

BLOW OUT

a voice for the offshore worker

50p - Minimum Donation

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ODYSSEY - HOW MUCH LONGER?

By
Garry Forbes

Timothy Williams died alone on the Ocean Odyssey as it burned. Fellow radio operators on nearby rigs, heard his cries for help. They were powerless. Moments earlier seven men had jumped from the deck into the sea as an explosion tore the shaker house apart and clouds of gas ignited. The rest of the 70 man crew descended in a covered lifeboat. They struggled to release the boat from the rig as gas erupted from the surface of the sea and burst into flames.

This disaster killed one man and left others seeking psychiatric help. It generated fear throughout the North Sea. Now as we approach September 22nd, the anniversary of Timothy Williams' death, another fear is spreading throughout the industry. The fear that a cover up is under way.

Speculation about a cover up is inevitable. And the responsibility for this lies with the authorities. A year later and there's still no public enquiry. Both the Grampian Police and the Department of Energy have submitted reports to the Procurator Fiscal in Aberdeen. But all he is prepared to say is that, "We are continuing with our enquiries, which are being pursued." A spokesman for the Crown Office in Edinburgh could offer no advice as to when any fatal accident enquiry might take place. But he said that the year that had elapsed since the death was "not unprecedented".

Anxiety about the Ocean Odyssey didn't suddenly appear a year after the event. The first fears that the truth of the incident would be buried, emerged only hours after the explosion. Escaping crew members of the Odyssey were evacuated onto the nearby Sedneth 701. As the Sedco crewmen offered their support and help to the shocked survivors, they were told to keep off the subject of the blowout. Meanwhile the survivors were being warned to say nothing to the press who would be waiting for them when they got ashore. This is standard practice offshore. But it was only three months after Piper Alpha, and we were being assured that there would be the fullest enquiry into offshore safety.

On the beach the picture didn't look much better. Television news was transmitting stories that suggested a "shallow gas" blowout. Neither Arco or the Department of Energy made any move to dissuade them, is broadcast talking about a "textbook evacuation". One dead and seven jumped into the sea? So if there are doubts today about how this disaster is being investigated then these doubts have a long pedigree.

Disaster

In the meantime the story is unfolding. On the 4th of November, six weeks after the blowout, the D of E issued a safety notice. The result of the notice was to downgrade a number of sub sea BOP stacks. Those with flexible hoses between upper and lower package were affected. Any previously rated to 15000psi were now to be deemed fit only to operate in areas where maximum pressures expected were to be below 10000psi. The implication was clear. We were being asked to believe that the blowout was a result of equipment failure.

Terry Hamilton from the D of E's Safety Policy Section explained to "Blowout" that these measures flowed from the D of E investigation into Ocean Odyssey. There seems little doubt that they did find damaged hoses. But eye witness accounts of the initial explosion in the shaker room area would tend to point away from hose failure as the cause of the disaster. It seems that only later did gas erupt from the surface of the sea underneath the rig.

In any case the D of E's safety notice didn't inhibit drilling in these high pressure, high temperature areas for long. Ultramar have drilled 29/5b-6 using the "Santa Fe Monarch". She has rigid pipe instead of flexible hose. But Conoco have been allowed to drill the well 15/29b-4 with the "Sonat Rather", and more surprisingly Arco managed to convince the D of E that they should be allowed to use the "Hendry Goodrich", complete with flexible hoses, to drill an observation well at the sight of the Odyssey blowout.

This situation is unacceptable. It's as though Timothy Williams had never died. The only clue we've been given to the cause of the blowout is the suggestion that it had to do with the failure of the hoses. And that's far from convincing. Now 15000psi stacks complete with flexible hoses are acceptable. It looks like it's business as usual. Meanwhile rig crews are none the wiser why the Odyssey went up, and presumably none the safer.

The view that's being presented to the public, is of a North Sea under the microscope of the Piper Alpha enquiry. The reality is of a wall of silence on the Ocean Odyssey. It's this frustration that is throwing up rumours about the Odyssey as the industry tries to make sense of an incident which if not understood could very well be repeated with even greater loss of life. A large question mark hangs over Arco's drilling practices. There have been accusations of excessive gas counts on the rig for days leading up to the incident. Is proceeding without adequate barite stocks on board using "good oil field practices" as the regulations demand? A body of opinion offshore believes that Timothy Williams was ordered back into the radio room from the lifeboat he was already in. That he had no "survival certificate". And even that a senior figure from the rig had been detained at an airport while trying to leave the country soon after the event. We need to know. The official version must be given.

Flippant

Worse even than all of this. The then Energy Secretary Cecil Parkinson spoke out about the incident. He rubbished one trade unionist's fears about the incident. He said, "The procedures were followed and they worked with the sad exception of one man...." That's an amazingly flippant way to refer to the death of Timothy Williams. It would also seem to prejudice the enquiry as his opinion as nominal head of safety on the North Sea at the time must surely carry some weight.

It is not difficult to see why the authorities might be reluctant to have the Ocean Odyssey affair in the news right now. Later this month new legislation will be introduced governing the operation of safety committees offshore. This code of practice is controversial as the protection it offers still falls far short of that enjoyed by onshore workers since the 1977 Safety at Work Act. The Ocean Odyssey is a can of worms. It must put the spotlight on the oil companies, contractors and D of E, the same people who are to be left in almost total control of offshore safety. Revelation of the true story of the Odyssey would perhaps be a severe embarrassment.

Another complication is the ongoing Piper Alpha enquiry. Enough evidence has already emerged to ensure that Occidental can not just walk away unscathed. It's already been suggested that Lord Cullen feels under enough pressure from the attentions of the media. It can be safely assumed that he "hopes" that his findings can be given before the spotlight falls on an incident that could show a major oil company in a very bad light.

On the other hand, we who risk our lives offshore have the right to know what went wrong on the Ocean Odyssey. No steps can be taken to ensure that it doesn't happen again until all the facts are made public. Whether it is an unprecedented delay or

Inside

- N.W. Hutton
- Strike Action
- Doran



WHO IS THIS MAN
AND WHY IS
HE HAPPY?
See page 2...

not, it is out of order. We have just come through the worst period in the 25 year history of oil exploration in the North Sea. Indeed it may well not be over yet. Only an immediate statement explaining the delay and announcing an imminent date for the enquiry to begin can help to stem rumours and restore some of the confidence that this issue has drained from the North Sea.

POSTSCRIPT

At a meeting of the "Society of Petroleum Engineers" held during the recent oil exhibition in Aberdeen an interesting paper was given. Kevin Wann, Arco's senior drilling engineer, who was on the Ocean Odyssey during the blowout gave the paper entitled, "Ocean Odyssey - Case Study of a Blowout". It was a sellout with standing room only in the hall. Unfortunately despite the title Kevin it seems wasn't able to deal with the events that led up to the blowout but concentrated on events after that. The chairman stipulated that anyone could ask any questions of Kevin as long as they confined them to the aftermath too. Glasnost North Sea style!

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FLARE OFF!

Letter from a Semi

ALL THOSE CONCERNED with the publication of "Blowout" are to be applauded for providing a long-awaited medium for the airing of concerns and grievances of those who work offshore. As a worker on a 'semi' and a member of the O.L.L. Ctte, I would like to use the paper to relate the reaction to, and offer some comments on, your articles relating to my sector of the industry.

Being an ODECO employee it was interesting to see two articles concerning us. In particular the article on the "Ocean Odyssey" touched base, as I worked with a number of the evacuees from our ill fated sister rig. The consensus was that the writers point on an enquiry into the operators drilling and well control procedures, hit the nail on the head. The second article raised not a little laughter, especially at the idea of bewildered, press ganged youngsters with untied shoe-laces, being loisted onto unsuspecting 'semis'. Bewildered they may be at first, but no one is forced to go offshore, not physically at any rate. There will always be 'green hands' - we have to ensure that there is adequate training for them before they are put into the offshore working environment.

On my own rig, the "Ocean Alliance", while our pay and conditions leave a lot to be desired, especially in relation to those enjoyed by our colleagues on the rig employed by Atlantic Drilling, we have a good working environment and experienced supervisors. Although only recently in service it's not perfect, but I've worked on many that were a lot worse. Indeed while Cecil Parkinson's recent safety legislation falls short of what many of us would like, the enthusiastic attitude of the rig's management, to the setting up of our safety committee has, in fairness, to be commended.

Having said that, there are many valid points in the articles which apply to more than a few drilling companies. To single out one is misleading. Those of us who have worked the 'semis' for any length of time, have seen, or experienced, intimidation and victimisation. These have been a hallmark of the job for two decades, and not confined to one company or area of the industry.

Let's be honest with ourselves! Trip after trip we return to our 'semis' and spend a fortnight bitching about our pay and conditions, safety, and victimisation etc.; and yet do very little about it. Is it any wonder that the companies sustain conditions that aren't challenged by the workforce? As long as that situation continues there will be no change - it's that simple!

While drawing attention to all the anomalies that pervade the industry in the U.K. sector is commendable, I feel that constructive suggestion on improving the situation should be voiced more often and pursued with the same enthusiasm we use to continually complain about it.

In the recent dispute in the North Sea, construction workers held back on an agreement with the companies because of the lack of provision for catering and drilling personnel on the platforms. An action for which we should all be thankful. If the conditions of these workers are enhanced, then somewhere down the line we on the 'semis' will benefit in some way - however small. And yet we will have done nothing really significant to help ourselves.

