

Summary and transcript of interview of Pat Thomson by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/17)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): determination of the establishment that the dispute should not succeed (2); significance of Asian strikers fighting for their rights (10); influence of politicised members of National Union of Mineworkers branches on other members (14); need for social solidarity and effects of its decline (18, 50); role of women during 1984-1985 miners' strike, and local miners who returned to work during the strike (anecdotes) (44-46).

Transcript

1. **CT:** Yeah, what were we talking about? Lessons that we learn, I suppose. Yeah, what did we learn, do you think, from that dispute?
2. **PT:** What we learned that if it were ever going to happen again you're going to need a lot more strength on the picket line, and be able to sustain it a lot longer. But people in power, government, they can't be seen to lose, you know, and that's – nobody's ever beaten the state. Ted Heath¹ in seventy-four, that were just a one-off, and the powers that be after that they said "that'll never happen again; we'll never be on a three-day week." It were just a glitch in their plans; they never thought anybody could stay out so many weeks, but they [made sure]. Every time you have a national dispute, or any dispute, the people that study these things know that they're going to make sure that you learn from your past lessons, you know. They're going to make sure that's never going to happen again; they're not going to have that weakness, weak point. And they learnt that from Grunwick. That were just an easy, simple, small dispute, you know, but I don't know whether they got trade union recognition after that.
3. **CT:** No, not to this day. And he's still winning thousands and thousands of pounds in libel winnings, the boss.
4. **PT:** Is he?
5. **CT:** Because he always claims he wasn't a racist and he wasn't anti-trade union.
6. **PT:** Yeah.
7. **CT:** He just didn't want a union in his factory.
8. **PT:** Oh yeah. Well, he were the same, Matthews, wasn't he? Bernard Matthews.
9. **CT:** Yeah, yeah, exactly. If you had a look back at a positive memory of it, what would it be?
10. **PT:** Of Grunwick? I'm repeating myself: positive memory was seeing coloured people fighting for their rights and for trade union status. I think that's a significant thing, because usually, they expect

¹ Edward Heath, prime minister during successful miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974.

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them to tug their forelock, don't they? And say "I'm lucky to have a job." But it were nice to see them people, mostly Asians, standing up and fighting. That were a very positive image.

11. **CT:** Can I go back and ask – I've covered it before, but we'll have another refresher at it: what I'm always interested in is how things get discussed in branches and decisions made. Quite a major decision for people to book a coach and come, what, a hundred and fifty miles, two hundred miles to London?
12. **PT:** Yeah.
13. **CT:** To a place, then go all the way back, lose a day's wages and all the rest of it. I mean, just talk through the sort of discussion that happened and why it was so popular to support it.
14. **PT:** Well, in a branch, as in any other sort of organisation, you've a core of people that's been politicised, and well-read on certain subjects, and their views are taken notice of by the majority. It's not being arrogant to say that they don't know nowt [anything], but a lot of miners, they're just not interested in political [issues]. If they get their wages, their hobbies and that, that's fair enough. But through branches certain people that talk – and of course you can talk when you're down the pit an' all – and you know the people that are political, and they tend to clique together. I mean, when I go out twice a week now, all the people I drink with, even after all these years and [pits shut], they're all ex-union men: not just miners, ex-union men. And it seems, some people come and sit down, [so] all you talk about is politics. So, I mean, people get together in a clique, and these things are discussed. And they're usually people that's put up for positions on the union, so obviously the people that vote them on take notice of their views, and if they say "we need a bus for London or Saltley Gates²", all hands go up, everybody's willing to go because they trust them people that's the union men; they trust them to tell them what's right and wrong. And when they say [indistinct] hands always go up, and that's it.
15. **CT:** Right.
16. **PT:** And that's how it should be, I think. [4:38]
17. **CT:** Well, it certainly was then, but, I mean, do you think we look after each other in the same way we used to?
18. **PT:** Trade union-wise? No, I think it's turned into a lot more selfishness. And, you know, it started with the – people used to get a car with no letter registration, and somebody on the street would want that next year's, and wife would say "he's got a B reg. We've only got a A reg. What are we doing here?" And people have been conditioned by the press and media to think that's all there is, and they can't survive, because if you're not together you've had it. They'll pick you up and drop you down, can't they?

² Refers to mass picketing of Saltley Gate fuel storage depot in Birmingham during 1972 miners' strike.

