

**‘We couldn’t do a Prague’: British government responses to
loyalist strikes in Northern Ireland 1974–77**

In May 1974 the Ulster Workers’ Council (U.W.C.), comprising loyalist trade unionists, paramilitaries and politicians, mounted a general strike backed by widespread intimidation. Their target was the Sunningdale Agreement, which produced a power-sharing executive for Northern Ireland and proposed a cross-border institution with the Republic of Ireland. After a fortnight the U.W.C. successfully brought Northern Ireland to a halt and the executive collapsed, leading to the restoration of direct rule from Westminster. Three years later the United Unionist Action Council (U.U.A.C.) adopted the same strategy, demanding a return to devolution with majority rule and the repression of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (P.I.R.A.). This second strike was defeated.

Many contemporary politicians were critical of the Labour government’s failure to put down the U.W.C. strike. William Whitelaw, formerly secretary of state for Northern Ireland in Edward Heath’s Conservative administration and the minister responsible for the bulk of the negotiations prior to Sunningdale, believed that the prime minister, Harold Wilson, and the new secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Merlyn Rees, did not have the same attachment to the political settlement and were less willing to support the Northern Ireland Executive in its hour of need.¹ Paddy Devlin of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (S.D.L.P.) argued that the unwillingness to arrest those involved, ‘more than any other single action by the authorities ... caused thousands of law-abiding people who had earlier given support to the executive to switch loyalties’.² Devlin’s colleagues Gerry Fitt and John

¹ William Whitelaw, *The Whitelaw memoirs* (London, 1989), p. 122.

² Paddy Devlin, *Straight left: an autobiography* (Belfast, 1993), p. 15.

Hume made similar assertions, the former describing Rees's policy as 'abject surrender'.³ Garret FitzGerald, minister for foreign affairs in the Irish government, wrote of a 'failure of the British government to give adequate support to the executive'.⁴ Brian Faulkner, chief executive under the power-sharing arrangements, described Rees as 'a sensitive and liberal man' and minister of state Stanley Orme as a 'left-wing Tribunate', believing the two ministers 'were more accustomed to viewing strikers sympathetically than taking action against them, and ... this background seemed to leave them confused and ineffectual in their response until it was too late'.⁵

Such views are supported by a number of academic authors. The most aggressive analysis has come from consociationalist political scientists. Brendan O'Leary glibly describes Rees's 'shambolic gait of a badly dressed and over-promoted headmaster', adding that he 'was not only incapable of credible commitment; he simply lacked conviction'. He writes: 'in 1977 Roy Mason would prove far more resolute.'⁶ Michael Kerr concludes that 'it was not that the British were incapable of successfully taking on the strikers, or that they had lost control of the army: they simply chose not to act ... if Heath had remained Prime Minister he would certainly have acted'.⁷ Anthony Craig, meanwhile, states of the U.W.C. that 'no one

³ Meeting between Rees and S.D.L.P. delegation, 29 Aug. 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/150); John Hume, *Personal views: politics, peace and reconciliation in Ireland* (Dublin, 1996), p. 38.

⁴ Garret FitzGerald, *All in a life: an autobiography* (Dublin, 1991), pp 243–4.

⁵ Brian Faulkner, *Memoirs of a statesman* (London, 1978), p. 262.

⁶ Brendan O'Leary, 'The Labour government and Northern Ireland, 1974–79' in Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry (eds), *The Northern Ireland conflict: consociational engagements* (Oxford, 2003), pp 198, 215.

⁷ Michael Kerr, *Imposing power-sharing: conflict and coexistence in Northern Ireland and Lebanon* (Dublin, 2005), p. 68; More qualified analysis has been offered by Paul Bew and Henry Patterson. Bew refers to what he describes as 'Wilson's decision not to support the executive with the army' but adds that it 'became very difficult to think of any military strategy that would have broken it without serious loss of life, with incalculable consequences': Paul Bew, *Ireland: the politics of enmity, 1789–2006* (Oxford, 2007), p. 515;

could have stood in their way' but elsewhere, rather confusingly, states that the strike 'could and would have been controlled had British contingency plans not warned for years of the dangers of a Protestant backlash' (which was precisely what it amounted to).⁸

What is lacking from all these accounts is a detached and systematic appreciation of the context of both loyalist stoppages and the challenges involved in strike-breaking. Too often academic literature on the Northern Ireland conflict merely repeats contemporary opinion with little or no evaluation. This article challenges existing accounts by testing them against archival material. The issues of strike-breaking are more complex than the simple application of will by government ministers and it is important to place government actions in the context of what was achievable in the circumstances. It is also necessary to take a less parochial approach, placing the subject in a broader, British context which considers the problems common to strike-breaking in the rest of the United Kingdom. Indeed, Kerr's remark that the U.W.C. strike 'was the strongest display of domestic defiance experienced by any British government since the home rule crisis' rather narrowly interprets the meaning of 'domestic defiance' in the British experience: comparable trade union actions in Great Britain could be said to have been undertaken in defiance of the will of Westminster; certainly British governments have tried to overcome the latter by deploying policemen and soldiers as strikebreakers.⁹ Indeed, only three months before the U.W.C. strike such defiance had been the dominant factor in the fall of Heath's administration.¹⁰ This article shows that the

Patterson argues that the government 'showed no desire to confront the strikers', while also acknowledging army advice against opening up a second front: Henry Patterson, *Ireland since 1939: the persistence of conflict* (Dublin, 2006), p. 243.

⁸ Anthony Craig, *Crisis of confidence: Anglo-Irish relations in the early Troubles* (Dublin, 2010), pp 180, 194.

⁹ Kerr, *Imposing power-sharing*, p. 251.

¹⁰ For an excellent history of British strikebreaking see: Keith Jeffery and Peter Hennessy, *States of emergency: British governments and strikebreaking since 1919* (London, 1983).

challenges faced in 1974 and 1977 were greater than has been appreciated and the outcomes cannot be attributed solely to ministerial personalities.

I

Although direct rule was introduced in March 1972 the British government had little desire for it to remain. Heath's administration sought to restore devolution in a form acceptable to both communities and proposed a power-sharing executive including both nationalists and unionists and a cross-border institution in recognition of the 'Irish Dimension' in Northern Ireland politics. Elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly in June 1973 produced a majority of support for these proposals (emanating from Faulknerite Unionists, the S.D.L.P., the Alliance party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party), though twenty-seven of the seventy-eight seats went to anti-White Paper unionists including 'un-pledged' Unionists, the Democratic Unionist Party (D.U.P.) and Vanguard. The balance within unionism was tilted against power-sharing. In December 1973 the pro-White Paper parties joined the British and Irish governments for a conference in Sunningdale. The resultant agreement led to the establishment of the Northern Ireland Executive, proposals for a Council of Ireland, a declaration agreed by the Irish taoiseach that accepted the status of Northern Ireland and a legal commission to examine North-South security co-operation.¹¹

Prior to the U.W.C. strike the agreement suffered a number of blows. In January 1974 Brian Faulkner was forced to resign from the Unionist party leadership after the Ulster Unionist Council voted against the concept of a Council of Ireland, despite the veto it offered unionists on any proposals discussed. His position was also undermined when the Irish government defended the acceptance of partition in court as merely reflecting present policy, after accusations that it was unconstitutional. When Heath called a general election in

¹¹ Alvin Jackson, *Home rule: an Irish history 1800–2000* (London, 2004), pp 311–24.

