

Shipworkers buy back jobs with redundancy cash

TYNESIDE shipworkers have been persuaded to forfeit over £6 million in redundancy payments as part of the deal when a private company bought out their employers, British Shipbuilders.

Tyne Ship Repair, the biggest ship repair yard in Britain, was taken over by two directors of British Shipbuilders (BS) in February, making the 1,180 workforce redundant. But the two, Michael Abbotts and Bill Burns, made it clear they would reinstate up to 750 of those who were prepared to forego half their redundancy payments. Only 500 came forward.

Under BS, they were entitled to redundancy agreements of three to four times the level set by law. Local shop stewards reckon that those who stayed on forfeited on average £5,000 each, although some of the long-servers lost as much as £10,000.

Director Michael Abbotts confirmed to the *New Statesmen* that the workers had lost substantial sums of money under their new terms of employment. He said it was no longer a matter for negotiation between Tyne Ship Repair and the union, but for the government as BS was a nationalised industry. 'If they get their money back from the government, then more power to their elbow. I lost out on half my redundancy too', he said.

Despite sacrificing half their redundancy money to avoid the dole queue, the workers have only been offered a 12-month verbal guarantee of work. 'I agree it was a tough choice', said Abbotts.

Under BS, the yard made a £20 million loss in the last three years. Although the first profit since nationalisation was registered in the first quarter last year, the yard was expected to make another £2 million loss this year. Now under private ownership, it is expected to make a £250,000 profit.

This will delight Mrs Thatcher and her entourage as living proof that privatisation works. But Abbotts and Burns have offered an interesting explanation for the sudden turnaround in the yard's finances. 'We can now price in a manner which meets market requirements. Before, we were subject to pressure exerted by the government on British Shipbuilders to restrict our pricing,' said Bill Burns at a recent press conference, adding that the yard can now quote at 20-30 per cent lower than before.

Abbotts told the *New Statesmen*: 'As half the shipbuilding industry is private and half nationalised, the private sector gets upset if they are undercut. So they put pressure on the government to make sure it doesn't happen.'

The biggest mystery surrounding the deal is how much Abbotts and Burns actually paid for the yard. Despite repeated questions by local reporters and a statement in the House of Commons by Jarrow MP Don Dixon, no figure has been released. When asked if it was not a matter of public concern to know for how much a nationalised industry asset was sold, a spokesperson for British Shipbuilders said it was a 'commercial secret'. Speculation on Tyneside is that the price was low or even nominal.

The other mystery is the fate of the redundancy money and the exact nature of the deal between BS and Abbotts and Burns.

Meanwhile, the firm is not only making good headway among other private ship concerns. The Ministry of Defence look set on giving it three contracts — one of them to repair the *Sir Tristram*, damaged during the Falklands War, worth £10-£15 million.

Jane Dibblin

More US bases for Britain

UNITED STATES forces in Britain have added a chain of new bases and extra satellite tracking equipment to their electronic surveillance network by expanding both their eavesdropping capacity and the links between GCHQ Cheltenham and its US counterpart, the National Security Agency.

British government information passed to the *New Statesmen* reveals that defence and British Telecom staff are now completing a £17 million extension to the National Security Agency's largest and secret overseas listening station, codenamed 'Steeplebush'. Steeplebush is in fact the American base at Menwith Hill Station, near Harrogate in Yorkshire, and was the scene of a 'large CND Easter demonstration and 'tap-in' last weekend. The *New Statesmen* revealed in 1981 that the surveillance base was plugged into Britain's international communications network and could monitor civilian international telephone and telex calls.

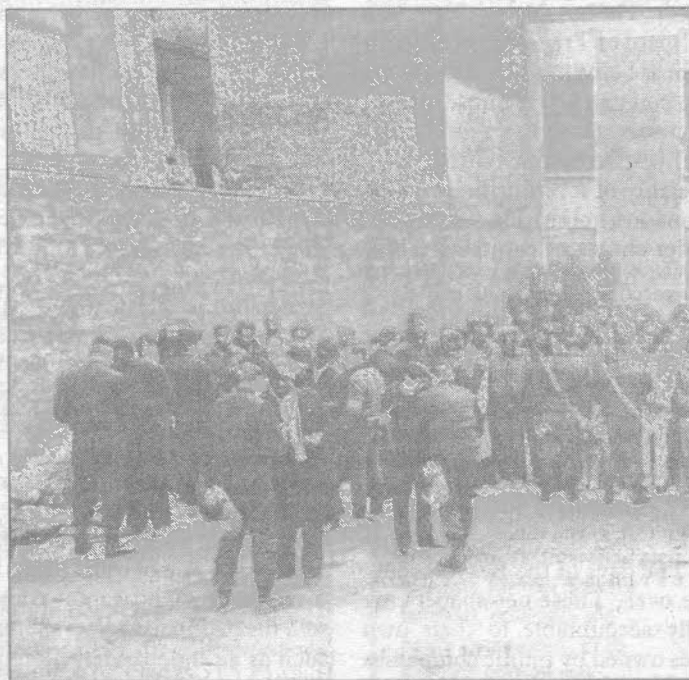
As part of the extension at Steeplebush, the British government last

year constructed new communications facilities and buildings worth £7.4 million, according to US budget information and UK Ministry of Defence documents. The expansion plan includes a 50,000 square feet extension to the Menwith Hill Operations Building and new generators to provide five Megawatts of electrical power. The purpose of the new construction is to boost an 'expanded mission' of US satellite communications surveillance. It also provides a 'new (satellite) earth terminal system to support the classified systems at the site'. With another £93 million being spent on special monitoring equipment, this section of the Menwith Hill base alone will cost the United States £110 million.

The Ministry of Defence also admitted last week that a new chain of US relay stations had been built in England as a communications hotline connecting GCHQ at Cheltenham to the United States and the American communications network in Europe. The link runs between GCHQ itself and the major US Air Force communications base at Croughton, near Banbury. New relay stations have been built at Leafield and Little Rissington, west of Oxford, and at Cleeve Hill in the Cotswolds. An MoD spokesman said last week that the link provides 'transatlantic communications capacity on behalf of GCHQ, MoD and the US Department of Defense'.

Duncan Campbell

The third extract from Duncan Campbell's new book, *The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier*, is on page 10.



Torregano-Bissoni/Collectif

Sari squad go to Europe

The Sari Squad is taking the Afia Begum case to Europe. Afia Begum has now been in hiding for eighteen months as she fears deportation because her husband, whom she came to Britain to join, died before she could get here. Now the Sari Squad, a group of 50 Asian women who have been campaigning against the immigration laws, is to lobby the European Parliament on her behalf, following an eight day tour which will take in Paris, Bonn and Amsterdam. They aim to show that discrimination against immigrants is happening throughout Europe, as shown by this photo of Black people being searched following an eviction of squatters in Paris earlier this year.

Too many children locked up

A NEW LAW designed to make it more difficult for troublesome children in care to be locked up is having the opposite effect. A survey by the Children's Legal Centre (CLC) shows that of 182 applications to magistrates by local authorities to have children committed to secure units, 178 (98 per cent) were granted by the court.

These are the first figures to be produced on the working of the new law, an amendment to the 1980 Child Care Act, which came into force in May last year. It is supposed to have restricted the number of children being locked up by stipulating that the child must be likely to abscond from any other type of accommodation and they would be at 'physical, mental or moral risk' unless they are locked up. Rachel Hodgkin of the CLC said: 'Lock-ups should be only used in cases where there is a serious