, contributing to branch meetings whenever shift patterns would allow. His thunderous snoring can be a tad off-putting when trying to deliver a report to the branch though; at least now we know why he is prone to nodding off halfway through a meeting!

Although a mainline driver for the majority of his years at Millerhill, his addictive love for the Yard Pilot turn is well known. Contrary to depot gossip, there is no truth in the rumour that Gordon would suffer from serious anxiety if he lost sight of a famous Edinburgh landmark... Arthur’s Seat; according to Gordon that is!

Peter Rogers

Sorry to lose Alan Rogers

ON behalf of all ASLEF members at Arriva Trains in Cardiff, I’d like to thank Driver Alan Rogers for all his work with the branch and as a health and safety rep. Alan, who has transferred to Freightliner, will be a great loss to us at Cardiff. On a personal note, when I became health and safety rep for the then Valley lines, Alan took me under his wing and helped me in so many ways. He taught me a lot and I will always be grateful to him.

Many members met Alan during his many stints as Cardiff’s AAD delegate and, like me, couldn’t fail to be impressed with his sincerity and knowledge. His report-backs were always straight to the point about both policies and socials. They were always entertaining.

We wish you luck, Alan. Our loss is Freightliner’s gain. Many thanks for all your work – you are an asset to ASLEF.

PAUL HARPER

100 YEARS AGO

In May 1908 Organising Secretary H. Parfitt reports on what happened at a meeting in Derby. But what did happen ...??

“On Sunday April 12th, I attended the ordinary meeting of Derby Branch. The attendance was fairly good for a meeting which had not been summoned, and here I spoke on amalgamation to an appreciative audience, over which Mr. Meek presided. The circular from Goodwick Branch was read, and I commend it to the members of our Society generally.

Derby will give it a special day, and as the object in view becomes known, other branches will probably follow suit. The following, which appeared in the Morning Leader, April 11th, has some bearing on the Goodwick circular: - “At West Hartlepool, yesterday, Judge O’Connor held that the widow of a ship’s fireman, who had a fatal seizure of heat apoplexy in the stokehold of a steamer whilst in the Red Sea, was entitled to compensation.”

After that, how about our men who get defective eyesight through the nature of their employment? Where is their compensation? That is what our Goodwick Branch wants to know?”

50 YEARS AGO

In the May 1958 Locomotive Journal, Percy Colicky, MP put forward a series of ideas that seem just as relevant today as they did then ...

“...I agree with the [British Transport] Commission that there may be a strong case for resisting any temptation to increase fares and freight charges at the present time. If one accepts that view, then it seems to me one must face up to a major policy decision, namely, that railways in the modern state must be run as a vital and necessary public service and financed accordingly. I have never been frightened of the word subsidy. It is in my view the fact, that just because too many people in high places have been afraid to face up to the need to subsidise our railways in the post-war period, railway wages and conditions have lagged behind their proper place in labour values. I want to see British Railways completely modernised. I want to see them employing high quality labour and having the pick of the labour market as they used to do in the old days. Only so can they be efficient as we all wish them to be. If on that basis railways become profitable, well and good. The main thing is that railways should be as highly efficient as possible and that they should serve well the public need. Profitability ought not to be made an end in itself.”

Extracts selected and edited by Jane Pimlott
Stratford special service

THE Stratford Branch Meeting on 14 April was a special occasion as presentations were made to a number of members in recognition of their long and loyal ASLEF service. We had the pleasure of welcoming District Organiser Andy Morrison, EC member Nigel Gibson and Steve Wright from the National Express East Anglia Drivers Company Council.

After the usual business, we then enjoyed reports from Andy and Nigel concerning issues from around the District and at National level before Steve up-dated us on NxEA issues. After questions and answers, Andy and Nigel made the presentations. Among the well-attended meeting were past and present members – including Andy Ramsey who had travelled from Scotland to be with us and to receive his 50 year medalion!

The members receiving their awards were Roy Allwood (25 years) Chris Nelson (30 years) Martin Cargill (40 years) Bill Stevens (50 year medalion) Herbie White (50 year medalion) George Watts (50 year medalion) and Andy Ramsey (50 year medalion). Unfortunately Neil Bunt (30 years) Alan Hill (35 years) and Peter Webb (40 years) were unable to attend, but we’ve sent on their badges in recognition of their long service to the union.

