

Summary and transcript of interview of Gary Fabien by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/07 part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): high calibre of certain trade union general secretaries at the time of the dispute (2); strong support to the strikers given by APEX (3); inadequate trade union solidarity leading to strikers going on hunger strike, and how such solidarity could have been stronger (3-4); organised action by employers, politicians and others to undermine trade union power, including restrictive legislation, as illustrated by the recent Gate Gourmet dispute and the lack of support by the Labour government in 2007 for John McDonnell's Trade Union Freedom Bill (5-6); lack of adequate partnerships between employers and workers despite promise by the Labour government in 1997 (6); Fabien's abiding memory of the dispute (7-8); support given to Grunwick owner George Ward by the McWhirter brothers' National Association for Freedom (10-13); the role of the print unions in the dispute (30-33); means of inter-union communication about disputes (36-37); possible negative consequences of the dispute for the low-paid (38-39); past achievements of the trade union movement and its current position and prospects (40-47).

Transcript

1. **CT:** OK. 'Failure', 'loss', 'unsuccessful', however you wish to describe the ending of the dispute, how do you think it affected the future political climate?
2. **GF:** Right, before I answer that can I just finish the last point, because I think it's very, very important. At the time of the Grunwick dispute there was some inspiring general secretaries who lent their full weight behind the dispute, and I'll name some of them: George Guy, from the National Union of Sheet Metal Workers, Coppersmiths, Heating and Domestic Engineers; Ken Gill; Ray Buckton; Jack Jones. And there are more: Alan Sapper, there are more. So, I wouldn't like to create the illusion that we weren't led by good people. Lots and lots of unions had some exceptionally good general secretaries that did everything they could to assist all workers in struggle, and particularly those particular workers.
3. **CT:** No, absolutely, I mean one of the ironies in terms of understanding the trade union movement at the time was the role of APEX themselves, the union they joined. I mean, there was a, you know, people put them on the right of the trade union movement, and what did they put, they must have put in, what did they say? two hundred thousand pounds into [that] strike. You know, and kept on going, you know, and Roy Grantham, you know – certainly not put in the militant bracket of the trade union movement – stood by them, absolutely to the very end, you know. But, nevertheless, there is the image of ultimately, when the services which the strikers thought was the only – when the cutting of essential services to George Ward was the only way the strikers thought they were going to get victory wasn't forthcoming by pressure from the TUC, demoralised, they ended up on hunger strike outside the TUC. I mean, and therefore, you know, their feelings were very much that, "come on, guys, you at the top, you know, that have really got it to put pressure on not only, you know, organise other unions [around it] but fight back towards the government as well. You know, this is we're all in it together here. And if we lose, what's going to be the consequence for all of us? Because there's going to be – certain people are going to exploit that situation."

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4. **GF:** Right, let's just look at that day, then, because you mentioned that day, and it's very important. It was the day at the TUC when we all went up there because the hunger-strikers were on the steps. Now, that whole area was closed off, and there was a few thousand people there. Nothing to gain in terms of stopping people going into work, it was about solidarity. But you look at that day: fire-fighters were there because they were in dispute; bakers were there because they were in dispute; we were there because we was in dispute; there was other people there because they were in dispute. Now, if you just take the disputes that I've mentioned, you can say that Grunwick wasn't a success, fire-fighters' dispute was a success, our dispute was a success, bakers' dispute was a success, so there was some successes. Now, that was a particular time – and I've already called it a special period – it was a time when you could take employers on and win and do it. I think perhaps on that pitiful day – because it was, seeing people then going on hunger strike – there should have been some fresh thinking. I mean, what would have been wrong in saying "OK, those avenues are closed to us, but why don't we keep those pickets outside of those plants for as long as it takes," not at the cost of APEX, at the cost of the trade union movement, by every trade union paying X into a fund, very much like our shop funds and our central funds. And they could have stayed there for as long as it took. And that would have been a political embarrassment, and that would have been a down-turn, a real down-turn, for Grunwick's. Now, that's the way that I've always felt you should do things. Not a way favoured by the trade union movement. It's true that when the dispute takes place – like the miners' strike, the Grunwick strike – lots of money comes out of unions and goes into it. But why do you stop? Why do you stop? I understand when a union stops its own dispute because it feels it can go no further, but [in] a solidarity-type dispute there is always an opportunity to give a bit more. And there was at that particular time, because, in my view, at that time unions were financially better off than they are now. There was over thirteen million trade unionists paying into their union, and in turn into the TUC. Now there's six point four million, and so the finances aren't what they were. [5:09]
5. **CT:** Now, we've talked a lot – obviously this film is about, fundamentally, solidarity, unions supporting each other. And it's a crucial element and without it we wouldn't have a trade union movement. But also, on the other side, they were organising, and that was interesting as well. And some pretty unsavoury forces were collaborating around the boss, George Ward, and that was to develop, that was to have quite long-term consequences, I would say, on the future of trade unionism. Just talk a little bit about the other side: why they were – who they were, why they were, and what their end-game was.
6. **GF:** The other side, if you like, has always been extremely [?well] organised, and it's always been politically motivated, and it's always had politicians at the highest level involved. Going back to 1926¹, the role of Churchill: the role of Churchill working with the League of Gentlemen to drive buses and things of that nature. The role of the government of the time bringing troops in. Now, when you follow that through history, there's not a dispute of any magnitude when there hasn't been, in my view, an influence of government working with what I would describe as unscrupulous and shady organisations: so-called gentlemen, who will find vast amounts of money to either pay scabs or pay the losses that a company would have made. The organisation that they are able to

