

Summary and transcript of interview of Ann Field by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/11 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 6:44.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): print unions forcing the inclusion in national newspapers of articles supporting the Grunwick strikers (8-14); reasons for aggressive policing of the picket line (17-22); importance of the right to strike and of a strong trade union movement (22, 26, 34, 36, 38); solidarity action of Post Office workers (28-34); role of National Association for Freedom in opposing the strike, and right-wing conspiracy against trade union power (39-48); role of Jack Dromey in supporting the strike (50).

Transcript

1. **CT:** To start at the beginning: how did you hear about Grunwick?
2. **AF:** Through my union, and the party¹, where else? But through my union, my trade union.
3. **CT:** And what did you hear?
4. **AF:** Well, I heard that there was a dispute that had started in north London, and that people had been sacked as a consequence of a dispute for trade union rights.
5. **CT:** And how did you become involved?
6. **AF:** Well, we became involved because we would always want to support workers who were in battle with their employer. Either we would go to demonstrations or picket lines, if they were organised; we would organise collections – money collections – for people; we would support motions and resolutions going to the TUC², the regional TUCs, the trades councils. Trades councils were very active in those days, well, they were much more active than they are now; many people felt that they were in decline even then, but people had the opportunity of becoming involved in disputes and action through trades councils as well as their trade union branches, and that's how we became involved.
7. **CT:** And the practical support?
8. **AF:** Well, that depended, really, on how active people were in the union and how strong they were. Some parts of the union, they were only able to donate money; they would collect from their members regular collections, either by levy or periodic collection. But even that, obviously, is very important because it's a sign of solidarity, it's a sign of commitment. Others would go to picket lines and attend the demonstrations regularly, but we were much more aware of the need to take public action on issues and disputes in those days, so as well what we used to do where we could was to challenge our companies in Fleet Street, where either their advertisements, or the articles that they were publishing, were either excessive or lying or apparently then supporting people like George

¹ Communist Party.

² Trades Union Congress.

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Ward at the Grunwick photo laboratory. So Bill Freeman, for example, along with the workers in the *Observer* and the *Telegraph*, and along with many other chapels in Fleet Street, regularly challenged the employers with the editorial material that they published as well as advertisements, and on one notable occasion the *Observer* was obliged to put in, by virtue of right of reply, on the front page of the paper, a piece on behalf of the Grunwick workers. On another occasion, at the *Telegraph*, the general secretary of the TUC³, as a consequence of the chapel – the union branch – protesting about what was going in the paper, the general secretary of the TUC had a piece put in the paper on the basis of right of reply. So these were very important activities which are now literally unknown because of the attacks on organised trade unions in national newspapers, but that's perhaps a different subject which we can come back to in a while.

9. **CT:** I just want to pick up on a point: even then it was quite a courageous act, and there must have been some quite possibly heated discussions within the chapel for the chapel to put themselves out on a line about, you know, all this stuff about editorial freedom, and all the rest that editors growl about. And here was a chapel coming to them and saying “hold on a second, if that's going out, this is going out.” How did the discussion? Talk through what happened, as you understood it through Bill, how it happened.
10. **AF:** Well, it was not only production workers that made those sort of challenges, it was editorial workers through the NUJ⁴, and also clerical workers through their union. My own union branch did it as well. But production workers were much more strongly organised than either editorial or clerical workers, so they were in a position to more readily challenge. But it was extremely difficult even so because, clearly, workers' priorities are largely financial, and if not financial specifically then defending jobs, so it's quite a big deal to discuss stopping or demanding that a right of reply is inserted on behalf of somebody else's dispute. And I think the significance of the Grunwick dispute in particular, for Fleet Street workers, is that it completely demolishes the myth of the racism of Fleet Street workers, which was very often what the employers tried to portray in the press. This was a dispute [involving] largely Asian workers, particularly Asian women workers, so it didn't make any difference to Fleet Street workers; they were workers nonetheless who had to be supported, and if workers are being attacked, and the employers are going overboard, either by advertisements or by articles, then people would hit back as best they could. And their best weapon, and they recognised it as being their best weapon, is not to stop the paper but to try and ensure that at least there was some sort of balance. So occasionally there would be blank spaces in newspapers, but my union preferred to have the right of reply, so that we didn't waste the blank space, we would have something in it on behalf of the workers. It used to generate a mass of differences of view, but I think very often it was important to go through that process of discussion amongst ourselves, because obviously it raised the consciousness of the need for solidarity action with other workers. So it wasn't an easy – it's never been an easy task. It's impossible now; it wasn't easy then, but it's unheard of now. People don't even realise it was done.

