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Contents

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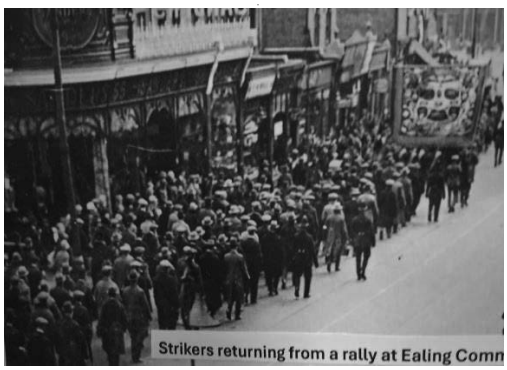
The General Strike

John Grigg



Before World War One the mining of coal dominated the British economy. Coal was virtually the sole source of power for British industry, employing over 1,000,000 miners, and of the 292 million tons mined in 1913 (highest yearly figure ever) approximately 30% was exported which was10% of the country's total exports.

Coal mine owners were amongst the wealthiest in the land. Some of the richest were not mine operators but aristocrats like the Duke of Northumberland who received royalties for every ton of coal extracted from his land. That contrasted with the coal miners whose wages barely covered living costs, and were insecure because the prominent means of payment was the 'piece' rate system paid by tub of coal mined by each miner. They paid rent for cottages owned by their employers. Between 1910 and 1913 fatalities averaged 1,200 a year. Injuries averaged over 160,000 a year. And there was the suffering and early deaths from lung diseases contracted in the mines.

One root of the 1926 General Strike can be traced to the growth of Trade Union strength and the 'Great Unrest' of 1910 - 14. This was an age of social unrest and hostility against the established order. The absolute power of the House of Lords had been overturned. Suffragettes were on the march. In Ireland demands for home rule were mounting. These were years of unprecedented national strike action when some 4,000 strikes occurred. 'Syndicalism' influenced the trade unions in the struggle for trade union recognition, higher pay, and lower working hours. Syndicalism originated in France and in Britain was led by the prominent trade unionist Tom Mann. The aim was to replace capitalism and the state with a society managed by a federation of trade unions. A weapon to achieve this was to be a general strike to collapse the capitalist economy and allow workers to seize control of the means of production.

Another root of the general strike was the decline in profitability in the coal industry caused mainly by the loss of export markets. Before WW1 Britain was the world's leading exporter of coal but France and Italy were receiving free coal from Germany from 1920 under the terms of the Versailles peace treaty. Also other countries were outpacing Britain with mining modernisation. Less than 10% of coal in Britain was cut by machinery and wages accounted for between 2/3rds and 3/4 of production costs.

Domestic demand also declined. During the 1914-18 war Britain's factories switched to munition production and Japan replaced much of British textile export trade to India. The USA took much of steel and machinery exports to South America. This was partly through more efficient production methods and these captured markets never returned. Also, the navy was switching from coal to oil and industry was beginning to do so.

A final factor in 1925 was Churchill's decision as Chancellor of the Exchequer to return sterling to the Gold standard; a decision that overvalued the pound and made all exports less competitive.

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1912

The Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) called out one million miners demanding a national minimum wage. Until 1912 pay was decided either by each of the vast number of coal mining companies (in 1947 over 800 companies received compensation when the industry was nationalised), or by local owners alliances such as the North Wales Coal Mined Owners Association. The strike was called off after 37 days when the Asquith Liberal Government passed the Coal Miners (Minimum Wages) Act. The Act did not introduce a national minimum wage but different rates in 22 national districts - Scotland, Nottinghamshire, etc.

1914

In early 1914 a triple alliance between the Miners Federation of Great Britain,

the National Union of Railwaymen and the National Transport Workers Federation intended to co-ordinate strike action and secure mutual support. That might well have led to a co-ordinated coal, railway, and transport strike but for the outbreak of war in August 1914.

1917

Lloyd George had replaced Asquith as prime minister. The government took

control of the coal industry and subsidised wages to limit industrial unrest during the war. Miners wages increased although barely kept pace with inflation. Coal mine owner profits were also subsidised and guaranteed to a level based on their prewar earnings. So both wages and profits were being subsidised by the government.

1919

The Coalition government led by Lloyd George, fearing major coal strike action, set up a Commission chaired by Sir John Sankey to consider the future of the mining industry. It was composed of three MFGB national leaders, three independent economists nominated by the MFGB, and seven representatives of coal mine owners and industrialists. Nationalisation, which had been campaigned for by the Miners' Union since before 1900, was recommended by the casting vote of the chairman. There was unanimity on the state acquisition of royalties, and on a wage increase and reduction of working hours. The government shelved the royalties issue, rejected nationalisation but implemented a government subsidised 20% increase in wages, and a decrease in working hours from 8 to 7.

The coal mine owners accepted the wage increase recommendation. In was in their interests to avoid a strike and the extra wages cost was not met by them, but by an increased government subsidy that guaranteed their profits under the war time guarantee.

The MFGB rejoiced at the nationalisation recommendation which they assumed would be implemented and were outraged when Lloyd George rejected the Sankey Commission's recommendation.

1921

The Lloyd George government terminated government control, cancelled subsidies, and returned the mines to the private owners.

