



# Labour Heritage

**Bulletin Autumn 2013**

## **The Dublin lock-out and the “strange death of Labour Ireland”**



The recent commemorations of the centenary of the Dublin lock-out of 1913 have all basically ignored one unpalatable but inescapable fact – that it was a complete and utter failure. After 4 months of increasing destitution 20,000 Dublin workers were forced to return to work in early 1914 seeking, as James Connolly bluntly ordered them, “any terms possible”.

Those terms were the employers’ terms and the 1913 defeat, together with the inexplicable decision of Connolly and his Irish Citizen Army to ally themselves with the cultural nationalists of the Gaelic revival and the single-minded militarists of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in the ill-fated 1916 Easter Rising, turned out to be fateful for the future of Irish Labour. As this was followed by the pivotal decision of Irish Labour to absent itself from political activity in the crucial period from 1918 to 1922 the revolutionary potential engendered by the lock-out had all been dissipated by the time the

independent Irish state was born in 1922. By then, Irish Labour had become what it has remained ever since- a politically timid and moderate adjunct of two monolithic conservative nationalist parties who took it in turns to dominate the politics of the new state.

### **A turning point**

Why then is the lock-out regarded as a significant turning point in Irish history? Part of the answer is that with the benefit of hindsight 1913 is often interpreted as a curtain raiser; the beginning of the ten year journey from 1912 to 1922 which saw nationalist Ireland finally achieve its historic aspiration of independence from British imperial dominance. However, this is a partial view coloured by the fact that we, not they, have this benefit of hindsight. We know our past; they did not know their future. Absolutely no-one in pre First World War Ireland thought that within a decade Ireland would be a partitioned country with the bulk of it free from British interference. All Irish people, especially those who were fearful of it such as the Protestant unionists in the north busy organising themselves into the Ulster Volunteer Force at the same time as Dublin workers were enduring the lock-out, expected the establishment of a Home Rule parliament in Dublin still inside the United Kingdom to become a political reality within a matter of months. This is precisely why a separate Irish Labour Party had been founded in 1912 - to provide effective opposition to the conservative Home Rulers in the new assembly.

As founders and leaders of the Irish Labour Party and the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (in 1909) James Connolly and James Larkin introduced for the first time into the United Kingdom a brand new revolutionary form of socialism light years removed from the moderate incremental labourism then prevalent in industrial Britain. This syndicalism was far more than just about improving terms and conditions. It sought through the use of sympathy strikes and secondary picketing to effect revolutionary social change in Ireland.

And this is precisely why it was resisted with such vehemence by the Catholic Home Rule supporting bourgeoisie gathered around the employers' leader, William Martin Murphy. These were prepared to tolerate respectable and moderate craft unions' negotiating on hours and pay. However, as this class was about to come into its own, as they saw it, with the granting of Home Rule it was certainly not prepared to put up with revolutionary syndicalists politicising low paid and casual general workers in this new Ireland.

It was the response of respectable middle-class nationalist Ireland to the lock-out – a response that veered from ambivalence to outright aggression with physical attacks on strikers by, in particular, the Dublin Metropolitan Police, that triggered Connolly's final disillusionment with Home Rule and his subsequent espousal and embrace of revolutionary Irish republicanism in 1916. His workers militia, the Irish Citizen Army, established in 1913 to resist police aggression and which was described by Lenin as the first workers 'army, threw in its lot with the 1916 rebels and fought in Easter Week.

### **Irish Citizen Army**

Yet this also needs to be put into perspective. Only 200 ICA members fought alongside their republican comrades in 1916. By then, ten times that number of

their former comrades in the ITGWU who had taken part in the lock-out two years previously had obviously decided that volunteering for the British Army with its regular pay and pensionable service was, no matter how much more dangerous, preferable to low paid casual starvation wages in the Dublin docks. Many of the Easter rebels with their Scottish, Geordie, Scouse and Cockney accents of the Irish diaspora in Britain paradoxically found themselves confronted by Royal Dublin Fusiliers from the north side and Liberties of working-class Dublin. With the fateful decision of Connolly to self-immolate and sacrifice both himself and the Citizen Army on the altar of revolutionary Irish nationalism, added to the exile of Larkin to the United States, leadership of the Irish labour and trade union movement after 1916 returned to the moderate and ineffective leaders who had been edged out five years previously.

### **Continued support for Labour**

In contrast to 1913 when economic conditions meant that there was always enough impoverished surplus labour to scab and undermine solidarity, towards the end of the war, when food production was vital and labour was in high demand, Irish workers repeatedly struck for higher wages and often won. Ironically, this was also the period when its reformist leaders who had replaced Connolly and Larkin refused to press home Labour's political and economic advantage. They acquiesced in the protest over conscription in 1918 when Irish nationalist MPs abandoned Westminster. Labour also withdrew from participation in the subsequent general election when, with a vastly increased working-class electorate, they could have reasonably expected to make substantial electoral progress. Instead, in return for some vague left-leaning sentiments from a victorious Sinn Fein in Dail Eireann's first "Democratic Programme" Labour in Ireland abandoned electoral politics from

1918 to 1922. By then, of course, the immediate future of Ireland, north and south, had been decided with absolutely no input from the ostensible party of the Irish working-class.

Yet throughout this period industrial disputes continued. Following the recent example of the Russian revolutionaries, workers in Limerick and other urban centres in the south established soviets or workers collectives. These were viewed with the utmost suspicion by Sinn Fein and the IRA as a dangerous deviation from the national revolution towards class struggle and were intimidated and suppressed by republican militants. At the height of the Civil War in 1922 Michael Collins complained about rural “communist agitators” in Limerick and Tipperary who were successfully defying the IRA with strikes and boycotts. The Free State Army was used to break a national postal strike against wage cuts as the new state saw industrial militancy as a threat to its authority and indeed its very existence. The high level of popular support for Labour and trade unionism throughout this period was evidenced by the results of the June 1922 “pact” election when 17 out of 18 Labour candidates were elected with the total Labour vote rivalling the anti-Treaty republican vote. Despite all this, by the mid 1920s the Irish labour movement had settled into the role it was to adopt for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – an also-ran to the two-party nationalist monolith. The revolutionary potential of only ten years previously had evaporated.

