

**Betty Shiers, Interviewed: 21/04/05**

*Q: Betty, would you like to start by saying when you arrived in Southampton and what happened from then on.*

BS: Yes, I will. I came down with my family, from Birmingham, in 1937, because my mother was widowed and there were five of us. I was the eldest. So we came down because her family was here. And they managed to find us a house to rent. But things were quite difficult and my sister and I went out to work and we had to give all our wages. We both worked at the Co-op. We were both cashiers. And I had become politically aware of what was going on in the world and at the Co-op there were two men who were Conscientious Objectors. Although I didn't necessarily agree with what they were doing, it did make me think. I thought, you know, we're going into this war. Some people don't want to. And I also met people who belonged to the Young Communists. And I joined them. And in 1941 we were conscripted, we were called up. We could either do Land Army work or join the forces, or go into industry. So my sister and I chose to go into industry. And just outside of Southampton they had a big training centre where they were going to train us to be engineers. I think we were there for three months, but it was a wonderful time, because there were all women. And we had to train. I was going to be a milling machine operator. My sister was going to do a lathe. It really was a wonderful time. There was a wonderful feeling of comradeship amongst the women because none of us had ever ... We never done anything like that. Probably never wanted to. But it did become quite enjoyable. And we were finally, you know, passed our little exam and then we were given factories we could go to and I chose a [Weir] Precision Engineering Company, which was a small company, but they were precision engineers. Of course, all the men there were in the AEU.

*Q: Right.*

BS: And they accepted us. They allowed us women to join them, which was a first, really, because I don't think they'd ever had women in the AEU.

*Q: That's correct.*

BS: And I became the shop steward and I also was on the District Committee and I was also a delegate to the Trades Council. So I was very busy. Also, we were organising meetings at factories in dock gates, especially when it came to wanting the second front, and I was involved with that. And it was amazing because, I also think it was a period when women took another step on the road to emancipation, in a way, because I think women were doing things during the war that were never done before. You know, we were much freer. My mother was eventually evacuated and my sister and I took on a flat. Well, it was two sort of very young women in a flat. That was quite a major step, really. We didn't think anything of it, but it was quite a major step. We were looking after ourselves. And she went to work over at Thornycroft's, you know, the shipyard that sadly is now no more in Southampton. It's gone. And I stayed at the [Weir] Precision for about three years.

Q: *Right.*

BS: But the whole of the period, to me, was a period of great political activity. We filled the Guildhall. I don't know whether you've ever been to Southampton Guildhall. It's a massive place. And Harry [Pollard] came down. And it was absolutely full, you know, it was absolutely wonderful. And I don't think I've ever experienced anything quite like it since.

Q: *This was for the second front, was it?*

BS: Yes.

Q: *This was all connected with the second front?*

BS: Second front. And also, we had a ... We campaigned for tanks for Joe. That was another slogan during the war. 'Tanks for Joe.' When you see how history has evolved since then, it's difficult to imagine it, isn't it? But it was real. That's how I met my husband. He was working in the docks. And I was down there at a factory gate meeting, actually selling *The Daily Worker*. And he was there and that's how we met. So I met him through politics, as well.

Q: *So he was working there ...*

BS: He was working in the docks.

Q: *So he ...*

BS: He came out to a dock gate meeting.

Q: *Right.*

BS: And I was selling *The Daily Worker*, and we met. He joined the Young Communists and ... I mean, war is a terrible thing. And it was awful. But, I don't know. It was a great time. Lots of fun for us, as well, you know? We organised little dances and things like that. Of course, we had a lot of American troops over here, especially in this area, during the war. So we did have fun.

Q: *Could I ask you to describe a bit, as a shop steward in the AEU, the kind of things you were dealing with. The kind of issues that tended to come up.*

BS: You know, I can't, honestly, remember. I can't remember any disputes at the [Weir] Engineering. I really can't.

Q: *Were you on the District Committee?*

BS: Yes, I was. I can't really remember anything, nothing stands out. You know, I can also remember going to the Trades Council, but I can't for the life of me remember the issue, I mean, what I talked about. I really can't

remember.

*Q: Talk a bit about your work. For example, how much you earned, your hours of work ...*

BS: Well, the hours were ten o'clock at night until eight in the morning. Month on nights.

*Q: Right.*

BS: And then days. And I think it was something like eight in the morning until ten at night. They were long hours.

*Q: Very long.*

BS: But we did five days.

*Q: Right.*

BS: Five days. But they were long hours. And the trained men actually set our machines for us.

*Q: Right.*

BS: So all we had to do was to operate them.

*Q: Right.*

BS: And I've always thought, and I believe I was told we were actually making little pieces for Spitfires. You know, just small components.

