British Syndicalism
Pages of Labour History
Five essays on Beating the Bosses
Tom Brown

Like many another militant, Tom Brown was relatively unknown in his life, and despite his massive contribution to the workers' movement, ignored by pretentious social historians. As a shop steward, an engineering worker and an organiser, they could hardly be expected to notice him. But he was a fluent, clear speaker and his writings are an expression of the way in which he talked. He was one of the last of a movement now all but passed away.

This edition first published 1994 by the Kate Sharpley Library
ISBN 9781873605707
Kate Sharpley Library, BM Hurricane, London, WC1N 3XX
www.katesharpleylibrary.net

What is Anarchism?
Anarchism is a political theory which opposes the State and capitalism. It says that people with economic power (capitalists) and those with political power (politicians of all stripes left, right or centre) use that power for their own benefit, and not (like they claim) for the benefit of society. Anarchism says that neither exploitation nor government is natural or necessary, and that a society based on freedom, mutual aid and equal share of the good things in life would work better than this one.

Anarchism is also a political movement. Anarchists take part in day-to-day struggles (against poverty, oppression of any kind, war etc) and also promote the idea of comprehensive social change. Based on bitter experience, they warn that new

‘revolutionary’ bosses are no improvement: ‘ends’ and ‘means’ (what you want and how you get it) are closely connected.

Syndicalism is based on the idea that only unions that are prepared to fight will win; and that winning slight improvements here and now is good, but not enough. We can organise ourselves for a world without bosses!

Tom Brown

Tom Brown was a Geordie engineer who grew up in the Newcastle shipyards and absorbed the working class syndicalist culture that once characterised the North East. With the virtual disappearance of the local anarchist movement in the late 20's and 30's he found a natural home in the old Socialist Labour Party. When all but a handful of its militants went over to the Communist Party, he saw through its pretensions (to be fair, so did many SLP-ers who entered the new party with their eyes open.) Coming to London to find work in 1936, in the late years of the Depression, and finding it in the aviation industry, he came to the realisation that the anarcho-syndicalists in Spain embodied not just the syndicalist ideas of France and Spain, but of the experiences of British workers too.

He was the clearest speaker and writer the anarcho-syndicalist movement had. A shop steward through the War, he played an important role in the building up of the modern anarcho-syndicalist movement in Britain.

Further references to Tom Brown may be found in the Kate Sharpley Library publications "First Flight" by Albert Meltzer and "Personal Recollections" by George Cores; also the Phoenix Press republication of his pamphlets under the title "Tom Brown's Syndicalism".

Other pamphlets by Tom Brown

Trade Unionism or Syndicalism?* [1941, enlarged 1942]

The British General Strike 1926* [1943, reprinted 1961]

Principles of Syndicalism*

The Social General Strike* [1948]

What's Wrong With The Unions? A Syndicalist Answer* [1955]

Nationalisation and the New Boss Class* [1946, reprinted 1958]

Lenin and Workers' Control [1950?, reprinted 1968, 1987]
Workers Control [1959?]

*reprinted in "Tom Brown's Syndicalism" [1990]

Syndicalism and workers' committees

In case the critics of revolutionary industrial unionism – Syndicalism – wish to know what it is about, let us recapitulate the main idea. What the historians of labour call the "Syndicalist Tendency" in the English-speaking world must include the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World and, in Britain, we cannot ignore the work of the old Socialist Labour Party in popularising the ideas of industrial unionism, particularly in Scotland.

At the end of the 19th Century, the socially-conscious workers were faced by a host of unions which organised disunity in the industrial struggle. Even by 1939 there were 40 unions in engineering and most of them might be in one factory. Worse, most of the time, most of the unions were craft unions, such as still exist, organised not only against the employer, but, too often, against other workers, men of rival unions, rival crafts and unskilled workers, who might encroach on the preserves of the craft organisation.

At that critical time, according to the historians, Syndicalism was able to arouse to revolt the latent discontent of the unskilled and, in an elementary, but potent way organise struggles which gained great advances and inspired the forgotten men and women of industry with self-confidence.

But Syndicalists were few and only the elementary lessons of class struggle were learned by the workers, so the unskilled became organised in mass unions , which resembled crowds rather than organisations. Most of these unions became amalgamated into the Transport and General Workers' Union and the National Union of General and Municipal Workers,

embracing between them the gas workers, the tramwaymen, the dockers, engineering workers, roadmen and hosts of others.

So we saw the workers divided into more than a thousand unions, skilled against semi-skilled and unskilled, craft against craft – even between men in one trade, but separate unions in rivalry. Iron moulders on strike, while the machine shop worked; boilermakers locked out, while their mates in another union worked on.

Against this disunity, Syndicalism has posed the idea of scientific organisation, revolutionary industrial unionism. Starting where the class struggle starts, in the factory, or other place of work, all workers, of whatever craft, so-called semi-skilled or unskilled, male or female, draughtsmen, clerks or storemen are organised in a branch of one union, based on the commodity made or the service rendered.

The affairs particular to that factory would be tackled by the workers there, in mass meetings making major decisions and electing their delegates and committee, always with the right of recall. But there must arise problems which also concern other workshops in the same district and the factory branch must be federated to its kindred in the same district, so we might have federations of, say, the South Wales miners, shipyard workers of the Clyde, cotton workers of Lancashire, or newspaper workers of London.

