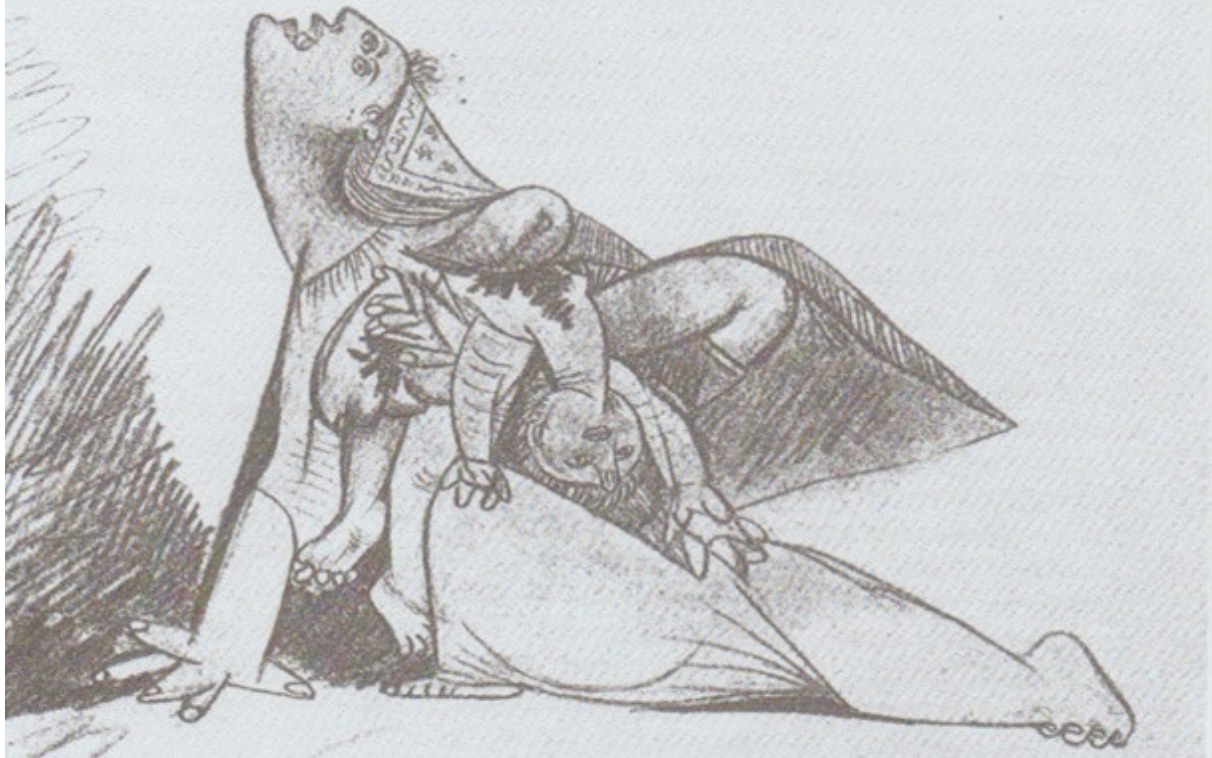


Britain at Work

London project newsletter issue 40 March 2020



NO PASARAN! 1936-2020

Design by Pablo Picasso (1937) dedicated to the mothers and children of Spain.

Abe Osheroff, 'Reflections of a Civil War Veteran': 'History at its best can tell us only what happened where and when. The why and how are far more elusive, for they involve the subjective aspect of events, the 'atmosphere' in which they took place, the way people felt about their lives and times.

Their strong feelings (ie. their passions) were the fuel that drove the locomotive of history. To understand these things we must turn to the art, the music, the poetry and the novels of that time. And also the oral history! The Spanish war as a people's war was the most potent and emotionally engaging focus of the hopes and fears of democratic forces worldwide. But it was also a war in which writers played an important role...'

George Orwell 'Homage to Catalonia' (1938): '(Barcelona) was a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flags of the Anarchists; every wall was scrawled with the hammer and sickle and with the initials of the revolutionary parties... The train (for the front line) was due to leave at 8, and it was about 10 past 8 when the harassed sweating officers managed to marshal us in the barrack square... finally they marched us to the station... the train was packed so tight with men that there was barely room even on the floor, let alone on the seats. At the last moment William's wife came rushing down the platform and gave us a bottle of wine and a foot of that bright red sausage which tastes of soap and gives you diarrhoea. The train crawled out of Catalonia and on to the plateau of Aragon at the normal wartime speed of something under 20 kilometres an hour.'

