

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): Magdani joining strike by colleagues at Grunwick's Chapter Road site whilst working at Cobbold Road even though his own working conditions were satisfactory (2-14, 38); growth in external support for the strike (44); political education of the strikers (50); speech by Magdani to large meeting in Friends House (58); successful visits to local factories to ask for support (59-62); mass picketing and aggressive policing (63-80, 100); blacking of Grunwick mail by Cricklewood postal workers (86-89); hunger strike outside TUC headquarters (102-110); disagreement between strikers and APEX on the need for more militant tactics (119-132); strikers' scepticism about the effectiveness of the Scarman Enquiry (133-138); right-wing support for George Ward (139-146).

Transcript

1. **CT:** OK, well let's just start at the beginning. I mean, just tell me how you started working at Grunwick's.
2. **VM:** I finished my studies in 1973-74, and was looking for a proper job, and this job came along, so I said "work for them and then wait, something else will turn up," like, you know. And I was working in the Cobbold Road branch, and the strike had started initially on Chapter Road, and I was in the Cobbold Road branch. And after [a] few days we heard the people had come out on strike, but we didn't pay any attention to it. Then we were approached that can we come out and support them. And while we were working in Cobbold Road branch I was one of the main guys, and with other my colleagues – there were six of us were main guys – and then we said "if we can come out then we'll give them support," and the company would give in to the demands of the people, the grievances they had in Chapter Road, like, you know. And the management heard about that, so we were taken away one afternoon, six of us, and we met [the] management in the Kingsbury Park on the Fryent Way, and they were trying to convince [not to go] on strike, and just to put us off, like, you know. So we went to work next day and then decided "let's come out on strike, and we [can] make the big impact, and hopefully it will be resolved in the week", but it didn't. So that's all how it started.
3. **CT:** Let me just ask you, because it sounds like the actual conditions that you were working under weren't that bad. It was the –
4. **VM:** No, no.
5. **CT:** The other, the conditions in the –
6. **VM:** Chapter Road was much worse than [the] Cobbold Road ones.
7. **CT:** So you were actually striking on behalf of other people. I mean, that must have been quite a commitment.
8. **VM:** Yes, yeah, yeah.
9. **CT:** And what made you do that?

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

10. **VM:** Well, we thought at the time that if we can come out on strike from Cobbold Road, that will give [a] lot of support to the people at Chapter Road, and that could have a big impact on the company, and on that basis we did come out.
11. **CT:** Was it a male/female thing? Was it the workers at Chapter Road, were they mainly women?
12. **VM:** The majority were women, majority were women, but there was [a] lot of men, there were a lot of students in that Chapter Road branch as well at the time.
13. **CT:** Were you aware of the conditions there being different from yours?
14. **VM:** At the time, no, because [we] never had visited Chapter Road, or what it looked like, what the conditions were in there. And even after coming out on strike, [we] never knew exactly what the conditions were at Chapter Road. But Cobbold Road wasn't that bad at all. **[16:46]**
15. **CT:** And so was it a surprise when they came out on strike?
16. **VM:** Yes, yes, it was.
17. **CT:** And what did you think?
18. **VM:** Well, again, the management was the same, so you could see some bad parts of the management, like, you know. And we were not totally surprised; you could feel like, you know, it is the same management, right, for both sides, and some of the tactics they were using, it wasn't a surprise at all.
19. **CT:** And did you try and encourage other people to join?
20. **VM:** Yes, as soon as six of us – the main people – came out, like, you know, a lot of people followed us as well. And because we came out, so they thought “yes, it's worthwhile joining the group”, like, you know.
21. **CT:** And what did you do?
22. **VM:** Well, we came out and stood on the picket line, and hoped that things will get resolved, they'll get to their senses, and negotiate [?or] meet Chapter Road's demands, like, you know.
23. **CT:** Was there any concept then of joining a union?
24. **VM:** I tell you, [to] be honest, while we came out on strike we would not really know what union meant as well. But just after coming out on strike, the concept of the union, what the union can do for us, was the right thing to do.
25. **CT:** And how – where did you go to find that out?