John Thorpe Reporter – Stratford Branch

East Ham welcomes retired section

ALL members of East Ham branch wish to thank Tony West and Peter J Smith from the Retired Members’ Section (RMS) for visiting our recent branch meeting. They offered some informative insights into how this rapidly-growing section operates.

It is a national shame how pensioners are treated in this country, especially those living below the poverty line. During discussions, Tony touched on the London Mayor elections and ‘PJ’ reminded us of the RMS prizedraw. The RMS is always ready to visit branches to speak about the work of their section.

We’re also grateful to brother Terry Wilkinson (EC) for his assistance in arranging the visit. The photo below shows most of the people who attended the visit: in the top row from the left are M. Connolly, K. Sullivan, I. Chauhan, M. McMullen, D. Daly, G. Church, D. Jones, J. Albert, C. Pirie, R. Warren, M. Cole, D. Buckland. In front are T. Laws (Sec), D O’Brien (Chairman), T. Wilkinson (EC), T. West & P. J. Smith (RMS).

At the end of the April meeting the EC’s Terry Wilkinson presented a loyalty certificate and badge to brother Dave Jones of Upminster (District line) LUL. This was to recognise all his hard work and service to ASLEF in general and East Ham in particular.

Terry Laws Secretary - East Ham branch

Weymouth true to form

ON 24 February the Weymouth branch held a retirement party for Bro Clive True. It attracted members of his family and friends and colleagues, working and retired, from all grades in the Weymouth and Bournemouth area – as well as some of his old South-Central work mates. I need hardly say that a good time was had by all!

Clive had completed over 45 years as a loyal ASLEF member and in recognition of this we had great pleasure in presenting Clive with the union’s Retirement and Appreciation Certificates (see pictures). I hope - and believe - that Clive enjoyed the occasion.

Rick Patterson Weymouth
England doesn’t subsidise Scotland

FOLLOWING on from the welcome Scottish pages in last month’s ASLEF Journal, I’d like to point out that the financing of the Scottish Government comes from a block grant from the central UK Government, currently around £30 billion annually. This is not a present we Scots get from our generous neighbours in the rest of the UK, but roughly the amount of taxes that are paid into the Treasury from all Scottish tax pays. It is a complete myth that the rest of the UK hands the Scottish people an overflowing bowl of milk and honey every year. How the Scottish Government wants to spend that block grant is up to the government of the day. Since coming to power, the SNP Government has followed a very social democratic path, which has not been emulated in the rest of the UK by a so-called socialist Labour Government! The fact that in Scotland there is free personal care for the elderly, free higher education and will soon be free prescriptions is the result of our successive Governments implementing their manifesto policies. However, because through home rule we have chosen to spend our taxes in this way, it is perceived in England that the English are somehow subsidising Scotland - which is certainly not the case.

I believe the Scottish Government is funded wrongly, even though we receive roughly what we pay in. Any modern Parliament must have fiscal independence in order to be accountable to the electorate, and full fiscal independence must be devolved as soon as possible. That will end any ill feeling towards Scotland, as all monies spent here will be raised here. The fact that we choose to do things differently here in Scotland is the consequence of devolution. The two countries will continue to deviate from the pre-1999 path as time goes on. As a result the Union will dissolve and Scotland and England will go their separate ways – but it doesn’t mean we can’t remain partners, allies and the best of neighbours!

There has been a lot of debate about funding local government here in Scotland and a lot of myth if not downright lies have been spread in the process. Taxing someone on the value of their property, regardless of how many individuals live in it, is akin to the window tax of the 19th century, which gave rise to the saying ‘daylight robbery’. Many people, especially the elderly, are property rich but financially poor. Surely the amount of tax anyone pays should be based on their ability to pay - and the only way to judge that is by a percentage of their income! Why should local tax differ from standard income tax?

The average train driver will not pay an additional £1,000 a year under a local income tax plan. As an average married train driver, my wife and I pay £2,228.10 per year in council tax, water and sewerage combined. Under the proposed scheme we would pay £1,422.90 in local income tax, a water bill of £257.40 and a sewerage bill of £280.81 - making a grand total of £1,971.11. This would save us £256.99, so this is not fairer tax system. However, because through block grant withholding from the block grant if the Scottish Government dares to implement a manifesto pledge to bring in a fairer tax system.

