

Summary and transcript of interview of Paul Stern by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/02A part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 19:14.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): injuries sustained by the pickets (10); magistrates' bias against the strikers (16, 18-22, 54); lack of support from Labour government (28-36); right-wing support for George Ward (28, 46-50).

Transcript

1. **CT:** We'll start at the beginning. How did you first hear about Grunwick and get involved?
2. **PS:** Well, I actually remember that very clearly because my wife keeps reminding me that thirty years ago we had three major events going on: one is that we'd just moved into this house, she'd just become pregnant, and the Grunwick strike had started, which was in my patch, near my practice. And she likes to say that our daughter was born first, rather we got our house first and then our daughter was born, and Grunwick's was still going on.
3. **CT:** Did you attend the picket line?
4. **PS:** Yes, yes, I used to go to the picket line in the morning. Tessa was actually living with us at the time, and we used to go there in the morning to stand in the picket line, and, yeah, the police were being really quite vicious, that's when I got my glasses smashed up by them. And then quite a few of the pickets used to come round to the surgery, those who'd been injured, sort of just to have them documented and treated and so on.
5. **CT:** What were the injuries?
6. **PS:** I'm afraid I really don't remember. It's quite a long time ago and my brain cells are fading away.
7. **CT:** But as a doctor were you surprised that people involved in a trade union dispute were turning up at your surgery?
8. **PS:** Not really. My surgery was the closest one to the picket, and when people were hurt it was quite reasonable for them to come along. Many of them were patients of mine too, of the practice, rather.
9. **CT:** Was it broken bones? I mean, what sort of injuries?
10. **PS:** It was – I don't remember broken bones, but it was soft-tissue injuries, really; sort of bruising, and having been hit or pushed around, abrasions, that sort of thing. Some people were really quite nastily beaten up and hurt. The police were very determined to break up the picket lines and used a lot of force. The streets around that area are really quite narrow, and it wasn't too difficult to see how people were injured, being pushed aside. And indeed there was a bus which was bringing scab workers to the plant every day, which would, you know, just plough through the crowds.
11. **CT:** Were you surprised at the style of policing?

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12. **PS:** I was astonished. I mean, having come from South Africa and seeing how police controlled political crowds there, I really didn't expect to see it here, that kind of thing happening here. But I suppose after Grosvenor Square¹ a few years before this it sort of began to be expected, and people couldn't expect to go on demonstrations without anticipating that something like this might happen.
13. **CT:** Were you aware of the judicial process after people were arrested? What was happening?
[22:58]
14. **PS:** I knew that quite a lot of the pickets were being charged with – I don't know the details of what they were being charged with, but certainly being brought to court. And indeed, quite a few of them I wrote reports for detailing the medical injuries that they'd sustained, but I didn't know the sort of consequences of their court cases, what the outcomes were, for the most part, until I read about it in the press.
15. **CT:** But were you aware of the prejudices of the actual stipendiary solicitors that were overseeing the court?
16. **PS:** Of the magistrates, you mean, and the prosecutors? I think this was well known, certainly to anyone who had an interest in political affairs. It's the kind of things that were happening were very clear and eye-opening, really, for what were really quite minor, if they were infringements of the law at all, were being very harshly dealt with. And of course this was a time I think of a Labour government; it was astonishing that they permitted this to take place. That was my sense of outrage, that these were people trying to join a trade union, I mean, you know, what could be so difficult or dangerous about that? So it was extraordinary, I thought.
17. **CT:** But just in terms of the magistrates themselves and their prejudices: were you aware of that and did you do anything about it?
18. **PS:** I wasn't aware of it really until one day when I was just returning to the surgery and someone I know was standing on the corner chatting to a woman and said "oh Paul, you must come over, you'll be interested in this, you know, hear about this," and introduced me to Mrs Oakley, whom I'd not really been familiar with before. And then this extraordinary conversation emerged that she used to be a magistrate who'd retired with her husband to Oxfordshire some months before - he was the local priest, vicar, something – and she was complaining that the pickets had been receiving very lenient sentences, and that she was about to become the sitting magistrate in Willesden and they would soon see a very different picture, that she would show them what should really be there fate. And this was just amazing; I think she said something to the effect that a large percentage had been acquitted of the charges that had been laid in a court which was tried elsewhere, not a Willesden court, and that she was going to change that and the local magistrates were going to change that.

