THE GREAT DOCK STRIKE OF 1889

UNITE EDUCATION
London docklands.
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FOREWORD BY LEN McCLUSKEY

Welcome to number three in a series of short books on great men and women and momentous events that feature prominently in the history of UNITE and its predecessor unions. Our hope is that publishing these histories will provide not only fascinating reading but inspire the current and future generations of trade unionists to take up the struggle on behalf of working people. There is certainly a lot to fight for. We are facing a difficult future in which the division between rich and poor is growing ever wider. The constant attacks on trade unionists, both in Britain, Ireland and abroad are expected to intensify. Education has therefore to be viewed in the context of equipping members to understand and fight back.

Additionally as part of UNITE the union’s three pillars strategy of organising, international solidarity and politics the education department is enthusing our members to write their own stories and explore their own family and local histories. To that end we have established on our website REBEL ROAD – an inventory of trade union and labour movement heroes who are publicly recognised in the form of a plaque, mural or statue or even a pub named after them. Please have a look at it and consider contributing. http://www.unitetheunion.org/growing-our-union/education/rebelroad/

It is in this context that we are producing these booklets. As a former docker brought up on stories of great struggles it thus gives me extra special pleasure to write the foreword on the Great London Dock Strike of 1889 that was the foundation stone on which the modern trade union movement is based. Before 1889 trade union membership was largely the preserve of skilled craftsmen. The dock labourer’s achievement – assisted by magnificent international solidarity from Australia – lay in convincing other unskilled workers that improvements in pay and working conditions could be won through trade union activity. Nothing was to ever be the same again. Our great union does, of course, have its own origins in the 1889 Strike. This booklet is, therefore, a salute to those who led and participated in the momentous events of August and September 1889 and a sign of our commitment to an ongoing collective struggle for a better future for all working people.

Mark Metcalf is doing a belting job for UNITE and the labour movement generally. Writing and compiling this book is only part of his contribution. This series of books already includes Tom Jones (published in October 2014 and Julia Varley. (published on 8 March 2015) Many more will follow.

Len McCluskey, Unite General Secretary
INTRODUCTION

1889 had been a relatively quiet year. The very first season of league football had ended with Preston North End winning both the Championship and the FA Cup, the first side in history to achieve this feat. In April, newly elected county councils in England and Wales took up their powers for the first time. Jerome K Jerome published his successful novel Three Men in a Boat.

In August the Savoy Hotel opened its doors in West London for the very first time. It was the first luxury hotel in Britain with electric lights and constant hot and cold running water throughout. Elegant dining facilities attracted royalty and other wealthy guests and diners.

It was a world far removed from the conditions experienced by workers in London’s East End; many of these were employed in the docks through which passed much of the trade that made Britain the wealthiest nation in the world. An estimated 10,000 casual labourers regularly sought work at the docks, even though often less than a third of that number was required. Not only did this make trade union organisation very difficult, it also meant that pay rates per hour for those who did obtain work were very low with no guarantee of even a full day’s work at any one time.

Yet in the same month that the Savoy opened its doors the docks found theirs being firmly shut when London’s Dockers’ began five weeks of strike action that really did change the world for the better.

Unite celebrated the 125th anniversary of the 1889 Great Dock Strike in 2014.
Children in East London lived in great poverty.
London’s East End slums

In late Victorian Britain London, then the world’s largest city, was at the centre of the greatest Empire in the world. Spectacular ships from all over the globe came to load and unload in its East End docks. It produced one of the greatest spectacles on the planet as every conceivable product was hauled, hoisted, rolled and transported. At points where the River Thames and its canal network narrowed it was possible to walk from one bank side to another without touching the water. It was this trade which helped make Britain the most powerful nation then in existence.

Yet a vastly unequal system of income distribution ensured that those who worked in the docks lived in appalling poverty. Such conditions led to an infant mortality rate (the number of deaths of infants under one) of 1 in 6 and bleak prospects for those who did survive. French historian, Hippolyte Taine, wrote in 1872: ‘Street-boys, bare-footed, dirty and turning wheels to get alms. On the steps leading to the Thames they swarm. More palefaces more deformed, more repulsive than the scum of Paris: without question, the climate is worse, and the gin more deadly.’ Even worse, Taine thought, was the condition of the men: ‘It is impossible to imagine before seeing them how many layers of dirt an overcoat or a pair of trousers could hold; they dream or doze open-mouthed. Their faces are begrimed, dull, and sometimes streaked with red lines. It is in these localities that families have been discovered with no other bed than a heap of soot; they have slept there during several months.’

Eleven years later the Reverend Andrew Mearns published a pamphlet called ‘The Bitter Cry of Outcast London’. In this he wrote:

‘Tens of thousands are crowded together amidst horrors, which call to mind what we have heard of the middle passage of the slave ship. To get into them you have to penetrate courts reeking with poisonous and
malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage and refuse scattered in all directions and often flowing beneath your feet; courts, many of them which the sun never penetrates, which are never visited by a breath of fresh air, and which rarely know the virtues of a drop of cleansing water. You have to ascend rotten staircases, which threaten to give way beneath every step, and which, in some places, have already broken down, leaving gaps that imperil the limbs and lives of the unwary.

‘You have to grope your way along dark and filthy passages swarming with vermin. Then, if you are not driven back by the intolerable stench, you may gain admittance to the dens in which these thousands of beings who belong, as much as you, to the race for whom Christ died, herd together.

‘Have you pitied the poor creatures that sleep under railway arches, in carts or casks, or under any shelter, which they can find in the open air? You will see that they are to be envied in comparison with those whose lot it is to seek refuge here. Eight feet square – that is about the average size of very many of these rooms. Walls and ceiling are black with the accretions of filth, which have gathered upon them through long years of neglect. It is exuding through cracks in the board’s overhead; it is running down the walls; it is everywhere...In one cellar a sanitary inspector reports finding a father, mother, three children, and four pigs! In another room a missionary found a man ill with smallpox, his wife just recovering from her eighth confinement, and the children running about half naked and covered with dirt. Here are seven people living in one underground kitchen, and a little dead child lying in the same room.

‘Wretched as these rooms are they are beyond the means of many who wander about all day, picking up a living as they can, and then take refuge at night in one of the common lodging houses that abound. These are often the resorts of thieves and vagabonds of the lowest type, and receivers of stolen goods keep some. In the kitchen men and women may be seen cooking their food, washing their clothes, or lolling about smoking and gambling. In the sleeping room are long rows of beds on each side, sometimes 60 or 80 in one room. In many cases both sexes are allowed to herd together without any attempt to preserve the commonest decency.’
Desperate

But there is a lower depth still. Hundreds cannot even scrape together the two pence required to secure them the privilege of resting in those sweltering common sleeping rooms, and so they huddle together upon the stairs and landings, where it is no uncommon thing to find six or eight in the early morning.’

Mearn’s work led to the establishment of a 1884-85 Royal Commission into the Housing of the Working Classes; this led to the introduction of limited legislation to force local authorities to close down unhealthy accommodation and to make it illegal for landlords to let uninhabitable property. It was an important landmark but in 1886 Charles Booth undertook one of the most important surveys ever carried out... By getting interviewers to go round asking questions, his work was thorough. ‘Life and Labour of the People of London’ was to come out annually up to 1902, making seventeen volumes in all.

Booth suggested that 30 per cent of the inhabitants of the largest and richest city in the world lived at or below the poverty line. (the minimum level of income deemed adequate) In the East End, particularly around Tower Hamlets, out of a population of 450,000 there were 50,000 living below the poverty line; another 30,000 he called the ‘irregular poor’; and 7,000 belonging to the semi-criminal class.

One of Booth’s best investigators was Beatrice Potter, who later became Beatrice Webb. In 1886 she described what she witnessed in Katherine Buildings, near the St Katherine’s docks. It was

‘A long, double-faced building in five tiers; one side overlooking a street; on the other looking into a narrow yard hemmed in by a high brick wall forming the back of the premises of the Royal Mint. All the rooms were ‘decorated’ in the same dull, deadred distemper, unpleasantly reminiscence of a butcher’s shop…….There were no labour-saving appliances…Three narrow stone staircases led from the yard to the topmost gallery; on the landings between the galleries and the stairs
were sinks and taps (three sinks and six taps to about sixty rooms); behind a tall wooden screen were placed sets of six closets on the trough system, sluiced every three hours.’

Only a small number of workers, the permanent dock staff, were able to live in much better accommodation. Earning 20 (£1) to 25 shillings (£1.25) a week they could afford to live further afield in places such as Hackney.

Booth described the life of individual workers and their families. One of these was Michael H (he did not give their full names). He was a dock labourer aged thirty-eight. When Booth saw him he was in poor health, just out of hospital. His 43 year-old wife suffered from consumption. (Tuberculosis) They had a son aged eighteen, who earned a very small wage as a delivery boy, and two small daughters, aged eight and six.

The family relied heavily on bread and margarine, tea and sugar. Sometimes there was enough money to buy a little fish, some eggs or bacon, but meat was rarely affordable. The family lived in two rooms, each about 10 feet square. Both parents and the girls slept in one whilst the kitchen was where the son slept and the family spent most of their time. The family was better off than other families where the father drank and the mother was either too ill or tired to keep the home clean.