### **Decline**

Why did this dramatic decline take place so rapidly? In his landmark 1930s book *“The Strange Death of Liberal England”* historian George Dangerfield analysed the reasons why the venerable British Liberal Party which had ruled the country and the Empire at the start of the First World War disappeared as a relevant political force by the mid 1920s (exactly the same period

during which the Irish labour movement’s revolutionary potential had declined into political meaninglessness). He concluded that the Liberals were let down by their poor political leadership and their inability to win the war, by political division at the top but most of all by their increasing irrelevance in an age of popular democracy with a vastly increased electorate in 1918 when they were replaced by the Labour Party. There is an uncanny similarity to the experience of the Irish Labour Party over the same period. The revolutionary potential of 1913 was shot to pieces by events triggered by the First World War such as the Easter Rising and the Conscription Crisis which catapulted militant republicanism to the fore in Irish politics, in effect, sidelining and suffocating both Home Rule and the rise of Irish Labour. Like the Liberals, Irish Labour was hobbled by poor indecisive leadership where personal and political animosities were never far beneath the surface and which were exacerbated by the return of Larkin from his American exile in 1924. This promptly led to further splits in the Irish labour and trade union movement at a crucial time when a united movement might have had a significant role to play in the new Irish state. By all means we should commemorate the Dublin lock-out of 1913- particularly the struggle of thousands of working-class Dubliners living in the worst slums in the second city of the British Empire but we also need to be realistic. It did not usher in a golden dawn. In the best traditions of Irish struggle it was a failure – a glorious failure maybe but an abject failure all the same. Maybe that is why we attach so much significance to it even after a hundred years?

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(This is an abridged version of a lecture  
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## **The Yangtse Incident of 1949, Harry Pollitt and anti-communist protests in Devon**

In April 1949, the British warship HMS Amethyst, which was sailing up China's Yangtse river during the civil war between the Chinese Communists and Nationalists, was fired on by Chinese Communist artillery. The Amethyst was severely damaged with many casualties among its crew and became trapped in the Yangtse. The attack on the Amethyst and the warship's subsequent ordeal became known as the Yangtse Incident. It aroused strong feelings among British politicians and the British public. Reactions were especially strong in two Devon communities with strong links with the Royal Navy; Plymouth, which was HMS Amethyst's home port and Dartmouth. When Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, made a singularly ill-timed speaking tour of Devon and Cornwall only days after the attack on the Amethyst, he encountered intense animosity and large-scale crowd violence in Dartmouth and Plymouth. In this article I will examine the anti-communist protests at Pollitt's meetings in Dartmouth and Plymouth.

### **The importance of the Royal Navy to Plymouth and Dartmouth**

The Royal Navy played an important role in both these Devon communities. Brian Chalkley, David Dunkerley and Peter Gripaos comment, in their introduction to the book *'Plymouth. Maritime City in Transition'*, "the dominance of the dockyard and the military to an extent affected almost every aspect of the city's life." The Royal Naval Dockyard in Devonport was by far Plymouth's largest single employer and its workforce numbered 21,000 in 1947. Thousands of service personnel were stationed in the city and the Royal Navy was particularly important to its economy and society.

Plymouth's Lord Mayor, Alderman F.G. Leatherby, in a welcome speech to Amethyst and its crew when the ship returned to Devonport in November 1949, said "this city is and has been for hundreds of years associated with the Royal Navy in a most intimate way and the doings of Her Majesty's ships are a matter of deep concern to us."

In the 1945 General Election, Labour won all three of the city's parliamentary constituencies. Bert Medland was elected in Plymouth Drake, Lucy Middleton was victorious in Plymouth Sutton and Devonport was won by Michael Foot. In November 1945, Labour won control of Plymouth Council for the first time.

Plymouth Labour's electoral success in 1945 was a major political change.

However, Plymouth continued to be a 'garrison town' and a major naval base and the armed services, especially the Admiralty, retained considerable political influence in the city.

Dartmouth, a seaport on the South Devon coast, was much smaller than Plymouth. In 1949, its population was less than 6,000. Dartmouth had strong connections with the Royal Navy and its economy had become increasingly dependent on the Royal Naval College established in the early years of the 20th century.

The frigate HMS Amethyst had particularly close associations with Plymouth. Plymouth was Amethyst's home port and the ship was Devonport-manned. In 1945, Amethyst joined the Far East Fleet.

### **The Chinese Civil War and the Royal Navy**

In 1945, China's ruling party was the Guomindang (Chinese Nationalist Party). In July 1946, conflict between the Chinese Nationalists and the Communists erupted into civil war. By 1949, the Communists were winning. Chinese Nationalist resistance north of the Yangtse River had come to an end.

The civil war threatened the safety and security of British nationals living in China. Britain received permission from the Chinese Nationalist government to station a British warship at Nanking, the Chinese Nationalists' capital which was 200 miles up the Yangtse River, to act as a 'guard ship' which could protect the British Embassy and business community in the city.

### The attack on the Amethyst



In February 1949, the Communist forces reached the north bank of the Yangtse River and faced the Chinese Nationalist forces occupying the south bank of the river. This made the position of British and Commonwealth nationals in Nanking increasingly insecure.

The Communists were expected to cross the Yangtse on 21<sup>st</sup> April. The existing guard ship at Nanking, the destroyer 'Consort', was overdue for replacement and the Amethyst was chosen to replace her. It was believed this could be done peacefully if the Amethyst sailed to Nanking before 21<sup>st</sup> April.

HMS Amethyst, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Bernard Skinner, sailed up the Yangtse on 19<sup>th</sup> April. Large Union Jacks were hung on both sides of the ship to show she was British. On 19<sup>th</sup> April, Amethyst anchored with some Chinese Nationalist warships. This may have caused the Chinese Communist

gunners to believe the Amethyst was a Chinese Nationalist warship. On the 20<sup>th</sup> April, the Amethyst suffered a sustained bombardment by Chinese communist artillery on the north bank of the Yangtse. The Amethyst was seriously damaged and ran aground on a mud bank. Seventeen members of the crew were killed and thirty-one injured. The captain, Lieutenant Commander Skinner, was critically wounded and later died from his injuries. Another injured crew member also succumbed to his injuries.

HMS Consort, the Nanking guard ship due for replacement, sailed down river and tried to extricate the Amethyst by taking her in tow. The Consort came under heavy fire from the Communist artillery and sustained serious damage. Ten members of her crew were killed. The destroyer abandoned her rescue attempt and sailed down-river.

On the following day, April 21<sup>st</sup>, the cruiser HMS London and the Black Swan, a frigate, sailed up the Yangtse to help Amethyst escape. The Communist artillery bombarded HMS London and the British warship retaliated, resulting in the biggest clash of the entire Yangtse Incident. HMS London was badly damaged and fifteen members of her crew were killed. London and Black Swan were forced to withdraw.

The Amethyst succeeded in floating herself off the mud bank but she was repeatedly shot at by Communist artillery and was forced to anchor. On 22<sup>nd</sup> April, Lieutenant-Commander John Kerans, the Assistant British Naval Attache at the British Embassy in Nanking, joined the ship and became its new captain.

The Chinese Communist forces crossed the Yangtse and captured Nanking on April 23<sup>rd</sup>. Amethyst was completely surrounded by Chinese Communist forces. Negotiations between the British Government and the Chinese Communists failed to achieve the release of the

Amethyst and the warship remained trapped in the Yangtse.