February 1974 in response to the ongoing miners' strike, the anti-White Paper unionist parties fought together as the United Ulster Unionist Council (U.U.U.C.). They campaigned under the slogan 'Dublin is just a Sunningdale away', winning eleven of Northern Ireland's twelve Westminster seats.¹² Faulkner told Merlyn Rees that he did not have the political support to allow the full implementation of the agreement.¹³ Rees warned his cabinet colleagues that the situation was 'extremely fragile'.¹⁴

Kerr claims that Labour showed a lack of commitment to Sunningdale. He writes that in March 1974 'Rees shocked the power-sharing administration when he announced that the British government was "reconsidering its wider Northern Ireland policy"', telling them also that the commitment of 15,000 troops was 'unsustainable' because of mounting pressure for withdrawal from within the Labour party. But on the contrary, Rees stressed that 'Sunningdale was still the basis for progress, and the House of Commons was firmly behind it'. The reconsideration he spoke of only concerned security policy and there is no indication of shock on the part of the executive at Rees's remarks. At no point did Rees attribute troop reductions to party pressure and Kerr omits to mention that this was actually a ministry of Defence (M.O.D.), initiative motivated by obligations to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.¹⁵ Contingency plans were requested for the possibility that Sunningdale might

¹² Gordon Gillespie, 'The Sunningdale Agreement: lost opportunity or an agreement too far?' in *Irish Political Studies*, xiii (1998), pp 100–14.

¹³ Meeting between Rees and FitzGerald, 7 Mar. 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/145).

¹⁴ Cabinet conclusions (CC(74)) 11, 10 Apr. 1974 (T.N.A., CAB 128/54).

¹⁵ Kerr, *The destructors*, p. 172; Executive meeting with Rees, 26 Mar. 1974 (P.R.O.N.I., OE 1/24); Ministerial Committee on Northern Ireland (IRN(74)) memo 5, 28 Mar. 1974 (T.N.A., CAB 134/3778).

collapse, but the Labour cabinet observed that this ‘would represent a failure of policies’; there was genuine concern for the agreement rather than a lack of regard for it.¹⁶

On 14 May the U.W.C. announced a general strike, calling for fresh assembly elections that would most likely damage Faulkner’s standing and therefore support for Sunningdale. The organisation was far from an ordinary trade union. Its co-ordinating committee incorporated trade unionists from key industries such as electricity, gas and oil, but also included senior loyalist paramilitaries and U.U.U.C. leaders Bill Craig, Ian Paisley and Harry West.¹⁷ On the first day of the strike minister of state Stanley Orme met U.W.C. representatives, insisting they ‘would not get what they wanted by attempting to intimidate the government’ and if the strike continued the army would maintain essential services (hardly the words of a sympathetic union man as depicted earlier by Faulkner).¹⁸

The strike was conducted using two methods. Firstly, key employees in essential services, particularly oil and electricity, restricted supplies to slow industry to a crawl. Secondly, loyalist paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Defence Association (U.D.A.) and Ulster Volunteer Force (U.V.F.) employed a campaign of intimidation. These two methods presented different challenges and army regulations reflect this, distinguishing between military aid to civil ministries (M.A.C.M.), that is, provision of essential services, and military aid to the civil power (M.A.C.P.), the maintenance of peace and public order.¹⁹ There is merit, therefore, in examining these separately.

¹⁶ CC(74) 11th conclusions, 10 Apr. 1974 (T.N.A., CAB 128/54). For further details on constitutional policy see Stuart C. Aveyard, ‘The “English disease” is to look for a “solution of the Irish problem”’: British constitutional policy in Northern Ireland after Sunningdale 1974–76’ in *Contemporary British History*, xxvi, no. 4 (Dec. 2012), pp 529–49.

¹⁷ ‘The Strike in Northern Ireland’ (report by N.I.O. official John Bourn), c. June 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/504).

¹⁸ Meeting between Orme and deputation led by Paisley, 15 May 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/504).

¹⁹ Ministry of Defence (M.O.D.), *The Queen’s regulations for the Army* (London, 1976), pp 11.1–11.3.

The chief form of intimidation, and the one which the British army was primarily criticised for failing to handle, was the barricading of streets. The U.W.C. was concerned at the start of the strike when the general population did not heed its call to cease work and the reduction in electricity had not yet affected businesses.²⁰ In response, Andy Tyrrie, the supreme commander of the U.D.A., ordered barricading.²¹ On 16 May military reports record fifteen barricades in Belfast.²² These steadily increased and on the sixth day of U.W.C. disruption there were 170. Most of the blocks consisted solely of people.²³ The paramilitaries were careful to avoid direct confrontation with the security forces. When the army approached the barricades, strikers often melted away before returning shortly afterwards. As the strike progressed into its second week women and children became involved, linking their arms to prevent access.²⁴ Three issues need to be addressed here: army claims that barricades were not their responsibility; the importance of political circumstances in responding to such subversion; and the capacity of the security forces to deal with it.

In a meeting with Rees on 17 May the general officer commanding Northern Ireland (G.O.C.), Frank King, argued that the army was based largely in Catholic areas and was ill-disposed to deal with the strike.²⁵ Ten years later he told the British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.) that soldiers armed with rifles and bayonets were not suited to handling such forms of disorder. King claimed the British army had acted similarly in every such circumstance since the Peterloo massacre of 1819.²⁶ There is a vast difference between Peterloo and the

²⁰ Don Anderson, *Fourteen May days: the inside story of the loyalist strike of 1974* (Dublin, 1994), p. 148.

²¹ Peter Taylor, *Loyalists* (London, 1999), pp 130–1.

²² Strike report by Major W. E. Rous, 16 May 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/501).

²³ Director of Operations brief, 21 May 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/501).

²⁴ Anderson, *Fourteen May days*, p. 97.

²⁵ Meeting between Rees and G.O.C., 17 May 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/504).

²⁶ ‘A modern rebellion’, (Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (U.F.T.M.), B.B.C.N.I., #1663).

U.W.C. strike. In 1819 a public meeting at St Peter's Field in Manchester demanding universal suffrage and annual parliaments ended when local magistrates ordered cavalry to disperse the crowd, causing eleven deaths.²⁷ It was a peaceful meeting attacked without provocation, whereas the U.W.C. strike was enforced by power cuts and intimidation. The implication that the British army had avoided violent confrontation with protestors since 1819 is also demonstrably wrong. In August 1911 British troops fired on striking dockworkers and railwaymen in Liverpool and Llanelli, killing two in the latter case. Eight years later the British military commander of Amritsar, India, ordered troops to fire without warning on an unarmed and peaceful meeting of between ten and twenty thousand people, killing 379 and wounding over 1,200.²⁸ Furthermore, Bloody Sunday in January 1972 is a clear example of the army engaging protestors with lethal force without justification.²⁹ King is nonetheless right to argue that armed soldiers are not suited to such confrontations. Keith Jeffery states: 'The rationale behind military organisation is the concerted use of lethal weapons. The army exists to fight other armies, not mobs.'³⁰

King later told journalist David McKittrick that 'if Rees had ordered us to move against the barricades we would have said, "With great respect, this is a job for the police. We will assist them if you wish, but it's not terrorism".'³¹ This meshes well with *The Queen's regulations for the Army* which state that M.A.C.P. requests should be referred to the chief officer of police unless a 'grave and sudden' emergency makes immediate intervention necessary to protect life and property. In such circumstances the soldier 'is to act on his own

²⁷ Boyd Hilton, *A mad, bad and dangerous people? England 1783–1846* (Oxford, 2008), p. 252.

²⁸ Keith Jeffery, 'Military aid to the civil power – an historical perspective' in Peter Rowe and Christopher Whelan (eds), *Military intervention in democratic societies* (London, 1985), pp 53–6.

²⁹ *Report of the Bloody Sunday inquiry, volume I*, H.C. 2010–11 (29).

³⁰ Jeffery, 'Military aid to the civil power', p. 54.