Without a welfare system finding work on the docks which, during the depressions of the 1870’s and 80’s, was difficult, was essential for survival as other means of eking out a living were fraught with difficulties. These other means included the following:

**Mud-larks**

Mud-larks scoured for valuable things at the riverside. They waded, often dangerously up to their middle, through mud on the shore when the tide went out. They were often children, scavenging desperately for coal, bits of old iron, rope, bones and copper nails. Anything that might drop from a ship.
Journalist and researcher, Henry Mayhew spoke to one nine year old: ‘He remembered once to have had a pair of shoes, but it was a long time since. “It is very cold in winter,” he said, ‘to stand in the mud without shoes.’

Others reported how, when they went into the river, they often ran over pieces of glass and long nails which often caused damage to the feet. After going home and dressing their wounds they had to return to the river as, if the tide came up and they failed to find anything to sell, they would starve until, at least, the next low tide.

A 13 year-old Irish lad of thirteen who lived in Millwall told Mayhew: “I generally rise in the morning at 6 and go down to the riverside with my youngest brother. Some of the mudlarks are orphan boys and have no homes. In the summertime they often sleep in the barges or in the sheds or stables or cow houses with their clothes on. The mud-larks generally have a pound of bread for breakfast, and a pint of beer when they can afford it. The Thames police and the watermen often chase us, as the mud-larks are generally known to be thieves. On one occasion I was swimming a considerable way out in the river when I saw two or three barges near me, and no one in them. I leaped on board one of them and went down into the cabin, when some of the Thames police in a galley rowed up to me. I ran down naked beneath the deck of the barge and closed the hatches, and fastened the staple with a piece of iron lying near, so that they could not get in to take me. They tried to open the hatch, but could not do it. After remaining for half an hour I heard the boat move off. On leaving the barge they rowed ashore to get my clothes, but a person on shore took them away, so that they could not find them. After I saw them proceed a considerable distance up the river I swam ashore and got my clothes again.”

**Sewer hunters**

Sewer hunters, who were popularly known as ‘toshers,’ sought loot in the sewer riverside outlets. They wore long greasy coats with huge pockets, and dirty canvas trousers. With a bag on their backs and a pole, seven or eight feet long, they attempted to calculate the depth of the water they scrambled over.

Ferocious rats were a problem and toshers also faced being drowned when tidewaters submerged the sewers. The prize was to find spoons, silver-handled knives and forks, and even jewellery. They often hunted in
gangs. When they finished a day’s work, they would probably share the takings equally. On a very good day they might get £2 each, a small fortune that meant that those who survived were strong, robust and healthy. Some were sixty to eighty years old.

Life in Victorian East London was therefore miserable for many people.
Dock work

London’s docks grew with the British Empire. The multiplying of trade, combined with many agricultural labourers being forced to abandon rural areas as a result of the enclosing of common land by large landowners, drove many to London in search of work. Employers welcomed the arrival of thousands of men seeking a day’s work and used this surplus pool of labour both to keep wages low and impose brutal working conditions.

Because there were several different dock employers, working conditions varied. The largest group of employers controlled the new Joint Docks Committee – consisting of the East and West India, the Victoria and Albert, the London and Saint Katherine’s docks. Independent companies controlled Millwall and the Surrey and Commercial. Meantime, wharfingers better known today as harbourmasters – owned and maintained wharfs along the riverside.

The Joint Docks Committee hired superintendents, with deputies, to manage the individual docks. Below them were warehouse keepers, quay and warehouse foremen. In the East and West India Docks the foreman hired the labourers. The wharfingers also hired their own men. In the Millwall, the London and St Katherine’s Docks hiring labour was let out to contractors or ‘gangers.’ Whilst some of these believed it was in their interests to respect the men, others were often hard and unscrupulous. Consequently, workers resented them.

The number of permanent staff needed by companies varied. They included officials to run warehouses, clerks, policemen, various mechanics and craftsmen. The permanent staffs of the three main docks (the Eastern and West India, London on St Katherine’s and Millwall) were estimated to number about 1128. There were also other special groups of dock and riverside workers.
The Thames Watermen and Lightermen

‘Load and navigate the lights or heavy barges, by the aid of which vessels discharge and load their cargoes overside. The lightermen and watermen form a close corporation, nearly two centuries old. Each novice has to serve an apprenticeship of from two to seven years before receiving a licence from the Watermen’s and Lightermen’s Corporation, entitling him to the difficult trade of navigating the river.....They earn good wages, from £2 to £3 a week, but to do this they must be up and working at all hours of the day and night, and the work is heavy and rough, especially in the wet and cold weather.’

From Smith and Nash: The Story of the Dockers’ Strike, 1889

Stevedores

Stevedores worked in gangs under Master Stevedores and did the comparatively skilled work of loading goods for export. Because they dealt directly with the ship-owners’ agent, not the dock officials, they had more say in how much they were paid. According to Ben Tillett, one of the strike leaders in 1889, stevedores got fairly regular work because they ‘really had some semblance of method by agreement of the union with the contractors’. Consequently, they were comparatively well paid.

The majority of the dock labour force was:-

Casuals

The casual labourers formed easily the biggest group of dockers. They unloaded the ships. It was very hard unskilled work. Because the work was irregular there are no reliable figures as to the numbers of casual labourers; in 1889, however, Charles Booth estimated there were 10,000 in Tower Hamlets alone. That was significantly greater than the number of jobs available for casuals in the various docks, with work at most for 2355 in the East and West India docks and 3700 in the London and St Katherine's. The demand for casuals was often affected by the time of the year or weather and irregular work meant the casuals were the poorest dockworkers.

Ben Tillett described how they often ‘hung around for calls at any period of the day or night, kept waiting for a week at a time, for work which never came’. When they did get taken on it was only, at most, for the day, so when their day's work was done they had to try all over again the next day.
The wool sales season might see the dock gates cleared but when the sea was calm and ships were consequently stranded then there was little to do except sit idly around. This had its own consequences as the longer someone was without work then the less fit they became.

Colonel George Raymond Birt, chairman of the Millwall Docks Company, told the House of Lords commission: “The poor fellows are miserably clad with scarcely a boot on their feet. There are men who come to work in our dock without having a bit of food in their stomachs; they have worked for an hour and five pence; their hunger will not allow them to continue. By 4 o’clock their strength is utterly gone.”

Ben Tillett described what a degrading business searching for work and food was: ‘To tramp hour after hour round the dock; to see men picking the rubbish heaps….of refuse, the furtive search for any kind of food,… …this was at times the only means of living and of hope to many. No wonder the contractors called the casuals dock rats…….The dock labourer came in for the foulest contempt……the submerged being a term of respect for the casual labourer. All of us who were dock labourers concealed the nature of our occupation from our families as well as our friends.’

The stevedores’ banner commemorated Australian support for the 1889 strike.
Many labourers were forced to use ‘doss-houses,’ (cheap lodgings) paying 2d (1p) a night for a bed. Many didn’t have such a sum and relied on a friend in return for a guarantee they would return the favour when they had the funds to do so. There was, of course, no such thing as Job Seekers Allowance or other benefits, limited as they are even today.

The work was dangerous, especially as many men were feeble from underfeeding and whilst there were cranes to unload it was a fact that crates, bales, barrels and other cargo often had to be hauled about to a great extent by a man’s strength. To make matters worse there were no laws regulating the cranes and it was not unusual for there to be rotten strings and ropes.

Half of accidents aboard ship occurred in the first few days after a lengthy spell of unemployment. Some men fainted with weakness and even the hardiest had to draw on sheer will power, whilst being bullied by harsh taskmasters.

Compounding this desperate scrabble for survival, a lack of jobs in other industries could result in an increase in the numbers seeking work at the docks. However, in 1889 the arrival of laid off stokers at Beckton gasworks could have been an advantage because they had recently organised their own union and won better working conditions.
The Royals

Even among the casuals there was a kind of elite called ‘royals’, ‘preferred’, or ‘ticket’ men. For various reasons, such as fitness or reliability, the foreman favoured some men or contractors who did the hiring and kept an eye open for them at the call-on. However Beatrice Webb said even they could not be sure of getting work and she also reckoned that when the docks were employing the maximum number of casuals only a small part – 700 in the East and West India and 450 in St Katherine’s – would be royals.

The cage

Men were picked out for work from within the ‘Cage.’ Ben Tillett described the process as follows:

‘We were driven into a shed, iron-barred from end to end, outside which a contractor or foreman walk up and down with the air of a dealer in a cattle market, picking and choosing from a crowd of men, who, in their eagerness to obtain employment, trample each other underfoot, and where like beasts they fight for the chance of a day’s work. Such struggling, shouting and cursing, when one man, younger than the rest, would throw himself bodily at the head of the close-packed struggling mass. For what? The possession of a ticket which at best would afford four hours’ labour for no more than sixpence an hour.’

