

# Britain at Work

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**MAY DAY 2017 ISSUE**

# Revolution and Russian Art 1917-32 exhibition

From February till April 17 this exhibition was at the Royal Academy. It demonstrated what a wide range of art and applied art and a range of styles came out of the two revolutions of 1917. The short booklet given to you at the door assumes you may not know much of the historical details of these turbulent years in Russia or much about the artistic styles the overthrow of Tsarist autocracy and its aftermath produced. Civil War beset Russia under Lenin; on his death, Stalin came to power.

A wide range of art was shown—from the beautiful products of the State Porcelain Factory in Petrograd to adverts for beer, photography, film and food rationing coupons as well as paintings, headscarves and political posters. Around the time of the 1917 Revolutions, avant-garde artists supported revolution and the hope of a new world. But by the late 1920s their abstract work was criticised. Under Stalin, the Soviet authorities turned increasingly to Socialist Realism. But earlier, the abstract was able to co-exist with forms of 'realism' and a range of other styles. So we were able to view work from Malevich, Kandinsky, Chagall, el Lissitsky and others less well-known—including women artists such as Lyubov Popova whose design work was shown a few years ago at Tate Modern with that of Rodchenko. This exhibition at the RA echoed much of the original '15 Years of Artists of the Russian Soviet Republic' which was shown in Russia in 1932.

By 1921 the Brave New World of art and society was becoming increasingly constrained by the State, the Civil War and difficult economic and political times. 1921 was the year of the Kronstadt Mutiny when the sailors, who'd so far supported the Bolsheviks, showed their discontent, demanded democratic elections and received brutal suppression.

The one aspect of the 2017 exhibition which was certainly not part of the original art show in 1932 is the big, black box at the end of the RA's exhibition entitled House of Memory where, in silence, the photos are shown of many, usually well-educated Russians who went to prison camps during the 1930s. So many were shot by 1937—with hardly a soul released. No comment is made; the photos, dates and one-word of their ending is sufficient.

We note the British Library is also holding an exhibition to mark the centenary of 1917. 'Russian Revolution: Hopes, Tragedy, Myths' opens on April 28. It would be interesting to hear from other readers of any other such centennial exhibitions (perhaps local?) and see if other historical interpretations are being displayed.

*Jan Pollock*

## How did the Russian Revolution affect you?

Here is our first response to the question 'How did the Russian Revolution affect you?'

Quite a lot, I suppose. I wasn't alive in 1917, but 30 years later I had just started university and was looking for answers to life's big questions. I read Quentin Hogg's 'The Case for Conservatism' and Willie Gallacher's 'The Case for Communism'. I attended a Liberal Party meeting addressed by Viscount Samuel. I read 'Why You Should be a Socialist' by John Strachey and, perhaps most important of all, 'The Socialist Sixth of the World' by Dr Hewlett Johnson, the Dean of Canterbury, which described what the Russian revolution had meant to the people in the Soviet Union, comparing the effects of the USSR's First Five-Year Plan with Britain during the depression of the 1930s.

I was most impressed. I wanted to go and see for myself. At that time, because of the devastation caused by the Nazi invasion and the lack of hotels, etc, foreign visitors were not allowed, so I wrote to Joseph Stalin at the Kremlin and asked if he could use his influence to get me a visa. The bastard never replied. Without any help from Stalin, I had decided I was a socialist.



**Chris Birch (second from left) and his wife Betty (4th from left) with others from the Aid to Spanish Youth Committee at the Spanish Embassy in 1952 (Photo: Sid Kaufman).**

At that time the universities were full of ex-service men and women, who had been fighting fascism, and I turned to them for advice. Well, I was told, the Labour and Communist parties have very similar aims but the Commies are more likely to get there. So I joined the Communist Party of Great Britain. I have never regretted my decision. *Chris Birch*

## London bus workers

In 2015 Britain at Work hosted a Bus Workers Forum which discussed rank and file organisation in London bus garages and tube depots in the 1980s. In this issue we print an extract from the Forum (many thanks to John O'Mahony for the transcription).

**Doug Wright:** If you read Ken Fuller's book, 'Radical Aristocrats', you can see how, when the Transport & General Workers' Union was founded, 1922, the London Bus section was the most dominant section there, and it was afforded its own trade group, if you like, the London Bus section; and that section, as Steve said, was comprised of a delegate from each branch.

We had union reps, whereas with other parts of the passenger group in the country it was the secretary that was the Shop Steward figure. But it was laden with bureaucracy, as you know. It was democratic, I'm not arguing that, but it seemed to go round in bloody circles.

**Steve Cushion:** Well, democracy without politics doesn't necessarily achieve a great deal; I mean, you can all vote to do nothing. **Martin Eady:** Good point.

**SC:** Then there was a bus committee, which was elected from areas. The areas changed to reflect management structure, which some of us thought management structure ought to reflect ours—probably more of a propaganda point than anything else! They were the day-to-day executive, as it were. The delegate conference...

**ME:** No, that was fine. The structure on the railways was completely different. It followed the structure on British Railways; National Rail. The negotiating structure was incredibly bureaucratic. I was on Sectional Council 9 for more than 20 years, so you could get elected into this; but it was a bureaucratic nightmare because you didn't have any power to call any industrial action at all, as a local. Everything was controlled by the National Executive of the three unions, and you had three railway unions, not just one. **Jan Pollock:** So that was NUR... **ME:** ASLEF and the TSSA—and they didn't all organise in all areas. The NUR organised in all areas; ASLEF organised in train crew, and the line of promotion to train crew; and the TSSA, as its name implied, salaried staff, where there was a bit of competition, because the NUR also organised clerical staff. **SC:** It was the possibility for unofficial local action, because when you've got a branch where everybody works together... **ME:** Any action had to be unofficial. **SC:** Whereas we did get kind of official action called by the conference. That was technically unofficial because, under rule, it had to be only the General Executive Council.



