

Jack in Dock

A local cause célèbre

Following a period of general industrial unrest, leaders of the Trade Union Congress went to 10, Downing Street on 15 June 1955 to discuss with the Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, and the Minister of Labour, Sir Walter Monckton, the general situation throughout the country. The meeting had been called by the Prime Minister and touched on the settlement of the railway strike and the continued stoppage in various dock systems. It would be followed by similar talks between the Ministers and representatives of the British Employers' Confederation.

On the same day a number of members of the crew of the liner "Queen Mary", estimated at between 100 and 300, attended a meeting of seamen on strike at Southampton at which a resolution of support for strikers at Liverpool was passed. It was uncertain whether the liner would sail at her scheduled time the following morning.

The situation concerning seamen had been fermenting for some days: on 4 June 1955, an unofficial strike started on board the Cunard liner "Mauretania" at Southampton and, on 8 June at a meeting on board the ship in the first class restaurant, 1150 seamen from the deck, engine and catering departments of the 83,000 ton liner "Queen Elizabeth" assured Mr Tom Yates, General Secretary, National Union of Seamen, that they would not join the unofficial strike of seamen at Southampton and Liverpool, and would sail the ship the next day. The "Queen Elizabeth", the key ship in the strike, duly sailed for New York. By coincidence, at about this time her Master, Captain Ivan Thompson, Commodore Master of the Cunard fleet, was knighted, Prince Philip reached the advanced age of 34 and, less happily, Ruth Ellis was sentenced to death.

On 11 June the "Mauretania" men voted to continue the strike at Southampton, and a member of their unofficial strike committee said that the recent sailing from Southampton of the "Queen Elizabeth" was a "severe psychological blow" to their morale. Earlier in the day passengers came ashore from the liner "Saxonia", whose sailing from Liverpool was cancelled after last minute efforts had been made to get the ship to sea. Alternative transport had been arranged for 80 per cent of the "Saxonia's" 930 passengers. The sailing of another liner from Liverpool had been postponed because of the strike of seamen at that port. This was the Furness-Withy vessel "Nova Scotia" with 140 passengers for Canada and the USA. The Canadian Pacific liner "Empress of Scotland" berthed at Liverpool with 362 passengers. In the holds were nearly 3000 tons of cargo, including grain which had been across the Atlantic three times because the tug strike at Liverpool in May prevented it from being unloaded.

On 14 June the Chairman of the Liverpool strike committee disclosed to a meeting of 500 men at that port that the delegates from seamen on strike at Liverpool were going to Southampton in an effort to spread the dispute to the liner "Queen Mary". Members of the crew of the "Queen Mary" were among those who attended a meeting in Queen's Park arranged by strikers already on strike from a number of liners in the port and, when a member of the crew asked for "a show of "Queen Mary" men who will strike now", about 150 hands were raised. There were 1,267 crew in the "Queen Mary". They joined the "Mauretania" men in demanding shorter working hours and improved living conditions. A first class waiter in the "Queen Mary" told the meeting "Now is the time to strike. Hit them hard. I am in favour of 100 per cent strike now".

At a further Queen's Park meeting on 15 June about 200 men, mainly catering staff from the "Queen Mary" voted in favour of supporting strikers in Liverpool although apparently assurances had been given to Captain Donald Sorrell, the Master, in New York, that the crew would not walk off the ship. The strike committee in Southampton however said the assurance came from men chosen by the Chief Steward and not elected by the rank and file. The would be strikers were urged to go on board, collect their gear and reassemble in the park.

On 16 June the "Queen Mary" was strike-bound at Southampton and could not leave the port for New York. About 150 crew, including some from the deck and engine room left the ship. They said they had walked off as a protest because 130 crew members brought by coach from the "Saxonia" at Liverpool had been put on board during the night and they regarded this as introducing scab labour.

