

# 13. Nothing to Lose but Your Pawns

William Harston

*'Totalitarianism in Britain could never work. How could it when nothing else does?'* (Alan Coren). Discuss.

Cambridge University Entrance Examination Question

It was a bright cold day in Hastings and the chess clocks ticked with their tentative limping tin voices. Five minutes earlier the Minister of State for Indoor Sports other than Backgammon had concluded his opening speech to polite applause from the gathering of elderly spectators. They had learned that the minister, though not a chessplayer himself, liked the occasional game of darts, so was fully in tune with the competitive demands of the game. A fully adequate speech by normal standards, but some regretted that they had been unable to secure the services of the Minister for Backgammon herself. Unfortunately she had a prior booking to appear in a charity strip show at Eastbourne.

The onlookers settled as best they could into the uncomfortable wooden chairs. Some lurched into conversations with old acquaintances whom they had not seen since the year before, but these were hushed into silence as soon as they began by the stentorian command of the tournament director. None questioned the need for silence, though one or two of the younger members of the audience did allow the thought to cross their minds, in view of the fact that there were no longer any players to disturb. There had been no players now at Hastings since the general strike called by the chessplaying unions five years earlier. But traditions had to be upheld. The opening and closing ceremonies continued and between them the spectators

'THEY'VE ALL GONE TO  
HASTINGS FOR THE  
CHESS STRIKE.'



still attended as absorbed as ever in the historic atmosphere of the event.

Opinions differed as to the reasons which were responsible for bringing about the strike. Some blamed militants within the chessplaying unions. Others traced the malaise back to the reorganization of the British Chess Federation in the late 1970s when they had replaced their cumbersome system of committees by a management board. This step was later to be described as 'provocative' in the inaugural statement which marked the formation of the chessplayers' unions.

Indeed, with the hindsight we now have given to us by historical perspective, it becomes plain that the creation of Management was the trigger which gave impetus to the unionization of chessplayers. Though there had been rumblings for many years among members of the chess labour movement there was no concerted activity until that time. Then apparently spontaneous mass meetings suddenly took place throughout the country. Those who earned their livings or reputations at the game loudly declared solidarity with one another against the dictatorship and exploitation of Management. Not that the British Chess Federation had actually taken any unpopular decisions, or indeed any decisions at all, but solidarity was clearly the right thing to declare at the time.

Men experienced in union matters were quick to come forward with advice. So, using the models of other well-organized working groups, the chessplayers, or chesspiece operatives as they were known, formed themselves into five distinct unions to represent the various skilled and unskilled sectors of the trade.

Initial omens were quite encouraging for the prospects of the newly unionized players. There was a small dispute early on, when the Polity for Precision Pawn Pushing Personnel were unable to reach agreement on differentials with the more prestigious Movers Union (Major Pieces). The introduction of legislation forbidding discrimination in pay between piecework and pawn pay led to industrial action by MUMPs members. We can all remember the famous Hastings that year when only pawns were moved. The hasty government action

on that occasion aroused such hostility that the pawn movers of PFFFF quickly came out in sympathy. The joint strike led to the formation of strong bonds between the unions. In a historic announcement, they finally agreed to amalgamate in a spirit of consensus in order to minimize relative deprivation and continue together the struggle to optimize parameters of remuneration.

With the abolition of demarcation lines, all restrictive practices were terminated and members of both unions were allowed to move any pieces they wished. The new rationalized structure incorporated all piece or pawn movers. It called itself the Federated Union of Chess Move Executants. Naturally the members of FUCME were very pleased to have ended their inter-role conflict, but their newly found solidarity and strength led to an increased militancy and did little to smooth the strained relationships with the other chess unions.

