

UNITE THE UNION History Project



Mark Metcalf has written a number of booklets for Unite. They can be accessed through the links provided. All can be downloaded for free.

TOM JONES - a fighter for freedom and working people.

Spanish Civil War Volunteer and Welsh TGWU general secretary

<https://markwrite.co.uk/2018/10/02/tom-jones-a-fighter-for-freedom-and-working-people/>

JULIA VARLEY - Trade union organiser and fighter for women's rights

<https://markwrite.co.uk/2018/10/02/julia-varley-trade-union-organiser-and-fighter-for-womens-rights-by-mark-metcalf/>

THE GREAT DOCK STRIKE 1889

<https://markwrite.co.uk/2018/10/02/the-great-dock-strike-of-1889/>

TONY HALL: Trade unionist, anti-racist and radical cartoonist

<https://markwrite.co.uk/2018/10/02/tony-hall-trade-unionist-anti-racist-and-radical-cartoonist/>

BENNY ROTHMAN - a fighter for the right to roam, workers' rights and socialism

<https://markwrite.co.uk/2018/10/02/benny-rothman-a-fighter-for-the-rights-to-roam-workers-rights-and-socialism/> See also:- <https://markwrite.co.uk/2018/11/29/mass-trespass/>

MOHAMMAD TAJ - Steering from the front

<https://markwrite.co.uk/2018/10/02/mohammad-taj-steering-from-the-front-2/>

Plus:- **ELLEN STRANGE** - A moorland murder mystery explained

<https://markwrite.co.uk/2018/10/08/ellen-strange-booklet-2/> and see also:- <https://www.facebook.com/martin.mcmulkin.1/videos/1724276561016587/>

Also due out in 2019 are booklets on Betty Tebbs, Betty Gallacher and the Origins of trade unionism. A special 8-page leaflet on the Women's Social and Political Union or Suffragettes is also out in spring 2019.

REBEL ROAD is a Unite Education project that commemorates trade union and labour movement heroes from Britain and Ireland that are publicly commemorated in one form or another such as a plaque, mural or statue. Dozens of men and women who have made a difference in working peoples lives are remembered with photos of plaques and details of their important battles and struggles to improve the world for the majority not the 1%. If you have a plaque in your area that you feel should go on the site then please get in touch.

<https://markwrite.co.uk/rebel-road/>

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Mark is available to speak at your trade union and labour movement event. Mohammad Taj is also happy to speak at meetings

Unite is collecting information on its legacy unions and is interviewing activists from the past. By doing so Unite is building one of the largest collections in the UK and Ireland of materials on trade unions and the working class.

Six books will be published on periods covering 1922 to 2022. Previously unexplored strikes are being unearthed and catalogued. Past and present Unite activists are being interviewed.

Mark Metcalf is a National Union of Journalists member and experienced trade unionist. He was elected as the Trade Union Liaison Officer for Halifax Constituency Labour Party in late 2018.

Mark is part of the Unite history project. What follows in this short document is three articles of his on strikes in the Halifax area in 1925 (textile workers), 1926 (the General Strike) and 1972 (building workers) plus a review of a book on the year 1842 when Halifax workers struck en masse in a national dispute over pay and extending democracy.

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For more details on Unite History project, visit www.theunitehistoryproject.org

Halifax and the successful strike in 1925 by textile workers in West Yorkshire

Mark Metcalf

The first specific locally reported indication that a Textile Dispute might take place amongst woollen (used for knitting) and worsted (tailoring) textile workers in West Yorkshire came with a published letter in the Halifax Daily Courier and Guardian (herein referred to as the Courier) dated 21 July 1925. It was signed by a 'Textile Worker' who urged his fellow workers to ignore the union officials and settle the dispute 'by heart-to-heart discussions between our employers and ourselves...both sides must be prepared to make some sacrifice in order to meet in the markets abroad our former enemy, who could not beat us in the war but who is capturing our trade. I do not think we should have the reduction from our pre-war wages, but only a reduction from the bonus that was given in order to carry on the war.'

The textile workers were poorly organised but had benefitted during WWI from the establishment of the Whitley Council (¹), which helped to settle disputes through negotiations. In the early 20s though the employers had used the recessionary period to reduce base wages by 5 per cent.

In April 1925 workers fed up with falling living standards demanded the restoration of the cut. In addition the executive committee of the largest union, the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), which was led by President Ben Turner, who was a JP and Alderman from Halifax, also proposed that the employers should - with prices rising rapidly - pay a cost of living adjustment every month other than annually.

In response, most of the employers within the Wool Employers Association (WEA) decided to try and boost profits by driving down wages even further. After initially proposing a ten per cent cut the WEA reduced its demands to a five per cent cut. WEA members were encouraged to post notices of wage reductions on 24 July. In a sign that not all WEA members were united, some employers chose not to post notices and the NUTW instructed its members to continue working in these establishments.

Turner criticised the employers' action and called it a Lock-Out. He viewed it as part of a general attack on all workers and remarked in a pre-strike rally that textile workers and coal miners (*) had been selected for the initial attack and, if both were defeated, then other attacks would follow.

