

JONATHAN NEALE

MEMOIRS OF A CALLOUS PICKET

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STRIKE ALL NHS STAFF STRIKE

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The hospital workers' pay struggle in 1982 drew widespread support from the trade union movement as a whole. But it was merely the tip of deep-seated industrial relations problems within the NHS.

Jonathan Neale offers a wry and entertaining shop steward's eye-view of hospital politics in Britain.

- He looks at the working lives of hospital workers from surgeons to domestics.
- He considers the daily workings of hospital unions.
- He reviews their history over the last ten years, a story of determined and unrewarded militancy.
- He identifies the reasons for both their weakness and their persistence.

Jonathan Neale describes himself as a competent anthropologist, carpenter and abortion counsellor. Over the last eight years he has worked as a porter in a teaching hospital and woodwork instructor in a geriatric hospital. He has held various offices in NUPE.



4. The battle of 1982

The 1982 pay dispute wasn't engineered by the TUC. It was thrust upon them by the government and by their members. Now all hospital workers had the same settlement date for their national pay awards: 1 April. We have seen that this was the result of a government tactic to split the hospital ancillaries off from the council manual workers. But in 1982 it wasn't the council workers who were feeling militant. It was the nurses. The hospital ancillaries had just come through the 'winter of discontent'. Few wished to repeat the experience immediately. The nurses, by contrast, had taken no action since 1974. That year they had won up to 50 per cent increases by demonstrations alone. Many nurses thought of the strike weapon as some sort of bolt from the skies. Because it seemed to them such an extreme step, they thought it would have extreme consequences. The ancillaries weren't so sure.

In the period before the pay negotiations there was little feeling among ancillaries. There was almost no propaganda by the unions or the left. But the nurses read a flood of propaganda from other sources. The Royal College of Nursing mounted a campaign of stickers, posters and demonstrations. They reminded the government that Mrs Thatcher had promised a special deal for the nurses. The nursing press ran large features on how miserable nurses' pay was. Something ought to be done about it, they said. It wasn't exactly clear what. But all over the wards stickers began to appear saying 'nurses deserve a living wage'. It all created a feeling that something would be done.

Then came the offer. It was a straight 6 per cent for nurses and 4 per cent for ancillaries. The government hoped to split the

nurses off. Only the nurses showed any sign of activity. The RCN might accept any deal, no matter how bad, as long as it offered them more than other ranks.

But the offer was just too low. The cost of living had gone up 12 per cent in the last year. Most other workers got more: many private sector workers, miners, gas workers, council workers, judges and the police. Civil servants and hospital workers got the bottom offers.

The civil servants had just a long-drawn-out dispute the year before. They weren't likely to offer any resistance. The government thought the hospitals wouldn't fight either. But they weren't unhappy about taking on the hospital workers. The government figured they were badly organised and badly led. They figured the TUC would huff and puff – and call one-day strikes. Nothing they couldn't handle. They also counted on public support in any confrontation with the hospitals. After all, most of the people they knew and all the papers had strongly disapproved of the 'winter of discontent'.

The union leaders didn't know what to do. The nurses expected more. It was impossible just to swallow the offer. So the TUC set up an alliance of all their hospital unions. This alliance called mass meetings of all unions in every hospital. These mass meetings were to consider the offer and what to do about it.

At my hospital, we usually had thirty people for NUPE meetings. Now we had a hundred from every section of the hospital. There were twenty nurses and even one doctor. This alone gave us a feeling of unity and greater strength than we'd ever had before. We disposed of the offer easily. No. Then we got stuck on what action to take. Some people talked of demonstrations or picket lines, some talked of one-day strikes. One porter proposed bringing down the government. He got into an argument with the other porters over the Falklands. One of the cleaners said the nurses would never strike. A nurse yelled 'Why not?' A male nurse shouted 'Dedication doesn't pay my rent.' The feeling was chaotically good. In the end we agreed to take whatever action the TUC advised.