### **Reactions to the Yangtse Incident in Britain**

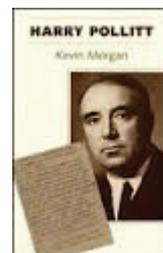
The bombardment of British warships and the Amethyst's predicament aroused intense feelings among British politicians and the British public. During a debate in the House of Commons on China in May 1949, prominent Conservative MP Harold Macmillan stated "The recent tragic events on the lower Yangtse have deeply stirred the British people" In its editorial of 26<sup>th</sup> April 1949, the *Western Morning News*, one of Devon's local newspapers, commented "events along the lower Yangtse have suddenly overshadowed all other matters of public concern at home". The Yangtse Incident produced especially strong public concern in Plymouth and Dartmouth, two communities which not only had close links with the Royal Navy but with the ships and sailors which had come under fire in the Yangtse. Plymouth was the Amethyst's home port and three of the four warships involved in the Yangtse Incident the Amethyst, the Consort and the Black Swan were Devonport-manned. The Amethyst and its crew were well-known in Plymouth. Jack Wright, a sailor from Plymouth, had been killed on the Amethyst and another Plymouth crew member, Roslyn Nicholl, had been seriously wounded. Several of Amethyst's crew were from Plymouth. The Amethyst's ships' boys- teenage sailors – included two local boys-17 year old Dennis Roberts from Plymouth and 17 year old Sidney Horton from nearby Plymstock. Speaking at Amethyst's homecoming in November 1949, Plymouth's Lord Mayor described Plymouth people's deep sympathy with the crew and their families. "We therefore shared with your next of kin their great anxiety for your safety and welfare when a Devonport ship and its Devonport crew were in such peril"

In Dartmouth, the Yangtse Incident had left a local family bereaved. Petty Officer Radio Electrician John Akhurst, a member of the crew of HMS Consort, was a Dartmouth man and the eldest son of C.F.Akhurst, a member of Dartmouth Town Council. During the Consort's attempt to rescue the Amethyst, John Akhurst was killed by Communist artillery fire.

There was increased anti-communist sentiment in Britain as a result of the Yangtse incident.

Public hostility towards the Communist Party of Great Britain had grown as the Cold War had produced more polarised political attitudes. The Yangtse Incident produced much greater public animosity towards and suspicion of the British Communist Party. During the Amethyst Incident, the Communist Party experienced greater harassment by the authorities and aggressive anti-communist political campaigns.

### **Harry Pollitt's tour of Devon**



The passions aroused by the Yangtse Incident made Harry Pollitt's speaking tour of Devon, which including meetings at Dartmouth and Plymouth only days after the attack on the Amethyst, very risky. Pollitt's tour was intended to help Communist candidates standing in the local council elections. Pollitt strongly denied that it was intended to be provocative and pointed out that it had been arranged in January long before the events on the Yangtse. The police and Communists in Devon warned of the risk of violence but Pollitt, displaying what his

biographer Kevin Morgan has described as 'reckless courage', decided to continue with the planned speaking tour.

Harry Pollitt, who died in 1960, was for many years the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the leading figure in that organisation. Pollitt was born in Droylsden in Lancashire in 1890. His working class parents were socialists and his mother, a member of the Independent Labour Party, had a major influence on his beliefs. Pollitt's family experienced severe poverty and three of his siblings died in infancy. This experience of childhood poverty produced in Pollitt a feeling of injustice and a class consciousness which were key factors in shaping his political views. Pollitt became a militant trade unionist and an active socialist.

He left Droylsden during the First World War and he was living in East London by the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917. He became an ardent supporter of the new Soviet State created by the 1917 Revolution. He was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain from its foundation in 1920. He remained loyal to the Soviet State and its leadership for the rest of his life.

In 1929 he became General Secretary of the British Communist Party and in the 1930s he was a dedicated and eloquent opponent of fascism. In September 1939 the Communist International (Comintern) reversed its previous policy after the Non-Aggression Pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, declared that the Second World War was an imperialist war and told the British Communist Party to oppose the war. Pollitt refused to accept the Comintern's anti-war policy and was removed from his position as secretary of the Communist Party.

However, he remained a member of the Party and was reinstated as secretary when the Soviet Union entered the war in 1941. In the 1945 General Election, he stood as the Communist Party candidate in the

Rhondda East constituency and came very close to being elected.

Harry Pollitt supported and admired Stalin. After the Soviet Union's new leader Nikita Khrushchev, had denounced Stalin in 1956, Pollitt would not condemn the man he had fervently supported and resigned as party secretary. Pollitt's living-room contained a portrait of Stalin and Pollitt declared 'He's staying there as long as I'm alive'. Pollitt believed that loyalty to world communism was more important than other allegiances such as loyalty to one's country.

### **Violent disorder at Harry Pollitt's meeting in Dartmouth**

Several Communist Party members accompanied Harry Pollitt on his tour of Devon. They included Peter Kerrigan, the Party's industrial organiser, who was a personal friend of Pollitt and acted as his unofficial bodyguard. Pollitt would need Kerrigan's protection at the tumultuous political meetings in Dartmouth and Plymouth.

Pollitt's meeting in Dartmouth took place on 22<sup>nd</sup> April very soon after British warships were fired on in the Yangtse and a local man killed. It was an open-air meeting held in a square close to the banks of the river Dart. Pollitt was accompanied by Peter Kerrigan and several local Communists including Ernest Holtham, secretary of the local Communist Party. Four hundred townspeople gathered. Among them was Dartmouth town councillor C.F. Akhurst, whose son John Akhurst had been killed in the Yangtse Incident. From the beginning of the meeting the crowd was noisy and unruly and reacted with hostility when Pollitt expressed his sympathy with the families of British sailors killed on the Yangtse. The crowd, which had been standing along the sides of the square, began moving towards the microphone Pollitt was using. Continuous heckling and booing forced Pollitt to end his speech and confine

himself to answering questions. Councillor Akhurst offered Pollitt a rope and a note signed 'C.F.Akhurst, father of one of the boys murdered on the Yangtse'.

Pollitt was booed as he answered questions about the Yangtse Incident. One person asked the emotive question 'Who paid for the shell that killed Mr Akhurst's son?' Pollitt replied that the shells came from the United States and that Soviet munitions were not being used in China. This reply did not placate the crowd. The crowd advanced towards the microphone and fighting broke out. Police and Communists attempted to protect Pollitt but he was attacked by a group of sailors, knocked to the ground and kicked for several minutes. Pollitt was saved from more serious injuries by Peter Kerrigan who fought off the assailants. A microphone was thrown at Ernest Holtham who was hit in the face and fell over. A Communist from Brixham was assaulted, a Red Flag was taken from him and burnt by the crowd. Eggs, fruit and bricks were thrown. The police struggled to restore order.

