

Britain at Work

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Not just All in a Day's Work: How we made history

Over 60 people packed the launch of 'All in a Day's Work' in March. Held at Unite's London & Eastern office, this was an opportunity for interviewees, supporters and friends to gather in a celebration of what had been achieved in post war West London through the collective efforts of trade unionists and activists. Our three speakers captured the spirit of the times with Sally Groves reminding the audience of the Trico battle for equal pay, Sarah Boston focusing on women trade unionists and Phil McManus outlining the struggles at Kodak in Harrow for trade union rights. John McDonnell MP was unable to attend but sent a pre-recorded video of his speech (at: www.britainatworklondon.com). The chair, Colin Prescod, a long-time friend of the London project, brought his passionate and sensitive understanding of workers' struggles to bear.

This was not an exercise in nostalgia. Speaker after speaker from the floor talked about the victories and defeats, the ups and downs and the appalling conditions of work that often had to be overcome. The role of women, as shown in the book, was highlighted by Sally and Sarah and, following Phil's contribution, it was clear that we needed to reclaim the history that had been made by several generations of trade unionists. Phil had pointed out that we should be proud of what was achieved even if many of the gains had been thrown back in the eighties and nineties. People had fought, day-in day-out, to win more control over the workplace and the work that was done in it and, in the process, had built trade union organisation, better working conditions, pay and health and safety for all.

All in a Day's Work: launch-pad to future action



All in a Day's Work book launch featuring Phil McManus, Colin Prescod, Sally Groves and Sarah Boston

'All in a Day's Work' launch continued: And whilst history is not a road map for the future, this spirit can show today's trade unionists what can be done collectively. In a period when young people are being crushed at work by zero hours contracts, bullying, discrimination, an appallingly long hours culture and lack of rights, it is important to bring the message that collective action can bring results. Today, we are told (Guardian 22.3.16) that work will be an 'adventure' and that young people therefore have to develop the social skills 'to please your boss', needing to know 'when the boss's face goes red, you can't just swipe left and move on'. It's hard to know where to start when you read this: suffice to say that when the boss's face goes red, it's time to call in the union because bullying, intimidation and victimisation are likely to follow. And the message from the launch was: we will need to rebuild unions in the workplace if social progress is to be achieved in the future.

The launch of 'All in A Day's Work' brought to an end one chapter in the work of the Britain at Work London Project. We are continuing to do interviews in north and central London as well as spreading the word about the collection of oral history inside the trade union branches

and trades councils. We have launched a new project called 'Over and Under', an oral history of London's public transport. Finally, many thanks to all the people who have helped the project over many years and to Janet MacLeod and Danny Freeman at Unite for their help at the launch. **Dave Welsh**

Britain at Work London Project website launched As well as the launch of the book, we now have our own B@W London website. It's designed to showcase what we have done: our first big publication 'All in a Day's Work', our bi-monthly newsletters and, as we build it, extracts from West London interviews and other special topics. It will report on the progress of our future work as well as encouraging people who worked in North and Central London to be interviewed (we have already done 21 new interviews), and will also feature our new public transport project 'Over & Under'. We hope it will give the London Project a new profile and help in creating a national hub for labour movement oral history. It will have links to other websites including the TUC Library Collections www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork Please go to www.britainatworklondon.com
Rima Joebear B@W London website editor

TRICO strike play and The Ghost Bus of Ladbroke Grove



Out on The Costa Del Trico 1976—how a feminist theatre group supported the Trico Equal pay Strike. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s there was an abundance, in fact a positive explosion, of political theatre in the UK. This was theatre on the 'fringe' of the mainstream, which toured to community venues, pubs, small theatres, factories, picket lines, shopping centres, anywhere some kind of a stage or space could be found to put on a show. The plays often contributed to the industrial disputes of the time, serving them by exploring political issues and raising awareness. These were heady days when the 'alternative' creative industries saw theatre as a tool for political change, not just in the workplace but also in the whole area of sexual politics. Much of this theatre was subsidised by the Arts Council of Great Britain or regional funding organisations. Heady days indeed!

The Women's Theatre Group (WTG), formed in 1973, was one such group, an all female collective who believed that everyone in the company was equal and could contribute to making and producing plays. Their 4th production, a musical play, 'Out on the Costa del Trico', was devised by the company to support the successful equal pay strike at the Trico windscreen wiper manufacturing factory in Brentford. The play was so called because the strike took place during the famous heatwave of summer 1976. The Women's Theatre group were considering subjects for their 4th production when the equal pay strike came to their attention. One member of the theatre group said later, "We went down to the picket line, saw what was happening, talked to some of the women and decided there and then to do a play about the strike... Everyone agreed it was an ideal subject." The play was written in consultation with the strikers and the action was set mainly on the picket line, where the women and their supporters courageously stood their ground for months against the police, scab lorries and the hostile press. The show opened at the Bush Theatre and toured into 1977 to enthusiastic audiences. **Tierl Thompson**

One of the stranger west London tales involves a ghost bus that haunted the junction of Cambridge Gardens and St Mark's Road in North Kensington in the mid-30s. The strange encounters with the number 7 bus (it was always a number 7) would always occur at 1.15 am, outside of the hours that it would normally operate. In June 1934, a young motorist was fatally injured when his car swerved off the road, hit a lamppost and burst into flames. Witnesses said it had swerved off the road to avoid a number 7 bus which was hurtling down the middle of the road. Typically, witnesses related the same story—a number 7 bus would be tearing down the middle of the road, forcing people to take hasty evasive action to avoid it by swinging their vehicles off the road. When they looked back after it, no bus was ever seen. People did try to offer rational explanations for this strange phenomenon, such as the rogue number 7 being a late staff bus or an apparition caused by reflections. However, further extraordinary witness experiences emerged, all relating that the lights on the top and bottom decks, and the headlights, were full on, but no crew or passengers were ever to be seen.