³ Len Murray.

⁴ National Union of Journalists.

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11. **CT:** Just summarise the, sort of, [?total] what action that you can remember [indistinct] that print workers took in terms of demanding either the right of reply, or actually stopping –
12. **AF:** Unfortunately, it's never actually been quantified, which is a real shame; somebody ought to do it at some stage. I know certainly we did in NATSOPA; NATSOPA at the time was the largest union in Fleet Street, and certainly we had a reputation for being quite stroppy about things. On numerous occasions at the *Observer* and at the *Telegraph* it was done. I know for a fact that there were efforts made by other unions, for example the NGA⁵ at the *Sun* and the *News of the World*. I think there were some efforts made at the *Daily Express* too. There were numerous instances on Grunwick alone, many other occasions it was done too, but I haven't actually got, unfortunately, a tally of the successful efforts that we had.
13. **CT:** I mean, are there any stories of Bill actually going to the editor and saying "look, hold on second." I mean, how did the dialogue go? I mean, it's a kind of unique bit of trade unionism in a way.
14. **AF:** Well, at the *Observer* it was a delegation from the chapel going to the management and informing the management that unless there was some right of reply, some counter-balancing material put into the newspaper, then there would be no paper that night. Now, sometimes those threats are made with everything crossed behind the back, but the *Observer* management wobbled. David Astor – who I believe was the editor at the time, but it's so long ago I can't remember – went absolutely bananas, but they were forced to concede. There have been other instances where the chapel at the *Observer* had to, with Bill and the other comrades, had to tell the management that they were going to take action. Like the night when women workers were first introduced into the machine rooms of Fleet Street at the *Observer*, and that night the management shut the paper down for a couple of hours because they were panicking about the fact that the machine branch had brought women workers in, but that's another story for another day. [15:26]
15. **CT:** In terms of your own presence on the picket line, when did that first happen?
16. **AF:** Fairly early on. I wasn't as frequent an attender as Bill and his brothers. They would do a night's work and then go to the picket line first thing in the morning, like six o'clock in the morning, whereas for us clerical workers then our regime was a bit different. But myself and many others, we were frequent attenders at different times, and on the very big demonstrations we were there as well.
17. **CT:** Now, the policing of the picket line was a first for many trade unionists. What was your – how did you witness the policing of the picket?
18. **AF:** It was very frightening. I hadn't actually – I'd been on picket lines, more by way of attending as a demonstrator rather than for a picketing purpose, but I found it very frightening. I'd never seen the police in action before; I'd never actually seen them wading into people in that way. I found it

⁵ National Graphical Association.

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absolutely horrifying, and very frightening. But I have to say it was as nothing by comparison a) with how they were in Warrington⁶ and, again, at Wapping⁷. So it was like a dress rehearsal: each time they were rehearsing and becoming more vicious in their attacks on workers. So Grunwick was a first for me, and a first for many others as well.

19. **CT:** Why was it so vicious?

20. **AF:** Because there was a desperation, I think. There was a lot of – it was going on, more and more support was being created, was being developed. There was immense solidarity action: everybody was aware what the Post Office workers were doing, and it was inspirational stuff. And of course, once people are inspired it's infectious, other people are inspired, and I think that so much effort was put in by the authorities through the police and through the columns of the newspapers, to try to stop workers from supporting each other, because that will spread. You couldn't have, you know, a bunch of workers in Brent being successful as a consequence of being helped by bunches of print workers, miners, Post Office workers. Where will it all end? And clearly, that was why the dispute, from the employer's point of view and the government's point of view, could never be allowed to be successful. **[18:04]**

21. **CT:** There was a Labour government at the time, and the Home Secretary was Merlyn Rees. Was he aware of it? Did he encourage it? Did he discourage it?