*Q: Right. OK. And what was your average weekly wage?*

BS: I can't tell you. I really, really can't tell you. No.

*Q: What was --*

BS: It wasn't a lot!

*Q: No. Well, it sounds as though the AEU members there were quite --*

BS: They were good!

*Q: -- were quite happy to --*

BS: Oh, yes, yes.

*Q: --have you there. And were you earning the same as them?*

BS: I don't know that.

Q: *No.*

BS: I doubt it. There wasn't equality then, was there? We couldn't have been earning the same. I mean, let's face it, they'd served five years' apprenticeship. We'd done six months as a ... I mean, we weren't engineers, were we? But they accepted us.

Q: *So you said that was a landmark.*

BS: It was!

Q: *In terms of trade union attitudes.*

BS: Yeah, yeah, the AEU, as far as I know, they'd never had women.

Q: *No. That's right.*

BS: They never had. So, you know, there was a big upsurge in the trade union movement during the war.

Q: *Was there a canteen in the factory?*

BS: Yes. There was.

Q: *Right.*

BS: Yeah. A very small factory, it was.

Q: *Small factory. And were there air raid shelters in the factory?*

BS: No. No, there weren't any there at all.

Q: *What did you do when there was a raid?*

BS: I think we just stayed in the factory because by that time the Blitz had finished in Southampton, so we just stayed. There certainly weren't any air raid shelters around there, no. I mean, if you could see the place now, you wouldn't know there had been a factory there. It's not far from here. It's just houses.

Q: *And how many, roughly, would you say worked there?*

BS: Well, there were two sections to it. The section that I was in was supposed to be for the skilled workers. And there was another section for unskilled workers. And I think there would be about a hundred where I was working and roughly about the same in the other side.

Q: *And did union meetings take place during the day?*

BS: No, no, no.

Q: *In the evening?*

BS: No, no. Not in the day. In the evening.

Q: *Right. Were they frequent? Once a fortnight? Once a ...*

BS: I think about once a month.

Q: *Were they quite well attended? Do you remember?*

BS: Yes. I think so. There was certainly an interest. The one thing that I think was active was the Trades Council, actually, because it brought together all the unions.

Q: *Right. Right. And what was that? Meetings once a month?*

BS: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: *In Southampton?*

BS: Yeah, they met in [Hensed] Road. I remember exactly where they met. It used to be UCAS offices.

Q: *That was quite lively meetings? Very well attended?*

BS: Yeah, very lively. Yes.

Q: *OK. Going to the YCL. They organised dances?*

BS: Yes.

Q: *And factory gate sales?*

BS: Yes, yes.

Q: *And regular meetings of the YCL itself?*

BS: We did. We met in a pub. It's quite interesting because I was actually still at the Co-op then. At the cash desk. And we met regularly at this pub. And one day, I was quite friendly with the manager at the Co-op. He was a socialist. He was quite friendly. And these two men came in. They looked a bit odd, you know, they were tall. They had a long chat with him and afterwards he said they'd been to ask him about me! Yeah, apparently they'd bugged the meeting room.

Q: *Right, right.*

BS: So.

*Q: And could you say why were you drawn to the Communist Party, rather than, say, the Labour Party?*

BS: Because I didn't know anybody in the Labour Party! I don't know anybody in the Labour Party and I just happened to meet people in the YCL. And they might just ... Maybe if I'd met people in the Labour Party, who knows. I don't know. They were the first people I met that really opened my eyes. You know.

*Q: So what would you say was the attitude of the other workers, women particularly, was to the Soviet Union?*

BS: Very friendly. The attitude towards the Soviet Union was wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. This is what makes me so sad. I feel so dreadful that, you know, some of the things that have since come out. And although I still think that their idea was a good one. It was probably people that let it down in the end.

*Q: When the call for the second front went on, presumably there was a lot of activity.*

BS: There was a lot. Especially down in this area because a lot of the troops left from here as well. But there was a lot of meetings to open the second front. 'Tanks for Joe.'

*Q: Yes. Were there lots of other factories in the Southampton area --*

BS: There were docks.

*Q: Yeah.*

BS: The docks, I mean, all the dockers, they were so active in the T and G, and lots of them, I mean, the Communist Party had quite a lot of members during the war. We could sell a lot of *Daily Workers* at the dock gate.

*Q: How often did you sell? Every day?*

BS: No, not every day. No, oh no. Well, maybe others did. I didn't. I think we probably took rotas, you know. I know I did it once a week. I also sold them in the factory where I was working.

*Q: And did you have a regular sale there? You found they were --*

BS: Yeah. I mean, people were so interested in politics, you know. Well, the whole idea of fascism and the war made people really think, you know? Probably for the first time.

