

Britain at Work

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The Headscarf Revolutionaries

March 8 International Women's Day special issue

Jayaben Desai and Urmilaben Patel on the Grunwick picket line (photo: Urmilaben Patel); Lillian Bilocca, one of the 'headscarf revolutionaries' who led the 1968 Hull trawler safety struggle (photo: Hull Daily Mail)

In this issue, we celebrate International Women's Day 2016. Marking the year 1968 with a fight for safety on the Hull trawlers and highlighting the contribution women have made in the daily battle for workers' rights, dignity and social change, summed up in that old slogan 'Bread & Roses'. To celebrate the achievements of women, we have included extracts from 7 of the oral history interviews conducted by the Britain at Work West London Project. One of the pioneering studies of working class women is the book 'A Women's Place, An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940' by Elizabeth Roberts, published in 1984. Based on an interview programme supported by the North-West Regional Studies Centre at the University of Lancaster, it built on the social history work being done in France and Britain.

Hull Headscarf Revolutionaries 1968



'Surely the first responsibility of socialist historians is to promote as widely as possible the discussion of the accumulated historical experiences of the working class and socialist movement, and help re-create a strong sense of the history which brought people to the positions inherent in contemporary political struggles.'
Ken Worpole, 1981.

One of the 'lost' episodes in history that has recently been re-discovered is the massive fight waged by a group of women in Hull who engaged in a relentless fight after three trawlers sank in 1968 with the loss of 58 crew members. Led by Lillian Bilocca, they waged a campaign for better conditions and proper safety protection for the men who worked on the trawlers. Lily Bilocca worked in the fish house on the Hull dockside filleting and packing trawlers' catches in ice. The loss of three trawlers at sea in the winter of 1968 galvanised a whole community to tackle the appalling neglect of their crews by their fishing bosses, even failing to raise the alarm for one of the ships, the St Romanus, for two weeks. This ship had no radio operator and its wireless equipment was faulty.

Lily launched a petition in protest and hundreds of women responded to her call for urgent action. The TGWU came into the picture but the men could not strike due to the restrictive Merchant Shipping Acts. When another ship, the St Keverne, was about to depart, one of the crew called out to Lily "We ain't got no radio man", and she immediately attempted to jump on to the ship and was restrained by the police.

Lily Bilocca leading a protest march in Hull (photo Hull Daily Mail)

This caused a national scandal and a number of women ended up meeting the Labour government in London.

Lily was attacked as a troublemaker by the press, was sacked from her job and blacklisted for the rest of her life. Despite the run-down of the fishing industry in Hull, the courage of the women and the organising of a community at the beginning of the year of the 'events' in France, makes this battle an important signpost in working-class history. It is thanks to Brian Lavery's new book 'The Headscarf Revolutionaries' (2015), with its meticulous research, that we have a full record of this struggle. International Women's Day 2016 is all the stronger for having such a history at its heart. Dave Welsh 'The Headscarf Revolutionaries', Brian W Lavery, (Barbican Press, Hull & London, 2015) £12.99.

Just 4 years later, in July 1972, Hull dockers joined a national ports strike in the support of the Pentonville 5. Sir John Donaldson, judge of the National Industrial Relations Court (NIRC), set up by the Heath government to curb the unions, had ordered the arrest of 5 dockers who had been taking action at container depots. The majority of Britain's 42,000 dockers were soon on strike to secure the release of the 5 men. They were quickly released and the dock strike helped to overturn the Industrial Relations Act. Hull dockworkers had taken part in an attempt to form a breakaway union from the TGWU in 1954.

Women workers interviews



Irmilaben Patel, Jan Pollock, Vee Davis and Marie Kamara

Irmilaben Patel I was born in Kenya. I was brought up there and I had a marriage there. I had children there. I don't know much about India. Actually I'm Indian, my parents are from Gujarat... At the beginning, of course, we had a problem getting jobs, actually. I went for a job in Harlesden, sorting (medicine) capsules. I worked at Save On part time as a cashier. I was working part time because the children were coming home from school at 3pm. Four or five years I worked there... I got a job at Grunwick's. I was sorting. People would send in their postal order money and everything, and film for processing in the cover. So, I would open it and make a record of what works (in Chapter Road). Anyway, one day, one of my colleagues (Mrs Desai) and her son were working in the sorting department—something happened in the sorting department. Something happened with the foreman, they walked out, and they thought that we were forming a union. So all the women came out. They wanted to form a union. I also walked out. I would not go inside. Yes, supporting the others to bring a union there. I didn't have any problem at all, let me tell you... I walked out for something good.

Jan Pollock Well, it was when a lot of equality issues were only new to the union (NUT), or newish. And I attended the Inner London Teachers Association, which was the place where all the different branches got together... People found me a bit peculiar because I felt that equality was, well, a lot of the straight white men felt that I 'overdid' it on equality, they seemed to think I was a bit of a woman that would 'always go on' about such things, certainly because they forced you to! Women's pay, but wider issues as well because there were terrible rows. A lot of them got annoyed at the idea of having a chairperson, or a chair, as opposed to a chairman. It used to annoy me having to raise simple, pathetic things like that. But there was a gang of women who also wanted to raise not only women's issues, but also anti-racist stuff and a whole range of issues. One of the school-keepers, who it became obvious was a fascist, had a big girly calendar, of women for each

month in very, very tiny bikinis, in those revolting so-called 'kinky' poses, we discussed it in the union branch, and then sent to the deputy head, to point out that the caretaker had to take it down. And sure enough the man did.

