

# FRANK BAILEY

# Britain at Work

## SUMMARY

Frank Bailey was brought up in Guyana, where he became an engineering apprentice. From Guyana he travelled to New York, working as a ship's engineer trimmer. In New York he worked in a hospital, at first as a diet aid porter and then in the physiotherapy department as a medical assistant. There he led a successful walkout against apartheid dining rooms. He came to London in the early 50s and joined the West Indian Standing Conference; as a delegate of which he attended a Trade Union Conference. He subsequently became the first black fireman in Britain and a Fire Brigade Union representative, working in the East End, before becoming a social worker in Kensington and Chelsea and the first black Mental Welfare Officer/psychiatric social worker, as well as the first black warden at the Toc H social club and hostel at 47 Pembridge Gardens Notting Hill Gate, a legal advisor to black youths at Marylebone Magistrates Court and NALGO branch secretary for Kensington and Chelsea.

Interview Alexis Bailey December 2014 transcription Tom Vague

## INTERVIEW

*I'm going to put this in front of you. What are they for? This is, it's called Britain at Work. Britain, oh, this the interview thing, I see. Yes, so I've got a list of questions, so I'll go through them. So can you tell me a bit about your background and upbringing in Guyana?* Ah, my background and upbringing: I went to two church schools and I passed exams and got, went up in the school until I became a pupil-teacher. A pupil-teacher was a bright child who taught the younger ones, you know. That was my school life. Otherwise, I lived like all the boys, I did the things that other boys did, you know, played games, robbed people's apple trees and pineapple groves as well, the normal things that boys do, that's how I grew up. *What about at home? Did you have a big family?* Pardon? *You had a big family didn't you?* I had 2 blood sisters and 3 adopted sisters as my father brought in. So I had 5 sisters and then they brought a brother in. My father spent time adopting children who were poorer than us, because there were a lot of poor people, you see, and my father took in poor people's children. So I had a big family but only 2 of them were my natural sisters, the others were adopted. *And what did your father do for a living?* My father was an architect; he built houses.

*Okay, why did you leave Guyana? What brought you to Britain?* I, while I grew up I took an apprenticeship in an engineering firm. So I was an engineering apprentice and I went one evening into a pub, you see, and I heard some sailors talking about a ship. But it made me curious about ships and what kind of things I would like to do. So I spoke to one German sailor, German war (?) ship were the sailors and he said he was an engineer aboard a ship. So I said does your ship need many men? He said well, we need a what's it called? He said we need a blimey, it's a job I had but I can't remember the name of it now. *Maybe you'll remember later.* Anyway he said we need a what do you call it, so I said I can do that job. He said you can? So I say yes, because I didn't even know what the job was but I said I could do it. So he said alright, come with me, so we went, we went aboard the ship and saw the chief engineer. The chief engineer say, trimmer, trimmer, that was the job, he said, the chief engineer said we need a trimmer; can you be a trimmer? So I said yes, I said yes. He said alright, you're hired, he said you can come aboard when we leave, we're leaving tomorrow, you can come aboard.

So I went home and got my stuff, not much, you know a bag, and I went aboard the ship as a trimmer. I found out that a trimmer, you know when a ship is sailing, well, a trimmer is a man who keeps the water in the tanks. You got 2 tanks, a tank on either side and that supplies the engine with water and the trimmer has to keep the water on either side at a level, which keeps the ship afloat, you see, keeps the engine running properly. So that was my job and I had to look up and there were 2 valves and I had to manage? these valves so that the water stayed at a level, you see. Anyway, that was how I left Guyana, and I had an aunt in America, an aunt living in New York. Now she didn't know me personally and we never corresponded because I didn't write letters and so on. But anyway I knew that I had this aunt in New York, so when we got to America, we went to America twice and the second time we went to America I decided to go and visit my aunt. I didn't tell the engineer anything about this, I just got off the ship and I went to a train station and I bought a ticket to New York, and that is how I come to be in New York. I didn't use my passport or anything, so I went to New York illegally if you like, and when I turned up at my aunt's, she said boy, who are you? So I told her who I was. She said hi, she called her

husband, she said look there's the boy, so they took me in and they gave me a room in their house, in their flat, and that's how I came to live in New York.

*What did you do while you were there? Pardon? What did you do in New York?* I got a job at a hospital, first as a diet aid, you know a diet aid is a person who carried around the food for the patients. So I got a job as a diet aid and after I did that for a couple of months or so I figured I could do something more interesting than this. So I went down, I look around the hospital, look around the hospital, and I came to a place, the physiotherapy department. So I said I know about physiotherapy because I used to be a weightlifter when I was a boy and so on see, so I knew about physique, so I went to see the doctor, the doctor Harpruder? A German doctor, and I told him, I said look you know I'd like a job in this department. So he said what can you do? So I told him I was a weightlifter and I know about physical training and so on. So he said alright, come here and spend a couple of days and we'll see what you can do.