This was the general pattern. NUPE said something like 99 per cent of its branches rejected the offer. But it wasn't very clear to

anybody what rejection meant. It was almost a decision without responsibility. There was a long tradition in NUPE of rejecting all offers at mass meetings and then waiting for the leadership to accept them. In the miners' union a rejection of the employer's final offer is also a decision for a national strike. That's why the miners have only rejected the offer four times in this century, and each time they've meant it. By contrast, nobody was certain whether to take the hospitals seriously.

But the TUC leaders clearly had to do something. They followed form and called a one-day strike. It was a rousing success. At our hospital, NUPE and COHSE voted to come out, NALGO to stay in. On the day, the stewards turned up on the picket line not knowing what to expect. A few nurses had said at meetings that they would strike. The stewards weren't sure if they'd actually deliver. By eight, no ancillaries had crossed the picket line. And something like a quarter of the nurses had stayed out, too.

With any other section of workers, that would have been total defeat. For nurses in a London hospital, it was very good. The nurses were buoyant on the picket line. One of them had been on strike once before in another hospital. One had been a shop steward in a factory before becoming a nursing auxiliary. The rest were on strike for the first time in their lives.

It took a lot to get them out the door. The first five nurses to show up announced that they didn't care if they lost their jobs. They were so fed up with the conditions in there – if management wanted to fire them, they fucking well could. They were going to stand on the picket line all day, and nobody was going past them.

We began asking passers-by to sign a petition. To our amazement, everybody did. We got together signs asking anybody who supported us to honk their horns. It was a busy road. Many did. We got ourselves a megaphone and stood out in the middle of the road asking people to honk their horns. It got noisy. The nurses hectored drivers who forgot, using the names on their trucks. 'Hey, Hovis, give us a toot.' A passing driver shouted, 'Go back to work.' Traffic was slow and his car window was open. A nurse leaned in through the window and put the megaphone against his ear and let him have it. 'One of these days you're going to be sick, mate, and you're going to need us. And when you do I'll remem-

ber, mate. I'll know your face and you'll die.' The lights changed, and the driver fled.

A policeman came along on the other side of the road. He crossed towards us. The two revolutionaries on the picket line shrank back against the wall, figuring the party was over. One of the nurses walked straight across and met him in the middle of the road. She smiled flirtatiously up into his face from a distance of six inches.

'I'm afraid I have to escort you away from here, constable,' she said, with a friendly laugh. 'If you come across and start to harass those people, I'm going to have to assault you. And we don't want that, do we?'

The policeman didn't really have time to decide if he was going to slug a pretty nurse in uniform in the middle of a busy road. She took him by the arm and led him away down the middle of the road. She shouted at each driver to honk his horn. The policeman waved foolishly at them with his free arm. The police didn't return that day.

The one-day strike was a success. The union leaders found participation all over the country far more solid than they had expected. On the other hand, the one-day strike did nothing to move the government. So the TUC had to find something else to do. In the jargon, they had to 'step up the action'. They decided on more strikes and a campaign to reduce the NHS to accident and emergency cover.

They called two one-day strikes: the first on a Friday and the next on the following Tuesday. This was a masterstroke. It was more militant than a one-day strike. It was twice as much striking. It had exactly the same effect on the government as a one-day strike. (Two times nothing equals nothing.) It lost the members twice as much money. (Two times ten quid is twenty quid.) The TUC was able to step up the action without actually achieving anything other than exhausting the troops.

The TUC also looked round for other weapons. Many hospitals were already threatening the management with sectional strikes unless they reduced admissions. The TUC backed this. The idea was to bring pressure to bear on the government. But of course Thatcher of the Falklands wouldn't mind if the whole NHS

closed down. The only thing that worried her was support from other workers.

At first, very few hospital workers could see how to build this support. The few members of the revolutionary left, particularly the SWP, had spent years taking groups of striking workers around workplaces to meet the stewards and ask for support. The people with experience in fighting hospital hospital closures had been round the local workplaces too and knew the stewards. So these few people started organising delegations to local workplaces. It was second nature, and in our dreams we hoped for support strikes. In our waking moments we hoped for a collection and a chance to address a union meeting. A hospital worker could get up and be cheered. She'd feel great and that would stiffen the strike.