### **Pollitt's escape from the crowd in Dartmouth**

It was C.F Akhurst whose intervention enabled the police to get Pollitt to safety. Akhurst jumped on the pavement and told the crowd "Let them go." This gave the police time to get Pollitt and Holtham away from danger. Meanwhile, hundreds of people in the square, led by Akhurst and another member of Dartmouth Town Council, A.W.Stevens, sang 'God save the King'

Pollitt took refuge in Ernest Holtham's house. He was bruised and badly shaken. It was later discovered the kicking he had received had caused a prolapsed disc in his spine and he never fully recovered from these injuries. A hostile crowd gathered outside the house and he decided it was too risky to try to leave Dartmouth by train. He left Dartmouth in a private car in the

early hours of the morning and travelled to Dartington, where he stayed at the home of a local communist.

Despite the disorder in Dartmouth, Pollitt decided to fulfil his speaking engagement in Plymouth. Plymouth was an important venue in his speaking tour. It was the largest city in the two counties of Devon and Cornwall, it was the home of the People's Centre, the headquarters of the Communist Party in Devon and Cornwall, and two Communist candidates were standing in Plymouth's council elections. Dave Goodman, the Communist Party organiser in Devon and Cornwall, confirmed that Pollitt would continue with his speaking engagement in Plymouth. Goodman did not expect serious trouble and said increased police protection had not been requested. Pollitt's reception in Plymouth would show Goodman had gravely misjudged the mood in the city.

### **Pollitt's meeting in Plymouth**

The Communist public meeting in Plymouth was held in the Corn Exchange, a large building at the eastern end of the city centre. The local Communist headquarters, the People's Centre, was a short distance away in Whimble Street near St. Andrews Church, a mediaeval church which was a well-known feature of the city centre.

The meeting took place on the evening of Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April. A large force of police officers was on duty. Thousands of people gathered outside the Corn Exchange to show their rejection of Pollitt and communism. The majority of the crowd were civilians but many Royal Navy personnel were present, both male sailors and female Wrens (members of the Women's Royal Naval Service.) A number of the latter had put half-rotted potatoes in their handbags to use as 'ammunition'

Pollitt entered the Corn Exchange just after 7 p.m. When he appeared in the meeting hall, he was greeted with boos. Most of these came from a group of naval ratings.

He delivered his speech but had to endure constant interruptions. Members of the crowd became even more disruptive when Pollitt discussed the Yangtse Incident. While Pollitt was speaking, members of the crowds outside broke in the doors of the main entrance of the Corn Exchange and forced their way into the building. In the meeting hall, Pollitt tried to combine sympathy with the families of the sailors killed on the Yangtse with criticism of the political decisions that put British seamen in danger. He said 'No person, whatever their politics, could be any other than sympathetic with the relatives of the British boys who met their death on the river' But he noted that every newspaper had asked why "our boats were placed in the situation when everyone knew that a full-scale offensive was about to start". These remarks provoked an aggressive response. A group of naval ratings rushed the platform. One of the ratings grabbed Pollitt by his coat lapels but his grip was broken. Chairs were thrown at Pollitt and the other Communists on the platform. A metal tubular chair hit Pollitt in the chest and face sending him hurtling back among his supporters. He retreated to the back of the platform. Peter Kerrigan and some of the other Communists picked up chairs and used them to repel those trying to storm the platform. The police managed to restore order.

The disorder and the incessant heckling meant the meeting could not continue. Pollitt attempted to close the meeting but there was more disruption when he addressed the crowd as 'friends'. A heckler shouted "You've got no friends; they're all in Russia' Pollitt couldn't be heard above the interruptions and he came to the front of the platform and shouted "I declare the meeting closed". The police led the crowd from the hall. Protesters outside threw stones through the Corn Exchange's windows

### **Pollitt's secret departure from the Corn Exchange**

The meeting had ended but disorderly protests continued. The crowd numbered several thousand and at times the Corn Exchange was surrounded. Some members of the crowd went to Whimble Street and smashed the windows of the People's Centre.

When Pollitt appeared at the Corn Exchange's main entrance, he was met by a hail of stones and had to retreat inside. Pollitt and his companions were under virtual siege for four hours. Pollitt eventually left the Corn Exchange through a trap door which led to the Meat Market next door. Police escorted him to Plymouth's main railway station where he caught the train to London. The police cleared the streets around the Corn Exchange and clashed with some of the protesters. One man was injured and six people were arrested.

### **The reasons for the violent protests at Pollitt's meetings**

Harry Pollitt claimed that the violent protests at his meetings had been instigated by the Tories. He declared "The Tories arranged the incidents at Dartmouth and the reporting of the incidents in the Press was deliberately done so as to foment similar actions at my other meetings in Dartington and Plymouth." Prominent Devon Conservatives were vocal in their support of the protests against Harry Pollitt and the Communist Party. During a House of Commons debate about the Yangtse Incident in May 1949, Brigadier Ralph Rayner, Conservative M.P. for the Totnes Division (which included Dartmouth and Dartington) told the Commons "I was delighted when in my own county of South Devon about 10 days ago, in Plymouth and in my own Division, the people showed Harry Pollitt and his gang exactly what they thought of those happenings on the Yangtse"

Harold Pattinson, Chairman of Plymouth Sutton Conservative Association, in a speech at his adoption meeting as a candidate in the local elections, praised the demonstration against Pollitt at the Corn Exchange. He described the protests as “One of the healthiest signs Plymouth has seen for many a long day. I welcome Sunday’s demonstrations because I believe it shows people are awakening” However, Pollitt’s allegation that the anti-communist protests in Dartmouth and Plymouth were simply the result of Conservative machinations is implausible. The *Western Evening Herald*, commented in an editorial that “for every person who took an active part in the demonstrations against Pollitt there were probably twenty present who stood by in silent support.” There was no doubt about the mood the people were in. The protests were an expression of public anger, not the product of a Conservative conspiracy.

### **Amethyst's escape from the Yangtze River**

Negotiations with the Chinese Communists failed to achieve anything and the Amethyst remained trapped on the Yangtze until July. Commander Kerans decided the warship would have to escape. On 30th July 1949 the Amethyst sailed down the Yangtze at high speed. She was fired on by the Communist guns but did not sustain any casualties or serious damage. Amethyst succeeded in reaching the mouth of the Yangtze and, aided by other warships, sailed to Hong Kong. On 1<sup>st</sup> November 1949, Amethyst arrived back in Plymouth and received an enthusiastic welcome from the city's people.

### **Conclusion**

The violent protests in Dartmouth and Plymouth were among the most spectacular examples of large scale crowd violence against the British Communist Party to occur in post-war Britain. The

Cold War increased public intolerance of the Communist Party. The Yangtze Incident had a notable effect on British public opinion. In his book “*The Age of Austerity*” David Kynaston wrote that the attack on British ships and the Amethyst's escape” seems to have struck a deeply patriotic chord in the working class breast” However, local factors were a crucial reason for the virulence of the anti-communist protests in Dartmouth and Plymouth. These communities' close links with the Royal Navy meant many of the sailors under fire on the Yangtze were known personally to local people. A visceral loyalty to British seamen rather than anti-communist ideology caused the public anger Pollitt faced in Devon.



