

Summary and transcript of interview of Mahmood Ahmed by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/02A part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): positive effect of the dispute on Ahmed (3-6); role of Jack Dromey, secretary of Brent Trades Council, and operation of the strike committee (11-16); support for the dispute from the Asian community and their subsequent disappointment (19-24); tense working atmosphere and uncomfortable conditions at Grunwick (36-40); George Ward's angry response to the strike (48-50).

Transcript

1. **CT:** I mean, looking back: any regrets [at] being involved in the strike?
2. **MA:** Only that we didn't win. After almost two years of striking that we didn't get anywhere; that was the only regret, that people who stayed for so long didn't get their jobs back.
3. **CT:** What did you get from it personally, do you think?
4. **MA:** A lot of experience in life about people, about unions, and just life generally.
5. **CT:** So it was a sacrifice – I mean, how did it change your character, do you think? I mean, would you have – what would've happened if you hadn't have been involved?
6. **MA:** You know, I'd have been probably just still working in a factory and, you know – but the strike obviously changed me. I got involved in things that I would've never imagined: some of the, you know, unions, some of the union leaders, travelling, being able to speak at mass meetings, the confidence, basically; [it] gave me [a] lot of confidence in life.
7. **CT:** Looking back, what was the high point, the high moment for you, your best memory?
8. **MA:** The big mass picket on the day when the miners were coming down the street arm-in-arm, and thousands of people there supporting us. That was the day.
9. **CT:** Low moment?
10. **MA:** Low moment, I think when we basically had to call the thing off. I spoke at that meeting, and I didn't want to say that we were going to call it a day, but we'd been told by the union that we had to. That was the low.
11. **CT:** Let me just look at my notes because I. . . In the media at the time – you know, there was a lot of talk about Jack Dromey¹ and that he was the leader and, you know, he was a mastermind and manipulating everybody. What was the reality?
12. **MA:** Jack was involved from the law centre side. He gave advice [coughs]. Shall I start again?

¹ Secretary of Brent Trades Council.

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13. **CT:** Yeah, yeah.
14. **MA:** Jack was involved from the law centre side from the day we went to the law centre for advice. He helped organise the strike committee, he used to attend meetings, we had him on as a member of the committee. We made sure he attended all the meetings because of his advice. He knew the law, he helped us with contacts, he used to point us in directions that we didn't know about. We got a lot of help from him: help with producing leaflets, letters, you know, general advice, he was always there to help. In manipulating us? I don't think so, because we had a strong strike committee of about twelve people, and we all decided, you know. He used to put his points forward; if he thought that we were going [in] the wrong direction he would point out and then it was up to us to decide, but nobody forced us to go the way they wanted. We did our own thing, with help and advice. **[4:45]**
15. **CT:** How much practice did people have to have to sort of work co-operatively in that structure? Because it must have been the first time that everybody had set down and made decisions in a democratic collective.
16. **MA:** We'd never done anything like this before, but I think that's where Jack helped [the] committee: explained how we had to make decisions, how, you know, we had to take vote[s] on certain items that we decided [to] do, and how to go about doing them. We had help, we didn't know, but by the time we were getting into – well, about six months – we were pretty well running it ourselves.
17. **CT:** Terrific. Did it produce any tensions within your own social network? Your friends, did they say "what are you doing on a strike, standing outside? What are you wasting your life doing that for?" Did you have to have those sort of arguments with anybody?
18. **MA:** No, not really. [A] lot of them, whenever we went to, you know, always supported; [they thought it was] a good job we were doing, and that it's not very often that Asian people stand up for their rights, and it was a good job that we were doing that. So [a] lot of the families of some of the women that, you know, normally wouldn't allow them even out of the house to go somewhere were encouraging them to go to the picket lines, and their husbands came and supported, or their families came and supported, and also stood up with us in the picket lines. So there was [a] lot of support.
19. **CT:** Given all that, did the consequences of the loss, or the failure to win, have a set-back, do you think, for the Asian community and trade unionism?
20. **MA:** Yeah, I think it had a lot of influence on the Asian community. And not only that but also on the trade union movement, because here we were fighting for a basic right: to be a member of a union, fight for a decent wage and, you know, decent conditions, which were the basic demands for any worker. And we didn't get that, even with all the mighty unions and the power of the trade union movement, we didn't win, and that disappointed not only us but [a] lot of the Asian community, because they thought "well, I don't know whether it was because we were Asian that we didn't win,

