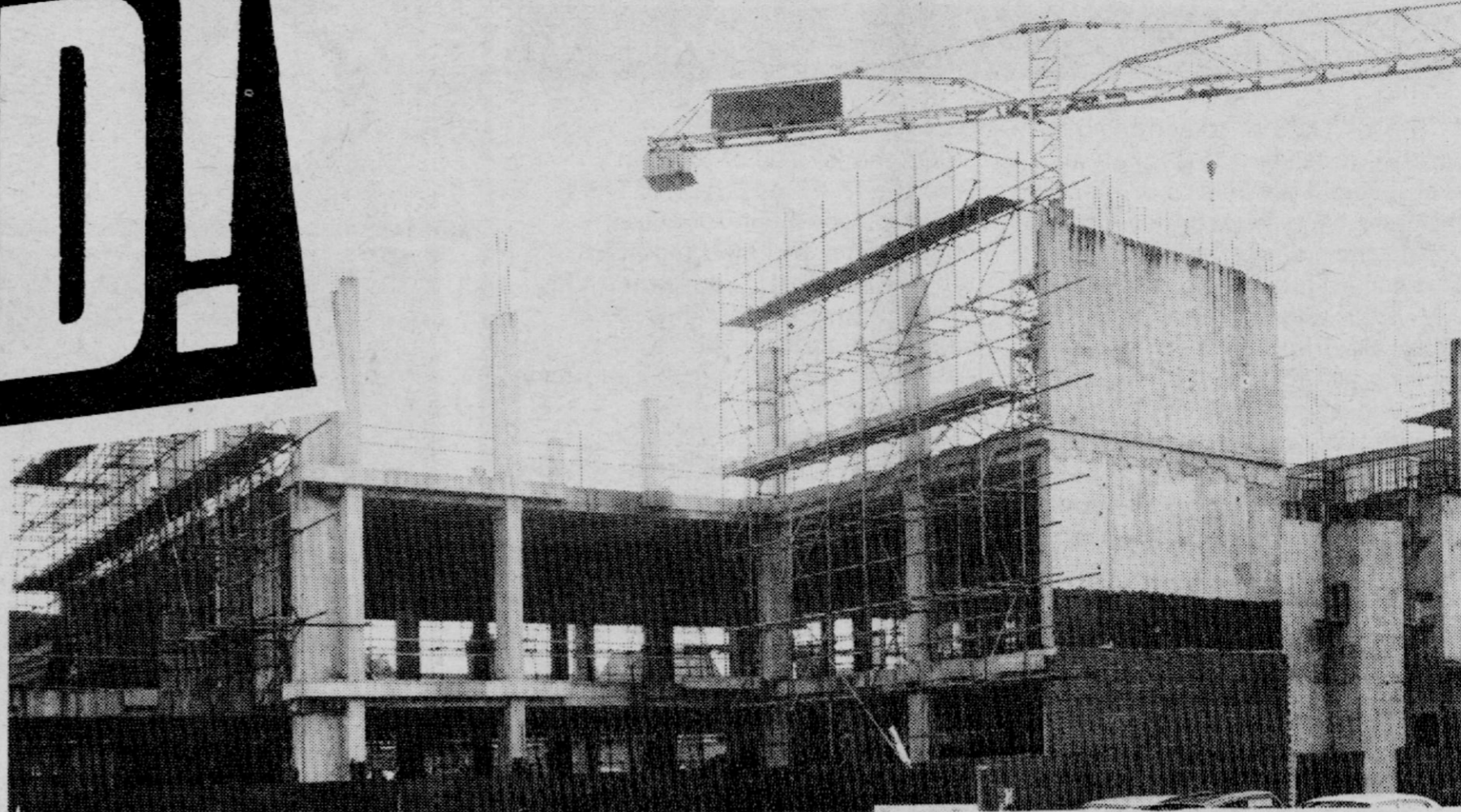


# WRECKED!



The unfinished telephone exchange

CHESTER is famous for its fine buildings and the ancient wall which encircles the city.

But recently it was decided that there was one 'historic' monument it could do without. Work has just started on the demolition of the partly-built Post Office telephone exchange in St John Street.