¹ Refers to the General Strike.

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enhance very quickly is tremendous. [We] shouldn't let that deter us, but it is tremendous. Where that's gone from the days of Grunwick is becoming more sophisticated, in as much as they then worked on the legislators. The legislators then imposed, through Thatcher, the anti-trade union laws on the trade union movement, and we have never been strong enough to get rid of those laws. Now, those laws would make sure that there isn't a second Grunwick. You can't secondary picket, you can't organise in your workplace, you can't join a union and automatically have the right to representation in the same way as you did previously. What that's meant is that you can't have the solidarity action, and an example of that is Gate Gourmet². Whilst that was in many ways a similar dispute: it was about black and Asian workers being exploited by an unscrupulous employer, being sacked by megaphone, being sacked by teletext. Now, you could never mount that kind of support for them, because the trade union laws said they couldn't. And that's all come from above. If you look at the position of the last couple of days: a very good MP called John McDonnell has tried to develop the Trade Union Freedom Bill. Now, that Trade Union Freedom Bill would give us as workers and trade unionists some of our rights back – not all of them, give them [us] some of our rights back. When he stood up in the House of Commons on Friday of last week to propose the bill, Labour MPs went out of the House, taken out by the Labour whip. Now, that's how well they organise, that's the level they organise at. They organise at a level where they can take people away from the debate to ensure something doesn't happen. And by the same token, they can influence employers, they can find ways of employers still turning a dollar and making money. Now, as time goes on they learn from each dispute that we're involved in with them. If you look at the current Labour government [it] said in 1997 "it's going to be wonderful now, we're all going to have partnerships." Now, I've not seen a working partnership that gives workers equality in the way that they should have it: management making decision type equality, because the powers that be make sure working people are never going to get to that level. [9:27]

7. **CT:** Fine, no, no. Let me just . . . Right, just tell me your one residing memory of the dispute; if you wanted to tell your grand, you know, your children, your relatives, your grandchildren, whatever. Just summarise it. What would be your one residing memory?
8. **GF:** When I do tell my grandchildren, when they are old enough to listen, I'd take them through the whole thing. And it would, if I picked one – it would be hard to pick between probably a Saturday, a cold Saturday in the winter, standing with the Grunwick strikers, or the mass picket at Dudden Hill, when I stood face-to-face with a very, very big horse, and I looked behind me and saw a sea of trade unionists, all there with the same view and determination as me. I don't know which one I'd pick so I'd probably tell them both.
9. **CT:** Terrific – [end of part 1]

² Refers to dispute in 2005 between Transport and General Workers' Union members and Gate Gourmet, the company to which British Airways outsourced the preparation of in-flight meals.

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[Start of part 2]