³¹ David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making sense of the troubles* (Belfast, 2000), p. 103.

responsibility'.³² Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Evelegh, who commanded an army battalion on two tours of Northern Ireland, observes that in internal peace-keeping operations soldiers are legally indistinguishable from common citizens. The soldier is 'seen in theory as being uncontrolled by the Government of the day and, in so far as he has a duty to respond to the civil authorities, as owing this response to the magistrates'.³³ In Northern Ireland the British army operated such that these legal positions were dramatically removed from events on the ground.

The G.O.C. held overall responsibility for security operations, including co-ordinating the tasking of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C.). Security operations were defined as 'operations to counter action ... aimed at subverting the security of the state', 'action necessary for the protection of life and property in case of actual or apprehended civil commotion' and 'service assistance in the maintenance of essential services'. Crucially, 'offences by civilians arising from subversion or civil commotion remain offences against criminal law and are to be investigated and prosecuted by the police in the ordinary way'.³⁴ If the G.O.C. deemed intimidation not to be threatening the security of the state or life and property, it was the responsibility of the R.U.C.

The British army was deployed, primarily in nationalist areas, because the R.U.C. was unable to manage disorder. As the conflict developed they became focused on combating the Provisional I.R.A. A Northern Ireland Office (N.I.O.) official subsequently noted that 'for the first 4 years or so ... the army command here operated largely independently of the civil power' and they consequently saw their function 'as organising a military campaign against a

³² M.O.D., *The Queen's regulations for the Army*, p. 11.1.

³³ Robin Evelegh, *Peace keeping in a democratic society: the lessons of Northern Ireland* (London, 1978), p. 3.

³⁴ Directive for the general officer commanding Northern Ireland as director of Operations, 14 Mar. 1973 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1293).

defined enemy'.³⁵ Meanwhile, the police continued their duties largely in Protestant areas. The reluctance of the army to involve itself during the strike should be seen as a consequence of this division of labour. The legal murkiness of military action against civil disorder and the open-ended nature of army regulations meant decisions were subject to personal assessments of military and political conditions. Jeffery aptly argues that the incidence of M.A.C.P. 'to a very great extent depends, not on military action, but political circumstances'.³⁶

Frank Kitson, brigade commander of the greater Belfast area between 1970 and 1972, also noted the importance of political circumstances in dealing with subversion. He writes, 'in practical terms the most promising line of approach lies in separating the mass of those engaged in the campaign from the leadership by the judicious promise of concessions'.³⁷ Had this line of action been followed this would have meant addressing loyalist fears of Sunningdale, either by abandoning the Council of Ireland or conceding the demand for assembly elections. The latter would have greatly weakened Faulkner's position. As for the former, on 22 May it was announced that the Council of Ireland would have a phased implementation.³⁸ The concession was not enough and came at a time when the strikers were confident of success.

Kerr argues that if barricades had been removed in the first couple of days the U.W.C. strike would have failed.³⁹ This would not have been the first time the British army mounted a large-scale operation to remove barricades in Northern Ireland. In July 1972 Operation Motorman brought an end to republican no-go areas in Derry and Belfast, with the army's

³⁵ Webster to Barker, 25 Mar. 1976 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1208).

³⁶ Jeffery, 'Military aid to the civil power', p. 64.

³⁷ Frank Kitson, *Low intensity operations: subversion, insurgency, peace-keeping* (Dehra Dun, 1992), p. 87.

³⁸ Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: a chronology of the troubles 1968–1999* (Dublin, 1999), p. 86.

³⁹ Kerr, *Imposing power-sharing*, p. 68.

strength reinforced to over 30,000.⁴⁰ Clearly this sets a precedent. The operation was dictated by political circumstances, however, with republican barricades allowed to remain for over a year; action was only approved after the republican bombings of Bloody Friday created a favourable situation.⁴¹ To deal with the strikers in May 1974 would have required an operation akin to Motorman within a dramatically reduced time span.

On 21 May the Trades Union Congress general secretary, Len Murray, led back-to-work marches in opposition to the U.W.C. Fifteen hundred soldiers and 500 R.U.C. officers were needed to keep open the seven main routes into Belfast.⁴² At a security meeting, the chief constable of the R.U.C. reported that ‘they had not sufficient manpower or the capacity to deal with the blocks on the side roads’.⁴³ That same night, following the arrival of 2,000 troops from Great Britain, six battalions ‘removed all roadblocks in the Village, Sandy Row, Donegall Road, East Belfast, Shankill and most of North Belfast’ between midnight and six in the morning. Road blocks reappeared just two hours later, suggesting the success of the operation relied largely on the sleep-pattern of the strikers.⁴⁴ During a later interview Heath dismissed as nonsense the chief of the general staff’s claim that keeping streets free of barricades would require a force equivalent to the British army of the Rhine, numbering around 55,000.⁴⁵ Any estimation of necessary numbers is of course speculative, but a presence on the side streets of Belfast would have required reinforcements the army believed

⁴⁰ Peter Neumann and M. L. R. Smith, ‘Motorman’s long journey: changing the strategic setting in Northern Ireland’ in *Contemporary British History*, xix, no. 4 (Dec. 2005), p. 414.

⁴¹ Bew and Gillespie, *Northern Ireland*, pp 53–5.

⁴² Transcript of tape recordings, undated (London School of Economics (L.S.E.), MERLYN-REES/1/4, p. 8).

⁴³ Security meeting at Stormont Castle, 21 May 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/504).

⁴⁴ Director of Operations brief, 22 May 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/501).

⁴⁵ ‘A modern rebellion’, 14 May 1984 (U.F.T.M., B.B.C.N.I., #1663).

to be impossible and may well have provoked an angry response from the Protestant community.

The police were even more ill-suited to deal with intimidation on this scale, with the regular force numbering only 4,455.⁴⁶ The predominantly Protestant R.U.C.'s loyalty was also in doubt. Rees later told the journalist, Peter Taylor, 'We couldn't do a Prague. You can't put down a popular rising by killing people. We're not Russia. The police were on the brink of not carrying out their duties and the middle classes were on the strikers' side.'⁴⁷ This perhaps exaggerates the scale of popular support, but the nature of loyalist barricades and the army's preoccupation with nationalist areas made it logical that Rees chose not to antagonise his army advisors by insisting on an operation they deemed unfeasible. Kerr writes that the army's response was 'no better' than the R.U.C.'s but 'rejecting criticism from Wilson, its commanders argued that if the government was irritated by the military approach that was being taken towards the strike, then the government "should have given some orders for the army to do something else"'. Despite the impression given, that these views were aired in 1974 by military figures involved in the strike, Kerr in fact cites General Harry Tuzo, speaking at an event in 1993, even though Tuzo was based in Germany at the time of the strike. Tuzo's remarks display an ignorance of the dialogue between the government and the army, understandable considering that he was not part of it.⁴⁸ In creating the impression that the government was simply unwilling to order troops to take down barricades, Kerr fails to adequately consider the significance of army advice itself. Rees bore responsibility in a situation where the police were not capable and the army was opposed to intervention. While

⁴⁶ *Parliamentary debates (Hansard), House of Commons, 1942–81* (vol. dcccclxxiv, London, 1974), col. 268w.

⁴⁷ Taylor, *Loyalists*, p. 132. A period of democratisation in Czechoslovakia during 1968 ended when Moscow sent 500,000 Warsaw Pact troops to the country: Tony Judt, *Postwar: a history of Europe since 1945* (London, 2010), pp 440–7.

⁴⁸ Kerr, *The destructors*, p. 213.

his temperament was such that he was not inclined to dismiss army advice, practical constraints had far more bearing on the decision than ministerial personality or political will.