The strike, endorsed by the National Association of Unions in the Textile Trade, commenced on Thursday 23 July. The editorial the following day in The Courier expressed hope that previous successful peaceful negotiations to settle 'the problem of wages and hours and general working conditions' would reassert themselves quickly. According to the paper 'a large amount of machinery remains in motion because the young workers are not in unions.' This was followed by a further appeal to nationalism, 'the only people who will benefit will be the foreigner...who will pour more goods into our country.'

In a lengthy article of 24 July 1925 the paper reported about 155,000 operatives had ceased work in the West Riding and Lancashire. Central (organising) councils of action were organised in each town. The demands of the strikers were for no reductions in pay.

Amongst those on strike were 10,000 in Halifax, a thousand less than in Dewsbury. There were 24,000 on strike in Huddersfield and 55,000 in Bradford, where the police and strikers had clashed, after the latter, believing an all out stoppage was needed, ignored appeals by their officials not to try and bring out factories where employers had not agreed to reduce wages. When the police attempted to intervene they were overpowered by several hundred strikers, some of whom threw stones that broke windows and they then forced the closure of some factories before police reinforcements arrived and dispersed the crowds.

In what was described as a complicated position, The Courier noted that not all the employers were standing by their Association and they had not posted notices regarding the proposed reduction of bonuses. In these cases work was continuing as usual. Although some operatives had not taken strike action 'the fact that some 10,000 in Halifax and districts have done so is in itself a serious thing.' Amongst those on strike were employees at Messrs Patons and Baldwins mills. At John Crossley and Sons carpet factory at Dean Clough work continued as the notices to reduce bonuses did not come into play for another 24 hours.

Arthur Dawson, local organiser for the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) announced that shop stewards were bringing in lists of members presenting strike cards and strike pay would begin from Monday next. (3 August) He announced that ten local factories were working at the existing rates and that no stoppage would take place at them unless there was any attempt to lower pay rates. In Elland, most employees at the various companies were on strike.

Dawson said: "the response in the area has been magnificent...the spirit of the workers is one of resolute resistance." (It appears from the press report that overlookers (supervisors) were amongst the staunchest backers of the strike. Without them at work getting the machines operating was a real difficulty). Even where there had been no previous union organisation, workers had struck said Dawson, who had been the Labour candidate for Sowerby at the last general election.

The Friendly and Trades Club had become a focal point for strikers and all the men appeared in good spirits. Meanwhile 'factory girls paraded the streets arm-in-arm, conversing gaily.'

On Saturday 25 July 1925 the Courier reported that there was no immediate prospect of a conference between the WEA and the NUTW, thus quashing rumours that the employers had decided to continue paying the old rate of wages for six months, at the end of which period the matter was to be reconsidered.

The paper reported: 'at the various mills in Halifax this morning everything was quiet. Most of the places were closed...the number of employees affected in Halifax...original estimate of 10000 for the town and district will not be far wrong...taking the whole dispute about 55 per cent of the operatives are women and juveniles and 45 per cent men.'

A mass meeting of around two to three thousand people was held on Saville Park on Sunday 28 July. Mr Crowther, NUTW assistant secretary to the Halifax district, said: "if workers suffered a reduction this time they might be faced with a reduction another time...the employers would say they could earn more if they worked longer hours." He said that whilst the NUTW had not sought the 'Lock Out' it was now time for textile workers to make a stand if they were going to retain their present standard of living.

Ben Turner made a speech in which he tried to explain the economic case for textile workers, who were being asked to take a cut in their weekly wages of 5 per cent or 3s 2d (16p today), which he contended would have limited impact on the price of finished goods and as such not produce much in the way of additional sales for companies. He showed how Britain exported more cloth than before and how imports of fabric were down by two-thirds since 1913. He criticised the biggest manufacturers in Britain for opening mills in Poland and France. He remarked upon how wages in the US textile industries were much higher than in Britain.

Furthermore, "workers could not afford a reduction of 3s 2d, which was the equivalent to one stone of flour" especially as weekly wages in Bradford averaged just £2 and in Halifax they were 4s (20p) less. He said the union was prepared to negotiate at anytime or place but would not negotiate a decrease in wages.

The Halifax Wakes/national weekly holiday commenced on Monday 3 August 1925. Due to the dispute far fewer trains than usual were needed with the most popular destination being London - 4 special trains were needed. More people had though preferred the road to rail and charabancs (horse drawn carriages/early motor vehicles) ran to Blackpool, Scarborough and Morecambe. After convening at 2.30pm on the Sunday, the Textile Joint Industrial Council was still in session in late afternoon the following day, delegates having only interrupted their negotiations in order to have meals.