All those on the lower end of the salary scales - which the UK Labour Government has just hiked their income tax from 10% to 20% - they too will be worse off regardless what the Scottish Government does. Finally those who will certainly be worse off are those who presently pay nothing - and believe me they are not a few. But as an honest taxpayer I must presently stump up my extra £256.99 so they don’t have to.

Andy Ross
Driver EWS - Fort William

No harmony for Northern

IT IS increasingly obvious that harmonisation at Northern Rail will not happen in the foreseeable future. In my view the reason for this failure is mostly due to certain members and Northern Company Council representatives conspiring against the proposals and working behind the back of ASLEF’s lead officer in the negotiations, Nick Whitehead, District 4 Organiser. Whilst I appreciate that the one-year wait for pay parity was out of the question, Nick negotiated a credible package that met most of our aspirations. The pay parity issue could have been worked on. We should be congratulating the Lead Officer - not criticizing him.

At a recent meeting in Manchester Nick was booed by certain members and questions put to him questioning his integrity. I find this sort of behaviour towards someone who was appointed by the EC and General Secretary to sort out the mess of harmonisation absolutely deplorable.

A lot has been said during this debate about the ASLEF charter and one branch has...
LETTERS to the EDITOR

put a motion to the AAD proposing a change to the Charter specifically for harmonisation talks. Why fix something that isn’t broken? The main contention during harmonisation talks seems to be the issue of Sundays within or outside the working week. The ASLEF Charter makes it plain that the aspiration of this union is for Sundays to be included within the working week. You can’t pick and choose the bits that you like from the Charter and ignore the bits you don’t like.

In my view Sundays within the working week meets many more of our aspirations, creating jobs, making a 4-day week possible, introducing a true 35-hour week and stopping institutionalised overtime.

The members of this union must get back to working together for the common good of all drivers and not for just the few who want to make more than others. I say this because I have just been on a TUC reps course where all of the other students from other unions would dearly love their union organisation to be as good and as strong as ASLEF’s. One fellow student told me that all unions should aspire to be like us. That is the high regard in which this union is held.

Let’s all remember that ASLEF has train drivers representing train drivers. I would like to finish by paraphrasing John F Kennedy. ‘Don’t ask yourself what your Union can do for you, ask yourself what you can do for your Union.’

Martin Exley
Skipton Branch

Pensions – action if final salary is ended

I AM writing to express my concern regarding a number of articles recently printed within the Journal and elsewhere in relation to the review of pension provision on the railway for the future. In line with many other industries, there is concern that the ‘final salary scheme’ which we currently enjoy will be prohibitively costly. Many of these schemes in other industries have been closed to new entrants in favour of a ‘money purchase scheme’.

Obviously, it would be preferable to maintain the former scheme, but I appreciate that economic circumstances and the increase in life span from a generation ago have significant bearings.

However, as I understand it, there has been some suggestion that rather than closing the scheme at a future point in time, the split should be made based upon ‘Protected’ and ‘Unprotected’ staff.

This is morally unjust and whilst no legal expert, this surely also breaks the contract signed when we joined. I fail to see how the break-off point can be justified on this basis. When I joined the railway, one of the conditions of employment was a final salary pension. To arbitrarily amend this is totally unacceptable.

If one of the recommendations resulting from the pensions review is to close the final salary scheme to ‘Unprotected’ staff (irrespective of whether they joined it this year or five years ago), rather than to future employees as is the case in any other industry, I propose ASLEF seek an immediate mandate for industrial action in respect of this very important principle. We must demonstrate that the membership will not allow this proposed discrimination to become fact.

R Thomas
London Driver

Waterloo appreciation

ALTHOUGH I was already aware of the outcome of our Employment Tribunal (ET) and its wider implications, it was a great pleasure to read about our victory in Waterloo in last month’s Journal.

The dispute - over payment of tax liabilities - had raged on for several years, and following industrial action in 2006 an agreement was reached between SWT and ASLEF to allow the matter to be resolved by means of a tribunal. The unanimous ET judgement confirms the belief, always held by the drivers at Waterloo, that contractually any such tax liability should rest with SWT and not our members.

The efforts of very many people contributed towards achieving this landmark victory. On behalf of the entire Waterloo membership I would like to thank District Organiser Graham Morris and Executive Committee member Simon Weller for their consistent support, Vicky Phillips and the legal team at Thompsons who helped build the case, Rowan...
**OBITUARIES**

**PASSING OF TONBRIDGE TWO**

I am sorry to report the passing of Bob Shilling, a man who always had a cheery smile no matter what time of day or night. Bob was a L211 man - which meant that when Tonbridge was electrified in 1962 he and 18 other L211 men drove only Electric Trains. Bob, who spent all his railway career at Tonbridge, was a loyal ASLEF man. He will be sadly missed – both by his family and our railway family.