Starting at 7.00am, these awful scenes took place throughout the day and were calculated to inflict upon the dockworkers the maximum of inconvenience, discomfort, anxiety and misery. In the interval between calls the unfortunate wage-slaves who had failed to catch the foreman’s eye had to kill time as best they could. In wet and cold weather their misery can better be imagined that described. The fewer ships there were to unload, the more brutal the fight for the few available tickets would be: ‘Coats, flesh, even ears were torn off. Men were often crushed to death in the struggle.’

The Great Dock Strike of 1889
The pay

Except for the permanent employees it is difficult to calculate how much a dock labourer could hope to earn in a day or a week. Rates of pay varied between docks but an attempt was made in 1887 to assess the average earnings of various classes of workers. Weekly wages seem to have been something like this:

Watermen and Lightermen: £2 to £3
Stevedores £1 16s (£1.80)
Permanent dock workers: £1 to £1 5s (£1.25)

Calculating the casuals pay was much harder. At best it was 15s (75p) to £1 a week. In the biggest docks 3s 6d (17.5 p) a day was reckoned an average rate of pay, but it was not necessarily the case that one labourer would get that every day. Booth thought the 10,000 men of Tower Hamlets would not take home more than 6s 3d. (32p) a week. This sort of income would not go very far and it was not unusual for families to live on bread and tea for many days and also pawn items of personal property.

Although work with contractors paid sixpence (2.5p) an hour, a penny more than the companies, the dock worker hated this work as he was expected to almost break his back in order that the contractor, who got a fixed price for a job, unloaded the ship as quickly as humanely possible.

Many contractors demanded bribes or free drinks from the men in return for a promise of work.

Ben Tillett:”The usual method of the contractor was robbery with violence. His first attempt at organisation would be to command a gang of bullies who hounded and whipped any man not able to stand up against their vicious methods….The worst feature of all was the payment in public house. There many a poor docker, his body wracked and nervous would have to spend the money he had crucified his body to earn. The blackguards have set about me. I have been sandbagged, brutally hustled, and beaten insensible. Even my meetings were disturbed by the drunken blackguards, inflamed and madly doing their masters’ bidding.’
In Tilbury the pubs were actually called ‘shipping offices.’

It was, though, in the West India dock – which had no contractors – where the strike started. There the company worked out how long they thought a job should take and how much it should cost. If the gang reduced the job’s time then the surplus or ‘plus’ money was divided out amongst them as a sort of bonus. But there was much confusion over this system, also used at Tilbury. The employers insisted it was a favour that could be withdrawn, while the men thought it was theirs by right. To make matters worse, working out how the ‘plus’ was calculated was difficult.

Tillett said in his memoirs that the whole system was a fraud: ‘Two things made this nothing but systematic robbery. One was that no docker knew the basis of cost. There was no check, no access to accounts….. I found this outrageous robbery in every one of the docks and quays where the system applied. It was this abuse that really led to the Dock Strike of 1889.’

The great depression: crisis in the docks

British trade suffered badly in the 1870’s and 80’s with particularly bad years in 1885 and 1886. As exports fell many men lost their jobs. There was more wrong than just a fall in trade. Beatrice Webb described the docks as ‘the scapegoats of competitive industry,’ meaning there was far too much competition for too little work between the various dock companies and ports. The London docks were also inefficient and as rival companies sought to keep costs as low as possible they resisted demands for wage rises.

Nevertheless, profit levels remained stubbornly low and in 1887 and 1888 the East and West India Dock Company paid no dividend to their shareholders; in 1888 the London and St Katherine’s paid one per cent. Sidney Holland, an East and West India Dock Company shareholder led angry shareholders protests. He proposed that the big companies should amalgamate and he became a member of the committee that was established to examine ways of doing so.
The result was an Act of Parliament permitting a Joint Dock Committee to be formed, composed of the East and West India, the Victoria and Albert and the London and St Katherine’s companies. The chairman of the new committee was Mr Norwood, known for his lack of sympathy with the dock workers. He opposed their demands for more pay in 1889. Business improved in 1888 and 1889, partly because of reorganisation and also because of increased trade. Work for the docks increased and so did the number of jobs.

In 1889, a boom year, Norwood claimed a profit of £218,000. Shareholders may have been delighted but the workers were bitter as they were not seen as important enough to share the rewards with higher wages and better working conditions.

Thus when the shareholders complained that their ‘unearned’ income fell the owners took notice of them whilst at the same time taking no notice of the dockers who made the money.

What was now needed was strong leadership to turn anger into collective action.
Unions for the unskilled

Organising unskilled workers would be no easy task. Trade unionism largely catered for skilled craftsmen who by being able to exert some control over production methods could obtain better pay and more favourable working conditions.

Trade unionism was, at least, legal by 1889. The Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 had outlawed any organisation aimed at increasing pay or shortening hours. When employers began cutting wages and a few brave workers walked out they found themselves up before the Magistrates and imprisoned. Tin plate workers in the Wolverhampton ‘great strike’ of 1819 were arrested, tried, found guilty and transported to Tasmania. This did not prevent other workers taking action, often successfully after their masters refused to use the law.

Workers responded by continuously petitioning Parliament and in 1824 the Combination Acts were scrapped only for the Conspiracy Laws to be introduced the following year. This again limited combinations and left trade union funds unprotected with their members liable to be sued for breach of contact. Picketing was made illegal and the employers again moved to prevent collective bargaining.

The growing power of labour was not going to be denied and union activity in coal mining and cotton-spinning expanded rapidly in the 1820’s and 30’s. In February 1834 the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (GNCTU) was formed with the intention of recruiting men and women from all trades in one massive organisation.

Later in 1834, six farm workers from Tolpuddle in Dorset were transported for seven years for getting recruits to a local union to swear an oath. They wanted to affiliate to the GNCTU. A massive popular campaign witnessed the industrial working class playing a prominent role in the collecting of 800,000 signatures and organising one of the first
successful political marches in the UK. This forced the Government to release all six by 1837. The laws on picketing remained in force until 1859 when the Molestation of Workmen Act was passed. In May 1860 the London Trades Council was established to represent and unite different trade’s organisations in the capital. In 1866 the UK Alliance of Organised Trades was founded in Sheffield and two years later the Trades Union Congress was established in the Manchester Mechanics’ Institute.

In 1871 trade union funds were given protection when unions were legalised for the first time in the UK. Yet at the same time a new Criminal Law Amendment Act again made peaceful picketing illegal. Within the year five workers at the Beckton Works of the Gas Light and Coke Company were sentenced to 12 months imprisonment for ‘conspiring, with threats, to coerce the Beckton Gas Company.’ Workers at Beckton had walked out after one of their elected leaders had been dismissed for presenting a claim for an improvement in wages.

Finally in 1875 the Employers and Workmen Act and the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act fully decriminalised trade unions. This meant that they could not be prosecuted for an act which would be legal if conducted by an individual. As a result labour disputes became civil rather than criminal matters and picketing was thus decriminalised.

Trade unionism thus began to grow among new groups of workers including farm labourers and railwaymen. The period, though, was marked by harsh economic conditions and this made it much harder to get workers to join and the vast majority of workers remained non-union. Meantime, John Burns and Tom Mann, who were to play major roles in the 1889 dock strike, attacked the current craft union leaders for their cautious attitude and belief that the interests of the workers and employers were the same. Burns also disliked what he saw as snobbishness. In 1885, he wrote: ‘the great bulk of our labourers are ignored by the higher grades. It is this selfish, snobbish desertion by the
higher grades of the low that makes success in many disputes impossible.’ Burns further believed that the subscription rates were much too high. These paid for welfare functions that Burns argued should be paid for by the state.

In 1886 Tom Mann wrote a pamphlet called ‘What a Compulsory Eight-Hour Working Day Means for the Workers.’ Mann knew skilled workers unions had done little to advance their desire for an eight-hour working day, which he saw as necessary in order to cut unemployment levels.

He said: ‘To Trade Unionists, I desire to make a special appeal. How long, how long will you be content with the present half-hearted policy of your unions? All of them have large numbers out of employment even when their particular trade is busy. None of the important societies has any policy other than of endeavouring to keep wages from falling. The true Unionist policy of aggression seems entirely lost sight of.’

With many of the permanent dock workers and stevedores enjoying better wages and conditions and living separate lives from the casuals it was clear that creating unity amongst all those who worked in the docks would not be easy. Without it, though, how could casual workers raise their wages to an acceptable level?
BEFORE

“This is the best way
MY WAY’S BEST”

“Why don’t you pull my way?”

“MY WAY’S THE BEST!”

RESULT OF LABOUR

AFTER

“MINE IS THE RIGHT WAY”

RESULT OF LABOUR

TGWU formation.
Socialism in the 1880s

With most unions still largely craft based then the trade union movement, up to the 1880s, was largely indifferent to socialism and largely accepted Liberalism as their political path. Union-backed MPs did so as Liberals or rather ‘Lib-Labs.’ Strong religious attitudes also helped ensure that the sizeable minority who felt the need for change largely emphasised reform rather than revolution.

It was, however, the socialists who would bring together the discontent of the labouring classes of East London. Charles Booth and Beatrice Webb were socialists and their reports exposed the hardship and poverty being endured by thousands. The Fabians, including Beatrice’s husband Sidney and writer George Bernard Shaw, held regular street meetings where they denounced the injustice of the labourers’ conditions.