The owners immediately proposed wage reductions which the MFGB rejected. The miners were locked out on 1st April. The MFGB anticipated support under the 1914 triple alliance and on Friday April 15th the NUR and the Transport Workers Federation and some other TUs agreed to come out. So, a general strike was imminent. There was however some reluctance and when the MFGB turned down an offer from Lloyd George to open discussions the other unions decided against sympathetic action. That date was subsequently labelled 'Black Friday' and regarded as a betrayal of solidarity. The miners struggled alone for three months until forced to accept increased working hours a wage of 20% above 1914 levels which in actual cash terms was a 30% wage reduction.

The rate per shift in 1914 was 6/6d (32.5p). In March 19221 it had risen with the retained war time subsidies to 16/11d (82.5p) per shift. Now it was down to 7/9d (38.75p)

Subsequently the government brokered a complex system that was to add to miners' wages by a major part of surplus profits above a certain level.

November 1922

General Election was won by Conservatives with a comfortable majority and Andrew Bonar Law formed a government. He resigned in May 1923 suffering from serious ill health and was succeeded as Prime Minister by Stanley Baldwin.

December 1923

Despite having a comfortable majority Baldwin went to the country seeking endorsement of a policy of trade protection by imposing tariffs on imports. This was rejected by the electorate and although Conservatives were the largest party in the Commons they were outnumbered by the MPs representing the Labour and Liberal parties that had campaigned for the retention of free trade. Baldwin was out voted in the Commons and the Labour party, as the second largest party, formed a minority government led by Ramsay MacDonald.

1924

In May 1924 the short-lived MacDonald government established an enquiry into miners' wages led by Lord Buckmaster which lead to the wage being 33% of the 1914 rate - 9s/1d (45p) per shift. In October 1924 the Labour government fell and the Conservatives were returned with a huge majority. Baldwin came back and appointed Winston Churchill as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

1925

Winston Churchill returned the pound to the gold standard that over valued the pound and made all exports even dearer. The price of coal dropped further and the owners proposed more wage cuts and an increase in hours. The miners threatened to strike and under the 'triple alliance' and the railway and the transport unions planned an embargo on the movement of coal. The MFGB, led by its secretary Arthur Cook and their president Herbert Smith, asked the TUC to consider recommending other TUs to come out in sympathy if the miners were locked out. In other words, consider a general strike.

Prime Minister Baldwin's response was a £27 million subsidy to maintain wages for 9 months, and the establishment of a Commission under Sir Hubert Samuel comprised of four 'independent' members to investigate, once again, the coal industry. The government thus had nine months to prepare for what it considered to be an inevitable general strike.

1926

The Samuel Commission reported in March 1926. Although favouring reorganisation of the coal industry it rejected nationalisation. The most significant recommendation was a wage cut of 13.5% to stabilise the industry. The coal mine owners immediately announced wage cuts in line with the recommendation and an increase in working hours. The MFGB refused to accept and were locked out on 30th April. The union immediately appealed to the TUC for national support and the National Executive of each affiliated union considered the appeal. The result was announced on May 1st and was an overwhelming decision in favour of a general strike – 3,653,529 to 49,911.

On behalf of the TUC Ernest Bevin the TGWU leader, and Jimmy Thomas MP, General Secretary of the NUR had been meeting with the prime minister since the publication of the Samuel Commission report hoping to find a settlement. These meetings continued after the overwhelming decision in favour of a general strike. It is clear that Baldwin had no intention of intervening. A diehard section of the cabinet had threatened to resign if a deal was done with the Trade Unions. Baldwin used a refusal by the Daily Mail Printers' Union to print an editorial, that condemned the threatened strike, to terminate negotiations. That, said Baldwin, was a

gross interference with the freedom of the press. On May 3rd the TUC launched the General Strike in support of the miners.

Ernest Bevin was the leading figure on the TUC committee set up to co-ordinate the strike. The strategy was to firstly call out railway and transport workers, printers, builders, and chemical, electricity and gas workers. Engineers and textile workers were to be called out later but many joined the strike anyway. Estimates of how many came out vary but 3,000,000 of the 5,500,000 trade union members is a likely figure. Those in the health industries, such as water workers, were not called out and an offer from the TUC to transport food was not taken up by the government. Deliveries to hospitals were allowed and permits issued by local strike committees for essential food deliveries.

The government had been preparing for the strike for nine months and stockpiles of food and coal were built up at strategic locations such as Hyde Park. The country had been divided into eleven regions headed by a civic commissioner with power to manage supplies and services.

Milk Churns in Hyde Park, 1926

Lord Hardinge led the establishment of the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) that recruited tens of thousands of volunteers to be available to drive buses and work at power stations and the docks. Some training was given on driving railway engines on some private railways. 100,000 had been recruited by the time the strike started, and this grew to half a million as volunteers from the middle and upper classes joined by university and public school students and boy scouts fulfilled their ‘patriotic duty.’ The OMS received the blessing of the Home Secretary and despite its right wing leanings had banned members of the British Fascists.