So I went down to the department and after a couple of days he said alright, you can stay here, you can be Dr Schaefer's assistant. So I became what they called a medical assistant. So I worked with Dr Schaefer and I spent 2 years and I did things in that department that changed the whole history of the hospital. When I went down there at first the hospital had 2 dining rooms, one dining room is for the doctors and nurses, another dining room for the other staff, the cleaners and so on. So I watched this and I thought I don't like this, so I talked to, I went to see the doctors and I told them, I said look, this is wrong, this is apartheid, this is what happens in South Africa, where they separate people, and they listened to me and I said we will come out on strike, we won't eat any food, we'll walk out and go across the road. Across the road there was a Jewish café, I said we'll go across the road on Thursday, and on the Thursday we left the hospital.

Well, you know New York is such a place that any kind of news spreads immediately all over the television and so on, and there were television men come down to visit the hospital and on all the news and the hospital was in confusion, because there were doctors that walked out when we did and refused to eat any food anymore in the canteen. So the lady who was in charge of personnel, a Miss, Mrs Faulkner, she came to me, she said what do you want? I said I want this separation ended. Everybody who works here look after the patients, so why should they eat separately? Why should you have apartheid? So overnight, overnight they brought in carpenters and pulled down the walls, so that the whole canteen became one place. Everybody, porters, cleaners, doctors, nurses, everybody ate in the same place. Everybody walked up to the counter with a tray and there they pick out what food they wanted to eat and they put it on a tray and they went and sat at their tables. So everybody was normal, and that put me you know in the press, you know the press put everyday news out.

*Okay, let's go on to when you came to Britain. Why did you leave America? What brought you to Britain? Do you want a drink?* Hold on, I went back to Guyana for a time and then I decided, having lived in America and seen a different kind of life, I couldn't live in Guyana anymore so I decided to come to Britain. I bought a ticket to London and I came from Guyana on a ship, I can't remember the name of the ship, but I came up here, up here to England on a ship and then I landed in England on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November, 23<sup>rd</sup>, yes, yes, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November I came here. *What year?* Pardon? *What year was it?* 1953, I think. But anyway, my friend and I, I had a friend who came up with me as well, a chap who was called Ron Schurler? A white boy, and Schurler and I went to live at a place in Fulham, Grafton? Road, 47 Grafton Road, Fulham, and we went there. Anyway, we didn't know anybody in England but it was at the end of November, you know the end of November you begin to think of Christmas, in a few weeks it'll be Christmas. So we went into a pub, a pub called the Gunter Arms in Chelsea and when we went to this pub they were singing a song, I laugh now to myself when I remember it. They said 'maybe it's because I'm a Londoner that I love London so, maybe it's because I'm a Londoner that I think of her wherever I go.' Now, I'd only been in the country about 3 weeks and I was singing 'it's because I'm a Londoner', (laughs) oh dear.

*So what led you to become a firefighter?* Oh, I joined the West Indian, I met other West Indians and I joined the West Indian (Standing) Conference, you see. The West Indian Conference was a political body who were attacking racism all over the place, because there were every, these English people took the racism in South Africa and practised it here. So we blacks had to fight against this racism and then we fought and fought. So they used to, the group used to send delegates to Trade Union Conferences, and a chap and I, what's his name now? He and I were sent to a Trade Union Conference, so when we got to this Trade Union Conference they said, one delegate went to the microphone and was talking and he looked at us, the 2 black fellows sitting in the front row. He said there are no black men in the fire brigade because, so I said why not? He said they feel that blacks are not educated enough or strong enough to do the job. So I said strong enough to do the job? I used

to be a weightlifter, I said, and not educated enough? So I said look here I'm going to apply for a job in the fire service. So I applied for a job in the fire service and they give me tests, you know a written test. I passed this test. They gave me a physical test, the physical test is you have to carry a 12 stone man on your shoulder and you had to walk 200 hundred yards, up and down with this 12 stone man on your shoulder. So I did all that, so they couldn't fail me, they had to hire me, and that's how I get into the London Fire Service.

*Which fire station were you in? Where was it?* Pardon, in the docks, they put me in the docks, Albert Docks. *Where's that? Is it southeast?* It's in what is now called Newham, used to be West Ham in those days, and that's where I served, and I got all kinds of injuries you know. Well, I had to climb up ladders and go into burning buildings, I got my face all burnt, my face, all my face was blistered, blister, blister, all over my face. I even had to be taken into hospital for the blisters on my face. *So there wasn't health and safety, like there is now?* Not as stringent. *So what was a typical day or nightshift like?* Oh, they were long and tiresome. We used to work I think 8 hours a day and it was 15 hours at night, when you were working night duty, you were working night duty from 6 O'clock in the evening to 9 O'clock next day. *What were the pay and working conditions like?* Oh, the conditions with the men were alright, round the fire station we were alright, because everybody knew everybody else. You had arguments now and then but camaraderie was important, everybody helped everybody else, and it was a good thing, it was a good crew, yeah. I enjoyed the crew; I enjoyed working with the men.