22. **AF:** I wasn't really aware, to be honest with you, of Merlyn Rees as an individual government minister. I mean, I was at the time, but I can't recall anything, anything specific, other than the fact that here was a Labour government, unfortunately as we see now looking back once again, not supporting workers, or not ensuring that a piece of legislation that was supposed to provide for workers' rights, that they weren't ensuring that that piece of legislation actually gave the protection it was intended to do. And we've got, you know, the same thing today, that pieces of legislation that are supposed to mean something for workers, whether it be trade union rights or individual rights, can only be backed up by trade union strength. But as soon as workers use that trade union strength to try to have their rights put into practice, unfortunately Labour and now New Labour backs away at the rate of knots. And so you see today people not able to fight in the way that we were able to do thirty years ago. But we're getting there: we're starting to re-organise, re-mobilise. In national newspapers we have pulled back an awful lot of membership. It's an uneducated membership at the minute, and the *Daily Mail* and News International are still holding out, as they always would. But we have to rebuild, and learning the lessons of what happened at Grunwick, where trade union solidarity was the order of the day, is the lesson for now. For me, the right to strike and the right to take solidarity supportive action in support of other workers is the most fundamental right, akin to and next to the right to vote. It's fine having a right to vote, but if you haven't got the right to influence, the right to change anything, the right to vote is almost meaningless. It has to be accompanied by a right to take action to enforce that. So the right to strike is an essential democratic right, and I think that that's the important battle for this century.

⁶ Refers to violence at picket outside premises of Messenger group of newspapers, 1983.

⁷ Refers to violence outside News International's Wapping plant during industrial dispute of 1986.

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The right to vote was the battle for last century, but the right to strike is the battle for this. And you can see today the excesses of newspapers. It's virtually unfettered: they can write what they like and they do. I mean OK, some people might find it very entertaining when they make things up about celebrities, but the point is that there is no organised workforce there that has the confidence and the determination to stand up and to try to prevent some of the worst excesses. And I think you can trace back the excessive behaviour of the press to the same period of time when they tried to destroy trade unionism, first through Maxwell⁸ and then more successfully through Murdoch⁹.

23. **CT:** But MPs were arrested.

24. **AF:** Yes.

25. **CT:** And trade unionists were arrested. And the SPG was used, I think for the first time on a picket line. And there was a Home Secretary – there must be a relationship, presumably, between that and the Home Secretary, and what do we learn from that in terms of the role of the state when it comes to industrial disputes?

26. **AF:** Well, the role of the state then is the same as the role of the state now, unfortunately, and that's why we have to fight so determinedly to ensure that, aside from rights being enshrined in law, they are also enshrined in active, independent and free trade unions. And I think the big lesson for the Labour Party and the Labour government, at the present time and for the future, is that you will only have a strong Labour government if you have a strong and active trade union movement. Labour is weak if trade union organisation is weak, or if it's immobilised in some form, and we have got to re-mobilise ourselves, give people – help people to have the confidence. Now, how much people will be inspired today by what happened at Grunwick remains to be seen, but it can certainly have a tremendous contribution provided we tell people about it. All of the while that it remains as something that happened thirty years ago and therefore of no relevance, people won't learn from it, but it was the beginning of a new period of solidarity action, which the Tories attempted to snuff out. It's still there, but they tried to snuff it out.

27. **CT:** Let's just talk about the solidarity action: the role of the postmen as you understood it was?

28. **AF:** Not to supply, to cut off the supplies of all the films being sent. Because this of course was in the beginning of days – booming by that time – but more or less at the beginning of the days of sending photographs by post. I mean, in this digital age I think people are not quite really aware of what a big thing it was, but the Post Office workers had the ability to cut off, or at least stand on either the jugular or the windpipe of the company, and that's why the company were going absolutely mad about the Post Office workers' action. It was a crucial action, and one that could be repeated today across a number of our industries, but of course one of the early steps that the Tory government took, in about 1980, was to introduce the criminalisation, virtually, of all forms of solidarity action by preventing so-called secondary action. And the minute that secondary action

⁸ Robert Maxwell.

⁹ Rupert Murdoch.

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was introduced as a concept it began to stop all possibility of workers supporting each other, ranging from, you know, the most straightforward of dismissals, unfair dismissal at a local factory or office, right through to big-scale solidarity action such as we witnessed at Grunwick only three years before the legislation was passed. [24:49]

29. **CT:** But it wasn't the Labour government, or even the courts, that actually broke the local post office workers, or forced them to withdraw the action, it was their own union, and that was a great moment of despair.

30. **AF:** Yes. Yes, it was.

31. **CT:** And what do we learn from that?