This half-finished structure, which cost £1½ million, has stood for nearly two years as a monument to the cost-cutting, profit-boosting methods of the construction industry.

A consultant's report showed recently that the building was unsafe, and would never be fit to use. The faults were so serious they could never be repaired.

A spokesman for the Government's Property Services Agency admitted: "Construction has not been carried out in conformity with the drawings and specifications with the result that the structure is not fit for its designed purpose and that safety of any occupants cannot be assured."

Even this carefully-worded statement is a damning indictment of Taylor Woodrow, the major construction firm who built this expensive, but useless, structure.

Naturally, the local newspapers, who are so ready to call building worker pickets 'saboteurs' and 'wreckers' are not using this sort of language to describe the actions and the methods of Taylor Woodrow.

But this history of this GPO building shows where the blame lies. Taylor Woodrow won the contract for the GPO exchange, which was then expected to cost £770,000, and moved onto the site in late 1971.

Right from the start the firm had a strong anti-union reputation. Few building workers could forget the firm had been major contractors on the notorious Barbican site in London, where union men had been sacked, even attacked, and then replaced by workmen who weren't organised.

What's more, Taylor Woodrow had for many years made a point of keeping well clear of Merseyside, particularly the Liverpool area, because they disliked the militancy of the local building workers who had managed to achieve the best pay rates outside London.

Still, they decided to take a chance in the quiet middle-class town of Chester. They hoped to cash in by employing poorly organised building workers from North Wales, by importing workers from as far away as Stafford, and by sub-contracting much of the work.

With scarcely disguised contempt Taylor Woodrow appointed a Mr Bill Freakley as their site agent for the GPO exchange. This meant he was basically responsible for all work on the project.

Mr Freakley had never before

## The scandal of Chester's £1½m. demolition site

been a site agent and had little or no experience in the building trade. His only qualification seems to have been that he was a brother of Mr Tom Freakley, one of the top directors of Taylor Woodrow.

Bill Freakley tried to ensure high profits and prevent union organisation by sub-contracting out scaffolding, joinery and steel-fixing work. He even asked a steward to name a 'lump' price for some work.

The joinery work was sub-contracted to two joiners, Bainbridge and Cottrell, who were used to tackling 'spec' house building work but not large concrete jobs. These two in turn employed workers on the lump (that is, they paid men only for completing a certain amount of work, did not pay insurance stamps, tax, or holiday stamps).

Similarly the steel-fixing was handed out to a Mr Anderton, from Wolverhampton. He again employed only lump workers.

If work on the GPO site had started a few years earlier, Bill Freakley and Taylor Woodrow might not have met such opposition to their lump and sub-contracting plans. But from 1971 onwards there was a growing militancy amongst building workers, who were frequently receiving wages of less than £20 a week. This militancy swept building unions into their longest strike ever, which gained them their highest-ever pay rise, but which also brought the charges of conspiracy against the Shrewsbury 24 pickets and resulted in the imprisonment of the Shrewsbury Two.

Several experienced trade unionists and members of the rank-and-file Building Workers' Charter group managed to secure jobs as lump workers on the Chester site. One of these was Des Warren, one of the Shrewsbury Two, who is still serving the vicious three-year sentence imposed on him for taking part in the

fight for better conditions.

The workers directly employed by Taylor Woodrow refused to allow any lump workers on the site. They went on strike and brought the site to an abrupt standstill. They were joined outside the gates by the 'lump' steel-fixers and joiners, who demanded to be employed directly by Taylor Woodrow.

The lump firms soon pulled out, as they were anxious to avoid paying higher wages, insurance stamps etc.