We're back: Britain at Work London Project 2020

Welcome to the 40th issue of the Britain at Work London Project newsletter. After a short break, in 2020 we will continue to keep you in touch with the project, providing news, interview extracts, reviews and other related materials. We think it's vital to publicise the work that that the project has done over the last 10 years, showing that work in and around London has been characterised by a battle to establish trades unions that reflect the needs of all working-class people. That those battles have often taken place outside the workplace - through art, architecture, poetry, novels, theatre, dance or photography does not mean that such 'cultural' channels are not valid. So too with anti-racist, anti-fascist and women's struggles which are as essential today as they were in the 1950s and 60s.

Loco-Focus, our new railway project, has just received a grant from the Lipman-Miliband Trust which will enable us to do interviews with ex-railway workers in the south east region. We have also received generous help from Norwich & District Trades Council, Ipswich & District Trades Council, UEA UCU branch, Richard Ross, Isobel McMillan, Chris Birch and Tierl Thompson. The funding will enable us to do more interviews in 2020, recording the rich history of post-war railway work at a time when Britain's railways are in deep crisis. The legacy of railway labour history is the bedrock of today's trade unionism in the future fight for full public ownership and the protection of trade union rights. And we make no apology for placing oral history (as our front page shows) in the context of contemporary political and social movements.



London Liverpool Street station protest against fares increase on January 2 2020

Loco-Focus: a new oral history of the railways

Were you employed on the railways in the South East region (suburban or mainline) 1945-1995? Did you work on a station, in a signal box, a depot, on a train or the p-way? Would you like to talk about your work? Were you involved in a trade union? You might like to take part in a new oral history project being run by the Britain at Work London Project. These interviews will also be placed on the TUC Libraries website under

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Paris Commune 150th/1972 Building Strike



March 2021 is the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune. A delegation from Britain is planning to visit Paris. Paris Commune remembered by Tom Mann (from Tom Mann, Memoirs) 'As far back as 1886', Mann writes in 1923, 'I took an active part in celebrating the Commune of 1871, and have continued to participate in the anniversary celebration down to the present time... when occasions came round for popular demonstrations, such as the visit to the cemetery of Père Lachaise, in memory of the massacre of the communards in 1871, the Syndicalists, ie. the trade unionists, of Grange aux Belles would organise their own demonstration, whilst those still working harmoniously at the Bourse (du Travail or Office of Labour) and recognising the authorities, would take steps to organise a demonstration also.

Before the date fixed for the celebration arrived, the Prefect of Police would send an intimation that no demonstrations would be allowed; the law-and-order men of the Bourse du Travail would drop the idea, but the CGT men would ignore the Prefect of Police and his (as they said) attempt at dictatorship. They persisted in holding their demonstration. After our visit to Paris, Guy Bowman and I, with the support of a few representative trade unionists, decided to organise in Britain on lines similar to those which had been adopted by the French comrades. We published a small monthly called the 'Industrial Syndicalist'. The first issue appeared in July 1910. We were far from proposing to ignore, belittle, or supersede the extant trade-union movement.

