

Britain at Work

London project newsletter issue 4 September/October 2013



WEST MEETS EAST LONDON SPECIAL

Britain at Work London Group www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork
contact davidwelsh83@btinternet.com 07946 284089



Eastenders Cable Street/Bethnal Green John O'Mahony



The Battle of Cable Street 1936 This October marks the 77th anniversary of the Battle of Cable Street, which took place on Sunday October 4 1936 in the East End of London. British fascist leader Oswald Mosley planned to march his Blackshirts through the East End, which constituted a profoundly provocative act because it was a predominantly Jewish area back then. A broad anti-fascist alliance, estimated to be 100,000, consisting of Jewish and Irish people, socialists, communists and anarchists travelled into the area of the proposed march with the avowed intention of preventing it from proceeding through its proposed route. They built roadblocks and barricades for this purpose.

The police (reckoned to number 6,000) arrived in Cable Street and attempted to clear the road for Mosley's estimated 2,000-3,000 'army' of fascists, meeting fierce resistance from the anti-fascist opposition, who adopted the Spanish Civil War slogan 'They shall not pass'. Serious disorder ensued, with violent running battles. Mosley was consequently forced to abandon his plan to march through the heart of the Jewish East End and he and his followers were rerouted through Hyde Park. The victory over the fascists in Cable Street is justifiably venerated to this day, and serves as an inspiration to those groups that organise themselves to oppose latter day extreme right-wing groups, who also plan provocative marches through racially and religiously sensitive areas. In the 1980s a large mural was created in Cable Street depicting the historic events of the battle. It has recently been fully restored.

The Bethnal Green Tube Disaster March 1943

Although the concentrated bombing of the Blitz had ceased almost two years before, on the evening of March 3 1943 there was renewed apprehension concerning possible reprisals, on account of the recent RAF bombing of Berlin. On that particular night, as people made their way into Bethnal Green tube station (a designated shelter), a young woman holding a baby fell, causing a man to trip over her; thereafter, 'a domino effect' occurred. People continued to file into the station, totally unaware of what had happened ahead of them. Then, a nearby deafening sound caused people to surge forward, thinking that it was a bomb (the searchlights were also trained on the sky). Consequently, with the tragedy already unfolding lower down the staircase, 300 people were crushed into the stairwell, with 173 people dying and 90 injured. The noise, in fact, had been the testing out of secret, new anti-aircraft rockets in nearby Victoria Park. There were no air-raids or bombs dropped that night. News of the disaster was hushed up at the time because of the adverse effect it might have on people's morale and to avoid handing a propaganda coup to the Nazis.

On the 50th anniversary of the disaster, a small plaque was put up to commemorate it, directly above the entrance to the tube station. In 2006, two local architects designed a more fitting, permanent memorial (19 bronze steps inverted and suspended). In March 2007 The Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust was set up to raise funds for the proposed memorial, the borough of Tower Hamlets having granted full planning permission. Frequent fundraising events continue and donations are welcome. For more information or to make a donation visit the website stairwaytoheavenmemorial.org or email info@stairwaytoheavenmemorial.org

1989 Dockers Strike Jessie Fenn/Heathrow Stan Davison

I chose this subject for my dissertation for two reasons - one was my personal interest in the subject, my father being a very active member of the official and unofficial trade union movement in the London docks, the other was the real frustration when reading industrial or working class history at the lack of voices from the real protagonists. So the subject question was whether or not industrial relations theory reflected actual industrial relations practise. I used the case of the London dock strike in 1989 that was the result of the closing of the National Dock Labour Scheme as a study. The docks in the UK had always been very strongly organised and the union was a powerful force in daily operations. A particular characterisation of unionisation within the dock industry was the strength of the unofficial shop stewards movement. This group functioned alongside and within the official union structures but executed the day to day functions of the union on the quayside. It was this story that I wanted to capture to see if the accounts were any different to the official story.

Proposing to interview dock workers was immediately a controversial concept. The existing materials on the events from the time were accounts by politicians, dock owners and port users and many academics. There was occasional commentary by the small left-wing press but little record of events from those people who took part in the strike. Even the official union accounts were few and far between. The doubt seemed to be around whether or not interviews would be sufficiently reliable to prove a case—how could an interview with an old man compare to the hundred page thesis of an academic? It was agreed that there should be enough interviews and of a high quality to draw together some conclusions and not just tell a story.

