

Britain at Work

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London Buses special pamphlet of the London Busmen's Rank and File Movement, at the time of the 1937 London bus strike whose central demand was a 7-hour working day; front cover of the Pan edition of Graham Greene's novel 'Its a Battlefield' (1934) about a London bus driver named Conrad Drover who is accused of murder; front cover of Busworker newsletter, 1984; picket line at Stamford Hill bus garage in north London, during the one-day strike in 1984, in defence of the GLC's control of public transport in London by the invisible photographer.

On the Buses 1937-2015



78 years ago, in 1937, London's bus workers took strike action against the mighty London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB). Today, in 2015, London's 27,000 Unite bus members are set to take industrial action over pay disparities and the demand for a single London-wide agreement covering pay and conditions with the capital's 18 bus companies, a situation caused by the Tories' forced private tendering of bus services in the 80s. In 1937, the TGWU busmen had the help of the militant Bus Rank and File Movement and its newsletter, *The Busman's Punch*, they fought for a 7-hour working day with the slogan 'London Busmen Demand the Right to Live a Little Longer'. Although the strike was defeated, it was to become clear that a strong and defiant section of the TGWU had emerged in the capital which would, in various forms, play an important part in shaping London Transport for many decades. Interestingly, it was at this time that John Sommerfield's novel 'May Day' (1936) was devoted to a bus strike and Graham Greene's 'It's a Battlefield' (1934) featured the story of a bus driver who was condemned to death for murder.

The next phase of industrial action was in the 50s with a series of strikes over pay parity which culminated in the 7-week strike of 1958. Lacking solidarity, this strike was also defeated. Another rank and file newspaper, *Platform*, continued to voice discontent which was then addressed in the 60s by the government's Phelps Brown Committee recommending a 40-hour week, and better holiday and sick pay. London Transport, however, simply failed to respond and further action, centred on an overtime ban, this time lasting 5 weeks, was called in 1966. By the 80s, the buses were engulfed in another phase of industrial action over the imposition of one-person-operated (OPO) buses and, in a directly political fight, the democratic control over London's transport services

by the Greater London Council (GLC). Bus workers at all London garages took part in one-day stoppages in March 1982 and March 1984 alongside tube workers. A number of garages also took strike action in support of tube workers who were suspended for refusing to deal with cuts to schedules. This was a brave assertion of the kind of solidarity that had not been seen in other disputes, helped by the unofficial organisation Unity in Action which vowed to unite all transport workers in the capital. Another publication, *Busworker*, had emerged at Westbourne Park garage and spread across the bus fleet until it became *Transport Worker* in the mid-80s.

Privatisation of bus routes and OPO buses decimated the strength of the London Bus Section in the 80s and 90s leading to a fragmented series of defensive positions. The loss of conductors destroyed the camaraderie felt by bus crews whilst attacks on pay and conditions were stepped up. Today, bus workers in London face the many challenges brought by high fares, overcrowding of their vehicles and passenger discontent. It cannot be right that drivers have to deal with poorly-designed buses in which passengers are often packed like sardines. Stop press: Transport For All is supporting Doug Paulley's battle for wheelchair-users' Right to Ride on public transport. Yet in December 2014 the Court of Appeal ruled it was not discriminatory if a bus-driver does not compel a buggy-user to move; in other words, disabled people still don't have the same rights as all other bus passengers. The case is likely to go to the Supreme Court. Surely Transport for London shouldn't be allowed to play divide-and-rule between buggy-users and disabled passengers, but should ensure all passengers have the same Right to Ride? Isn't it time for disabled passengers to get equal rights? Dave Welsh and Jan Pollock

On the Buses and Trams

HA Wilson 'Death Over Haggerston' (1941) I have been a London Public Service driver for 41 years, and have just been retired. I drove horse-buses and horse-trams, and in 1901 was one of the first to drive a London electric tram. 5 years later I started on a motor-bus, and have been driving one day and night through the London traffic for the past 35 years, latterly on the not particularly easy Number 11 Service from Liverpool Street to Shepherd's Bush, via the Bank, St Paul's, Fleet Street, Charing Cross, Whitehall, Victoria Street, Sloane Square, and Fulham Road... There's not much fun bus-driving in the black-out and during air-raids, though during the 1914-18 war we had more lights. I had some narrow escapes then. Once I arrived a minute behind a bus that had been bombed at Worship Street, Bishopsgate, and was one of the first to give help. Another night I was following a Number 9 bus into Liverpool Street; my bell rang, and I had to stop for a passenger to alight; a bomb hit the 9 bus; and that was a lucky escape for me. I still laugh when I think of my pal George, who had a moustache like Bainsfathers Old Bill. He was driving a 2 bus then. There were no sirens, but maroons. When they went off he used to tell his passengers that they could get off, or stay where they were; but he was stopping for no one, then he put his foot on the accelerator, and drove at top speed for Peabody Buildings, Old Pye Street, Westminster.