Socialist newspapers had small circulation levels but were influential. The Social Democratic Federation (SDF) was founded by Henry Hyndman in 1884 and attracted some working-class trade unionists with a belief in the revolutionary ideas of Karl Marx. The SDF paper Justice began to become increasingly popular.

The organisation attacked the existing trade unions for not caring about the unskilled and by the mid-1880s there existed several SDF branches in East London. When unemployment rose to 10 percent in 1886, the SDF held a series of well-attended rallies and marches. The winter of 1885-86 was the worst for thirty years and many people were starving. On 7 February 1886 an SDF march witnessed demonstrators marching up Pall Mall whilst smashing the windows of the establishment’s clubs. Some central London shops were attacked and looted. In the aftermath Hyndman, Burns, Jack Williams and Henry Champion, whose paper ‘the Labour Elector’ made him well-know, were arrested and prosecuted. There subsequent acquittals made them popular heroes.

On Sunday 13 November 1887 the police tried to prevent demonstrators holding a meeting in Trafalgar Square and serious rioting took place when the crowd fought back. In the aftermath Burns and the MP Cunninghame
Graham, the first socialist MP, were sentenced to six weeks in prison. Demonstrations themselves could not, of course, improve working conditions. Ultimately that relies on collective organisation at work and, in the final resort, the ability and courage to take strike action.

Convinced of the need for unskilled workers to establish their own union, Burns, Mann and Tillett, who worked in tea warehouses along the River Thames, wanted it to be aggressive and not burdened by a lot of costly welfare functions. They were aware of emerging organisations of dockers in Liverpool and Glasgow. In 1887, Ben Tillett helped found and became General Secretary of the ‘Tea Operatives and General Labourers’ Association.’

“The Cutler Street warehouse management sought to impose a reduction on the men employed upon the new season’s tea. It spread immediately to other warehouses, resulting in the calling of the meeting in the Oak Tavern, off Hackney Road. What a sweltering meeting that was. The clamour and vociferation was deafening and equally confusing….The meeting decided straight away to form a union, and elect a provisional committee. I was appointed secretary at two pounds a week.”
Matchwomen and gas workers show the way

With trade reviving, Tillett found it hard to recruit new members on the docks and in October 1888 he led an unsuccessful strike at Tilbury. He had hoped that the recent successful strike by women workers at the Bryant and May matchmakers in East London would act as an inspiration. At the beginning of the strike in Tilbury he invited the secretary of the newly formed matchworkers’ union, Annie Besant, to speak at a large rally of 5,000 dockers. During the dock strike the following year, Tillett and the other leaders regularly made reference to the matchwomen as a group of workers to look up to.

1,400 women, including many young girls, took strike action in June and July 1888. The Bryant and May factory on Fairfield Road was less than two miles from where the 1889 dock strike began. Strikers and dockworkers lived cheek by jowl; many were related to each other, including plenty with Irish backgrounds, whilst there are also strong indications that amongst both sets of workers there were some with a strong interest in radical politics.

It is indisputable that the women were poorly paid. Average pay was around 8 shillings (40p) a week with some even earning less than 5 shillings (25p). This was for a seven day working week that started at 6.30am in the summer and 8am in the winter and which ran till 6pm with half an hour off for breakfast and an hour for lunch. Half a day’s pay was lost if they were late for work and there were also a series of illegal fines and deductions for materials such as glue and brushes. Many workers were confused about how their wages were calculated. They were also badly bullied by domineering foremen some of whom were not averse to handing out physical punishment.

Matches were essential in Victorian homes for lighting candles or gaslights and where coal fires provided heat and hot water. Although portable devices to produce a flame had existed for centuries it was the
discovery of phosphorus in 1669 that paved the way for mass production of matches. In 1831, the introduction of white phosphorus by French chemist Charles Sauria made matches much easier to strike by increasing their toxicity. Within a few short years it was well known that phosphorus poisoning affected workers in match manufacturing. Safer alternatives were to be ignored for decades with Bryant and May, the largest match manufacturer in the UK, persuading the government to veto the proposed banning of white phosphorus internationally.

Workers at Bryant and May were forced to take their meal breaks at their workstations, thus further increasing the risk of contracting ‘phossy jaw’ in which the jawbone rotted producing evil-smelling pus that made it almost impossible for anyone to remain in the sufferer’s presence. Death, often very painful, was not uncommon. Bryant and May failed to report illnesses and fatalities and sacked any worker exhibiting symptoms of the disease.
Bryant and May became a limited company in 1884. Shareholders, including prominent clergymen and Liberal politicians, saw the value of their shares leap from £5 to £18 in four years. They further enjoyed massive dividends of 20 per cent as the company expanded both at home and overseas, with their dominant position in the industry allowing the company to force down wages.

Bryant and May’s shares had more than tripled in value since they were issued in 1884, leaping from £5 to over £18. Twenty per cent dividends were standard and amongst those to benefit were a number of prominent clergymen and Liberal politicians.

Workers at the factory took strike action to try and raise wages and improve factory safety with walkouts in 1881, 1885 and 1886. With no union organisation or funds these failed but demonstrated workers were aware of the need to collectively fight for their rights; this was also demonstrated by matchwomen throwing red paint over a statue of Prime Minister William Gladstone that had been erected by Theodore Bryant who illegally deducted a shilling from their wage packets to help pay for it.

On 15 June 1888, after Henry Champion had drawn attention to low wages at the company, members of the Fabian Society resolved not to use any matches made by Bryant and May and called on others to boycott the firm. Annie Besant was keen to investigate further and visited Fairfield Road where she – and possibly other Fabians who accompanied her – approached a small number of women as they left work to get accounts of their working conditions. They confirmed what Champion had said and Besant wrote an article for The Link that was published on 23 June.

By heading her work ‘White Slavery in London’ Besant made the point that it would cost Bryant and May much more to look after a slave than it paid in wages to its workers. The article did not however call for strike action, which, in general, Besant disapproved of throughout her life. (1)

The article forced the match manufacturers on to the defensive and, after denying all the charges, Bryant and May sought to discover who had spoken with Besant. To ensure that there were no more attempts to exercise free speech, workers were asked to sign forms stating they would remain silent about their working conditions.
Exactly how many refused is not known but on 2 or 3 July at least one woman and possibly two more were dismissed. The company denied this had anything to do with any failure by a worker to sign the distributed forms and they cited a lack of trade and some disciplinary problems for the sackings. None of the remaining female workers believed this and, suspecting foul play, they downed tools and marched out of the factory. The small number of male workers who mostly worked as dippers joined them.

**Women take the lead**

Although the company quickly offered to reinstate the victimised workers this was no longer sufficient to satisfy the strikers who extended their demands to include, for example, the ending of illegal deductions. The women immediately organised an effective, noisy picket line and felt confident enough to send a deputation of six match women to meet company directors. When the discussions were not to their satisfaction they resumed their strike.

On 6 July around one hundred strikers marched to the offices of Besant near Fleet Street where three of them informed her of developments and asked for her assistance. The following day, Besant wrote a further article for the Link in which she expressed her dismay at the action the women had taken but continued to call for a boycott of Bryant and May’s products.

On 11 July, a friend of Besant’s, Charles Bradlaugh MP, raised questions in Parliament and a deputation of 56 women who marched there to meet him brought parts of central London to a standstill as onlookers were startled by the appearance of so many poor people.

Newspaper coverage of the strike developed and for the first time it was reported that the shareholders were pressuring management at Bryant and May to come to a compromise with those refusing to work. The Star and Pall Mall Gazette began collecting donations from its readers and on 14 July the first strike pay was distributed. It was also reported that the women themselves had been collecting funds across East London.
On 16 July the company’s directors met with a deputation of matchwomen and two days later the company ceded to all the strikers’ demands. These included:

- Abolition of all fines.
- Ending deductions for paints and brushes.
- All grievances to be taken straight to the managing director without the intervention of the foremen.
- The provision of a breakfast room to allow for meals to be eaten away from work stations.
- The formation of a union so that any future disputes could be officially laid before the company.

The Union of Women Matchworkers, which was then the largest union of women and girls in the country, was formed, with Besant taking the role of secretary for the next few years.

**Important victory**

The Star newspaper had no doubt about the importance of the outcome:

“The victory of the girls……is complete. It was won without preparation – without organisation – without funds……a turning point in the history of our industrial development……”

As late as 1923 it was believed that every person in the Fairfield Works was a trade union member.

The national publicity and success gained by the women strikers at Bryant and May had demonstrated what could be achieved by determined, organised groups of workers whatever their skills. The numbers involved had been relatively small but the way was open for larger groups to take up the baton and further advance the cause of working people. Many groups made attempts to do so. In addition to the strike at Tilbury docks there were strikes in the fourth quarter of 1888 by Welsh and Yorkshire coalminers, engineers in Middlesbrough and ironworkers in Workington.
This blossoming of self-organisation continued into 1889 as Lancashire cotton workers, mainly female, walked out. In taking action, shipyard workers on Wearside joined seamen in Cork, Dublin and Glasgow. Steelworkers were out in West Cumberland. It was, though, in London where the next major victory was achieved.