Special constables were sworn in to assist the police. The army and navy were put on standby, and warships were sent to key ports. The national press for many years had created a fear of Bolshevik revolution and the government reflected this fear by using a Mutiny Act of 1797 in 1925 to arrest and imprison for up to 12 months 12 key leaders of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

The TUC urged peaceful activity and this, with inevitable exceptions, was observed. There were clashes between strikers and strike breakers in the North East and the government commissioner there appealed to the government for help. In London and elsewhere the OMS were very active driving buses that were attacked by strikers. Public transport had ground to a halt and even taxi drivers, who had not been called out initially, struck in sympathy. OMS volunteers unloaded cargoes at the docks and attempts were made to block the transport of ‘essential supplies,’ other than food.

Pickets at the docks

The presence of the army was confined to escorting convoys and guarding the docks and power stations (which were kept going by navy and other qualified OMS volunteers.) Fixed bayonets were visible but not a single shot was fired during the strike. Baldwin had resisted Churchill's call for soldiers to be armed.

No newspapers were issued although limited newssheets appeared and Churchill edited the British Gazette and the TUC published the British Worker. Both publications publicising their sides of the dispute. Baldwin spoke on the BBC and attacked the strike as a challenge to parliamentary rule.

The TUC's biggest weapon was the withdrawal of rail and transport labour that closed down many factories due to lack of coal and manufacturing supplies. A few trains ran were driven by inspectors and some trained volunteers. There were baton charges to clear the way for lorries and buses driven by volunteers. Barges were sunk on various canals to prevent transport of coal.

It has been said that much of the population felt sympathy for the miners and thought 'something ought to be done,' but how that 'something' could be achieved was beyond the general public.

Crowded bus, General Strike 1926

The strike continued for nine days before the TUC called it off. Various reasons have been aired for that decision. A high court decision declaring the strike illegal thus no longer protecting TUs from civil damages. Fears by the TUC that they might lose control of the strike leading to wide civil disorder. A meeting between Jimmy Thomas and Sir Herbert Samuels and others of the nobility from which emerged conjecture that negotiations might be resumed – completely unauthorised by Baldwin.

Other reasons can be suggested. The obvious realisation that the government was not going to solve the crisis, that the mine owners were not going to give way and a belief that the majority of the public were not on their side. Furthermore, the TUC leaders,

Bevin, Thomas, and Clynes, although respecting the overwhelming vote in favour of the general strike and successfully organising an astonishingly wide response, did not believe a general strike was the way forward. All three are on record expressing this view. Ramsay MacDonald, Labour Party leader, thought the same. He went further fearing that trade unions were a liability that alienated many of the 22 million voters who were not TU members. He knew many of their votes were needed to elect a Labour government to pass legislation favouring welfare of the working classes. Finally strike pay had almost exhausted TU funds (TGWU paid out £600,000).

Arthur Cook, secretary of the MFGB, and probably the man most associated today with the strike, was a charismatic leader who believed the miners should struggle on. They stayed out for a further seven months until poverty and starvation forced them back to work on the employers' terms of lower wages and longer hours.

The Trade Union movement had lost the battle and in 1927 Baldwin's government passed the Trade Union Dispute Act banning sympathetic strikes and enforcing 'opt in' in place of 'opt out' of TU members subscribing to a political fund. That reduced the amount of money subscribed by the unions to the Labour Party and was a factor in reducing TU membership from 5.5 million in 1925 to 3.75 million in 1930.

After the failures of the general and the miners' strikes the TUs shifted away from industrial action. The TUC and the employers addressed the fact that unyielding conflict could damage the interests of both sides of industry, and in 1928 the Mond-Turner talks began to explore the issue. (Sir Alfred Mond, chairman of ICI, represented a group of major employers and Alfred Turner was chairman of the TUC General Council)). Ernest Bevin was prominent in the discussions that lead to formal recognition of trade unions by a number of employers, and the establishment of the TUC as the recognised representative of workers at a national level. However, not all major employers accepted the changes and there was a measure of scepticism in the trade union movement. A proposal for a National Industrial Council did not materialise. Britain's economy continued to decline the working classes continued to endure the brunt of the nation's troubles.

<u>A verdict</u>.

The general strike has been described as a class war and in a sense this is so. A conflict between two classes - the 'workers', represented by the trade unions, and the middle and upper classes organised by the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) backed by the Conservative government. It has also been described as a failed revolution but as an attempt at revolution it was a pretty tame affair. There are no reports of factories, premises, town halls, or property being occupied by strikers, and troops, often prominent with fixed bayonets, were otherwise unarmed.

There was no intention of using the strike to replace the capitalist system as advocated by the Syndicalist movement. The TUC leadership hoped to avoid the strike that only went ahead when the Executive Committees of affiliated unions voted in favour of the stoppage. The purpose

was to support and achieve the legitimate claims of the miners and when it was clear that the aim would be missed it was called off. The tragedy was the failure to dissuade the coal mine owners and the government from burdening the coal industry's problems on the shoulders of the miners.

It was an extraordinarily non-violent event. There were of course the inevitable and highly publicised exceptions. Some injuries occurred from baton charges and bricks hurled at policemen. The only deaths were caused by inexperienced volunteers driving buses or working on the railways. There was the well-known derailment of the Flying Scotsman in Northumberland when a group of striking miners removed a rail from the track. Their intention was to derail a blackleg goods train carrying coal. The Scotsman was moving slowly, having got wind that there might be trouble ahead, and there were just a few minor injuries.