Further, there are matters which are not peculiar only to the district of the industry, but concern all throughout the area, temporarily historically speaking, enclosed by national boundaries. Thus the Miners' Industrial Union, the Port Workers' Industrial Union and so on, thirty or so unions would cover most of the jobs.

Further, each industrial union is dependent on the others, as a man is dependent on his fellows, and each union would be federated to a National Confederation of Labour, which would deal with the general labour questions and render aid to weaker

unions, or those on strike.

Of course, within this framework there is room for other federations as and when necessary, such as federations of dockers and seamen and, in London, a traffic federation of railmen, busmen and underground workers. The greatest strength of this form of organisation is its flexibility; one weakness of trade unionism is its rigidity.

Let the man whose reasoning power is too weak to see the obvious superiority of such a system, read labour history, let him look about and see the obvious advantages of this potent idea, even when limited in application.

Revolutionary syndicates are the means, once we brush the cobwebs of prejudice from our minds, to wage struggles with much less hurt to our people and with much grater chance of victory. But wage demands are not enough. The day will come when the workers must decide not to ask for another loaf, but to take over the bakery; to take, hold, own and control the means of production, not by walking out, but by staying in and locking out the capitalist class. The ultimate aim of Syndicalism is common ownership of the means of production and distribution, abolition of the wages system and a true democracy, the industrial democracy of Workers' Control.

Our critics include Labourites, Trotskyites, Stalinists and other sorts of Bolsheviks and almost as many varieties of Socialists as there are permutations on the Treble Chance, as well as open supporters of capitalism. But they have so much in common that we can deal with the main objections, without breaking every butterfly on the wheel. It is well to note that most, though not all, the alleged Labour and Socialist critics, are supporters of trade unionism of the present sort, craft and general unions.

"Syndicalism is old fashioned, it sounds like something out of the 19th Century." The speaker is often a person who supports a union founded about 100 years ago, or a craft union

based on a mediaeval guild and an industrial process which vanished with the Industrial Revolution. Sometimes the statement is accompanied by a chunk of the "Communist Manifesto" of 1848, or some other contemporary work (contemporary with the first Duke of Wellington) hot off the press.

The point is not whether Syndicalism is old or new fashioned, but whether it is likely to be efficacious in solving our present problems, which, after all, are as old as class society. Fashion we can leave to the House of Dior. The question of efficacy is rarely, if ever, tackled by our opponents.

We turn now to a body of criticism which is quite different, stemming from the belief that all that is necessary are "workers' or factory committees", without the continuous and thought-out organisation forms of industrial unionism. Just workers' committees, that is all.

But if we rule out Syndicalism and agree to committees only, then surely the committees must have some form and some relationship to one another. Are the councils just formed, say, in factories, or parts of factories, to live a tiny, corporative life without forming part of a natural or deliberate pattern? If, however, these primary bodies are to be cohesive parts of a greater public whole, has that whole a form and pattern and aims? Or is it amorphous?

If the committees are to have social form and pattern, then it seems to us that they cannot attain these attributes unless they adopt the principles of Syndicalism. The Syndicalist pattern, here outlined briefly, and its further and more intricate forms, are splendidly suitable for adoption by a workers' council movement, and if our aims be the same, there is really no conflict of means.

Syndicalists have never said that everyone must first hold a ticket in his appropriate industrial union before anything can be done, but advocate continuous organisation for propaganda, for

learning, teaching, demonstrating and handing on the torch. Techniques cannot exist without field and workshop practice and social techniques do not come from intellectual test tubes. Truly we learn in struggle.

But always we remember that the working class are greater than the union membership, who are the vanguard. The influence of the Syndicalists has always been immensely greater than their numbers. The IWW moved millions of workers in the USA, whatever its state of membership.

(*World Labour News*, Jan/Feb 62)

Syndicalism and shop stewards

Syndicalists are often accused of wanting to form new industrial unions out of turn, and even of wishing to wait until that event occurs before taking any action. A reading of British labour history during the past 70 years, by almost any author, will prove how false is this charge. We claim, certainly, that Syndicalist industrial unions offer a form of organisation superior to trades unionism and, when trade union branches are addressed on the subject, approval is almost unanimous. But when the workers, through lack of propaganda, do not understand or desire Syndicalism, it would serve them ill to form small, weak breakaway unions, where the existing unions or their members comprise the only defence of the working class, however inadequate that defence might be. Our watchword has always been Solidarity.

In fact, the only organisation ever to adopt a policy of forming micro-unions by artificial insemination is the Communist Party. During the late twenties and thirties this policy was forced on the C.P. in Britain by Moscow, despite the doubts of Pollitt and others. In 1929, the United Garment Workers' Union was formed as a breakaway from the Tailors' and Garment Workers' Union. The new union soon faded out.

Among seamen, the Minority Movement (a Communist front

organisation) was making some progress, led by Fred Thompson, ex-dockers; organiser of the T&GWU. In this case something could be said for a new union, as the Seamen's Union, under Havelock Wilson's rule, was little more than a company union. But the C.P. took control from the M.M. and on Tyneside, where the feeling against Wilson was most promising, declared a strike among Arab seamen in the most confused and clownish fashion, causing a riot between Whites and Asiatics and ensuring the stillbirth of the well-planned Red Seamen's Union.