The answer is simple - 'Join the appropriate union'. Organise the crew of your rig into the N.U.S. or another suitable union of your choice, and do it with confidence. In the present climate there should be no fear of victimisation or intimidation. If you need confirmation of that, then attend the meetings of the O.L.L. Ctte and savour the atmosphere of the new confidence amongst oil workers. As was said in the "Odyssey" article, "Government and oil companies are finding it more difficult to suppress the news".

The N.U.S. is enjoying an upsurge in membership within the drilling sector with over 500 new members in the last 10 months. Every rig that can secure 60 - 70% membership, even if the company doesn't instantly recognise it, is making a practical statement.

We should support the N.U.S. in pushing for a meeting with the Drilling Contractors' Association, and the implementation of a package for all employees that would guarantee good basic rates, leave pay, travel expenses and other conditions. There is reputed to be an upturn in the exploration side, and even with the complacency that permeates most companies, there must be those in senior management who realise that in order to maintain safe and stable crews, pay and conditions will have to be vastly improved.

• Who is this man... (from page 1)

Yes, the man looking so pleased with himself - the smug smile of knowing that it is a job well done, with pride of place in our illustrious journal is...no, not our editor...but John E. Browne.

And why is he so happy? Well of course he is 'ra big yin at B.P. and he's just sacked about 1,000 workers. Each to his own sense of job satisfaction.

YOUR LETTERS

It must be remembered however that our attention must also be directed to the oil companies. It is they who sat back and allowed the day rates for drilling units to tumble as they watched our employers cut each others throats for contracts during the slump. They operate under licence in other sectors in the North Sea and elsewhere, and accept union agreements which provide the workers with far better conditions than are enjoyed in the U.K. sector. With the upturn, the onus is really on them to accommodate tenders or adjustments, that allow our employers to provide decent wages and conditions.

B.P. Shell, and other operators have stated that they are concerned with maintaining a strong contracting sector, with a workforce that is properly rewarded. They have also admitted that they have a significant influence, through the types of contracts awarded, which in turn affects the way people are paid. It would be more than helpful if they were seen to be doing something practical towards attaining what they purport to desire.

I would suggest that it is high time that all the old complacency and hostilities were set aside and that operators, construction, drilling, catering contractors and the unions sat down and hammered out a long term package on pay, conditions, safety and industrial relations, that would make this industry worth working in again.

In the meantime it is incumbent on all of us to do more than continually complain. Joining the N.U.S. would be a good and effective step.

J. Chambers

North Sea Action

Dear Brothers,

YOU HAVE ACCEPTED THE O.L.L. Ctte's recommendation, not once but twice, to return to normal working, (a recommendation that I fully endorsed), so that in the first instance meaningful negotiations could take place. The result of these negotiations were, no trade union agreement, no trade union recognition and no further negotiations to take place. All these decisions were taken by your company, not by the trade unions. Your company broke off negotiations. They made no commitment to discuss with the oil companies, the improvements to the health and safety legislation which you are seeking.

Your company then imposed a new contract of employment on you, with a cash increase which they believed was sufficient to satisfy you. Your company believes that you are not really concerned about a trade union agreement which would help to safeguard the increase in pay that you forced out of them by your joint actions. Not interested in a trade union agreement which would protect you against intimidation, victimisation and NRBs (not required back - Ed)

The contempt that the offshore contract companies have for you, knows no bounds. But you let them know the contempt you had for them by your stoppages. The companies retaliated with nearly 3000 men downmanned, writs, sackings, threats of a blacklist, and police intervention. The companies know now how serious you are in your demands, serious enough to continue your actions despite these threats.

The second recommendation to return to normal working came about due to the involvement of the conciliation and arbitration service (ACAS). Certain oil companies and contract companies intimated that a possible solution to the dispute was for a secret ballot of all offshore contract employees, for for trade union recognition. ACAS approached the trade unions who agreed to abide by the result of any ballot. Certain trade union officials were aware that the Offshore Contractors Council (OCC) had at a meeting of their members, voted 13 to 2 in favour of a secret ballot. With all these facts the O.L.L. Committee felt that a recommendation to return to normal working was necessary if ACAS were to succeed in helping to resolve matters to your satisfaction.

ACAS approached the OCC companies individually, to discuss their attitude to a secret ballot and found to its great disappointment that the positive response expected was unfounded. All the contract companies rejected any involvement in a ballot. It is believed by many that at a meeting of the OCC and the oil companies, that the oil companies rejected the idea of the OCC and the unions setting up agreements across the North Sea. This rejection would in effect bar all the present OCC companies from tendering for any future contracts.

Once again the oil companies have shown that they, and not the contractors are the people who are denying you the right to trade union recognition, agreements, and a change to the health and safety offshore, which you demand and which the oil companies accept onshore.



What happens now? I believe that the struggle must go on. All workers offshore and on the beach must unite to fight the oil companies. You must speak to fellow workers on the platforms and on the semi-submersibles. All skills and trades must unite. If construction, drilling, catering and maintenance join together you will win this struggle. You must use the coming weeks to reorganise, build platform committees, take out shop stewards credentials, and send delegates to the OIL Ctte. United we stand, divided we fall.
Yours Fraternally
Jim Fleming

Although this letter is a bit dated because of the time it's taken to get out this issue of "Blowout", the editor still felt it raised important issues. It is anyway our policy to print all letters from offshore workers and their families if at all possible.

Sweet-Heart deals

Dear Brothers,

MAY I FIRST congratulate "Blowout" on its efforts to bring to us all the relevant and unabridged reporting which is lacking in the media today. At each offshore meeting I have attended in Glasgow, the press have been criticised for the lack of coverage and inaccuracies on the offshore dispute. I would therefore ask you all to support our paper, "Blowout" both financially and vocally.

As an ex-EEPTU member, (I resigned my membership after the stage-managed walk out at the 1988 TUC conference), it comes as no surprise that they are once again signing sweetheart deals with the employers, (SJB - Ed), without considering the damaging consequences such a betrayal can have on our industry. I repudiate this selfish and irresponsible behaviour and urge you all to adhere to our original demand of an agreement to cover everybody.

The latest climbdown by the contracting employers and multi-national oil companies to accept a ballot can be the breakthrough we are looking for, only by remembering those who have been victimised, and the dedication of the "Liason Committee", can progress be made. The return to normal working to allow orchestration of the ballot must not be construed that our support and effort are no longer required. On the contrary, there is still a lot of participation left for us to work at. It is vital that we attend our offshore meetings while at home, and we should not forget the significance of contacting our Westminster MP and Euro MP, who continually debate in their respective Parliaments, on union and safety legislation.

I would also like to reassure personnel on semi-submersibles, of the advantages in belonging to a trade union for their bargaining power in negotiations within the offshore industry.
Yours Fraternally
Aon (name and address supplied)

Union Support

OUR BRANCH WISH to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your most excellent first edition. This branch, with many members employed offshore, fully support the hard-hitting factual content of your first edition.

Yours Fraternally
Jim Fleming
(Branch Secretary AEU Construction Section
Banff and Buchan Branch)

INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE NORTH SEA LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

BY Frank Doran MP (Aberdeen South), Shadow Spokesman on Oil & Gas

WRITING IN A PAPER for offshore workers, I don't need to go into the background to the recent dispute in the North Sea. What is much more important is the question "What has the dispute achieved?"

Three things. First, of course, an increase in the rate. That was long overdue, but there is still a long way to go to get back the rate of the late 1970s and early 1980s. A long way to go to win proper rates for doing a very dangerous job, and rates which recognise serious skill shortages in the industry.

Secondly, the dispute highlighted the problem of offshore work. After the Piper Alpha tragedy the global spotlight turned onto the North Sea. Newsmen from all over the world converged on Aberdeen. All the oil companies, the contractors, and the government spokespeople were very uncomfortable. They preferred life when the North Sea was an industrial backwater in news terms: when the publicity was controlled by their PR departments, and very few people on the beach took an interest in life for the offshore worker.

The result was that everyone made promises. Many fine speeches were made. But when the news cameras and the journalists left, nothing had really changed for most offshore workers. The old problems of short term contracts, no job security, NRB on the spot, intimidation and unsafe working conditions and practices were all still there.

The dispute showed the frustration of the offshore workforce, and turned the spotlight back onto the North Sea. One of the more interesting aspects of the dispute was the way in which it was handled by the media. OK, I know that not every paper gave it the attention it deserved. But virtually all the coverage it did get was sympathetic.

The oil companies were put on the defensive right away. Although their PR people worked overtime trying to convince everyone that they had nothing to do with the dispute, nobody believed them. What is more, journalists said that they didn't believe them.

The contractors were in an even more desperate position. They were reduced to personal abuse (e.g. Rigblast and others against Yours Truly) and downright dishonesty (like the Wood Group on the ballot for recognition).

The idea that offshore workers are overpaid, underworked and live the life of Riley is gone forever.

The third important gain of the dispute is that it showed the oil companies the strength of the workforce. At the same time, it showed the workforce how strong and effective it can be when united. The importance of this should not be underestimated.

In my job, I have a lot of contact with the oil industry. I must, if I am to do my job properly. It has always been my view that, on issues such as safety, there is no real problem at the senior management level. All of the major operators in the North Sea spend enormous amounts of money on safety and safety programmes. This has increased since Piper Alpha. They do this for two reasons.

First, any shut-down in production costs money, sometimes huge amounts of money. Poor safety is bad for business! Secondly, oil companies worry about their image. One serious incident, like Piper Alpha, or the Exxon Valdez, destroys that, not just for the company involved, but for the whole industry.

