

Summary and transcript of interview of Ann Field by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/12)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers in brackets): role of Bill Freeman and other print workers in forcing newspapers to print articles in favour of Grunwick strikers (2-10); strikers' hunger strike outside the TUC building (13-26); curbs on picketing introduced after dispute (28); ignoring by George Ward of Lord Scarman's recommendation in favour of union recognition at Grunwick (29-32).

Transcript

1. **CT:** [Question about significance of Bill Freeman's role in getting pieces in favour of the strikers inserted into newspapers].
2. **AF:** I think Bill Freeman's commitment was like many other things that comrades like himself and others were able to take part in activities in support of other workers because of the strength of the organised chapels¹ in Fleet Street. So they were able to attend demonstrations, they were able to obtain support of other workers because of the time that they spent in going to meetings, in going to picket lines and demonstrations. But Bill had two brothers as well, they were all three of them in Fleet Street, and all three of them at different times worked at the *Telegraph*. Bill worked at the *Observer*. So it was no accident, really, that two of the main areas where the right of reply was fought over so strongly was at the *Telegraph* and the *Observer*. And they were regularly on the picket lines as well, usually in the morning, first thing in the morning about six o'clock, the three of them. There was the one notable occasion where all three of them managed to get involved in an altercation with the police – by accident not by design, obviously – but the police obviously decided that they were going to bag all three of them because on that particular day all three were arrested. The elder brother, Jim, unfortunately died before the case came to court. He was already a heart attack victim, and not long after he was arrested and had a bit of tussle with the police he had a fatal heart attack, and Bill and George were left to continue attending the picket lines themselves. But Bill's activities, both as a chapel committee member at the *Observer* and at the *Daily Telegraph*, were crucial in securing the right of reply, and it was an element in Bill's work as a trade unionist, as an activist, as an FOC², shop steward and also a full-time official.
3. **CT:** It took a lot of courage. I mean, how did he actually raise it, and what were the arguments he had to make?
4. **AF:** Well, [he] discussed it with his fellow chapel members and secured support from them, discussed it with the chapel committee, secured support from them, and then they would go as a delegation to the management and inform the management that the members were very upset about what appeared to be going into the newspaper, either attacking in this case the Grunwick workers, the violence and so on – alleged violence – and that if the paper was going to support George Ward then the workers would want to indicate that they supported the Grunwick workers,

¹ Printing trade union branches.

² Father of Chapel.

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and they would want balance to ensure that the workers' point of view was put up. And that's what was done, both at the *Observer* and at the *Telegraph*. [3:33]

5. **CT:** And this was met by?
6. **AF:** Well, initially horror, shock, but eventually both newspapers agreed. And at the *Telegraph* it was done on numerous occasions, and as I said earlier it was also done at the *Sun* by other workers, and I believe at the *Express* as well. So it was not something that it was unique to Bill; many workers tried to do this in Fleet Street because it was part of what we felt was our role as trade unionists to try and support other workers. We didn't want to deprive people of the newspapers, but what we wanted to do was insist that there was some balance put in.
7. **CT:** It's extraordinary, isn't it? Because the *Telegraph* of all papers, this was the paper that effectively was the mouthpiece of the National Association for Freedom.
8. **AF:** Oh, absolutely, yes.
9. **CT:** So teeth must have ground. I can't just imagine – Who was the editor? Was it – is it the bloke who's gone leftie? He's become a sort of soft –
10. **AF:** I don't think any of them have become left, but – well, it depends if you're grinding your teeth – Peregrine Worsthorne, it might have been. I don't think so, actually; he was later. But if you're grinding your teeth on pound notes, I mean, you eventually have to make a decision whether what is going to be in the greater interest of your readers to deprive them altogether and stand up to the workers and say "no, you're not going to have this", or "well, OK," you know, "we'll let it go on this occasion." And that's what they did. I mean, otherwise they would be creating a dispute where they need not have one. So the balance of convenience for the employer, out of the political masters that they would serve, would be "well, we'll let it go." But they let it go once too often, then clearly the employers then decided in due course that they would need to shackle trade unionists in Fleet Street. Bill, of course, was sacked eventually by the *Telegraph*.
11. **CT:** Yes, I was going to say: did we reap a terrible reward?
12. **AF:** Well, lots of workers lost their jobs in Fleet Street. Big payback, big payback. Shortly after the Grunwick dispute Times Newspapers tried it with a lock-out of a year, but they lost that. They spent forty million pounds trying to do something about trade union organisation. They lost that; they were obliged to take everybody back. And then of course it was some years later in nineteen eighty-five/six to seven that Murdoch decided that he had the resources to take the unions on and he won.
13. **CT:** When things got desperate, and the call from the strikers for essential services to be cut, which they felt was the only way that the dispute was going to be won, and that wasn't forthcoming, there was the hunger strike outside the TUC.
14. **AF:** Oh God, I remember now, Jesus! Yes.