Crew of the Amethyst returns to Plymouth

Jonathan Wood

## **Labour and the 1983 election**

Labour's abysmal result in the last election, the second worst since 1918, reminded many of us of the worst result, in 1983, and particularly those of us who were candidates in that election, as I was. As this year is the thirtieth anniversary of that election, some reflection on why the result was so bad and how it might have been different are perhaps appropriate. There were in my view five main reasons for the result.

Firstly, the breakaway to form the SDP in 1981, the only major split from a large party in post war history, was a huge blow to Labour, and carried with it significant numbers of previous Labour supporters who were not prepared to support its 1983 manifesto, the most left wing there has been before or since, since its founding. Secondly, and following from this, while I supported the manifesto at the time and still believe in essence in the policies it espoused, or most of them, the manifesto was in hindsight too left wing to win the votes required for a majority. Something more moderate and tentative which could have been built on would have been better. (This is in part a problem with our electoral system, which unjustifiably rewards those who can appeal to the centre).

Thirdly, Michael Foot. Despite the enormous affection felt for him then and since by many in the Labour Party, including myself, it was entirely wrong for him to have been made leader, at least in the television age, conveying as he did the impression of a shambling, dotty professor rather than a national leader. He was of course elected as a reflection of internal party divisions, but the public face of the leader is generally recognised as being of major importance, although the extent to which this is so is debateable. It is often pointed out that Thatcher was far less popular than Callaghan in the run up to the 1979 election.

Fourthly, Labour was still blamed by some for the upheavals of the late 1970s, particularly the IMF crisis of 1976 and the 'Winter of Discontent' of 1978-9.

Fifthly the Falklands War. There is no doubt that it was this that delivered a handsome victory for the Tories, as polling figures for the time illustrate. In March 1982, the month before the Argentinian invasion, the average polling score for Labour and the SDP/Liberal Alliance put them both on 33%, with the Tories on 31%. After the invasion the Tories moved to a comfortable lead in the low 40s which they maintained through to the following year's election. However, if there had been no war, or if Britain had lost, (both quite possible) there would probably have been a hung parliament, and that would have probably meant a Labour/Alliance coalition, as even if it had been possible it is unlikely that the Alliance would have been prepared to go into a coalition with the Tories. This could have completely changed the face of British politics, with a possible deal on proportional representation and the end of the Conservatives as a dominant force, although that appears to have now happened.

So while the first four factors cited above were probably enough to have prevented a Labour majority, it was clearly the Falklands War which enabled Thatcher to project herself as a Britannia like figure and win the next two elections for the Tories, taking voters from Labour that would otherwise have remained and giving Labour the worst result since 1918. While Labour might have done better if the factors referred to above had not been present ( a more appropriate leader, a more moderate programme, no SDP breakaway) because of the Falklands War the Tories would still have won a majority in 1983.

## **Brentford and Isleworth**

But as I said I was also a candidate in 1983, for the Brentford and Isleworth

constituency in West London. It is a 'bellwether' constituency, slightly more Conservative than average but winnable for Labour when Labour wins overall. This was the case from 1997 to 2005, when Ann Keen won and held the seat, having fought it unsuccessfully in 1987 and 1992. She lost in 2010 to Tory Mary Macleod. I followed Peter Walker's two attempts to take the seat, in October 1974, when he narrowly lost, and 1979. The seat emerged from a re-organisation and was first contested in February 1974, when the Labour MP for the previous Brentford and Chiswick seat, Michael Barnes, lost to the Conservative's Barney Hayhoe, who retired in 1992 when Nirj Deva became the first Conservative ethnic minority MP.



The CLP was fairly well organised, and I was given a lot of support, which is why the vote held up without collapsing as it did in similar constituencies, and I came a comfortable second, but with a much wider gap between the Labour and Tory vote than in 1979, as can be seen from the figures below ( all percentages and rounded), with a significant switch from Labour to SDP.

CON. 49% (1979), 47% (1983)  
 LAB. 40% (1979), 29% (1983)  
 LIB/SDP 8% (1979), 22% (1983)

I recall that I fought a fairly active campaign, but under the circumstances it was doomed. These of course were the days when people still attended public meetings, and I recall meetings in Ealing,

for local candidates with Michael Foot, in Hounslow, with Arthur Scargill and sitting MP for Feltham and Heston Russell Kerr, who lost, in Chiswick with Slough's Joan Lestor, who also lost, and in Isleworth with Denis Healey. I cannot remember all the individuals involved, but they included Barry Wilson, who was Agent, Mike Rickwood, Party Chair, Elizabeth Ball, Bob Whatley, Ron Bartholemew and our own John Grigg. I also recall one Bob Kerslake, who produced some very good leaflets, and a youthful Ruth Cadbury, who I understand is interested in becoming Labour's candidate for 2015. Good luck to her or whoever is selected.



Peter Rowlands

## The Trico Equal Pay Strike 1976

Talk by Sally Groves on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2013 at the Forester pub, West Ealing, to commemorate International Women's Day. (shortened version)

Recorded and transcribed by Martin Eady

Trico Folberth, was an American owned multinational which at the time of the strike had grown really fat on profits, having established a virtual monopoly of the motor accessory equipment market in the UK. It produced mainly windscreen wiper blades and motors and other accessories. It wasn't for nothing it called itself the 'raining champions'. 14 years previous to 1976 Trico moved to concentrate all its production at its very prestigious site on the Great West Road

between the old Firestones, and Rank Audio Visual; we now know the site as Glaxo Smith Kline. There had been a recent downturn in the economy so the workforce by '76 was down to 1,600 employees. But it was still one of the biggest employers in the whole area. Often whole families worked at Trico. Family ties kept people working there even if rates might have been a bit better elsewhere. The workforce was also made up of many different ethnic backgrounds. The trade union had been organised there for over 20 years. In 1976 I suppose about 70% of the workforce were organised in the union, and the AUEW (Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers), which is now part of Unite, had sole negotiating rights in the factory. But the union had never really been strong or supported others in struggle outside its four walls. Wage rates had actually fallen below the district average and at the time sections of the workforce were very much divided one against another. It was women versus men, black versus white, segregation of men's and women's jobs. Two years earlier, before the strike, the Company had suddenly told the union that it was opening a plant in Northampton and, despite protests from the union, some production lines were moved to Northampton and they took on about 200 women there. We later learned that they were being paid about £11 less than we were, and that they were paying less than the minimum rate.

