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Women workers

“We Are The Lions, Mr. Manager”

- Features - Feminism -

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On the 20th of August in 1976, a group of Asian immigrants in London began a strike that would define an era.

Britain in the 1970s was awash with strike action, as an emboldened trade union movement responded to a deep economic crisis. From coal miners to truck drivers, public sector workers to gravediggers—it seemed that every sector of the economy would be impacted by the wave of national unrest. But the unlikeliest of strikes took place in northwest London, at the Grunwick film processing factory. There, in August 1976, a group of mostly immigrant women from south Asian descent came out on strike against poor conditions, victimization and degrading treatment from a bullying management.

The strike, which dissipated after two years of militancy, foreshadowed what was to come in Thatcher's Britain. The policing was vicious, with over 550 arrests of trade unionists during the dispute, the highest number since the General Strike fifty years earlier. The Conservative Party saw it as a key moment—an opportunity to discipline both immigrants and workers. Hardline right-wingers in the party paid the legal fees of the employer, and shadow cabinet ministers plotted to crush the strike as a means of unravelling the postwar social-democratic consensus.

But Grunwick was also one of the most impressive demonstrations of class solidarity in modern British history. The determination of the strikers and their supporters inaugurated an era where working-class struggles would be more multi-racial and more militant.

Workers and Immigrants

Shortly after many former British colonies gained independence, the fledging states embarked on policies of ‘Africanization.’ Although differing by national context, these policies were generally characterized by discrimination against people of southeast Asian origin who migrated to Africa under British rule.

As a result many of these Asians, who were Commonwealth citizens, moved to the United Kingdom, leaving behind generations of friendship and familiarity with Africa as well as white collar jobs or, in some cases, small businesses. Most gravitated to the industrial centers of Britain but, with the country experiencing the highest unemployment since the 1930s, found only menial and precarious work.

Unusually for the time, dire financial circumstances meant both men and women from these immigrant families were forced into the workplace. Soon enough their combination of fluent English and desperate need for a paycheck saw them in the employ of highly exploitative bosses. It was assumed that these southeast Asian workers would be willing to work harder for less pay. They were generally given tough jobs where they had little contact with their British colleagues and even less cultural connection with the British labour movement.

The Grunwick film processing factory in Willesden, northwest London, was one such workplace. The conditions were described as ‘sweatshop’ – something which would take on a literal character during the heatwave summer of 1976. The nominal 40-hour week included compulsory additional hours, and earned the workers only a basic starting wage. Conditions were cramped, with little space for anything but work; and management was severe, with workers forced to request permission for bathroom breaks. This pettiness was coupled with an undercurrent of racist and misogynistic attitudes which further exacerbated tensions.

On Friday 20th August, one of the workers at Grunwick was sacked on spurious grounds. In a show of solidarity, another worker – Jayaben Desai – walked out and brought five other workers with her. During the eruption of the dispute, Desai’s manager compared her and her colleagues to ‘chattering monkeys’, to which Desai responded:

What you are running here is not a factory, it is a zoo. But in a zoo, there are many types of animals. Some are monkeys, who dance on your fingertips. Others are lions, who can bite your head off. We are the lions, Mr. Manager.

The Strike

The following Monday, a mass walk-out of sixty workers swelled the ranks of the strikers. Desai’s son Sunil – who was also her fellow worker – took up the duty of organizing picket lines. Once the strike came to be seen as effective, even more workers came out and the numbers swelled to well over one hundred within a few days.

Unsure of what to do next, Sunil Desai approached the local Citizens Advice Bureau, who advised him to contact Brent Trades Council and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The strikers quickly resolved to join APEX (Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff), who helped the workers to communicate with the press and lent their fight a broader public legitimacy. Soon enough, the core demand of the Grunwick workers was for trade union recognition in the workplace.

This demand was refused, and the 137 workers on the picket line were sacked. At the time, APEX was under a right-wing leadership, one of the few to maintain a list of ‘proscribed’ left-wing organizations and an opponent of the left-leaning TUC of the 1970s.

But local solidarity soon arrived as an antidote to the conservatism of APEX. Brent Trades Council chair Tom Durkin and secretary Jack Dromey – now Shadow Minister for Labour under Jeremy Corbyn – liaised with low-level union officials to help the strikers organize regular pickets and daily strike meetings, as well as a support committee and a strike bulletin. By October 1976, Len Murray, the leader of the TUC, urged trade unions to give every possible assistance to the Grunwick strikers. After discussing what they could do to help, local postal workers voted to halt all postal deliveries to the Grunwick factory. This was a crucial development: the business largely depended on customers mailing film rolls from holidays and family events.

In November the owner of Grunwick, George Ward attempted to take the postal workers to court. Born into a well-off family in colonial India, Ward had friends in high places. One of these was the hardline Tory MP John Gorst, who ran the anti-union pressure group the National Association For Freedom (NAFF) and spent £80,000 of his own money supporting Ward’s attack on the workers. The case was eventually thrown out, but the Union of Postal Workers were forced to abandon the non-handling of their mail for fear of further damaging legal action.