**Picket line at Stamford Hill garage in north London in 1984 (Photo: the invisible photographer)**

**ME:** We worked—when I say 'we', the Left, broadly speaking—worked within the structure as well. There were the odd occasions when we managed to get a left wing majority on the National Executive, and get industrial action called. I was on that Executive in 1988 and '89, and the 1989 strike, which started off as a series of unofficial strikes, we actually managed to get the buses out in 1989, and British Rail. The last time we got all three organisations out, for possibly the first, and I believe, the last time. We managed to achieve that, by working through the structures and gradually getting our aims realised. As regards full time officials, we only had one full time official for the whole of the Underground and the NUR. ASLEF had a slightly different structure. But some of the sectional councillors were full time; I wasn't. Basically, the train crew and station staff sectional councillors were full time, and the head offices of 55 Broadway; and they were completely sucked in; whereas, the engineering sectional councillors, we had to fight to get any time off at all. I must have written tens of thousands of staff memos—"Please grant me leave with pay to attend a meeting....", blah, blah, blah, you know; and that is how it was done.

**SC:** Whereas most of the strikes on the buses actually started at a garage level. I think because there was an ability to do that, that's only based on a physical structure, actually, more than anything else; everyone's in a garage... **Doug W:** On what you were talking about, Steve, I can't remember if the strike was fleet-wide, or just in our area, but it wasn't 100%; and I can remember Steve Johnston said, "Can you come down to Barking?" I went down to Barking and, basically, he said, "I'm having difficulty holding them out." I just got on the table in the canteen and said a few things and they stayed out—only for the bureaucrats to call it off the next day!



## Grunwick 40 exhibition

**“We Are The Lions” An exhibition commemorating the Grunwick Strike 1976-78 at Brent Museum and Archives, Willesden Library October 19 2016— March 26 2017.** This exhibition (which closed recently but is now set to tour) is displayed on a series of large screens, upon which the story of the Grunwick dispute is related in 12 concise sections, with telling use of contemporary quotes from participants, and various items of photographed ephemera, such as the multitude of short-lived campaigning journals that existed in the era. Dramatic photographs of the struggle are also brilliantly portrayed on some of the windows. The conditions in which the mainly South Asian women were working under are graphically illustrated in a contemporary description by Laurie Pavitt, the Labour MP for Brent South at the time of the strike: “A sweat shop with a management which could have been lifted straight out of the Dickens era. Conditions and management attitudes such as these have never been seen in Willesden since World War 1.”

The Grunwick workforce was fighting against compulsory overtime and low wages; to be treated with dignity, and for the right to be represented by a trade union. With the stereotypical view of South Asian women as being passive and docile, the Grunwick management felt that they had carte blanche to treat their oppressed workforce as second class citizens. In the sweltering summer of 1976, they hadn't reckoned with Jayaben Desai who, having been pushed too far on one particular occasion, decided to take a stand, and soon became the eloquent leader of a strike that was to last for the best part of two years. She let the management know in no uncertain terms that they had rather underestimated the workforce: “What you are running is not a factory, it is a zoo. But in a zoo there are many types of animals. Some are monkeys who dance on your fingertips. Others are lions who can bite your heads off. We are the lions, Mr Manager.”

So the scene was set for what was to become one of the most protracted and bitter disputes in labour history. Flying pickets as an effective tactic were seen at Grunwick, along with the sight of the police operating as a repressive force, rather than just putting the emphasis on keeping control and maintaining the peace. The story of the struggle is traced, from postmen refusing to handle Grunwick's mail, through to its sad conclusion, with the workforce's sense of ultimate betrayal by the trade union movement. The declassification of Special Branch files in 2016 proved particularly timely for the exhibition, and introduces a sinister element, with its revelations about 'company police' and surveillance



tactics. Legislation, in the form of Racial Equality and Equal Pay legislation was introduced in the 70s but, at the end of the decade, Margaret Thatcher was elected; sweeping anti-trade union legislation would soon follow.  
*John O'Mahony*

### **Do you want to record your working life? Did you work in London in the years 1945-1995? Then let us know**

The key focus of Britain at Work London Project is to build an oral history archive of interviews covering both the private and public sectors across the whole of London, recording the shop-floor activities of the men and women who formed the backbone of the trade union movement in the period 1945-95. We hope to be able to 'map' a number of strategic workplaces eg train stations, town halls and post office sorting offices as well as factories, hospitals, and many smaller workplaces. Britain at Work London has done a further 30 interviews across London in 2015-16 and we hope to do a further 70 interviews in 2017-18. So far, interviews have included Liverpool Street and Waterloo stations, the ambulance station in Park Royal (now closed), social work and housing, and full-time union work in the London Boroughs of Camden and Hammersmith & Fulham, London Underground ticket office work and working as a tube guard, disability rights activism, postal work in Islington, health visiting in Wimbledon, LGBT activism in NALGO/Unison, working in a music venue in Soho, secondary teaching in south London and running a fish-mongers in Barking. Please contact [rima@britainatworklondon.com](mailto:rima@britainatworklondon.com) to arrange an interview.

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