

Summary and transcript of interview of Graham Taylor by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/09A part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): postal workers' boycott of Grunwick mail and narrow vote to overturn it (15-26); determination of strike's opponents to break trade union power (28-30); significance of Grunwick as a turning-point in the fortunes of the labour movement and the political left (31-34).

Transcript

1. **CT:** . . . talking about Ward challenging the outcome of ACAS¹. ACAS recommended union recog[nition]. Well, let's pick it up from there: Ward² was to challenge that.
2. **GT:** Ward challenged the ACAS report, and again, backed by [the] National Association for Freedom legal team. And as a result of that, there was an appeal against the ACAS report, and the report went to the High Court. And that's all I can say about it, really. I haven't got anything interesting to say about that, really.
3. **CT:** Well, just the mechanics of it, that in fact he lost the appeal. It was only on the subsequent –
4. **GT:** First time he did.
5. **CT:** Yeah, that's right.
6. **GT:** But then it was subsequently –
7. **CT:** He went to the Lords, he went to the High Court.
8. **GT:** High Court, yeah.
9. **CT:** Yeah. So first there was an appeal, the appeal found against him, and then he challenged the appeal, and they found for him. And it was Denning³ – and the point I was trying to get to is Denning actually got it, go the – did he select it for himself, because High Court judges could in those cases, and he was no friend of the trades union movement.
10. **GT:** Well, my [indistinct]
11. **CT:** Can we just, sorry, go back to the begin[ning]. Just pick up the story so we've got the three leaps that bring us to Denning, that's what I'm interested in. Does that make sense? So, George

¹ Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service.

² George Ward, Grunwick owner.

³ Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls.

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Ward challenged the ACAS findings, and his first appeal failed with Widgery⁴, and then he challenged that with an appeal in the High Court, and Denning was the presiding judge, who took no additional evidence, and was no friend of the trade union movement. You know, [he] had a whole long history of being antagonistic towards . . .

12. **GT:** The first appeal was on July the twelfth. That was the day after a mass picket, and –

13. **CT:** Sorry, I'm going to pick you up. Just the first appeal to the ACAS report . . .

14. **GT:** Yeah, the first challenge to the ACAS report was on July the twelfth, and that was at the height of the mass picketing. And it went in favour of the strikers and Grunwick lost; the ACAS report was upheld. But then there was an appeal against that challenge, and that took place on July the twenty-ninth, at the end of the month. Now, by that time the support for the strikers was ebbing away, and this time, instead of Widgery, who was sympathetic to the strikers, the judge in charge was Denning, who was unsympathetic to the strikers, and he gave a judgement in favour of Grunwick and declared that the ACAS report had been suspect.

15. **CT:** Terrific. Now let's talk about the pressure on the postal workers, because it was again coming up to the high season for Ward, the mass picketing had produced huge solidarity by not only Cricklewood but also when Ward tried some 'Pony Express' stunt to get his mail released from the local branch, the local sorting office, that failed because [the] UPW⁵ stopped it, and although it was re-directed, it all came tumbling back to him and was frozen again at Grunwick, as I understand it. It wasn't as successful as he quite made out. But nevertheless, then the pressure came on from on high in the Post Office workers to pull off the support, and of course it was only narrowly defeated in a mass meeting at Conway Hall . . . Yeah? Are you happy to tell that story, as you recall it?

16. **GT:** Well, the decision by the postal workers to call off the boycott of the mail was absolutely crucial to the success of the strike. They'd very valiantly held out in an action that might well have been illegal for such a long time. There was a tremendous amount of pressure on them from their own union and from the leaders of the unions in general. And eventually there was a big meeting at Conway Hall, and by a very narrow vote they decided to call off the boycott. And that was a massive blow to the strikers because it was only really by hitting George Ward's postal service that the strike could be won.

17. **CT:** I'm going to ask you – sorry, we had a plane drowning out the crucial bit of that, but you said it absolutely perfectly. Just picking it up from the August – the June and July boycott of the postal workers.

18. **GT:** Eventually it went to a meeting at Conway Hall.

19. **CT:** Oh, just tell me the story that led up to that, the significance of it. [5:32]

⁴ Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales.

⁵ Union of Post Office Workers.

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20. **GT:** The action by the postal workers at Cricklewood was absolutely crucial. They gave really valiant support to the strikers. Their action might have been illegal, but nonetheless they kept going, and they were under tremendous pressure from their own union leadership to call it off. In the end, there was a big meeting at Conway Hall and a decisive vote. By a very narrow margin they decided to call off their boycott of the Grunwick mail, and this was a real body-blow for the strikers because Ward was so badly hit by the interference with his mail because his whole business was a mail-order business and depended upon the mail in order to be successful. The funny thing was that, years afterwards, I was doing an evening class, and there was a man at the back of the room who in the course of discussion said "I was the man who changed his vote at the Conway Hall when there was a big meeting about the Grunwick strike." And I said to him "well, that's interesting because that was probably the decisive moment in the strike in some respects. Why did you do it?" And he said "oh, I didn't want to do it, I've felt guilty ever since, but we had so much debt at that time, and my wife said to me, well, you know, 'we need the money.' Great events are determined by such small things, you know.
21. **CT:** Sorry, just tell the story again because it wasn't clear that it was a postman that made this –
22. **GT:** Oh, wasn't it?
23. **CT:** No.
24. **GT:** Oh, right.
25. **CT:** You were doing an evening course?
26. **GT:** Yes, funnily enough, many years later, I was running a class, and in the back of the class there was a man who had been a Cricklewood postman. Oh no, they weren't postmen, were they? They were sorters . . . The funny thing was that many years later I was doing an evening class, and in the class there was a man who said he was a sorter from the Cricklewood sorting office who'd been involved in the Grunwick strike. And in fact he confessed that he'd been the man who changed his vote at the Conway Hall and converted the backing of the postal workers for the strikers into an ending of the backing, and that was absolutely decisive, he thought, for the strike. And I said to him "so why did you do that?" And he said "it was just money. I've felt guilty ever since." He said "we were absolutely broke, and we were getting into debt and I just couldn't hold onto it any longer." He said "but afterwards, of course, I really regretted it." [9:05]
27. **CT:** In your view, if the vote had gone the other way and the boycott had continued, do you think Ward would have caved in at that point?
28. **GT:** No, I don't actually think that the strike was winnable once the National Association for Freedom had become heavily involved. It had become a point of political principle for that group, and I think that the 'Pony Express' operation, where they organised the delivery of the mail all round the country without using the Post Office, showed the lengths to which they would go. They had a lot of money behind them and a lot of legal expertise. They were trying to prove that the

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Heath government had been too soft, and that the Heath government could have defeated the miners, defeated the trade union movement if only it had been tough enough and had been legalistic enough. And it was a dress rehearsal for the Thatcher government that came in in 1979.

29. **CT:** We just had a little bit of plane noise on there, but just picking up. I'm going to ask the question again: if the vote to continue the postal boycott of Ward had gone the other way in favour, do you think Ward would have caved in?
30. **GT:** I don't think Ward would have caved in by that stage because by that stage the National Association for Freedom was backing him really heavily. It had become a point of political principle as far as they were concerned. They had a lot of financial and legal backing. The 'Pony Express' operation, where they delivered Ward's mail round the country for him without using the Post Office, shows the lengths they were prepared to go in order to win this strike for the employer. And their whole motivation, if you read their material and you read George Ward's book, was one of reversing the failure of the Heath government, and they wanted to prove that the Heath government had been too soft, that the Heath government could have defeated the miners and the other trade unions if only it had been tough enough and legalistic enough. And in fact, it was a dress rehearsal by the National Association for Freedom for what became the Thatcher government of 1979 to [19]90, in which she used all these legalistic tactics, used the forceful intervention of the police, and used the digging-in and uncompromising approach that NAFF had honed and practiced at Grunwick. [12:18]
31. **CT:** Do you think it was a pinnacle moment in trade union history?
32. **GT:** We're talking about the strike now? The Grunwick strike was the pinnacle of all the developments that had occurred in the sixties and seventies, and we felt at the time that if that strike was lost then a change was about to come over Britain, and the National Association for Freedom felt exactly the same as we did. And a lot of people felt that this strike was absolutely decisive, and so it proved, because after the Grunwick strike was defeated it was downhill all the way for the left and for the trade union movement as we knew it from the post-war period.
33. **CT:** And do you think the trade union leadership was blind to this?
34. **GT:** I think the trade union leadership and lots of trade unionists were completely blind to the political and ideological situation that the country was drifting into. And they said they had the big picture in the sense of "well, we must bend all our efforts to defeating pay restraint and to changing government policy." But there was a bigger picture than the one they thought, and this was an ideological change in the structure of British politics, and that was the big picture that they missed. They were too immersed in the financial and economic and inner trade union politics that they'd become accustomed to, and meanwhile, Thatcherism, the National Association for Freedom, and movements on the extreme right –