10. **CT:** George Ward was supported by the National Association of Freedom³. Now, did he find them or did they find him?
11. **GF:** Well, there's a contradiction there, isn't there? National Association, was it, of Freedom? Now, what is more free than being able to belong to a trade union and that trade union negotiate for you? But that was denied to them by an organisation that I think was fronted, was it, by the McWhirter brothers?⁴
12. **CT:** Yes.
13. **GF:** Now, they found him. Quite clearly they found him, because they were looking, at the time, for disputes of that nature that they saw as winnable. Disputes in the motor industry, from their point of view, weren't winnable – workers were too well organised – so they had to look for weaknesses, and they saw that as a weakness. They saw that as having an employer that was very vain, that wanted to win, not just because he wanted to win the dispute [but] because he wanted to go to the House of Lords, so he was easy pickings for them. But that organisation is not new; it probably goes back generations, and that organisation has moved on into something that's far more sophisticated now. And I would think has the eyes and ears of people within government circles, and certainly within circles of the opposition.
14. **CT:** Terrific.
15. **GF:** Morris [Norris] McWhirter, that was his name, wasn't it?
16. **CT:** Well, there was two.
17. **GF:** Yeah, there was two twins; one of them was a presenter.
18. **CT:** Yeah, they made their money on the *Guinness Book of Records*.
19. **GF:** Yeah, that's just where they made their big [?dough].
20. **CT:** One got blown up by the IRA.
21. **GF:** One of them, as I say, the IRA got to him⁵.

³ National Association for Freedom, founded in 1975.

⁴ Ross and Norris McWhirter, authors, publishers and campaigners.

⁵ Ross McWhirter was shot dead by the IRA in 1975.

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22. **CT:** That's right.

23. **GF:** Just after Mountbatten, I think they got Mountbatten first.⁶

24. **CT:** That's right. I mean, that's what started all these – and the other guy was Airey Neave, Airey Neave⁷.

25. **GF:** Airey Neave, yeah. And Thatcher⁸ mourned his death.

26. **CT:** That's right. Well, they were grooming Thatcher; Thatcher was their – she was going to deliver the long-term thing. [break in recording]

27. **GF:** - also [?comes to] the picket lines as well.

28. **CT:** Couldn't ask that question again, could I? Just the role – sorry, just a slight technical problem.

29. **GR:** Can't remember exactly what I said!

30. **CT:** No, no. The role of the print unions, you know, how, during the dispute –

31. **GF:** Yeah.

32. **CT:** - they actually got alternative views presented to challenge what they saw was biased towards George Ward.

33. **GF:** Yeah, I think the print unions have always had a difficult role. Their role is that they are employed to produce a newspaper. There are points in history, there are good points in history, where the print unions – and I think at the time one was SOGAT, the NUJ⁹ – have said "enough's enough, and we're not going to print stories of that nature. Those stories are damning, and they're wrong, and they're very, very biased." And they've refused to let them go out, they've got different things printed, and they've changed the editorial, they've done lots and lots of good stuff.

34. **CT:** I just want to pick up on a point you said earlier: just about how the trade union movement has its own network. We don't need a biased media to communicate with us or tell us how to do things, we have our own, and certainly then.

35. **GF:** Well, we had –

⁶ First Earl Mountbatten of Burman was killed by the IRA in 1979.

⁷ Conservative politician killed by the IRA in 1979.

⁸ Margaret Thatcher.

⁹ National Union of Journalists

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36. **CT:** All right, just talk that through, you know, the way trade unions could communicate with each other.
37. **GF:** I'm talking about, again I describe as a special time. It was a combination of what trade unions had built up from, in the forties and the fifties and the sixties, where the vast majority of working people had national agreements, had shop stewards' committees, works committees. And at their works committees they would discuss the correspondence that had come into them, and there was always a place to discuss disputes. We could always, always, get something discussed in the place where I worked, and it was exactly the same where other people worked. If a dispute was taking place, then that would go on the agenda and that would be discussed. And we would decide exactly what we'd do about that dispute, based on, perhaps, what was being asked for, money or whatever, and we would do that. Now, that's the way our drum beat; we were able to do that. We're not able to do that anymore. And as I've said before, there was thirteen – sorry – thirteen million trade unionists. Awful lot of organised people; way of getting things round. And that's why we were so successful in terms of secondary picketing. [5:00]
38. **CT:** Clearly with – because it was an organisation in an area where people had never had a tradition of organisation before, a very vulnerable area in terms of employment. It was new arrivals – Asians, immigrants – unaware of workers' rights, glad for a job in periods of high unemployment in an area of high unemployment. And therefore, obviously it would have been a fantastic victory and a boost for all those areas trying to organised the low-paid. Now, the consequences: do you think it had a negative consequence for those areas trying to break through in?
39. **GF:** The Grunwick dispute had a negative consequence for all of us as workers, inasmuch as the anti-trade union laws come out of that. It must have had a real negative dispute for low-paid workers, for Asians that had come over here seeking, really, to do anything to get a living. Because what they're seeing is their sisters and brothers go into dispute over pay and lose. And so therefore, there must have been a sinking feeling that they weren't going to break out of this low-paid position they were in. They weren't going to break out of this long-hours culture that they were in; they weren't going to break out of the position where the employer told them when to start and when to stop. And they saw clearly at that time other people breaking out of that, other people moving forward, other people doing better. So it must have been difficult, and there must have been times when they felt, well, perhaps people could have done more for us than they did. I mean, I hope they didn't dwell on that because I don't think that was the case, but they must have thought that.
40. **CT:** And yet, I mean, to put the positive side on it, I mean the struggle never stops, does it?
41. **GF:** The positive side of Grunwick's is that the struggle will go on. We have got so many fronts to fight on now: the first one is to win our way back to something like a playing-field that we can operate on, so that we can take the action that's necessary. Wherever there's a worker that talks to another worker about how bad the conditions are, how low-paid the work is, worker is, then there will always be fuel to fire the struggle. Whenever there's a trades council, wherever there's an opportunity for people to try and develop things, you know, it will begin to work again. The issues of the war in Iraq, all that kind of stuff that comes out of that, doesn't divided us, it brings us