We have also lost the gentle giant who was Harry King. He started his Railway career at Tunbridge Wells East, moved on to Guildford and finished his railway career at Tonbridge. Another loyal ASLEF man, Harry was passionate about bowls, often representing Tonbridge at BR sports. He became President of bowls for Kent. Rest in peace, Harry.

**ARTHUR BELL - ONE IN A MILLION**

It is with deep regret that I pen these few words to report the death of Arthur Bell, a retired member of the Warrington Branch. Arthur commenced his railway career as a clerk at the Ellesmere Port Station. However he always longed for the footplate and eventually transferred to our grades, commencing in 1948 as a cleaner at Dallam Loco. He progressed through the ranks and eventually transferred to the Warrington Central depot to become a Driver.

A stalwart member of ASLEF he was, during my 25 years as Branch Secretary, the finest collector of Union dues one could wish to have! Arthur stood for many long hours in the smoke-ridden depot collecting, not just the Union dues, but also contributions for the depot Welfare Fund.

Without such members ASLEF could not have progressed. I feel obliged to pay tribute to Arthur and his like. He will be known by many Locomotive men in the North West because he was a very friendly, generous, trustworthy man.

May he Rest in Peace; knowing he will be missed by many, none more so than his past colleagues and the members of the South Lancs Regimental Association of which he was a dedicated member.

**DAVIE MELVILLE – A QUIET MAN**

It is with great sadness that I write to report the passing of retired Driver Bro Davie Melville, formerly Eastfield depot, latterly Yoker depot.

Davie retired some 9 years ago, a quiet man who never said boo to anyone. He passed away peacefully on 13 March at Gartnavel Hospital in Glasgow. Our thoughts are with his relatives at this time.

**CAMBRIDGE LOSSES**

Branch Secretary Andrew Dawson informs us of the passing of Brothers Ron Goundry at the age of 85, Ray Wiles at 82 and of 75-year-old Stan Fenn.
YEMEN’S PART IN SOUTH SHIELDS’ HISTORY

A PHOTO and video exhibition at Gateshead’s Baltic Arts Centre offers a picture of some remarkable immigrants to this country. It’s about the Yemen people who first came to live in South Shields in the 1890s. Yes – you read that right: the Yemen community in South Shields!

Apart from being a fascinating account of an extraordinary story, this exhibition also raises questions about ‘Britishness’. How many generations do you need to live here to be ‘British’? Are some people always ‘foreigners’? How does the Duke of Edinburgh fit in?

But the subjects of this exhibition are far removed from royalty. They are the Yemeni who first settled on our north-eastern shores in the late 1890s. They had been working as sailors on British boats and often needed to stay over in the area between voyages. Ali Said saw the need to provide accommodation for his countrymen and in 1894 he became the first Arab to establish a seamen’s boarding house in the area.

VISIT FROM THE CHAMP

Over the next 120 years, thousands of Yemeni seamen made the small town of South Shields (along with other British ports) their home. The event at the Baltic Arts Centre tells their fascinating story. This is done by showing large-scale photographs of first-generation settlers by artist Youssef Nabil and a series of video portraits by Tina Gharavi in which 14 settlers tell their own stories in their own way. It also features a film called ‘The King of South Shields’ – which is a documentary about boxer Muhammad Ali’s little known visit to the town in 1977.

People came from all over the North to see the three-time world heavy-weight champion. The boxing legend toured the borough in an open topped bus, visited South Shields’ Gypsy’s Green stadium, tried his hand at darts and sparred (for a short time!) with a local fighter, Reg Long. Then, sporting an all-white suit, he had his recent wedding blessed at Laygate’s Al-Azhar Mosque - the first purpose-built mosque in Britain.

REMARKABLE STORIES

The videoed ‘oral histories’ see the immigrants tell some remarkable tales. They dwell on the 800 Yemeni men from Tyneside who died at sea in WW2; they talk about the 1929 seamen’s union campaign against Arab seafarers at British ports, trade union clashes at the Customs House in the 1940s and, during the depression of 1921, the financial assistance given to unemployed Arab seamen by the British and Foreign Sailors Society.