II

The second element of the strike was a reduction in essential services. Such disruptions were far from unique to Northern Ireland and nor was military intervention. While the precise political context of strikes in Great Britain were markedly different, usually taking the form of traditional disputes over wages and conditions, the logistical challenges in handling them were often very similar. The use of troops as substitute labour in Great Britain occurred on twenty-one occasions between 1945 and the U.W.C. strike, fifteen of which took place under Labour (rendering the view that trade union sympathies made the party hesitant to tackle strikes rather simplistic). In all instances the work given to the military was manual and did not require specialist skills, but on six occasions the use of troops worsened the dispute. During the 1949 London power station strike troops were deployed to assist engineers, prompting a fourth, larger station to join the dispute. This led to widespread power cuts.⁴⁹ There is a need for sensitivity in using the army as substitute labour and the impact of the armed forces is seriously affected by the skills required for intervention. Analysing the experiences of strikebreaking throughout the U.K., Jeffery and Hennessy make the distinction that troops ‘can be used extensively where relatively unskilled work is involved’.⁵⁰

Within the U.W.C. Billy Kelly, a power station worker and union convenor at Belfast Station East, and Tom Beattie, an engineer at Ballylumford power station, produced plans designed to bring industry to a halt. On 15 May, as the strike began, labour was withdrawn

⁴⁹ Gillian Morris, *Strikes in essential services* (London, 1986), pp 51, 100–02.

⁵⁰ Hennessy and Jeffery, *States of emergency*, p. 241.

from generators at Ballylumford, and there were similar walkouts at Coolkeeragh and the two Belfast stations. Pickets were mounted outside, stopping the supply of fuel and essential chemicals. The four electricity stations in Northern Ireland normally generated 725 megawatts of electricity and Kelly's plan was to reduce it to 400.⁵¹ As the strike progressed it was reduced further.⁵²

The N.I.O. considered various ways to increase the electricity supply. One was deploying a nuclear submarine in Belfast harbour. Two days into the strike, however, the M.O.D. noted difficulties in converting the supply to the electricity grid. Only a few hundred kilowatts would be provided in Belfast, where the two power stations were capable of producing 360 megawatts. They considered deploying the destroyer H.M.S. Bristol, but this would only have produced six megawatts at most.⁵³ Any attempts to increase the supply therefore depended on the existing power stations in Northern Ireland.

The deployment of troops to run the power stations was given serious consideration. On 16 May Rees informed Wilson that 'he had put on immediate notice troops capable of running power stations, and at short notice troops capable of running sewage plants'. He said there was enough power for twenty-four hours but 'it might be necessary to take a difficult

⁵¹ Robert Fisk, *The point of no return: the strike which broke the British in Ulster* (London, 1975), pp 19, 168–70.

⁵² Here Kerr claims that the British government mistakenly rejected an opportunity for a compromise. He argues that Orme's meeting with the U.W.C. 'was an entirely counterproductive exchange, leaving little room for manoeuvre' and quotes Paisley's assertion that the U.W.C. would not have had to maintain essential services had Rees 'not rejected their offer to operate the power stations at 60 per cent output', observing that there was 'something to Paisley's remark'. The U.W.C.'s condition was that the government shut down industrial sites. To accept this would have undermined the executive and allowed loyalists a substantial role in running economic affairs in Northern Ireland: Kerr, *The destructors*, pp 204, 212, 227.

⁵³ Nicholls to Butler, 17 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/146).

decision the following day to bring in troops'.⁵⁴ The term 'immediate notice' was inaccurate. A Royal Engineers field squadron and an additional '500 or so personnel' were placed on seven days' notice, except for '134 men, who might be required to maintain power stations' who were placed on forty-eight hours' notice from 21 May. The following day discussions between the N.I.O. and M.O.D. led to the time frame being reduced to forty-eight hours from 20 May.⁵⁵ Intervention within the first week of the strike may not, therefore, have been possible.⁵⁶

On the afternoon of 17 May, Rees informed Wilson that if troops were deployed middle management would probably walk out. He proposed that deployment should occur only on the basis of maintaining life.⁵⁷ At a meeting of officials, including a representative of the Northern Ireland Electricity Service (N.I.E.S.), it was observed that the army would require assistance from specialist technicians if it intervened.⁵⁸ A representative of N.I.E.S. was also present at a security meeting held between Rees, the G.O.C., and the chief constable. Rees asked how middle management would react to the use of service technicians in the event of a life and death situation. The N.I.E.S. representative replied that 'bringing in

⁵⁴ Butler to Bridges, 16 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/146).

⁵⁵ Nicholls to Butler, 17 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/146).

⁵⁶ Kerr writes that the secretary of defence, Roy Mason, 'refused' to put service technicians in England on less than seven days' redeployment notice. Here he fails to cite any evidence of such a refusal. M.O.D. correspondence with Downing Street shows that the notice required stemmed from the difficulty of assembling the relevant people: Kerr, *The destructors*, p. 207; Nicholls to Butler, 16 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/146); Nicholls to Butler, 17 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/146).

⁵⁷ Conversation between Wilson and Rees, 17 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/146).

⁵⁸ Meeting of officials in Stormont Castle, 17 May 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/504).

the Services would alienate the whole of Protestant opinion, including his middle management' and he would prefer to try to keep electricity going without intervention.⁵⁹

Dependence on middle management and the difficulty of using military forces to carry out skilled work is reinforced by the experience elsewhere. Gillian Morris points out that 'engineers have enormous industrial muscle as it has been clear for many years that they are indispensable to the supply system and cannot be replaced'. During an electricity manual workers' overtime ban in 1970 the secretary of state for trade and industry told the House of Commons that using troops in power stations was not practical. In 1977 the House of Lords heard that individual power stations were so specialised they could only be run by resident engineers with long-standing experience.⁶⁰ This situation existed in Northern Ireland as well: the Ballylumford station had twenty-four volumes of manuals of over 200 pages specific to the various boilers and turbines, while each engineer kept a personal notebook on modifications.⁶¹

In a meeting with the Irish ambassador, who conveyed the taoiseach's desire for military intervention, Wilson remarked that if troops were moved in 'the amount of power produced might, in fact, be less than at present'.⁶² On 24 May Wilson received a letter from the Electrical Power Engineers' Association (E.P.E.A.). The E.P.E.A. said that a majority of its members would walk out if this happened and that it had no choice but to back their decision.⁶³ That same day intervention was discussed at Chequers by Wilson, Rees, the defence secretary Roy Mason and the leaders of all parties on the Executive. Wilson stated the dangers of intervention. Faulkner and Fitt argued for it.

⁵⁹ Meeting between Rees, G.O.C. and chief constable, 17 May 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/504).

⁶⁰ Morris, *Strikes in essential services*, p. 139.

⁶¹ Fisk, *The point of no return*, p. 172.

⁶² Meeting between Wilson and Irish ambassador, 23 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/147).

⁶³ Lyons to Wilson, 24 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/147).

Rees said he ‘was placed in a difficult situation, when making his mind up about possible intervention ... if presented with conflicting advice’. This was a weak response. Rees was not firm enough in explaining the practical constraints to the Executive. Despite his apparent hand-wringing, the evidence was stacked against intervention and the decision against it did not stem from mere lack of political will, as existing literature suggests. Wilson suggested that a threat to the pension rights of middle-ranking engineers ‘might make them see reason’. This is a further indication that the claim Labour was unwilling to confront the strikers because of trade union sensibilities is unsubstantiated. Indeed, Wilson was prone to taking an aggressive line in such circumstances, as during the seamen’s strike of 1966 when, much to the frustration of MI5, he publicly used intelligence material to accuse communists of orchestrating the strike to bring down his government.⁶⁴ His pension proposal fits into this pattern but was judged counter-productive and rightly so.⁶⁵ Another option was to ask Catholic workers at Coolkeeragh to increase the supply. The N.I.E.S. opposed the plan on the grounds that it would provoke a walkout of the Protestant workforce at Ballylumford, with the chairman even threatening his resignation in response.⁶⁶

Counterfactual suggestions that the army could have maintained the electricity supply are borne of frustration rather than understanding. Early in the strike the government sought advice on intervention in the power stations and placed army technicians on standby. The news was not encouraging and the U.W.C.’s tactic of keeping the electricity supply at a level that made military intervention risky discouraged Rees from deploying troops.