The following day, the unofficial strikers at Southampton agreed to send a letter to the Minister of Labour, asking him to arbitrate for them. A similar letter would be going from Liverpool strikers.

On 18 June 1955 summonses were issued against 49 men of the deck department in the "Queen Mary", returnable on 28 June, by Southampton magistrates on information laid by Captain Donald Sorrell, described as of the Cunard Company, Canute Road, Southampton, who was of course in command of the liner.

Issued under Section 225(1) (b) of the Merchant Shipping Act 1894 the summonses alleged “Being a seaman lawfully engaged did wilfully dispute a lawful; command on board s.s.”Queen Mary” on 16 June”. The same day Cunard’s Counsel applied in chambers to a Judge of the High Court for interim injunctions against five of the strike committee. This application was granted. The strikers were told about the serving of the writs, and of the summonses by detectives on board the ship, at their meeting in Queen’s Park.

The seamen however promptly elected a new strike committee Chairman and voted to go on with the strike, planning to picket the gates of the New Docks for the arrival of the “Queen Elizabeth” at Southampton.

The Trial

On the day set for the trial I was enjoying an extended period of leisure optimistically called studying for Master. This meant I had chartered a desk at Warsash on a purely part- time basis, an admirable arrangement permitting ample time to pursue any other interests, all easily justified provided these could be shown to be the slightest maritime connection such as discussing Shipmasters’ business in the “Rising Sun”. Clearly, a trial of this nature would be too much to miss.

The dock in the Magistrates Court could not of course accommodate 49 men and so they were lined up in any convenient spaces, the Court and public gallery being somewhat crowded. I was fortunate not to get 14 days for nothing, as the defendants looked not particularly villainous but just like most of the people I had sailed with during the previous 10 years. Fortythree men pleaded guilty, sentences being postponed while the other cases were tried. The bench was presided over by Mrs Thornycroft Donaldson, sitting with five other JPs.

A charismatic London barrister, Mr Victor Durand, later Victor Durand Q.C., prosecuted for the Cunard Company, instructed by J. Gifford Gordon, a partner in the firm of Hill, Dickinson and Co., the company’s solicitors, of London and Liverpool.

Mr F.L.Cox represented one seaman, Counsel Mr Michael King, later Judge King D.S.C. Q.C. another, the remainder were represented by a local solicitor, Mr J.B.S.Attlee.

After evidence that the “Queen Mary” was a British ship and that the crew were “signed-on”, the trial proceeded. Captain Sorrell said he ordered the men to “single up”, interpreted for the benefit of the magistrates by Mr Durand as “a maritime term to diminish the number of lines between the ship and the shore”. The men refused to obey the order. By lunch time all the seamen had been found guilty and all 49 were ordered to return at 2pm for sentencing.

During the lunch adjournment the men made a bee-line for a public house, now gone, called the “Lord Louis”, to consider their fate and sink their sorrows. They had heard Mr Durand say that seamen found guilty of disobeying a lawful command were liable to imprisonment not exceeding four weeks. I heard one citizen of Liverpool say to his mate “See you in Winchester tonight, Wack”. There was also concern that some striking seamen on board the “Scythia”, another Cunard vessel, who were 26 or under, had been notified that they were liable for call-up for National Service.

On their return to Court a number of pleas in mitigation were heard. Many of the men had excellent records with years of service in Cunard and, often, in the “Queen Mary”. No doubt this was considered by the Court which was able to impose on each seaman a conditional discharge with payment of £3 costs.

The “Queen Mary” sailed, for Cherbourg and New York, on 30 June 1955 with 1089 passengers, a further 830 embarked at Cherbourg, but without the men who had been on strike. Apparently they were replaced, as were the majority of the other crew members who took part in the unofficial seamens’ strike.

Our Clubroom overlooks the now tranquil Queen’s Park and many members will recall the union meetings of dockers and seamen. Now, sadly perhaps, they seem all to have vanished.

O tempora, o mores

Hamish Roberts