

Britain at Work

London project newsletter issue 6 January/February 2014



2014 is a year of anniversaries. It's the 30th of the miners' strike, the struggle to defend mining jobs and communities from the onslaught of Thatcher's government in 1984. We plan to mark this courageous fight-back with regular information and interviews with people involved in miners' support groups in London. 2014 is also the anniversary of the start of the imperialist slaughter of the First World War. We will feature articles by historians of the conflict and other relevant material throughout the coming year.

Britain at Work London Group

www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork



Barry Amiel &
Norman Melburn Trust



Britain at Work 1945-95 London Project

'Every union has a history, and every member is part of that history.' In this year of anniversaries, the Britain at Work London Project celebrates its first year. So we thought it would be useful to review what we did in 2013 and to outline our plans for the future. Britain at Work is a national programme collecting oral testimonies of the post-war labour movement. Its two most successful collections to date have been 'Constructing Post-War Britain: Building Workers Stories 1950-70' (2010) based at the University of Westminster, and the west London project based at Historytalk (Kensington & Chelsea Community History Group), where over a hundred interviews were collected (2008-12). After the closure of Historytalk in 2012, Britain at Work London was formed to complete the original project and launch a new two-year project covering north and central London. The London project aims to maintain its close ties with the national Britain at Work programme in 2014.

Funding for the project has come from a variety of sources including Phil McManus (ex Kodak worker), the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Lipman-Miliband Trust, the Society for the Study of Labour History, UNITE 1/684 branch and Kensington & Chelsea Trades Council. With more funding, the project will have a sound financial basis for its activities in 2014. We would especially like to thank Christine Coates at the TUC Library for her unstinting support for Britain at Work and previous projects. Chris plans to retire in 2014 and will be sorely missed. The new project has finished the transcription of 100 interviews and 68 have now been added to the

TUC Library Collections website www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork We have a strong commitment to ensuring that all future interviews go to the TUC Library Collections because this is the best means of reaching a trade union audience. We have published six issues of this newsletter, which have combined interview extracts with news, reviews and articles by supporters. The newsletter goes out electronically to 100 contacts and is also available in hard copy for conferences, branch meetings, bookshops and so on. We welcome articles and other contributions such as photos and artefacts. We are in contact with 40 people who wish to be interviewed in the future and the list keeps growing (thanks to Megan Dobney at SERTUC). Several interviews in north and central London have already taken place and we hope to do at least 50 in 2014.

The 1984 Cabinet papers confirm that the Thatcher government planned to destroy the mining industry and the NUM. It was prepared to use the army allied with a state of emergency to break the strike. Thatcher was able to deploy the full force of the state (including the use of 2, 800 troops in 13 specialist teams) and to rely on the media to launch a massive anti-NUM propaganda campaign. Nevertheless, strikes in the docks and on the railways posed a serious threat to Thatcher's strategy. The Cabinet papers show that the miners' strike, drawing on the unmistakable rank and file solidarity on a mass scale in the workplace and local communities, was on the brink of defeating the state and changing the course of history. **Britain at Work London Group**

The banner features a dark red background with the text 'Britain at Work' in large white letters, followed by 'Voices from the Workplace 1945-1995' in smaller white letters. On the right, the London Metropolitan University logo is visible. Below the text, there are three historical images: a black and white photo of a man in a military-style uniform, a yellow poster for a 'MASS RALLY AND PICKET' for the 'CARNERS STRIKE' on 'OCTOBER 7TH', and a black and white photo of a group of people holding protest signs for the 'GRUNWICK STRIKE' with slogans like 'STOP THE N.A.F.F!' and 'CUT GRUNWICK OFF NOW!'.