The Gas Light and Coke Company (GLCC) had been formed in 1812 and is identified as the original company from which British Gas is descended. Built in 1868, the Beckton Gas works was named after the GLCC chairman, Simon Adams Beck. The vast 500-acre downriver site meant large colliers could serve it. Thousands of men worked there and in 1872 five men served four months in prison following a strike in support of two workers dismissed for daring to ask for a pay rise.

**Deadly working conditions**

Many gas workers hated their working conditions, pay rates of just 5d (2.5p) an hour and the treatment they received from management. Stokers were required to shovel vast amounts of coal on shifts that lasted 12 to 13 hours. When gas demand was at its highest the men might only get one day off a fortnight. Shareholders meantime were getting dividends of 13.5% from the efforts of the stokers.

Henry Champion’s paper, ‘The Labour Elector’, managed to get a reporter into Beckton and what he saw horrified him. The paper backed the men’s demand to work eight hours a day and described how one totally exhausted worker, Michael Maloney, had collapsed and died after he succumbed to the terrible heat. His widow might now face a life of poverty and hardship. Yet Maloney had only been earning 5d an hour (2.5p) and to make matters worse the foremen could at anytime change a man’s class of pay by downgrading him to an even more poorly paid labourer’s post. Any worker who also failed to give seven days’ notice if they left their employment lost all the pay due to him. There
was also the constant threat of being laid off in the summer when less gas was needed.

Will Thorne, a Beckton worker, proposed forming a union – the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers – and on Sunday 31 March 1889 a large and enthusiastic crowd assembled at the works to hear from an impressive range of speakers.

Will Thorne told the men: -

“Fellow wage slaves, I am more than pleased to see such a big crowd of workers and friends from Beckton Gas Works. I know that many of you have been working eighteen hours under very hard and difficult conditions, that many of you must be dead tired; often I have done the eighteen-hour shift.” (The length of shift described was the result of the men being asked to work a further five hours after they finished a 13-hour Saturday night/Sunday morning shift – editor) “This sort of thing has gone on for a long time; we have protested but time after time we have been sneered at, ignored and have secured no redress. Let me tell you that you will never get any alteration in Sunday work, no alteration in any of your conditions or wages, unless you join together and form a strong trade union. Then you will be able to have a voice and say how long you will work, and how much you will do for a day’s work.

“In my opinion, you have the perfect right to discuss all these matters with your employer through your chosen spokesperson. Why should any employer have the power to say you must do this, that, and the other thing?

“By your labour power you create things for the community, you create wealth and dividends, but you have no say, no voice, in any of these matters. All this can be altered if you will join together and form a powerful union, not only for gas workers, but one that will embrace all kinds of general labourers……It is easy to break one stick, but when fifty sticks are together in one bundle it is a much more difficult job, The way you have been treated is scandalous, brutal, and inhuman. I pledge my word that, if you will stand firm and don’t waver, within six months we will claim and win the eight-hour day, a six-day week and the abolition of the present slave-driving methods in vogue not only at the Beckton Gas Works, but all over the country. Now will you do this?”

“WE WILL!” was the massive reply. This was the genesis of the union.
A three-man committee of Thorne, Ben Tillett and W Byford, who later became Thorne’s father-in-law, was elected and began recruiting and organising the new union. It cost a shilling (5 pence) to join and 2 pennies (1 pence) a week subscription. Three weeks later over 3,000 members had been recruited from across many different gas works. It was at this point that the three men avoided calling a strike as with the summer approaching they knew the company would need less workers during a period when gas was not in as much demand as during the winter months. Thorne decided to concentrate on winning an eight-hour working day.

In June the company approached Thorne to grant the eight-hour day but the conditions that management sought to impose would mean the men did as much work as they previously had over 12-hours. Different offers were made to men in different gasworks in a clear attempt to divide the workers. The offer was refused as the men also knew that by reducing the working day to eight hours then the unemployed would be absorbed into the workforce. Finally, management caved in and agreed to negotiate over how much work would be accomplished in an eight-hour shift. After several discussions with the resident engineer a final settlement was agreed between the union and management at the Beckton Gas Works. This was followed in due course with terms being agreed at the remaining gas works across London.

“The formation of our union, and its first victory, put heart into thousands of unskilled, badly paid and unorganised workers.” Will Thorne

1. For over a century it had been assumed that Besant was the strike leader – with few historians questioning whether well over a thousand poorly paid workers really would go without pay under the leadership of a middle class woman they hardly knew. In her brilliant book – STRIKING A LIGHT: the Bryant and May Matchwomen and their place in History – author Louise Raw very capably demonstrates this was not the case. The key to this was a re-examination of Besant’s own writings and the newspapers of the day along with Raw’s finding and interviewing grandchildren of some of the strike leaders. Besant’s role in the strike was important but she was not its leader and to suggest so has meant the inspiring story of the matchwomen’s courage, determination and self organisation has remained hidden whilst the ability of working class people to successfully organise collectively in defence of their needs has been underplayed.
The strike leaders

The 1889 strike was dominated by four men – three were trade unionists, whilst the other has been termed ‘the honest broker’.

Ben Tillett, [1860-1943]

Born in Bristol, Tillett was twenty-nine when the strike started. Self-educated, he had a sensitive face and a stammer. Beatrice Webb described him as “a light-haired little man with the face of a religious enthusiast.”

Tillett had an adventurous spirit and joined a circus when only eight years old. He later enrolled in the Merchant Navy and spent many years abroad. He returned to London in 1880 and worked as a docker and odd-job man. Any spare cash was used to buy books.

By 1887 he was fortunate to have a regular job at the Cutler Street Tea Warehouse. After the management threatened to cut wages the workers organised a meeting at the Oak Tavern, Hackney Road. Tillett, overcoming his stammer, made a passionate speech in which outlined the need for an organisation in the warehouses with a democratically elected committee and a membership fee to cover costs.

His speech did the trick and the Tea Operatives’ and General Labourers’ Union was born with Tillett as its first full-time general secretary. Success, though, did not come easy. In the autumn of 1888 a dispute at the recently opened Tilbury dock ended in a defeat for the union.

Tillett was inspired to try again by the victories achieved by the matchwomen and the gas workers in their disputes with their employers. Tillett’s upbringing meant that he was the closest of the strike leaders to understanding the grievances and outlook of the ordinary working man.
This helped make him the chief organiser of the dock strike and he walked the streets deciding how to organise picketing and rally support.

His friend Tom Mann said: “Ben would reach the heart’s core of the Dockers by his description of the way in which they had to beg for work and the paltry pittance they received, and by his homily illustrations of their life what it ought to be.”

After the strike Ben took a leading part in organising the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers’ Union and in another great dock strike in 1911. He was central to the establishment of the Transport and General Workers Union in 1921-22.

Tillett courted controversy with some of his supporters in the labour movement through his outspoken support for Britain's involvement in the First World War. He was one of the founders of the Labour Party, and was MP for Salford from 1917 to 1924 and from 1929 to 1931. He became Chairman of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress in 1928 and retired from public life in 1931. He died in 1943; his legacy being that he was one of the founders of modern trade unions in this country.

**John Burns, [1858-1943]**

At an early age Londoner John Burns predicted that he would one day become an MP. Despite losing his father at an early age and growing up in great poverty John overcame these disadvantages to realise most of his ambitions.

Having left school at ten he was arrested in 1877 for breaking the law on public speaking on Clapham Common. His court room defence impressed a young woman, Martha Gale, who later married him. He became a well-known orator and notorious
as the ‘man with the red flag’ which he carried to distinguish himself. He was sent to prison for six weeks after the riot in Trafalgar Square in 1887 (known as Bloody Sunday). As such he was easily the best-known socialist in the UK in 1889 and the man that Tillett understood would be needed if the dock strike was to be victorious.

“He had a voice like a megaphone,” said Tillett. “He used this voice to good effect in the early days of the strike, when he marched with the other demonstrators round the docks, and, standing on the backs of those who accompanied him, peered over the walls of the gates which barred his entry to the Company’s premises, to summon the men who remained at work to join the strike.”

At one point, Burns made 36 speeches in three days during the strike. He became known to the dockers as ‘The Man in the Straw Hat.’ This was another example of his self-publicity that came in especially useful when he was trying to keep the peace between the strikers and the police. The hat was thrown into the River Thames after a party on board a launch celebrating the end of the strike.

Burns became MP for Battersea in 1892, and was one of the first Independent Labour Members. His strong independent streak saw him go his own way and in December 1905 he became President of the Local Government Board in the new Liberal Government. This made him the first working-class man to gain Cabinet rank.

In 1914 he became President of the Board of Trade, but his opposition to the First World War led to him resigning from public life and spending the rest of his life collecting books on London and the River Thames, which he called ‘liquid history.’

He died in the same year as Ben Tillett (1943), but whereas Ben was popular with many of his colleagues the same was not true of John Burns. Yet as the historian G.D.H. Cole said of him: “With all his faults Burns did big things in his day. The Great Dock Strike of 1889 would almost certainly have been lost had he not been there to lead it.”
Arguably the finest trade unionist that Britain has ever seen, Mann was working at nine and down the coal mines at eleven. The Warwickshire youngster used his experiences in the mines to educate himself before moving to London, where he met John Burns, who became his lifelong friend. He also joined the Social Democratic Federation.