¹ Probably refers to the anti-Vietnam war demonstration in 1968.

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19. **CT:** Did you do anything with that information?
20. **PS:** Well I did, yes. I made a record of it as soon as I got into my car. [Indistinct] I can't remember exactly which, but I had a little – I used to use a pocket Dictaphone for writing letters, and while things were fresh in my mind I just detailed what had happened. I thought this was just such an outrageous bias and prejudice on behalf of a magistrate that I discussed this with some friends and showed the notes that I'd made to the editor of the then *Socialist Challenge* newspaper, who published it. And looking through the newspaper clippings of the times, of those times, it caused an enormous impact in the Willesden magistrates' court, Brent magistrates' court, and she was very quickly removed from the bench, although other reasons were given: that she'd retired, or something like that. **[28:01]**
21. **CT:** Were you surprised to see such overt prejudice so casually presented?
22. **PS:** So openly presented, yes. One always knows that there's prejudice and bias, but you'd think that people had more sense to keep it to themselves, but she clearly felt comfortable that there [was] no harm in telling me about it.
23. **CT:** Were you aware of the mass picketing and the consequences of that? And did you attend any of those?
24. **PS:** I certainly was aware of it, yes. I used to go the pickets in the morning. As I say, it was happening very close to my surgery – just a couple of blocks away – and I was the nearest doctor's surgery to it and there was – as I say, it was just the issues of the time which were so outrageous, that these mainly Asian women who were trying to join a union – or form a union, I can't remember the details – were being obstructed. And it was quite clear that the police, the state, was determined to prevent them from doing so.
25. **CT:** What do you think was the most significant aspect of the solidarity that was provided to the strikers?
26. **PS:** Oh, I think it was enormously helpful to have such support from the trades council and from other unions. Certainly when the miners came along to lend their support with Arthur Scargill² and so on, this was tremendously encouraging. And I think we were all really very bitterly disappointed that it didn't achieve the results that were needed.
27. **CT:** Why do you think the dispute was lost?
28. **PS:** I think there were a lot of pressures at work here. I was interested to see, just about a year or so ago, there was a television programme called 'Tory, Tory, Tory'. I think it was a series of three programmes which detailed the history of the Conservative Party in the post-Heath days, so the rise of Thatcherism basically, and one of the early programmes – I think it was the first programme –

² President of the National Union of Mineworkers Yorkshire Area.

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really started off with the Grunwick strike. And that this is where the – what was it called, the National Association of Freedom, or something like that? – was formed, and the Tory think-tank was quite determined, clearly, to smash the unions, and this was used as one of the pivotal events of that time. What astonished me, in retrospect, certainly, is that the Labour Party seemed to just go along with this, and really didn't do anything of a more positive nature to support the workers here.

29. **CT:** Do you think they were embarrassed by the dispute?

30. **PS:** The government? The Labour Party? I don't know if they were embarrassed or not, it's not something I'd have given too much thought about.

31. **CT:** I mean, in theory, you know, they are the political party of the trade union movement.

32. **PS:** Right.

33. **CT:** In theory the TUC was putting on pressure for them to resolve it in a positive way, that the trade union would be recognised. [As I] understand it, the union that the strikers were trying to belong to, APEX, there were three members in the Cabinet that belonged to APEX, and the president was James Callaghan the then prime minister's right-hand man in the Cabinet. So you couldn't be in a much more better position to influence the outcome of the dispute, you would think, and yet the reverse, they used their influence in the reverse direction.

34. **PS:** Yeah, yeah.

35. **CT:** Talk through that conundrum if you like.

36. **PS:** Well, I really don't have the political nous to do that. I couldn't begin to explain or even understand, other than the, I suppose, the entrenched attitudes of what was then seen to be the ruling class, which was the Labour faction which was in power then, but it is bewildering. I mean, there were some people who came out and supported the strike as well. I can't remember the individuals now but I remember at the time that there were one or two, I think, MPs who came out and gave their support, and certainly there was mass trade union support, and, yeah.