The real problem lies with middle and lower management. Generally, they are under pressure to achieve targets. To be promoted, they have to stand out in a company. They are sometimes prepared to cut corners. They sometimes compromise on safety. Most have been doing it for so long that it's a habit. Sometimes they don't even know they are doing it.

Worse than that, most tend to view the average North Sea worker as brainless and gormless - someone with no job security, who can be hired and fired at will, who should take orders without question, regardless of the consequences. These people, and they are all over the North Sea, couldn't believe that offshore workers were capable of organising in the way they did.

They agonised over the discipline, the principles behind the strike, and the high level of organisation. They spent hours discussing the communications network, which controlled the dispute, and which brought work to a halt in an organised way. They couldn't find any answers because they persisted in underestimating the offshore workers. The Bears had brains, and they couldn't understand that.

Potentially the third lesson is the most important one. The demands on Health & Safety and on Trade Union recognition have not been met. It is likely that there will be more industrial action next year. The principles involved are too important to leave unresolved. The Bears have learned how strong they can be. The important thing to remember is that, now the penny has dropped, the oil companies and contractors know it too.

WOMENS' SUPPORT GROUP

AS READERS WILL be aware, feelings are running high just now amongst many offshore workers and amongst their families. The reasons for this are largely related. The sadness brought about by the Piper Alpha tragedy was heightened by the passing of the first anniversary of the disaster. At the same time the recent dispute offshore brought to the fore the unacceptable standards of safety in which many employees in the North Sea oil industry have to work. In the light of this we have formed the, "Offshore Support Group". We support the stand of the offshore workers in their fight for higher safety standards. Our intentions are to bring this fight out into the open, showing oil companies and government that there will be no rest until the situation is rectified.

The group has written letters to those in government, and to those oil companies which we feel to be responsible for this unacceptable situation. We urged them to accept their responsibilities and act accordingly. We approached BP personally, but to no avail; however the visit was televised and we consider this good publicity for our cause, and it showed BP in an unfavourable light.

The women from our group were made very welcome at the "Piper Alpha Support Group" meetings. The obvious affect that the disaster has had on those concerned, made a great impact on us, and strengthened our resolve to ensure that another such incident never happens again.

Terry Lippe

All those interested in discussing with us, please contact.

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VIEW FROM HOME

AS THE WIFE of an offshore worker I was interested to read your mag/paper. I received a copy from my neighbour whose husband also works offshore. I'm interested to find out what my husband makes of it when he comes home next week.

However, in response to your 'Readers' Wives' article, I feel there is a strong need for a support network for all wives throughout the U.K., though perhaps not a militant wives union, which I frankly would find embarrassing. After all, I work full time and as a Nalco member myself have been in a strike situation recently. Yet I would be mortified if my husband appeared at my workplace demonstrating/protesting for my rights.

I do think a support network would be useful and perhaps companies should employ welfare officers to be available 24 hours a day to employees wives and families to provide help and information in times of stress or in an emergency situation.

Many marriages/relationships break up when the men go offshore, as it's a different lifestyle. Basic roles change, for half the year you are responsible for house, kids, car and dog etc., yet when your husband's at home you are expected to let him make decisions, be 'in charge'. Many relationships cannot stand this type of change, then on the other hand, many women cannot cope on their own, cannot handle money, - run up debts, go out and have affairs to combat loneliness. Many families have moved nearer to Aberdeen for work (as we have). So a wife with young kids away from friends and family can soon become isolated and unable to cope. I suppose I'm lucky, I grew up on the Buchan coast where for centuries the men have gone to sea and the women coped at home on a daily basis. So I cope (I think), I juggle a full time job, a baby and the house. Not always well, but I muddle through with crises coming and going. Luckily I have friends in similar situations, either married to offshore workers or trawlermen, but I still think companies should provide a welfare office. Not necessarily someone to pry into peoples affairs, but someone to contact should you need help, or someone a husband can ask to contact his wife if he feels she needs help or support at anytime when he can't be home. Someone a wife can contact for information, even simple information like, "when is a flight due in?" so a husband can get picked up. I feel that the oil companies could well afford to

EDITORIAL

THE NORTH SEA oil industry finally paid some of it's respect to the victims of Piper Alpha. It wasn't done by the oil companies and their flunkies. It was done despite them by over 8000 construction and maintenance workers, who struck on the anniversary of the tragedy.

As far as "Blowout" can ascertain, the other two major groups of North Sea workers, drilling and production, were not represented that day. There could be many factors involved here. But the fact remains indisputable, and has been noted by the men themselves.

There will also be many different interpretations of this fact. But amidst all the opinions that may be held, there are some solid facts about us and our industry that retelling won't change.

One distinct group within the offshore workforce is drilling. It includes drill crews on the platforms, the crews of the exploration semis, jackups and drill ships. And also the many service personnel employed by logging, cementing, mud and other companies. These workers do not have skills that are applicable to other industries. They began to come offshore 25 years ago, they didn't take trade union membership offshore with them then and generally speaking little has been done to change this. The backwardness and the viciousness of the drilling contractors is legendary. Industrial relations are still modelled on the cotton plantation. The workforce tends to be fragmented. Split up on a host of exploration units and production platforms. The struggle of the 'Bears' will encourage these men to organise.

No Defence

Production workers on the platforms are employed directly by the oil companies. It was not difficult for the oil companies to see that they pose the most immediate threat to profits. These workers have the power to shut down production. Their loyalty has, it is believed by the oil companies, been bought by wages and conditions far superior to those in maintenance and drilling. But Piper Alpha proved that a heavy wage packet is no defence against an oilfield fire. They too, of the difficult groups offshore, are most aware that little has been done to fundamentally improve safety and avoid another Piper.

The Offshore Industry Liaison Cttee (OILC) is as yet still predominantly an organisation of the construction and maintenance workers. It's stated aims are however applicable to all offshore workers. They want the Health and Safety legislation in its entirety applied offshore, and a 'continental self agreement' to protect wages and conditions of all offshore workers.

provide this sort of service because if the wives are happy then the men are bound to be happier too.

My final complaint is the parking situation at both major heliports. On the occasions when I've been to collect my husband, parking has been impossible to find. Or if you do manage to find a space some jumped up little Hitler security guard threatens to 'wheel clamp' you. Mind you on the three occasions I've been in, he's only once threatened to wheel clamp me. But surely with an immense offshore population using the heliport, it's not unreasonable to expect to be able to park safely near a terminal so that wives and kids can meet Daddy.

I shall be interested to find out what other wives feel about my suggestions and those in any other letters you print.

Normally we would not print a letter which did not include a name and address (which of course we would withhold if requested).

However it was felt that not to print this letter would be a grave loss for the paper.

GREAT

Very pleased to see the first edition of Blowout. Great. I have sent it on to some of the wives on Teeside, who I hope will contact you. Frank Doran kindly sent me a copy.

Yours

Marjorie

(Dr. Marjorie Mowlam M.P. for Redcar)

OBITUARY

"Blowout" remembers Timothy Williams. Timothy died on board the Ocean Odyssey when the well it was drilling for Arco blew out on September 22nd 1988. He was a merchant navy radio operator who was making his first trip on a North Sea oil rig.

On the anniversary of his death the thoughts of many oil workers and their families will go out to those he left behind. The truth will eventually be told and Timothy Williams death will not be forgotten. His life will not have been sacrificed in vain.

STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

NORTH SEA WORKERS paid their respects to those who have lost their lives in the industry over the past 25 years. Over 8000 'bears', most employed by the construction and maintenance contractors on the platforms, struck for 24 hours on the July 6 anniversary of Piper Alpha.

The 'Day of Remembrance' wasn't an isolated day of protest. It came in the middle of a bitter struggle by the contractors men for the extension of health and safety legislation in full to the rigs, and for trade union recognition that would offer all offshore workers the protection of agreements on safety as well as wages and conditions.

Throughout June and July the complacency of the Government and the oil companies was rocked by the men's determined strike action that rolled on across the North Sea. Men struck on the platforms and sat in on their 'hotels', resisting the threats of the OIMs. The action was co-ordinated by the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee (OILC).

Onshore the OILC held over 80 mass meetings in Aberdeen, Glasgow, Middlesbrough and later in Hull and Liverpool. These meetings were open to all offshore workers. They discussed events as they unfolded, and guided the OILC standing committee in its work. Wives of oil workers organised themselves in the Offshore Support Group and occupied BP offices in Aberdeen, focusing attention on the struggle. Like the men at St Fergus defied sacking threats to support their offshore colleagues, and in Glasgow both BP and the Daily Record were left in no doubt about the men's contempt for their respective positions, as men descended on their offices from OILC meetings.

The oil companies parroted that it was, "nothing to do with us" and nauseam. Meanwhile BP was bringing scabs from Holland to their Forties Field. The incomparably incompetent Shell, not to be outdone, tried to get the Court of Session to order the removal of men from Cormorant Alpha. Even Grampian Police were being solicited by them. Meanwhile Mr Wood and his fellow contracting employers shut only when the oil companies said it was OK for them to do so.

THE TRUTH ABOUT N.W. HUTTON

THIS IS A story about a friend of mine and an incidental cast of liars, fools and smug bastards. The friend will be easy to spot. The complication is of course that you have to work out who all the others are.

Around lunchtime on Sunday September 3rd, I got a phone call from a friend who'd heard about an evacuation of a North Sea oil rig. He didn't know much about it. I got that quite a bit since Piper. He knew it wasn't my rig. He was just showing a bit of solidarity.