### **Equal Pay Act**

Then in September '75, before the Equal Pay Act came in, there was a sort of bombshell because the union was told that the night shift was going to close down at Brentford, and it would close fully by April '76. The union managed to get the management to agree to give the men the choice of either redundancy or transferring onto days, or a new back shift. Only 5 guys actually accepted coming to work on days, which was all worked entirely by

women. And the Company said that the 5 would lose their night shift premium but they would continue to be paid the higher rate which had been given to them over some period of time. Now, I think, little did the Company realise when they did this what a fateful decision that would be. It was actually going to be one of the most fateful in the whole history of women's struggles for equal pay in the UK! The Trico management had paid very little regard to the Equal Pay Act since its inception in 1970. When it became law at the end of December 1975 Government had given industry five years to prepare for equal pay. As we know most of industry did spend five years, but they spent five years looking at ways of avoiding it! In the entire five years Trico had paid the women another £3 to close the gap as they said, but the gap of course was much wider than that. So by the summer of 1975 the union had started negotiations to try and ensure that by Equal Pay Act Day there would be a common operational rate regardless of sex in the factory. The union worked out that, according to Trico's very complex payment by results formula, which even gave the computer a nervous breakdown, let alone the staff, at the normal factory performance the women were earning approximately £6.50 less than the men at the end of the 40 hour week. And at that time women assembly workers at Trico were bringing home – well it depended on the rate you worked at – but somewhere between £30 to £34 net, so it was a sizeable amount.

### **The strike begins**



The management were not prepared to consider the issue at all as obviously it would have shown up the whole state of their wages structure in the factory. The Company then said that the men had been paid more as they were more flexible, but the union pointed out that there was a flexibility agreement dating back to 1969. So, in December 1975, as there was no progress, the union called in the AUEW officials. Equal Pay Act Day came and went. The national press was absolutely full trivialising the whole issue of equal pay, but that is a story in itself. Then by April 1976 the remaining 5 male operators from night shift, their "commandos" as the Company used to call them, had been transferred to days and the night shift closed down completely. The Company's solution, they said, was for any future wage increases only to be given to the women, and the men would mark time until the women caught up. The union said, oh, that's equal pay in reverse. I mean it was absurd. No one was meant to notice, despite the men now working alongside the women and doing identical work taking home £6.50 more. So that was the final straw.

And so it was that a mass meeting was held in Boston Manor Park to report back really on those negotiations, and that was Monday May 24<sup>th</sup>, and it was to report on the lack of progress. There were two items on the agenda – a National Day of Action on Unemployment and lobby of Parliament for the Wednesday, and the report back on that morning's negotiations. Unemployment was at record post war levels at the time – it was one and a quarter million – so when Roger Butler, who was our District secretary, addressed the meeting, it was actually divided on whether to support this Day of Action, because, as I said, Trico didn't support many things which it felt was outside the factory. But in the end they supported a half-day stoppage for that. Then the factory convenor, John Inwood, asked for the women to stay behind and the men to

go, and Roger Butler reported to all of the women that at the meeting in the morning the Company had clearly had no intention of implementing equal pay, and that all formal negotiating procedure had been exhausted. And he said that it was now down to the women; to the stewards and the members to decide what to do. The meeting was then closed by our convenor John Inwood and Roger Butler left because he had another meeting. And women began leaving the park. Dinner break was over but about 200 women stayed in the park. "We want to decide now what we're going to do – we're not waiting any longer". And so then everyone else returned, which made about 400 women in the park – that was all the production workers. The mood was really angry and for action, and there were three proposals; lightning strikes; one or two days a week, or all out strike action. Well. It was felt that nothing short of all out strike action could force the management's hand. So the last proposal was put first, and it was carried overwhelmingly. And then we realised about 98 women were not even in the Union! So everyone was dazed because basically I don't think almost anyone had been on strike before. We didn't really know what to do. So we went in and collected our belongings. I remember hearing someone saying "Should we clock out?" And then we were outside the gates. Some men did come out with us at the time. They realised what was happening – they had been told. They came out and those particular men who came out then stayed with us for the whole strike and they were diamonds. But some hid behind the fact that the strike was not official. It wasn't at that point. Then, gradually, we did start to get organised and we finally got a functioning strike committee together, and we began to put together strike bulletins. And the weather became sunny. There was then a spontaneous march which went all the way round Brentford and it was a sort of carnival atmosphere. Then theatre groups

came and entertained us in Boston Manor Park, which was great – things like that were happening. And then the strike was made official by the District Committee, three days later. It was made official by the National Executive three weeks later, which was of course very important for us. At that point a lot of other men did come out, about 150 came out and supported us. But still a lot didn't. The company saw the division in the workforce and they hoped it would demoralise us and ultimately break the union.

### **Solidarity**

But the Company underestimated two things. The first was our determination as women and our belief in our right to equal pay which, we were told, was now law. And second, the extent to which we would get organised and the trade union movement would respond to our need, and would give huge and phenomenal support to us as time went on. That was, in those days, the miners, the dockers, the steelworkers, the car industry, local factories, local temples, the Working Women's Charter, and a lot of other women's movement organisations. So the picket line actually became known as the Costa del Trico, and it later became almost a Who's Who of the Trade Union and women's movement. Later on, different factories and organisations were allotted different nights and days to picket, to help us. Southall District Committee (of the AUEW), Brent, Hounslow and Ealing Trades Councils on various nights, British Airways, Glacier Metals, Acton Works, the Working Women's Charter groups came down, even the Gay Socialists had a slot! It was very difficult for a lot of women to keep the picket line going because we later had to have a night picket and a lot of the women had to be home to cook for husbands, to look after children and to do all the chores. And many women at Trico were already in their 60s or 70s even. Some of their husbands were very

hostile and it's interesting that some of those who were most active had husbands who were supportive. So some women stayed at home and never came down the picket line though they didn't go back to work.

The picketing began to fall, after a while, on about 50 or 60 women and it was quite hard going. The Company had always treated the women with barely concealed contempt and it began this propaganda war with us, sending out letters first class mail to all the employees. We called them love letters from Sid because Sid Atkins was the works manager, who was a local boy made good. They were full of misinformation and threats about our jobs and what would happen to us, and some were even used by the local paper, the *Brentford & Chiswick Times* which was very hostile to us generally. So we treated these letters with the contempt they deserved. Well, a lot were torn up, a lot were sent back. We used to write 'equal pay' all over it and I remember writing on this one: "If the Company has an offer to make it can contact our union reps, so when you decide to give us equal pay you can pick up a telephone or walk to the factory gates.

### **Industrial tribunal**

The union said it was prepared to meet the Company any time, day or night, anywhere to reach a settlement, but the Company instead took out an application to the Industrial Tribunal, advised by their lawyers that the new Equal Pay Act was so full of holes that they would be sure to win against us. But then in July the Company suddenly cancelled its application to the Tribunal and met the union via the Conciliation Service and started making offers. You know, £1.53, £2.33. These were rejected at our mass meetings which we had regularly because they weren't equal pay. But the Company had begun to destroy their own case because they'd been

“telling the world and its wife” that we already had equal pay.