In 1887 he went to Northumberland and Durham to demonstrate on behalf of the unemployed. Using an alias he got a job in a chemical works and exposed the terrible working conditions in that industry.

When he went back to London he threw himself into organising the Gas Workers’ Union and after Tillett heard him speak he made it his mission to get Mann’s support for the docker. He contacted him by letter on 14 August 1889 and the response was immediate; Mann threw himself into the struggle and he became president of the new Dockers’ Union at the end of the strike.

In 1894 he was elected as secretary of the Independent Labour Party. In 1898 he helped establish the Workers’ Union that enjoyed a large membership in the second decade of the 20th century and which later merged with the TGWU in 1929. In 1901 Mann journeyed to Australia and New Zealand where he organised the Labour Parties there. He came back to England in 1910. He was one of the founder members of the British Communist Party, and his activities between the two world wars got him several spells in prison.

He died in 1941 and a plaque from the local trades’ council marks his grave in Leeds.
The fourth great strike figure is very different from the other three in that he was one of the most important churchmen in England at the time, not from the working class and an old man of eighty.

Henry Manning was born in Hertfordshire in 1808. He was a good sportsman and athlete who wanted to become a politician before being drawn into the Church to become a parish priest. He converted to Roman Catholicism in 1851, becoming Archbishop of Westminster, the highest position for a Catholic in England, in 1865. Ten years later the Pope made him a Cardinal. Apart from his religious duties he always took a great interest in the needs of working people and he supported the right to strike and was opposed to the laissez-faire economic orthodoxy which was prevalent at the time.

In 1874 he wrote: “The homes of the poor in London are often very miserable….these things cannot go on, these things ought not to go.”
The accumulation of wealth in the land, the piling up of wealth like mountains in the possession of classes or individuals, cannot go on if these moral conditions of our people are not healed. “

Manning, who served on the Royal Commission on Housing in 1884, was tall and thin with clear, grey eyes. His vast experience, wisdom and great standing in the community made him the ideal man to help settle the dock strike.

Tom Mann outlined Cardinal Manning’s effect on the dockers: “He spoke to the dockers in such a quiet, firm and advising, fatherly manner that minute by minute, as he was speaking, one could feel the mental atmosphere changing.”

The peace settlement that ended the strike in 1889 was called ‘The Cardinal’s Peace’. He can have no better epitaph. On his death in 1892 a resolution was moved in the London Trades’ Council that, ‘English, Irish and Italian workers in London felt that by the death of Cardinal Manning they had lost their very best friend’.

Dock Labourers, 'Illustrated London News' 14 September 1889.
The Dockers’ tanner

‘The Lady Armstrong’

Having witnessed two successful strikes by the matchwomen and gas workers then many of the unorganised dockers were keen to push for a pay increase and, if necessary, take strike action in pursuit of their demands. Confidence was high and despite the previous year’s failure at Tilbury, Ben Tillett was still speaking of the need for a General Dockers’ Union.

‘The Lady Armstrong’, a cargo vessel lying in the West India Dock, had already been discharged, but the men and the Dock Superintendent argued over the amount of bonus or ‘plus’ money that should be paid. This had the potential to set a strike in motion.

On Monday 12 August at 7.30am, Will Thorne, fresh from his victory at the Beckton Gasworks spoke at the South Dock gates of the West India Docks in a meeting organised by Will Harris who worked on the tugs at the Albert Docks. Ben Tillett joined Thorne on the platform and they appealed for the men to form a union and then refuse to go to work unless their pay was raised by 1d an hour to 6d – the ‘Dockers Tanner’ – with overtime raised to 8d (3.5p) an hour. In addition the dockers demanded that no one should be employed for less than four hours. As was the tradition of the period – and for many years afterwards – the dockers agreed to the resolutions by a show of hands, which on this occasion was unanimous.

When Ben Tillett took these demands to the dock directors they refused to listen; he returned to tell the men the strike had begun. Despite the obvious hardships ahead there was enthusiasm.

On 16 August 1889, Tillett again informed Dock House that he required a satisfactory reply to his demands. When this was not forthcoming he carried out his threat to lead 10,000 men in the first of the mammoth colourful processions that raised the profile of the dispute locally, nationally and internationally.
As the noisy dockers with their bands and banners entered Commercial Road, John Burns took off his straw white hat and came forward to offer his support. Burns was a famous figure and his backing would help gain the strike publicity. He was warmly welcomed as he joined Tillett at the head of the march with the police bringing up the rear. The impressive spectacle, however, failed to stir the dock directors when it arrived at Dock House and the marchers were sent away without any satisfaction. Over the following weekend a frenzied series of meetings were held all over the docks to help spread the strike as widely as possible.

One significant problem was the need to organise a strike fund and Tillett thus sent telegrams to Tom Mann and Henry Champion at the offices of ‘The Labour Elector’, successfully appealing for them to come and use their considerable political experiences and oratory skills on behalf of the strikers. The strike leaders realised that a battle plan needed drawing up quickly with pickets posted at every gate in order to prevent strikebreakers. Publicity was also needed.

For the strike to be successful there was a need to persuade the members of the Stevedores’ Union not to go to work and also bring out the men at Tilbury Docks. Harry Orbell was delegated to work with the latter and he was successful in persuading 1000 men to join the dispute.

Following discussion, a joint manifesto was issued on 18 August 1889 with the Stevedores which stated ‘knowing the conditions of the dock labourers, have determined to support their movement by every lawful means in our power. We have, therefore, refused to work because of the dock company employing scabs and blacklegs, who are now taking the places of the dock labourers on strike.” The kings of the river had joined the strike.

Ben Tillett: “It was no small triumph to secure from the Union of Stevedores a proclamation. It is dated four days after the beginning of the strike. That fact alone indicates how strenuous and protracted had been the effort necessary to get the Union Executives to throw in their lot with us.”

A Joint Strike Committee was set up. James Toomey, John Burns and Henry Champion represented outside support, Ben Tillett and Harry Orbell the mass of the dockers.
Strike headquarters

From the beginning the Wade’s Arms pub in Jeremiah Street, Poplar, became the strike centre. Landlady Mrs Hickey became like a mother to the strikers. Whatever time it was when the weary leaders arrived back at their headquarters she was there with a welcome meal or some refreshments and her constant enthusiasm played an important role in maintaining morale over the five weeks of the strike.

There was a constant stream of visitors to the first floor room where the committee discussed the conduct of the strike including the placing of pickets and the distribution of strike pay. Clergymen visited with food and clothing, letters were delivered, collecting boxes were handed in, reporters demanded interviews for their newspapers and the publicity this would give the strike was desperately needed. It was an exhausting time for all the strike committee, who often stayed at the pub for a few short hours in which they were able to grab some desperately, needed sleep. Mrs Hickey provided some marvellous stews and a big breakfast for all the leaders.
As funds grew women, including Mrs. Burns and Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl Marx, were brought in to organise the financing of the strike. Initially, 4,000 food tickets worth a shilling (5p) were issued daily but as more joined the strike the number issued rose to 25,000 and to 50,000 on Saturdays. Raising the money to feed all the families and keep the strike going was, although difficult, obviously very necessary.

On 20 August men at the Surrey and Commercial Docks joined the strike. Meantime, John Burns was busily engaged at the wharfs spreading news of the strike.

Anxious dock directors were now being forced to defend their actions as well as what they paid their employees. In an interview with the Morning Post, their chairman, Mr Norwood, said: “We cannot afford an advance in wages for it would destroy any possibility of a dividend to the shareholders of the Joint Companies or tend to drive shipping from the port.” When Tillett and Norwood met the former informed the latter that he could manage the docks better and the dispute remained unresolved.

Norwood was convinced that the dockers could not sustain a long strike and would return to work defeated. The Strike Committee were able to prevent this by persuading local tradesmen to exchange food tickets worth a shilling each in return for being paid when sufficient funds were available. The arrival of these tickets initially caused a great scramble and later eight ticket centres were established to avoid congestion.

The Great March

Saturday 24 August 1889 was the day of the Great March. The Star newspaper backed the strikers stating on the day itself:

“STAND FIRM STRIKERS! This is the critical day for the dock labourers. We do not for a moment believe that Mr Norwood’s brutally cynical expectation that the pinch of hunger would be too much for the men by
the end of the week will be fulfilled; but everyone in sympathy with this gallant army who are ‘out of principle’ should do his utmost to help them.”

The march started after breakfast at Poplar Town Hall. Thousands of dockers, headed by a group of police, advanced towards the City. Leading the march was the strike committee. Then came the brass bands, followed by mass rows of marching men, all carrying their trade banners festooned with hundreds of slogans.

A banner from one of the striker’s wives had as its slogan:

‘Our husbands are on strike
For us wives it is not honey
And we think it’s right
Not to give the landlords any money.’

Huge floats followed with cartloads of men, some in fancy dress depicting dock scenes, Britannia in a Union Jack skirt with Father Neptune alongside a scene depicting a director’s huge dinner compared to that of a docker. The march was a magnificent success.