That's how it worked out at first in our hospital. In Sheffield, it was different. The day of the first strike the local SWP cajoled ten hospital workers into cars, mainly nurses and occupational therapists. They took them on a tour of the local pits. To everybody's amazement, four of those pits were on strike by lunchtime. By the next day, hospital militants all over the country knew it was possible. Of course, the Yorkshire miners were special. Of course, it wasn't simple working-class solidarity: it was partly because it was nurses who'd made the call. But the barrier had been broken. We knew we could get solidarity strikes. With that, we knew we could win. An all-out strike would enable us to send out flying pickets. We could bring out the mines. With the mines and the hospitals out, we could capture the imagination of the working class and walk all over Thatcher. Suddenly, there was mad joy and hope.

So we came out for the two one-day strikes. Not everywhere, certainly. Many places picked one of the days and worked the other. They felt the impact would be the same. But the strikes were solid and the feeling was good. In the middle of these strikes came the union conferences.

It was the first time in history that the NUPE and COHSE leadership had to face a rank-and-file body of any authority during a dispute. Again, nobody knew what would happen. NUPE met first. On the opening day there was an emergency

resolution from Sheffield calling for an all-out strike. It was carried overwhelmingly, with just a few abstentions. That evening the militants were drunk with delight.

The NUPE leadership were visibly shaken. They were almost at a loss for words in the TV interviews as they left the conference. By that evening, they had figured out a line. The NUPE conference had voted for an all-out strike, but that didn't mean there was going to be one. This was a joint effort by all the unions and NUPE couldn't strike out on their own. Our great strength this time was that we were acting together. We had no intention of dissipating that. The conference decision meant that NUPE would argue in TUC meetings for an all-out strike. And just as soon as they converted Geoffrey Drain of NALGO to the general strike, we would have one.

It was the old 'NUPE trick' with a vengeance. Every activist felt they had to tie the leadership down. On the second day of the conference, the Stockport delegate stood up. He moved the suspension of standing orders so they could set a date for the strike to begin. Standing orders were suspended. There was quiet. Nobody stood up to name the day.

Why? Because Bill, the delegate, had been on the phone home to Sheila, early in the morning before the session began. Sheila was the branch chair, holding things together back at the hospital. He told her about the exciting decision. Sheila reminded him of some things. 'Bill, I don't think our members are going to do it. They haven't voted for it. We're low paid and we live week to week. They keep saying to me that if they go out for two weeks they'll go under. And how are we going to strike here if COHSE walk across our picket lines? Remember, we got them out last time by saying that at long last we were all together this time.'

Bill held the phone and didn't know what to say to Sheila. When it came to naming the date, he quite properly sat on his hands. The other delegates were in the same position. The NUPE conference decision for an all-out strike was now just a demand on the TUC.

The COHSE conference followed two weeks later. Albert Spanswick, the general secretary, spoke passionately against an all-out strike. Some at the conference agreed with him. Some

just felt their members weren't ready for an all-out strike yet. The strike motion failed. But the union conference gave the leadership no authority to settle. So what to do next?

Incredibly, a three-day strike. The arithmetic was as before. Three times nothing is nothing. Three times £10 lost is £30 lost. A lot of places came out for all three days. Some picked two. Some picked one. The feeling was beginning to drain on many picket lines. On the other hand, quite a lot of hospitals which had so far done nothing were galvanised into action. They were enthusiastic.

The real killer in the three-day strike was what it did to the prospects of building outside support. We were madly running around the docks, the print, the mines, the steel and the shipyards. They were big workplaces with strong traditions. People would sit up if they came out.

It wasn't easy to walk into the docks or the mines and ask for support for a three-day strike. They looked at you with the friendly pity of wise old men. What was the point, they asked, of a three-day strike? What were we playing at? They couldn't argue for their blokes to come out for three days. It was lunatic. Their lads knew it was all or nothing. But tell you what, we'll try for a one-day stoppage. Have you got a demonstration we could take the lads to? No? Well, get one fast.