Marie Kamara (Marie was in a dance group) Most of them were originally from Africa, their origin was African and West Indian. I think there was a Martinique person there and like myself, English black. There were about 10 girls and 10 or 15 men. One night, somewhere out of London, if I didn't finish the concert I wouldn't get paid, I had to go and finish a job and I had two children with me and they were in the audience and I was doing the fire eating... I did the mind over matter: when you hear the rhythm, then you do fire eating. Now if the rhythm's not right, you can burn yourself. Auditions used to be hell because you couldn't get the atmosphere. Still got scars there (on the forearm). It's just that when the wind blew when you did the outside thing it's unpredictable, the flame, you know.

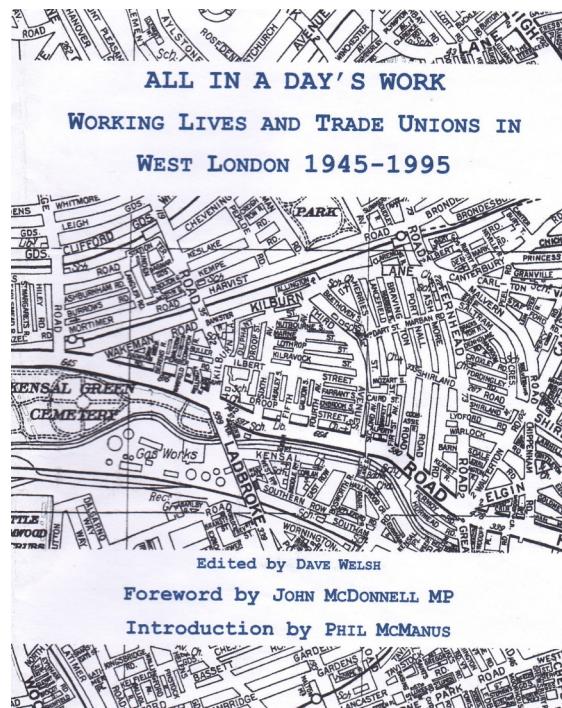
Pam Osborne (At Minimax in Feltham) the divide was men were managers and women generally weren't. The only managerial that was female was actually in personnel. The men were all managers basically. The sales reps were men. Because women actually didn't have many rights then... it was generally accepted that women got married, had babies, didn't work. Probably in the 70s I think it started to change. The finance became easier. When I got married and we were getting a mortgage, my money was not taken into consideration at all. When I went to buy a washing machine in the 70s, I didn't have to have a guarantor so things got better for women in that respect. When I had my children, there wasn't maternity leave, you were expected to give up work and look after the children. (After four and a half years of looking after the children) I got a job in a pre-school in Uxbridge and then a job as a dinner lady which actually paid more! And that was in the local junior school where my daughter went.

Women Workers

Rose Madden Coming from Ireland at 18 (in 1957) I had worked in shops and places, I didn't even know what a union was. By the time I was working at Smith's, I noticed the difference (of having a union) straight away—all those fights would have been done and dusted, I was benefiting from them. As soon as the ladies there called the union meeting, the shop steward came, there was no question about it then, we were going to get what we asked for... Health and safety in regard to the atmosphere you worked in, to have it bright and airy, and not so smelly. I'm sure McVitie's & Price's in Harlesden paid probably a third of what I got paid in Smith's in Cricklewood for the same hours. I didn't dislike my time in the factories as I said but I do say that the union stood up for people and in the cleaning industry you could be expected to do two women's work just because that woman forgot to show up and then get exactly the same pay. I do, I fully support the unions, I think they're needed badly, and it's a crying shame that half the power's been taken away from them.

Vee Davis (In the 50s) I used to get the train, jump off at Hammersmith and go around the corner and just keep walking down until you get to Osram... they give me hell there. I was the first black in that little unit and they give me hell. Osram was something else. But to me when they were going blackie and Sambo and all of this, I wonder what the hell they were talking about. But I noticed my supervisor, she was a fantastic woman, English woman, she was always coming behind the little screen and cuddle me and say things like don't take any notice of them. I just do the job and what I have to do, you know, and hear this talking, talking, talking. I stayed there about four or five years, I worked for this Jewish man on Shepherds Bush, scything leather, you know those shoes they used to make, like platted shoes but they were all done on a machine—you pass the leather through to get that smooth effect. I think I was getting £5 or £6 a week.

Christine Rowe It felt to me as though we were building a new society, that our mothers had built a new society because of the war, holding it together when the men were away. We were up in Scotland living in a farm cottage with no running water or electricity when my father was in London being bombed. So I felt that me and my friends in London were building a new way for women to be, where we could call the shots, where we were in control of things like contraception, boyfriends, how we wanted to live our lives. (Later in London) I went to my bank manager at Notting Hill Gate and said look I've saved a 10% deposit, what about lending me



the money to get a mortgage? And do you know what he did? He locked the door and came over and put his hand on my knee, and I had to threaten to scream before he would let me out. That was a shocking experience to me, that turned me into a quite ardent feminist at that time. I remember sitting around one evening in the pub after a union meeting with a dozen friends from the Regional Women's Committee, we were educated teachers in our profession and, every one of them recounted an experience where they'd been attacked in the street. Of course I was tall and had lots of hair in those days, Angela Davis hair you know, but that was in some way thought to be provocative.

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 The 'All in a Day's Work' book with foreword by Labour shadow chancellor John McDonnell is available for £12.80 with p&p contact rима@britainatworklondon.com or phone 0207 2727649

Grunwick 40—Help mark the 40th anniversary of the Grunwick strike. The plans for the commemorations are taking shape. Grunwick 40 now have permission to install a mural on a prominent wall very close to the factory site in Willesden. This will be a permanent public reminder of the unity and solidarity that Grunwick represented and ensure that the history is remembered. You can get involved in the design of the mural by coming along to one of several workshops during April. Grunwick40@gmail.com Brent Trades Council