What I discovered was a colourful, complex and passionate narrative from those dockers who fought so hard not only to save their own jobs but the jobs of the future and how they felt betrayed by the very union they had been a part of for so long. Despite this, there was an understanding of the contributing factors to the situation and the wider attack by the then Tory government, a theme that ran through every interview. It was clear that, for some, the issues raised in this struggle were still very much relevant today but the differing political views remained visible. For some, the feelings of anger and hurt were still strong. For others, life had moved on although the issues were still relevant and the struggle for workers' power as important now as ever. As Bob Light put it: "You suffer the consequences and if you are not strong enough to impose your will then the consequences can be dire." The first-hand accounts by the key players in the struggle are far more insightful and give a much richer understanding of events. There is also no doubt that these 'old men' were as able to analyse their situation as the academics.



Stan Davison I was a shop steward (at BEA London Airport) for ten years. There was quite a big strike at some point and I was a steward there, it was a serious one, attack upon a trade union, and we just about won it. As a result, I became a leading steward and my mate became the convenor. The Communist party had a powerful impact, the West Middlesex Communist Party was in an area of London which was a bit of a red belt in the factories. Factories were all the way down the Edgware Road and up the Western Avenue and Great West Road, factories all around here. I became the district convenor for five years and I suppose we had the factory franchise—Hoover, CAV at Acton, Firestone, Woolf Rubber, Hayes EMI, Fairey Aviation. And the man who was best known to me in the first place, partly because he lived not so far from me, Wal Hannington, who wrote *Unemployed Struggles*, straight out of the established left, straight out of British CP history. I used to collect his dues (about 6 pence a week).

West meets East London John Shepherd/Peter Blackman



***In and Out of the Lion's Den* by Julie Ryan** 'Poverty, war and football', the story of John Shepherd, the 50s Millwall player born in North Kensington, is written by his daughter. Shepherd, who played for Millwall, Brighton and Gillingham, was born on the notorious Southam Street in Kensal on the site of Trellick Tower. While still living in west London, he scored four times on his debut for Millwall in 1952, and married the daughter of a local Spanish anarchist from the civil war.

Esther Gonzalez was born in Spain during the war. In 1937, when she was a baby, she escaped from Madrid with her mother and father as Franco's nationalist forces advanced. Her father Jose was subsequently held in a concentration camp in France and shipped to Algeria, where he was liberated by the allies and joined the British army. After the war, the reunited family came to London and settled on Golborne Road in the Spanish exile community of North Kensington. John Shepherd later worked as youth team coach at Brighton when Alan Mullery (who also came from Notting Hill) was manager, and he discovered the Everton and England player Gary Stevens. *In and Out of the Lion's Den* by Julie Ryan, published by Goodreads, is available for £8.99.

West meets East London The Spanish Civil War depicted in the Westway mural on Portobello Road was a defining moment for anti-fascists—both in the defence of the Spanish Republic and the advancement of the European-wide revolutionary movement in Spain. But just as many volunteered to fight in Spain, others built barricades in Cable Street in 1936, shown in the mural, making it the other frontline in the struggle against fascism. Britain at Work is a national programme collecting oral histories of the working lives of people in Britain 1945-1995. The Britain at Work London Group has recorded over 100 interviews in west London and plans to continue in north and central London.

***Footprints* by Peter Blackman, edited by Chris Searle** *Footprints* is a new book of poetry by Peter Blackman. A railway worker as well as a poet, he worked in west London at the Old Oak Common railway depot after the Second World War and was active as a member of the NUR. His poetry is a reminder that that the flame of resistance to racism and oppression burnt in workplaces in those years, and that the trade union movement needs to celebrate its poets. Peter Blackman had joined the Communist party after he arrived in Britain from Barbados in 1937. He became an activist in the Negro Welfare Association and the League of Coloured Peoples, and worked in factories in the war.

He began to broadcast on the BBC to the West Indies but was effectively banned during the Cold War. His most well-known poem 'My Song is for All Men' was published in 1952. This timely edition goes to the heart of what he believed in and stood for throughout his life. *Footprints*, published by Smokestack Books, is available for £7.95. The book will be launched at the Institute of Race Relations on October 17, for more information email events@irr.org.uk Chris Searle and Colin Prescod will speak at the event.

With the help of a £2,000 grant from the B@W London Group, the TUC Library Collections B@W website has been able to upload lots of new interviews from the west London project, as well as images of the participants. The TUC Library has also produced a new B@W postcard available from tuclib@londonmet.ac.uk 0207 133 3726. We will also be publishing a book *All in a Day's Work*. All interviews will be placed on the TUC Library Collections website www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork If you would like be interviewed or be on our mailing list please contact davidwelsh83@btinternet.com secretary Dave Welsh/chair John O'Mahony/treasurer Jan Pollock/outreach/IT Rima Joebear/newsletter editor Tom Vague

Britain at Work London Group www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork
contact davidwelsh83@btinternet.com 07946 284089