Although these negotiations failed to produce anything of note, the two sides reconvened for another even lengthier series of negotiations on Friday 7 and Saturday 8 of August 1925, when it was agreed that there should be established a Court of Investigation to inquire into the state of work, employment and general conditions in the textile industry. However, when the employers held out for the reduction to be applied until the Investigation was concluded this was flatly rejected by the workers' representatives. The Court was to be held in private and would report to the Industrial Council, with any recommendations as to a new wages agreement to be accepted by both sides.

Over the weekend about £45,000 was paid by the trade unions to striking members. Of this £32,000 was paid out by the NUTW, about £2000 more than the previous weekend. The increase was due to many workers from Dewsbury returning from their holidays and resuming their participation in the strike.

On Sunday 9 August there was a good attendance at the Albert Theatre, Brighouse for a meeting organised by Brighouse Trades and Labour Council at which Ben Turner was supposed to be the main speaker. However with negotiations at a delicate stage he absented himself from proceedings at which Mr F. Holroyd (President of the Trades Council) spoke and during which Mr William C. Robinson MP for Elland and former President of the United Textile Factory Workers Association between 1913 and 1919, said he was willing to abide by the outcome of the Court of Investigation. It was reported that around 600 to 700 were on strike in Rastrick.

On Tuesday 12 August it was reported that the conference in Bradford between the Northern Counties District Council of the National Wool (and Allied) Textile Industrial Council had been adjourned because the employers' new offer had been rejected by the unions. The offer was that the difference between the old and new rates should be pooled and later disbursed in accordance with the Court findings. In essence this would have meant the unions largely accepting there was a need for a wage reduction. They were not willing to do this and replied that work could only be resumed under the old wage rates.

When the conference in Bradford was adjourned no new date for it to reconvene was fixed. The Courier reported that 250,000 workers were affected by the strike and of which the Halifax figure was 8,500 and Brighouse 1,000. The unions had paid out nearly £80,000 in benefits to its members. Later in the day the employers alleged that the unions had committed a 'Deliberate Act of Deception' by refusing to get their members to return to work. The employers later sought to break the strikers unity by taking out front page newspaper adverts arguing their case.

Following the collapse of negotiations the two sides were asked by Mr Leggett, who had been present in Bradford, from the Ministry of Labour to meet him in London. Meanwhile Ben Turner, the NUTW President and W. Riley travelled south to consult with the Trades Union Congress General Council. The General Council itself was only four years old and was responsible for 'keeping watch on all industrial movements.'

Prior to journeying to the capital, Turner met with the Central Council of Action in Bradford. Present were representatives of the Transport and General Workers' Union (2) who discussed calling on their members to refuse to handle certain goods. The council also discussed demands for all permits for mills to work to be withdrawn but the previous decision to allow production to continue in firms where the old rate was being paid was reaffirmed.

It was reported that a large trade union had offered the NUTW a £5,000 interest free loan and Turner declared the union had funds to "last several weeks yet comfortably." However the following day (13 August 1925) the union announced it was to reduce the lock-out pay by 40 per cent in order to conserve funds for a long struggle. Meanwhile there had been 200 applications in Halifax for poor-law relief.

In Halifax, the Heckmondwike Manufacturing Company agreed to reopen the factory at the old non reduced rates and a permit was now being sought from the NUTW to allow strikers to return.

Under the direction of Sir Arthur Herbert Drummond Ramsay Steel-Maitland, the Labour Minister in the Conservative Government, the London Conference brought together the two sides on Thursday 13 August. The discussions continued the following day.

On Saturday 15 August the Courier reported: 'Work was to be resumed at old rates of pay on Monday.'

In turn this would allow the Court of Investigation, consisting of 5 persons, to start its work. The Minister later issued a letter thanking the employers' side for being 'prepared in the general interest to waive their proposal. He also remarked on how few incidents there had been of law breaking during the strike.

When news of the temporary agreement reached Halifax it was warmly welcomed and plans to reopen most of the mills at 7am on the Monday were announced.

On Sunday 16 August 1925 a not very well attended meeting of textile workers was held on Saville Park at which G. Boothroyd, described as Chairman of the local Council of Action, said he felt too much secrecy was attached to the inquiry.

James Hudson, the Labour MP for Huddersfield, praised the strikers and said securing the investigation was entirely due to the unity and solidarity of the operatives in the textile industry. He hoped that this progress would be maintained and said: "the effort to reduce the textile workers wages was part of a worldwide attempt to reduce wages, and was part of a bigger question. The old system of capitalism was on its deathbed and the community must take every step it could to secure increased control in industry."

When the five man investigating council, consisting of an independent chair and two from the employers and trade union side respectively, reported it opted to preserve wages as they were with no cuts in pay.

Turner remarked "I am glad to have lived to see the day when overlookers, foremen and managers, craftsmen, engine tenters etc. joined together to defend labour's interests - when the office lass, the designer, the long brat men, and the woolcombers were standing together."

Combined with a temporary solution (see below) to the then coal crisis the textile workers victory boosted the morale of the trade union movement and suggested that if trade unionists, with the assistance of the relatively new Trades Union Congress General Council, could achieve unity in action then it was possible to defeat attacks on pay and conditions.