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

26. **VM:** Brent Law Centre.
27. **CT:** And how did things develop from that?
28. **VM:** From the Law Centre, then we found out more, we start[ed] to understand exactly what it all meant. By joining the union, when we do get recognised, when we go back to work, the benefits we will have.
29. **CT:** At that time, did you imagine it would be a long-term. . ?
30. **VM:** No, no, no. And the perception of when we came out, we thought it would be [a] matter of weeks, then we will get the recognition.
31. **CT:** But didn't the general quality of the management – in terms of their bullish behaviour, as I understand it – feel that they wouldn't countenance anything about workers organising themselves or asking for dignity and representation?
32. **VM:** I think, on hindsight now after looking after years, that if we'd done that from inside: get people joining the union and then go to the management and say "look, we've got that many members joined up, can you please give us the recognition?" And I think that way would have been a better way of getting the union recognition. But I think once we came out it became like "all right, it's them and us", like, you know, "we will not let the union in in our workplace." And we were determined to, you know, make sure we get the recognition, so it became like a political battle then. Yeah. **[19:33]**
33. **CT:** But in terms of George Ward: how much did you know about him, and how much daily contact did you have with him?
34. **VM:** Well, he used to come and walk round the shop floor, like, you know, so there was always contact, like, you know.
35. **CT:** And he was a self-made businessman in the sort of old style, you know.
36. **VM:** Yes, yes, yeah.
37. **CT:** And therefore had very, as I understand it, very strong views about the role of workers and the role of management. How conscious were you of that at the time?
38. **VM:** Well, again, when I was working I was more or less like a senior person in the organisation, so more or less anything we asked we got it, like, you know. So that wasn't an issue, like, you know. And as I said, Cobbold Road wasn't a bad place to work, like, you know, it was the Chapter Road.

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

39. **CT:** But were you aware – because subsequently, obviously, he got support from some very reactionary forces who were very anti-union and pushed him all the way – that that’s where his sympathies were politically?
40. **VM:** I think because [?we got] the whole strike got blown out of proportion, and it became, like, you know, “now we don’t give in”. Then that’s how it got exhalted [sic], but if it was done within, probably it wouldn’t have got to that extent. Yeah, probably wouldn’t have got to that extent.
41. **CT:** Explain how the strike sort of formally developed into a trade union issue after you’d come out and joined a union.
42. **VM:** So as we came out, and more and more people joined the strike, every day there was more people walking out. And there were still [a] few people [who] carried on working, and we were persuading them to join, and if we had everybody come out, then we would have solved the issue there and then. But because some people didn’t come out; whatever the commitments they had, the fear of losing jobs and finding another job, family commitments, that did not help. If they’d had a hundred per cent walk-out then George Ward would have recognised the union straightaway.
43. **CT:** Terrific. What was I going to say? So how – in the early days, no one heard anything about it. Just talk through what it was like in those early days before it became a national issue.
44. **VM:** I think it was quite exciting at the time, and we were learning things which we were not aware [of] at the time with the help of Brent Law Centre. Then we started using Brent Council Hall, and we had meetings there. And then we [were] beginning to see [a] lot of support coming through, and that was fantastic, like, you know. And [the] amount of support we were receiving on [a] daily basis: people coming down to visit us on the picket line, donations, letters of sympathy. And it was fantastic, and we thought “with this type of support we’re bound to get recognition.”
45. **CT:** But the issue of – well, first of all you formed a strike committee.
46. **VM:** That’s right.
47. **CT:** That must have been a new experience.
48. **VM:** It was, yes, yeah.
49. **CT:** Just talk through how you made the decisions and what you learned from that.
50. **VM:** Again, as I said, before we came out on strike, politically we were not – we didn’t know nothing, and we were beginning to know what [the] Labour Party meant, what [the] Tories meant, how the trade union fitted in [the] whole structure of that. And it was a good learning curve, and I can say it to you: you can go to any college or school, what we learned in those days, nobody will teach us, nobody will teach us that. It was good, and the moment where I am, because of that experience has helped my life throughout after the strike. And I always remember those strike days even now, because that has made me what I am now, yes.