⁶⁴ Jeffery and Hennessy, *States of emergency*, p. 232.

⁶⁵ Meeting between Wilson and chief executive, 24 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/147).

⁶⁶ Meeting between Rees and senior commerce officials, 27 May 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/503); meeting between Wilson and chief executive, 24 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/147).

The U.W.C. also controlled the distribution of petrol and bread. At their headquarters in Hawthornden Road they issued passes to those who successfully argued that their work was essential.⁶⁷ A contingency plan for the distribution of oil and petrol was placed before the Executive by Hume on 22 May, where it received approval. Two days later Wilson, Rees and Mason approved the use of troops to requisition the Belfast Harbour Estate and twenty-one petrol stations spread across Northern Ireland.⁶⁸ Before the operation took place Wilson made a controversial television broadcast on 25 May which infuriated unionists. He spoke of the resources given to Northern Ireland, stating: ‘people who benefit from all this now viciously defy Westminster, purporting to act as though they were an elected government; people who spend their lives sponging on Westminster and British democracy and then systematically assault democratic methods. Who do these people think they are?’⁶⁹ This had a devastating impact on support for the executive. By indulging in such emotional responses he failed to act in the balanced manner required in Northern Irish affairs.⁷⁰

Rees delayed implementing the oil plan. He believed Roy Bradford was leaking information from within the Executive and that ‘anything we discussed in the Castle in [the] Emergency Committee’ also leaked, showing distrust of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (N.I.C.S.). Similarly, the R.U.C. were not told about an army operation in Rathcoole for fear that they would have leaked to loyalist paramilitaries. Rees recorded in his diaries ‘that one

⁶⁷ Fisk, *The point of no return*, p. 74.

⁶⁸ Meeting between Wilson and chief executive, 24 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/147); Department of Commerce oil plan, undated (T.N.A., CJ 4/504).

⁶⁹ ‘Text of broadcast made by Harold Wilson on 25 May 1974’, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/> accessed 25 Jan. 2012.

⁷⁰ Kerr’s claim that ‘Wilson decided to withdraw financial support to Harland and Wolff for the duration of the strike’ is incorrect; the government postponed a decision on whether to give the company assistance on top of what had already been granted while insisting that it would not let the firm go under: Kerr, *The destructors*, p. 224; IRN(74), memo 14, 7 June 1974 (T.N.A., CAB 134/3778); *The Times*, 23 May 1974.

daren't talk in the Castle'.⁷¹ On 26 May Rees told Wilson the oil plan would be implemented, but both believed that a return to direct rule was likely.⁷² Frank Cooper, Rees's permanent secretary, warned that the oil plan 'is so fraught ... that the outcome is most likely to be a degree of chaos, larger-scale and unsuccessful intervention and public humiliation. The fact is that at the end of the day we do not have trumps enough to go up the scale.'⁷³ After the army carried out the oil plan on 26 May there was less petrol available than before. The U.W.C. responded to the opening of twenty-one government-requisitioned petrol stations by closing over 140 that it previously kept open. Mistakes were made in distributing the exact grades of oil needed and at some stations paraffin was put in cars.⁷⁴ Pressure on the Executive continued and on 28 May Faulkner asked Rees to negotiate with the strikers. He refused, leading Faulkner and his unionist colleagues to resign.⁷⁵ The Executive collapsed and the following day the U.W.C. ended its strike.

III

The seriousness of the constraints experienced in trying to break the U.W.C. strike are reinforced by the discussions that took place in its aftermath. Government preparations for responding to a second strike began immediately. All N.I.C.S. departments were asked to prepare reports on their experiences.⁷⁶ One N.I.O. official noted that contingency plans had been 'gravely hampered' by assumptions that middle and senior management would continue

⁷¹ Transcript of tapes, 2 June 1974 (L.S.E., MERLYN-REES/1/4, pp 9–11).

⁷² Conversation between Rees and Wilson, 26 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/148).

⁷³ Cooper to Rees, 26 May 1974 (T.N.A., PREM 16/148).

⁷⁴ Anderson, *Fourteen May days*, pp 138–9.

⁷⁵ N.I.E. news release, 28 May 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/501).

⁷⁶ Parkes to all permanent secretaries, 6 June 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/777).

to co-operate with government and that problems would be isolated, such as the assumption in the oil plan that electricity and public transport would be operating normally. The Emergency Committee, which co-ordinated strike-breaking, had a number of defects: it did not formally report to or receive direction from ministers; decisions were taken ad hoc by officials without political guidance; and responsibility was divided between the N.I.O. and the power-sharing executive.⁷⁷

Frank Cooper established the Emergency Steering Committee (E.S.C.) in June 1974. The army told E.S.C. that ‘the initial commitment of troops might only have real advantage as a delaying tactic’. Similarly, contingency plans for police involvement were hampered because of the dependence on public co-operation.⁷⁸ A cabinet committee of officials produced a disheartening report in November, concluding that it was ‘not possible to seek to maintain the general continuance of most commercial, industrial and essential life’ if a major strike occurred again. It might be possible to maintain a lower level of services while letting industry come to a halt, but this required negotiation with the strikers and was sustainable for only a fortnight.⁷⁹ A month later, Frank Cooper informed ministers that there were ‘no conventional means of dealing with a full scale strike’.⁸⁰

By September 1975 each of the relevant Northern Ireland departments had produced contingency plans for industrial action.⁸¹ The R.U.C. made preparations for roadblocks but only for ‘priority routes’.⁸² In October the N.I.O. conducted ‘Exercise Fastball’, a simulated strike to test the operations room designed to co-ordinate responses by civil service

⁷⁷ Parkes to Harris, 4 June 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/777).

⁷⁸ Emergency Steering Committee (ESC(74)) meeting 1, 26 June 1974 (T.N.A., CJ 4/777).

⁷⁹ IRN(74) memo 25, 21 Nov. 1974 (T.N.A., CAB 134/3779).

⁸⁰ IRN(74) meeting 10, 4 Dec. 1974 (T.N.A., CAB 134/3778).

⁸¹ Meeting of the Emergency Steering Committee, 12 Sept. 1975 (T.N.A., CJ 4/781).

⁸² England to permanent under secretary, 22 Sept. 1975 (T.N.A., CJ 4/781).

departments and the security forces. Afterwards, the N.I.O. noted the immense pressure placed on the co-ordinator of the operations room and the crucial need for the secretary of state to take ‘quick, often unpleasant decisions’.⁸³

The official cabinet committee concluded that if there was ‘determined industrial action by the majority community, the armed forces would not be able to sustain essential services’. The government was unable to prevent a breakdown in electricity and gas; substitute labour from Great Britain would be unavailable, or unwilling, in sufficient numbers to strike-break. They would also be unable to protect the minority as any attempt to guarantee supplies in, for example, west Belfast, would ‘precipitate violence and sabotage which would effectively cut off the supplies’.