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1984-5 Miners Strike Lionel Hackett/Jim Hyde/Allan Tyrrell



Lionel Hackett (worked on London buses from 1957 until 1969 and then as a postman) I was a conductor for two to three years and then in 1960 I went driving trolley buses, with London Transport. Eight hours a day, for instance, the first shift at my trolley depot we used to start four in the morning and I had to make my way there, when I first came I lived in Shepherd's Bush and early in the morning I used to walk from there to Hammersmith Broadway to get the staff train to Hounslow East station and walk about ten minutes to my depot to pick up my bus from there... the very first year (1958) we went on strike with the union for eight weeks... I think unions are very important today because if they don't have a union, employers would do whatever they feel like, you know, I draw one conclusion, when you look at Arthur Scargill what he was saying all along proved right because when he said they would close down the pits and things like that a lot of people didn't believe it, but it comes to pass that it happened. The trouble was and why he didn't get what he wanted, because they said 'united we'll stand, divided we'll fall' and some of the same people went and set up their own union and others were going to work. If everybody had come together there would have been a settlement.

Jim Hyde (after working at Firestone's tyre factory on the Great West Road from 1951 to 72) I had 18 years with Hammersmith and Fulham Council as a park keeper. How it started off at all is my wife was in the GMB as well and we started collecting for coming up to Christmas, we went to shops and everywhere, on the streets and we were collecting money and food for the miners' children and then we had bonfires in Ravenscourt Park at that time and we had collections. We collected an awful lot of money for miners' children at that time. And you know that at the time they (the police) were trying to stop people going to picket lines, we were stopped a good few times I tell you. You see the thing was, Maggie bought the police didn't she? She bought the police, she gave 'em a rise and she gave them everything because she was working up to this, and they helped her. I remember being down in Kent, with the Kent miners when they were on strike and there

was a bloody coach load of police from London going in. There were only seven allowed on the picket line at that time, and they were going into the gate and the windows of the coach opened and they were waving fivers, saying 'Come on, keep it going lads, we're earning plenty out of it'. If that wasn't stirring it up, like you go to the police? But if you can't trust the police... We were collecting for the miners' children in King Street, there was five or six of us there, we were collecting outside the Co-op... we were collecting there and the Co-op rang up the police and there were three or four vans came down and they bundled us all into the police vans, and I and my wife Dolores were there... and we were put in the van and me and my wife and Clive Soley and a couple of others, and the policeman sitting in the front of the van with the driver was one of the head blokes...now Clive Soley said to the police, on what charges, he said, are you picking us up, because we weren't obstructing the traffic, we weren't doing nothing? ... and your man said don't fucking worry, that's the very words he said, don't fucking worry, mate, by the time we get to the police station we'll have thought of one.

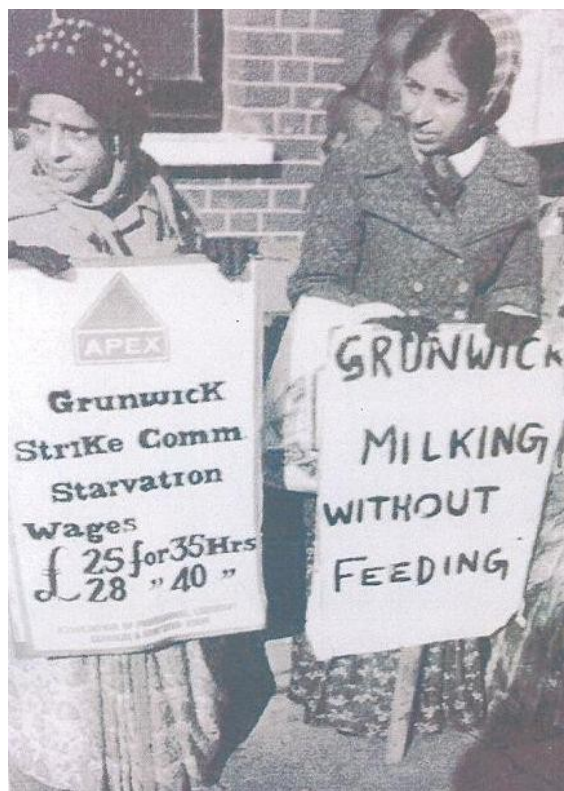
Allan Tyrrell Yeah, 2010 there'd be some muppets out there saying 'Well you was overpriced and you killed the industry'. No, Margaret Thatcher killed it. There's no ifs, and or buts. Anyone don't believe it, go up to the north-east of England, go out to Wales, where, when the miners' strike was on, I was in the union. Rather than give money, we decided, because the Daily Mail—and I'm a reader of the Daily Mail—the Daily Mail highlighted that money was going to the miners, and said they were spending the money in the miners' workingmen's clubs. And we as a union said 'Right we won't do that. The money we collect, we'll buy food.' And we bought vast amounts of tins of beans and that, and we used to take it up with the vans... I was on the last miners' demonstration, and I'm proud of this, and it'll always live with me, and I hope my grandson don't forget it... went on the final miners' march in town, up the city, through parliament and that. Tens of thousands, my union (Furniture, Timber & Allied Trades) was there. I took my grandson, he was only little, in his pushchair.