They speak about how the Yemeni married into, and became part of the community; and about how they saw South Shields from the 1940s to recent times. Muhammad Nasser, for example, tells of his time in the Royal Navy during the Falkland conflict when he was captured and tortured. Showing the scars of that encounter, he also relates his fight to get recognition and compensation.

Tina Gharavi says South Shields is one of the sites of the first wave of Arab and Muslim migrants, a process she says has been ‘largely successful’. But as she filmed the elderly men, she felt ‘a certain urgency’ that their tales would be lost. ‘It was important to me that this did not happen for three reasons,’ she says. ‘It shows the migrant history of the North East and tells a positive story of Muslim integration into mainstream British society. But it also intrigues me that not long ago if you said you were a Muslim, you were regarded as pious, or dignified. How desperately – and falsely - that has changed today.’

ANOTHER VIEW

But this is not a hectoring exhibition: it is also an entertainment. Tina was enthralled as she began collecting, preserving, addressing and exchanging personal dramas which read like epics that stretch across worlds, oceans, cultures and our modern history.’ It’s well worth a visit if you get a chance. It gives you another perspective.

The exhibition ‘Stories from the South Shields Yemeni Sailors’ runs until 5 May at the Baltic Arts Centre in South Shore Road, Gateshead. It’s open from 10 to 6 and the phone number’s 0191 478 1810. Admission is free.
FREE LEGAL ADVICE  ASLEF also provides first class free legal advice – both for members and for their dependents. In the first six months of this year we have secured £1,442,369 in compensation claims! Call the helpline on 0808 100 8009

EMERGENCIES  If you are an ASLEF member who is arrested or being interviewed by the police and need legal assistance – day or night – you can call the members' Emergency Hotline on 07980 996159.

SACKINGS OR OTHER PROBLEMS AT WORK  Harassment, discrimination or bullying? If your local, branch or district representative is unavailable, call the Industrial Relations department at union headquarters (020 7317 8600) or email info@aslef.org.uk

Prize Crossword No. 25
set by TLC

CLUES ACROSS
3 Principal route (4,4)
8 Vital tool for a fireman (4)
9 Freight carrying vehicle (5,5)
10 Short skirt (4)
11 Celebrity (4)
13 No money left! (5)
17 Very decorative (6)
18 Breakfast cereal (6)
19 Weapons of war (5)
22 Are they in the Belfry? (4)
24 Scottish valley (4)
25 Five o'clock – watch for a meal (4,3,3)
26 TV celebrity (4)
27 Booked in advance (8)

CLUES DOWN
1 Wheeled railway vehicle (5)
2 Make laws (9)
4 Snake (5)
5 Memos (5)
6 Very cross (5)
7 Mathematical genius (8)
12 Sir … Guinness (4)
14 Navy recruiters (5,4)
15 Regular traveller (8)
16 Girl's name (4)
20 Title of individuals (5)
21 Less risky (5)
22 Canal boat (5)
23 Type of railway crossing (5)

The winner of this month’s crossword will receive Marks & Spencer vouchers to the value of £25


ACROSS  3 Traction 8 Mini 9 Paddington 10 Shoes 11 Loco 13 Large 17 Amanda 18 Alerts 19 Press 22 Flat 24 Undo 25 Platelayer 26 Exam 27 Sleepers DOWN 1 Light 2 Pipelines 4 Radio 5 canal 6 Inter 7 Nonsense 12 Coal 14 Apertures 15 Baggpipes 16 Hail 20 Evade 21 Steep 22 Flair 23 Ideal

Name.................................................................
Address..........................................................
.................................................................Postcode

Thanks for all your responses to the 24th ASLEF crossword in the March edition. If you complete this month’s crossword please send the solution to the Editor, ASLEF Journal, 9 Arkwright Road, London NW3 6AB by the 14th of the issue month.
For a written quotation, write to Arrow Finance, Freepost, Solihull B92 0BR. We are professional finance brokers, trading as Arrow Finance since 1983. We arrange loans up to 100% of house value (less existing mortgage balance). Loans are secured against your home and subject to status including credit scoring and property equity.

THINK CAREFULLY BEFORE SECURING OTHER DEBTS AGAINST YOUR HOME. YOUR HOME MAY BE REPOSESSED IF YOU DO NOT KEEP UP REPAYMENTS ON A MORTGAGE OR ANY OTHER DEBT SECURED ON IT.

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