

Labour Heritage

BULLETIN SPRING 2003

THE 1897 ENGINEERS STRIKE -

WHAT HAPPENED IN CHISWICK

In 1864 John Isaac Thornycroft established a boat building yard on the Thames at Chiswick and by the 1890s was building destroyers for the British and foreign navies and employing 1,800 men at Church Wharf. The firm moved to Southampton in 1904 when the ships became too big to get under the Thames bridges.

Sir Robert Ensor in *'The Oxford History of Great Britain 1870 -1914'* wrote that 'trade unionism went ahead through the nineties with a new impetus. The most famous disputes were the miners lock-out in 1893 and the engineers strike of 1897.' This article is based upon reports

in the Chiswick Times and the Acton & Chiswick Gazette about the 1897 striking Chiswick engineers who were members of the Hammersmith branches of the Associated Society of Engineers. Engineers served a seven years apprenticeship and another five before coming on to full pay which in 1897 was 10d an hour (about 4p in today's money). Their basic working day was nine hours. At Thornycrofts work started at 6am. There was a half hour break for breakfast and an hour for lunch and the men were expected to work overtime. The normal leaving time was 9pm.

Many Thornycroft skilled workers rented terraced cottages on the Glebe estate or in the Paxton Road area - properties now fetching up to £500,000. Others, whose families lived away from Chiswick, lodged locally during the week. Unskilled workers lived in poorer property, since demolished and replaced by council flats, at the end of Devonshire Road.

At Thornycrofts in 1896 there were demarcation disputes between the Amalgamated Engineers Society (ASE) and the Boilermakers Union over who should do work on boiler manhole covers. The Chiswick engineers claimed it was their work and came out on strike on 15th July for three weeks; the boilermakers struck over the same issue for a week in August. The company said the matter had to be settled and the

AMALGAMATED SOCIETY OF ENGINEERS.

Engineering Trade Lock-out, 1897-8.

Cause of Dispute.

THE Executive Council of the above-named Society, having had prepared a careful analysis of the sources of income of a voluntary nature received during the recent dispute, have now much pleasure in issuing the same with summarised statement of the disposition of the monies so subscribed and an epitome of the facts relating to the dispute.

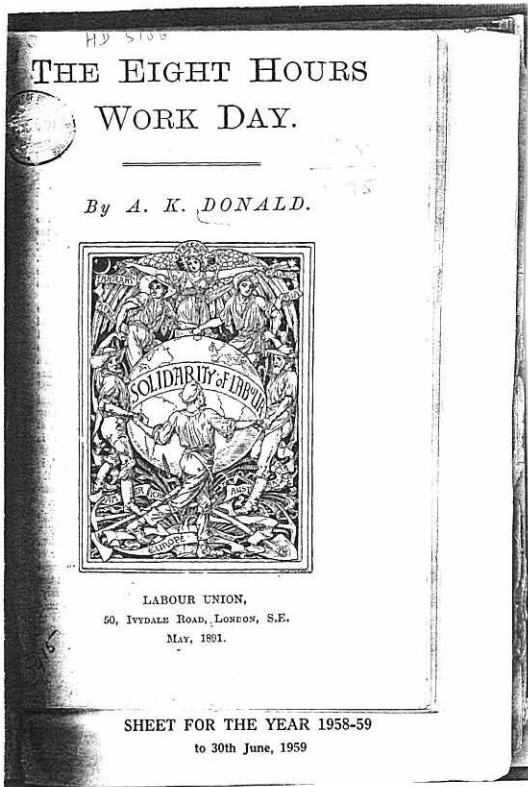
The immediate cause of the Lock-out was the claim made in London for an Eight Hours Day.* This claim, as regards the general body of the Employers, was preferred by the London Joint Committee only on the 30th of April, 1897, although some Employers had voluntarily conceded the shorter working day prior to that date, and many had conceded as the result of negotiation.

Other matters were, however, at issue, and it is necessary to go back a few years to understand the position. Since 1892 there had been a good deal of friction, especially in the Marine Engineering centres. Interruption of work, consequent upon squabbles about lines of demarcation, had alternated with disputes in regard to wages, which had been subject to extreme fluctuation. And concurrently with this there was also a gradual perfecting of organisation on the part of the Employers, as well as on the part of the men, so that, by the middle of last year, the Employers had formed a strong Federation, and the Unions had, in the period under review, increased their membership by some 25 to 30 per cent. We do not suggest that better organisation should in itself have constituted a danger or contributed to rupture, but there was unfortunately a desire on the part of many to use the weapons thus forged as means whereby complete

* See Appendix, Document 4, page 19.

unions agreed to submit future disputes to arbitration.

Eight hours day



In March 1897 the 70 ship joiners at Thornycrofts struck as part of a London wide carpenters' and joiners' strike for an increase from 10d to 10½d an hour and a reduction in hours from 9½ to 8. The firm accepted the wage increase but said Tyneside competition prevented them granting the reduction in hours. The joiners remained out and in fact never went back. Thornycrofts replaced them with non-union men, an action resented by other unions at the shipyard, and there were court appearances after scuffles between strikers and the non-union men. One man was bound over to keep the peace.

Meanwhile the ASE, allied with some smaller craft unions, had been negotiating with the London Federation of Engineering Employers for an 8-hour day and the concession was secured at many London firms for about half of their 10,500 London members. But three big firms - Thornycrofts, Middletons at Southwark and Humphrey & Tennants at Deptford - refused the 8 hours. At the beginning of July the ASE and allied trades unions called out their members at these firms who then joined the northern based National Federation of Engineering Employers lead by Colonel Dyer, a much tougher outfit than the London Employers Federation. This National Federation locked-out ASE members at selected firms in the North in retaliation for the ASE strike in London. The ASE then called out all its members nationally, except in firms where the 8-hours had been accepted, and there was a national stoppage.

In Chiswick, Thornycrofts said 450 out of 1,700 men were on strike and they were buying in ship parts from America. The boilermakers never came out in Chiswick or nationally and this was a crucial factor that affected the final outcome. The Boilermakers Union attracted great resentment and invective. The London boilermakers, who had at first decided to strike, were drawn back at the last moment by their Newcastle based National Executive Council who decided the 8-hours should be negotiated by peaceful means.

The yard was picketed and the men set up their headquarters at the Old Ship public house, by the river in Hammersmith Mall, which had large grounds where meetings could be held. The pub is still there and you can see the open space beside it stretching back towards Chiswick. They elected a strike