The Star reported: “The excitement along Commercial Road was intense….Over the entrance to Star Street was suspended the inscription ‘No Rent paid in the East End till the docker gets his tanner.’ The fireman at Commercial Road came out later on the roof of the station and cheered. The big hotels later on had throngs on their balconies and along the embankments at De Keyser’s Hotel and the Savoy, opera glasses were much in request, and rich men and women waved their handkerchiefs as token of sympathy with their poor brothers marching below…..the men on the river steamers blew their boats’ whistles in invitation of three cheers. The show of sympathy reached its climax when the strike army passed the barracks in Birdcage Walk. Here the soldiers from the windows and in groups about the place responded to the cheers of the strikers………”

It was one of the largest movements ever seen and showed that the dockers were not going back without their tanner. Speaking at the Hyde Park rally that ended the demonstration, Ben Tillett noted that working men had done the organising themselves and by doing so had demonstrated the need for the labouring man to get their own representatives in the House of Commons.
Despite the great sufferings being endured by the men and their families the strike organisers were determined to try and keep good relations with the police. They did not wish to antagonise the strong public support they had gathered as a result of positive newspaper coverage their actions had generated. This did not mean they shrank away from placing pickets at every dock gate and at some main railway stations to keep watch for men being brought in by the dock companies.

Tom Mann was placed in charge of picketing, which was legal as long as persuading anyone not to cross a picket line was undertaken peacefully and without intimidation. With the Dock Companies keen to show the pickets were threatening willing workers, 2,000 police were drafted into the East End once the strike began. John Burns in particular made it his business to welcome the new arrivals and to create good relations with them. During the dispute just twenty dockers appeared before the courts charged with breaking the law. Most cases were dismissed and by keeping the peace the dockers’ maintained public support.

Pickets often came up with ingenious ways of stopping people from going to work. The dock companies widely advertised work at £1 a week and tried to smuggle the men into work in meat vans and in the back of cabs. Large groups of pickets prevented vehicles crossing without those inside being informed of the effects of their actions and many refused to cross the picket line as a result. Guards on gates were relieved every twelve hours and pickets were decently rewarded. Pickets would often enter the docks, pretending to be returning to work. Then at meal breaks they would speak up about the strike and persuade those working to come out on strike. Some Liverpool men were paid by the Strike Committee to return home and spread the news of the strike there.

The strike and the picketing was very successful and traffic to the world’s largest port was brought to a standstill. This meant that it was impacting on companies that relied on London for the import and export of their supplies and products. It is not exaggerating the situation to say that the British economy, in general, was facing a major crisis as a result of the determined efforts by the strikers to raise their pay and conditions.

This was especially the case as many solidarity strikes broke out in locations including Thames Ironworks at Blackwall, McDougall’s Chemical Works and Peek Frean and Company. So many strikes occurred that eventually the dockers strike committee had to issue a manifesto that asked workers to contact them before any dispute was started.
The Dock Companies were still relying on hopes that the men would be forced back to work due to hunger. Fortunately, many organisations had stepped in to help feed people with the Salvation Army Food Depot in the East India Dock Road supplying supper, bed and breakfast for 1.5d a night whilst at Austin House 5,000 breakfasts were served daily. Nevertheless many people were getting dangerously close to starving even after they had sold and/or pawned everything except their bedding. On Friday 30 August 1889 The Times reported:

‘some 80,000 men of the poorest people in London, the men who can less than any others afford to be out of work, are doing nothing, and, in spite of the help they are receiving from outside, the sight is one of the most pitiable upon which the human eye could rest………the river is full of steamers lying low down in the water and obviously ready to discharge their cargoes…the new result of the present state of affairs is that the trade of the greatest port in the world is paralysed.’

The No-Work Manifesto

With their coffers empty the strike committee felt compelled to send out notices immediately suspending all relief. Solidarity strikes had encouraged some belief that a more general strike could be organised across the capital. It seemed that in this desperate situation it might offer the best way forward. Over the evening of 29/30 August a ‘No-Work’ manifesto was drawn up by Mann, Llewellyn Smith and Henry Champion. Other strike committee members added their signatures with a starting date of Monday 2 September 1889, when the aim was to get other groups of workers to walk out on mass unless dock directors agreed to pay the dockers their claim.
Once this manifesto appeared on the streets it was quickly realised that its effect would be to lose the dockers public support: people feared that, rather than being responsible trade unionists, the dockers were socialists or anarchists threatening essential services such as gas for lighting. There also seemed little enthusiasm for sympathetic actions amongst some of the London unions and if the proposed actions were not heavily backed then the strikers’ cause would be badly – perhaps irretrievably – damaged.

The manifesto was no sooner issued than withdrawn. Much betters news was that the same weekend, Cardinal Manning, accompanied by the acting Lord Mayor of London, Sir Andrew Tusk and Colonel Henry Smith, the acting commissioner of the City Police, approached the Dock Committee to try and persuade the employers to agree to the reasonable demands of the men.

Although the Cardinal’s efforts failed, strikers appreciated his attempt to intercede on their behalf. Although the dock companies were refusing to budge the Times reported that shipowners were now putting them under tremendous pressure to conclude an agreement and get the men back to work. The government was becoming concerned and had brought in convict labour to work alongside the Army in moving strategic materials.

A leading wharfinger, Mr Henry Lafone of Butler’s Wharf, also began separate negotiations with the strike committee and on 29 August some of the dock employers issued a statement stating they had conceded most of the striker’s demands except the 6d or docker’s tanner at the hourly rate. This was not enough for the strikers who did not consent and remained on strike.

Yet the employer’s internal disputes were also being reflected within the ranks of the strikers; Mann denounced the Liberal-Labour MPs for their lack of support and had to also exert considerable influence on the south side of the River Thames to prevent a return to work amongst men who felt they were inadequately represented on the Strike Committee. In the circumstances the news that striking watermen and lightermen had agreed terms of 6 shillings for a 12 hour working day was a big boost and this was set to be paid when they returned to work after remaining out in solidarity with the dockers.
Magnificent international solidarity saves the day

With funds urgently needed to prevent a movement back to work came the welcome news that the Dockers’ Union in Australia was sending a significant sum in a gesture of extraordinary international solidarity. Brisbane Wharf Labourers’ Union sent an initial £150 and this marked the start of a stream of donations.

Australians had become fully aware of what was taking place in London through the Australian press. Prominent citizens convened meetings right across Australia in support of the strikers at which it was agreed to hold a collection at the end of each event. Bands gave concerts in support of the appeals and there were mass rallies and demonstrations by trades unions.

The amount donated totalled over £30,000 – from an overall total of £47,000 raised during the strike – took away the strike leaders concerns for their members; it was now unlikely that strikers would be forced back to work through hunger. On 3 September nearly 100,000 tickets of 1 shilling in value were issued. Strike leaders switched their focus away from holding mass processions in London and on to bolstering the picket lines in order to prevent strike breaking.

The employers were now in a difficult situation as it was clear that the strikers could now remain outside the dock gates for some while yet and it was apparent that they could not persuade sufficient people to even consider taking the strikers’ places at work. Norwood in particular was under pressure to open up negotiations with Tillett and Burns. The Peninsular and Oriental line had lost about £15,000 in the first two weeks of the strike and they were among an increasing number of firms keen for a solution to be found.
Mansion House negotiations.
Victory

The Lord Mayor set up a conciliation committee – the Lord Mayor and his deputy, the Bishop of London, Poplar MP Sidney Buxton, Cardinal Manning and Sir John Luddock, the President of the London Chamber of Commerce. The strike leaders were asked to meet it on Friday 6 September.

When Tillett and Burns met with them negotiations were concluded with an agreement that pay rates would increase to 6d an hour from 1 January 1890. The Dock Directors were in agreement. The Conciliation Committee demanded an answer in four hours but this was simply impossible as the strike committee members wanted time to consult the men they represented and find out if they were willing to wait six months for a pay rise.

The Conciliation Committee was convinced that Tillett and Burns had agreed the proposed compromise deal. The two men disputed this but members of the committee verbally attacked them in the press, allowing the Times, amongst others, to attack the strike leaders and by default those on strike.

The strike continued and on Sunday 8 September. Burns demanded the ‘tanner’ from 1 October when he spoke to a huge meeting. Tillett approached Cardinal Manning to work out how to make progress and he reconvened the conciliation committee the following day. Following this meeting, he and Sidney Buxton met the whole strike committee in Poplar to patiently persuade them to accept the ‘tanner’ from 4 November.

Smith and Nash reported the meeting dramatically: ‘Just above his head was a carved figure of the Madonna and Child and some among the men tell how a sudden light seemed to swim around it as the speaker pleaded for the wives and children. When he sat down, all in the room knew in their own minds that he had won the day.’

By the time the Cardinal left the schoolroom he had a written statement from the Strike Committee authorising him to negotiate on their behalf a 1d an hour pay increase to start on 4 November.
Rather than going straight to see the Dock Directors, the Cardinal waited until Thursday 12 September as he felt that by then both sides would be keen to come to an agreement. Strike funds were becoming low and trade was being moved to other ports.