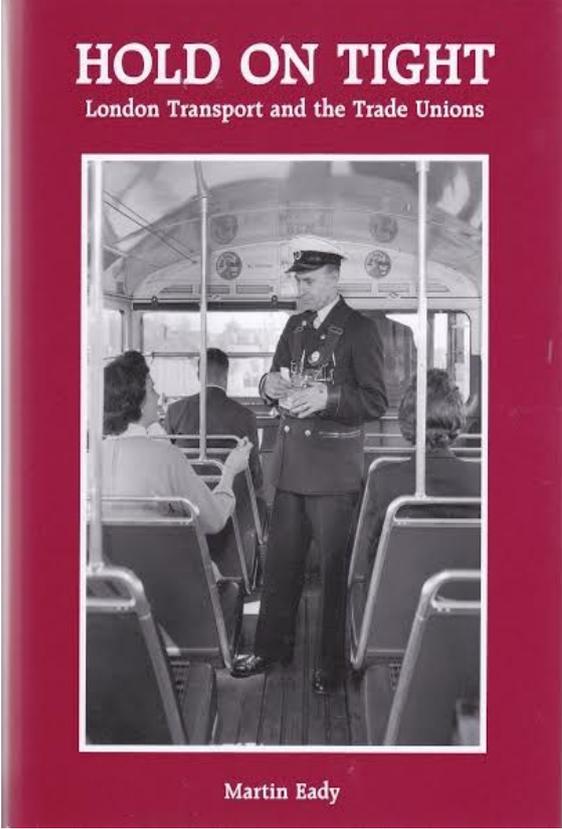
Even a local Transport official testified to seeing the number 7 bus drawing up at the local bus garage with its engine purring, and immediately disappearing. It was only when, eventually, the local council carried out work to straighten out the stretch of St Mark's Road between the junctions of Cambridge Gardens and Chesterton Road—a notorious accident black spot—that the sightings of the mysterious number 7 bus ceased. No convincing explanation was ever found for the small-hours excursions of the phantom bus of the mid-30s, a mysteriously recurring event immortalised in verse by Jerry Pitt:

'Cambridge Gardens, 1.15, the morning bell had rung its last, most residents tucked up in bed, and precious few were driving past, October 1934, and from a mist of late night smog, the number 7 blaring lights, descended on them, lost in fog.' **John O'Mahony**

'Hold on Tight: London Transport and the Trade Unions', Martin Eady. Standing on the south-bound platform of the Bakerloo line at Queen's Park station as a schoolboy, I often got talking to the car examiner who had a little office at the leading end of the platform. I never really knew what a car examiner was although I did know some things about the underground as my father had worked on there for 28 years. Martin Eady, who has written a much-needed history of London Transport and its trade unions called 'Hold on Tight', actually was a car examiner at Ealing Common depot. Martin's book is an extremely detailed and thoroughly researched account, the first, to my knowledge, that really considers the political as well as the industrial role of the trade unions in shaping London's transport. Most histories of transport concentrate on the rolling stock or the institutional structures. When historians explore politics, it's usually the relationship with local government and says transport is a non-political technocrat's game with which naughty politicians or unions interfere. This is especially the case when historians deal with the Livingstone GLC period, typically seen in Theo Barker's bland dismissal of Labour's fares policy in 'Moving Millions, A Pictorial History of London Transport'.

Martin puts the politics back into transport, looking in depth at some of the key battles such as the 1958 bus strike, the reaction to the stagnation of the post-war era: 'the way London Transport was structured and run following nationalisation in 1948 was not working well' and the high octane confrontations of the 1980s and 1990s. I don't always agree with his conclusions—Nina Fishman is right to say that the 1958 bus strike was 'sold out' by the TUC—Martin does compare and contrast the various strategies of the TGWU and the NUR and explain the shift of power from the bus to the tube unions in recent decades. He appears to take a dim view of the one-day wildcat strikes of 1989, but he does admit that the unions had negotiated a pretty poor deal in return for accepting one person operated trains on the underground.

Martin actually worked on the underground and, literally, saw the system from underneath—changing the brake shoes on tube trains (the fact that many of the photos are of Ealing Common shows his personal connection with that depot). But he was also a long-serving NUR member and a member of its National Executive which moves the book from being simply a reminiscence towards an analysis of the nuts and bolts of transport trade unionism. The great strength of the book, and its value to labour historians, is the meticulous attention to the twists and turns of negotiations between London Transport/LRT/Transport for London and the trade unions. This is particularly evident in the later chapters where the full impact of the sell-offs and closures with



the loss of the Croydon Food Factory, Aldenham Works, Chiswick Works, Acton Works, and the Building Department ripped apart the fantastic public body that had existed for some 50 years following the setting up of the London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB) in 1933. Gordon Brown's outrageous PPP plan for the underground is given the treatment it deserves: a good kicking.

This is not a social history of London's transport: the voices of London Transport workers or the activities of recent rank and file groups such as Busworker or Close Encounters on the District line are not to be found. Let's hope that this is to be his next book! Then maybe we will get to discover what the job of a car examiner is, apart from being the annoying person who gets on your train, bangs about a bit with hammer and tells you there's no defect. Only joking, Martin! 'Hold on Tight, London Transport and the Trade Unions', Martin Eady (London, Capital Transport, 2016), £19.95 **Dave Welsh**

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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