I turned on Radio Scotland and learned that there had been a helicopter evacuation of 113 "non-essential" personnel from Amoco's North West Hutton. The report also said there had been vibrations on the rig which were like the shuddering of domestic water pipes. To evacuate a rig is a very serious business. To make such an insane comparison made me feel uneasy. I doubt if you'd evacuate the bathroom if the water pipes were vibrating. I hate to think what a BBC presenter would evacuate if he was on a rig and it began to vibrate.

To try and find out a bit more I "paged the Oracle". ITN's report was headlined, - "Kickback Hits Oil Platform", while B.B.C.'s Ceefax told of 75 men left on board. By Monday the whole thing was beginning to bug me. By now Radio Scotland news was talking about a "blowback". What is a "blowback" or a "kickback" for that matter? I called the newsroom at S.T.V. and asked them. They didn't know. They got their information from the Press Association who were attributing "kickback" to Amoco. So I called Amoco in Aberdeen and was given a London number which I rang.

The spokesman had no idea where the press had got hold of the terms "kickback" or "blowback". They didn't really mean anything. As far as he knew there had been no appreciable vibrations on the rig although he understood vibrations could indeed occur in situations such as this. There had been no "blowout" as there had been no "physical manifestation" on the surface of either oil or gas, what in fact had taken place on the North West Hutton had been a kick. The spokesman then gave a definition of a "kick" that he read from a copy of "The A to Z of offshore oil and gas terms". The kick had been shut in according to D of E guidelines and was in the process of being killed also according to D of E guidelines.

There are of course no such things as "kickbacks" or "blowbacks". The fairest possible way of describing these words is as disinformation. According to Amoco the responsibility for such disinformation lies with the press. But to be fair Andy Fowers from the D of E thought the term was one that Amoco had used. However that was the only thought he had about the whole affair. He couldn't say whether 113 evacuated from a North Sea platform could be called a "serious" incident. As far

As the sum total of the Government's public position was the angry repeating of his usual lie by the Oil Minister Peter Morrison, "that the Government has made its position clear repeatedly. Safety offshore is of paramount importance". This gave us all a good laugh. It also was a timely reminder that this Government in no way sees its role to protect its citizens even in a year that saw a hundred and seventy of us killed on the North sea.

At the end of the day the Acas intervention was destructive. The employers were already hoisting up the rate for the job. Trying to breathe life into the lie that this was a wages struggle really and that the men could be bought off with a few bob extra. They were making it clear that no one but them will have any say on the sensitive subject of safety. After showing willing to hold secret ballots of the workforce on the question of union recognition they reneged once the action had been called off to facilitate discussion.

STOP PRESS On Monday 18 September the Govt. yet again amended the N Sea safety legislation. Now safety reps on all installations will have the power to 'fax' an inspector at the D of E and ask for an immediate shutdown if they think the operation is unsafe. This major concession is a direct result of the struggles of oil workers in recent months. Ronnie McDonald of the OILC said that while, "the new regulations are welcome", they, "still leave unaddressed the fundamental problems". He urged all those offshore to take up their new rights and seek election to safety committees.

Mr Roger Lyons, the assistant general secretary of the Manufacturing Science and Finance union, described the final package as an, "honourable draw". Mr McDonald described this as a "public relations stunt in dubious taste". "Blowout" consider the score over the last ten years to be, 250 deaths and 600 serious injuries to 0.

The strikes will go down in history. The battle is not yet over on the North Sea. In fact it looks like it's only begun.

As he knew all that had occurred was a "kick". He had no opinion as to how many kicks are experienced in any one year on the North Sea. He wouldn't even guess as to how many times a kick had been taken, closed in and killed, all in line with D of E guidelines; nor whether they had been accompanied by evacuation of personnel. Why 75 men were essential to carry out this operation was also a mystery to him.

On the Monday afternoon, a reporter for Radio Scotland's "Good Morning Scotland" recorded an interview with a spokesman from "Blowout". He was aghast at the disinformation passed on by the BBC. The interview was to go out on the early morning show the next day. That evening his editor squashed the story on the grounds that it was "actionable".

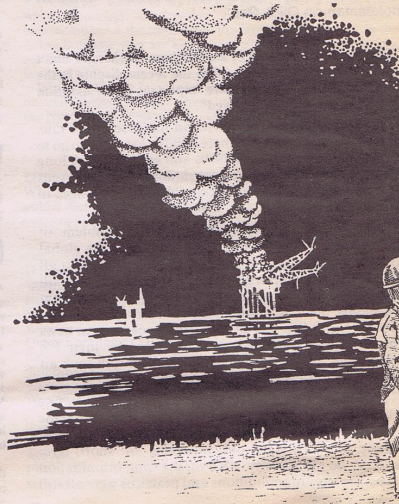
On the Tuesday a delegation of Offshore Industry Liaison Committee members met with national officers of all the unions involved in the North Sea. These full time officials included Jimmy Airlie of the AEU, Jim McFall of the GMB, the national secretary of NUMAST and senior officers from the MSF, EEPTU, T&G and Norrie McVicar the Aberdeen branch secretary of the NUS. A member of the OILC spoke of his fears that a serious situation was being covered up on the N.W. Hutton. After the meeting Norrie McVicar suggested that John Prescott the shadow transport minister and NUS sponsored MP be approached.

An OILC meeting took place in Glasgow on Thursday. From the platform another member of the OILC delegation revealed that he had that morning spoken to a contact in the D of E in Aberdeen. He had been told that there had been an underground explosion at N.W. Hutton. "Blowout" contacted a spokesman at the D of E in Aberdeen later that day. "Yes", he said, there had been an underground blowout in the Hutton incident which he described as, "a flow of gas from one zone to another". However on being challenged that this didn't square with Amoco reports, he attempted to backtrack and said, "Before you go into print and stir a lot of misrepresentation up, I don't want you to get the wrong story".

This situation is outrageous. An underground blow out in a producing oil field is a crisis of major proportions - if this is indeed what occurred. Men on the "Safe Gothia" when evacuees arrived there Sunday morning spoke to "Blowout" at Thursday's OILC meeting and a picture completely different to Amoco's version is beginning to unfold. Men from the N.W. Hutton on their arrival on the "Safe Gothia" described this sequence of events. At around eight o'clock on Saturday night the platform began shaking from top to bottom. There was no muster. By nine o'clock they were pouring cement into the well. Men who were landed on the "Safe Gothia" arrived with only their passports.

**N.W. & MORECOMBE BAY
DISTRICT COMMITTEE OF THE O.I.L.C.
MASS MEETING
OFFSHORE WORKERS
A.E.U. HALLS MOUNT PLEASANT
LIVERPOOL
TUESDAY 31ST OCTOBER AT 11A.M.**

GET ORGA



PRIZE COMPETITION!

THIS CARTOON WAS kindly contributed by a member of Strathclyde Region Fire Brigades Union. We are sure that there are many talented doodlers, wits and poets out there whiling away your talented brain cells watching some video you've seen umpteen times before.

Well BlowOut is your paper and this is your chance! Send us your cartoons, poems, story or humorous tale and the best one will be rewarded with not only getting into print - anonymously if you like - but also we will send you a framed copy of the above cartoon.

Everything else fit to print will also appear so show us what you can do - in black ink for drawings and typed if at all possible for stories.

WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT NOT ONLY FOR CONTRIBUTING STORIES AND INFORMATION BUT ALSO TO PLAN AND FINANCE BLOWOUT.

If you are prepared to get involved in BlowOut and help us plan the next issues and learn with us how to improve the paper we want you as a supporter. If you just want to make sure you get the next copy and a few to give round to your mates we want you as a supporter. If you think it is worthwhile keeping BlowOut going we need your support - we hope you'll participate in the scheme below - but if you can't, get in touch anyway.

I WANT TO SUPPORT BLOWOUT AND MAKE SURE I GET THE NEXT ISSUES WITH SOME EXTRA COPIES FOR MY WORKMATES.

I ENCLOSE A CHEQUE FOR.....
(RECOMMENDED MINIMUM £10)
PAYABLE TO BLOW OUT.

IF YOU WANT YOUR NAME AND DONATION MENTIONED TICK HERE

I WOULD LIKE TO HELP OUT WITH THE NEXT ISSUE. TICK HERE.....

YOU CAN CONTACT ME:

NAME

ADDRESS.....

TEL. NO.....

INSTALLATION.....

UNION (IF ANY).....JOB.....

ING NISED



SAFETY COMMITTEE FRAUD - D O F E TO INVESTIGATE

One Tuesday in July

New "Chief" appoints a safety committee. We meet and discuss a few things. He says that Slum Drilling want to keep ahead of the legislation. A suggestion comes from the floor. "Why don't we elect a safety committee?" "Well, it's not the law." "Ah! - Well what about sending the safety reps. on training courses then?" "Not necessary, Slum's module training is sufficient." The minutes of the meeting were drafted accordingly.

Wednesday

The notice board carries minutes of a completely different meeting, which don't even mention anything about elections or training. The chief says they're "too socialist".

Thursday

Some directives from Slum Safety have arrived. Suddenly we're having elections. Get the megaphones out. But first a discussion about the purpose of the committees, and how to nominate someone. Oh! no need, slum thoughtfully display the constituencies. So you know what section you're in. Some names are missing. Rumour has it that the OIM is automatically in the chair and that the Medic is secretary. You'll be spared the experience of voting them on. Of course universal suffrage is only for installations that have curtains on the bunks of their four man cabins.

The ballot papers are issued in sealed envelopes with your name thoughtfully printed on the front. Select your choice of candidate from the list given and replace in the envelope before returning it to your supervisor. What could be easier? "But doesn't that mean that ...?"