Mining in Scotland held out the best chance for the C.P. to form a red union, and a breakaway from the Lanark and Fife Miners' Unions was started under the title of the United Mineworkers' of Scotland (all breakaways are called "United") .Within a few years the total income of the red union was insufficient to pay the wages of the officials, as Willie Gallagher (later Communist MP for the district) wrote, and the union quietly died. Nothing but ill came from these attempts of the politicians to form unions of their own. When new unions are needed, it must be the workers of the industry concerned who themselves form them.

Syndicalism however, has had a great influence on the development of trade unionism. It is well, before going further, to point out that what historians call "the Syndicalist tendency", as distinct from the formal Syndicalist organisation, should include the old Socialist Labour Party, especially in Scotland, who preached a revolutionary industrial unionism which I have never been able to distinguish from Syndicalism, also the I.W.W. in Britain.

Men inspired by Syndicalist thought were constantly calling for one union for each industry, instead of the thousand-odd which existed 40 years ago. It is generally agreed that it was this propaganda which made possible most of the amalgamations on industrial lines for the greater co-operation

of men of different unions in one factory or industry. This may seem natural and commonplace now, but 50 years ago it seemed impossible in the face of sectional prejudice.

The strike methods peculiar to Syndicalism, many originated by the once Syndicalist C.G.T., have been used by trade unionists, as well as Syndicalists, in this country, usually with great success. When writing the pamphlet “Trade Unionism or Syndicalism?” in 1941, I included a short list of Syndicalist strike weapons, none of which had been used in this country, except by Syndicalists.

Now, many are commonplace. The E.T.U. has tried them with success; busmen and railmen have since the war used the work-to-rule strike, previously used in Britain only by Syndicalist railmen in the North-East 40 years ago. The practice of sympathetic industrial action, too, originated in Syndicalist propaganda. All this and much more is testified by writers of labour history of many shades of thought – capitalist, Socialist and even communist. But perhaps the greatest fruit of this revolutionary tendency has been the shop steward and works committee movement.

The shop steward movement, as we know it, did not exist until shortly before the 1914 war. Shop stewards existed before that, but they were little more than card inspectors. It was the men of the syndicalist tendency who changed that. Something to span the scores of unions in the engineering industry was needed and the new conception of a shop steward, and the works committee which soon followed, did just that, being a primary form of syndicate, embracing all sections, formed at the point of production and ready to combat the employing class on the spot.

With the outbreak of war the movement developed rapidly. Cloaked by patriotism the cost of living soared, wages were pegged, hours ranged from 60 to 80 a week. Soon unofficial strikes broke out in the big industrial centres, principally the

Clyde and the Tyne.

Alarmed, the Government called the union leaders to a conference in February, 1915, where all parties, except the miners, agreed to the abolition of the right to strike, to the dilution of skilled labour, to State fixing of wages and to "leaving certificates." Generally, in fact, to what the Webbs termed "virtually industrial conscription." With military conscription from 18 to 21 years, the effect was "the individual workman realised that the penalty for failure of implied obedience to the foreman might be instant relegation to the trenches" (Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*). Said the *Herald* (later the *Daily Herald*) of July 17, 1915: "The trade union lamb has laid down with the capitalist lion."

To this State slavery there could be but one defence – rapid extension of the shop steward and shop committee movement, for the trade unions were completely on the employers' side. Strikes and the threat of strikes followed, winning wage increases, especially piece work rates, and controlling workshop conditions. The Government, faced by threats, introduced food control and, forced by the Clyde factory committees, controlled house rents, which were soaring,

After the war the movement was there to stay, but was confused and bedevilled by the development of the Russian Revolution, the formation of the Communist Party and the vast funds it obtained from abroad. The union bureaucrats, too, saw that the shop steward was not going to vanish, so they tried to control him. They are still trying. The employers, after a long resistance in some cases, accepted his presence in the factory and, in very many cases, tried to corrupt him.

Neither of these, however, were worse than the activity of the Communists, concerned not with the winning of a straightforward class battle of the worker, but with the interest solely of "The Party" and with carrying out the latest twist or turn of the Comintern.

Granting the premise that a class workshop organisation is necessary for the protection and extension of the workers' livelihood, it follows that a party concerned only with the welfare of "The Party" and its conquest of power can only do harm to the workers' cause. Its measure of success is its measure of mischief.

The record of the C.P. since its entry into industry is proof enough of this thesis – its thirst for power, its splitting of the workers' ranks, its slander of honest militants, the eagerness of its members to become foremen with the necessary double-dealing that goes with that ambition, the calling of "political prestige strikes" and the calling of them off, the twists and turns of Holy Mother Russia's policy now "down with the boss and strike everywhere" and next day "collaborate, form joint production committees, the striker is a traitor." All this had driven into apathy tens of thousands of good militants and confused and disillusioned millions.

It is true that there have been many Communist shop stewards who tried to be honest stewards and good party members at the same time, but these men are usually sorry creatures, trying to be two opposites at once and unhappy with both. A practising bigamist leads a simpler life. To add to their split personality agonies, "The Party" is likely to court martial them or expel them. The men at Comintern headquarters had a proverb about the C.P.G.B.: "The good Communists are bad trade unionists and the good trade unionists are bad Communists."