1. The Whitley Council took its name from John Henry Whitley, (1866 - 1935) the Liberal MP for Halifax between 1900 and 1928. Related to the Crossley family, Whitley took over his uncle Samuel Whitley's cotton spinning business, S. Whitley & Co. at Hanson Lane Mills, Skircoat, Halifax in 1884.

During WWI, in 1917, Whitley chaired a committee on Industrial Relations, which was set up in the wake of the establishment of the Shop Stewards Movement, which had in May 1917 organised an anti conscription strike by 200,000 workers in 48 towns and which was demanding 'Workers Control.' The aim of the Whitley Councils that were set up was to establish a system of regular consultative meetings between workers and employers such that good industrial relations were established and maintained.

2. The Transport and General Workers Union or TGWU is the forerunner to today's UNITE. It was on 1 January 1922 that 24 unions combined to create the TGWU.

*Miners

- April 1925 : Britain returned to the Gold Standard and this resulted in a rise in the price of goods and a subsequent reduction of coal exports. The heavy financial losses in mining thus saw the coal owners propose 13% pay cuts. However, the subsequent Macmillan Inquiry into mining favoured the miners' side. Walter Citrine became TUC General Secretary.
- 30 June: Coal owners gave notice of the termination of the national agreement with the miners which had been in force since 1924. This meant a reduction in wages and the end of the guaranteed minimum wage. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain recommended rejection of the proposals.
- 10 July: The miners' representatives put their case to the TUC General Council, which pledged its support.
- 29 July: Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin stated that the Conservative government would not grant a subsidy to maintain the level of wages in the mining industry.
- 31 July ("Red Friday"): With strike action in the offing the government was forced to climb down and offered a 9 month subsidy to the coal industry, on condition that coal owners withdraw notices of wage

reductions. It was announced that another Royal Commission would be appointed to inquire into the coal industry. A union defeat four years previously was called Black Friday, hence the term Red Friday for the victory.



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References

The General Strike of 1926 by Keith Laybourn

Prelude to the 1926 General Strike - the Wool & Worsted Strike by Iain Dalton
<https://leedssocialistparty.wordpress.com/2015/07/30/prelude-to-the-general-strike-the-wool-worsted-strike-90-years-on/>

Halifax and Calderdale during the 1926 General Strike (GS)

Mark Metcalf

Brief notes on sources of materials used for this article - there was a daily local paper at this time but, in fact, there was better information in the weekly paper that was published each Saturday and which was called the Halifax Courier and Guardian Weekly. The information is patchy and so this report cannot be taken as definitive.

Pre the strike

In the weekly paper dated 27 February 1926 there is a brief report on the activities of Halifax Trades and Industrial Council (HTIC) in 1925. Total income in 1925 was £102 6s 11d. It was reported that 1925 was the fifth year of the HTIC.

The report makes reference to the **successful strike by textile workers in 1925**.

'The year had been strenuous...the unemployment problem, owing to depression in trade, had had serious consideration...**The textile dispute** had their entire support, and they immediately formed a Council of Action, which, without doubt, did much useful work in assisting both by active propaganda and public meetings, **towards the deserving victory of the workers.**'

For more on the 1925 textile dispute in West Yorkshire see:- <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=VEu8AAAAIAAJ&pg=PA22&lpg=PA22&dq=1925+textile+dispute&source=bl&ots=3gu02pabv5&sig=tat22lser8Q2-7Qt-UMi-OKy63TA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjK-7fXthsXdAhUiLcAKHYKEDycQ6AEwA3oECACQAQ#v=onepage&q=1925%20textile%20dispute&f=false>

<https://leedssocialistparty.wordpress.com/2015/07/30/prelude-to-the-general-strike-the-wool-worsted-strike-90-years-on/>

The strike lasted just over three weeks and involved between 135,000 and 170,000 woollen and worsted workers across West Yorkshire. It was resolved only after Government intervention and it was widely viewed as a victory for the workers, who had been facing a reduction in wages.

Combined with a temporary solution to the coal crisis in 1925, the victory by the textile workers buoyed up the whole of the trade union movement.

The Trades Club, in Halifax, itself had at the end of March 1926 a total of 18,698 members, (I do not know if this is individual members or perhaps a figure relating to the number of members in branches that were affiliated to the Trades Club) a drop of 169 on the year. Income was just over £7,525 and of which £5,187 came from the sale of refreshments, largely alcohol. There was a loss of just under £2634 (£2,633 19s 1 d) with £388 14s 3d paid off the mortgage for the premises. These figures and the successful strike of the textile workers show that the trade union movement in the early part of 1926 clearly had some numbers and strength across Halifax and Calderdale.

For those unfamiliar with the 1926 General Strike then there is lots of information around including the following article on the BBC website:- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13828537> A much better article is at:- <https://spartacus-educational.com/TUgeneral.htm>

First week of GS 1926

There were no coal mines in the region. **When the General Strike started** there were no trains running with only a dozen staff turning up for work. "The Halifax railway stations have been closed since Monday.' 'All others, including the railway clerks, are on strike...Even the clock at Halifax station had stopped!" reported the paper on May 8, 1926.