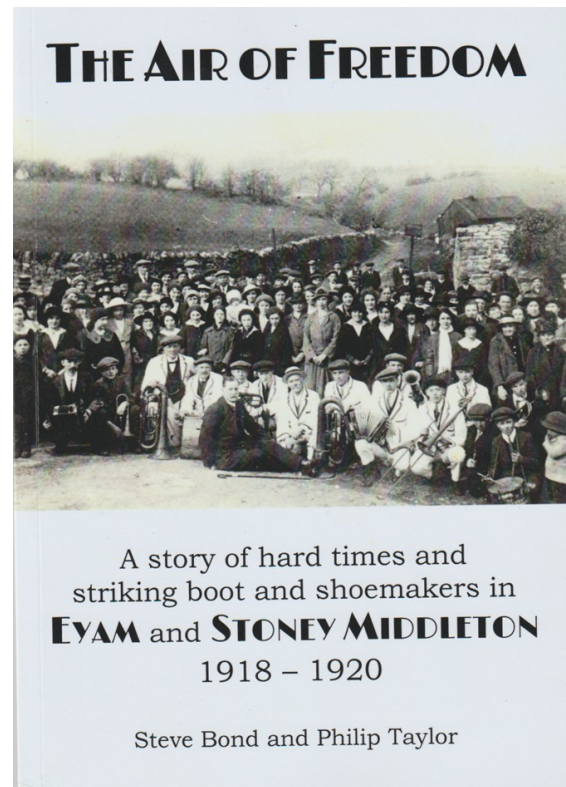
1972 building workers strike

Extract from the Britain at Work London archive: Chris Murphy talks about the 1972 building workers strike. 'I don't think it was the leadership (of UCATT). It was the rank and file, I mean it was they were being paid washers. They were badly paid and the slogan was a pound an hour, 35 hour week. Now they never got it, the 35 hour week, but they got the biggest rise they had ever had til then you know... there was a delegate conference for UCATT, and there were loads of resolutions, looking you know for a decent rate of pay for highly qualified skilled people. The leadership were reluctant, so it was the rank and file really overturned the leadership which quite often happens in UCATT, and the strike was called... London had its own committee running a dispute in the London area, for the sites in London. They met on a regular basis. The officials would attend the meetings you know and there would be sites they were going to, who were their people and that. You know they work out plans, strategy, leafleting, the usual campaigning.' *Chris Murphy worked on exhibitions at Earl's Court since the late 60s. He became a shop steward and then a convenor in the ASW, Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, which merged in the 70s with the bricklayers and painters unions as UCATT, Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians. He was blacklisted after a dispute over the Motor Show being moved from Earl's Court to Birmingham and went onto be the convenor of shop stewards at London Transport Parsons Green joiners works and was on London Underground till he retired in 2010.*

The Air of Freedom by Steve Bond and Philip Taylor. 2019, £6 The authors of *The Air of Freedom* have done a fantastic job in bringing us the history of a two and a half year (1918-1920) strike of boot and shoe workers in the Derbyshire villages of Eyam and Stoney Middleton. An incredible story of one of the longest strikes involving a group of women workers in any industry, the book is based on detailed research into the lives of the strikers and the communities in which they lived but also using many photographs, letters and maps to show the location of factories and solidarity with the strikers. The book also draws on an oral history project started in the 1990s involving those who had family connections with the shoe factories or who had worked in them. So this is a continually developing history using a wide variety of sources and thereby adding a rich dimension to the local history of the area.

The strike began when anti-union employers refused to meet the National Union of Boot & Shoe Operatives union (NUBSO) and sacked workers they believed to be union activists. Wages and conditions were poor but women throughout Britain were joining unions and taking action. The strike was therefore part of a wider working-class movement at the end of the war with, for example, women on the tube in London taking strike action in 1918 and a national rail strike in 1919. The strikers held out despite the harsh winter of 1918/19 and continued to get union support from all over Britain but they were suffering and turned to the idea of setting up a new co-operative factory to provide employment. A site was found in Eyam and a factory set up employing most of the women still on strike. NUBSO ended the strike in 1920. However the factory closed in 1922. As the book's preface says: 'Together with teams from Eyam museum, the Stoney Middleton Heritage Group and other residents, we've been able to bring the story back to life again.' A truly collaborative project.

NOR4NOR News After the successful NOR4NOR (Norfolk for Nationalisation of Rail) rail summit last spring, another summit will be held in Derby on Saturday May 16 2020. This will be an opportunity to develop local campaigns and to formulate a Peoples' Plan for regional railways. There is a real need for better co-ordination of transport campaigns at a national level, particularly with the threat of station staff cuts by the companies, the continuing fight to retain guards on trains, and the threat of new legislation to further restrict the right to strike.



Alice Wheeldon: The Fight Goes On In 1917, Alice Wheeldon, born in Derby, her daughter Winnie Mason and son-in-law Alf Mason, were convicted and imprisoned for conspiracy to murder the Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Labour party chair Arthur Henderson. Hettie Wheeldon was acquitted. They had been framed by an undercover agent, a fabricated story 'so strange that it seems hardly to relate to the world or reality'. Alice believed in universal suffrage and was an opponent of the war and all her family were members of the N-CF (No Conscription Fellowship). Alice went on hunger strike and was released on license. She died shortly after in 1919. The fight to clear her name continues to this day and Derby City Council has put up a blue plaque marking her second-hand clothes shop and visitors can do a 90-minute walk through Derby based on her life. For more information go to www.alicewheeldon.org and www.derbypeopleshistory.co.uk For more info on the Derby summit contact Keith Venables ivceducation@yahoo.co.uk or go to the NOR4NOR website. www.NOR4NOR.org

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