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The Duke's Coal Millions

John Grigg

The Duke of Northumberland received a royalty of approximately 6d per ton mined on his Northumberland and Durham land. On other estates the royalty could vary between 4½d and 9d depending on the quality of coal and the specific seam being worked. These royalties generated immense wealth. In mid 1840s the Duke received £18,000 per year (equivalent to over £2 million in today's money) from a combination of coal tonnage and wayleave which was charged for moving coal by road or rail over the ducal estate. The Coal Act of 1938 nationalised all coal 'hereditaments' and ended the private royalty system. The Duke was among the 4,300 royalty owners who shared compensation from the state of £66,450,000. Valuation was based on 15 times the annual royalty so the Duke's compensation would be in the region of £270,000 – equivalent to about £23 million today. He was one of the three biggest recipients the others being the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and the Marquess of Bute. The compensation was in government bonds rather than cash to avoid a sudden inflationary shock to the economy.

Foraging for coal in the 1926 General Strike

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Memories of the General Strike in Newcastle

Bertha Elliott

Whilst looking back through past copies of Labour Heritage Bulletin this article was found in the Spring 1996 issue – the 70th anniversary of the General Strike.

After the First World War the Co-operative Employees Association became the National Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (now USDAW.) The union owned a large house in Leazes Terrace, Newcastle and it was there that the General Strike in the North East was organised.

Charles Flynn was the regional organiser – a brilliant organiser from a well-known Fabian family. On the staff were my father Peter Hancock, Clem Swanson and Fergie Foster who were members of Gateshead Council. A clerk was Gus Hedley, a nephew of Charles Flynn, and there was an irate Welshman who lived in Newcastle.

As they needed extra help in the office and I had just left a commercial school I was taken on as temporary staff – my very first job. It was very hectic, with queries coming all the time by phone or messenger. My father was in charge of issuing permits for cars according to the priority of need to serve the public. He had to deal politely with a number of very angry businessmen.

A stream of people came to help in the North East. One was known as ‘Mr. Brown’ who slept in one the rooms in the house. He was a Communist whose real name was Robin Page Arnot and he had been in prison for his political activity. He was an extremely nice man. Word got out about him and one day the very right wing miners’ leader, Peter Lee, stormed into the office demanding that Page Arnot be thrown out otherwise he would not work with us at the office. His bluff was called and ‘Mr. Brown’ remained.

I think all my father’s family were involved. My aunts helped at the food kitchens, while my mother made up huge dishes of the healthy tasty recipes for spreading on sandwiches.

My uncle Jack, my eldest aunt’s husband, was an inspector on the railways and was not called out on strike. However, he withdrew his labour and went to the meetings in Newcastle joining in with his fellow workmates.

One Sunday morning after attending a meeting at Newcastle Central Station Uncle Jack was walking home to Gateshead. There was no public transport except that manned by blackleg students. He was approaching the High Level Bridge

when he heard a vehicle approaching. It was a Black Maria and policemen waving truncheons were hanging on the sides and on top of it. They made a lunge at Uncle Jack but missed and hit an inoffensive little man who was in front of him. The man was knocked to the ground unconscious. My uncle, who served in the St. John's Ambulance and was the recipient of two awards for the bravery in life saving, gave the man first aid. He told the police that they had no right to hit people indiscriminately, that the man had just been walking innocently along the road as he himself was doing. The police threw the unconscious man into the Black Maria and told Uncle Jack to tell that to the magistrates in the morning- and that he might also be charged.

The incident had a devastating effect on my uncle. He agonised about going to the magistrates court. He was advised that this might make things worse for the man in custody and he in turn might get arrested. He did not go to the court and worried about it, feeling that he had let the man down.

As a result Uncle Jack could not forgive himself, his health was effected and he lost a lot of weight. He thought he had developed TB, the scourge of the North at the time. The doctor however diagnosed diabetes brought on by shock. My uncle did not live for very long after the General Strike.

How Engineers in West London secured a Labour victory in 1945

Barbara Humphries

George Pargiter said in 1945 that he thought that the 'Engineers in Southall could win the seat (Uxbridge Parliamentary division) for Labour.'

Ahead of the 1945 election campaign, the Amalgamated Engineering Union held political meetings both outside factory gates and inside its factories, putting its full weight behind Labour's electoral campaign. The June 1945 issue of the *AEU Journal* had the headline 'All Out to Defeat the Tory Menace.'