*So how did it make you feel that you were the first black firefighter in Britain?* How what? *You said there weren't any other black firefighters at the time, you were the first one, how did that make you feel?* Well, at first it made me feel like an outsider, because they were all trained and friendly with among themselves, but I was a curiosity. They spent a lot of time asking me questions: where do you come from? What is it like where you live? This stuff, and so I had to answer all these questions. But they found out that I was educated if you like, because I was more learned than they were. They hadn't the same understanding of foreigners, as I had of them. I knew more about them than they knew about themselves and they were surprised at that. Here is this black man that knows so much about England and we don't know much about where he comes from, see, and this had the effect of making them more friendly to me because they learned about countries that they didn't know about.

*Did you ever experience any racism while you were there?* In the Fire Service? *Yeah.* No, I don't think, not I think among the firemen. I never experienced it around the firemen. They, apart from when the curiosity of my person was got over, they accepted me as one of themselves. *Were there any female firefighters at that time?* No, no. *And how long were you in the Fire Service?* 10 years.

*So how did you become involved with the trade union FBU, the fire brigade's union?* I was always a trade unionist. When I lived in New York I was a trade unionist, when I worked on the ship I was a trade unionist, because I always hated injustice. Whenever I found injustice I fought it, I didn't wait to have something extraordinary happen. As soon as I saw injustice, I attacked it, and when I was in the fire brigade, the firemen realised that I hated injustice and every time something happened that I thought was unjust I put my foot on it and I made an issue of it. And so they elected me representative or union representative at that time, and the man who was the general secretary of the fire brigade's union was a man called John Horner, and Horner came to see me, and we found out that he and I had the same attitude to injustice so we became friends, and Horner and I became friends. And he went on to become an MP and even when he became an MP he and I still remained friends.

*So what led to you leaving the fire brigade and becoming a social worker?* My education. I was educated and as an educated man the fire work, the fire brigade was not the job for an educated man. I applied for a job as a social worker and they hired me. When I went for the interview there were 10 of us, I was the only black man on the application site and they interviewed us all and in the end they hired me. And I heard a story about the interview panel, apparently they said when they interviewed us all, they found me the best candidate. So a woman called what's her name now? Her name is, anyway, when they interviewed us she said, they said he's the best candidate but he's a black man, how can you hire him? Suppose he has to go and look at, examine a woman in the night, how can you have a black man examining a woman, a white woman in the night? So she said, she listened to this, Amy Jackson was her name, she listened to this and she said well, suppose a woman has to go to hospital and have a black doctor examine her, what about that? What can you do about that? So in the end they had to hire me, so they hired me and I became a Mental Welfare Officer, nowadays it's developed into a psychiatric social worker but in those days they were called Mental Welfare Officers. So I was the first black Mental Welfare Officer.

*And what training did you have for that job? Pardon? Did you have any training for that job?* Oh yeah, you got some training, yes. *And where did you do that job?* In London, here. *Which area?* From County Hall. There was a place called, I don't know if it's still called County Hall, is there still a place called County Hall? I think so, yeah. Yeah, well, we worked out of County Hall. *And which part of London did you cover?* Chelsea, Kensington, in the same area where I am now, Kensington and Chelsea. *What was your relationship with your employers like? Was it Kensington and Chelsea Council? Were they your employers?* It was questionable. I don't think they saw me as a normal person. They saw me as a curiosity and although they gave me the job, they didn't, they weren't too sure of whether I was capable but they gave me cases, they gave me a bundle of cases. I had 180 cases, see, now I remember one time a psychiatrist came to see me and he saw the bundle. He said what are those? I said these are cases, my cases. He said your cases, how many? So I told him, he said my god, how do they expect you to handle 180 cases? So.

*Did you handle them? Pardon? Did you handle them?* Well, I worked as best I could and I became, I got some credit because some of these cases other social workers couldn't deal with, I had, I dealt with them, I dealt with them successfully. So that the doctors in the hospitals learned to trust me and there was a Dr Baker, who was in charge of Hampstead? Hospital, and there was a doctor, the chap at Springfield, they, these doctors who were in charge of these hospitals, they trusted me, and Baker, I had a case where I had a situation where Baker's GP wanted to get a woman into hospital and he got in touch with the hospital and said he wanted the bed for this woman, and Baker got in touch with me and he said to me: he said look Frank, you go and see the woman. If you think she's mentally ill, we'll give her, I'll give her a bed, otherwise she can't come here. He said these GPs know nothing about mental illness, and so I went to see the woman and I felt that she was mentally ill, so Baker gave her a bed and he said thank you Frank for looking at her, see, and so I became as it were noticed, I was famous as the most intelligent of the Mental Welfare Officers.