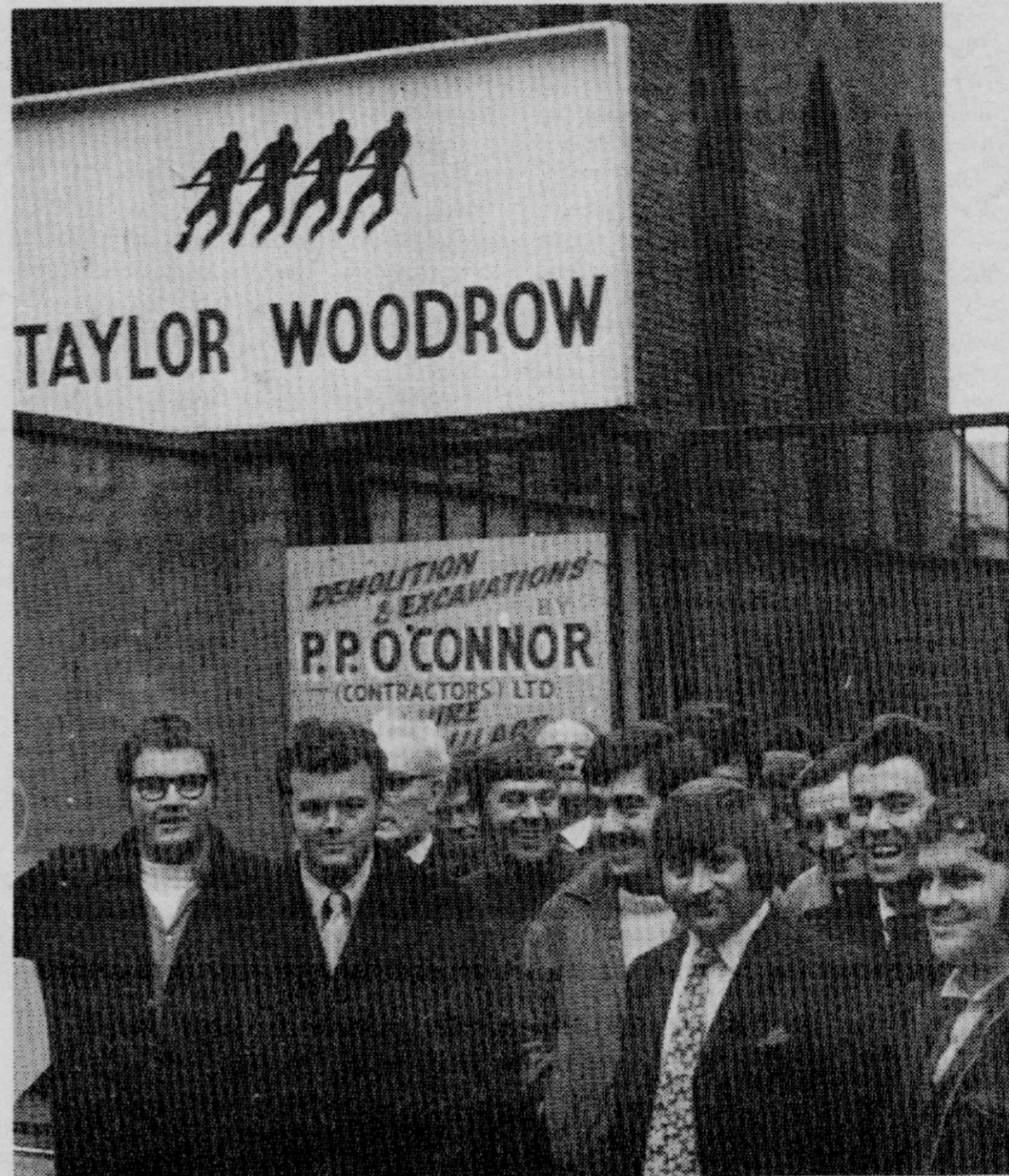
Eventually a disputes panel (over half of which consisted of employers) met and ruled that Taylor Woodrow should directly employ the joiners. Taylor Woodrow were defiant. For weeks they refused and instead tried to break the strike by importing other workers from Nottingham, who — when they arrived — refused to cross the picket lines.

After weeks and weeks Taylor Woodrow gave in over the joiners. But they would not take on the steel fixers. Instead, they brought another sub-contracting firm in to do the work. This firm, Supafix (Reinforcements) from Walthamstow, receive a large amount of labour-only work from Taylor Woodrow.

Within two or three days Supafix sacked Des Warren, who had been forced to use another name to obtain work with the previous lump firm. Warren was sacked because he had worked for a subsidiary of Taylor Woodrow on the Barbican site and had been active there in helping to organise the site.