A good, honest-to-goodness shop steward is worth his weight in gold to the workers' movement – literally if we were still paid in sovereigns – but his is just about the most difficult of all jobs, even without the extra snags thrown in his path by the bosses, the union officials and the politicians.

Yet the stewards suffer from one more difficulty. The present movement lacks the revolutionary thought, doctrine and

training of the first wave. The present-day shop steward, when he tries to be consistent, feels very much alone. Ideas are social products, movements are social movements and men will seek to identify themselves with people of like tendency. Now where can our sincere steward look? Leaving out the movement of which I have written, there is nothing for him. Little wonder, then, that so many are fooled by the politicians, grow tired or, in the case of the weaker brethren, are tempted by the boss.

The originals had the benefit of a revolutionary idea and fire, they had training to hand, speaking, industrial history and the study of such works as Mary Marcy's "Shop Talks on Economics." This training made them superior to most of their opponents on the other side of the boss's desk.

They had a social aim, too, making them a movement in their own right, not an appendage of another movement. The Clyde Workers' Committee, the strongest union force in the country at that time, proclaimed this among its objects:

"...to obtain an ever-increasing control over workshop conditions, to regulate the terms upon which workers shall be employed, and to organise the workers upon a class basis and to maintain the class struggle until the overthrow of the wages system, the freedom of the workers and the establishment of industrial democracy have been attained. "

In the wilder parts of the Lone Star State, Texans used to tell me that when they said "a man" they meant a man and his horse, for a man without a horse was only half a man. A shop steward without a social philosophy in tune with his workshop is only half a steward.

That brings me to what Allan Flanders of Oxford University terms "the popular Syndicalist slogan 'Workers' Control'". The desire to alter the Labour Party's "Clause 4" was based on an estimate of the discontent with nationalisation. The rebound which put it back is a sign that social ownership is looked on as

a solution of the social problem. But socialisation cannot be reconciled to State control. If the sincere rank and file of the Labour Party and trade unions would look back to the early shop stewards movement, then look forward, their honesty and idealism would find a practical mechanism in workers' control, for the realisation of the social ownership and democratic control of the means of production, They would see, too, that the fashioning of the mechanism begins now, at the coalface, the bench and the lathe.

(*World Labour News*, Sept/Oct 1962)

Engineering workers fought back

The general post-war slump hit most of British industry about two-and-a-half years after the 1918 Armistice, but shipbuilding was in depression almost at once, for the Coalition government's policy of "Make Germany Pay" took from her a great deal of merchant shipping and set the German yards making ships for "reparation". Naturally, this threw out of work British boilermakers and fitters.

General wage reduction in all trades, beginning with the lock-out of the miners, took place during 1921 and 1922. After several wage cuts, the shipyards and engineering workers were locked out in 1922 and defeated. The unions, particularly the Amalgamated Engineering Union, lost many members. Pessimism and defeatism prevailed. Southampton marine engineering workers were badly hit. The wage of fully skilled men was £2. 7s. a week of 47 hours – that is, 1 s. an hour. Compare this with £2.16s for the Tyne and Clyde, £3. 0s.11d. for London, 1s. 6d. an hour for the provincial dockers, 1s. 2d. for building labourers. (1s = 5p in today's currency)

"Semi-skilled", many of them highly skilled machinists, received less, labourers less again. Holidays were unpaid, work often temporary. In ship repairing, men stood each day in the dockyard, hoping to be picked up for a few days' work after

being looked over by a few men in bowler hats, in the manner of a slave market.

In 1924, opportunity to redress the balance a little came with the “lay up” of Atlantic shipping for annual repairs. But few expected the long upward fight back of the engineering workers to begin in Southampton. Union membership was low, Scots and Northern workers did not have much regard for the port as a fighting unit. Southampton’s two M.P’s were Tories, each enjoying a big majority. But fight the Southampton workers did. Led by the local AEU, the unions demanded an advance in wages. The employers refused and referred to the employer-union agreements, particularly the “procedure for avoiding disputes”, the “machinery” which creaked for six months to a year over every case and reached no decision. The union executives stood by this agreement and refused to back the men.

The Mauretania, “Blue Riband” of the Atlantic, had her turbines dismantled, the rotors slung in the engine room. Despite the threats of the AEU and other executives, the ship repair engineering workers voted a strike. A scratch organisation had to be created at once and a strike committee of experienced trade unionists, with necessary sub-committees was formed.

When considering the work of this committee, one should remember that trade union members were a minority of the workers concerned. The strikers had to fight the employers, backed by the State and the trade unions. No strike money was paid by the unions.

Fitter handled the finance

Money, then, was one of the early problems to be tackled. Local trade union branches and AEU branches throughout the country were circularised. Well-organised local events helped to raise cash and strike money was paid out of this “unofficial”

fund. The financial business of the strike was handled splendidly, though the middle-aged fitter who was treasurer was told by the professional auditor that he, the fitter, must know nothing about finance or he would not have carried an odd halfpenny down through the books – and that was the only fault he could find.