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19. **CT:** Saltley was a significant moment in miners' history, you know. What do people say about it? I mean, was it a surprise, the solidarity that miners got at Saltley? Did they expect it?
20. **PT:** That was seventy-four, was it? Or seventy-two?
21. **CT:** Two, I think.
22. **PT:** Seventy-two. Them that I were with were surprised, especially when all the men came marching, all the workers, yeah. It were really moving, that, to see all that. I mean, you saw old men with their medals on, coming [?out] with chests out, you know, probably been in the Second World War, and it did your heart good to see that you hadn't come there for nothing.
23. **CT:** And that stayed in the memory.
24. **PT:** Oh yes, it still does. I can see that bloke now, with gabardine mac on and war medals on, still see him.
25. **CT:** And therefore the whole concept of solidarity and reciprocating that kind of stuff, that's how it became part of the NUM³ history – is that – would you say that?
26. **PT:** Yeah, well, any union man worth his salt, he's got that in his mind all the time, if he's [of] a political nature. That's why the Labour Party were formed: solidarity. And it's in their heart, you know; they don't just look after number one. Like you said, nowadays it's more number one, isn't it? I mean, I worked in a factory [?down there]: a hundred men and I were the only one that were in a union and still in a union, even when the pits shut. I joined a union called FTAT; have you ever heard of it?
27. **CT:** No.
28. **PT:** F T A T: Furniture, Timber and Allied Trades. It got swallowed up with GMB, I'm still in that. I mean, as soon as that pit shut, as soon as I got a job, I joined the union, and that's how they should be. [7:29]
29. **CT:** And you find that people just have no sort of understanding of that.
30. **PT:** You get comments: "why should I pay three pound a week?" You know, and they'll go out and spend four quid for a packet of cigs. And they don't realise the value of a union. Same as I said earlier on: professional people have all got their unions. And it's sad, isn't it? It's sad really.
31. **CT:** Let me just have a look through my questions because I – I'll just stop for a second. I mean, yeah, how could this dispute have been won, do you think?

³ National Union of Mineworkers.

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32. **PT:** Miners?

33. **CT:** No, no, the Grunwick dispute in this case.

34. **PT:** Truthfully, I don't think it could've been won. The attraction of people to going there were just to make sure that that bus didn't get through for one day, but there are three hundred and sixty-five days in a year. It could've been won if all – I've changed my mind – it could've been won if all the unions in London had have come out and said "we're not going to allow this to happen." All the big unions, but the TUC probably didn't want that. They could've done that in a week, couldn't they?

35. **CT:** Yeah, absolutely.

36. **PT:** But close the factory and, of course, those people would've been out of work then, so what sort of victory's that for them?

37. **CT:** Yes.

38. **PT:** He'd have set up somewhere else.

39. **CT:** Yeah, possibly, yeah, yeah. Do you think it was an omen for the future?

40. **PT:** Yeah, I do. I think it set the pace for future disputes, definitely. To show that there was the money there for people to go and picket, as they call them: 'flying pickets'. And then, it was not only an omen for the future, it was an omen for strikes, it was an omen for the future for trade union law: "this happens, we can't allow it to happen." They stopped that, some other form of industrial action takes place. What do they call it, 'sympathy action'? Not allowed. All the time, unions were being stymied and stopped. They wanted democracy [?tell] our trade unions, but not trade unions that were effective. That's an opinion, and it's proved to be true, I think. [9:59]

41. **CT:** I would agree with you totally. I think we've sort of covered all the ground, unless – can you think of anything that you want to say?

42. **PT:** The women's part in the strike, a bit about that.

43. **CT:** Yeah, go on. Was it significant that women were leading the strike?

44. **PT:** Well, if you can get your family involved, you've got the members behind you. I mean, my missus, she worked at the food kitchen right through the strike with a lot of other women all over the country. And they were building up that unity, and of course since then a lot of them women have moved on into the trade union movement. And I think that were a pivotal part in keeping the men out. I mean, you've got women sat at home, and of course if they've no money you get grumbling, but if you can get them involved. Also, the pit I worked at, it were just down the road here: Hickleton Main. And I had to go see everybody that turned in for work; I were union man, and I went and visited every one except one that we couldn't find out about. And he lives down the village here, and a few month back he went for his haircut and the barber said "did you work during

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the strike?” And he says “yeah” and he says “well, go somewhere else for your haircut.” Tickles me, that! How many years ago, were it?

45. **CT:** Nineteen? No, more than that: eight-four.

