

Britain at Work

London project newsletter issue 1 March 2013



Welcome to the first issue of the new Britain at Work (London) Project newsletter. It's based on the successful Britain at Work project which carried out over a hundred interviews about work and trade union activity in west London. We plan to continue doing interviews across the whole of the capital, starting with north and central London. We hope to do a hundred interviews across both private and public sectors with people who were working in the period 1945-1995. These interviews will be placed on the TUC Library Collections website where the existing west London interviews are being located—go to www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork We will be publishing a booklet called *All in a Day's Work* which will include extracts from all the west London interviews as well as background information and a photographic record.

Work in Britain has changed massively in the last 60 years. Many jobs being done in the 40s and 50s have either disappeared or have been hugely changed by technology. In public services such as the NHS or education, the work people do has often been transformed. Even the idea of what constitutes a workplace has changed, and change itself has become the norm. The trade union movement has faced a vast onslaught from both governments and employers since its expansion to over 12 million members in the 60s and 70s. Unions, their elected representatives and their members, have had to carry on with the day-to-day struggle to defend workers both individually and collectively. It's therefore vitally important that we record what people have done in the post-war period.

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Football and Work by John O'Mahony



Post-war Football and the Maximum Wage (Part 1): Professional football in England experienced an unprecedented boom in the post-Second World War period. However, the rise in attendance did not trickle down to an improvement in conditions for the players. They were still subject to the old 'retain and transfer' policy, which meant that clubs could retain a player's registration, thereby preventing him from moving on and, also, refusing to pay a player if he requested a transfer. Footballers were also subject to the rigidity of the maximum wage conditions that had prevailed in the sport ever since it became a professional game.

By the late 50s, a concerted effort was being made by the professional footballers' union to shake off these shackles. The re-named Professional Footballers' Association (formerly the Players' Union), under its new chairman, the enterprising and charismatic Jimmy Hill, then a player for Fulham (later TV personality and chairman), campaigned vigorously for the abolition of these restraints on its members' working conditions. After a ballot mandated the union to threaten strike action, a meeting between the PFA and the Football League led to the abolition of the maximum wage (then set at £20 per week) in 1961. Jimmy Hill also felt that he had come away with a binding agreement to abolish the 'retain and transfer' system. However, a few months later this agreement was reneged upon by a meeting of the football league clubs.

A decade earlier, in 1950, Neil Franklin, a player with Stoke City and an England international, had tried to improve his lot by signing to play for a Colombian team in the summer, for a weekly wage of £60 a week and (a then colossal) signing on fee of £2,000. However, having returned to England following this short-lived adventure, he found himself banned indefinitely by his club (before being sold on) and permanently ostracised from international football.

The first beneficiary of the abolition of the maximum wage in England was Johnny Haynes of Fulham, with his chairman Tommy Trinder being forced to make good on his rather rash statement to the press that he would pay Haynes £100 a week should this eventually ever come to pass. One amusing anecdote of the maximum wage era concerns Haynes' great pal and Fulham colleague, the rather more modestly talented Tosh Chamberlain. On finding that his pal Johnny had been given a pay rise, Tosh went into see the chairman and was refused, being told in no uncertain terms that Haynes was an infinitely superior player to him. Tosh returned and requested remunerative parity for the close season, on the grounds that Haynes wasn't a better player in the non-active summer recess.

John O'Mahony—B@W London Group chair and *A Kick Up The R's* reporter/picture QPR players help with terrace work (to be continued in the next issue)

Recording Oral History—Some Experiences by Sarah Boston

In 1976 I set about making a documentary for the BBC about the strike of women chain makers in Cradley Heath 1910. With my researcher we tramped the streets of Cradley Heath tracking down women who had been chain makers and were involved in the strike. We found a few and interviewed them. Edited versions of those interviews were used in the documentary and the transcripts are now lodged in the TUC library—a precious piece of history. Had I not interviewed them then but left it, even for a very few years, no one who had been in that landmark strike would have been alive to give their oral testimony.

Their memories add immeasurably to our understanding of the work the women did, their wages and their experience of that strike. The women were bemused that I wanted to interview them. They had no sense of the important place they had in the history of trades unionism or that their descriptions of their lives and work as women chain makers would be of interest to anyone. This assumption by working people that their stories of life and work are of little or no importance I have found to be, all too often, the case. The consequence of this assumption for the researcher is that few keep any record; photos, press cuttings, memorabilia; of their lives, their work and struggles for a better wage. But they have their memories.

It was to capture those memories before they were lost that the TUC invited myself and a colleague, Jenny Morgan, to work on a filmed oral history project: *Winning Equal Pay: the value of women's work*. * The project interviewed women, and the men who had supported them, who had fought and won equal pay for work of equal value cases. The first set of interviews, sometime before the feature film *Made in Dagenham* reached cinema screens, was with the Ford Dagenham sewing machinists who had gone on strike in 1968 and again in 1984 for recognition of the skill of their work.

One of the things that emerged during these interview sessions, and the others in the TUC project, was that bringing together the interviewees in a group was very productive. The participants gained confidence as the filming sessions progressed and as each jogged the memory of the others more and more stories were recounted. We ensured that plenty of time, and tea breaks, were built into each recording helping the stories to flow. In 2068—a hundred years on—we will still be able to hear the voices of the sewing machinists that brought the mighty Ford empire in the UK to a standstill just as in 2010, a hundred years after the strike of women chain makers in Cradley Heath, we could listen to the voices of women who took part.