The only real option was to ‘nip such a strike in the bud’ by arresting the ringleaders. The possibility of some sections of the R.U.C. and the locally-recruited Ulster Defence Regiment (U.D.R.) choosing not to co-operate was raised, extending also to parts of the N.I.C.S. The security forces had sufficient legal powers to handle intimidation and those who refused to disperse from a crowd. Intimidation, however, required ‘an inefficiently large manpower commitment’ and as soon as the security forces’ presence diminished the intimidators could move back in. The best response was deemed to be intensive publicity to encourage people to give information. The government was advised to describe in public statements ‘what was possible; to express a determination to do what could be done to deal with acute distress; but to make clear that what the government could do generally to alleviate suffering and hardship would be very limited indeed’.⁸⁴ There was little to suggest that the prevailing understanding of the handling of the U.W.C. strike outside of government

⁸³ Bell to England, 7 Oct. 1975 (T.N.A., CJ 4/781); Bourn to England, 13 Oct. 1975 (T.N.A., CJ 4/781).

⁸⁴ IRN memo 25, 7 Nov. 1975 (T.N.A., CJ 4/781).

was correct and that more decisive or determined ministers could easily overcome logistical difficulties.

IV

The political context of the 1977 strike was very different from three years earlier. In April the United Unionist Action Council (U.U.A.C.), formed by Ernest Baird of the United Ulster Unionist Movement (U.U.U.M.) and including the D.U.P., the U.W.C. and all major loyalist paramilitary groups, organised a demonstration in support of five members of the Ulster Service Corps, a small paramilitary organisation, charged with mounting an illegal road block. Ian Paisley ‘called for the expenditure of “blood, sweat and tears” in a campaign which would restore Stormont, return control of security policy to local hands, and lead to the extermination of the I.R.A.’.⁸⁵ A special security meeting in the N.I.O. surmised that Paisley had been overtaken by the paramilitaries with whom he was dabbling and the emotional impetus for a strike would be dissatisfaction with the security situation rather than with direct rule.⁸⁶

This distinction is important as direct rule was more acceptable to the unionist population than power-sharing and much harder to present as a threat to the union than Sunningdale in 1974. Paisley and Baird were left isolated by other unionist politicians. Bill Craig’s Vanguard and the Official Unionists had supported the U.W.C. strike, the former being the most vocal to do so, but in April 1977 they issued a joint statement admitting to being disappointed with the security situation but condemning ‘any loyalist action which

⁸⁵ *Irish Times*, 25 Apr. 1977; Elliott to Neilson, 25 Apr. 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1566).

⁸⁶ Special security meeting, 25 Apr. 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1566).

might embarrass the security forces'.⁸⁷ There was consequently less likelihood of more respectable sections of unionism supporting the strike. Revealingly, the deputy leader of the Alliance party, Basil Glass, informed the N.I.O. that U.D.A. members had been telling sections of the Protestant community that the strike would break the government and “‘good Catholics’” would be invited to leave their suburbs and join the rest of the community’ at which point ‘loyalist forces would enter the Catholic suburbs, burn them and kill those who remained’.⁸⁸

Another factor limiting support for the strike was the ongoing economic crisis in the United Kingdom and the fear of job losses in this climate. Negotiations in November and December 1976 between the British government and the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.) brought home to the British public just how precarious its economic position was and very few regions of the United Kingdom suffered from as precarious a position as Northern Ireland.⁸⁹ When Roy Mason replaced Rees as secretary of state in September 1976 he pointedly remarked in his first press conference that Northern Ireland’s biggest problem was the economy, not security.⁹⁰ Just before the strike began it was announced that Shell had placed a £70 million order for two liquefied petroleum gas tankers from Harland & Wolff, which Mason believed was ‘a critical factor’ in preventing shipyard workers from supporting the strike.⁹¹

British preparations were also naturally more advanced than in 1974. On 25 April the contingency preparations were outlined to Roy Mason alongside recommendations to activate

⁸⁷ Elliott to Neilson, 25 Apr. 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1566).

⁸⁸ Neilson to Ford, 29 Apr. 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1566).

⁸⁹ Michael Artis, David Cobham and Mark Wickham-Jones, ‘Social democracy in hard times: the economic record of the Labour government 1974–1979’ in *Twentieth Century British History*, iii, no. 1 (1992), pp 32–58.

⁹⁰ *The Times*, 28 Sept. 1976.

⁹¹ Mason to Callaghan, 16 June 1977 (TNA, PREM 16/1344).

machinery such as the E.S.C. and the operations room.⁹² Mason emphasised that if a strike did take place the burden would remain with the police.⁹³ There was less doubt about the R.U.C.'s loyalty this time because of the differing political context. Policemen were also less likely to oppose existing security policy because the R.U.C. was now at the heart of it. In 1976, having phased out detention without trial the previous year, the government pursued a policy of police primacy. By April 1977 the organisation of the R.U.C. had been completely overhauled, police numbers increased by about 900 to 5,400, greater expenditure brought in new training and equipment, and the R.U.C. had been granted a bigger role.⁹⁴

From 26 April onwards daily security meetings were held including Mason, Brian Cubbon (Cooper's replacement as permanent secretary), David House (the G.O.C.) and Kenneth Newman (chief Constable of the R.U.C.). Jack Hermon, deputy chief constable (Operations), agreed with the N.I.O. assessment that roads were the top priority, but warned that there were limits to police resources and the removal of barriers could either provoke violence or weaken the strike. Unlike in 1974, the G.O.C. prepared in advance for a re-deployment of troops. He planned to request three regular battalions and call out the U.D.R. to relieve three further battalions from routine duties.⁹⁵

Even with all of these advantages compared with the position in 1974, there was still a sense of the difficult challenges that the strike would present. It was agreed in a security meeting that 'there was no chance of keeping Ballylumford out of the hands of the paramilitaries' and the West Belfast and Coolkeeragh power stations, although operated by a 50 per cent Catholic workforce, would be subject to intimidation. The N.I.E.S. were

⁹² Pritchard to Mason, 25 Apr. 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1566).

⁹³ Special security meeting, 25 Apr. 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1566).

⁹⁴ Ministerial Committee on Law and Order memo 6, c.June 1976 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1204); McMillan to Sands, 15 June 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1781).

⁹⁵ Special security meeting, 26 Apr. 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1566).

confident that middle management would remain in place but were unsure if they would stay there if the army was deployed to work in the power stations. The idea of importing middle management from Great Britain was ‘not “on”’.⁹⁶ On 28 April it was revealed that House’s anticipated request for three battalions would be granted, with arrival set for noon on 2 May. Specialist troops had to be assembled from different units all over Great Britain and would take longer to arrive. Once present their ability to maintain essential services would be ‘strictly limited’ without co-operation from middle management.⁹⁷ There was a consensus that, as in May 1974, troops would not be able to run the power stations themselves and if they intervened co-operation might not be forthcoming.

On 29 April army instructions described the need to respond quickly to R.U.C. requests and to ‘talk down’ barricades where possible.⁹⁸ Guidance was issued on handling pickets with two distinct phases. Unless a state of emergency was declared the army did not have the right to break a picket line. If the R.U.C. believed pickets were somehow breaking the law then the army could respond to a request for help. After a state of emergency the army had the right to use minimum force to gain entry to an installation.⁹⁹ This first phase existed throughout the strike as Mason did not declare an emergency.

The importance of the machinery developed for handling the strike is reflected in the sheer wealth of records produced throughout its duration. From the start of the strike the operations room kept a continuous log of events and issued thrice-daily situation reports.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ IN(77) meeting 2, 28 Apr. 1977 (T.N.A., CAB 134/4039).

⁹⁸ OP 0 10/77 OP Productive (army instructions for response to the strike) , 29 Apr. 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1565).

⁹⁹ Signal to army brigades, 1 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1565).

¹⁰⁰ Situation reports (T.N.A., CJ 4/1572); Northern Ireland Operations Room (N.I.O.R.) log sheets (T.N.A., CJ 4/1573–4).