But what of the non-unionist strikers? They, too, received strike pay with the union members – penny for penny, pound for pound. First, however, the "nons" had to be got out on strike, and meetings were held at all factory and dock gates. All, irrespective of union or non-union, were promised a fair share of all money raised, and protection against victimisation, "one back, all back; one out, all out." a promise that was honorably kept. Many of the "nons" had dropped their previous membership because of the high rate of union dues, 2s. a week in the case of the AEU, and some were still trade unionists at heart – but not all.

There were those, too, who refused to join the strike, They had to be encouraged by additional measures. Picket lines, good, solid, militant picket lines were formed each morning to draw out the waverers. Whatever, in those days, may have been the law about the "right to peaceful picketing," in fact the Law usually acted as though all picketing was illegal. As an extra, a flying picket was organised, squads of loyal stalwarts, some on cycles, who met outlying blacklegs on their way to work, often in the country lanes which were then close to Southampton docks on the Woolston side of the Itchen.

I remember, in particular, two red-headed brothers of about 23 who took alternate days on the flying picket. The efforts of police and assaulted scabs to bring a prosecution against one or the other and the defendants' alibis made a delightful comedy of errors.

Frequent meetings were held, so that all were kept informed and encouraged to join in strike activities. Amusements, sports

and concerts were organised, for boredom and personal isolation are inimical to strike success. We had a good supply of singers, musicians and comedians. I doubt if such an array of talent could be mustered at scratch today, for there was then no telly and more people developed their own talents.

There was propaganda too. A panel of speakers was active every day, visiting union branch meetings and anywhere else they could get a hearing. But printed and duplicated means of presenting the strikers' case were insufficient. There was no national organisation directly sympathetic to the strike case and trade union officials were active in the districts of trade unions to curtail support.

Tough times were ahead. The Engineering Employers' Federation threatened to lock out all members of the AEU and other unions concerned in the strike – a complete lockout on a full national scale. The employer got permission from the Government to move the Mauretania, with her engines suspended, to be taken to Cherbourg by tug to have her overhaul completed.

The full victory which had been just possible escaped the strikers, but they did get a two-stage advance of 7s. a week, the first win for the engineers since the big defeat of all trades in 1921-22.

Aircraft men reap the harvest

Aircraft workers in Southampton had wanted to join the strike, but this would not have helped the marine engineers, who were fighting other employers – Harland & Wolff and J. I. Thomeycroft. The aircraft men worked for A.V.Roe, Faireys and Supermarine. Then, too, the slender strike fund would have been more heavily drawn on. The aircraft men pressed their claim in the climate created by the strike, and got an advance of 15s. 8d. a week, a direct fruit of the marine workers' action.

Engineering workers in other parts of the country were

encouraged by the Southampton example, initiating small actions, usually in one factory at a time, to regain a little lost ground and dispel the spirit of defeat.

One weakness of the strike was the failure to persuade the French workers to declare black the Mauretania; lack of communication, of international organisation and contact, were largely responsible for this. That is one lesson. Another comes from consideration of the sort of men who took part in the strike. Southampton was a Tory stronghold and, as any strike to be successful must have at least 90 per cent support, many strikers must have been Tories, some Liberals and many non-voters. On the strike committee there was no faction which could be defined as “left-wing” much less a majority, though some were more radical than others, of course. Most were just good solid, perhaps rather old-fashioned trade unionists, but they were quick to learn the changing facts of life.

On the strike committee there was unity of purpose and respect of others, from right wing to rebel. The Communist Party tried to muscle in, sending down Pollitt and the rest of its top brass and a cohort of full-time officials with Moscow-made slogans, “Defend the Soviet Union”, “Vote Labour”, and the rest of the ragbag, but the strikers had their own slogans – the aims of the strike. After the strike the C.P. tried to persuade the strike committee to become the district committee of their newly-formed Minority Movement. The offer was rejected with scorn.

This unity, mutual respect and tolerance, a major factor of success, was never understood by the C.P. but the militants understood the importance of recognising, as the Prayer Book says, that there are “all sorts and conditions of men.”

Common sense in organisation and absolute honesty in the collection, care of and distribution of money were also ingredients of success. All this contrasts, as light to murky darkness, with the Communist sponsoring of strikes in the

following years, with their confusion, sectarianism and lack of financial frankness, the double-dealing of their trade union bureaucrats and the leadership's eagerness to get them back to work after about the tenth day.

For the will to win is the greatest single factor in winning a strike.

(*World Labour News*, July-August 1961)

Fighting for the nine-hour day

When I last visited my native city of Newcastle, I saw the sports shop of Stan Seymour, one-time footballer and director of a Cup-winning Newcastle United. I looked up at the heavy stone walls and recalled that the shop was a converted dwelling house, the house where my father was born, the home of my grandfather John Brown, Radical and trade unionist. Here and in a nearby dwelling he had been visited by Garibaldi. Best of all, I recalled his part in the famous Nine-Hours Strike.

Journeying along the riverside amid the clanging shipyards, I remembered the change of working hours which took place at the beginning of 1919, one stage in a long fight. Before that there had been a nine-and-a-half hour day and a 53-hour week, but unpaid meal breaks made a working day of 11 hours. Then we won the 47-hour week, after World War II the 44-hour week, then 42, but even the 53-hour, five-and-a-half day week had been a great triumph, a stage in the long climb from the depths of the Industrial Revolution. One of the best chapters of this saga is that of the "Nine Hours Strike".