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or whether it was just that the trade union movement wasn't willing to help." So they were disappointed, I think they were disappointed. [7:39]

21. **CT:** Do you think it set back their commitment to any further trade union involvement?
22. **MA:** I don't think we've had a strike of Asian people since. Recently we had that British Airways –
23. **CT:** Gate Gourmet².
24. **MA:** Gate Gourmet one, where they were saying that – trying to – has similarities with the Grunwick strikers, you know, even on the news, but I think that is almost, like, twenty-five years later.
25. **CT:** But if you were to say there were pluses to that dispute, whether we lost it or not, what would you say?
26. **MA:** Yeah, there was pluses, because, really, the ordinary working-class trade union members and trade union came together on a dispute of basic rights and, you know, massive support, even though some of the leadership didn't support it. But the normal everyday working members from small branches and everywhere came together.
27. **CT:** Do you think that frightened people?
28. **MA:** I think so. You can say it was a small dispute in the middle of nowhere by some small number of Asians which brought out the might of the trade union movement – some of the big leaders, members of parliament, even government ministers – and I think people were frightened.
29. **CT:** I've asked this before, but just so we get another – get me clear on it, I might have missed it at the beginning: just talk me through how you heard about Grunwick, and going there for the first time and what you saw.
30. **MA:** For a job?
31. **CT:** Yeah, right at the beginning.
32. **MA:** I was unemployed, basically, and [a] friend of mine used to work there, and he knew I was looking for a job and he says "oh, there's a job going at this factory, they do film processing and that." And I said "yeah, that's all right, because I know a bit about film processing" and, you know, because I used to do a bit of photography and that. And he actually took me there for a job, and I had an interview there, they asked me questions about how film processing, this, that and the other, and they gave me the job. [10:32]
33. **CT:** And how did things proceed after that?

² Company supplying in-flight meals for British Airways which was in dispute with its workers in 2005.

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34. **MA:** Just went in, basically, at the lowest, which was sorting out films.
35. **CT:** What was the atmosphere? How would you describe the atmosphere, you know, for working there from the beginning? I mean, did you start to pick up a vibe, or. . ?
36. **MA:** It was very tense. You know, people looked like they were frightened or something. You know, we used to go in and there was like a long row of bench with baskets on the front, and to get to your seat you had to sort of like walk in from one end, you know, like on a long a bench, where [if] you want to get sitting you have to sort of like one go in and then another all in line to get to the [?back]. If you wanted to get out everybody had to get out and so you [could get out], and that kind of situation. It felt like you was tied up there because you couldn't get out.
37. **CT:** I mean, some of the managers were white. Was racism and your ability as a new Asian workforce, did that play into it? I mean, were you aware of that in any way?
38. **MA:** They used to sort of like, you know, treat you, basically, [like], you know, nothing. Used to look at you – they – how to describe it? They weren't very friendly; I mean, they didn't need to be.
39. **CT:** I mean, they were contemptuous of you: cheap, easy labour.
40. **MA:** Labour basically. You know, they just kept bringing the work and [?you had to] hurry up and hurry up, and you had to finish this, you know. And it didn't matter how much work came in you had to finish it. If on a day a thousand films came you had to finish; if ten thousand turned up you had to finish them. You know, and it was just, and there was no tea – I think you used to get two fifteen minute tea-breaks and I hardly remember ever having lunch and that, and you were always stuck in that little booth where [you were] working. And you couldn't talk to anybody; you know like, once you were there you were there; you couldn't go and talk to somebody, you couldn't talk to the people over there. You could see them working, all doing their own jobs, but nobody was talking to nobody. There was no – the atmosphere wasn't friendly, it was all very tense and –
[13:02]
41. **CT:** So when it blew up on a hot summer's day you didn't need to be asked twice.
42. **MA:** No. When they came and said "look," you know, "they're treating us like this, that and that, and we're being paid this and that," and obviously we all agreed and we were out.
43. **CT:** Just in terms of [indistinct], because it wasn't ever a hundred per cent strike. That was one of the problems, wasn't it? And a lot of people started benefitting from your action, your strike action. How did feelings go about that?
44. **MA:** [A] lot of the people who – well, not a lot, there wasn't a lot, the majority was for our side, but some of the people stayed, went to work. We used to be quite friendly with them because basically we was trying to get them to explain that "look, you have to come out and support us, otherwise,