May Brinkley (pictured) For a penny you could go a long way on a tram, the old ticket collector, used to 'ding dong'. The trams went from here (Queen's Park Estate) to Paddington Green. They were old, long narrow things and they had straw seats and a round bit in the front where everyone wanted to go and see where they were going. The driver stood up and two bits of iron went 'clang, clang, clang.' He had one foot on a lump of iron in the cab and he went 'ding ding' when he went over a crossing and you could hear it miles away. And of course the platted straw seats weren't very comfortable. All the main roads, like Harrow Road, were cobblestones. They were like blocks of wood, wooden bricks laid along then they'd tar over them and throw dust and sand over the tar and called it the main road. And when they done it up, they'd just take up the worn bricks, drop another one here and there, a bit of tar and cover it up.

Sheila Emmanuel I am from the island of Dominica in the Caribbean. The first thing I did was to work in the Catering Department of London Transport. I worked at 55 Broadway for about four years. From there I went to Baker Street and from Baker Street I went on the buses (as a woman conductor). They didn't say I had to join the union but once I was employed they got me a form for the union because there was a union rep at the garage. I went on the buses in the early 70s and I think I worked for 13 years on different routes. There are times when you see people gritting their teeth because my colleague



says this to me or that to me which isn't fair but you know generally I think the atmosphere at my garage was alright. Of course, if someone isn't there to take the bus over because when you reach your time to get off the bus and that person isn't there to take over from you, you either have to continue the journey which means you have to work an hour or so later, not a very happy thing for passengers because 'we are on the bus and we want to go to our destination and nobody told us anything and now all you say is we're not going.' The problem I experienced was passengers who were verbally abusive. I was coming from Cricklewood on the 266 and I said [to a man] 'well can I have your fare please', he got so annoyed he says to me 'if you blacks didn't come here we would have jobs for ourselves' and 'I can't pay the fare' so I tell him to get off the bus and he quarrelled until we reached Willesden Green Station.

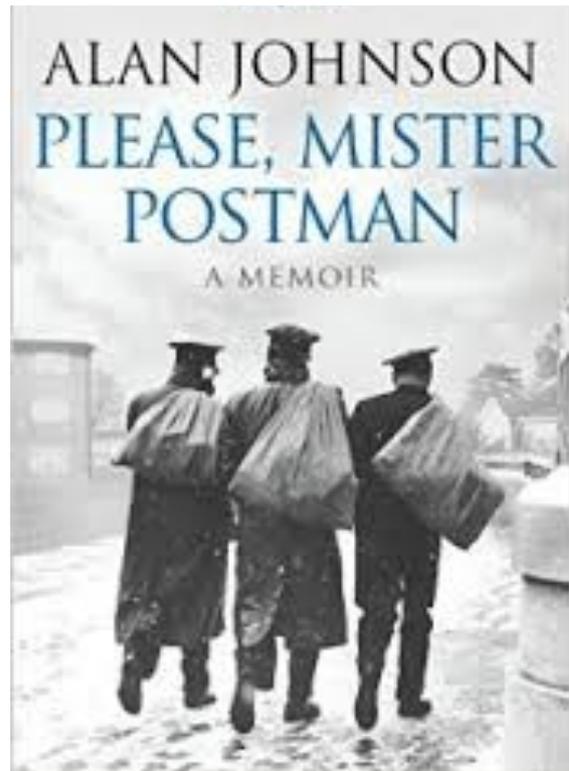
Mary Williams (LT) advertised in the Belfast Telegraph and the Derry Journal. They collected girls from all over Ireland. They told us we would be trained at Chiswick and we had a couple of weeks training. My job was from Edgware bus garage. At that time we were carrying very heavy pennies and you'd be trying to get rid of pennies so you'd get the driver to stop, barge into the pub and get the money changed to lighter stuff and also it was easier to count at night. My bus was the 140 and that started at Mill Hill and finished at London Airport. There was a feeling of camaraderie. It was both between the driver and the conductors and between the people who were catching the bus. And you used to get a load of school kids. I used to quite like that. This accent again, they used to laugh. They used to run upstairs and it was a real problem to collect the money off them. There might be 30 or 40 of them tearing around and you could hardly get them to stop. We used to have fun with them. Then we had the Teddy boys with the long jackets and sleek hair and they would run upstairs. They would go to the Queen of Hearts, which was a pub there. They'd come on and run upstairs and each one would say 'he's paying'. And before you could sort it out, the bus would be there. You couldn't get the money.