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

51. **CT:** Terrific. But the issue of picketing must have seemed very bizarre: to stand all day outside a factory. How did people take to that? Being asked to do that?
52. **VM:** I think it was good because at that time it was one of the hottest summertime, and we were loving it, standing out on the picket line. Wintertime it got a bit difficult, but then we managed it because at that time, in the wintertime, we were already into it – six or seven months in[to] it – so we had to do it, like, you know. But picketing was a good experience.
53. **CT:** Culturally, was it a problem for women to be seen out there just standing around on the street? I mean, it's –
54. **VM:** Yes, from culture point of view, yeah, it would be difficult to get women on the picket line, but the women who were on the strike, they were willing to do that, and we had no issues at all.
[24:10]
55. **CT:** Were there issues within the community: people saying “what are you doing this for? This is not –”
56. **VM:** Nothing when people started to find out why, and what the strike was all about, and the reasons why we came out on strike, instead of being negative there was a lot of positive, a lot of support. So that made the people to stay on the picket line and then continue doing that.
57. **CT:** Now, as the strike developed you started doing workplace visits, is that right?
58. **VM:** Yeah, we visited [a] lot of factories, we went to [a] lot of different meetings in the evening, made speeches. And I can tell you I never made a speech in my life at that time – I was [?all of] twenty-two, twenty-three – and we went to Friends House in Euston High Street, I think, Euston, and there were about six to seven thousand people there. And I think it was just a normal Saturday morning meeting, and we [?they] were told the Grunwick strikers were here as well, and they asked can one of them, one of us can come up and say a few words, like, you know, and I was volunteered to go forward, like, you know. So as I climbed the stairs I nearly fell down [a] few times, like, you know, but I got there, and it was heart beating, like, you know. But then, once I started saying [a] few words, it was good experience, like, you know. And [it was the] first time I made a speech in front of five to seven thousand people. And now, you tell me to make a speech, it's not a problem, it's not a problem.
59. **CT:** And about going into factories: have you got a memory of any particular large factory, going in and talking to the stewards or the convenors?
60. **VM:** At the time in west London – Park Royal, Acton, Alperton – there were a lot of manufacturing sites: Glacier Metal [?Sheets] in Alperton, I remember going there for a meeting; there was Heinz in Park Royal, there was [a] lot of other factories, [?when] we used to visit them every day, asking for support and sympathy, like, you know. And we got, we spoke to [a] lot of convenors, district officers, national officers to the trade union, and it was great.

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

61. **CT:** Were you surprised?
62. **VM:** Yes, it was a surprise that, you know, we are, like, 'ethnics', minority, and trade union, it was all white type of environment and we were getting that support, and it was brilliant, it was brilliant.
63. **CT:** Now, the picketing didn't start for some time into the dispute – the mass picketing, the call for people –
64. **VM:** I think the mass picketing started probably after six, seven months.
65. **CT:** And who made that decision, and how did you go about organising it?
66. **VM:** Well, again, the strike committee, with [the] help of APEX, because APEX were the union we had joined. I think it was Len Christie who was our national officer, district officer, with [the] help of Jack Dromey and the Brent [Trades] Council, the decision was made through the strike committee to have mass picketing, to put impact, so that we can bring George to his knees and get recognition.
67. **CT:** And what happened when the first call came out? How many people turned up?
68. **VM:** I remember one particular one when we had twenty thousand people on the picket line, and we were getting messages that there was hundreds and hundreds of coaches coming down [the] M1, and it was a great feeling, and on the first mass picket, to see so much support. It was out of this world.
69. **CT:** But as I understand it, one of the first ones, before it generated to that big day on July the eleventh, when everybody came, it started off – and I think it was a women's only picket, or women came, and then the police were particularly violent on that day, and that got into the newspapers. Do you have any memory of that? **[28:15]**
70. **VM:** I can't particularly remember that particular occasion, but picketing with the police was an issue. Almost every other week some of the strikers were getting arrested for obstruction of the highway, and including myself: I got arrested twice for obstruction of [the] highway, like, you know.
71. **CT:** What would happen?
72. **VM:** We were just taken away to Willesden police station, kept in the cell and then released after somebody from the trade council or the law centre would come down and bail us out, like, you know.
73. **CT:** And did you have to go to court?
74. **VM:** On one occasion, yes, yeah.
75. **CT:** And what happened?

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

76. **VM:** Got fined forty pound.
77. **CT:** And were you aware that the policing was getting more aggressive?
78. **VM:** Yes, it was, it was, yeah.
79. **CT:** And how did you – at what stage did you realise “hold on, this is something different’s going on here”?
80. **VM:** I think we realised from day one, like, you know, the police were getting [a] bit tougher and aggressive. And we were [trying] to stand up to them and say “look, we got rights to stand on the picket line.” And then they used to insist there should be not more than six people, so then we converted into rotas: six people would stay for two hours and then another six would come on, like, you know.
81. **CT:** And were you aware of, sort of, the (quotes) the ‘personalities’ of MPs and leaders of the unions coming to join you? Do you have any memory of that?
82. **VM:** Yeah, I remember Shirley Williams was on the picket line as well; Dennis Skinner was on the picket line; a lot of MPs were on the picket line.
83. **CT:** At that stage did you think you must be near to victory if these sort of people?
84. **VM:** Yes, yes, yeah, because every day, when we had so much support from the trade union, [the] amount of support we were getting from MPs, member[s] of parliament, and we was sure that we were going to win, we were going to win.
85. **CT:** And what was the crucial support for you that you – that was the kind of crunch, in terms of the business in Grunwick’s, that you thought that was applied?
86. **VM:** I think especially when the Cricklewood post office blocked all the mail coming to Grunwick’s, and we thought if we can sustain that for a certain period of time that will bring George Ward to his knees, because [the] majority of his business was through the mail box. But then we couldn’t sustain it for [a] certain period of time, and that was the breaking-point.
87. **CT:** And [their] own union, they had problems internally, didn’t they, with their union?
88. **VM:** Yeah, because the national board would not do what the postmen in the Cricklewood [office] wanted to do. But then [the] postmen in Cricklewood, beyond the union, they went and blocked it, like, and they were I think penalised for that.
89. **CT:** It was an amazing bit of solidarity, wasn’t it? Absolutely incredible.