During a great part of the 19th Century, the trade union movement tried to shorten the intolerably long working day by influencing politicians to introduce "Short Hours Bills" in Parliament, as well as by some strike action. There was some limited success through Parliament, for it was sometimes possible to gain the support of Conservative politicians against the Liberals. Traditionally the Tories were "land-owning

aristocrats", the Liberals coal, ship and factory owners, believers in "Liberty", the liberty to work men, women and little children to death without State interference.

The limits of this method of obtaining a shorter working day were clearly seen by 1870 and even before. Philanthropists and politicians would never agree with workmen on how far the day should be shortened. Many of the former, including Lord Shaftesbury, were opposed to trade unionism; the Bills, such as the 10-hours Bill, were obtained on the plea of the effects of the long hours on women and children – the reason why mining and textiles figure so largely in the discussions – and workers were beginning to resent gaining a shorter working day for men by pleading the case for women. As a union paper declared, "Now the veil must be lifted and the agitation carried on under its true colours. Women and children must no longer be made the pretext for securing a reduction of working hours for men." *Cotton Factory Times*, May 26, 1873.

In 1874 the Tory Government introduced, against Liberal opposition, its shorter hours bill, entitled, "Factories (Health of Women, etc.) Bill", relating chiefly to the cotton mills of Lancashire, the women securing a 56-and -a-half hour week. It should be remembered that there was no half-holiday on Saturday until the latter part of the 19th Century.

Increasingly workers were losing hope in political action and turning with stronger faith to direct action, especially to reduce the working day and week. During 1859-60-61, there had been strikes to this end in the London building trade, to be followed by action in many provincial towns, gaining for many building workers a shorter working day, without, of course, any reduction of the weekly wage. The building workers continued to enjoy a working week shorter than that of factory workers until recent post-war years, 50 against 53 before 1919, then 44 against 47 until 1947.

In 1866 the engineers of Tyneside debated a district strike for

the nine-hour day, but a slump ended the discussion. In 1870 the demand was again put forward, but the Central District Committee of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, now the AEU, cautiously decided against it.

Then, early in 1871, the engineers and shipyard men of nearby Sunderland took up the issue, decided, prepared and acted with remarkable speed and decisiveness. All out on April 1 and no fooling. The employers, who had been very confident and had the support of the Durham County authorities, with military force to back them, soon found themselves on the losing end. After four weeks, a short strike for those days, the workers were victorious and gained the nine-hour day.

Alarmed at the emulation that must follow such inspiring action, the engineering employers of North East England met in Newcastle on April 8 to prepare a counter-attack. Headed by Sir W.G. Armstrong, of the Armstrong Whitworth Company, they obtained the support of engineering employers throughout the British Isles, who levied themselves a shilling a head for all men employed by them.

The engineers of Newcastle and Gateshead were for strike action, but trade union strength was low. There were many unions, craft unions, but even one craft might have several unions in one shop. And even these divided ranks did not contain all, or even a majority of the workers in the factories. The Webbs, with access to the well-documented records of the strike stated that “two out of three of the men in the engineering trade belonged to no Union whatsoever.”

There was the problem… a strong and wealthy foe, our side poor, divided by a multitude of unions and two-thirds of the men non-unionists. A new, even if temporary, single-purpose organisation must be created, above the exclusiveness of trade-union brotherhood, a movement founded on a class, in class conflict.

A Rank and File Movement was formed and named the Nine

Hours League. The League included all crafts and unions and all men, unionist or non-unionist. It took over, temporarily, the functions of the unions, without destroying them. Its president was John Burnett, an Alnwick man, member of the ASE District Committee.

The men of Newcastle and Gateshead struck, it was a hard strike, as my grandmother often told me, for I loved to listen to her stories over a winters fire, with the wind howling down from the Cheviots, or across the angry North Sea when she later lived near the Scottish Border. I have since checked the details of these stories with the records and works of historians. It is remarkable that the tales of actual events experienced by such old people always seem to stand the test.

The national executives of the unions were lukewarm , but the local men were full of fight. “The five-month strike… was, in more than one respect, a notable event in Trade Union annals” wrote the Webbs in their dry manner. “One of the most memorable strikes on record.” said G.D.H. Cole. The strikers were mostly non-unionists and unused to organisation. “Upwards of 8,000 men had struck, whereas only 500 of them belonged to our society and very few to any other,” said the ASE *Abstract Report of Council Proceedings*, June 1, 1870 to December 31, 1872, page 184.

But the League organised them – meetings, processions through the city streets and to neighbouring towns, demonstrations on the Town Moor, factory pickets, organisation of relief, everyone seemed busy. Agents of the League went to distant towns and villages, sometimes walking many miles , sometimes going to Hull, Leith and London by coasters for a few shillings, for the strike funds were guarded with miserly care, “Every possible penny must go for food.”

Although the majority of workmen could not then read or write, the need of printed propaganda was understood. There was a minority who had received a rudimentary education at

Church and at “Penny” schools, or who had taught themselves to read and write. From them came a team of writers, men who had learned to read the hard way and loved their diet of the “classic novels”, Shakespeare, *Tales of the Border* and poetry. This reading, combined with a notorious Northumberland love of narrative, now served them well.