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you know, we weren't going to get what we want." And some of them just didn't understand or didn't want to. They just carried on going to work and –

45. **CT:** Didn't they end up getting some of the things that you wanted in terms of pay?
46. **MA:** Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, obviously, as soon as, you know, to get them to come back or stay they had a wage increase, they got a bit better, you know, conditions and things. And they were saying to us "look, we've got a wage increase now, we don't need to go out with you because, you know, we've got a wage increase, and we're getting [a] canteen, we're getting this and we're getting that." So basically the employer, you know, gave them some benefits to keep them, and that's just what we wanted.
47. **CT:** Just talk about the mind-set of George Ward in terms of him being a boss, employer, and his attitude towards workers and their right to a democratic say about how they should be treated.
48. **MA:** No, he was God, and whatever he said went, and if you didn't like it you were out. And if you complained he really was angry.
49. **CT:** Do you have any evidence of that?
50. **MA:** We used to have on the picket line, he used to come out with a loud-hailer. He'd come outside the factory and he would stand there. Because he had all our employment records and all the details on it he used to stand there. This actually came out in the enquiry, the Scarman Enquiry they had about the strike, that he used to stand there with a loud-hailer shouting everybody's, you know, names and saying "oh, you'll never get another job, you only got two 'O' levels, you're useless, and you're [indistinct]." All these kind of shout about different members of the strikers. I mean, basically he was angry, he couldn't understand why, you know, these people were striking and that. You know, he thought what he was doing was right, and we couldn't question it.
51. **CT:** Terrific. Is it just that he thought that there shouldn't be? I mean, no way. I mean, given that mind-set. Start the question again: given that mind-set, didn't you think this was going to be a really tough one to win?
52. **MA:** We did to start with – the first week or so – but then when we got the union and we got the support we thought we had a chance.
53. **CT:** Hadn't there been an attempt earlier to have a union in Grunwick?
54. **MA:** I'm not sure. I think somebody mentioned that they tried to have a union there before, and he sacked them all or whatever, all the ring-leaders, but I didn't know anything about it. It must've happened before I was there.
55. **CT:** Just so I've got it as a choice: your strongest memories and your worst moment?

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56. **MA:** Strongest memory we had was on the day of the mass picket when thousands of people came to Willesden. And hundreds of miners came, and when the miners came, and they were walking down the street at the factory and they were all arms linked, and the whole streets were blocked by hundreds of thousands of police. And the mass support we had, that was the strongest. And the weakest point we had was the day we had to call the strike off. It was something we didn't want to do but we had to.
57. **CT:** Terrific, terrific. What happened to you after the strike?
58. **MA:** After the strike I carried on, basically, wanted to carry on with the union movement, and I went and got a course at Ruskin College in Oxford to do trade union law. I spent two years there and came out with a diploma, and tried to look for a job with no luck. Got married, moved to Nottingham to run a business there that we bought – because the businesses were cheap up there at the time – with the help of the family. I was there for about twenty-five years and recently moved down to London. I've got two grown-up kids now – a daughter and a son – and my son is an immigration officer and my daughter works for a pharmacy, and I run a dry-cleaning shop down in London.
59. **CT:** Terrific, terrific.