

## BR fails to convince rail unions on nuclear safety

BRITISH RAIL, who transport two nuclear waste shipments every day, are refusing to re-route the shipments away from highly populated urban areas, and London in particular. The principal reason for this is spelt out in leaked documents obtained by the *New Statesman* — public relations. If the nuclear waste transports were to be rerouted, the British Railways Board asserts, the public might get an alleged 'totally false impression that there was in fact a safety hazard'.

This justification for BR's intransigence was spelt out several times during a recent series of high level joint meetings with the railway unions ASLEF, NUR and TSSA. We have obtained a record of the meetings. Although claiming that shipments of nuclear waste were perfectly safe, BR representatives in fact spelt out a series of hitherto unknown or unproven hazards resulting from the use of the special 'flasks' which contain the waste being shipped to Windscale from the CEBG's network of nuclear power stations.

The most remarkable of these is a phenomenon whereby the outside of the nuclear waste container becomes *more* radioactive, not less, during shipping. This is not caused by leakage from inside, but by the 'leaching' of radioactive substances from the white paintwork of the enormous containers. The paint becomes mildly radioactive during the time the container is loaded with waste nuclear fuel at a power station.

If the container — which is uncovered during transport — is exposed to rain during transportation, a likely occurrence, then the radioactive substances from the paint may gather in a pool at the bottom of the container. At least one reportable nuclear incident a year has been caused by this phenomenon — containers which on leaving a nuclear power station had no external contamination have on arrival at Windscale been found to be notably radioactive.

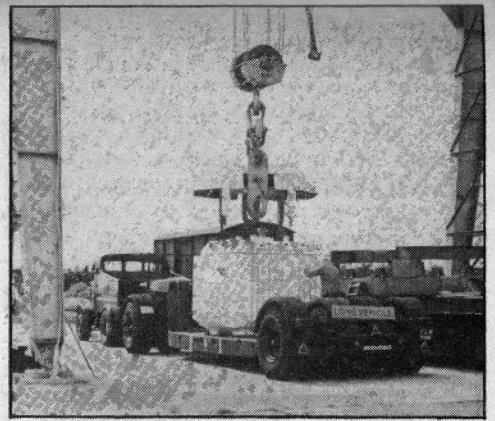
This problem has been so widespread that the CEBG and BR always fit discardable aluminium plates at the bottom of the waste containers to try and catch as much of the radioactive run off as possible, before it affects the railway wagon. These aluminium 'feet' cannot however stop the radioactive rainwater from reaching the ground around the wagon.

This problem has been made worse by the casual attitude taken by the CEBG and BR to the 'stabling' of nuclear waste shipments in city areas for several days. The CEBG/BR deal over nuclear waste is the cheapest possible, with little regard for public concern. Thus the waste trains are taken by the shortest possible route, central London *not* excluded. And if the CEBG ships out the waste late in the week, then it will end up parked in a suburban goods yard for 2 or 3 days, because the deal does not include paying crews overtime to work at weekends. It was 'inevitable', BR Chief Operations Manager's representative Mr P Lynch told a joint BR-union meeting in September 1979, that containers would be stabled 'in suburban areas at weekends'.

However in response to NUR pressure, BR claimed three months later that they were then only accepting containers from the CEBG 'on days which ensured that they completed their journey to Windscale before the weekend'. Last month, however, a BR official admitted to the *New Statesman* that containers were still being left for 2 or 3 days in urban areas.

The NUR also unearthed more hair raising stories of occasions when the nuclear waste containers had been left parked directly outside staff Mess Rooms for a three day period. These leaked documents add to the evidence of disregard of risks to the public, already apparent in debate over the hazards of waste transport. Earlier this year, anti-nuclear campaigners were able to demonstrate that they could attack a nuclear waste train at a central London station using a mock anti-tank gun weapon. Although the containers can withstand many accidents they cannot deal with attacks by terrorists or other encounters with explosives.

The British Rail Board have promised extensive further information for the unions. But they rejected any proposals for some railway crews to be equipped with geiger counters to check the



Nuclear fuel container is moved onto rail wagon at Leiston.

hazards for themselves. They wrote off concern about the radiation exposure to railway workers and others from the containers and their contents in the customary offhand manner of the nuclear industry, with the claim that it was comparable to the dose from medical X rays. As is also customary, the figures to prove this were not available.

Rob Rohrer and Jane Leighton report on a Liverpool sacking

## Out goes the good doctor

LIVERPOOL Area Health Authority is forcing the city's chief medical officer to resign because he opposed senior colleagues over massive health service cuts and insisted they were partly prompted by serious financial miscalculations. In secret session last Friday the health authority voted to dismiss Dr Duncan Dolton, the medical officer who heads their management team.

The sacking is likely to bring to a head discontent over the current management of Liverpool's health services. Several months ago

Whitehall's concern was shown when the DHSS privately mooted the possibility of suspending the authority and installing health service commissioners or sending in a 'shadow' team of administrators. These steps, unpublished and so far not carried out, are known to have arisen partly from anxieties expressed by Dolton on how the authority managed its finances. Intervention for this reason would be unprecedented. Lambeth, Southwark, and Lewisham health authority was only suspended when it refused to enforce financial cuts.

Dolton's opposition to cuts began earlier this year when he publicly challenged the authority's treasurer over estimates that £4.5 million cuts were necessary. At the height of the debate officers were withholding from authority members' and the public, information that a substantial £22 million increase in the annual budget had been achieved. The budget had been increased by the regional authority from £88 million to £110 million. 'It meant,' says one observer angrily, 'immense and unnecessary distress, particularly in hospitals faced with closures.'

Included in the £4.2 million cuts were measures designed to provide a £2 million contingency fund to counteract any additional inflation. Dolton argued that this inflation was a government responsibility and should not be used as a reason for further cutbacks. Following instructions from the regional authority Dolton's view was accepted and a considerable number of cuts became unnecessary.

The main problem, however, was Liverpool's intention, strenuously resisted by its chief medical officer, to balance the books. This has been achieved. Last week the expected surplus was estimated at £32,000 and if wage settlements are held below the budgeted 14 per cent this will rise to around a quarter of a million. Dolton is known to believe privately that the last time Liverpool health authority produced a surplus — in 1977 a projected loss was turned into a £300,000 'profit' — lives were lost. Renal dial-

## Oswald Mosley's final message

Oswald Mosley, the veteran fascist demagogue, died last week. Throughout his life he was intent on persuading people that their view of history was seriously mistaken. Ironically, days before his death the *New Statesman* received the following letter from him:

26 November 1980

To the Editor of the 'New Statesman'.

Sir,

In your issue of November 21 there was a reference to my Olympia meeting. The simple facts have often been published without disproof. The largest audience ever seen at that time assembled to fill the Olympia hall and hear the speech. A small minority determined by continuous shouting to prevent my speech being heard. After due warning our stewards removed with their bare hands men among whom were some armed with such weapons as razors and knives. The audience were then able to listen to a speech which lasted for nearly two hours.

Yours faithfully,

Oswald Mosley