It was harder to organise the three-day strike than anything we'd organised before. But the 'quality' press suddenly made Health Minister Norman Fowler into a scapegoat. They said he was being unreasonable and should concede. He started calling the TUC in for talks. He conceded another 0.5 per cent almost every day. In the end, we had an extra 1.5 per cent for the nurses and 2 per cent for the ancillaries. It wasn't enough. But the stewards could point to the members: the strikes do work, we're moving them.

The government wasn't moving just because the hospital workers were striking. It looked like the railways were coming out for themselves. The NUR executive had instructed its members to come out over the national pay offer on the railways. They had also instructed their members on the London Underground to come out, and there was talk of the buses coming out too. The capital would be crippled. Everybody notices a transport

strike. If it was going on at the same time as a hospital strike, there would be movement in the air. People would start to feel their power. Other workers might come out, too. The government tried to buy off the hospital workers. They didn't try hard enough. The union negotiators rejected the offer.

The rail strike promptly collapsed. The executive had called a strike without balloting the membership. They didn't want to strike. The NUR conference called the strike off on its first day.

Two days later, the government told the train drivers' union (ASLEF) that they would have to give up their eight-hour day for 'flexible rostering'. They were forced out on strike. Management threatened to sack all of them unless they gave in. The TUC withdrew their support and told ASLEF to throw in the towel. ASLEF threw it in. The settlement negotiated by the TUC was a total defeat.

The effect on hospital workers was unfortunate. The government could now sit back and deal with them at its leisure. The militants in the hospitals had been arguing that the only way to win was an all-out strike. Like the railways, we said, and everybody cheered. That looked a bit sick now.

The most demoralising effect was what it showed about the TUC. They simply didn't have the bottle to stand up to the government. Many in the labour movement told themselves that the railway dispute was very complicated and there were all sorts of rivalries between ASLEF and the NUR. In the hospitals, nobody was quite that unrealistic. We were marching into battle behind the TUC. We were inclined to take a very careful look indeed at our generals. We didn't like what we saw.

We waited for what the TUC would do next. We'd had a one-day strike, a two-day strike and a three-day strike. Some jokers said that nothing could be more natural than a four-day strike. Nobody quite believed the TUC would be that thick. The TUC opted for a five-day strike.

Some places did indeed come out for all five days. Most places, the stewards and the members couldn't face it. They wanted to know what good a five-day strike would be. The TUC said it would help to reduce the NHS to working on an accident and emergency basis. The stewards and the members usually decided

to try to achieve that with sectional strikes.

These had been a success in many areas already. Some hospitals had had sections out for twelve weeks. In most general hospitals quite small sections can bring everything to a grinding halt. Stores, the laundry, the central sterile supplies department and the operating theatre are all crucial. The union collected a levy from all the members in the hospital. This made up the lost wages of the dozen or twenty strikers. Management usually had to agree to reduce the hospital to an accident and emergency basis. In return, the unions agreed to provide emergency cover in the striking section to service those beds.

The stewards recommended sectional strikes because they wanted to keep something going. They also wanted to bring local management to heel – just this once. The members voted for sectional strikes so they didn't have to lose five days' money. Things were definitely winding down.

And there were problems with sectional strikes. Some sections did stay out for ten or twelve weeks. But they all eventually came to an end. For one thing, people got tired of being on picket duty all day. Collecting the levy got harder and harder. The reason it got harder was that nobody could see what good it was doing. It reduced the number of patients. Fine. That didn't seem to bother anybody apart from those on the waiting list. Management was moving to close the empty wards and lay people off.

The sectional strikes tended to isolate hospital workers. After all, you can't go and ask other people to strike in your support if you're not on strike yourself. Unlike a real strike, you just don't have a horde of people to go on flying pickets and talk to other workers. It's also a lot of work keeping a sectional strike together and raising a levy and running a picket line. It demands almost as much from the stewards as a real strike.

Sectional strikes also encourage the idea that union action is somebody else's business. You pay your dues and the men in the laundry or the miners strike for you. You're only a nurse. Nurses can't be expected to act for themselves, can they? They wouldn't know how, would they? Anyway, think of the patients.