So, when we rejected those offers the Company took out another application to the Tribunal, for a second time, and a date was set for August 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> for it. Before then our District Committee had the political courage and vision to take the position, which didn't happen with all disputes, that we would not appear at the Tribunal, and it stuck to that. We agreed because the Tribunal was making all these ludicrous pro-employer decisions running quite counter to the whole spirit of the new Equal Pay Act. At least 72% of women's applications under the Act were failing. I'll just give you one example of what was going on. There was a Ms Hobson who worked a machine which put wrappers on the Black Magic chocolates. Now she wanted – this is a real case – equal pay with the men who wrapped Kit Kats. But the Tribunal accepted Rowntree Mackintosh's explanation that the men were concerned with the product which is to be consumed by the customer whereas the applicant is concerned only with the outer wrapping, and so that failed!

### **24 hour picketing**

But at the same time as this the Company had begun organising, and it was so different from what we heard with the Ford women in 1984. They'd begun organising massive American style mercenary convoys of lorries and scab labour. Scab labour from the East End, and haulage companies which hurtled into the factory at night. Hence we realised because there were few people at night on the gate, that we needed a night picket. These convoys must have started about the beginning of July, possibly earlier, but there weren't any night pickets before then. For example, on the 11<sup>th</sup> July, in the early hours, there was a convoy. Imagine the amount they spent on all this. There were 17 mainly unmarked lorries and 15 private cars with scab labour that forced their way

through the picket line. They would come in at huge speed, and the police were actively assisting them; stopping all the traffic in Boston Manor Road; turning a blind eye to the fact they'd got their number plates covered up (they didn't want to it be known in the industry they were doing this), and letting them drive fast across red lights. Five coach loads of police were drafted in. Following that occasion we lodged an official complaint with the local Chief Inspector at Brentford Police Station. And that investigation went on all summer. I guess it was put in the waste paper basket!

Our time on the picket line was unforgettable. Incredible jokes went on and it was amazing. But particularly at night, it was a state of tension because we were always expecting another convoy and always waiting for tip-offs from inside the factory about what might be happening. And so we set up a flying picket for people who could come out quickly to help us. And then, on the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> July a convoy was successfully turned away by a very large and disciplined picket made up of us and supporters. We were jubilant. Needless to say the Company redoubled their efforts. At tea time on 29<sup>th</sup> July (which we have a newsflash of), the police arrived. Five coach loads of police had been drafted in from outside the area, all pre planned with the Company, and they used walkie-talkies to communicate, (it was before mobiles!), and they cleared away all but six pickets, which didn't used to happen before, but they began to do that. And then six 40 foot lorries arrived. They stopped everyone communicating with the lorries, which we had been allowed to do before. They manhandled people and dragged Eileen Ward and others away. Three of the pickets were arrested. Some of the lorries hurtled through. They went at a very dangerous speed. One misjudged the gateway and came to a standstill. That was called “ the Battle of the Trico Gates”. Later the police allowed the lorries to leave crossing the

lights at red. The roads were all cordoned off by the police. They blocked the junction at Boston Manor Road and the Great West Road to stop any cars following the convoy, because we had done that before.

Now, most of the women, up to the time of those convoys, had actually thought that the police were fairly impartial. That was what police were about. It was those convoys and the way the police colluded with the Company and with the dreadful scab labour that was being hired; it was that which horrified all the women. Everyone was completely disgusted at this. The effect of it was just to harden our resolve, so it was counter-productive really for the Company.

### **Hardship**

But during this time the hardship was really worsening. We were getting £9 a week strike pay and by then we were getting, in addition, a £1.50 District levy which was levied on all the local factories. Strikers also began to be paid 50p to picket a morning or afternoon, because it was quite difficult to keep the picket line going. A lot of the women didn't have at home someone who was working, many were living alone, single, divorced, widowed. Some were really young, some were much older. I knew that the Department of Social Security (DSS) (as it was then) could pay out to strikers. It was discretionary to pay out Supplementary Benefit to people on strike that needed the money. So I got together a group of women and we went to Ealing DSS office. There were at least nine of us and we occupied the office. We demanded to see the manager, who came out to see us. We said we weren't prepared to leave until it was agreed we got some payment. The manager was so aghast at us women turning up at the office that he agreed to make payment to all of us. So we returned to the picket line jubilant. Spurred on by this success I organised another

group of women who came under Hounslow DSS office. There were about eight or nine of us that went in my tiny car, sitting on each others' laps! We got there and went through the same process. Unfortunately senior DSS management must have warned the staff about the Trico strikers and had given instructions that nothing should be paid to us. When we met the manager he refused to pay anyone despite the hardship. We refused to leave and gradually all the other claimants left and we realised we were the only ones there. Then they pulled the hatches down over the counters and bolted them. All the staff were on one side and we were on the other side, and it went very quiet. And then we heard what we thought was distant thunder ! It got closer and louder and we realised it was actually booted feet coming up the stairs. The office was on the third floor. Some of the young girls with me panicked, realising that the police had been called, and asked me what to do as I had organised this. Well, we couldn't jump out the window; we were on the third floor! So all I could advise was we should sit down and when they grabbed us we must all go floppy and fall on the floor. It would just be passive resistance and no one would get hurt. So the police all came, a load of them. The girls unfortunately, instead of sitting down, jumped up, but I felt I had to follow my own instructions! When they grabbed me I fell to the floor, at which they lifted me up, six of them, turned me upside down and hurtled me down three flights of stairs head first with all the girls behind me shrieking! I don't know if they had dropped me, well I wouldn't have been here tonight I think! They got me outside and dropped me in the gutter. And I remember looking up from the gutter and seeing this police officer brushing his hands clean of me! So you win some, lose some.

Then everything depended on raising money. We sent delegates all over the UK by this time. And we raised in all £30,000.

In 1976 that was a lot of money for a group of women who have never been on strike before. We sent delegates to South Wales; to Glasgow to the Upper Clyde, organised by Jimmy Reid; Birmingham to British Leyland, to Ford plants, to British Airways, to Sheffield, to Leeds, to the Kent Miners, who gave huge support, all the local factories, the local temples where we raised a lot of money; weekly collections outside Firestones; even pensioners sent us stamps to help us send out our bulletins.

### **On to victory**

Then, in August, the Tribunal finally met, under the Chairmanship of Sir Jocelyn Boddeley. We kept to our word and boycotted it, much to the fury of some national newspapers and the local rag. As expected the Tribunal ruled against us, despite saying we did exactly the same work as the men. So here it said: "The Company must rely on the escape provision contained in subsection three of section one of the 1970 Act - a material difference", which basically was that the men had previously worked on night shift. Despite being prepared for that outcome it was a very difficult time. We were worried, with all the pressure on us, that quite a lot of women might walk back in when we got the result. But actually few women walked back in; very few returned to work. The Company had staked everything on defeating us through the Equal Pay Act, through the Tribunal's interpretation of the Act as it was then, and they expected us to cave in completely at that point. The right wing press was highly critical of us, and the local paper carried some of the Company's letters as editorials for them.