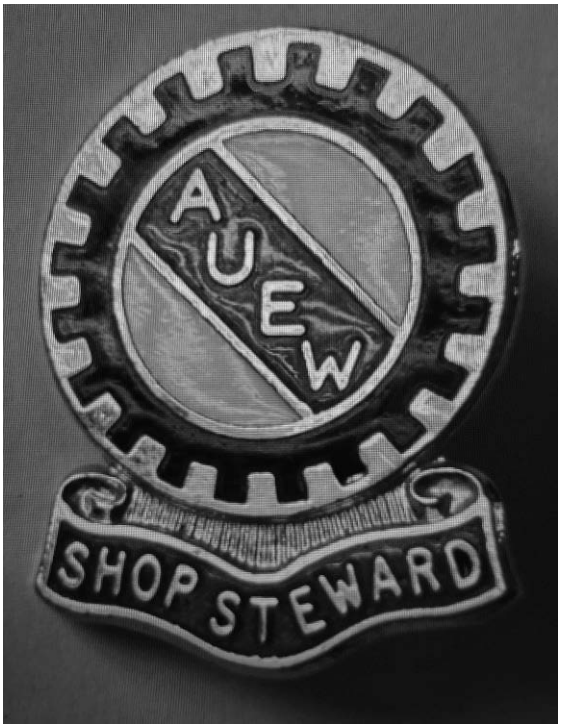
The Southall AEU held six public meetings and 40 factory gate meetings over the summer of 1945. Two local Labour candidates were members of the AEU – Walter Ayles for the newly created Southall parliamentary division, and George Pargiter for the neighbouring division of Spelthorne. Both were elected, and when parliamentary divisions were re-organised in 1950, Ayles was elected for Hayes and Harlington, and Pargiter for Southall. Pargiter had been convenor at the AEC factory and on the General Strike local committee in Southall in 1926.

During the summer of 1945 the Southall District of the AEU invited Labour Perspective Parliamentary candidates and councillors to trades union meetings, and purchased in bulk the Party's policy pamphlets. At a political conference in June, 70 members attended and were told that

the coming general election was the ‘best chance in ten years.’ Brother Athorn, the district secretary believed that the campaign would be won or lost in the local factories. It would be a dirty campaign with lies from the press which would have to be countered. In response to Churchill’s ‘Gestapo jibe’ he said that engineers knew better, they had been the victims of blacklisting by their employers for years. The District resolved to set up election campaign committees in factories, to canvass every section, and to hold regular collections. On election day itself union members would be called upon to stop work at noon and to go out electioneering. Teams from local factories were to report to the local Labour Party election agent. Within the factories regular canteen meetings were to be held. In addition factory gate meetings would be held. This was all necessary to ‘keep out the old Tory gang.’

Amalgamated Engineering Union

The AEU was a craft union of skilled engineering workers. Founded in 1919, it had formerly been known as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE). The years after 1919 had seen the pinnacle of its strength, with campaigns for the eight hour day, based on the position of strength that it had built up in the munitions industry in World War 1. This had involved the building of a substantial shop stewards movement, in munitions factories including those in Park Royal, west London.



Membership nationally rose to 410,988. In October 1919 a strike took place at the Fellow Magnet Company on Park Royal over proposed reduced rates of pay. There were local strikes to defend the 40-hour week.

In 1922 however the union faced a devastating defeat in an employers’ lockout, and with pay cuts and unemployment in the engineering trade it lost 25% of its membership. By 1933 it was still only 191,539 members. Its membership was not to fully recover until the late 1930s, with the growth of the aircraft engineering industry. By 1939 it had risen to 413,094. During World War 2 its fortunes improved and by 1944 membership had risen to 898,508. The AEU launched a campaign for one million members in 1945.

In west London, Acton and Hayes were the main centres of the engineering industry. The largest

factory in Acton was Napiers. During the 1922 lock-out engineers in Acton from Napiers and CAVs (also on Acton Vale) demonstrated on Acton Vale in protest. Many were later to face unemployment.

The main factories in Hayes and Southall included AEC, which made London's buses, and EMI, which made gramophone records. The AEU did not recruit all the workers in these factories, as they were semi-skilled and it was still very much a craft union. Many of the workers at AEC had relocated from other London locations and retained their union membership. Tommy Steele, who was to become convenor, commuted initially from Bow in East London. Branch organisation was on an area basis. In 1919 the *AEU Journal* reported four branches in west London, two in Acton with a total of 603 members, one in Hayes with 250 members and one in Southall with 325 members. By 1920 there was a total of 1,275 members across the area. In 1922 a branch of the AEU was reported in Ealing.

Southall District of the AEU

The Southall District of the AEU had been set up in 1916, with 393 members in Southall, Brentford and Hayes. It was re-established, after a lapse in 1923. Its branches covered swathes of west London, Southall, Hayes, Uxbridge, Brent, Greenford, Hounslow, and Slough, to the west of London. In local factories it built a shop stewards movement, which held meetings every four months. It recruited at AEC, Fairey Aviation, Crown Cork and EMI. At first it met obstacles to recruitment and recognition from managements, especially in the wake of the 1922 defeat. In 1928 it was reported for instance, that the AEC was only 50% organised. By 1931 however this had risen to 90%. At Fairey Aviation in Hayes, dinner time meetings were organised and by 1935 100% organisation had been achieved. As the economy improved in the mid-1930s, the trades unions enjoyed improved recruitment opportunities in parts of the country like west London, and good progress for the AEU continued to be reported for Hayes and Southall. Hayes and Southall had the highest recruitment figures nationally throughout 1935. In January the quarterly shop stewards meeting had an attendance of 18, with representatives from AEC, Fairy Aviation, EMI and Crown Cork. A new branch was established in Hayes End with 50 members. In the vote for the new district secretary, members took part from branches in Wembley, Hayes, Harrow, Hayes End, Brentford, Southall and Slough. In 1936 shop stewards organisations were reported at Hoovers, Perivale and at Rockware Glass in Greenford.