"Well yes it does. Your vote's not secret. And so what if you vote for someone who didn't want to be nominated in the first place. Let's just get on and do it before they lumber us with some enforceable rules."

"How will we know what the candidates views are on safety?" "What? Have hustings on the North Sea? Don't be ridiculous."

Friday

"Ah! You sir! We don't actually need your vote. We've enough from your section already so yours will not make any difference anyway. Yes, as a matter of fact we do open the ballots as they're handed in. Isn't that the way it's always done? Damned subversives."

Saturday

"Oops! You're being transferred to another crew. I suppose we'll have to have another election to replace you on the safety committee. What you're quitting next hitch? Hmm! It might be useful at least to ask people if they're prepared to stand for the safety committee".Thinks....

This as we all know is an isolated incident. You don't have this sort of nonsense on your rig. Do you?

OFFSHORE INFORMATION CENTRE

THE LAST IN the recent series of mass meetings organised by the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee (O.I.L.C.) took place on September 15th. Since they began last November 94 have taken place in Aberdeen, Glasgow, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Hull and Liverpool. The next series, which will include Yarmouth, will be announced when dates and venues have been finalised.

These meetings overall have to be seen as a resounding success. For the first time in the history of the North Sea the barriers of isolation have come down. A forum has been provided in which the problems faced by the offshore workforce can be properly debated, analysed and solutions sought. The O.I.L.C. intends to build on this. For two decades the oil companies have had it 100% their own way. That is now changing. The coming boom in offshore developments will release vast new wealth of which the offshore workforce intends to have a share.

The flow of information and knowledge will be two ways. We are anxious to build up as complete a picture of the offshore oil industry as possible. As you arrive at the station, and before going on your way, make a quick visit if you think there is anything we should know about. The Information Centre is being equipped with multiple phone lines, telex, fax, photocopying and word processing facilities, in fact every tool of modern communication. It may be ten years overdue, but it is now up and running.

The outstanding issues still unresolved from the summer's dispute, can only be tackled by an organised workforce, aware of all the issues. Through a continuing series of mass meetings and publications such as "Blowout" this will be achieved. The O.I.L.C. now has a further weapon at its disposal. By the first week in October we will have, up and running, our Offshore Information Centre. This is situated above the Criterion Bar across from the mainline rail station in Aberdeen. The very crossroads of the industry! All offshore workers are urged to avail themselves of this service. If you require advice on absolutely any issue relating to your life offshore, come in or phone. We are not a replacement union but will run complimentary to them, so no matter which union you belong to, or indeed even if you belong to none, you may still use the centre.

CHEVRON - THE HIGH COST OF ECONOMY?

THERE ARE MANY costs involved in running a business. The level of expenditure will decide the viability of the enterprise. Management is obliged to pursue policies designed to minimise those costs. Indeed, not to do so would be a dereliction of their duty to shareholder and employee alike. The quest for economy does however have limits. If for instance, this or that chemical will do the job better and/or cheaper, go for it. But if the side effects of doing so cause undue harm to health or environment, there are obligations, both legal and moral, to use the dearer option. In other words, there is a threshold that even the most cost conscious management cannot cross.

Has Chevron been cutting the cost of transporting contractors personnel offshore crossed that threshold?

In 1986/87 the oil price dropped and Chevron in line with other members of the UK Offshore Operators Association, viciously slashed expenditure. To minimise the impact of the price drop on themselves, they passed on as much of the suffering to others as they could. Mass redundancies of contractor's personnel resulted, with those who remained taking wage cuts of obscene proportions. Chevron went further. One of the aircraft used on the Unst shuttle was dispensed with, saving a reputed £1,000,000 per annum on charter costs.

As usual, contractors bore the burden. The resulting late check in times, going to and coming from the Ninian field, has had a serious effect on their welfare and safety.

Travelling men arriving on the platform late in the day and going on night shift end up forced to be on their feet 24 hours in what is now generally accepted as the most hazardous working environment in Britain. This is safe working practice? Apart from the usual hazards of working in the North Sea the Ninian has a special one. High H₂s levels make breathing apparatus training obligatory. The presence of this lethal gas at the workplace, requires that the workforce should be alert, fit and free from fatigue.

Now that oil prices have recovered and stabilised, is it not time for Chevron to enter the welfare of contractors into the flight cost equation?

No less serious questions must be asked on the journey from the Ninian field. Late afternoon check-in on the platform, and evening arrival in Aberdeen mean it is impossible for travelling men to get home by public transport. The logical option is private car hire, but this has its disadvantages. Travelling already fatigued, is dangerous to avoid having to spend a 16th night away from home and family, risks are taken. It was after such a trip offshore that the deaths of three scaffolders occurred, killed in a car crash.

BLACKPOOL TUC SUMMIT

You may be aware from reports in the national press that a delegation from the O.I.L.C. met the national officials of those unions which have an interest in the North Sea. Represented were the AEU, GMB, T&G, NUS, NSF and significantly the EPTU although no longer in the TUC accepted an invitation to attend. The O.I.L.C. outlined its intentions for the future and indicated in some detail what it saw as appropriate tactics in our dealings with the oil companies and offshore contractors.

The financial aspects of running the Information Centre were also discussed. The fact that the office has been set up with contributions entirely from the men's own pockets was noted. That the success of the Info Centre will be in direct proportion to its funding, means that the men can only achieve so much. Major funding and resources are required. These talks are ongoing.

FINANCE

Dwelling on the issue of money, contributions from the offshore workforce to the running of the O.I.L.C.'s activities now exceed 12,000. A considerable portion of this has already been spent, mostly in running the dispute. For those of you who did not make the recent meetings, and will therefore not have seen the up to date accounts, please call at the Information Centre where a fully audited account of all the incomings and outgoings will be available for scrutiny. It is appropriate at this point to thank those of you who have contributed since the O.I.L.C. was formed. Without your help we could not have got this far. Over £4,000 for instance, was spent on newspaper advertising alone. Our opponents have at their disposal ever means of communication, all data, information and intelligence with which to exert their will over us. Our neglect of this essential means of defending ourselves has gone on too long. The O.I.L.C. is seeking funding and resources from many quarters. Essentially however, it must be the offshore workforce who keep the project going, and this is what is happening. Had we to approach potential backers with the begging bowl, any funds forthcoming would have too many strings attached. We have created this asset ourselves. Consequently our overtures to potential backers is in the form of an invitation to participate!

Thank you to all those platforms which have been unstinting in their support of the O.I.L.C., and may we urge those who have not so far participated in this support - do so.

Of all the many factors that led to the death of these three men, was Chevron's cost cutting one of them? Chevron may say that travelling overnight, without first having a break, the men created the risk themselves. It was no greater a risk than Chevron are happy to see on their own platforms, when because of this disgraceful flight situation, men commence night shift without such a break.

The crisis created by the oil companies' panic reaction to the oil price drop is behind us. Is it not now time to re-establish the previous flight levels? What price the Health, Safety and Welfare of the contracting workforce on the Ninian field, especially when considering they are the majority of those employed there! Chevron's turnover for the year ending 1989 was ...?

(first postcard with the correct answer gets a drink at the Crit.)

SAFETY AND THE NEXT ISSUE OF BLOWOUT

WHY OFFSHORE WORKERS, despite changes in safety regulations forced on the government by the Piper tragedy, are still being ripped off.

Ronnie McDonald of the O.I.L.C. will be writing an article for us giving a full run down of the new offshore legislation and what it means for your safety.

You too can contribute to "Blowout", short or long safety features or something humorous - send it to us, c/o the Information Centre, Criterion Buildings, 52 Guild Street, Aberdeen.

The Short and Curlies...

WHEN WAS THE last time a man ran his fingers up the inside of your thigh? Forget the fantasies for a moment. Cast your mind to the last time you were at the heliport on your way out. Aye! a security guard. But do you know why he did it? ... No! I doubt if it was that. Your mother might. But I doubt if a hairy arsed security guard does.

I can't remember anyone bothering to tell me why it was being done. You just arrive at the appointed place, throw up your arms, shuffle your feet a few inches apart, and open up your body to his hands. Nothing to it.

Maybe the reason that nobody's bothered to tell you what it's all about is because it's so obvious that only an idiot could be in doubt. Doesn't every worker get his balls felt before he's allowed into work. Could he! I've got it! You're really and international terrorist whose only pretending to be a Press Offshore painter. All those years. And you? We thought you were with Dresser Magobar and you were with Baeder Meinhoff all the time. Sneaky bugger! The chances are that any genuine terrorist would get caught up in one of the routine explosions offshore before he managed to get his 'semtex' out of his holdall.

Maybe it's drugs they're after. They think we're trying to smuggle out mind bending drugs to try and counteract the mindbending accident record offshore. You notice I said record and not statistics. They're already bent. The only problem with this one is that there is no drugs problem offshore. And it's no thanks to the body searches either. The way you're searched at Bristows and British Helicopters you could be carrying a bazooka and five rounds, never mind the latest Colombian export. They still wouldn't find it.

There's no more of a drugs problem out here than there is in the pits or in the yards or on the building sites. We, like them, are responsible workers doing a hard and dangerous job while trying to raise our families, and live a little bit when we're home. Nobody's ever told us why we're being groped because there is no legitimate reason.

All that they're saying is, 'Give up all hope ye who enter here'. They want the right to do what they please with us once we're offshore, and that includes bouncing our balls in the palms of their hands if they see fit.

We will have the right to dignity one day.

THE PROUD OWNERS of the Adonis 2 also run a neat wee rig called the Peacemaker 5. Possibly there was a mistake in the naming of this vessel as according to one informant management have taken their lessons at the North Sea School of Industrial Relations to heart.