The same thing was wrong with the sectional picket lines. Usually, the section and a few stewards would be on picket duty

in front of the hospital. Every morning most of the union members would happily stream past the pickets into work. They weren't on strike, after all. Then the pickets would ask the lorries and the post van and the lift guards not to cross. By and large, they would turn away.

What was happening showed how little most hospital workers understood about what picket lines *mean*. Most workers won't cross one as long as they have a union of their own to fall back on. This isn't out of some generalised feeling of solidarity. It's because the people on that picket line are losing money day by day. They're not eating right, their families are hurting, the electricity board is threatening to cut them off. They're fighting for their working lives, and you respect them for it. Crossing that picket line is scabbing. But in the hospitals everybody was crossing. Other workers were being asked to respect the line by people who, in many cases, weren't really hurting.

And, of course, the sectional strikes did nothing to win the dispute. Most stewards running sectional strikes were only too well aware of that. They were just trying to keep something going inside the hospital while they figured out how to move the TUC.

The basic problem was this. Nothing less than an all-out strike was going to win. The TUC was running things. The TUC wasn't going to call an all-out strike. They were just going to keep calling token strikes till you were exhausted.

Nobody had an alternative to the TUC. There was no rank-and-file network in the hospitals that could move independently of the TUC. Remember that most cities and districts didn't have a joint shop stewards' committee. Many of the ones that did exist were largely talking shops. After four months of the dispute, many cities still only had strike committees of activists, not real stewards' committees. On a national level, there was nothing with enough standing to challenge the TUC control.

On a local level, there had been valiant efforts to start an all-out strike. In the wake of the NUPE conference decision there had been all-out strikes in Rotherham and in two Edinburgh hospitals. But in both cases the movements had been too small. The workers couldn't spread the action to other hospitals or other industries. They went back to work.

So the hospital workers waited to see that the TUC would do. Demoralisation crept up as the weeks wore on. The stewards and activists were done in. Many of them had gone sick: their bodies were telling them to slow down. Then a funny thing happened. The TUC conference in September was all about militant support for the hospital workers.

The General Council had considerable problems going into the conference. They had a lot of explaining to do. They had to sell the delegates their support for the Labour right and the attack on Militant. They also had to justify their own craven behaviour in the train drivers' dispute. Not easy. What they did, in effect, was to change the subject. Speaker after speaker advanced to the rostrum. Each delivered ringing words about how the whole labour movement must pull together against Thatcher by supporting the hospital workers. The emphasis on duty and fighting the Tories disposed of those who might quibble about what was happening in the Labour Party. In the conference corridors there were whispers about ASLEF. There had been all that rivalry between Ray Buckton and Sid Weighell, and the whole thing had been very complicated. Best not to rake up that old stuff, really. Because now the hospital workers need all our support and we really mean it this time . . .

Exactly what our leaders really meant was not 100 per cent clear. It was clear enough they didn't mean an all-out strike in the hospitals, with support from other unions. Possibly Bickerstaffe of NUPE and Spanswick of COHSE still thought that something less stood a chance. It's not possible that David Basnett, of the GMBATU, or Moss Evans, of the TGWU, thought that one-day strikes would win. They were both men with too much experience within the strong sections of the labour movement. Nor is it likely that Arthur Scargill thought the one-day strikes would win.

The TUC wanted to win the dispute. But not if it meant really taking on the government. That much was clear. Little else was. There was a one-day strike already fixed for 22 September. The obvious move was to support this. Despite the speeches, few union executives actually instructed their members to strike on that day. Instead, they recommended, or encouraged, them to participate in a day of action – whatever that meant.

In truth, the union leaders weren't at all sure their members would follow a strike call. They often didn't take their own rhetoric seriously. But one group of people did take them at their word.

The TUC conference is shown on television every afternoon. Highlights are shown in the evening. Among the few people who watch it are the leading activists on the shop floor. They themselves treasure a secret ambition to be a TUC delegate one year. They take its proceedings seriously. Though they have considerable reservations, they do tend to believe what their leaders say. They saw their general secretary call for support for the hospital workers. They decided it was their duty to start organising that support.