Arbitrary action like this provoked a number of disputes on the site. In 1974 Taylor Woodrow's contract was terminated.

The new contractors were Costains, who were supposed to complete the building. But already large cracks, which showed the structural defects, had appeared, and Costains scarcely did any work. Instead they



Pickets at the site in 1971. The name of the real wreckers is on the large board behind them

are now demolishing the building.

Consultant engineers examined the building. Their report is being kept secret, but already Taylor Woodrow have been issued with a writ by the Property Service Agency.

Possibly there are design faults, but most of the evidence suggests that the steel-fixing firms were to blame.

Some reports say that steel has been left out of the reinforced concrete walls, which has inevitably led to the cracks, and the building being written off as unsafe.

Supafix are a labour-only firm, but they claim they did not use lump labour on the site. Certainly their books and records were checked on occasion by union officials, but workers on the site agree that they 'smelt' a lump system of payment. All the other workers on the site

had similar bonus payments... but not the steel fixers, who wouldn't talk about their wages. The directly employed men also noticed that whatever the conditions the steel fixers kept on working, which suggested they were receiving a lump payment for a certain amount of work.

By early 1972 Bill Freakley was withdrawn from the site, and replaced by a new site agent. But by this time Taylor Woodrow had set the pattern for the work on the site. They had tried to cut corners and costs by using small firms employing lowly-paid, unorganised workers. And in turn this led to Chester's £1½ million unwanted monument.

Perhaps it should have been left up as a lasting reminder of one of the "wreckers" of the construction industry... Taylor Woodrow.

## Teachers in jobs fight

TEACHERS in Knowsley are continuing to refuse to cover for absent colleagues and non-appointed teachers, in an attempt to restore cuts in staffing levels planned for September.

Although the action will not really take effect until next term, classes have already been sent home from a dozen comprehensives as well as a number of junior schools.

Both main teachers' unions are resisting Knowsley Council's economy plans. They say the result will be a worsening of teacher-pupil ratios, with larger classes, the disappearance of some subjects, and less help for slow learners.

The teachers find this unacceptable, especially at a time of high unemployment and when the drop

in school entrants gives scope for improvement in standards.

Knowsley Council maintain they have enough staff for the new academic year. The teachers insist they need to take on 50 more.

The council are already operating a ban on recruitment outside the borough in an effort to get staff numbers down. Vacancies can only be filled by transfer from one Knowsley school to another.

Although both sides are juggling with staffing figures, there are clearly difficulties in some schools.

At St Marks Junior in Halewood 30 eight and nine-year-olds have been sent home one day a week for much of this term. The school is short of one teacher. Both the

remedial class and music lessons had to be dropped after Christmas.

At St Lukes Junior in Prescot one class has been sent home each day this term, because they are also a teacher short. Advertising the job within Knowsley has not attracted applicants because, unlike many schools in the area, this is not one of "special difficulty". This classification means extra pay for teachers, who could therefore lose through a move.

Meanwhile the National Union of Students estimate that only one in four newly qualified teachers have jobs to go to. Students at the C.F. Mott training college in Prescot (50% unemployed) are urgently organising a street theatre group on the theme of cuts in government spending.

## Robert Tressell memorial likely

A MEMORIAL to Robert Tressell, author of the famous socialist novel "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists", could soon be erected at his pauper's grave in Walton Park Cemetery.

Walton MP Eric Heffer is hoping to raise £1,000 for a carved headstone in black granite. The TUC,

national Labour Party, UCATT and the TGWU building section are all being asked for support.

The idea of a memorial was resurrected by an article about Tressell in the March edition of the Free Press, written by Alan O'Toole, an unemployed man from Bootle.

## 'LIBERTY HALL'

TRITON HOTEL, PARADISE STREET

July 11: "The Hidden Revolution" 40th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War 1936. Plus Enrique Tremps "Consequences of Franco's Victory"  
July 18: Mike Evans - history of rock music with sounds.

25p members, 35p non-members  
July 25: Hillary Beacroft - "The American Indians" with slides.  
August 1: Film "Battleship Potemkin".

To check details phone 227 2514