'Strong pickets were on duty, but everything was quiet.' 8/05/1926

It was reported that the engineering industry was little affected. The Halifax branch of the Typographical Association decided by a 2-1 vote not to resume work. This affected the operative staffs in the composing and machine departments of the "Courier and Guardian" office. The stereotyping department was already out.

The paper also reported on the 8th of May that:

'The response to the calls by the different unions to cease work has been general in this district; those so far affected, in addition to transport workers, including printers, wire workers, joiners, plumbers and members of the Workers' Union, embracing many occupations.'

On Sunday 9 May 1926 ten thousand attended the mass meeting on Savile Park and 'two platforms were provided and many speeches were delivered

in support of the claims of the miners and workers generally' as reported in Halifax Courier and Guardian for **Saturday May 15, 1926**. The numbers present were the largest in many years.

The local Master Printers Association also backed the strike and stayed out throughout it. At the firm of J. Blakeborough and sons, Brighouse, the response to the strike appears to be mixed, with some staying at work.

A leaflet was handed out at the Halifax Unemployment Exchange and elsewhere appealing to all unemployed workers 'not accept any instructions to sign on for any work now stopped by order of the Trade Union Congress Council.'

I would suggest that the information shows that where asked to support the General Strike the large majority did so.

More out on strike in second week

When the strike was called off the Courier welcomed the development and in a lengthy piece on 15 May reported: 'during the early part of the week more operatives were brought out on strike, but the majority returned to work when the general strike was called off.'

On the rail it was reported that 'trouble arose with respect to the terms of re-engagement' and there appears to have been some continuing actions by permanent way staff.

Organised opposition to strike

By the end of the strike the authorities had increased the number of Civil Constabulary Reserves to around 230 and several police pensioners were on duty in Halifax. Over 1,000 had volunteered to help the authorities in maintaining food supplies and a similar number (not sure if there is duplication here) had registered as special constables.

The paper further reported that the appeal by trade union leaders for the preservation of order had with the exception of one incident at Wheatley on Thursday been observed. A bus driver was molested. Those involved were sent to prison.

Late May/June 1926

700 people turned out for the late May Day march in 1926 and which ended with a rally at Victoria Hall with the main speakers being Darlington Labour MP Mr A L Shepherd and Miss F Hancock of Gloucester.

A meeting on Savile Park in June to support the Miners' was badly attended due to prolonged, heavy rain. 'A collection was taken on behalf of the miners' wives and children.'

Tentative conclusions

The 1926 General Strike was well supported in Halifax and the Calder Valley. There were few incidents of disorder. The numbers on strike increased at the start of week two. At the same time the state was increasing its own organising abilities and clearly intended to frustrate ongoing activities.



The Halifax area and the Building Workers' Great strike in the summer of 1972

What follows is an examination of action in the Halifax area of West Yorkshire. It is based exclusively on reports from *the Halifax Courier* at the time.

Brief background

The period between 1968 and 1979 was to witness a massive expansion of over three million in trade union membership. They included 1.5 million more in the public services and 600,000 extra among white collar manufacturing workers. There was also a significant jump in the number of shop stewards and this reflected the increasing importance of workplace bargaining.

The working class was confident and wages were rising above the rate of inflation and people were becoming better off at the expense of profit levels. The period also saw attempts by Labour (1965-1970 and 1974-79) and Tory Governments (1970-1974) to restrain wage growth. The years 1969 and 1970 saw record numbers of separate strikes with sections previously not regarded as militant also taking action. Many strikes were unofficial.

The Tories were elected in 1970 with the promise not to have a statutory incomes policy but Edward Heath's Government still aimed to restrain income rises and after issuing a document on industrial relations legislation in October then the stage was set for conflict. A one day strike against the proposed legislation was organised by the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU) - a Communist Party body formed in 1966 to oppose government wage restraint - on 8 December 1970. The action was undertaken without TUC support. Around half a million workers came out on strike.

The TUC then called for demonstrations outside working hours on 12 January 1971 but the TGWU backed strikes inside working hours whilst the AUEW left the decisions to district committees. In the event close to 200,000 working days were lost. Further strikes were planned but the legislation was still passed and it was set to be fully operational by 28 February 1972.

Over the summer of 1971, the Upper Clyde shipyards were occupied by workers determined to prevent their closure. This work-in continued until 28 February 1972 when the Government agreed to provide £25 million aid for the three Glasgow shipyards. On the same day miners, on strike nationally for the first time since 1926, returned to work having won a famous battle over pay. The success of the miners was to be mirrored over the summer of 1972 by railworkers and the dockers who each, on occasion against the wishes of their full-time officials, defied the Heath Government.

In the summer of 1972 there was also a wave of factory occupations in the Greater Manchester area by engineering workers angry at having their pay claim rejected by the Engineering Employers' Federation.