The semi-skilled members of FUCME, of course, had only to move the pieces. The skilled labour of deciding where they should be moved was the domain of the more highly paid Confederation of Chess Analysts, Thinkers and Theorists, the white-collar (or more often grey tee-shirt) members of the Association of Chess Horological Operatives, known commonly as MACHOMen, or more pejoratively as the clock-bashers. Thus the CCATT man would decide what move was to be played and duly inform the FUCME representative of his decision. On completion of the task, the FUCME representative alerts his colleague from MACHO, who, with due ceremony, bashes the clock. Finally the move is transcribed onto the score-sheet by the man from SCRIPT, the Society of Chess Record Inscribers, Printers and Tabulators.

Despite some initial hostility from Management, these working practices functioned well and created a great deal of employment. The Government's job-creation programme declared itself very pleased with the new system. Chessboards did, however, tend to become a little crowded, but this seemed a small price to pay for peace. Even when the semi-skilled and unskilled unions came to re-negotiate manning levels, Management conceded their demands with good grace. After all, it

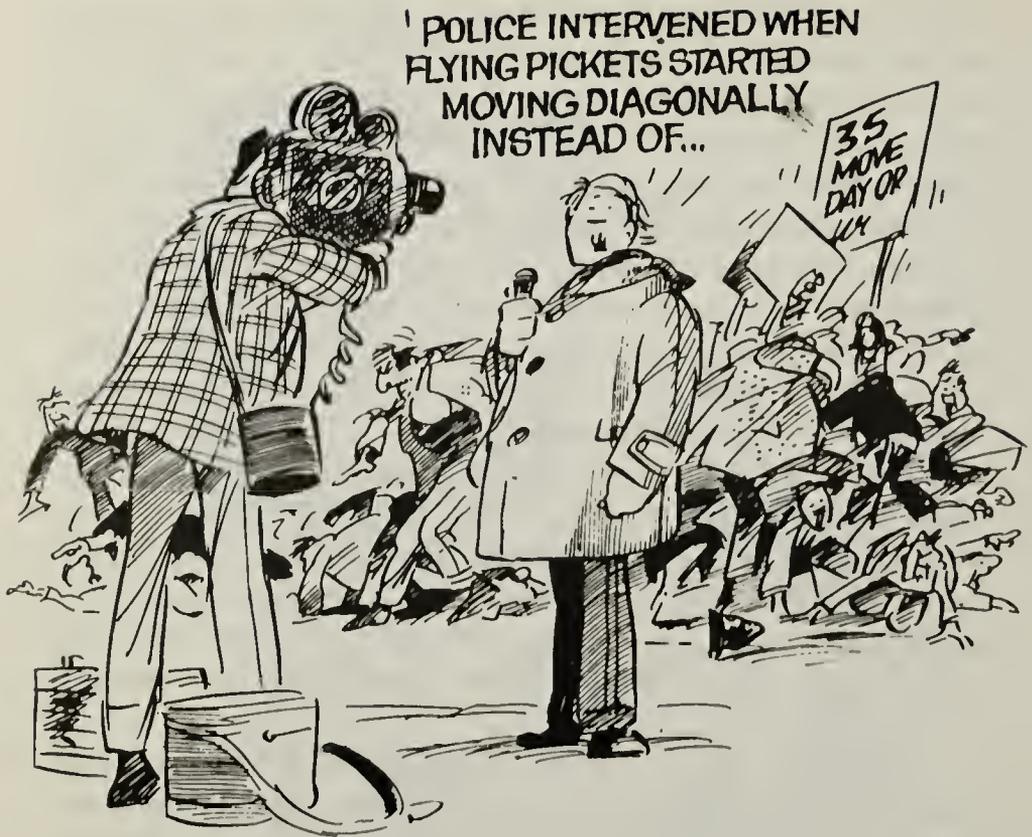


was unreasonable in the present climate, to expect a single man to operate the pieces, or press the clock, or even write the moves for both sides in a game. Having separate union men for each player was a sensible rationalization concomitant with production capacity, as a joint union spokesman put it. The agreement was finalized at a manning level of eight workers to each board.

The great dispute began one year during the British Championship. The Management Disciplinary Committee had been convened to hear a protest following one of the first round games. The loser had complained that no CCATT member was present on the other side. Since the new manning levels had only recently been agreed, and transitional seating regulations were still in force at the board, he had not realized, what with so many people coming and going, that the opposition had only consisted of three union men. Investigations after the game had confirmed that the FUCME operative had been making moves in the absence of instructions from any member of CCATT.