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15. **CT:** What was your response to that? Was it a good tactic?
16. **AF:** To be honest, I don't think it was, and maybe that's why I haven't remembered it in the form, I mean –
17. **CT:** The purpose was to actually shame the TUC.
18. **AF:** No, it wasn't a good tactic, it wasn't a good tactic. It didn't produce a result, and I think that all that tactics like that do is – it, it's not a – because it's not positive: it's a demonstration, and I'm not saying it's a horrific demonstration, but people can only identify with it, they can't take action with it, unless you have everybody else going on hunger strike. And I'm afraid that it was – it's not a tactic that is sustainable, unfortunately. [7:34]
19. **CT:** I think they would argue – or some of them, because obviously there was disagreements and we remember histories differently – that that was to focus attention, that there should be now: “come on, the TUC”, from the rank and file, “this is an outrageous situation, we can't have that.” And they weren't going to disappear, silent losers, and as a reminder, “come on, we're all sticking together here, and you're, you know, the umbrella organisation, and you're deserting us.”
20. **AF:** Yeah, but the TUC – I mean, the lesson really is for all of us is not to ask the TUC to do things that it can't do. It's only workers that can express solidarity with workers. The TUC can organise demonstrations, the TUC can respond, but unless there are people actually on the ground being prepared to take action, it's not going to happen. We can ask for it, but it becomes a gesture, unfortunately; if we're not prepared to take action ourselves then we can't ask others to take action in my opinion.
21. **CT:** But it was also that they were – I mean the feeling was, then, the pressure was coming from the Labour government to put on pressure to not –
22. **AF:** To not take action, yes.
23. **CT:** We'd had the example of the Post Office workers.
24. **AF:** Absolutely, absolutely.
25. **CT:** Workers on the ground doing it and being fined by their own union for taking that action.
26. **AF:** Absolutely, absolutely, but the Post Office workers themselves took action, and for a long time they took action in defiance of their own union. The point that I'm making is that we have to – it's worker to worker, and hard lesson though it is, the TUC, and often trade union leaderships, will only respond where the workers on the ground are taking action or demanding that the union takes action. And this is why the legislation has been so well thought-out by the Tories, when it was put into effect, I'm sure, in 1980, that solidarity action, you stop the individuals on the ground from taking action, but you also deal with the national union by threatening to sequester and render it ineffective in that way. But it's a double blow. But the lesson is that when we're taking action we're

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asking other workers to take action. Other union leaderships will only call people out if they think that the members are going to respond, and I guess that there weren't other workers responding in the supply industries that were being asked to support. I guess that was the situation. We had that at Wapping³, obviously, where we could not get people in Fleet Street to take action in support of the workers who'd been sacked by [Rupert] Murdoch. The question is, did we ask them? We tested the water; we could've been criticised, I suppose, as union leaderships, for not calling out the rest of Fleet Street, but the fact is, had we called out the rest of Fleet Street, the rest of Fleet Street wouldn't have responded. And, hard though it is, I guess that's what I'm trying to say in relation to the Grunwick workers. I feel that a hunger strike, awful though it is, that kind of action is misdirected. I accept it entirely as a tremendous act of personal sacrifice, but the TUC is never going to be shamed into doing anything. If the TUC was going to be shamed into doing anything, well, we would be faced with hunger strikes all the time, let's be honest.

27. **CT:** For people now, the whole concept of picketing is a bizarre act. You know, that you actually start outside. So, the significance and history of picketing.
28. **AF:** Yes. Well, yes, you're right: people now don't know about picketing. The six on a picket line was after Grunwick, well after Grunwick. There was no such thing as a limit on the number of pickets, so you picketed – whether it was six people or sixty, six hundred or six thousand – it was still a picket, and there was no limit. The police would try and apply a limit, and where they did, of course, that's when it used to get very nasty indeed very often. But the Tories decided to institute the six, which of course is completely ineffective. A picket is there to try to stop a company from getting supplies in or out, and to try to encourage the workers who are inside to stop work. But if you can't picket effectively, then that in itself is a major blow against trade union and worker solidarity, and that of course is part of the secondary action. **[13:03]**
29. **CT:** Right. Just a thought about George Ward and Scarman⁴. Now, he was the first employer not to take on the recommendation that Scarman came up with, which was that there should be, despite the lack of information provided by the company, recognition.
30. **AF:** Yes.
31. **CT:** And quite an extraordinary act, and something that completely bewildered the Labour government. They just thought "well [indistinct] he's come down, he's brought the tablets down from above. Here we are: recognition. Hooray, it's all going to be quiet." And he just popped up and said "no, I'm not going to take any notice of that." How did he have the confidence to do that? And what were the consequences?
32. **AF:** Well, he had the confidence because he was being supported by the establishment, and clearly there was going to be no enforcement of workers' rights. But I suspect as well that his support that he was getting from the National Association of [for] Freedom and others was to indicate "just hold

³ Dispute between the print unions and News International over the Wapping plant.

⁴ Inquiry into the dispute chaired by Lord Scarman.

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on and you'll be OK." I mean, I'm certain that that was the case, and I think it's been borne out. So all he had to do was sit tight and he would attract all of the support from the establishment.

33. **CT:** Terrific. OK, what's your most powerful residing memory of the dispute?

34. **AF:** Thousands and thousands of people swirling around, on the one hand wanting to be there, whether they could see anything that was going on or not, but to try and be part of supporting workers, particularly workers in Grunwick. But also, unfortunately, on a personal basis, the three brothers themselves who were a part of that dispute now being dead: one at the time, one during the course of the miners' strike, and Bill of course more recently. But they symbolised a kind of a spirit of support and solidarity which had always displayed itself in Fleet Street, whether it was those three or any other groups of workers in Fleet Street. Fleet Street workers were much maligned – and we hear all the publicity about Mickey Mouse and so on – but they were the small minority. Most people were good people who'd got a good living and who were prepared to share their trade union experience with others and try and support others. That's what I'll remember, and the links between the Fleet Street and Grunwick at the time.

35. **CT:** Terrific!

Followed by shots of still photographs of print trade unionists marching with banners and being arrested on the picket line.