Ward also had the political backing of Margaret Thatcher, the leader of the Conservative opposition at the time, who described him as a “champion of freedom.” But her party was not so unanimous. The dispute was to bring to the fore differences between Shadow Cabinet ministers who sought a compromise and a neoliberal vanguard that was to define the direction of the party and ultimately the country in the coming years.

Keith Joseph, a close confidante of Margaret Thatcher, saw the strike as pivotal for their political project. At a time of widespread workplace struggle, he called the Grunwick dispute a “make-or-break point” for the existing order. The working class had to lose, he argued, or the victory at Grunwick would represent “all our tomorrows.”

The Pushback

By the end of 1976, the dispute seemed strong. The rallies regularly made reference to the Indian independence struggle – with Desai encouraging the striking workers to follow the example of Mahatma Gandhi against the British. Through the vast connections and resources offered by the TUC, the strikers were able to take the story to every major industrial area in the country to appeal for support and solidarity.

Nearly a year on from the strike’s beginning, a special Women’s Support Day was organized for June 13th 1977. Of the 100 women assembled on the picket, the police arrested 84, using an extraordinary level of brutality. The following day, a bus carrying scabs drove through the picket line, and by the 14th the London region of the UPW advised London postal workers not to handle Grunwick’s mail again. The nearly all-white union branch agreed, with their chair wryly remarking that “you don’t say no to Mrs. Desai.” A few days later, the left-wing Labour MP Audrey Wise was arrested on the picket line, followed on June 23rd by miners’ leader Arthur Scargill.

Following the outrage over police treatment, Jayaben Desai went on a nationwide tour to gather support and by the following Friday there were 1,300 on the picket in support. A demonstration called by the TUC on the 11th July brought approximately 30,000 coal miners, electricians, postal workers, printers, engineers, dockers and teachers out together in solidarity with the industrial action.

The Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, established an enquiry into the strike under Lord Scarman. The Scarman Report, as it was known, reflected the moderate Labour leader who commissioned it: calling for union recognition in the factory and the reinstatement of workers, it also criticized the mass picketing, the UPW’s ‘blacking’, and the confrontations with police.

Grunwick’s owner Ward refused to accept its recommendations and the rest of 1977 was marked by mass pickets, involving upwards of ten thousand people. A particularly aggressive attack by the London Metropolitan Police’s Special Patrol Group (SPG) in November led to 243 picketers being injured and 113 arrested. The mood was serious enough that Home Secretary, Merlyn Rees, turned up to calm the crowds down and was met with jeers.

Around the same time, APEX began to show their ambivalence towards the strike. The opinion grew among the union leadership that the confrontation wasn’t worth it. In protest at APEX’s refusal to offer leadership, Jayaben Desai, Vipin Magdani, Johnny Patel and Yasu Patel – members of the strike committee – held a one-day hunger strike outside Congress House, the TUC’s headquarters.

By the end of the year, a report by ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration services) found in favor of the strikers and could have been used to reach an agreeable conclusion to the strike – but it was rejected by the Court of Appeal. Attempts to continue the strike failed without sufficient union support, and despite efforts to reignite the fight in May 1978 with a national supporters’ conference, the committee voted to call off the strike by July.

The Lessons

Like many struggles which enjoy iconic status in British labour history, the Grunwick strike did not win. In fact, Grunwick inspired many of the authoritarian anti-union tactics which were to become commonplace in the 1980s, such as the establishment of a Special Branch database of socialists and trade unionists, extraordinary violence perpetrated on pickets by riot police, and draconian laws limiting the right to organize and strike.

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But despite these outcomes, long-term lessons were also learned. In watching sari-clad women scuffle with British riot police, some cautious sections of the British labour movement overcame their prejudices against immigrant workers, no longer seeing them as too docile to internalize the principles of trade unionism or collective action.

The unity shown at Grunwick between white and Asian workers displayed the potential for new kinds of class alliance, ones that might more accurately reflect the increasingly-diverse working class in many of Britain's cities. It inspired antifascist solidarity as well as actions such as the lesbian and gay support for the miners in the 1980s.

Just as it was inspirational for British trade unionists to see these unlikely militants strike back against their exploitation, the solidarity the Grunwick workers received from the movement and the class fundamentally changed their worldviews. As Kamlesh Gandhi recalled, “workers came from all over the country ... they travelled all night, gave up holidays, lost their wages, stood in the rain, got hammered by the police – but they still came!”

The TUC and labour movement had many weaknesses, but the experience of Grunwick led to far better understanding and policies on immigrant organizing than were commonplace at the time. Although there remains significant room for improvement, the black sections of British trade unions and the BAME section of the Labour Party remain streets ahead of their European counterparts. In this, if not the strike itself, the Grunwick workers secured a victory“for recognition and respect.

Jayaben Desai passed away in 2010. She is immortalized in a photograph from the strike: wearing her sari at a picket, she holds aloft a sign reading “the workers united will never be defeated.” Her legacy, and that of all the Grunwick strikers, should be many more lions biting back at their masters.

Source [Jacobin](#).

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