* www.unionhistory.info/equalpay

Interview with Vee Davis

Rima Joebear: Hi Vee. Hi. Would you start by telling us a little bit about your background and then we can talk about when you went to your first job? Yeah, my background is West Indian woman, right. I've been in this country '57 to now. 50 whatever years. You know, came up on a banana boat, quite green and a bit backward. How old were you? Old enough to know. In my 20s, my late 20s. I came here 1957. I'm 80 now, so work it out... I got up the morning, it dark like hell, I'm thinking when will I see the sun? because you go to bed it dark, you get up in the morning it dark, because it was November and those days they had that smog and fog and everything looked black, even the clothes that people wear look black, everybody was in grey and black, no colours. So I got up that morning. Someone had told me how to get to, not to Osram, to register. It used to be across Queensway... Someone told me go there and get registered and I just got up and do things on me own. So they suggested that you to go to Osram's? I don't think they suggested. Someone had told me before and I went, I was looking for a job. Where was Osram's? Osram is, used to be right where Tesco's is now in Hammersmith in Brook Green... you remember the fire station there, the Palais there, and right in that corner there it was Osram, the whole big building was Osram. And this was where they made? Lightbulbs!



But my god, when I got there they didn't tell me what I'm making. I don't know, I was sitting there doing something with you know little fiddly things. Electric things? Yeah, looking down a sort of microscope and you see these little things and you have to straighten them, for they going into something. Somebody had said it was for the war. I don't know what the hell I was doing but I was doing it. For the war? That's what they said, I can't understand what the people said. Korean war? Which war? Not the Boer war. (laughs) We just had the second war, the last war. Something was going on, some unrest was going on, I don't know. But they were making this thing and I don't know if they were using it in a bug or where they were using it, all I know is I was doing it. You had to get them straight, like lined up straight, and you had this little machine you fiddled with...

Britain at Work 1945-95 Oral History Project by Mike Gold

Britain at Work 1945-95 is a nationwide oral history programme set up by historians, social scientists, community history groups and librarians of labour history collections. It aims to collect memories of the working lives of men and women, and bring their voices back into the mainstream of contemporary Britain. Working from a number of different centres under a national steering committee, it aims to find people from a wide range of workplaces. This includes accounts of their work and trade union activities. It acts as an umbrella for an increasing number of oral history projects. The inspiration for the programme was the Workers' War oral history project in 2004-06. Over one hundred interviews with World War 2 civilian veterans were carried out under the auspices of the TUC and the National Pensioners' Convention, and placed on the TUC Library Collections website: Workers' War: Home Front Revisited at www.unionhistory.info/workerswar

Britain at Work builds on the success of the Workers' War project. Interviews cover the period of post-war reconstruction, when there was growth in jobs, expanding trade union membership and a new democratic input by women and ethnic minority workers. This period of economic reconstruction was a watershed in the history of work and industrial relations. Traditional industries such as coal mining and shipbuilding co-existed with the expanding NHS, Post Office and telecommunications. The construction industry grew with social housing and motorways, whilst entertainment created jobs in television and film. In the 60s, the shop steward became a familiar figure in the press as governments were confronted by shop-floor militancy.



Britain at Work London Group secretary Dave Welsh/ chair John O'Mahony/treasurer Jan Pollock/outreach/IT Rima Joebear/newsletter editor Tom Vague/contributors Sarah Boston—author of *Women Workers and Trade Unions* and producer of *A Woman's Work/Vee Davis/ Mike Gold—chair of B&W national steering group*

From the late 1960s, industrial conflict began to intensify associated with changes in the labour process, de-industrialisation, new union legislation and issues of racism and sex discrimination. The 1972 NUM strike, the UCATT national building industry strike, and the long-running strikes at Trico and Grunwick in west London were all key examples. There were also repeated government attempts to reform industrial relations, including the 1971 Industrial Relations Act and the 1974 Trade Union and Labour Relations Act.

Britain at Work provides a supportive and collegial framework for research into the period 1945-1995. It aims to promote, collect and make accessible on-line oral history interviews and research. Interviews and other material collected by the various projects are available on the website at www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork linked to The Union Makes Us Strong: TUC History Online. In 2012 it helped to organise a successful Oral Labour History Day at the Bishopsgate Institute, and is currently organising a follow-up event, with a focus on migrant workers, for May 11 2013, also at the Bishopsgate Institute.

For further information on B@W, contact Stefan Dickers (secretary), Bishopsgate Institute stefan.dickers@bishopsgate.org.uk or Michael Gold (chair) at Royal Holloway College London m.gold@rhul.ac.uk The B@W website project is led by Chris Coates c.coates@londonmet.ac.uk If you live in north or central London and would like to be interviewed, please get in touch. Or you might like to become a supporter of the Britain at Work (London) Group.



cover pictures London's Burning 1949/2013 Firefighters march over Westminster bridge in 1949, over pay claim delays/FBU lobby of the Fire Brigade Authority on January 21 2013 over station, staff and appliances cuts. Paul Davey Demotix Press Association/left Sheet Metal Workers Union banner at 1983 unemployment march