They recently called in their supervisory grades, such as drillers, a/d's and crane ops to the office. Obviously they were concerned for their personnel's welfare as they told them that if they had a grievance that they intended to take to the (and here we quote) 'offshore union in Glasgow', then don't come back.

We are reliably informed that this union in fact refers to the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee (OILC) which you will see mentioned a few times, and recommend to all those drilling away for Eastern Seas to get on down there 'cos it sounds as if you need to get organised quick along with most of the rest of the semi-sub fraternity. There again maybe all is well on the Peacemaker and nobody had a grievance in the first place - but you've got one now.

OUR REGULAR RECORD review by the growling man's popster. The North Sea's number one music critic - John Rowlinson

Don Henley : Building The Perfect Beast - The End Of Innocence

I've been listening to Don Henley now for a long time, since an American friend introduced me to the Eagles in 1972. I think it was. That was during those post Woodstock, Isle Of Wight days when to have been a rock star and still to have survived was viewed by the more intense of the day as a sign of serious cop-out. If you weren't dead, you hadn't paid your dues.

Into such a climate came four young white guys, looking like boys a girl's parents wouldn't have too serious reservations about, who sang catchy tunes, occasionally sharp lyrics in voices that sounded like nightingales in the midst of orgasm. If you liked the Eagles and wanted to keep credibility, you listened to them in private. I did both.

Melody, lyrical sharpness, the voices and increasingly clean production remained very much the hall mark of the Eagles, a group more than a band, it's roots in white pop/country and western. Their progress really lay in honing and refining what they were good at rather than expanding and diversifying their output, so that by the time of their last album, Hotel California, even despite personnel changes and the introduction of Joe Walsh (or God if you come from Cleveland), they were still instantly recognisable as the Eagles.

Since the split, the only recording contacts I've kept with the group are Glen Frey's solo album, "The Allnighter" and Don Henley's, "Building The Perfect Beast". The differences between them are surprisingly great. Frey seems to me to continue where the Eagles left off, chunky little rock songs full of libidinal itch, tender, lush love songs and rather dubious sentiments like "Better in the USA", all the more disturbing because he appears to believe his own lyrics. Henley, however, seems to adopt a more critical stance, showing both in his music and his lyrics, an unease both with himself and his world, themes which dominate both this album and his latest, "The End Of Innocence". To "Building The Perfect Beast" first. I think in many ways it is a more satisfying album than his latest effort. "The Boys of Summer", to my surprise a modest hit when released as a single, has all of Henley's strong points. His voice soars effortlessly into heights which would leave lesser singers with hernias, his backing technically sparse but in effect full, and lyrics which catch the ear and make you pause for thought.

QUOTE OF THE dispute must be that by Sir Trevor Skeet, (honestly, that's his name). According to the Press and Journal he's a senior Tory MP and chairman of an all party minerals group. He said on July 2nd in response to BP bringing scabs onto the Forties:

"It is regrettable BP have had to resort to foreign workers, but striking is not the answer. We would be prepared to take up the men's grievances with Peter Morrison (oil minister), as I know he is concerned about the position of offshore workers."

Many offshore workers were no doubt pleased if a little surprised to hear that Peter Morrison was interested in their grievances. However Sir Trevor's own concerns shone through when he said:

"Strike action which affects production and hence jeopardises our balance of payments, would be diabolical and will not solve anything."

What is diabolical is Sir Trevor Skeet's ignorant and offensive ramblings in the middle of a strike for improved safety, and said 4 days before the Piper anniversary.

Frank came back from his holidays the other day. He was looking well. Said it was great. It's the first time they'd been over to visit the folks. Newfoundland was out of the question while the kids were really young. They knocked it off this time though. Weather was great the whole time and they got around a bit, enjoyed the beauty of the place and its Celtic culture.

Tommy, Frank's brother in law and his family had just moved into a new house. Nice big place. Just as well as Frank's kids took the number up to seven. You'd need a bit of room with that many children around. It was ideal with the big garden even if you could feel a little bit of tension coming from the neighbours. If 7 kids moved in next door to you it might take you a bit of time to adjust. That was the theory anyway.

Things were settling down nicely till Tommy's doberman appeared in the kitchen early one morning with the neighbours pet rabbit between its jaws. It was very dead. And not looking good with it either. This was not what Tommy needed to found his relationship with his new neighbours on. So he got the rabbit and cleaned it up as best he could, gave it a wash and fluffed up the fur a bit with the hair drier and stuck it back in the cage.

A couple of hours later all hell broke loose next door. Their kid's wailing would have broken your heart. The rabbit, it seems, had been dead and buried for three days.

The 'Blue Toon' has no intention of being left behind in 1992. Predicting a massive influx of European workers into the metropolis, one doughty Peterheadian was determined that these visitors should be equipped with the wherewithal to communicate with the locals.

"Blowout" is proud to start serialisation of this important book.

PETERHEADIAN MADE SIMPLE by W.A. (Know the country, spik the lingo)

FOREWORD

Welcome student!

May I first say congratulations on your effort to broaden your horizons by purchasing this invaluable phrasebook. In your travels abroad, you will find that Buchan and its capital Peterhead is an exotic and mysterious country, full of adventure and romance. It can also be a dangerous place for the unwary traveller, for the wild life in certain parts is still largely untamed. We will come to these hazards as we progress through the book, but suffice to say that it is wise to seek a native guide when exploring the interior. Peterhead has two main communities, i.e. the fishing and the farming community. In the native language they are known as 'fishers' and 'teuchters', (see section on pronunciation), and it is on these people that the heritage of Peterhead is blamed. We will learn of them later.

We hope that the knowledge gained from this publication will be useful for any traveller who is intent on exploring this pearl of the North Sea. It will be a holiday never forgotten.

LESSON 1 THE LANGUAGE

When holidaying or working in Peterhead, a good knowledge of public notices is desirable since most of them will directly concern you. Here are some of the more common ones:

Oot	Exit
Haymin getaffi girse	Please keep off the grass
Weet pint	Weet paint
Fagsoot	No smoking please
Mannies	Gentlemen
Weemin	Ladies
Getyir bonedome oan	Wear a hard hat in this area
Bar	Bar
Sumdee in jisnoo	Engaged
Waatch oot	Beware
Waatch oot fir'i bowfer	Beware of the dog

Some basic words in everyday use:

Aye Aye	Hello
Fit like i'day	How are you today?
Nae bad, fit like yirsel?	I am well, how are you?
Fit	What/Pardon?
Fitsa?!	What is that/What did you say?
Haymin	Excuse me sir?
Haymin, yi canna de at	Excuse me, that is forbidden
Nae muckle wunner	I am not surprised
Farr?	Where?
Fars'!...?	Where is the...?
Farsmi...?	Where is my...?
Haymin, far yi gan?	Where are you off to my fellow
Awa	Away
Am gan oot	I am popping out for a while
Am awa noo	Goodbye

(to be continued)

We intend to serialise this invaluable guide in its entirety and we would be grateful if the author could contact the paper as lessons 3 and 6 are missing from our copy.

"Out on the road today
I saw a DEADHEAD sticker on a cadillac
A little voice inside my head said
Don't look back, you can never look back."

The song is of lost love, of rejections, of hope for reconciliation made bitter by the stronger realisation that this is impossible. The lost love becomes a metaphor for a fall from grace, of the loss of a time when things were good, when the world and the people in it were nice. The album goes on to explore both themes, the first in a smashing we country and western song "You're Not Drinking Enough", and in the heavily sentimental "Not Enough Love In The World", the second in the title track itself, the grating deliberately discordant "Building The Perfect Beast" and the haunting, almost surreal "Sunset Gull", where progress is measured by the refinement of inhumanity, the distance we've come from our primitive innocence:

"All the way to Malibu from the hand of the Talking Drum
Just look how far - look how far we've come."

If this review were to stop here, everything would be fine. I'd say go out and buy "Building The Perfect Beast". You'd have an album which would enhance your collection, give a lot of pleasure in terms of its music and production and show you an artist of some integrity working out his world where pleasure struggles against pain and doesn't, despite the fatuous and one disappointing track which closes it, "Land Of The Living", quite win.

The new album starts promisingly enough with the title track (a melancholy lament for lost innocence carrying on fittingly from the last album), co-written and accompanied by the wonderful Bruce Hornsby.

"Remember when the days were long
And rolled beneath a deep blue sky
Didn't have a care in the world
With mummy and daddy standin' by
But 'happily ever after' falls
We've been poisoned by these fairy tales
The lawyers dwell on small details
Since daddy had to fly."

That the world isn't the place our childhoods may have led us to expect may not be the most earth-shattering of insights but the

song catches splendidly the sense of loss, even betrayal, and that horrible feeling of emptiness that's left as you carry on struggling to piece together some sense of self and worth. It's never disillusionment that causes pain, it's what comes after that's tough.

And that's where the album goes, picking up pieces, casting them aside, breaking down the clay gods and combing through the rubble. There's momentary defiance in "I Will Not Go Quietly" where the singer attempts to seize control of his own life like he tries to seize control of his woman.

"Well c'mon over here, baby
You 'bout to gimme a heart attack.
I wanna wrap my lovin' arms
Around the small of your back."

Then there's momentary despair in "New York Minute" where the oppression of day to day experience becomes almost unbearable, the belief in a redeeming love around the corner creaking under the strain. Or in "Shangri - La" where despair turns into a cry for action, to "do what must be done" whatever that is.