Work History from Below

'I hope that people can listen to our stories and understand them, and go on to do something better'. Urmilaben Patel, Grunwick striker. Britain at Work London is all about 'history from below'. Contemporary working class history, as told by the people who made that history, is an essential source for historians of the labour movement. It's also important to record the testimonies of activists who are now in their 70s and 80s, or even older, before it's too late. The interviews already done by Britain at Work give some indication of the richness of this history: sometimes reaching national proportions as at Trico or Grunwick but mostly highlighting the daily struggles over rights, equalities, and health and safety in the workplace or sometimes just being Bolshie for the sheer hell of it. But this is not a big pat on the back for the movement. The defeats, mistakes, failures and cock-ups as told by the people on the front line, are also part of this history.

Britain at Work counters the anti-working class views that have become common in recent decades. The emergence of the organised working class after the Second World War gave it a prominence and a power that showed itself in the media and wider cultural Institutions. Thatcherism's assault on the working class started to reverse these gains and was accompanied by an ideological assault on working class communities, describing them as 'chavs' or victims. On the contrary, the oral history shows just how creative people have been at work in building a trade union presence when faced with victimisation, bullying, blacklisting and government-backed repression. Counter-planning on the shop floor has produced organisation, ideas and debates that help to make up working class culture. For an excellent survey of this see 'All Knees and Elbows of Susceptibility and Refusal: Reading History from Below' by Antony Iles and Tom Roberts (Mute Books 2012).

Britain at Work has shown how important place is for the history of work and working conditions. West London, for example, has many iconic factories such as Firestones, Guinness, or Hoover and, whilst some have been demolished, they are places through which the history can be studied. This is not, by the way, the same as the tired cliché 'dig where you stand', which has become the mantra of oral history. It is about showing the places where people worked and putting those places into a wider local, regional or national context. And it isn't just in the factory, workplaces such as railway depots, banks, offices and hospitals, reflect the huge variety of working life. We know that working class history is no longer concerned to build up a stereotypical Stalinist or vanguardist male, non-disabled white worker who leads the



Jayaben Desai and Urmilaben Patel

benighted workers towards the revolution. Oral history suggests the more reflective, tentative, unrecognised ways in which people fought to gain improvements.

Perhaps we need a reassessment of the recent (1945-95) history of work and trade unions and how we might combine forces in the future. The labour movement appears more receptive to its own history and trade union education may be opening up and moving towards the 'lived' history of its members; see the Working Class Movement Library's 'Invisible Histories'. Some unions are redirecting themselves towards community organising, opening up possibilities for new kinds of union training and education. New initiatives such as Independent Working Class Education (IWCE) suggest that debates are taking place around the past, present and future of the working class. Britain at Work London is one of many oral history projects that seek to record contemporary workplace history, see the Derby History Group, BECTU and News International project. No one organisation has the 'franchise' for labour movement oral history but, nationally, Britain at Work can act as an umbrella and the TUC Library Collections as a site for this new wave of 'history from below'. **Dave Welsh**

We will also be publishing the Britain at Work London book *All in a Day's Work* in 2014. secretary Dave Welsh/ chairman John O'Mahony/treasurer Jan Pollock/ outreach/IT Rima Joebear/newsletter editor Tom Vague

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