The official pay strike of building workers', who were mainly members of the TGWU and UCATT, began in June 1972 with action at selected sites. It escalated significantly two months later when local action committees (1) that strikers had established themselves largely took control and defied the national officials of the TGWU and UCATT by organising all-out stoppages. Building workers adopted the successful examples of the use of flying pickets by the miners. As the strikes spread the TGWU and UCATT officials had no option but to support their members. The workers were to win the largest single pay rise ever in their industry.

What follows is an examination of action by building workers in the Halifax area of West Yorkshire. It is based exclusively on reports from *the Halifax Courier* at the time. What the reports appear to show is that the short analysis in the paragraph directly above is correct.

The Halifax Courier reported on **18 July 1972**: 'Work on M-way viaduct halted by cash dispute' as 'picket lines from the Construction Engineers' Union forced work to a standstill...following a bonus dispute with the Cleveland Bridge and Engineering Company...thirty men, mainly steel erectors, have been sacked...the picket line stopped two cranes from getting to the bridge and persuaded plant drivers to stop work.' Bill Foy, the shop steward on site, complained it had taken seven months to get adequate safety precautions on the site "and we are not prepared to wait that long for a bonus settlement." Management claimed the strike action was unofficial.

On **21 July** the Courier reported that attempts to restart work by diverting supervisory staff with steel erectors qualifications to steel erecting duties had been thwarted. This came after crane drivers, also members of the CEU, had been persuaded to join the strike.

Three days later on **24 July 1972** the Courier carried a lengthy letter from T Enright arguing that 'trade unions are the coping stone of democracy' and pointing out that members of Halifax's Trades Council's 'Fight the Bill' committee had warned in 1971 about the 'inevitable consequences of the Industrial Relations Act becoming law.' They had held public meetings, organised a demonstration, spoke to various bodies and also issued a pamphlet.

'Because of this piece of anti-working class legislation trade unionists (2) now lie in prison and the solidarity of brother trade unionists is now being expressed in the docks and elsewhere...only a free trade union movement can protect British workers' said Enright.

On **9 August 1972** - and with work already stopped at the new £5 million headquarters of the Halifax Building Society and at a local public house - the Courier reported of the possibility of more building site strikes after negotiations between the building workers' unions and the National Federation of Building Trades Employers had broken down. The paper reported that pickets were out in force at the society building site, most being members of UCATT and TGWU. Their demands were for a £30 craft minimum for a 35-hour week, the latest offer being £25 with another £4 in May 1973. The most likely site to be hit next was the £4.5 million inner relief road project where the main contractors were Kiers. The UCATT regional organiser Arthur Harris predicted more widespread action after the latest offer was rejected the previous day and a decision had been taken to end selective strike action in favour of a total withdrawal of labour by building workers.

The following day work was stopped on the inner relief road project.

On **11 August** the Courier reported that strikers on the M62 viaduct had decided that having just recently settled one dispute they would not be coming back out on strike, which elsewhere was growing locally with men on the Post Office reconstruction sewer works site and scaffolding erectors on Halifax Town Hall and the Borough Market stopping work.

Meanwhile the Yorkshire region of Employers Federation accused strikers of engaging in 'mob rule.' Three days later the Federation sought to intimidate site pickets by stating it was compiling a dossier of pickets' activities to send to the Home Secretary. The Fed complained of a militant minority illegally picketing sites and causing worry to employers and building workers. It was asking Fed members to send formal complaints to their Leeds regional headquarters.

It was later claimed by the Fed that events on the previous Thursday and Friday, some of them in the Halifax area, had involved "outright intimidation."