The Aircraft Engineering Industry

In 1937 the Hayes AEU branch called for the union to begin a campaign to organise the aircraft engineering industry. Fairey Aviation in Hayes alone employed 1,500 workers, and the membership of the Southall district of the AEU had risen to 3,000. This increased membership gave the union

the industrial muscle to campaign for better wages and conditions, including holidays with pay. By 1938 the Southall District was recruiting at the rate of 1,000 new members per month.

Much growth in the membership of the AEU was due to the expansion of the aircraft engineering industry as the British government began a programme of rearmament. In 1933 52,741 apprentices had been recruited nationally. Employment in aircraft engineering in the UK increased tenfold between 1935 and 1939, from 35,000 to over 350,000. By 1944 there were 1,678,000 engineering workers, working for the Ministry of Aircraft Production, one third of all workers across UK manufacturing.

During World War 2, membership of the AEU, including the Southall District rose dramatically. By September 1940 it stood at 6,205 and rising. In Hayes there were three branches with a total of 1,758 members, and two in Southall with a total of 656. Youth committees were established, and new shop stewards were recruited by the month, some with only a few months membership in the union. By 1942 AEU membership in the district had risen to over 10,000, with members reported at factories such as Alladin (Greenford), Philo Radio, Pyrene and Bell Punch. By April 1943 the Southall District had 12,500 members, organised into 31 branches, with 540 shop stewards. Yet by June this had risen again to 15,000 in 33 branches and 675 stewards, up by 135 from the previous quarter. The number of women shop stewards had increased over the same time from 10 to 37. In all the factories across west London the union campaigned for 100% membership. This favourable recruitment situation was fostered by full employment, and trades union participation in government. Former General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, Ernest Bevin was Minister for Labour in the wartime coalition and had invited the trades unions into government.

Membership of the Southall District continued to rise after the end of World War 2, with 14,425 members reported in May 1947. In October 1947 the quarterly shop stewards meeting was attended by 112, out of a total of 427 across the district.

Acton's Factories

Acton's factories were represented by the North London District of the AEU. In Acton trades union membership increased during World War 2, in the factories on Acton Vale and the Park Royal Estate. Reg Birch was president of North London AEU District and was convenor at Landis and Gyr on Park Royal, which employed 700 workers. His dismissal as convenor by his employers was to lead to a walk out by 15-20,000 workers and the Ministry had to intervene to get him reinstated. From having a low level of trades union organisation in its factories, the area got the reputation as 'Red Park Royal'. A second Napier factory had been opened on Park Royal. The unions campaigned for Joint Production Committees (JPCs) to undermine profiteering by companies

and to increase productivity. Malcolm Mitchell a youth representative on the local shop stewards committee from the Ultra-Electric Company in Acton, describes how the JPCs worked at a local level. A shop steward at the factory reported the manager to the Ministry of Labour for spinning out work in order to increase its profits. Ultra-Electric management angrily dismissed the shop steward in question, but in the face of protest from the workforce, was ordered to re-instate him by an industrial tribunal. Union power was used to prevent a repetition of the defeats which occurred in the aftermath of World War 1. Mass meetings were called in the summer of 1945 and 9,000 workers protested at Acton Town Hall in protest against redundancies.

The strength of the AEU in west London continued after 1945 and survived until there were major factory closures beginning with Napiers in 1962. Two thousand engineering workers were made redundant.

Sources: Acton Gazette and Express, AEU journal reports, AEU Southall District Committee Minutes (Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick), Podmore, W., Reg Birch (London, 2004), R.Croucher, Engineers at War (London , 1982).

Stephen Arthur Bird. 1946 – 2025.

John Grigg

Stephen Bird at IACHI visit to the Modern Record Centre 1982, photo credit Chris Coates

Stephen was a founder member of Labour Heritage in March 1983 and our first secretary and later worked as an archivist at the Labour Party HQ in Walworth Road. He moved with the archives to the Museum of Labour History in Manchester in the early 1990s (now a part of the Peoples History Museum). He had a unique knowledge of Labour movement history and served for many years as the UK representative of the International Association of Labour History Institutions. He attended several labour history conferences in the United States.

Barbara Humphries recalls that he was once a council candidate in Ealing and was at the Ealing School of Librarianship at the same time as her in 1977-1978. He worked at the John Rylands Library at Manchester University until he retired.

We lost touch with Stephen several years ago when he moved from Salford and we were unable to track him down. However our member Chris Coates was advised of his passing by a former colleague of his in Manchester, and an obituary appeared in the Society for the Study of Labour History on their website.

Thanks to Stephen and others in 1983 Labour Heritage exists. I never met Stephen and if any members have stories to relate please let us know for a future bulletin.

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Chirk Colliery

John Grigg

Some years ago I was on a Local History Cambridge Adult Education course and we visited the Suffolk Record Office at Bury St Edmunds. I was researching local World War One history and came across the Suffolk Regiment Gazettes. In the May 1912 edition I found an article headed ‘CHIRK COLLIERY. The Great Coal Strike - 1912.’ The first line said ‘Of all duties a soldier has to perform strike duty is the most repugnant.’

In 1912 the first national strike of almost one million miners led by the Miners Federation of Great Britain took place. The demand was for a national minimum wage to replace a complex structure that left miners with unpredictable and inadequate earnings. The strike lasted 37 days and was ended with the Asquith Liberal government passing the Coal Mines (Minimum Wages) Act.