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

90. **VM:** Yes, but the grassroots labour support was brilliant, and if we had had that type of support from the national unions then we would have got the union recognition. [?Because] at one stage we were talking of cutting the water supply, the electricity, and if that had have happened, definitely we would have got the recognition.
91. **CT:** Now, what were your views at that time that there was a Labour government in power that was supposed to be sympathetic to trade unionism?
92. **VM:** Well, that was the whole thing that our hopes were built on that. Because of the Labour government in power, to have the recognition would be that easy, but it wasn't.
93. **CT:** And did that surprise you?
94. **VM:** In [the] early days probably not, but as time went on and we were getting much wiser, we were understanding the political issues, it didn't surprise me after a while, no.
95. **CT:** And in terms of the policing, the fact that Merlyn Rees was the Home Secretary. Did he visit at all?
96. **VM:** Yeah, he was on the picket line as well, yes.
97. **CT:** And he seemed to – and then eventually the Special Patrol Group arrived.
98. **VM:** Yes, yeah.
99. **CT:** Do you remember when they arrived and what effect that had?
100. **VM:** I think it had a big impact on the people, the Special Patrol Group, and the amount of people who were just beaten up and pushed around on the picket line wasn't good at all.
101. **CT:** Now, what was your relationship with the TUC at this time?
102. **VM:** Well, again, we went to [the] TUC headquarters in Russell Square several times and we were given the lip-service, and it was [indistinct]. And then we did a hunger strike outside [the] TUC, and I was one of the guys who was on hunger strike outside [the] TUC.
103. **CT:** Why did you make that decision to have the hunger strike?
104. **VM:** The reason was we were getting a lot of lip-service and [we] said now, you know, we need some action from the TUC to instruct the unions to do – close off the postal, switch off the lights, cut off the water, and we would get the recognition. And that was not forthcoming, and so we said by having a hunger strike outside [the] TUC would accelerate that process.
105. **CT:** Was there pressure put on you not to do that? **[33:24]**

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

106. **VM:** Yes, and we still went ahead and did it, but –
107. **CT:** Who applied the pressure?
108. **VM:** I think the pressure was coming from APEX, and I think probably through [the] TUC, through Roy Grantham¹, through the channels down.
109. **CT:** Were you getting the feeling then that people were walking away from you?
110. **VM:** Yes, yeah, and we were already one day into the hunger strike and we had to call off the hunger strike because of that pressure.
111. **CT:** And what pressure was APEX applying?
112. **VM:** I think it was – there was pressures through, like, you know, that – at the moment it's now difficult to describe what that pressure was, but it was like meeting with the strike committee and saying "this –
113. **CT:** I mean, [we] might start at the beginning: I mean, what were your feelings when APEX, you joined APEX and the position they took of supporting you at the beginning?
114. **VM:** Well, we were glad that there was at least a union there who was taking our case on board, and to us that was a big step forward, like, you know, that we were getting recognition through the union, and it was using APEX that all other unions would support APEX in recognition of it. In the early days it was great to have APEX on board.
115. **CT:** And what did they – what did APEX provide you in terms of support?
116. **VM:** We were paid strike pay, and that did help to manage our homes and families, like, you know. That was good.
117. **CT:** Just explain to me the difference between the management of the strike in terms of that done by the strike committee and the influence of APEX nationally or regionally in terms of influencing the actions that you took to generate support for the strike.
118. **VM:** Well, I think APEX did support all the way the mass picketing, but then, after a lot of negotiating and a lot of putting pressure on them. If we didn't put that pressure [on them] the mass picketing wouldn't have happened.
119. **CT:** Were there disagreements between you about the tactics that should be applied?
120. **VM:** Yes, yes, yeah.