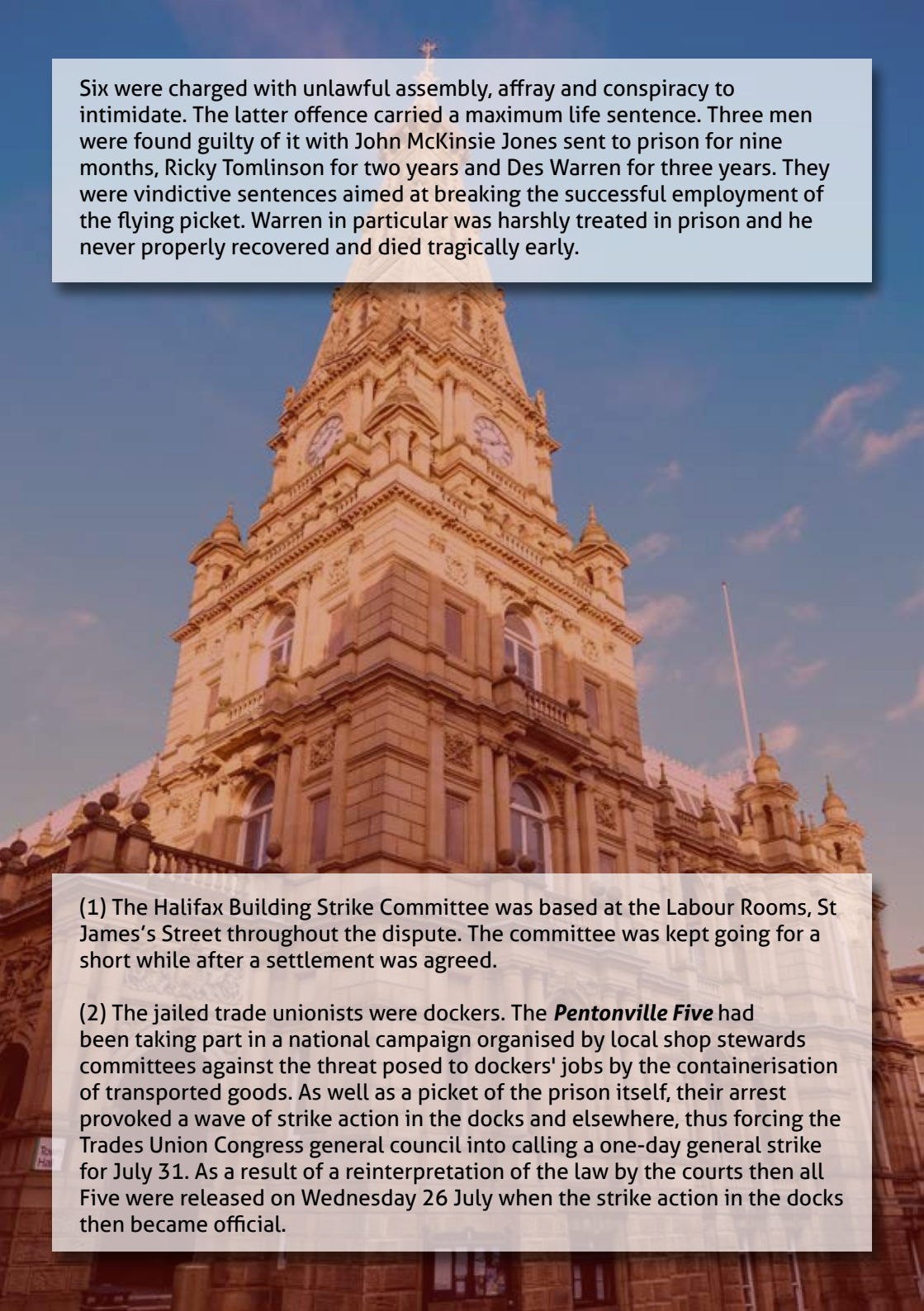
On **16 August** the Courier reported that all building work had stopped on the Outlane to Hartshead Moor section of the M62 motorway after members of UCATT and TGWU, already working to rule, voted to join in the growing strike action that was expected to exceed a quarter of a million construction workers by the end of the week. 10,000 were on strike in Yorkshire. Management later claimed that this fresh stoppage had been the result of intimidation by those already taking action.

On Monday **21 August** the Federation across Yorkshire claimed that some strikers were returning but this was disputed by union officials. Attempts on **24 August** by flying pickets to close a Joseph Walker and son building site in Elland failed and the police were called. The men at the site had promised to take part in the strike action on the Monday but after a brief stoppage six workers had returned to work on the Tuesday. A further attempt by 40 pickets later succeeded in stopping the site and after which the head of the firm: "a stop should be put to so called pickets using threats and acting like hooligans."

The paper reported that major work was still being held up on a number of local sites and of how strike action had spread to 'many parts of the country during the past 11 weeks. Several major sites in and about Halifax have been strikebound for over a month.'

The conflict was to end in September with what was the biggest single pay rise ever won by building workers. The wage of craftsmen jumped immediately by 30 per cent to £26 a week with pay rates increasing to £27 in June 1973 with a guaranteed weekly bonus of £2.60 rising to £3.00 alongside a final rise to £29 from June 1974. Labourers got proportionate wage rises and there was to be an extra day's holiday in each of the two years.

Of course in the aftermath of the successful action, the state and employers struck back hard by victimising activists. Homes were descended on by police in February 1973 and many former pickets were charged with numerous criminal offences.



Six were charged with unlawful assembly, affray and conspiracy to intimidate. The latter offence carried a maximum life sentence. Three men were found guilty of it with John McKinsie Jones sent to prison for nine months, Ricky Tomlinson for two years and Des Warren for three years. They were vindictive sentences aimed at breaking the successful employment of the flying picket. Warren in particular was harshly treated in prison and he never properly recovered and died tragically early.

(1) The Halifax Building Strike Committee was based at the Labour Rooms, St James's Street throughout the dispute. The committee was kept going for a short while after a settlement was agreed.

(2) The jailed trade unionists were dockers. The **Pentonville Five** had been taking part in a national campaign organised by local shop stewards committees against the threat posed to dockers' jobs by the containerisation of transported goods. As well as a picket of the prison itself, their arrest provoked a wave of strike action in the docks and elsewhere, thus forcing the Trades Union Congress general council into calling a one-day general strike for July 31. As a result of a reinterpretation of the law by the courts then all Five were released on Wednesday 26 July when the strike action in the docks then became official.