Alan Johnson postman/politician

The postman always rings twice. Alan Johnson's follow-up to his best-selling 'This Boy' autobiography, 'Please, Mister Postman' (Bantam Press), continues his literary journey from poverty-stricken North Kensington to political power in Westminster. The story of the Southam Street boy made good (exception to the rule) is taken up at the end of the 60s, as he forsakes his aspirations to be a pop star with his rock groups the Area and the In-Betweens, and shop work, to be a postman; briefly returns to Ladbroke Grove to live with his wife Judy on the soon to be demolished Camelford Road, and is then re-housed in Slough. Alan Johnson becomes a GPO/PO employee, encouraged by his black band mate Sham, and first works in Barnes at the Royal Mail delivery offices; the postal psychogeography of which he details, entertainingly recalling his war veteran colleagues' attitudes and traditions.

The radical left-wing political events of 1968 in Paris and Notting Hill pass him by, as he's starting a family, earning a living, and reading the Times, rather than International Times. But, as his Tory brother-in-law Mike puts it, he is 'on the way to becoming a Bolshie shop steward' in the first national Post Office workers' one-day strike in 1969. He calls his young family circumstances 'not so much far out as a bit out—not so far out that we couldn't get back again.' Suburban working class life in the 70s is vividly evoked, as he survives the move to Slough—if not exactly prospers, it's upward from Southam Street. He starts to become more politicised in the first all-out Post Office strike in 1971, which lasted 7 weeks, led by his role model/hero Tom Jackson. His major life changing experience happens at Bournemouth Winter Gardens, as did mine; his is his first union conference in 1976, mine was a Clash 'White Riot' the following year.

OUT IN FEBRUARY 2015—ALL IN A DAY'S WORK: WORKING LIVES AND TRADE UNIONS IN WEST LONDON 1945-1995 All in a Day's Work is a 200-page book featuring over 100 oral history interviews carried out by the Britain at Work London Group. It chronicles the working lives and trade union activities of people who worked in West London during the years 1945-1995. A unique snapshot of many types of work and workplaces in both the private sector and public services, covering an area stretching from Hayes in the west to Paddington and from Harrow in the north to the River Thames. Price £10 plus £2.80 p&p. Please make cheques payable to Britain at Work London Project. contact Rima rima@britainatworklondon.com phone 07946 284089 or write to Britain at Work, 15 Wellington Road, Norwich, NR2 3HT.



In the later 70s and 80s Alan Johnson's career in the Union of Post Office Workers duly progresses towards becoming general secretary of the Communications Workers Union and a Labour MP. A working class hero is something to be. This is a regular everyman pop/political autobiography really, but Alan Johnson is about as good a role model as you can get in political life nowadays. So I don't want to go against the universal acclaim his memoirs have received, though have to say, for a former postman, they contain some glaring street and building name errors. (In this one the notorious KPH Kensington Park Hotel pub on Ladbroke Grove is the Kensington Palace Hotel.) Tom Vague

The News International Dispute Exhibition will be on display again at the St Bride Institute, Bride Lane, just off Fleet Street. It's a historic location from the Fleet Street era of national newspapers and the print and media industry, and not just for proximity to Fleet Street: countless chapel (workplace union branch) meetings were held there, starting disputes and ending them, setting up campaigns and declaring solidarity with other workers in struggle. In addition to the exhibition, the print workshop and the library are also well worth visiting. For visiting times see info@wapping-dispute.org 07831676587.

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Britain at Work London

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Barry Amiel &
Norman Melburn Trust