But we didn't cave in and vowed never to cave in and never to go back if we didn't win equal pay. Instead we had a mass picket, which was organised on the Monday to lift morale. In face of our

refusal to be defeated the Company couldn't continue the facade of business as usual. It was never made clear who was making all the decisions at Trico. I think for a long while they kept the news of the whole issue from the American parent Company, saying "Oh, it's just a little local difficulty at Brentford". But they couldn't really keep that up. So suddenly on the 1<sup>st</sup> September the management informed all the men who were still inside the factory that everyone would be laid off from Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> September at Brentford, and a lot at Northampton too. So the men who had been scabbing on us all that time were absolutely furious. There were some very unpleasant elements in the factory. There were some, one or two maybe only, National Front members and also their sympathisers, and there were some unpleasant confrontations. But we weren't going to be defeated at this point so we stepped up the campaign and we lobbied the TUC in Brighton. At the TUC there was a resolution on equal pay that year. Also, the Greater London Association of Trades Councils held an emergency co-ordinating meeting to increase support around the whole of London for us, which was very important. So the TUC passed a resolution calling for the Equal Pay Act to be strengthened and actually citing our strike.

But then, after that, suddenly the Company again approached the union and offered yet another 50p. They did this every so often – they seemed to have 50p on the brain! I think by then even the Engineering Employers Federation, who were very powerful, were growing tired of bailing Trico out. Because we learned later that it had been subsidising Trico to the tune of £1 million a week, (and this was in 1976), to keep the Company going because there really was almost no production. The Company had been bringing in other wipers and blades from other suppliers in Europe. Of course, they had other plants,

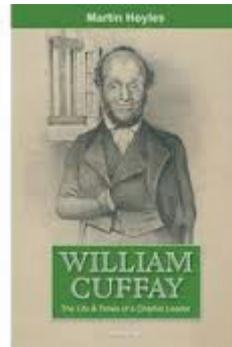
they had one in America, one in Australia, and all over.

But then Trico approached the union again for talks on 14<sup>th</sup> October, and at that meeting it caved in. One of the American directors was in the UK. He was present. I don't know where he'd been all the time! They conceded a common operational rate and the whole principle of equal pay was established in the factory. So following that there was a mass meeting on the Friday and we all voted unanimously to accept this. Then we all received telegrams from the Company, not funnily enough congratulating us, but saying "Settlement reached, dispute over, report to work as normal Monday 18<sup>th</sup> October" And hey, there we were going back in and the summer was over – it was pouring with rain!

I just want to say that it all goes to show that the history of women's struggles is not actually about individuals. It's always been about the organising and the struggling of ordinary working class women. So when 400 women voted to strike for equal pay that day in May 1976 and won 21 weeks later we did it for women everywhere. We could never have actually done it without a strong trades union and the trades union movement to support us. That's why I think we need to get the vicious anti trade union laws repealed, that have come in since then, and our trade unions strengthened so that we can fight and win those battles for our rights in the future.

Thank you – (applause and cheering.)

### **Review of William Cuffay –the life and times of a Chartist leader by Martin Hoyles, Hansib, 2013**



William Cuffay was one of the leaders of the Chartist movement, although his role was not always documented in standard histories. This book gives his life story, not just his contribution to the Chartist movement, but how he came to be involved and what happened to him at the end of his life. As an early black activist in the British labour movement his history dates back to his parents and grandparents. His grandfather and father were slaves – the former was shipped from Africa to the Caribbean island of St Kitts, which was a British colony. The book describes the lives of slaves on St Kitts and how some of them were able to gain their freedom, through for example being able to grow their own vegetables and buy themselves out. Cuffay's father did this and like many other freed slaves he sought employment in the British navy. At the time of the Napoleonic Wars it was estimated that one quarter of the British navy were black, with jobs as diverse as cooks or musicians. Cuffay's father ended up in Chatham which was a naval dockyard town, and his son William was born in 1788. William Cuffay trained in Chatham as a tailor, but he eventually moved to London, where he became active in the union – the Grand Lodge of Operative Tailors. At the time there were 20,000 tailors in London, a significant section of the London working class. But the London tailors faced depressed wages and long working hours. As a union they had to organise secretly to

avoid anti trades union laws and after a strike in the 1830s was defeated, many faced deportation to Australia as a penalty. Cuffay, like many tailors was radicalised by this experience and became involved in Chartism, through the Metropolitan Tailor's Chartist Association. He was also a leader of the Anti-Slavery League. Unlike respectable anti-slavery campaigners he saw the struggle of slaves for freedom as part of the same struggle as that of the British workers against poverty, and for the political emancipation, which he believed that Charter would achieve. Cuffay, by 1842 had become one of the main leaders of the Chartist movement. He chaired public meetings calling for the release of Chartists imprisoned after the 1842 strike. He also made himself popular by singing Chartist songs. His wife, like many other women was active in the Chartist movement, helping to raise funds for prisoners' wives.

After the rejection of the 1848 petition, Cuffay was himself imprisoned. Chartism after 1848 were secret societies heavily infiltrated by police spies. Charged with treason, he was sentenced to life transportation to Van Dieman's land (Tasmania). However the harsh conditions and separation from his wife did not break his spirit – he addressed public meetings of the Anti-Transportation League. He died aged 82 in a workhouse (his wife pre-deceased him). His obituary was recorded in the *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River Advertiser* under the title “*Death of a Chartist celebrity*”.

This is a readable book with a human insight into slavery, life in Chatham in the 19th century, London tailors as well as Chartism. It also offers an insight into the lives of women as Cuffay lost his first wife to the hazards of childbirth, and what happened to the many labour movement activists who were sentenced to life transportation in the 19th century. It is also affordable at the price of £9.90. Barbara Humphries

### “In praise of ... labour history”

The following paragraph appeared in the *Guardian* newspaper on 23rd September – “In the academic world, labour history was once ignored, then prospered for a time, and now survives in the margins. Today, it is often sustained by enthusiasts. But the Labour party, a subset of the labour story, has rarely nurtured its own history. EP Thompson's phrase about the condescension of posterity often applies. Under Tony Blair, the party centenary passed almost without notice. Ed Miliband by contrast has the study of history in his DNA. But Labour still does too little to mark and reflect on its past and the unions are not much better. It would be good to think that the 50th anniversary of Hugh Gaitskell's death and of Thompson's seminal book, or the centenaries of the Dublin lockout or of Emily Davison's death would offer moments for reflection on the Brighton fringe this week. But with the exception of an organised walk around local landmarks, Labour conference is a history free zone – a sad but not untypical loss.” *My response (which did not get printed)*. “I agree that the Labour Party in recent years has paid too little attention to its history. However that is not true of all of its members. Labour Heritage was founded in 1982 to encourage Labour Party members to take an interest in their own history, particularly at a local level and to preserve their records and historical material. It had the support of the then leader of the Labour Party (Michael Foot) and general secretary (Jim Mortimer). Labour Heritage has survived the Blair years and with other groups in the Party did commemorate Labour's centenary – in 1900 the foundation of the Labour Representation Committee, and in 1906 the foundation of the Party itself.”

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