

Mirror's costly failure

Duncan Campbell writes: The *Daily Mirror* group must decide this week how to solve the enormously costly failure of their plans for new technology printing systems. A six-month long crisis, which started with the introduction of computerised systems for setting and laying out the *Mirror's* type, has resulted in rapidly escalating costs, millions of newspaper sales lost, and the need to choose between two ways of stepping back.

The crisis – billed modestly as a 'setback' in their internal newspaper – follows plans to convert the entire group of papers, including *Reveille*, the *Sunday Mirror* and the *Sunday People*, to totally computerised setting. Traditional printing technology involves creating both type and illustrations by moulding 'hot metal'. The new system, sold by the US company Linotype Paul, was intended to create a newspaper page electronically from start to finish. But the last six months, during which a dozen of the *Daily Mirror's* 32 pages have been converted to the electronic system, have shown that the new technology won't work as planned. The computerised system has been prone to numerous small errors and even breakdowns, and has proven to be far less flexible than older methods. As a result, deadlines in the critical process of printing and distribution are missed as pages of type are prepared hours late.

The economics of the transition have now left the *Mirror* in a financial cleft stick. Instead of reducing staff and wage costs as the new technology was phased in more have had to be employed to run the two systems in parallel. And since printing staff have been paid higher wages to compensate for the

anticipated loss of jobs, the extra costs of the composite printing arrangements are substantial. Journalists have been told that the group lost £5½ million through the new technology in the last year alone. That included the embarrassing failure to convert the *Sporting Life*, which resulted in the paper being off the streets for a week. With the recent switch of processes on the *Mirror*, costs have begun to mount. The additional cost of running the new technology in March alone is believed to have been about £750,000. Plans to convert the *Sunday People*, *Sunday Mirror* and the rest of the *Mirror* have been abandoned indefinitely, although the weekly *Reveille* is now typeset on the system.

Two weeks ago an emergency working party was appointed to review the crisis. It is not now possible for the *Mirror* to return to the old hot metal methods because of the new wage rates, quite apart from any loss of face; the present mode of operation is producing untidy papers, losing sales, and could mean the end of the *Mirror's* profitability to its parent company, Reed International. And there is no prospect of converting entirely to the new technology system, even if this were possible. A much vaunted facility for the computer system to handle pictures and graphics has never worked, and any full scale use of the system would require the *Mirror's* news and sports to be completed hours before its competitors, a formula for journalistic suicide.

Almost the only solution to the problem is to downgrade the computer system from full page composition to simple electronic typesetting, followed by 'cutting and pasting' of the newspaper's pages, a method already in use by the *Mirror's* Scottish sister paper, the *Daily Record*. The decision

is due to be announced to staff next week.

The *Mirror's* experiences do not necessarily invite comparison with the continuing suspension of the *Times* and *Sunday Times* over the issue of the introduction of new technology. However, the person responsible for the *Mirror* project, development director Joe May, did invite such a comparison in these columns six months ago when we wrote about the *Times*. He suggested 'if (*Sunday Times* editor) Harold Evans would like to see the future of Fleet Street he can come to look at it – at the *Mirror*'. Mr Evans may now be looking the other way.

After Southall

Ken Worpole writes: An intensive campaign has now started within the labour movement for a full public enquiry into the death of Blair Peach, the East London teacher who was killed after the anti-racist demonstration at Southall. In addition, a Blair Peach Memorial Fund has been set up in the East End of London to continue the fight against racism with which Blair Peach was strongly identified, and to give support to his dependents.

The shock of his death can still be strongly felt in the East End where he lived and worked. He was very well known and liked there, having taught at the Phoenix School for the Delicate for ten years, as well as being President of the East London NUT until a year before his death. Because of his public commitment to the Anti-Nazi League he had on two occasions within the last year been personally attacked by right-wing thugs, once on his way home from school.

The Blair Peach Memorial Fund is c/o Langdon Park School, Byron Street, London E14 0RY.