There had certainly been support from other workers already. But most of the organising had been done by hospital workers and revolutionaries. It was they who went around visiting workplaces, got hospital workers invited to speak, and so on. Now, stewards from all over were deluging the hospitals with phone calls asking for speakers. They were arguing endlessly with their members in bus garages and offices.

The hospital workers caught the imagination of the working class. There were several reasons for this. First, they were the angels of mercy. Every time a steward asked for a speaker, he said please could at least one speaker be a nurse. He was a little embarrassed about it. He explained that he knew all hospital workers were in it together. But his members went on about the nurses. They were a little backward, really, and didn't realise it was a class thing. But could they have a nurse?

The propaganda had backfired. If the angels of mercy were that badly paid, then other workers had to help them. They couldn't win on their own without endangering patients' lives. There was something here of chivalry. Nobody actually said anything, but we were terribly tempted to send pretty young nurses to do the speaking. The *Yorkshire Miner* replaced its nude pin-up of the month with a picture of a fully clothed nurse on the picket line. There was also something of gratitude. It turned out that the ads were right. People do remember nurses.

There was something more going on as well: a stirring of class feeling. You could see it when you spoke at mass meetings. The

meeting would begin with a speech by a couple of hospital workers about why we wanted support. Then the stewards and convenor would come in with why they should strike. 'It isn't just them,' they said, 'Look what's happening to us.' The stewards on the bins talked about privatisation. The dockers talked about redundancies. On the post, they talked about second deliveries and changes in rosters and shifts. In each case, they were talking about looming attacks. In each case, the workers didn't see how they could fight back.

One building site was typical. Ken Livingstone's GLC was wrapping up its direct labour force and replacing those workers with contractors. The work on that particular site was coming to an end. The lads were all taking their redundancy. For middle-aged men in a collapsing construction industry, that was a one-way ticket to misery and the dole. The convenor tried to interest the lads in a one-day strike against the GLC. Why bother, said the lads. You can't win. Yet at the same time, the lads started pushing the convenor to get a nurse down to speak. They were fully prepared to come out for the nurses.

It was the same in a lot of places. It surprised the stewards all right. Suddenly, people who were stuck in apathy and wouldn't fight for themselves were fighting for the hospitals. It seemed contradictory.

The reason they wouldn't fight for themselves was the same reason they would fight for the hospital workers. The slump. For eight years the Callaghan and Thatcher governments had pushed through cuts and redundancies. Most strikes had ended in defeat. There were four million unemployed and more to come. People were overwhelmed. They were being attacked as a class, and yet they were being picked off one by one. It would take a massive fight to beat the government. They couldn't see it happening. They felt hopeless and took the redundancy money. They then felt depressed and helplessly angry.

Along came the hospital workers. This was a national strike, called by the TUC. The isolation was over. It was a change to show how you felt. 'We may not be able to do anything about the mess in this office, but by God we can come out for the hospital workers.'

There were other reasons they came out too. The stewards and convenors at the mass meetings went on about the threat to the NHS and all the hospitals that had closed. The cuts campaigns had seemed almost a waste of time. All that knocking on doors and going on to stewards about the closures and giving them badges and petitions to sign. They hadn't been able to do anything then. But they had remembered. And now they were telling their members about it.

Perhaps the most important reason people came out was that the hospital workers actually had the confidence to ask them. Most workers on strike feel isolated and defensive. We stood up and told them that we were providing emergency cover because it was their mums and dads in that hospital. They'd *have* to strike to support us. We spent our working lives caring for people, with few thanks and little money. We felt the working class owed it to us to support us in our need.

That gave us the confidence to go back and back. At my hospital, we went down to the town hall every time we came out. The first time, we gave the NALGO steward some leaflets. The second time, we talked to three NALGO stewards. The third time, two of them stood with us in their lunch hour. The fourth time, they arranged a mass meeting for us to speak to. The fifth time, ten of them stood on our picket line. The sixth time, they had their own picket line and struck in our support. Their picket line was better than ours.