32. **AF:** What we learn from that is that we fight ever harder. I mean, there isn't a union, a trade union in the land or in the world where there aren't terrible incidents of despair as a consequence of either bad decisions being made by good people, or bad decisions being made by people who haven't really got the interests of their members at heart, or the interests of workers at heart in general. Most workers, in one form or another, have been on the receiving end of those kind of situations. We don't live in a perfect world, and unfortunately nobody has invented yet an absolutely fool-proof, fail-safe way of organising a trade union to guard against it. We have to learn the lessons and try to create strong trade unions that are strong because there is accountability of the representatives at all levels.

33. **CT:** But, one of the lessons learnt is how pressure is applied in both two directions. I mean, we're trying to – trade unionists are trying to apply pressure to the government, but here the government, through the TUC to the UPW¹⁰: how was that working and why was it our downfall?

34. **AF:** Well, I mean, I don't have, I don't know exactly how it was done at the time. I was a young steward at the time, and became shortly afterwards elected as a full-time officer, so I wasn't involved in the Post Office workers' union. I read about it in the *Morning Star* and was told about it by the trade union comrades, obviously. And it was there for all the world to see that people – some of the union leaderships involved were weakened, either by their own inability to support their own members or their preparedness to go so far and no further. But I'm afraid that's one of the things that happens with some unions, and it's something that we have to fight against. I mean, at Wapping, we were fighting against a terrible conspiracy between the EEPTU¹¹ leadership and News International, and who knows what other forces were at work there as well, supported by the Tory government? And yet today my own union comprises the electricians as well as the engineers and ourselves. We have to move on, and we have to try to not simply move on but we have to try and convince others that we need to build [the] kind of trade unionism which is there to defend workers and to – irrespective of government, or police, or company influence – support the workers,

¹⁰ Union of Post Office Workers.

¹¹ Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunication and Plumbing Union.

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come what may. I mean, that's the lesson: there's no magic answer to it and there's no mythology about it either, it's very straightforward.

35. **CT:** But did the trade union movement box below its weight? What message did that send out?
36. **AF:** I think the trade union movement always boxes below its weight. I mean, unfortunately, you just can't always get everybody to do everything that you want and it's obviously right to do. If we were, we wouldn't be in the situation that we're in now, now would we? We would be up there not putting money into Trident¹², not bombing the life out of Iraq, not doing all sorts of things, if we had a situation where we could convince everybody to do the right thing. I mean, unfortunately, it's called a class struggle because it is a struggle; it is a struggle to convince people of the need to do things and the need to stand up rather than to bow the knee, either to the employers or to government. And I think the great tragedy for the movement at the minute is how much the knee has been bent. But then, even this week, we hear of a situation where nearly a hundred Labour MPs have actually tried to stand up to their own government by voting against Trident in one form or another, and it's exactly the same with the trade union movement. Wouldn't it have been wonderful? And we really wanted it to happen, we really wanted to try to get support right across the movement for our struggle against News International at Wapping. We weren't able to do it, but it hasn't meant that we've stopped. It hasn't meant that workers don't go on. You have to pick yourself up and carry on. [30:04]
37. **CT:** But did it send out a message? And were there consequences of the failure of Grunwick?
38. **AF:** There are always consequences, and the press and others who take pleasure in watching trade union organisation founder. Yes, there were repercussions; the main repercussion was that it contributed, the defeat contributed to the failure of not only trade union solidarity action but also the legislation that just couldn't operate any longer, and hardly operated anyway, for trade union recognition. We didn't then get trade union recognition as of right again until New Labour was elected in the late nineties. But as a failure, it wasn't a permanent failure in the sense that it's been a source of inspiration for countless thousands of workers and trade union activists ever since. And nobody could ever say again that workers aren't prepared to support people for the right to belong to and to be recognised as a trade unionist. That's what the dispute was all about: it's a permanent tribute.
39. **CT:** On the other side: we were marshalling on one side, but on the other side other forces were marshalling. The National Association for Freedom: who were they, and why did they support George Ward?
40. **AF:** They were an organisation of business people and right-wing suspicious characters, I would say, what we would call today celebrity characters like the McWhirters¹³ and so on, who were part and parcel of a view that there was a communist and 'workerist' conspiracy to bring the country down.

¹² Missile system for delivering nuclear weapons.

¹³ Ross and Norris McWhirter.

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So I can't remember at the minute – I might remember in a moment or two – when exactly it was formed, but it was trotted out on every occasion when the country was thought to be going to the dogs as a consequence of trade union pickets and organisation, organised disputes and so on. And they were basically trying to support anybody who would be doing workers down. So if workers were in struggle they'd be trotted out to show how picketing was always violent, picketing was always for no good purpose, and that all that striking workers were all about and all that trade unions were all about, was to bring the country down. I mean, that was one of their main purposes.