The album is as you will have deduced, intensely introspective and therein, I feel, lies its main disappointment for me. There's a line in an Abba song of all things which for me has always offered a sobering wisdom

"You feel bad, let me tell you.
We all get the blues."

If you dwell on the blues you get to enjoy them like you enjoy picking a scab even though the wound won't heal. I think Henley is stuck in this groove and in a world so manifestly full of shit as this one, feeling pissed off doesn't really amount to a hill of beans. I feel he's wallowing in the very real and deeply felt symptoms of personal despair and this stops him from coming to terms with their cause.

Does this mean don't buy it? I don't think so. As always with Henley the music is seductive and good and you still feel there's an artist at work behind it all. On top of that, there's one of the best love songs I've heard in a good while, "The Last Worthless Evening". This record will still prove a worthwhile addition to any collection, but I can't wait until Henley turns his attention further from his own navel. Then, you'll have one hell of an album.

PIPER ALPHA - A SURVIVOR'S STORY

by Ed Punchard

IN THE "PREFACE" Ed Punchard tells why he wrote this book. His recurring nightmare, "...is of a young boy on his paper round in Aberdeen, delivering morning newspapers which showed the chummy remains of Piper Alpha. On his return home, he says, 'Mummy, Dad's on Claymore isn't he?' But he wasn't. He'd been on Piper Alpha. And it's no dream. The story's true."

The rest of Ed's story is equally true. Not just literally. No one will question that. But more important, it's true to the spirit of the North Sea oil industry, and to the men who work in it. And that's no small achievement. Traditionally the oil companies have let little news leak from the N. Sea. (There were even early attempts to suppress the news of Piper Alpha before it became apparent that it was just too big.) And even today, what does get out is sanitised by a newspaper industry that either relies on oil industry advertising or has political sympathies with the oil companies. "A Survivor's Story" tells the truth.

In the prologue Ed takes us through his personal experience of escaping from Piper Alpha in the first ten minutes after the initial explosion. He doesn't try to titillate us by exploiting the horror of the situation. But the horror's there nevertheless and the reader can't get away from the thought of those who were never going to make their escape as Ed did.

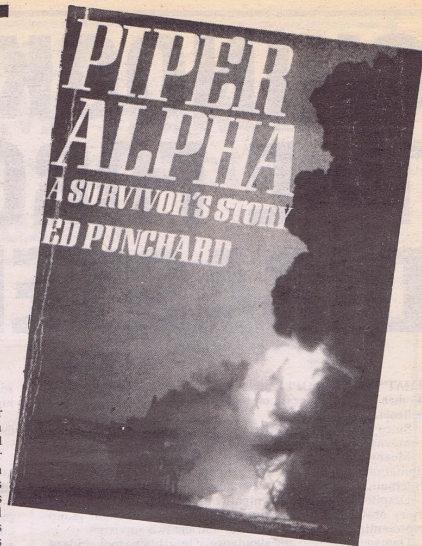
It took me some time to work out why I had to plough through a potted history of the author. Oil workers often appear to outsiders as pretty mysterious. Even for other oil workers reading about the life of a north sea diver is a bit like a visit to a local masonic lodge. But it did all fall into place eventually. Ed Punchard carefully lays out his experiences for all of us to see. Later on in the book we'll understand why he is able to make the assertions he does about the whole question of safety offshore. As well as his experience, Ed Punchard bares his personality for all to see, pimpler an' all. In this way the reader knows that he's getting the real story told by a real person. And if you don't think that's important you should compare this excellent book with the honeyed account of life on the Brent field by Shell's hack A. Alvarez in "Offshore - A North Sea Journey". A classic of misinformation.

The second part of this book acquaints the reader with Piper Alpha and some of the characters on it. It then takes us through the disaster and the rescue operation in the company of Ed and some of his colleagues. Their courage and capability is very clear as the survivors take the initiative in the rescue operation immediately they themselves escaped. The stresses and strains that affected Ed and his family afterwards are apparent. His problems compounded by a meeting with Energy Minister Cecil Parkinson. "I realised that I couldn't trust anybody", was his feeling after experiencing how worthless Parkinson's assurances had been.

Ed Punchard's conclusion is that, "We cannot wait till the next century before it is accepted that the working conditions endured in the North Sea are unacceptable." He details a whole catalogue of crucial changes that must be made. Understandably he undervalues his own contribution to events. The role that he and his colleagues played in the rescue, and his own contribution in writing this important book point very clearly to another conclusion. Safety on the North Sea should be firmly in the hands of those people who stand to lose their lives if it fails - offshore workers themselves.

At the outset Ed Punchard says, "I have no interest in blame or retribution. To me, they serve no purpose and have no value. Consequently, though it may seem strange to some, I have no bitterness towards Occidental or to any of its employees." Well yes it will seem strange to some, especially as this high minded approach was not copied by Occidental who lodged a "Notice of Blame" against two of the men who are remembered in this book.

It seems to me that there are two reasons why Ed Punchard wrote this book. The truth needed to be told if another Piper Alpha is to be avoided. But also to exorcise the devils that torment him. There can be no doubt that this book will play its part in making the North Sea safer for people to work in. We can only hope that Ed Punchard gets a bit of peace from the torment of his memories and feels very proud of a book that will benefit all offshore workers. A worthy monument to the victims and survivors alike.



VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

THE NATIONAL UNION of Seamen and the T&GWU made a new approach to an offshore contractors organisation.

The idea was that they would ask for their recent pay award to be uprated in light of the recent agreements imposed by other sub-contractors, mainly in construction.

At his point the union reps got the benefit of some straight talking from the company negotiators.

Just a few days ago they had a meeting with UKOOA who told them that the recent wage increases of the construction workers were not going to last very long and they would expect to return to pre-strike wage levels soon.

So the company reps thought the unions were unwise to link their claim to that which had been extracted from other contractors by the bears recent industrial action.

It all goes to show that we are all in this together and its only by keeping ever vigilant and extending our organisation that we'll keep what we've won.

Maybe it is just a threat, or an excuse not to pay up - but it is one we would be foolish to ignore given the oil companies and their contractors record to date.

WHAT THE PAPERS SAY

Oil exploration



No questions asked?

"NO ACTION" is now the most likely recommendation of the Scottish procurator fiscal in the case of the blow-out a year ago on the oil rig Ocean Odyssey (see *Eyes passim*).

This will cause some relief at the Department of Energy (former prop: Cecil Parkinson), whose secret report to the procurator concluded the best thing to do about the disaster (especially since a big oil company was responsible), was to make a few irritated noises and then shut up.

People on the rig at the time of the blow-out are not so happy. They recall that it had been visited the week before the disaster by a safety officer from the Department of Energy (itself a rare event: there are eight inspectors for the whole of the North Sea). The inspector did not even inspect the drilling equipment and went off declaring that everything in the rig was wonderful.

If the procurator fiscal does indeed draw a veil over the disaster, the department will not feel obliged to publish its report nor answer any of the following questions:

1. Why did ARCO (the oil company) and ODECO (the drilling company) continue to drill for a week after the ARCO representative on the rig had recommended that drilling should be stopped and the site abandoned?
2. Why was the blow-out preventer which could have stopped the disaster tested only to 15,000

pounds per square inch of pressure (and in fact was capable of dealing with only 11,000 psi) when the psi on the day of the blow-out had reached 17,000?

3. Why were the television videos, which plainly showed hydraulic leaks, not recovered on to the rig on the grounds that their recovery would mean a "waste of drilling time"?

4. How had the rig run out completely of the mud used to damp down the pressure of rising gas? How could drilling possibly have continued after such a desperate emergency?

5. Why was the crew kept in lifeboats for several vital minutes before being allowed to evacuate the rig? Why were no orders given to evacuate, leaving the men to take their own initiatives? Why was Tim Williams, a radio operator on his first stint on a rig, ordered out of the lifeboat and back to the radio room, where he was burnt to death?

All these questions lead to the Big One: was it not the case that the site drilled by the Ocean Odyssey was essentially unsafe, in that a blow-out could not have been prevented in the normal way?

Was not the amount of mud necessary to stop a blow-out in itself too heavy for the drilling well?

Did this not mean that the grim alternative was either to use too much mud, and crack the rock in the well, or too little mud and allow the gas to escape up the pipe?

Is this not likely to be the case in more and more of the "marginal" wells sunk in the North Sea, leading to more and more disasters?

These questions are of course far too relevant to be asked in public and are in any case certainly well beyond the expertise or concern of the Department of Energy.

PRIVATE EYE

Oil men go to court

MEN who worked on a tragic oil rig are to sue the company. A radio operator died in a fire on the Ocean Odyssey last September.

The action is being brought against rig owners and operators Odeco in Louisiana. And yesterday Labour MP Frank Doran said many of the

66 who were on the rig were facing extreme financial hardship because they were now unable to face working offshore.

Mr Doran met a group of eight in Aberdeen yesterday. He said: "The Ocean Odyssey group wants to emphasise how serious the effect of their experience has been on them all."

