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LONDON LETTER

Conflict at the BBC

(Special to "The Listener")

August 4.

THE threat of a musicians' strike against the BBC, which was to have caused drastic cuts in the Home and Light programmes this week, was handled with such outward calm and dignity on both sides, BBC officials being polished gentlemen and musicians (as everywhere) being highly rational beings, that hardly anyone, I suppose, thought the cuts would really come. And yet there is now a report in the *Sunday Chronicle* that there may be some resignations high up in Broadcasting House, because of a "public rebuff" dealt to the BBC by the Ministry of Labour.

The musicians have been pressing four claims against the BBC for some time now. They have already enforced (1) a restriction on the use of gramophone records (made for sale to the public) on a scale that would leave New Zealand Broadcasting quite helpless. They also want (2) a prohibition on recorded repeats of any programme (concert, opera, etc.) which contains more than 20 minutes' of orchestral playing; a full studio fee for relays from theatre and dance halls (i.e. a fee three or four times what is at present paid for a performance involving no extra work by the players); and (4) a minimum fee for studio work that is higher than that now given by other employers for public concerts.

Obviously all these are interconnected. For instance, the claim for higher pay for a relay from an outside performance must be considered together with any ban on recorded repeats of such a relay. And the BBC has argued that none of the four can be considered on its own.

Therefore, when the Musicians' Union threatened to strike on the one issue of higher studio rates, and ordered all its members to refuse studio engagements from August 1 (a convenient day, because it was also a Sunday, and the beginning of a week's programmes in the *Radio Times*), the BBC refused outright, demanding that all the four questions be discussed together.

Calm and proper statements were made by both sides, and then on July 15 the BBC sent out a special edition of its cyclostyled press handout "Broadcasting News" with the black letterhead that replaces the routine red one on special occasions. It talked of "harmonious relations" and of the BBC's realising "its responsibility as a large-scale employer." Since 1939, the handout said, the BBC has doubled its employment of outside musicians and is at present paying a million pounds a year to union members. It not only pays many of them higher rates than the agreed minimum but also recognises an obligation to pay good salaries to its own staff orchestras (who were not involved in the dispute); for instance it pays £15 a week to the rank and file of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and £13 a week in the regional orchestras, with extra fees for the use of their records, and a provident fund for members.

One hint of bitterness came at the end of the statement. The BBC suggested that the musicians "shall not



regard the BBC's resources, which are the licence fees of its listeners, as a fund to be perpetually raided."

Next, the union said it would consider altering the strike date if the BBC would stop being obstinate and hold a meeting, or submit to arbitration. Ten days later the union held a lively meeting and confirmed the strike date. Entrance was by union card only. Sir Thomas Beecham, carrying stick and gloves, sat in the second row, and said that after 20 years' experience he knew the BBC to be "bad payers."

Next day the Minister of Labour (Mr. Isaacs) stepped in; the union and the BBC accepted his invitation to a joint meeting with the Ministry's chief reconciliation officer. Meanwhile, the BBC had made and announced its plans for reduced programmes on August 1, with the Home Service and Light programme merged during the daytime, and splitting up only at night. The Third, which had already arranged for relays from the Salzburg Festival, had its music quota provided for, and was to be unaltered. All programmes were to close at 11.0 p.m.

Then came the announcement that the strike was off. The meeting in the Ministry of Labour had produced concessions by both sides, but chiefly by the BBC, which had agreed to submit the higher studio fees question to arbitration, having already blankly stated that it was "not susceptible to arbitration." The Union had evidently agreed that the independent committee which the Ministry will appoint could also consider the other three collateral questions. The next step, therefore, is the naming of the committee.

"Major Snub"

All might have been well for the BBC, if there had not been a bitter dreg in the bottom of the glass, which had to be swallowed. The cyclo-styled handout of July 15 had been given a prominent place in the *Radio Times* containing this week's programmes, and nine million copies had been printed; "not susceptible to arbitration," said the BBC, having meanwhile agreed to arbitration. It was just one of those things. But the *Sunday Chronicle* says resignations may follow, because the BBC's recantation followed a "major snub" from the Ministry. That may or may not be so.

(continued on next page)

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