41. **CT:** There is a theory that we really underestimated their effectiveness and efficiency, and their deep-rooted links into the right wing of the Tory Party. That there they were, organising; they had various MPs, we know their names: John Gorst, others, the Monday Club.
42. **AF:** Yes.
43. **CT:** They were grooming Margaret Thatcher in the background.
44. **AF:** Yes.
45. **CT:** She was to become new leader. Saltley¹⁴ hadn't been forgotten, and there was deep-seated resentment about the power of the trade unions and that humiliation against that class. And we were very casual about it, we thought "oh," you know, "we're well organised," you know, "we have our TUC, we have our –"
46. **AF:** I don't think we were casual about it.
47. **CT:** And it caught us up eventually.
48. **AF:** Well, I think certainly a lot of people were casual about it, but my general secretary – the general secretary of my union, NATSOPA – in nineteen, I can't remember when it was, seventy-three or seventy-four, during one of the miners' disputes, during the three-day week, we held a meeting, a candle-lit meeting at Central Hall, Westminster. And because there was no power it was all very dramatic, and Briginshaw – Richard Briginshaw, who subsequently, unfortunately, was revealed not to have done everything that he should have done financially, but at time it wasn't known – he called everybody together, all of his shop stewards and officials and what have you. We had a candle-lit meeting in Central Hall, Westminster, because he wanted to tell us not only about the dispute with the miners and what have you but the worries about the Tory government and what they were going to do, and also this right-wing conspiracy. And a lot of people, I have to say, at the time thought he'd gone round the bend, but it's only just recently, I think a couple of years ago, with the thirty year rule or whatever it was, papers are now being revealed where indeed it's absolutely the case that there was a right-wing conspiracy. I think lords lieutenants of the counties and all that were part of a whole band of people who would be brought in to support and secure Her Majesty

¹⁴ Successful mass picketing of a fuel storage depot at Saltley Gate in Birmingham during a national miners' strike, February 1972.

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and run the country. Yes, I mean, there was a mad strata of people who would certainly have wanted to run the country if they could, and they re-emerged with – I can't remember his name now, the advisor to Thatcher – where they concocted this whole series of disputes, including with the miners in the eighties: set out with a complete plan of what would be done. And I've got absolutely no doubt about the fact that Grunwick was in part not so much a dress rehearsal, maybe a dry run, but certainly they learned a lot of lessons from that and were determined that militant trade unionism had to be brought to book.

49. **CT:** Terrific. Role of Jack Dromey.

50. **AF:** Brent Trades Council secretary, Brent Law Centre, subsequently south-east region TUC. Absolutely superb. Always appeared on the picket line, organising, helping. I know Jack's had lots of criticism over the years more recently about this, that and the other thing. I'm not remotely concerned about that, it's a matter for the other comrades in his own union. As far as I'm concerned, Jack was brilliant at the time of Grunwick and was brilliant at the time of his stewardship of the south-east region TUC.

51. **CT:** And without it?

52. **AF:** Without?

53. **CT:** That support.

54. **AF:** Well hopefully, if Jack hadn't have been Brent Trades Council secretary there were others in Brent who were equally determined. I think – I mean, we all bring different characteristics and qualities as leaders. Jack was very good at the public presentation, but there were many other comrades in Brent without whom Jack as secretary would not have been able to operate anyway, so, you know, the fact that he was able to present it with great energy, great good humour, lent tremendous weight to it. But there were many other comrades as well: Tom Durkin, yes.

55. **CT:** Do you know him?

56. **AF:** I knew Tom through the Communist Party. I didn't know him well, and of course, for south London girls like me, Brent was an awful long way away. So he was one of a number of comrades that I was aware of and I didn't know terribly well. You know, I sort of admired them from a distance.

57. **CT:** Now, the strikers: did you get to know any of them at all?

58. **AF:** No, not personally. Bill knew them, my husband Bill Freeman, knew them; he knew Mrs Desai. I always found it difficult to say 'Jayaben' because she seemed to me so heroic that Mrs Desai was the right way of referring to her. Bill knew her, and I think Mahmood¹⁵ as well, the secretary and the

¹⁵ Mahmood Ahmed

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chair of the strikers' committee, but I didn't know them well; I was, you know, one of the band of general supporters rather than a front-liner on this one.

59. **CT:** I'm going to change the cass –