

## Summary and transcript of interview of Pat Thomson by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/16 part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places. Interview starts at 22:59.

### Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): need for solidarity between trade unionists (16, 46-48, 60, 66); distancing of Labour Party from trade union movement (36-40); TUC's lack of militancy (42-44); strong trade unionism among coloured people at time of interview (44); decline in militancy caused by national minimum wage (52).

### Transcript

[Sound check]

1. **CT:** OK, well let's start at the beginning: how did you hear about the Grunwick dispute?
2. **PT:** Every branch, of course, were getting letters in communication with other unions, and it probably come through to the branch through the TUC. And, obviously, any strike, any major strike, were discussed at the branch anyway; so through the branch.
3. **CT:** Had you heard anything about the dispute, about, you know, who was behind it, what the conditions – I mean, you know, what the cause of the strike was all about? What had actually filtered through to you?
4. **PT:** What we had heard were that – film-processing plant wasn't it? Run by, I think it were a bloke called Ward, were it? And that it were full of Asian workers, and because of this, and they couldn't get jobs elsewhere, he were exploiting them from the time they were open, and he were trying to exploit them more and more to run his business.
5. **CT:** Was it the trades council that officially – did it go to the Yorkshire NUM<sup>1</sup>? How did it –
6. **PT:** I've no idea of that. Most things that I followed come from through the branch, and then we decided. Obviously, I think they had come through area NUM.
7. **CT:** And what was decided? I mean, what did you – you were asked – what support was asked of you?
8. **PT:** Support from the branch was asked that they were going to get a bus up, and they'd like it filling, and anybody just put their name down and go up. And the feeling were that – solidarity in them days, even solidarity to coloured people, strange as it may seem – the bus got full easy.
9. **CT:** Right. And what was the sacrifice that people were making to go on the bus?
10. **PT:** Hardly anything, I think. It must have been a weekday; I don't know if it were a weekday. The Labour Party were in power then, weren't they?

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<sup>1</sup> National Union of Mineworkers.

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11. **CT:** Yes.
12. **PT:** Yeah. It must have been a weekday because the fact they were trying to open the factory weren't they? And get the scabs through into work.
13. **CT:** But I was just thinking, was it a loss of pay shift or, you know, I mean, the sacrifice for giving up the work was what?
14. **PT:** It probably was a shift, yeah, that's what I can think: that it were a shift loss. But they got paid; I don't know what we got paid food money, something like a tenner or something. **[25:58]**
15. **CT:** Wasn't there the feeling that this was a hammer to crack a nut? I mean, just a tiny little dispute, you know, a hundred workers, I think, at the most, out on strike in the backstreets of London. I mean, we weren't talking main industry here –big-time industry – and, you know, there, you know, people coming to the mighty NUM for support. