

## Summary and transcript of interview of Graham Taylor by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/09A part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

### Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): suggested use by the strikers of passive resistance tactics like those of Mahatma Gandhi (8, 14, 16); loss of interest in the strike by major trade union leaders and left-wing parties in favour of campaign against government's Social Contract and pay restraint policy (18, 20); declining enthusiasm among trade unions for mass picketing in support of the strikers (22); abortive talks between ACAS and Grunwick management (28, 46-50); legal advice given to George Ward by the National Association for Freedom regarding recommendations of ACAS and the Scarman Inquiry (50, 54).

### Transcript

1. **CT:** OK, we're picking up on the story of, at that time, the Indian women.
2. **GT:** Yes, at that time . . .
3. **CT:** Just, sorry [indistinct] just say, "at the time of the mass picket after the – ." Was it after the first week of the mass picketing? Or thereabouts?
4. **GT:** I was saying that the trades council made a . . .
5. **CT:** Made an error.
6. **GT:** Well, it wasn't the trades council, it was the movement. The movement made a mistake, I think, in not consolidating their gains after the first week. And one interesting thing at that time was that some of the Indian women strikers raised the question with the strike committee, and also it came up at the trades council.
7. **CT:** Sorry, I'm just going to ask you to go [again]. Just say, "at the time of the . . ." It's just that there's so many pickets if I cut this in in the middle. Just say after the first week of the – was it after the first [week], or thereabouts?
8. **GT:** Yeah, it must have been at that time, so yeah, it was some time during June, you see. During the remaining weeks of June, there were discussions about tactics, and at that time the Indian women strikers did raise the question of using traditional tactics from India, the tactics of Mahatma Gandhi, passive resistance, and this was discussed on the strike committee and also at the trades council. And their idea was that if they sat down and passively resisted and were arrested by the police this would create all sorts of moral support from the community, and it would overcome the image of violence that the media was creating in the newspapers at that time. And some of us were quite enthusiastic about this idea, and there was quite a long discussion, and I was amazed that many people on the left and many of the trade unionists present were absolutely hostile to any sort of suggestion like that. They were aghast at it and were dismissing it out of hand. I thought that it was a tactic that should be considered because of the bad publicity that we were getting. And in the end, the idea was defeated, but in retrospect it might have turned the tables on the mass media in a very effective way. Incidentally, another incident occurred on the picket line

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which is connected with the idea of using Gandhi and the idea of passive resistance, and that was the appearance on the picket – I'm sorry I've got it wrong . . .

9. **CT:** Another idea?

10. **GT:** Yeah, I . . .

11. **CT:** Hold on, we'll just wait for the plane to go.

12. **GT:** Yeah, OK.

13. **CT:** This is really good for us, for me, by the way. Lots of very useful holes and other dimensions coming into the story which I'm very – you know, it's not just, you know, [a] Jack Dromey [?snow] job we're after. **[4:09]**

14. **GT:** This idea of passive resistance didn't just come from the strikers. There was also the same idea on the picket line itself. One day I was standing on the Chapter Road picket line as a steward, and the Grunwick bus was due to arrive, and there was an American woman standing next to me. And she revealed to me in the course of conversation that she was the mother of the world chess champion, Bobby Fisher, and she was there to support the Grunwick strikers. And I explained to her that the bus was imminent, and she said "well, the bus will be no difficulty for me to stop. We'll just stop it going in." And I laughed and said "well, how do you plan to do that?" And she said "well, have you never heard of Mahatma Gandhi and passive resistance?" I said "yes, in fact the strikers themselves were talking about it only recently." "Well," she said, "have an orange and watch this!" So she gave me an orange from her bag of oranges, and when the bus arrived she just threw herself in front of the bus and the bus stopped. And that was one of the few occasions when the Grunwick bus was prevented from getting into Grunwick. She was arrested, of course, and never went back, but it showed that there was an alternative to having thousands of pickets and photos of mob violence appearing in the newspapers.

15. **CT:** Let's just move on. The decision –

16. **GT:** By the way, I should add that Jayaben Desai<sup>1</sup> was in favour of these passive resistance tactics because she had been trained in them as a schoolgirl in Gujarat. Gujarat, her province of India, was Mahatma Gandhi's home province, and she as a child was very enthusiastic for Gandhi. And, interestingly enough, in the November of that year – 1977 – she did in fact organise this passive resistance and hunger strike tactic, but outside the doors of the TUC. So in other words, this showed what could have been done in Chapter Road if the traditional trade union approach hadn't overruled what the strikers themselves had wanted. **[7:02]**

17. **CT:** OK, let's pop onto the hunger strike. How did the hunger strike get discussed, or how did it come up in discussion as a tactic, as something to do?

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<sup>1</sup> Treasurer of the Grunwick strike committee.

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18. **GT:** I don't know, I wasn't there. But, as far as I understand it, the hunger strike was entirely an idea from the remaining strikers, and it was an act of desperation. It was done at a time when all their support was dwindling away. It was a last fling, and a lot of people thought it was very misguided because, actually, the TUC was very limited in its powers. The TUC could only do what the big barons on the General Council approved of, and by that time – by the autumn of seventy-seven – the big noises in the TUC had decided that the Grunwick strike was a thing of the past, and that their main campaign was to defeat the government's pay restraint and Social Contract policies. This had already happened, by the way, in July; before the end of July the word had gone round that even so-called left-wing members of the TUC General Council now wanted to put the Grunwick strike aside. They regarded it as a diversion from lobbying the TUC in September for action against pay restraint and the Social Contract; that was the main political objective. We were told that the big picture was pay restraint and the Social Contract, and that any further Grunwick action would get in the way of focussing upon that. And I was getting this message from organisations such as the Socialist Workers' Party and the Communist Party. Bert Ramelson and Paul Foot both said that the main focus from now on should be on beating the Social Contract and pay restraint, and therefore they weren't really interested in diverting resources any more towards the strikers. [9:29]
19. **CT:** So how did the wind-down came [come] about? Who was putting on pressure from who? Government, APEX, TUC: how did it work? How did the effect reach down to the strike committee?
20. **GT:** Well, there was the sort of – there'd always been pressure from the government and from the more timid of the trade union leaders to cool it down; that had always been there. The Callaghan government had a lot of ministers who were conventional politicians. They listened to the Civil Service, to the advice of senior police officers, and they didn't want to lose votes. And so there was always pressure consistently to be moderate and to cool things. They thought that after the Scarman Inquiry had been set up then the whole thing could then wait until the court of inquiry actually came up with its results. And they then told us that they expected that the Grunwick company would abide by the findings of the inquiry, though few of us actually believed that, but that's what their line was. So why not wait for the inquiry result to come out before engaging in any more action? But support for any more mass picketing also fell away from the so-called left-wing members of the General Council because they wanted to focus upon combating the Social Contract and the pay restraint, and they were all geared up to lobbying the TUC that September, and Grunwick cut across that in some respects because the issues at Grunwick were not principally matters of pay. At the beginning of the dispute the traditional trade union movement had tried to convert the issue at Grunwick into a pay question. Right way back into September and October of seventy-six, just after the strike started, the trade unions, including APEX, were starting to present the strike as a strike about low pay, about poor working conditions, and about the sacking of trade unionists. And in fact Laurie Pavitt, the MP for Brent South, he mentioned all three of those things in parliament. And although those things were factors, they were all things that weren't the central factor, and they were all things, too, that the Grunwick management could argue about, because it was low pay but it wasn't the worse pay. The conditions weren't too bad in the factory, and the trade unionists were sacked before they became strikers. So the management could argue about all those things. But the central question for the strikers was this arbitrary power of a manager in the mail-order department over their working lives and social lives, and that was something that

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could be overcome by the recognition of a trade union. So the protest against the arbitrary power of an irresponsible manager, and the remedy of trade union recognition in order to deal with that, that was the strikers' central demand all through, and from their point of view, questions of low pay and conditions and who was sacked and who wasn't sacked was a sort of diversion. Now, in the summer of 1977, the whole of the left started to focus on this question of pay restraint. In fact, it had been a question at the previous TUC General Council in seventy-six, and it had been resolved to some extent there by Jack Jones<sup>2</sup>. But it came up again in seventy-seven, the question of pay restraint, and the Grunwick strike didn't fit easily into that campaign because from the strikers' point of view it wasn't principally about pay, and so therefore the strike was increasingly side-lined, by the left as well as by the right. [14:29]

21. **CT:** So just again: how did the pressure, the tier of pressure, come to hit the strikers? We have a government that's hostile, trades union – TUC that's starting to throw up its hands with exhaustion, and APEX, who had been supporting, paying the strike pay now for what? sixteen, eighteen months, on a dispute that appeared unresolvable.
22. **GT:** The pressure from government ministers came through Grantham<sup>3</sup>, the leader of APEX, and he was a moderate trade unionist, always had been, and so he thought that enough had been done, that a court of inquiry was a big victory for any trade union to achieve, and now was the time to give evidence to Scarman, concentrate on giving good evidence to Scarman, and producing the right result from the court of inquiry. Now, there wasn't actually pressure from the left not to have any more mass pickets; what it was was that they ceased to be interested in having it, and so when the idea of having a picket on August the eighth came up there was quite a lot of difficulty in getting trade unions to commit to that. Arthur Scargill<sup>4</sup> and the NUM did, but the NUM I think was exceptional. There were a lot of trade unions who had previously given support in June and July who said that they couldn't manage the same sort of support for August the eighth. And there was a general sense that support was ebbing away in the second half of July. [16:37]
23. **CT:** Just talk me through the history of ACAS<sup>5</sup>. Did ACAS come post-Scarman or pre-Scarman?
24. **GT:** What do you mean, ACAS? ACAS was set up by the Employment Act. ACAS was in at the beginning.
25. **CT:** Right at the beginning. So ACAS was way before Scarman, was it? When Jim Mortimer<sup>6</sup> was involved in . . .

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<sup>2</sup> General secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union.

<sup>3</sup> Roy Grantham.

<sup>4</sup> President of the National Union of Mineworkers Yorkshire Area.

<sup>5</sup> Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service.

<sup>6</sup> Chairman of ACAS.

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26. **GT:** Right, yeah, yes.

27. **CT:** So just, when did ACAS . . . ?

28. **GT:** Now, ACAS became involved properly – let's start again: ACAS was the government mediation service. They became involved in November of 1976, after the postal workers' boycott and then the calling-off of that boycott. And ACAS became involved because there was a deal between the postal workers and Grunwick to the degree that the postal workers would call off their boycott and Grunwick would talk to ACAS. And so, all through November and December, ACAS and Grunwick talked to each other. Sorry, my leg's gone numb.

29. **CT:** No, no, no, stretch it out. Is that all right?

30. **GT:** Yeah.

31. **CT:** Fine, we'll just start the story again. Just make yourself comfortable. Are you comfortable?

32. **GT:** Yeah, am I in –

33. **CT:** Yeah, you're perfect.

34. **GT:** - in camera?

35. **CT:** Yeah, OK. I'll just move that so you don't have any fear of putting your foot on anything. Is that all right? Are you sure?

36. **GT:** Yeah.

37. **CT:** Are you happy?

38. **GT:** I think so.

39. **CT:** Great. OK, perfect. Just, as you say, ACAS, an explanation of ACAS.

40. **CT:** From the beginning of that section? Right. ACAS became involved in the November of 1976. It came about because after the postal boycott was called off Grunwick agreed that it would talk to ACAS and –

41. **CT:** I'm going to ask you to just – because you did a wonderful explanation of what ACAS was: ACAS, which was the government arbitration – yeah, OK.

42. **GT:** Right, OK, go back [indistinct].

43. **CT:** You OK?

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44. **GT:** Am I in camera?

45. **CT:** You're perfect.

46. **GT:** ACAS was the government mediation service for industrial disputes, and they intervened in the strike in November of 1976. It came about because, after the postal workers' boycott had been called off, the Grunwick management agreed – in return, it seemed, for the calling-off of the boycott – to talk to ACAS and to involve itself with mediation. And all through the months of November and December, ACAS and Grunwick talked to each other. ACAS, however, became increasingly frustrated because it soon became clear that Grunwick management was not seriously interested in coming to any sort of settlement. And finally, at the end of December, ACAS gave up and withdrew from any further discussion. And they then produced a report in March which came out in support of APEX and the strikers. Is that what you wanted?

47. **CT:** Yeah, that's fine, but you can go on. And how did George Ward<sup>7</sup> respond to that? [20:23]

48. **GT:** George Ward, after the breakdown of the talks with ACAS, he was very dismissive of ACAS, and described it as a socialist organisation, called it 'the alliance of comrades against socialism', and argued that it was biased in favour of trade unions. In a sense, he was right, because ACAS had been set up to encourage collective bargaining between employers and trade unions, so from the point of view of a recalcitrant employer like George Ward, clearly, ACAS coming along and telling him to involve himself in collective bargaining with a trade union was taking a trade union point of view. From Ward's point of view this was the trade union point of view, but ACAS, of course, felt it was acting in a neutral fashion.

49. **CT:** But nevertheless he must have been getting advice because mostly, most employers, and the legislation was there assuming that there would be consensus agreement reached through the good offices of ACAS for between employee and employer, [but] George Ward didn't accept it. By this time he must have had the hutzpah. Where was he getting the hutzpah to actually just give two fingers to the government organisation?

50. **GT:** All the rejection of ACAS came from the National Association for Freedom. By the time ACAS appeared on the scene, the NAFF was into heavy advice. By the time ACAS came on the scene, NAFF was already advising George Ward, and it's quite clear that they had a legal team and the legal team told George Ward that ACAS was only encouraging collective bargaining, it had no real power, that if he resisted ACAS's blandishments there would be no legal comeback, and George Ward was happy to go along with this, it let him off the hook completely. George Ward couldn't have done this without having a legal team backing him up, supplied to him by the National Association for Freedom.

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<sup>7</sup> Owner of Grunwick.

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51. **CT:** Terrific. Now, we're leaping forward to the Scarman Inquiry, July seventy-seven it was sitting. It actually, by public inquiry standards, rattled through its business. Just talk that through, and why the speed at which it was formed, how Booth<sup>8</sup> – Booth had been resistant, as I understand it, to an inquiry. That's what he tells me, anyway, when I interview him. He didn't want the inquiry; he thought ACAS could deal with it, and it was only when it failed to resolve it and the picketing reached a crescendo that he acquiesced into the principle of having an inquiry. And Scarman, who was generally thought to be sympathetic and liberal within the judiciary, the aristocracy, was considered, you know, a sympathetic judge to hear the – start that question again: Scarman was considered a sympathetic judge to chair the inquiry.
52. **GT:** Yeah, the Scarman Inquiry went ahead very quickly because it was set up to remedy a specific situation. The government wanted to end the mass picketing on the streets, and the quicker Scarman brought in his report the quicker that bad publicity would be achieved, so Scarman pressed ahead. Scarman himself wanted to put an end to the violence on the streets, as it was perceived by the press. He was a liberal man, he wanted peace and an end to violence, so I think he was genuinely personally intent on finishing the report as soon as he could. [25:00]
53. **CT:** And the report recommended?
54. **GT:** The report's recommendations were ninety per cent in favour of the strikers and in favour of the union, and that was why almost immediately Grunwick rejected the report. They rejected it almost out of hand. And it didn't stop them taking certain sections from the report that they said vindicated them, but nonetheless it was clear by the rapidity of Grunwick's response that they'd decided weeks before that they would reject it and pursue their own course. After all, they'd rejected ACAS and there'd been no comeback, so now they rejected Scarman and there was no comeback to that either. And this was all fitted in with the very legalistic approach of the National Association for Freedom. These were people who knew that with good barristers they could really fight trade unions and secure victories, providing they dug in and were tough enough and held out for a long enough period of time, and this lesson was one that Mrs Thatcher was to adopt for the policy of her government from 1979 onwards.
55. **CT:** But it went to appeal.
56. **GT:** What did? ACAS?
57. **CT:** Grunwick took the recommendations of Scarman to appeal.
58. **GT:** Oh, I'd forgotten that.
59. **CT:** And the first – and it was Widgery<sup>9</sup> who actually called in witnesses to hear the testimonies, actually –

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<sup>8</sup> Albert Booth, Secretary of State for Employment.

<sup>9</sup> Baron Widgery, Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales.

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60. **GT:** I'd forgotten all this.

61. **CT:** This was – who told me this?

62. **GT:** Jack, probably.

63. **CT:** No, no, no, it was more recently than this. It was Roy Grantham. And he said, because they were still believing that OK –

64. **GT:** This was the appeal to Scarman, not the appeal to ACAS?

65. **CT:** No, there was no appeal to ACAS; it was not a legal process. But Scarman in theory could be – had a judicial review on the outcome, and that's what they did. They took it back; Ward's team took it back to the Appeal Court, and Widgery and one other judge took additional evidence.