The Disciplinary Committee summoned the accused side, who admitted that there had indeed been no analyst, thinker or theorist prescribing the actions of their FUCME man. Accordingly, the Disciplinary Committee considered that they had no alternative but to expel the offenders from the tournament. After consulting their lawyers, however, and with the full support of the FUCME union, their man sued the Management for wrongful dismissal.

The case made legal history and dragged on for months. The reason for dismissal seemed simple enough: that the FUCME representative had contravened his terms of employment by indulging in a work practice specifically excluded from his contractual obligations – viz: thinking. His defence, however, was equally uncomplicated: that he had played the moves without thinking. Expert witnesses were called by both sides to establish whether one could win a chess game without recourse to processes of thought, theory or analysis. Statisticians proved that it was unlikely; psychologists maintained that it was unthinkable, but the crucial evidence was on the side of the dismissed man. When the judges came to examine



exhibits demonstrating just how horribly chess can be played when the participants do think about the moves, they found themselves unable to exclude the possibility that one might conceivably do better without thinking at all. The dismissed man was reinstated and awarded compensation. Costs were awarded against Management.

The judgement had immediate and far-reaching repercussions. The skilled CCATT union had been dealt a heavy blow. FUCME submitted a claim for large wage rises, claiming an immediate establishment of parity with the CCATT members. The courts had established that their job was more important than thinking; the thinkers, theoreticians and analysts had lost credibility. MACHO and SCRIPT also demanded large rises, to preserve differentials, they said. Management suggested talks, and were accused of complete intransigence, pursuing a repressive and divisive path to social disruption and

economic collapse, and a lack of commitment inconsistent with right-minded awareness.

'We will not talk,' said a joint spokesman for the unskilled unions, 'until there is money on the chess table. We demand across the board increases.'

The Management Board of the Federation reacted cautiously, suggesting that any increases could only be linked to local productivity schemes. More money could only be forthcoming if it meant more moves. Union officials were furious. 'We are furious,' they exclaimed. 'Management seems hell-bent on a collision course.' In a statement, they issued new demands for a 35-move day, with overtime for adjournment sessions.

CCATT men were also angered by talk of increased productivity. More moves by FUCME members would necessarily demand more thinking by their own members. Despite the earlier court ruling it was still generally accepted as a traditional trade practice that pieces could not be moved without the consent of a CCATT member. All that was under dispute was the value in financial terms of the thought, analysis or theory which he could provide. The threat to the work quota of CCATT members immediately caused them to down pieces and join the strike call for a 35-move day.

Long periods of negotiation followed, but all have been totally fruitless. Relationships between management and unions became still more strained when an independent time-and-motion study was published claiming that streamlining the industrial practices could result in greater move productivity for less thought. The unions did their own calculations and concluded that British thought was the most productive in the world, in real terms.

So the strike went on. Pickets from all the unions appeared at the doors of all major chess events in the country, attempting to prevent the delivery of chess sets, boards and clocks and to dissuade non-union labour from operating chessmen. 'We shall bring the Federation to its knees,' said a spokesman. 'Chess life is already at a complete standstill. We are at this moment in time in a negative chess situation.'

And so it has been for the past three years. Since the ban on imports of foreign players, there has been no chess played in the land. Latest moves indicate a slim hope that all sides will agree to send the dispute for adjudication. There is even a chance that the forthcoming Royal Commission report may contain the seeds for a settlement.

Until then, however, we rely on the ELO computer to bring us round-by-round tournament results. By this means titles continue to be awarded, prizes won and reputations enhanced. Some of the spectators even prefer the new system. After all, as long as the sporting interest is maintained and the glorious traditions still flourish, why bother with the troublesome necessity of taxing one's brains to try to comprehend the moves. The players were, at the best of times, just an expensive luxury; were they ever really necessary? Long live tradition!