John Brown was deputed to seek the aid of the Radical Joseph Cowan, owner of an excellent local press, the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, to the weekly edition (the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*) of which Kropotkin was a regular contributor (Kropotkin often stayed with Dr. Spence Watson at Gateshead). Gripping John Brown’s hand Cowan promised to open the pages of his papers to the strikers.

But the *Chronicle* had little more than a local circulation. The workers’ correspondents aimed further afield, too. The Webbs, usually lofty towards anything short of a university education, wrote: “The tactical skill and literary force with which the men’s case was presented achieved the unprecedented result of securing for their demands the support of *The Times* and *Spectator*.” – *History of Trade Unionism*.

Armstrong (Lord) wrote a howling protest to *The Times*: “We were amazed… we really felt that, if the League themselves had possessed the power of inspiring that article, they could scarcely have used words more calculated to serve their purpose than those in which it is expressed. The concurrent appearance in the *Spectator* of an article exhibiting the same bias adds to our surprise.” *Times*, 14.9.1871.

The poor man could never believe that some of the articles were written by some of his fitters.

The strike lasted for five months, during the first three of which money came in slowly, afterwards in a flood. The flood of donations from so many parts of the country heartened the men and dismayed the employers. Writers then and historians since have attributed the financial success to the skill and

eloquence of the now unknown writers.

Blacklegs were brought in from the extremes of the British Isles, then hundreds were recruited from Europe. To stop the latter source of labour, the assistance of the International Workingmen's Association was called, with some success. Then the IWMA's Danish secretary in London, Kohn, was sent to Europe to complete the job. European members of the IWMA came to Tyneside and persuaded many blacklegs to return to their home countries.

Five months gone, the League was growing stronger, the employers capitulated and granted the nine-hour day, 54-hour week, without reduction of the weekly wage. Afterwards, instead of six days of nine hours each, it was agreed to have five of nine-and-a-half hours and one of six-and-a-half hours, finishing at 1 p.m. on Saturday.

A later struggle knocked off one hour, blowing the factory whistle at 12 o'clock for the week-end.

The victory caused the Tynesiders' struggle to be emulated throughout England and in Scotland and Ireland, in other trades, especially building, too. On the Clyde, the shipbuilding workers were offered, instead of a 60 hour week, 54 hours and a rise in wages. The rise they refused and forced from the employers a 51 hour week at the old weekly wage, though in a later depression they were forced to accept a 53 hour week.

From then on not political action but direct action was the method used by the workers to secure a shorter working day and week – a fight that is not yet over. The strike ended, the leaders of the struggle went back to the lathe, the bench and the shipyard – with one exception. Burnett became General Secretary of the ASE. The names of the others are unknown to history. I have the word of one old lady that is how they wanted it to be.

(*World Labour News*, May/June 1962)

Trafalgar Square and the free speech fight

"But you have free speech in England. Look how the Government allows you to use Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park for meetings." How often we hear such statements, usually accompanied by a rebukeful suggestion that we ought to be grateful. The truth is we were never granted such rights. The means of holding meetings in the streets and public places of Britain was fought for and torn from the ruling class. Let us take first the popular and ever-topical case of Trafalgar Square.

The year of 1886 was one of depression and on February 8, Black Monday, a great crowd of unemployed met to hold a meeting in Trafalgar Square. The police dispersed them and the men re-formed to march to Hyde Park to hold their meeting. At their head walked John Burns, later a Socialist M.P. and Liberal Cabinet minister, until he resigned in protest against the 1914 war. Burns carried a red flag.

The orderly, quiet procession marched along Pall Mall, but on passing the Tory Carlton Club they saw the windows crowded with well-fed, well-drunk, wealthy Tories, who not content with laughing at the unfortunate unemployed, shouted sneers and insults at their ragged clothes, their broken boots and hungry looks.

The road was being repaired and the crowd seized the opportunity, pelting the club's windows with large stones. The Tories' laughter vanished with their courage. Yelling for police protection they retreated to the back of the premises. As police reinforcements dashed to the spot, and a general struggle began, shop windows in nearby St. James' Street and Piccadilly were broken.

Burns and three others arrested were charged with seditious conspiracy, but the jury refused to convict. The Lord Mayor's Fund for the relief of the unemployed, which had slowly crept up to f3,000 and looked like stopping there, suddenly leapt to £70,000.

The following year, 1887, brought Bloody Sunday on November 13, when another demonstration was planned in Trafalgar Square. Using the powers given them by the Trafalgar Square Act of 1844, the Government prohibited the meeting and procession. As in the earlier revolutionary struggles of Paris and later St. Petersburg, the State garrisoned the river bridges with police and infantry, preventing by merciless use of batons, the South London workers from reaching the Square, many being injured.

North of the river the processions were to be halted in streets leading to Trafalgar Square, but some groups got through and one contingent, the North London, reached the Square in procession and were met by police and cavalry, the Life Guards. Among the wounded were John Burns and Cunningham Grahame, a Radical M.P. Both were arrested and suffered six weeks' imprisonment.