Virtually all coal miners across the country came out but those at the North Wales Brynkinalt colliery at Chirk in Denbighshire stayed at work. The owner was William Young Craig who claimed that he had already granted a minimum wage and the fact that the miners in his pit stayed at work confirms that this was the case. Striking miners at Cefn Mawr planned to march to Chirk to picket the Brynkinalt mine. Fears were expressed in the national press that the intention was to sabotage and even ‘destroy’ the mine. The Cefn Mawr marchers were described as ‘an armed mob,’ and the Home Secretary despatched 1,000 soldiers and 50 police officers from Caernarfon and Merionethshire to guard the mine. It is reported that the mine owner, Mr Craig, went to meet the marchers and explained that his men already had the concessions for which they were striking and implored them to return home – which they did. Evidence, including photographs, at the Chirk History Museum and also compiled by the Chirk Local History Group indicate that the strikers from Cefn Mawr were not armed, had no intention of damaging the mine, and were just intending to picket and

persuade the Chirk miners to join the strike.

The Chirk mine owner William Young Craig was a former Liberal MP for Staffordshire North 1880 to 1885. He was a qualified mining engineer who used his expertise in parliament in support of the Employers Liability Act 1880, and he favoured mining regulations concerning ventilation and gas management. He bought the Chirk mine in the 1880s and is said to have established a paternalistic relationship with his miners, and negotiated terms and conditions direct with them rather than by the normal practise in the region through the authoritarian North Wales Coal Mines Association.

The unknown writer of the piece in the Suffolk Regimental Gazette writes that they were given one and half hours to march to the mine from where they were based and, on their arrival, camped in Lord Trevor's grounds in Brynkinalit park. He writes that they were there because strikers from the adjacent district threatened to destroy the mine. The attackers were expected to arrive at about 2pm. There is an ambiguous sentence that is worth quoting "I am sure I am quite wrong legally in suggesting that the 'strikers' might 'attack' the mine. No doubt the right word would have been 'peaceful picketing,' but technicalities don't appeal to the average soldier."

He reports that there were many press photographers there (no doubt hoping for the 'armed arrival.') Once the expected conflict did not occur much of the Suffolk Regiment returned to base over the next few days. A football match took place between the soldiers and the miners.

The writer (obviously an officer) was royally entertained by Lord Trevor and Mr. Craig presented every one of the 500 soldiers with a tin of tobacco. The mine officials took parties of private soldiers down the 1,500 foot shaft and along 'three miles of passages, 4 ft. 6in. high', to the coal face. They learnt how the tubs were brought up and weighed so that men working miles away underground were credited with the amount they cut. "4 and a rounder" meant 40 to distinguish from 14, and a pair if ones meant 11.

The Suffolk Regiment writer displays some respect for the miners and says how pleasurable the visit turned out to be. He states that our nation rarely gives way to those bursts of passion which sometimes take place on the continent. 'This has been noticeable in the late coal strike – the greatest strike we have yet experienced – in which over a million coal workers have stopped work for over a month. Yet, with one or two small exceptions, there has been no rioting or disturbance.'

On Friday 29th March 1912 the Daily Mail reported there was a fatal accident in the mine and the manager, Mr. Yates, at once stopped the pit , and the miners, following the custom when a fatal accident happens, ceased work for the day. When word of the accident reached the 500 men of the regiment a deputation visited their Colonel to show how sorry they were and told him they would like to make a collection.

William Craig died in 1924 aged 97 and the company was inherited by his sons . The benign attitude of their father had gone and the Chirk miners were locked out and joined the 1926 general strike. Like elsewhere the Chirk miners stayed on strike for seven months after the general strike ceased. Hardship during those months were much the same as elsewhere. It is reported that soup kitchens were established by volunteers in surrounding villages. Local tradesmen donated surplus vegetables and meat (sheep heads for broth) - often 'on tick' repayment being expected once the strike was over. Schools provided free food, often just bread and biscuits, to ensure children stayed at school. The miners lost their coal allowances during the strike and slag heaps and railway embankments were scavenged for 'slack' coal to heat homes. Miners lodges distributed food vouchers and tiny amounts of strike pay until funds were exhausted.

All collieries were nationalised in 1947 and the Chirk collieries finally closed in in 1968.

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Review of Ali Milani: the Unlikely Candidate, Polity Press, 2022

Barbara Humphries

Unlike many books describing politics in the Corbyn years, this is a 'grassroots account.' It is the story of the son of an Iranian refugee, brought up by a single parent on a council estate in Uxbridge, who dares to take on one of the most famous (or infamous) politicians in British politics and future Prime Minister. It is also the story of thousands of activists who took to the streets to campaign for Labour, when it was led by Jeremy Corbyn. Many of these came to the Uxbridge and South Ruislip constituency to support Ali Milani.

The differences between Ali Milani and Boris Johnson could not be more striking. The former whose mother struggled sometimes to put food on the table and did not have money for the electricity meter versus a member of the ruling class who had attended Eton and Harrow and who was the MP for the constituency of Uxbridge and South Ruislip seemed like an impossible contest. Milani had attended the local comprehensive school and then Brunel University to study law. He had a background in student politics and became President of the National Union of Students (NUS) at Brunel. He was vice-chair of the NUS. As an Iranian refugee he was a Muslim. He had also become a local councillor in neighbouring Hayes and Harlington.