The E.S.C. met at 0730 each morning, with Mason briefing the media at 0900 and three press statements timed to catch the lunchtime, evening and following morning's news. Cubbon held a stocktaking meeting at noon each day to prepare the agenda for the special security meeting at 1800, immediately preceded by a meeting between House, Newman and himself.¹⁰¹ On the evening of 2 May the third and final battalion of House's reinforcements arrived.¹⁰²

On 26 April the U.U.A.C. had given Mason an ultimatum that if he did not begin 'a powerful and effective offensive against the I.R.A.' and announce steps to implement majority rule within seven days they would act.¹⁰³ Ian Paisley, who declared that if the strike failed he would leave politics, received a letter from Mason, insisting: 'You are playing the I.R.A. game and you should realise it.'¹⁰⁴ Paisley replied that he would 'fight to the death' for 'the devastated Province which I love'. He attacked 'the drunkenness, lewdness, immorality and filthy language' of British politicians, declaring that 'Ulster Protestants are not interested in gaining the goodwill of such reprobates'. Mason wanted 'to crush the Protestant majority, destroy Protestant liberty, foist republicans into the government of Northern Ireland, and eventually bring Ulster into a united Ireland'.¹⁰⁵ There was no room for negotiation.

The strike arrived as anticipated on the evening of 2 May and the following day proved a difficult challenge for the British government, despite all its preparations. On the night of 2 May the N.I.O. operations room recorded numerous instances of intimidation, including threats to the night shift at Harland and Wolff shipyards by armed men, as well as

¹⁰¹ Private secretary to the permanent under-secretary of state to the private secretary to the secretary of state for Northern Ireland, 4 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹⁰² Special security meeting, 2 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1575).

¹⁰³ *The Times*, 26 Apr. 1977.

¹⁰⁴ *Irish Times*, 2 May 1977; Mason to Paisley, 3 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ/1567).

¹⁰⁵ Paisley to Mason, 3 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ/1567).

the cutting of railway lines between Bangor and Belfast.¹⁰⁶ The following day electricity supplies remained normal with an extremely high turnout but major industrial concerns were heavily disrupted.¹⁰⁷ Although there was little open violence, threatening phone calls were made, bus services were seriously affected and flying pickets intimidated small businesses. Larne harbour closed after dockers walked out and fuel tanker drivers agreed to follow U.W.C. instructions, restricting deliveries to hospitals, health centres and homes for the elderly.¹⁰⁸

Speaking to Chief Constable Newman, Mason commended the R.U.C. for their presence on the streets and asked ‘whether [it] might now be the time for action against the intimidators’. Newman replied that the R.U.C. ‘had a three-line whip out all day on intimidation’. When Mason said non-strikers would be looking for evidence of action, Newman responded that most of the intimidation was by telephone and there ‘was nothing physical to meet on the streets’.¹⁰⁹ After a nervous first day the situation improved. On 4 May all main roads were open and industry reported an increased turnout. Bus services continued to be disrupted and minor roads were still blocked but a major effort to obstruct the Newtownards Road leading from east Belfast into the city centre was cleared by the police.¹¹⁰ Although intimidation was substantial, popular reaction appeared to be more overtly opposed to it and the widespread obstruction of roads in 1974 had not materialised. The G.O.C.

¹⁰⁶ N.I.O.R. log sheet, 2 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ/1573).

¹⁰⁷ Situation report at 1100 hours, 3 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1572).

¹⁰⁸ Situation report at 1600 hours, 3 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1572).

¹⁰⁹ Conversation between Mason and chief constable, 3 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹¹⁰ Situation report at 1100 hours, 4 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1572); Situation report at 1600 hours, 4 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1572).

watched the Newtownards Road confrontation from a helicopter and described the R.U.C. performance as ‘first class’, arguably a mark of its improved training and greater resources.¹¹¹

The power stations remained a focal point in the tug-of-war between the government and the strikers. Workers were unhappy with the idea of troops being used so assurances were given that this would not happen.¹¹² On the first day the general secretary of the Electrical Power Engineers Association, John Lyons, ‘reiterated his belief that the troops would *never* have a role in the power stations’.¹¹³ The following day both Lyons and the head of the N.I.E.S., Jim Smyth, complained that attendances were announced on the radio. The N.I.E.S.’s transport provision for workers had been defeated in one instance when a crowd of a hundred stopped a bus on the Newtownards Road.¹¹⁴

On 5 May Mason met a deputation of Ballylumford staff. The workers felt they had ‘become a political football between the government and the strikers’. The deputation said that the vast majority supported the aims of the U.U.A.C. but had doubts about their methods and did not want to be manipulated by either side. Security was the most important issue and they wanted evidence that the government had a will to defeat terrorism.¹¹⁵ N.I.O. officials considered how to present security policy in order to garner support, suggesting a concentration on surveillance and covert activity.¹¹⁶ Mason issued a number of statements, though archival material shows that they were misleading. The week prior to the strike

¹¹¹ Special security meeting, 4 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1575).

¹¹² Special security meeting, 29 Apr. 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1566).

¹¹³ Conversation with John Lyons, 3 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹¹⁴ Conversation with John Lyons, 4 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567); Gilliland to Ford, 4 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹¹⁵ Meeting between Mason and Ballylumford workers, 5 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹¹⁶ Stephens to P.S./P.U.S., 29 Apr 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1653); Bourn to Stephens, 2 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1653).

Mason publicly claimed that the number of S.A.S. troops in Northern Ireland had been doubled. The M.O.D. complained that this was untrue and Mason's private secretary promised it was based on a misunderstanding. On 2 May they were 'extremely surprised and concerned' when he claimed that 'the number of special security forces such as the S.A.S. had been substantially increased and this trend would continue'. Jolyon Dromgoole, assistant under-secretary in the M.O.D., objected that this implied S.A.S. numbers had increased, which was untrue, and that they would increase in the future, which was 'not feasible'.¹¹⁷ When Mason met the Ballylumford workers he said that 'S.A.S. type operations' had been doubled and 'this trend will continue'.¹¹⁸ Both Dromgoole and the deputy under-secretary for the army, P. T. E. England, advised the defence minister to send a letter to Mason 'pointing out, yet again, that what he said about the S.A.S. is not true'. England, formerly deputy secretary of N.I.O. Belfast, also could not 'help observing wryly' that much of the remaining content in Mason's statements was based on decisions made before his appointment.¹¹⁹ Not knowing that Mason's promises were false, Ballylumford voted to continue working by 286 votes to 171.¹²⁰ Mason seized the opportunity to capitalise on doubts at Ballylumford but most important was the difference in attitudes there from three years earlier.

The failure to secure support for the strike at Northern Ireland's biggest power station was crucial. This was recognised by the U.U.A.C. and intimidation increased on 7 May. Some of this took the form of picketing but most of the pressure came via telephone calls. As the situation became increasingly tense the R.U.C. promised workers protection. The strikers decided that, because of threats to them and their families, the day shift would walk out

¹¹⁷ Dromgoole to Bourn, 3 May 1977 (T.N.A., DEFE 13/1402).

¹¹⁸ Meeting between Mason and Ballylumford workers, 5 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹¹⁹ Dromgoole to assistant private secretary to the secretary of state for defence, 6 May 1977 (T.N.A., DEFE 13/1402); England to PS/SSDEF, 6 May 1977 (T.N.A., DEFE 13/1402).