¹ General secretary of APEX.

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

121. **CT:** Talk that through because that's quite interesting.
122. **VM:** Again, they wanted to follow the normal norm: six people on the picket line, "let's put the pressure through the picket line." And as time went by we were saying "look, we're getting nowhere; George Wood is continuing to do his business, people are going into the site workplace, and he's carrying [on] as normal, and if we carry on like this we'll be here until the cows come home. If we don't change our tactics then we'd better just go home," like, you know. And eventually they did agree, but it was [a] lot of negotiating heartache.
123. **CT:** What was the change of tactic that you were hoping for?
124. **VM:** Like asking the TUC to block the mail, cut off the electricity, the water, the mass picketing. And by putting the extra pressure we thought that would give us what we wanted.
125. **CT:** And APEX were a little reluctant, were they?
126. **VM:** Initially they were [reluctant] to do that, but after a lot of pressure they had agreed.
127. **CT:** And basically, from time to time there were tensions between the direction the strike committee thought was best to resolve the issue and [indistinct]. Now, do you think people [were] putting pressure on APEX at the top?
128. **VM:** I think there was pressure coming from APEX on the top through, probably, [the] TUC, probably through the Labour government, saying that "it is getting out of hand, you need to control the strike committee," and I think that was very evident.
129. **CT:** And what did you do about that? What were your feelings about that?
130. **VM:** Well, at the time we were getting frustrated, we were almost a year into a strike, getting nowhere and George Ward was carrying on as normal, and we said "sorry, we have to change our tactics, otherwise we're not going to win this strike."
131. **CT:** And the change was?
132. **VM:** The mass picketing came in, the hunger strike, asking Cricklewood postmen to block the mail. And if we'd have gone through the normal channels, through the union, through APEX, none of those would have happened.

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

133. **CT:** Right. Now, what was I going to say? Oh yeah: now, at the same time as the mass picketing took hold the government stepped in and started coming up with the Scarman Report², and there was going to be ACAS³ [indistinct]. What was your views about those interventions?
134. **VM:** Again, we were asked to file our cases for unfair dismissal, so go to the tribunal, and again we said “we’re not going to win that one. Scarman’s enquiry: whatever recommendations Scarman made, George Ward is not going to follow that.” And that was exactly what happened: the industrial tribunal we lost at, because we knew we were going to lose, but we were asked to do that, yes.
135. **CT:** But weren’t you surprised that here was the judge, you know, major judge in the land, making recommendations, and I think it was the first time that an employer had just walked away in contempt of what those recommendations were, and there seemed to be nothing anybody could do to make him adhere to those recommendations?
136. **VM:** Well, again, before Scarman’s enquiry had begun, we did say if it’s not legally binding George Ward is not going to anything about it. We did say that from day one, but we still went along and said “let’s hope he abides with whatever recommendation [?he presents].” And that was exactly our fears: that he’s not going to abide by it.
137. **CT:** Do you think it was a sideshow to take the pressure off?
138. **VM:** Pressure off, yes, yeah.
139. **CT:** Now, do you think George Ward had the confidence to do these decisions alone? What was the impact of the support he was getting over his bravado?
140. **VM:** I think, again, when he started seeing a lot of support for the strikers from the rank and file, a lot of people coming on the picket line and MPs coming in the picket line. And I think that must have frightened him and [he] said “look, I need support as well.” And he went round getting support from – I remember the MP, the Tory MP, George Gort?
141. **CT:** John Gorst?
142. **VM:** John Gorst, yeah. And he visited Grunwick’s quite a few times as well. So as we were building our support he was doing the same thing: to build his support, like, you know.
143. **CT:** And then the National Association for Freedom –
144. **VM:** Freedom started giving him support as well.
145. **CT:** And how crucial do you think was that?

² Enquiry into the dispute chaired by Lord Scarman.

³ Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service.

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 13:24.

146. **VM:** Again, I think by him getting that support he was more determined to stick it out, and that's what he did.

147. **CT:** Do you think he felt he'd become, because of the strike, part of the establishment?

148. **VM:** Yes, yeah.

149. **CT:** And that was important for him.

150. **VM:** Yes, yeah.

151. **CT:** So it pandered to his sort of social achievement.

152. **VM:** Yes, yeah, yeah.

153. **CT:** I mean, was he that sort of – I mean, was those sort of snobberies and aspirations?

154. **VM:** Well, probably you could see those there in [the] early days, but then there was not evident, but this brought it out of him, yes.

155. **CT:** That's interesting.