When first approached to put his name forward to become a Labour candidate. Milani is at first apprehensive, even aghast. This was not 'for the likes of him.' However he sees that he is a genuine representative from the local area, as a young person and immigrant who has been brought up locally and knows the community. This is in stark contrast to his privileged opponent who is almost never seen in the constituency. So when he is approached by an

officer of Momentum to consider the prospect he first consults with friends, who voice the same dilemmas as himself but are ultimately supportive.

The first obstacle he faces is getting on the Labour Party parliamentary panel, at a meeting where he is the only non-white candidate in the room in his twenties. Having got on to the panel he then faces the selection conference in Uxbridge. The local Constituency Labour Party (CLP) is sympathetic to the election of a local candidate, as an antidote to Johnson who is barely seen in the constituency and who has used it to forward his political ambitions. There are however other candidates who have spent years in the Labour Party, working their socks off at every general and local election. This was bound to cause some friction.

This is however not just a personal story. Milani is one of thousands of young people who had joined the Labour Party inspired by the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader. Changing the Parliamentary Labour Party was very much on the agenda, with more young candidates like Milani. He receives support and advice from neighbouring Hillingdon MP and Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, John McDonnell. When selected with 63% of the vote, he gathers a team together from the local CLP and beyond.

The book is a story of the obstacles faced by this improbable candidate. When serious leafleting begins his team realise that the Johnson campaign can easily out spend them, delivering in one day leaflets by courier to the value of which it had taken his team months to raise. However contributions to Milani's campaign are mainly less than £18 per head.

Could he win Uxbridge? In the 2017 General Election Johnson's majority had been halved from 10,000 to 5,000. With the Tories in disarray this appeared as a possibility. Mass canvasses had been held in the constituency in 2017 and 2018. Then Theresa May resigned, and Johnson is elected as leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister.

Milani takes to social media and gets 30,000 followers. He had to learn how to handle a hostile press. He attracted publicity. Some journalists are curious however about his back story and speculate as to if history could be made in Uxbridge. His social media profile gave his campaign a high profile but with the danger that antisemitic and homophobic remarks that he made as a teenager are brought to light by the mass media. He apologises for these and goes on an antisemitic awareness programme.

Milani's job with the NUS comes to an end and with the publicity he is getting he finds it virtually impossible to get another job with his high political profile. He faces the real threat of violence and death threats, particularly by racists who use his Muslim identity as a stick with which to beat him.

Nothing however can beat his enthusiasm and determination which comes over in the book. From small

canvassing teams, mass canvasses are called, with participants coming from all over Britain and indeed some from all other the world. Milani addresses them and encourages them, by saying that they can win.

Then the election is called in December 2019. The campaign reaches full gear as it continues. However so many canvassers turned up on a wet night in South Ruislip that they ran out of leaflets and canvassing sheets.

With the exit polls on election night predicting a landslide Tory victory Milani's dreams and those of his campaigners are dashed. He blames Brexit for the result. Milani however addresses his supporters at the count and vows that this is not the end of the struggle. For those of us who canvassed in Uxbridge and South Ruislip in 2019 this book is a welcome and at times familiar read.

Labour Heritage Annual Bursary project

Thank you so much to members who have contributed to our Birbeck Bursary project in memory of Stan Newens and Linda Shampan. The project is support for students from migrant and refugee backgrounds studying at Birkbeck University. We have been able to raise over £3,000 each year for successful applicants to this programme.

Anna Hetherton, Sanctuary Programme Manager for Birkbeck has told us:

The Bursary is at the heart of the Sanctuary Scholarship. It is what enables students to participate fully and enthusiastically in their studies . We all know travel alone can be expensive, but when combined with the cost of study materials, books, field trips, and technology, the true cost of education extends far beyond tuition fees. So far ,the bursary has supported unfunded students from migrant backgrounds pursuing subjects such as Law, Theatre, and International Relations, helping a diverse range of talent and knowledge to flourish and ensure they can achieve the qualifications they deserve.

This is an appropriate way to remember Stan and Linda who both worked hard to support education and equality of opportunity for all,

Please send cheques payable to 'Labour Heritage', marked 'bursary' on the back to Labour Heritage, 11 Aylmer Road, London W12 9LG.

Or bank transfer to Labour Heritage at Unity Trust Bank Sort Code 608301 Account Number 20149763 referenced with your surname and 'Bursary'.

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The future of Labour Heritage Bulletin

Labour Heritage has been functioning without a chair or secretary since we lost Stan Newens in 2021 and Linda Shampan in 2022.

In the past we had annual meetings to consider officers' reports and elect officers, but these ceased with the onset of Covid in 2020 and were not revived when covid restrictions were lifted in 2022. Committee members elected at the 2020 annual meeting have kept things going since then.

John Grigg, the treasurer and stand-in bulletin editor with Penny Grigg since Barbara Humphries was unable to continue as editor, has entered his 92nd year and has decided it is time to retire.

An email will be sent to members seeking volunteers to fill the posts of chair, secretary, treasurer and bulletin editor. Hopefully people will come forward to ensure that Labour Heritage can continue, and a members meeting can then be held to appoint officers and consider future activity.