46. **PT:** Well, something like that can happen. And he said “go get your haircut somewhere else.” Well, that chap probably could have taken him to a tribunal for discrimination, but he won’t do it because his name would have been all over the paper. And I had to visit every one, and you could understand, certain people, when you went to their houses, their wives were persuading them to go back, you know. And in one case, his wife was a qualified cordon bleu cook, and she’d got involved in the food kitchen with all the women, and they wouldn’t let her have her own way, so for spite, “I’m a cordon bleu cook: make that, make that and make that”, she forced him to go back to work. You know, it would make a story book, wouldn’t it? Some lads went back because they were single and they’d sold everything they’d got and they’d no money, but the union tried to help out there with money, you know. And it were amazing. I mean, I still see young lads that I worked with – right good mates – they were solid on the picket line, and that does your heart good an’ all, to see them doing so well, you know. And it will never be forgotten. Yeah, that’s very good, that. That solidarity’s still there, even though there’s no pits here, and I don’t think it’ll ever happen again. I mean, there’s not only that, there’s your trade union, when something come up, say like rendition with these flights⁴, if that’d happened in them days, people in the trade union movement had had that brought up – or Trident⁵, wouldn’t it? I mean, all these things that are fed through each branch, and people who were interested had have been able to get hold of that issue and use it. You’ve got now – I know it’s off of the straight, like, but you can edit it, can’t you? These [cases of] knife crime: you could say to Tony Blair “these young’uns, what they carrying knives for? Well, they might think they need an independent deterrent of their own, same as you want one.” That’s it, isn’t it?

47. **CT:** Absolutely, absolutely right, absolutely. [14:08]

48. **PT:** They need an independent deterrent to protect theirselves. You can’t vote for one nine billion quid and then condemn a young’un for getting a knife out of the kitchen drawer.

49. **CT:** Yeah.

50. **PT:** But I’ve always been a strong trade unionist, me. And one of the things that’s creeping in – I understand the National Front⁶ are targeting mining areas because they think miners are gullible and a bit ignorant. Well, we’ve got the National Front down here last election they polled a decent number. Now, nobody in all this world would ever believe that the National Front would get voted in in a mining area. It shows where things are going, doesn’t it? But all them things, if there’d have been local branches – and you can throw a brick at four collieries from here – if that had have come

⁴ Forced deportation of Islamist terrorist suspects by United States.

⁵ Missile system used for United Kingdom’s nuclear deterrent.

⁶ Far right political party.

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up, National Front or owt like that, it'd have been dealt with. Burglary would've been dealt with; if a lad had burgled he'd have come down pit, blokes would've said to this father "come here, we're not having that", and he'd have gone home and made sure it didn't happen again. But I think, same as Thatcher's⁷ supporters said "there's no such thing as a community", that's what they'd like to believe because if you can destroy a community you destroy unity, and you're really in trouble then, because they can pick you off one at a time, can't they? But I've always thought this. I mean, my philosophy – I live in a terrace house here with probably eight other, eight houses here on this street – and if I'm selfish, and I trample on [?half] of these to get a better job and all that, and all these get the sack, what have I gained? I'm in the middle of a terraced house [?where] people that don't work; [they're] bringing up kids what turn to drugs and [have] no money, so what have you gained? You know, it's – aye, it's strange.

51. **CT:** Yeah, I think it was – I mean, do you think it was a training-ground there? Do you think they were trying - ?
52. **PT:** Grunwick?
53. **CT:** Yeah.
54. **PT:** It got a lot of young lads politicised. I do think that [indistinct]. Of course, the big strike did. The young lads there, they'd no idea of politics or Labour or owt, but they could see in the back of their minds they'd probably been doing five or ten years down the pit bored out of their arse, and then having something like that, and they'll never forget it. **[16:44]**
55. **CT:** I was wondering if it was a training ground for the, you know, forces in opposition to trade unions.
56. **PT:** Well, it's easy for them to do what they want because they've got the law on their side. And they always use the law, and if the law is not strong enough they'll pass another one. I mean, miners can't go on a picket line in tracksuit and shorts and get smashed over the head with a truncheon, he can't go back and say "I'm going to get a truncheon and put a stab-vest on" because he's broken the law as soon as he's got a truncheon. I were arrested at Clipstone and ended up in the cells for a night at Chesterfield. And when we were in the holding cell, there were a dozen youngsters and me – I mean, I'm a pensioner now – and we were talking and [indistinct] my head were bleeding and these youngsters, and I were on about nineteen seventy-two strike, nineteen seventy-four, eighty-four eighty-five, and they were all listening, these young'uns. And this young'un, he'd got his head cut out, and he says "hey up, mate." I says "what?" He says "tell us what tha [thou] did in nineteen twenty-six!" Place were in as bloody uproar! And the custody sergeant come in, "what's going off in here?" Brilliant!

⁷ Margaret Thatcher.

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57. **CT:** Yeah, that was an extraordinary time. I mean, you know, without even knowing anybody, people just knew that, you know, they'll pick us off one by one, if we just don't stand shoulder to shoulder together we're going to get screwed.
58. **PT:** It's a gut instinct, isn't it? "If they pick him off, they're going to pick me off next." And it shows you that, because before the strike, when you were in the pit you had a bit of leeway and a bit of power, but after the strike you'd none. You know, if you were told to do two jobs, you did two jobs. And that's how quick the situation changed, and it were terrible to see it: a proud union being treated like that.
59. **CT:** No, I think that was a [?finally], yeah –