DEATH OF A PIPER

by John Fyvie

Come in stand-by vessel
It's Alpha sixteen
It's a comfort to know
That you're there on the scene

I've a desperate feeling
This midsummer night
There's a stillness unusual
Something's not right

The day shift is sleeping
The hour is mine
There's a valve that is missing
On a high-pressure line

The stillness is broken
What a terrible howl
Demented and rabid
Like wolves on the prowl

The gas is escaping
Now fire teams await
There's a call for a muster
But I fear it's too late

An inferno is raging
God I'm standing alone
The steel it is melting
Like the flesh from our bones

Look! Here comes the Tharos
But it's doing no good
Now black smoke engulfs us
Like a hanging man's hood

Oh! the fire it is spreading
And panic is rife
A scaffolder cries out
Then jumps for his life

There's men going crazy
And screaming in pain
The sound of the dying
It drives me insane

Up in the derrick
A roughneck in vain
Screams for his mother
To come ease his pain

Another explosion
God! that make it three
The quarters we lived in
Now slide to the sea

Inside men are weeping
Not really in fear
The thoughts that torment them
Are the folks they hold dear

For never to see them
Saddens their heart
For death and oblivion
Will keep them apart

And now Occidental
Your debt you must pay
For the death and the sorrow
You caused on that day

God I hate all these bastards
Who don't give a damn
Oil bosses and Thatcher
We know you're a sham

A word of condolence
Then you leave us to grieve
While you sit in your penthouse
And laugh up your sleeve

So remember the Piper
You, who are to blame
When you're sent to the devil
To burn in his flame

To the lads of the Piper
You've not died in vain
We'll remember you always
And inherit your pain

CHINOOK THE FORGOTTEN DISASTER

THAT'S HOW PEOPLE are beginning to describe the death of 45 men in the 1986 crash of an American built Boeing Chinook helicopter off Sumburgh.

Since then, families of the dead have waited for some sort of compensation ...and waited...and waited.

Meanwhile the whole issue has become tied up in a damage limitation exercise by the helicopter makers and British International Helicopters, operators of the doomed Chinook.

Despite fine words of sympathy at the time of the disaster, every obstacle has been put in the path of the legal group representing the victims' families and the two survivors.

Damage limitation and avoidance of legal blame took pride of place in Boeing's actions, although the official enquiry blamed the crash on a faulty gearbox component.

Offers to settle claims have been pitched at UK compensation levels, while every effort was made to block legal moves and deny liability in the USA.

Money is at the root of the whole thing, with the helicopter makers apparently hoping families facing immediate hardship

will settle for low UK compensation rather than push for much higher US levels.

Despite the much heralded mid-Atlantic levels of settlements for Piper Alpha, Boeing and their co-defendants have steadfastly refused to move in that direction.

They even objected to the findings of the accident investigation into the crash - virtually unprecedented, but adding further delays to the US court process.

Boeing and lawyers have fought every step of the way; first to get the US courts to rule they had no jurisdiction in the matter and then to block inclusion of the UK accident report in the evidence.

They failed on both counts, but David Burnside, the Aberdeen spokesman for the families legal group says it will be next spring at least before a court case is heard in the US.

Meanwhile there has been no move for an out-and-court settlement.

Families facing up to a fourth year without compensation could be forgiven for asking 'where's the justice?'

"MAINTENANCE ROUSTABOUT -----PICK UP!"

THE "Adonis 2" gets my vote, but if there was a prize for the worst rig on the North Sea there would be some competition. The company man, Claude Ashole, and this rig were built for each other. The rig was a shit-house.

The cabins were unfit for human habitation. But they were better than prison cells. You didn't have to slop out. Except in rough weather when sewage exploded from the bogs and swam along corridors and under doors. The top bunks were hardly affected at all. And eventhen the only serious case of illness, was proved to have been contracted on shore. The cementer claimed he'd just been unlucky. Down on the farm, back home, everyone does this with chickens before they're, bar-be-cued. The medic denies to this day that he said the blood that the cementer was passing was really tomato sauce.

Claude had a friend on board, called George. He was the night pusher. I first met him in the smoko shack, dosing the whole crew with 'kaoline and morphine'. He was spooning this 'liquid cork' into the open mouths with one spoon, and from an out of date bottle. The derrickman was sent up the derrick to pull out. With him he took a six-pack of toilet rolls and a black polythene bin liner. To put it plainly, George was an ignorant b-----d. I only mention this because I never had the courage to tell him this to his face.

He and Claude were, as far as I know, the only two on board who liked the phone system. Claude because has was a master in its use. George because he couldn't get the hang of numbers. You didn't need numbers for this phone. If you wanted to speak to the mud engineer and discuss some of the finer points of mud theory, you just picked up the nearest phone, pressed the button, and asked him to do likewise. The phone cleverly edited out all unnecessary words, and over the public address system would come, "Mud engineer - - pick up - - now!"

Claude was a master in the use of the phone. The way he sacked the maintenance roustabout was legendary. The man had been fingered by George for supposedly destroying the rig heating system. He hadn't even known that the rig had a heating

system. It didn't reach his cabin anyway.

Through the rain streaked office window Claude surveyed the scene on the pipe deck far below. It was scattered with colourfully dressed crew. Choosing his moment carefully, just as the crane operator lowered a ton of casing onto the catwalk, he yelled, "You!"

Immediately a dozen or so pairs of eyes raised themselves towards the source of this terrible sound. Simultaneously twelve hands pointed in self-acusatory fashion towards twelve rapidly deflating chests. The casing bounced on the catwalk unnoticed. "NO, not you! YOU! You with the white hat!" This skillfully narrowed it down to eleven.

"You with the white hat and red coveralls." Down to eight. "No! No! No! You with the white hat, red coveralls, green boots, orange hat, blue eyes and broken nose. You! Yes! You! You're run off". Pure poetry. So it was hard at first for many who knew Claude to believe the story that was soon circulating the oilfield.

•••

Picking up the phone one day, to order the execution of some defenceless service hand, he was confronted by voices on the line.

"Get off the phone", Claude explained. The voices continued their conversation.

"GET OFF THE LINE" Still no answer. "DO - YOU - KNOW - WHO - THIS - IS?" screamed Claude.

"NO!" came the reply. "Well it's the company man so GET OFF THE PHONE!"

"Do YOU know who this is?" said one of the mystery voices? "No!" said Claude.

"Well F----- then!"

•••

Claude never really recovered from that. And frankly, who cares. He was never going to learn anything about respect anyway. But plenty of others learned a lot about self-respect. Now when you see a man smiling in an unlikely situation, watch his lips. They're likely to be forming these two wonderfully expressive words.



Sikorsky 561: Chinook's demise has left the Sikorsky 561 unrivaled.

HELP

LET'S PUT OUR cards on the table, producing a newspaper is a helluva lot of work, even one of such modest proportions as "Blowout". The small number of people presently producing the paper also work offshore and carry out all the normal family responsibilities etc. This puts tremendous restraints on time available to prepare the paper.

Quite frankly this will be the last issue of "Blowout", until the task of production can be put on a sounder footing.

We urge anyone with whatever skills (or lack of them) who can spare some time to participate in writing, planning or distribution of "Blowout" to contact us immediately.

It would be tragic if the paper were to disappear after such an encouraging start but we must be realistic.

We want to organise a meeting of all those interested in ensuring the success of "Blowout" so drop us a line, with your telephone number preferably and we can start to plan ahead.

It's your paper! Don't let it go down! Write to us now!

APPEAL FOR FINANCE

IF "Blowout" is to survive, one of the things it needs is regular finances. It really is as simple as that. The first issue was financed exclusively from personal donations. Some of them were extremely generous as you'll see from the list below. But it's obvious that can't go on.

This issue will be financed in the main through a donation from the O.I.L. Cttee, and from Aberdeen NUS. Some of this came from the striking "Bears" who when they were collecting for the O.I.L. Cttee on their different installations, stipulated that, a part of that money went to "Blowout". We're not only thankful for this but extremely proud to be associated in this way with an historic struggle which we are confident will win in the end.

With the acquisition by the O.I.L. Cttee of premises for an Information Centre, the O.I.L. Cttee itself will require increased and regular financing (see article p6). It'll therefore be important the "Blowout" finances itself in order to free the O.I.L. Cttee from extra financial responsibility. And also to be able to fulfill its pledge to be an independent paper open to every offshore worker. We now have a bank account. Please consider making a collection amongst your mates offshore and sending us the means to continue.

Received so far: from S.R. £240.00, N.L. £50.00, J.K. £50.00, Anon £3.00, Sales £5.00, Banf and Buchan AEU £10.00. The following Labour MP's also contributed £110.00:

John Battle
David Blunkett
Denis Canavan
Frank Doran
Maria Fyfe
John McAllion
Majorie Mowlam
Joyce Quinn
Clare Short

"Blowout" would like to thank all those who have contributed to the success of the paper so far.

CAMPAIGN COFFEE SCOTLAND/ EQUAL EXCHANGE

importing, distributing, marketing
Coffees (instant, ground decaffeinated)
from Nicaragua/Frontline African States
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SOLIDARITY THROUGH TRADE
Stockists: throughout UK including
Ambrosia, Aberdeen / Vitality, Dyce /
Dundee Wholefoods / One World Shop, Edinburgh /
Grassroots, Glasgow.
Mail order, Bulk purchases, Membership
Other stockists:-
C.C.S. Equal Exchange
29 Nicholson Square, Edinburgh EH8 9XB

AMOCO WANTS TO LEAVE

AMOCO GUATAMALA PETROLEUM Company, the local branch of the Texas-based firm, has requested the Ministry of Energy and Mines' authorisation to halt prospecting operations in its exploration block in the northern El Quiche and Huehuetenango departments. Amoco contends that guerilla sabotage of equipment and demands for payments of 'war tax' make continued operations in the area prohibitive. The guerillas have targeted oil exploration projects for some time now, charging them with stealing the country's scarce natural resources, and claiming that profits reaped from the 'black gold' only benefits foreign 'imperialists'. The isolated regions where the oil companies operate are also the areas of heaviest insurgent activity. The guerillas object to the access roads built by the companies, which they say facilitate military penetration.