37. **CT:** The impact that the strike was lost: what was significant? **[33:44]**

38. **PS:** I think this is in the late seventies – mid-seventies, late seventies – I don't have a good memory for dates. But there'd been a sort of flush of enthusiasm when the – I can remember it in the early or mid-sixties when Labour came into power, after a long time of being in opposition, under Harold Wilson, and who then won the next election as well, I think, and then retired and Callaghan took [his] place and so forth. And indeed following that, when Callaghan was prime minister there were the enormous changes, I remember Dennis Healey³ rushing off to the IMF to borrow money and

³ Chancellor of the Exchequer.

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giving in to the demands of the International Monetary Fund. So I think [a] great many important political changes took place here. The mid-sixties were a time of great hope and enthusiasm. It looked as if there were possible changes, on the brink of changes. One thinks of what happened in France in May sixty-eight and so on. But this was certainly reversed, and then with of course a vengeance when the Tories came into power. So, sadly, we were subjected to interesting times.

39. **CT:** Strongest memories of the dispute?

40. **PS:** Oh, I think seeing friends and patients getting hurt, getting beaten up, and being really bruised and punched up. I remember my mother-in-law from South Africa was visiting us at the time, and she wasn't in the slightest bit political – other than mildly conservative, I should think – and she was helping us with our move into a new house, and a new baby, and so on, and she was just astonished at how people were being manhandled and hurt by the police. She really didn't expect that in England, you know. [In] South Africa, where she came from, one was used to it and you didn't see it, but here it was very strange.

41. **CT:** Positive memory?

42. **PS:** Oh, I think being in touch with political friends and comrades who were very much involved, trying to develop an analytical concept of what was going on to draw lessons from this. Sadly, it didn't do very much for quite a long time.

43. **CT:** No. How would you summarise the political consequences of this dispute?

44. **PS:** Of the Grunwick dispute? Well, I think it showed that the state could actively intervene to stop one of the most powerful trade unions. After all, this is the – the miners had been the union that had brought down the Heath government. Who'd have thought that they couldn't stop a piddly little photographic processing plant? So there were clearly much greater forces at stake here.

45. **CT:** Do you think the trade union movement actually boxed below its weight at the end of the day?

46. **PS:** I'm not sure that the established part of the trade union movement were very active. I can remember there being protests outside the Trades Union Council [Congress] in town, and that I think some of the Grunwick strikers actually got on hunger strike outside there. So clearly there were things that were not being done to be helpful. The establishment, I think, come [came] down against them.

47. **CT:** Just talk about what you know of the forces that supported George Ward. Who were they and what did they represent?

48. **PS:** Well, I must turn to this magnificent television programme once again, which I thought was extremely revealing, which showed people like Neil Hamilton, who become [became] one of the arch-members of their think-tank, and providing, of all things – which surprised me – the sort of intellectual height of how to challenge the trade unions, and smash them. And that these were actions which were clearly taken on by Thatcher once she came into power, and the –

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49. **CT:** Was she being groomed?

50. **PS:** I don't know if she was being groomed at the time. I'm not sure that she was truly recognised for being the kind of iconic figure that she then became. I think it probably surprised quite a lot of the more traditional Conservatives that this took place. But this sort of radical Toryism sort of swept all before it, I think, once she'd got her teeth into the bit.

51. **CT:** Terrific. I tell you one thing: If I could just ask [you] to go back again and we'll do the story about the magistrate. I was just thinking we'll have another go at it, possibly to make to just a little bit shorter. Is that all right?

52. **PS:** Sure.

53. **CT:** OK. Yes, just lead in with the – you became aware of a magistrate; just the background to that was involved in the bench here at Willesden.

54. **PS:** Well, I only became aware of it when one day I was returning to my surgery and a person that I knew was talking to a woman on the corner just outside the surgery, who called me over and said "Paul, you must come and listen to this. I know you've been interested in the Grunwick strike that's been going on." And the person he was talking to turned out to be Dorothy Oakley, who used to live in Willesden but had retired to Oxfordshire some months before, and had come back. She was going to be sitting on the bench as a magistrate, and she then began to talk about the picket and the cases that had been held so far against them, and was astonished out how leniently they had been dealt with. She said something like forty per cent had been acquitted, and those that hadn't –