G.B. Shaw opposed this fight for free speech, but Annie Besant entered the struggle wholeheartedly. Three months later a free speech demonstration was batoned by the police and a young worker, Alfred Linnel, beaten to death A great procession followed Linnel's coffin to the grave, where William Morris gave the funeral oration. Then the vast crowd stood bareheaded while the Death Chant, written by Morris, was sung:

"They will not learn; they have no ears to harken,
They turn their faces from the eye of fate,
Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies that darken,
But lo! this dead man knocking at the gate."

And the refrain, often repeated in the years that followed:

"Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day."

The fight went on, the Square was won for free speech, but in more recent times permission has had to obtained from the Ministry of Works and only one meeting at a time is allowed.

Hyde Park

The Reform League, a continuation of Chartism demanding democratic reform of the electoral laws, had planned a mass procession and demonstration in Hyde Park for the evening of July 23, 1866. On the afternoon of that day Sir Richard Mayne had notices posted throughout London, declaring the Park closed from 5 p.m. The organisers decided to go on to the Park and attempt a meeting there. When the great procession, with many bands, banners and wagons arrived at Marble Arch, the three principal speakers, Edmund Beales, Colonel Dickinson and George Brooke, descended from their wagon and asked permission to enter the Park, the gates of which were guarded by a large force of police. After a little polite conversation and an adamant refusal, the leaders turned away and called on the demonstrators to follow them to Trafalgar Square. The procession – well, some of it – went along Oxford Street and on to the Square where, after a few brief speeches and thanks to Mr. Gladstone and others, the meeting ended.

But at the Park -oh boy! This was a Bank Holiday to remember.

In a movement which includes a large middle class, as well as a large working class following, critical events usually find the middle class turning to constitutional compromise after many brave words, while there has often been a large section of the working class which has wanted to use Direct Action. So it was on that glorious Monday.

As the procession wended its musical way along Oxford Street, the tens of thousands who had remained, struck at the garrisoned Park in two places. In Bayswater Road a throng hurled themselves at the massive iron rails, which were thrown down; at the same time workers in Park Lane tore down the park railings and the two sections joined forces in a fight with the police.

The fight died down as the Foot Guards marched in. The workers, seeking to fraternise, checked the troops, who halted near the gates. Then the Horse Guards cantered in – and again the crowd cheered. Soon the cavalry trotted off to another part of the Park and the police were again attacked.

Now more Foot Guards marched in under orders to shoot "if necessary". Then more cavalry, the Life Guards. Many were wounded that day, but the workers triumphed. Let us turn to a newspaper, at that time Radical and Republican, for an on-the-spot account.

"The people have triumphed, in so far as they have vindicated their right to speak, resolve and exhort in Hyde-park. True, the gates were closed against them, and lo! in twenty minutes after the Park all around was one vast, gaping gate. The ordinary gates were the only closed part of the fencing.

"A long pull, a strong pull and a push all together, down went the iron railings and the stones on which they were fixed in hundreds of yards, so that in less time than it takes to tell the story, the iron barriers which excluded the people from Hyde-park were levelled to the ground, or inclined against trees, for miles.

"Then the people poured in hundreds of thousands into the park and then, under the nose of Sir Richard Mayne, and before the masses of the bludgeon-brigade and through the scarlet lines of Foot Guards and Life Guards, with bayonets fixed and sabres drawn, were flanking police and ready to charge, a meeting was held, a chairman appointed, speeches made and resolutions proposed, seconded and carried." *Reynolds*, July 29 , 1866.

The Streets

Even more important than these two famous London spots were the market places and street comers of Britain, where a struggle for free speech went on for more than 100 years, until

about the mid 1920's. Every city had its meeting place, which was also a big open-air club – the Mound, Edinburgh; the Bigg Market, Newcastle; the City Hall Square, Leeds, and a hundred others.

Not content with such places, the radical movement and also some religious movements, such as the Salvation Army and the Methodists struggled for the right to hold public meetings at any street corner they thought suitable. At the end of last century and the beginning of this, the free speech fights seemed to come in waves, and seasons, or at times, city by city. Sometimes a lone agitator or preacher would champion the cause, often successfully.

When the authorities made a general attack on public meetings, an impromptu united front would often form and Socialists, Anarchists, Syndicalists and Radicals would queue up to be hauled off by the police. I recall one such incident, told me by our late comrade, George Cores. Brighton was having a free speech fight and, running out of speakers, sent a call to London. George went down to Brighton, began a street meeting and was in a police cell before he had time to sniff the ozone. With him was a Salvation Army captain, also arrested for speaking in the streets. After a few hours both were called to the station desk and told they must appear in court on the following Monday, it then being Saturday. The Salvationist would be let out on bail, but George held in custody.

Then came a surprise. "This is unjust," cried the Salvationist, "if I go this man should go too." "It's none of your business," said the inspector, "Get out." "Not until you let this man go," was the gallant reply, "If he stays, so do I." As accused persons were not provided with chairs, the captain sat on the floor – surely the grandfather of the Committee of 100. Dragged to the door he returned. Pleading, threats were useless and after an hour of rather bewildered and highly emotional contest, the preacher and the revolutionary left arm in arm – free until

Monday morning.

Free speech came the hard way. It could go the easy way.

(*World Labour News*, Sept/Oct 1962)