When Cardinal Manning and Mr Buxton called to see the Directors they were eager to agree to the men’s terms. When Burns and Tillett announced that a solution was in sight the Wade’s Arms resounded with cheers and the good news spread like wildfire.

On Saturday 14 September, after five weeks on strike, an agreement was signed and the strike ended. The following day a final triumphant procession marched to Hyde Park. The Australian flag led the march alongside a multitude of crosses placed in honour of Cardinal Manning. Along the Commercial Road women turned out in their thousands to witness their husbands and sons pass in triumph. Despite the hardships people looked fresher and tidier and there was a carnival atmosphere as Tillett and Burns marched in front. Blazing sunshine celebrated the arrival of the crowd as it entered central London.

This being the days before a tannoy system it was necessary to set up four platforms so that parts of the crowd could hear at least some of the speakers. John Burns spoke from three of the platforms and praised the strikers, urged them to return all together the following day and he paid tribute to the women who had helped, including his own wife.

Meantime, across the east end of London, there were numerous celebratory sermons following the famous victory. Ministers sought to present the strike not as a socialist or political movement but as a labour struggle.

The men then turned up for work on the Monday. ‘The Dockers’ Tanner’ (with 8d an hour for overtime) was awarded from 4 November. No man was to be employed for less than four hours at a time. The contract system, which had put workers at the gangers’ mercy, was abolished. Fortunately, the employers showed little resentment to the strikers, who in turn also showed great restraint by not taking any revenge on those dockers who had worked during the strike. Burns appeal that no strike breaker should be molested was respected.
The Star reported the return to work as follows:

Long before 6 o’clock John Burns was tramping cheerily along to gladden his eyes with the pleasant sight of the real termination of the strike, the sight of the men going in happy and peaceably to work again. By 6 o’clock, John, the ‘Sun’, and the ‘Star’ man were at the West India Dock gates. It was an hour or two before the time for commencing work, but already there was a big crowd there, and from every street and every turning the men were pouring in. As they walked they filled the morning air with a wonderful sound – the sharp, ringing tramp, clamp, trampety, clampety tramp of the thousands of heavy boot heels on the resounding flagstones.
SOUTH SIDE CENTRAL STRIKE COMMITTEE, SAYES COURT, DEPTFORD.

SEPTEMBER 10, 1889.

GENERAL MANIFESTO.

Owing to the fact that the demands of the Corn Porters, Deal Porters, Granary Men, General Steam Navigation Men, Permanent Men and General Labourers on the South Side have been misrepresented, the above Committee have decided to issue this Manifesto, stating the demands of the various sections now on Strike, and pledge themselves to support each section in obtaining their demands.

DEAL PORTERS of the Surrey Commercial Docks have already placed their demands before the Directors.

LUMPERS (Outside) demand the following Rates, viz.: 1. 6d. per stand for Deal. 2. 4½ per stand for all Goods, surcharge from £ x 10 to £ x 10, as for rough boards. Working day from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., and that no man leave the “Red Lion” corner before 8.30 p.m. Overtime at the rate of 6d. per hour extra from 5 p.m., excluding meal times.

COVERWEIGHTERS (Terminal) demand 6d. per hour from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. to pay for overtime, overtimes to commence from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Pay to commence from leaving “Red Lion” corner. Meal times to be paid for. Weekly a Meal Times double pay, but that this basis of the United Combination. Longer to be used is any particulars.

OVERSIDE CORN PORTERS (S.C.D.) demand 15s. 6d. per 100 qr. for Deal. Heavy labour 17s. 6d. per 100 qr. per annum, or with use of steam 18s. 6d. All overtime after 6 p.m. to be paid at the rate of 16s. per qr. extra.

QUAY CORN PORTERS 1s. 3d. demand the return of Standard piece privilege in March 1889, which had been in operation for 15 years.

TRIMMERS AND GENERAL LABOURERS demand 6d. per hour from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and 8d. per hour overtime. Meal times as usual, and not to be taken for less than 4 hours.

WEIGHERS & WAREHOUSEMEN demand to be reinstated in their former positions without distinction.

BERMONDSEY AND ROTHERHITHE WALL CORN PORTERS demand:
1. Permanent Men 8½d. per week.
2. Casual Men 8½d. per day and 8d. per hour overtime. Overtime to commence at 5 p.m. Meal times as usual.

GENERAL STEAM NAVIGATION MEN demand:
1. Wharf Men 6d. per hour from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m., and 8d. per hour overtime. 2. In the Stream, 7d. per hour, ordinary time, 8d. per hour overtime. 3. In the Dock, 8d. per hour ordinary time, 1½ per hour overtime.

MAUDSEY’S ENGINEER’S MEN. Three men 7½d. per week now demand 24s. and those remaining 2½d. per week demand 2½d.

ASHBY’S, LTD., CEMENT WORKS, demand 6d. per ton landing Coal and Chalk. General Labourers 7½d. rise of wages all round. This making up for a reduction made 9 years ago.

GENERAL LABOURERS, TELEGRAPH CONSTRUCTION demand 4s. per day from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., time and a quarter for first 8 hours Overtime, and if later, time and a half for all Overtime. No work to be done in Meal Hours.

Signed on behalf of the Central Committee, Whitechapel.

[Signature]

[Signature]

Signed on behalf of the South Side Committee.

[Signature]

[Signature]
Conclusion

A 20 per cent pay increase, minimum hours and an end to the hated contract system were the reward for the docker's heroic efforts. Pay levels rose from 3s 4d (17p) a day to 3s 9d (19p) and with four hours overtime the increase was from 7s 2d (36p) to 7s 10d. (39p) From now on each gang elected a representative to liaise with the foreman in hiring labour. This still had its problems but was much better than the cage.

Meantime Tillett swiftly organised a meeting at which the union was rechristened the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland. Harry Orbell, Tom Mann (briefly) and Stevedore Tom MacCarthy joined Tillett in becoming organisers and an organising tour of the regions was organised.

Port after port witnessed the formation of new branches with 63 alone in January-February-March 1890. Will Thorne however was less pleased by this new organisation and criticised its leaders as he had hoped to see one great union encompassing all sections of labour. Tensions rose when the Dockers’ Union refused to recognise the Gasworkers’ Union ticket when members of the latter sought work on the docks. Some of the older dock unions were also unhappy that potential new recruits were being lured into becoming members of the new Dockers’ Union.

There also remained problems on the docks for many years afterwards with major industrial disputes in 1911 while the casual system survived for decades after 1889.

But the strike was undoubtedly a major success as following the victories at Bryant and May and amongst the gas workers this was the third in under a year by unskilled workers. It had also involved much greater numbers and consequently its impact was bound to be much bigger and better known.
In his 1889 article on the strike, John Burns stated what he felt was important about the victory:

‘The gain in wages I have already touched on. That is not the most important result to be considered. We have to note, above all, that labour throughout the whole East End of London has, by the outcome of the Strike, been placed upon a higher and more substantial footing with regard to capital than it has ever stood upon before. Still more important, perhaps, is the fact that labour of the humbler kind has shown its capacity to organise itself; its solidarity; its ability; its readiness to endure much for little gain. Then, the labourer in the East has acquired hope. He has learned that combination can lead him to anything and everything. He has tasted success as the immediate fruit of combination, and he knows that the harvest he has just reaped is not the utmost he can look to gain. He has learned the value of self-sacrifice in a large movement for the benefit of his class. Conquering himself, he has learned that he can conquer the world of capital, whose generals have been the most ruthless of his oppressors.’

The Dockers success helped encourage the development of unions everywhere. Unions for railwaymen, seamen and farm labourers, with similar aims, grew amidst enthusiasm for general labour unions. By 1890 it was reckoned there were about 200,000 ‘new unionists’ in unions catering for poorer casual labourers who could not previously afford to join the older, more exclusive organisations.

Certain features especially set the new unions apart from those that had gone before. They organised by the industry they worked in, not by their craft. They were ‘general’ unions, and at least at first this meant any type of worker could join. Their low entry fees and subscriptions meant many of the lower-paid workers could afford to join. They were also more ready than the older unions to go on strike.

The number of unionists represented at the Trades Union Congress (T.U.C) also rose, from 568,000 in 1888 to 1,094,000 in 1891, and apart from some small, temporary drops, total membership rose steadily in the twenty-five years following the dock strike. With far too many small unions unable to defend their members, the period from 1910 witnessed a number of amalgamations and then on 1 January 1922, 24 unions combined to create the Transport and General Workers Union, forerunner to today’s UNITE.
The 1889 strike was important politically because many of the leaders of the new unions were closely associated with socialism. At the 1890 T.U.C., socialist delegates got several resolutions passed calling on central and local government to protect the weak. Some new union leaders also supported the Independent Labour Party. This was founded in 1893 to represent the interests of the working classes and to get real workingmen’s representatives into Parliament. John Burns and Tom Mann were among the first trade union leaders to become MPs in the 1890s. Although the links are weaker, the Labour Party still has very close ties with the trade unions, including UNITE.
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This is the third booklet written and compiled by Mark Metcalf. The first on Tom Jones, and the second on Julia Varley can be viewed at:
http://tinyurl.com/k9q8e3m

Look out for the following in 2015 on Tony Hall and Charlie Chutterbuck.