HALIFAX 1842: A Year of Crisis by Catherine Howe

and published by Breviary Stuff Publications.
Mark Metcalf 2016

Catherine Howe has done an incredible job by discovering a significant piece of West Yorkshire history that very few people know anything about.

The period from 1838 to 1848 was made famous by Chartism. This was the first working-class movement in Britain. It sought to end exploitation by ensuring working class representation in Parliament, dominated at the time by the landed aristocracy, and had six demands: universal (male) suffrage, equal electoral districts, secret ballots, annual Parliaments, payment for MPs and no property qualifications for MPs. With just 8 per cent of the adult male population possessing the vote these were radical demands.

1834 had heralded in the New Poor Law, which ended direct financial help to the poor, who from thereon would only receive help by undertaking monotonous backbreaking labour inside the workhouse. On 16 May 1834 a massive 100,000-strong gathering was held on Hartshead Moor. Other similar gatherings were held, but when they produced no change in government policies the People's Charter petition was drawn up on 8 May 1838.

Over 1.3 million, including 13,000 from Halifax, signed yet on 14 June 1839 it was rejected in Parliament by 235 votes to 46.

In autumn 1839, South Wales miners and ironworkers revolted and twenty died when they were shot down by armed soldiers waiting in Newport. Further disturbances in Sheffield, Dewsbury and Bradford followed whilst some Chartist leaders were convicted of seditious libel and imprisoned.

Meanwhile, whilst newly industrialised workers, including many children, continued to be killed in factories, mills and mines, Parliament remained indifferent to their fate.

On 2 May 1842, another giant three million strong petition was handed to Parliament. It was again swiftly rejected by 287 to 49 votes. In early August 1842 miners walked out in the Black Country, which led to lay-offs in the neighbouring Potteries. Within days, workers in Lancashire were being laid off and spotting an opportunity to direct the situation to their advantage

the Chartists incited more walk-outs. There were fatal consequences when workers and the military clashed at Burslem, Preston and Blackburn.

A meeting of the leaders of Britain's trades was being held in Manchester in mid-August 1842. Ignoring the presence of troops that were sent to intimidate them, delegates agreed to organise a tramp over the Pennines and into Yorkshire. Halifax was being drawn into the conflict.

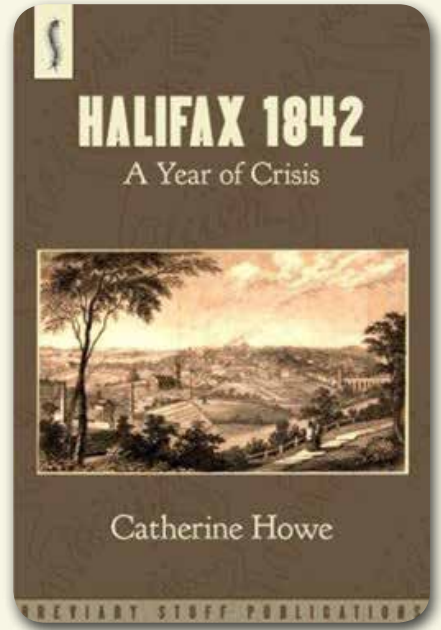
On 15 August 1842, thousands were at Skircoat Green just outside Halifax to greet the Lancashire marchers. The authorities had decided to meet force with force and had sworn in 200 special constables to serve alongside 150 soldiers. Yet with thousands arriving from across Yorkshire this was never going to be sufficient to prevent the mills of Halifax from being stopped from working by the protestors, who entered and removed a few bolts or 'plugs' in the boilers so as to prevent steam from being raised. All work had stopped.

Halifax was at a standstill and a large meeting was held on Skircoat Moor around a mile from the town centre the following morning.

When Skircoat Green was passed by the departing crowd they became aware that those arrested the previous day would be escorted by the military to nearby Elland railway station and they made to release their friends. Missiles were thrown at troops and, at least, three were badly injured in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to release those arrested. Following the stoning a number of the crowd moved back to the Moor and then later into Halifax town centre where the riot act was read and troops, still smarting from the humiliation that morning, fired into the crowd before attacking it with their sabres. Henry Walton, from Skircoat Green, received a fatal sabre head cut. By the time the military had done their worst hundreds had been injured and, at least, six were dead. Many protestors were also arrested and a number served harsh terms of imprisonment that ultimately killed them.

Such was the determination of those then in power to prevent working class people obtaining the vote and with it political representation. Six years later another giant Charter petition to Parliament was again rejected. As such it was not till 1867 - when an alliance between the middle and working class brought about an Act that doubled the male electorate - that the path was paved towards universal suffrage for men and women.

HALIFAX 1842 A Year of Crisis



Stephen Roberts writes a foreword for this book, which he judges is now the definitive account of events in Halifax at the time.

Of special interest by Howe is her focus on Halifax child miner Patience Kershaw. Roberts comments that these events are not particularly well known in Halifax itself.



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