That was the one-day strike on 22 September. Nationally, it was patchy. Support from the public services was far stronger than from private industry. Spanswick went on television to beg the rail workers not to join in. He said trains were needed to take people to demonstrations. The railways didn't strike. The unions mostly did no more than 'advise' their members to take 'appropriate' action. But the strike showed the power that was there. It was the largest solidarity strike since 1926. A watershed in class consciousness had been crossed. If the TUC pulled itself together, the strength was there to smash the government. Hospital militants had been on the point of despair. On the day, the demonstrations were magnificent. People who had given up allowed themselves to hope. They told themselves the TUC

couldn't sabotage this sort of feeling.

They could. In fact they reached new imaginative heights. First, they called a series of one-day regional strikes. The one-day national strike hadn't moved the government. What would a regional strike do? The strikes happened here one week and there another week. The feeling of shared power was fragmented. A few workplaces did come out in solidarity. Most hospitals hung on grimly. But the writing was on the wall.

Next the TUC called a one-day strike by hospital workers and transport workers. Other workers were told not to strike. And the union leaders had just sold the transport workers down various rivers. The TGWU baggage handlers at Heathrow had gone down to an isolated defeat. The engine drivers had been deserted, the NUR thrashed. London Transport had accepted fare rises and staffing cuts. The dockers had been ready to fight to extend their job-guarantee scheme to the unregistered ports. The TGWU called off the action to keep the blood flowing in the Falklands. Now the TUC had come back to ask these same workers for support. At the same time, they were holding back on any other activity.

The hospital workers reluctantly agreed to come out again. By now, it was hard to find anybody who thought anything less than an all-out strike would win. But they just couldn't bring themselves to cave in. The stewards emphasised it was an official call. There are all these other people striking for us. The least we can do is strike with them. Cuts and privatisation are coming. Any hospital that stays in will be marked down as a soft option.

Our hospital voted to strike. But there were murmurs that some would scab. There was considerable resentment among the ancillaries about the nurses. The press had gone on about the nurses this, the nurses that. The cleaners knew that they had stayed solid for months. Most of the nurses had crossed the picket line time after time. The cleaners felt used.

The heart had gone out of the picket line. In May, twenty enthusiastic nurses had hurrahed on the picket line. In the regional one-day strike in October, two stewards stood on the line alone until ten in the morning.

The transport strike was due to start on Monday. After the last

mass meetings were over, the TUC panicked – on Friday night. Reports from the docks and the stations said many areas weren't coming out. The TUC were afraid their weakness would be exposed. They called off the strike, and exposed their weakness themselves.

That was that. The pay campaign was effectively over. The TUC had little option but to accept the offer. They had to refer it to the members, though.

They said, 'Look, there are two choices. Either we have an all-out strike or we accept what's on offer. No other tactics will change the government.'

Most people had known this for months. There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to victory. So it is said, and we have no reason to doubt it. The TUC were taking it at the ebb, and leading on to defeat. For months they had called one useless one-day strike after another. Not once had they turned round and explained that their tactics weren't going to win it. Not once had the NUPE leadership taken the argument for an all-out strike to the membership. Now, when their members were exhausted and demoralised, they were suddenly going on about all-out strike. It let them off the hook. Look, we didn't sell out. The members just wouldn't fight. Now we saw the true beauty of the one-day strike as a tactic.

My NUPE branch was typical. We had a mass meeting. Thirty-three people came, which was average for our small hospital. Twenty-seven voted to accept the offer. Six voted for an all-out strike. There wasn't much dissension in the meeting. The six didn't really expect an all-out strike. We were registering a protest. The twenty-seven were more bitter towards the TUC than the six. One of the twenty-seven put it well. 'If we'd all come out in June we would have won. The TUC doesn't care, with their mortgages and their cars – they're all right. I tell you straight, I'm voting to accept. I don't think there's any point any longer. But at least we've learned something. That's about all you can say for this year. We've learned something.'