*Okay, so were there any challenges that you faced as a social worker? Pardon, yes, yes, from patients, you know there were a lot of wealthy people here in Kensington didn't like the idea of a black man coming into their homes to talk to their parents or their wives or whatever. So they used to watch me and in fact some of them used to complain to the council – used to say how can you send this man? Who is this man that you sent to us? See, and of course the council told them he's a psychiatric social worker, so. Do you think that those sorts of issues still exist today? Pardon? Do you think those issues still exist today?* Yes, yes.

*Can you talk a little bit about Toc H and what it stood for?* Toc H was a thing started by an ex soldier, Tommy? Tubby? Tubby Allen I think was his name and he ran some social clubs for ex soldiers, and one of these social clubs was at 47 Pembridge Gardens and they needed a warden to look after this. That was mark 1, the first of their social clubs, mark 1 at 47 Pembridge Gardens, and they needed a warden and my friends, 2 friends I had, Donald Chesworth and the other fellow I can't remember his name now but anyway, they recommended me to be warden. So I was doing my council job and also doing my job as a warden for this Toc H, you see, and I was willing to do the 2 things, the 2 things, but I got into trouble because I took in, you see when it was just Toc H they never had anybody like me in charge: they had these white men in charge.

But I took in black boys, you know these homeless rag boys and the boys who got into trouble with the police and so on, I took them into the hostel and so I lived there and look after my friends and look after these youngsters, and I became involved with the police because the police then know that I had these black boys and they used to come to see me to complain about these black boys' behaviour in the community. So I had to start lecturing my black youngsters and telling them how they should behave, telling them what they should or shouldn't do. And I used to have to go to court, go to the Marylebone Magistrates Court and stand up and speak on behalf of these black youngsters, because some of these black youngsters didn't know what was going on.

I remember one case, I went there and I was sitting in the viewers' gallery while the case was going on and the police came in, brought in this boy and the boy stood there and as they read out the charges and so on, the boy, I knew that the boy wasn't on, didn't know what was going on. So I put up my hand and the magistrate said there's a man in the gallery with his arm up. So he said why have you got your arm up? I said I'd like to say something to the court, so he said come down here, so I went down and I stood up and he said what is it you want to say? I said look, this case is supposed to be trying a man to produce justice and I said this youngster don't know what's going on. He doesn't know what you're charging him for, he doesn't understand the charge, he doesn't understand what you're saying. This means he can't be tried fairly. So the magistrate, he said what do you want to happen? So I said let the police tell me what they think he has done wrong and I will answer. So in the end they, we

discussed the matter and we discussed what they said the boy did and what the boy said he didn't do and so on, and in the end they quashed the case. And that's how I at that Marylebone Magistrates Court whenever I went there and had to deal with a case it was nearly always quashed.

*How far did you get involved with NALGO union? Pardon? NALGO, NALGO? NALGO, oh yeah. I became branch secretary for NALGO. I was the branch secretary for Kensington and Chelsea. What is that union NALGO? Pardon, NALGO, National and Local Government Officers. What role do you think unions have today? Do you think they're still relevant today? What? Unions, do you think they're still relevant? Yes, yes, yes, they're the only working man's defence against the government. This government, this Tory government that we've got now they want to put England back to before the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, they want to take England back, they don't want to advance, they want to go back. They want working people to have no power; they want to rule and the working man must listen to their rule and not complain about their behaviour. The Tory government is not for working people, the Tory government is anti-working people.*

*When you were dealing with unions, did you ever experience discrimination? Not within the union. Discrimination has always been here, sometimes blatant, sometimes secretive, but not in the union. In the union I have always sought justice and I have always got justice. The union are the only defence against discrimination. The union are the only people who want to advance society, to create equality among men and women in life.*

*When you were a young man, what were your aspirations and goals? What was my? Aspirations and goals. What did you want to achieve when you were young? Equality. I've always wanted and aspired to equality, because I believe that all men are equal. I don't believe that some men are better, some men are better than other men, I believe all men are equal. I believe all the world is equal. You know, one of my heroes was a man called Thomas Paine. Have you ever heard of Thomas Paine? Yes. Okay, Thomas Paine said the world is my country, all men are my brothers, to do good is my religion. I believe that, I believe that sincerely in my heart, I believe that, and that is what I have always aspired to.*

*Would you say that you reached personal fulfilment at work? Pardon. Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, I was satisfied with what I did and I was satisfied with the respect I got from my workmates. They respected me because they knew that I knew what I was doing. I took my job seriously. Okay, that's all the questions, is there anything else you want to say? Nothing, nothing really. Well, I hope that you are successful in what you're doing. Okay, thank you very much.*