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together, because that's about workers being oppressed into doing things they don't want to do. And when you go on national marches of that nature, what you don't see is white trade unionists on their own, you see young Asians, young black people. You know, so the future is there if we grasp it; the nettle is very prickly.

42. **CT:** Do you think there's some in our movement that are embarrassed by our strength?
43. **GF:** I don't think the word 'embarrassed' is right because, irrespective of what political perspective they come from, every now and again they like to rattle the sabre. There are some that's concerned about the strength, and some that are happier that we're weaker now than what we were then. And I certainly wouldn't want to name them, but that's the feeling that I get with them. There are an awful lot more that want the kind of strength that we had and to some extent we've still got. They want that to be used in a progressive way. And I make that point quite clearly: a progressive way, not an irresponsible way.
44. **CT:** But I was just thinking, are there some that think that there is political solutions – the resolution is through the political parliamentary process – and those that think the solution is a syndicalist solution?
45. **GF:** Well, history tells us quite clearly that there isn't – nothing [?we] finally achieved without starting with some kind of workers' struggle. If you look at the whole question of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the way they were shipped off: they didn't get back because the authorities in this country said, "well, they've been over there in Australia [?in the sun] for too long." They got back because unions like mine demonstrated – rallied and demonstrated – and demanded that they were released. Now, I'm not quite sure what view you call that; I certainly call that collective responsibility, because it wasn't just grass-work rookers [grass-roots workers] saying that, it was trade union leaders saying it, it was national officials, local officials, shop stewards. It was everybody that was involved, saying that that had to change. And when you get everybody involved saying that has to change, working collectively, things begin to change, don't they? That's the reality. **[10:23]**
46. **CT:** Terrific, terrific. You know, the continuing struggle, you know, despite everything, you know, trade unionism isn't, you know, is here for the duration. It's an eternal struggle, if you like.
47. **GF:** OK, well, I mean I'm coming to, if you like, the end of my working life; a lot more of it has gone than is going to come. And I've enjoyed it immensely, in terms of the struggle, and I can go back to when I was an apprentice, and how difficult it was in terms of bad working conditions, incredibly bad working conditions – long hours, low pay - how we turned that round in the space of, I suppose twenty, thirty years. I went from an industry where we were low-paid to an industry where we were the highest paid. And things kind of go in circles: at the end of every circle I think you land up a little bit better off, a little bit better off. What we've done through the Thatcher period is gone backwards and downwards, the spiral has been very, very bad. We're now in a position where we're working the longest hours anywhere in Europe, quite often for the lowest paid. We've watched our industries being taken away from us: we've lost mining, we've lost manufacturing, we've to a large degree lost shipbuilding, we've lost all of that. But that doesn't mean to say that that's the end, it's

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just the end of a circle. What will happen, quite clearly, is that young people will say “this isn’t enough, we’re working too long, we want more, we want more of what belongs to us, we want more of the wealth that we’ve created.” So I have tremendous hope for the future. If you look at the industry that I’m employed in now, I work for ASLEF, the train drivers’ union. Train drivers now are earning extremely high salaries, they’re enjoying long holidays. It wasn’t the same fifteen years ago; that’s evolved because of strong trade union leadership in ASLEF, that’s evolved because of a good executive, and that’s evolved because train drivers knew that they could get more by taking the right attitude. So if it’s right for train drivers, then it’s right for others. It’s just how you organise and the will, and that will will come.

48. **CT:** Terrific, terrific, absolutely.