*Q: Do you feel this persuaded people to want change at the end of the war?*

BS: Yeah, they did. They really did. And this is what really saddens me, because we worked our socks off to get the Labour government. There was such enthusiasm, you cannot believe. When you think what's going on now ... I can't believe it. We went streets and streets and people were saying: 'Yes!' you know. And they did. They wanted change. They didn't want the Tories. And I must have been an absolute fool because I thought socialism was around the corner, you know. We done it! You know. But it wasn't.

*[Break]*

*Q: Would you talk a bit about towards the end of the war what you did when you left the precision factory?*

BS: I left the [Weir] Precision because of the hours. I was married and the hours were very long, a month on nights, a month on days. So I left. I worked for a short time at the local tobacco factory but it was a short time because it made me physically sick, the smell of tobacco. So after that I went to work at the Communist Party bookshop in Southampton. For a couple of years. And then I had my daughter so I didn't do anything for awhile.

*Q: What about the aspirations that people had at the end of the war for a different kind of society. And obviously, you as a member of the YCL, you were very involved in trying to get a Labour government elected ...*

BS: Absolutely, that was our goal. We wanted a Labour government. And I don't know whether it was because I was involved, but I think everybody at that time really, really wanted change. They could remember the thirties and to some extent they blamed the government for the war. To a certain extent. All the deals that had been done. And people wanted change. We worked our socks off going 'round from street to street, canvassing for Labour Party. And naïvely I thought socialism was around the corner. It wasn't. I have to say that. Because, you know, it just wasn't. But they did a lot of good. I mean, Beveridge came in and, wasn't what I quite wanted, but I think things were better. It was certainly better after the war.

*Q: In the YCL, did they have lots of educational meetings --*

BS: Yes!

*Q: -- about Marxism?*

BS: Yes. I went to classes on Marxism.

*Q: Did you? And what did they ... Was it Dialectical Materialism?*

BS: Yes. Did all that. Did all that!

*Q: So you know your dialectics quite well, then?*

BS: Yes, I did all that. I loved it.

*Q: Right. So you got a very good grounding in --*

BS: I loved it. I really did. It really opened my eyes. Because I'd been brought up in just an ordinary working class family, and I did have a grammar school education, but I'd never been interested in anything, you know. Went to Sunday School, went to church. Then one day my eyes were opened and I realised there was a bit more to life --

*Q: So that was really when you were in the Co-op and you came across people who began to have a political ...*

BS: It could even go back a little further than that, in a way. Because I had scarlet fever and I had to go to the local hospital and I was there for six weeks. And while I was there, there was another lady in the ward and she was obviously very ... I didn't realise it, but I think she was in the Communist Party. But we started to talk about God. And she said: 'Well, I don't actually believe there's a God.' So I began to think about it, and I thought, God, you know, perhaps there isn't a God! Does this sound silly? But it really never given it a thought that perhaps there wasn't a God, you know? And from that moment, that was my real awakening. I started to think and then I met Young Communists, and that was my political education.

*Q: It's just interesting that it was you that got attracted into that, and obviously a lot of other men and women, didn't, somehow. Didn't start to think.*

BS: Just chance, isn't it?

*Q: I guess so.*

BS: It's just chance. If I hadn't had scarlet fever, if I hadn't met Young Communists, I don't know. I really don't know. I wouldn't have missed it.

*Q: You said Harry [Pollard] came?*

BS: We filled the Guildhall in Southampton, and that's a huge hall.

*Q: And he was a very good speaker, wasn't he?*

BS: Excellent. Absolutely excellent. I can't imagine how it happened, you know? I really cannot imagine, today, in 2005, how we filled Southampton Guildhall with Harry [Pollard] as a speaker. It's just unbelievable, isn't it?

*Q: It would be today.*

BS: You know, with the demise of the Soviet Union and everything, how could you imagine filling the Guildhall? But we did.

*Q: Yes, yes, yes.*



BS: We really did.

Q: *Yes. I mean, you were selling the Daily Worker at work.*

BS: Yes.

Q: *I mean, did any other people join the Party? Or were they --*

BS: I can't remember any joining. But there was no antagonism. None at all.

Q: *No.*

BS: None at all.

Q: *And how did people feel about the course of the war? Did they always feel that ... Because we've talked with some people who've said: 'Well, we always thought Britain would win. There was never any question that Britain wouldn't come out and defeat fascism.'*

BS: I think people did think we'd win, yeah. I don't think there was any ... Nobody ever thought we'd lose. No.

Q: *Right.*

BS: Definitely not.

Q: *But clearly, the entry of the Soviet Union was pretty ...*

BS: Absolutely crucial.

Q: *Crucial.*

BS: Without that ... I mean, they all talk about the Americans coming over, but without ... If Hitler hadn't averted his troops to the Soviet Union, there could well have been a different ending. Couldn't there? There really could.