¹²⁰ Roy Mason, *Paying the price* (London, 1999), p. 187.

unless assurances came from the U.U.A.C. that they would not be subject to force. Baird evaded the intimidation question but the Ballylumford workers received supportive public statements from the mayor of Larne and were visited by unionists Bill Craig and James Molyneaux. The following morning attendance was sufficient for the power station to operate as normal.¹²¹ Cubbon and Newman agreed that, in addition to keeping the roads open, their chief priority was to maintain protection for Ballylumford.¹²²

Without the aid of a strike at Ballylumford, which had played such a key role in 1974, the paramilitaries increasingly dominated the strike. The Ulster Freedom Fighters publicly remarked: 'It is with great reluctance that we find ourselves in the position of having to coerce the loyalist people to support themselves.' Two buses were attacked in Protestant areas of Belfast on 8 May, with one driver wounded by a gunman.¹²³ On 10 May Paisley took part in a tractor blockade in Ballymena. Paisley, Baird and ten others were arrested around noon when they refused to cease obstructing roads and the blockade dispersed that afternoon.¹²⁴ Moments later the U.D.A. shot dead a Protestant bus driver on Belfast's Crumlin Road.¹²⁵ Reports on attitudes in north and east Belfast recorded that Paisley's arrest had failed to arouse any sympathy, with some noting 'that he took care to be out of Belfast when the bus driver was murdered ... His professions of opposing violence are treated

¹²¹ Report on Ballylumford: 7/8 May, 8 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹²² Cubbon to Mason, 8 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹²³ Meeting on political aspects of the security situation, 9 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹²⁴ Buxton to Wicks, 10 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹²⁵ David McKittrick, Brian Feeney, Seamus Kelters, David McVea and Chris Thornton, *Lost lives: the stories of the men, women and children who died as a result of the Northern Ireland troubles* (Edinburgh, 2008), pp 720–1.

sceptically.’¹²⁶ Bus drivers ceased work but voted to return on 14 May after the funeral of their colleague.¹²⁷

There was a more pronounced effort by the government in 1977 to strengthen the resolve of various industries to keep operating. Here the discussions involved reinforce the significance of the differing political context from three years earlier and the usefulness of the preparations undertaken in the intervening period. Don Concannon, minister of state, kept in close contact with trade union officials, making numerous phone calls.¹²⁸ This gave the N.I.O. a greater knowledge of the situation, as well as allowing them to reassure workers that the government was responsive to their plight. On 4 May Concannon met a deputation of workers from Shorts and Harland and Wolff. As with the Ballylumford workers, the deputation ‘did not object to the U.U.A.C.’s end, only their means’. Although unable to satisfy their frustrations about the security situation entirely, Concannon and Jack Hermon were able to put the government’s position with the meeting ending ‘on a cordial note’.¹²⁹ This approach was not so successful with the Larne harbour dockers. By 9 May John Freeman of the Transport and General Workers’ Union felt there was a chance the dockers would return to work and suggested Concannon meet them to repeat Mason’s assurances at Ballylumford. The dockers voted to return to work if they received satisfactory assurances, but after Concannon arrived with a letter from Mason they voted against re-opening.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Elliott to Ford, 11 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹²⁷ Situation report at 1600 hours, 13 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1572).

¹²⁸ Note by Masefield, 4 May 1977 (Ibid); Note by Masefield, 5 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1577).

¹²⁹ Meeting between Concannon and Short Brothers and Harland and Wolff shop stewards, 4 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1577).

¹³⁰ Meeting between Concannon and Larne harbour deputation, 9 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1577); Note by Pritchard, 10 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1577).

Another key industry that the U.W.C. had successfully disrupted in 1974 was the supply of petrol. As elsewhere, the experience three years later showed the persistent limitations of strikebreaking. The department of Commerce held meetings with the oil companies. Two days into the strike Esso and Shell drivers were delivering supplies to U.U.A.C.-approved users but British Petroleum and smaller companies were not supplying at all – only 2 to 5 per cent of Northern Ireland’s consumption was delivered. The managers believed that the attitude of the drivers was motivated primarily by fear of intimidation and established a liaison with the U.U.A.C. The following day they planned to ask their men to undertake normal deliveries and, if they refused, only the army would be able to maintain supplies.¹³¹ N.I.C.S. officials argued that the oil plan might have to be put into action, but they were hesitant because soldiers would not be able to supply ordinary motorists.¹³² The following day the U.U.A.C. relaxed its list of essential users and, with positive signs from Ballylumford, the overall situation was more encouraging for government. Officials told the managers that industry was now supplying more than the army could hope to and at the end of the meeting news came through that all drivers would revert to normal deliveries on 6 May.¹³³

On 12 May, however, a petrol tanker driver was attacked. Concannon was given the unusual task of keeping union leaders inside Stormont Castle for as long as possible to prevent them declaring a cessation of work.¹³⁴ They arrived at 0915 on 13 May and had a series of meetings with officials, senior army officers and policemen, tempered by recesses for discussion amongst themselves and with senior oil managers. At 2130, twelve hours and

¹³¹ Meeting between officials and the Oil Industry Emergency Committee (O.I.E.C.), 4 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1571).

¹³² Permanent secretaries’ meeting, 4 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹³³ Meeting between officials and the O.I.E.C., 5 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1571).

¹³⁴ Mason, *Paying the price*, pp 194–5.

fifteen minutes after arriving, the deputation left Stormont Castle.¹³⁵ At midnight Paisley announced the end of the strike and said he would not leave politics because the strike had been a partial success in securing security policy changes.¹³⁶

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After the strike Callaghan congratulated Mason, declaring that he had ‘displayed courage and firmness against these dangerous men’.¹³⁷ Mason proudly quoted the document in his memoirs, though he claimed the victory was not his but that of the ordinary men and women who ‘kept alive a hope for Ulster that might otherwise have been crushed beneath the hobnailed boots of Ian Paisley and the forces behind him’.¹³⁸ Mason requested improvements in army training so that in future soldiers could operate power stations, but this was dismissed by officials as impractical.¹³⁹ Despite his subsequent reputation, the success in 1977 cannot be put down to Mason having a stronger resolve, though he seized the opportunity to convince workers at Ballylumford not to join the strike. The N.I.O. cited a number of factors behind the success: the mass of unionist opinion was not convinced that the strike would solve their problems and were concerned about the ongoing economic crisis; prominent unionist leaders opposed Paisley ‘with some skill and tenacity’; trade unions proved far more effective; there was mutual suspicion between the groups comprising the U.U.A.C. and the

¹³⁵ Synopsis of meetings between Concannon and tanker driver representatives, 13 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

¹³⁶ Mason to Callaghan, 17 May 1977 (T.N.A., PREM 16/1344).

¹³⁷ Callaghan to Mason, 17 May 1977 (T.N.A., PREM 16/1344).

¹³⁸ Mason, *Paying the price*, p. 197.

¹³⁹ Waterfield to Janes, 11 May 1977 (T.N.A., CJ 4/1567).

government's response was unified in the absence of a power-sharing executive.¹⁴⁰ The great improvement in machinery for handling the strike should be added to this list, but what stands out most is the political context of the two stoppages. Direct rule seemed far less threatening to the union than Sunningdale and this had a crucial impact on key unionist politicians, power station workers and the general population.

Accounts which attribute Sunningdale's collapse to Labour's lack of will or sympathy have failed to acknowledge the parameters within which the security forces operated. Reducing the outcomes of the two strikes to differences in ministerial personalities fails utterly to understand the nature of both events. Michael Kerr claims that Rees 'had the power to tackle the [1974] strike and, *in what many observers regarded as a gross dereliction of duty*, totally failed the executive by not using it' [emphasis added].¹⁴¹ The italicised remarks are symptomatic of not just Kerr but other authors' tendency to confuse contemporary opinion with definitive argument. Instead a rigorously historical approach to the issue, and one which avoids a dangerously prevalent preoccupation with "what might have been" in Northern Ireland reveals that logistical constraints and political context were far more important than ministerial personality or wilfulness. Even after three years of planning and preparation many of the limitations experienced in May 1974 could not be overcome in 1977.

STUART C. AVEYARD

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¹⁴⁰ Mason to Callaghan, 17 May 1977 (T.N.A., PREM 16/1344).

¹⁴¹ Kerr, *Imposing power-sharing*, p. 69.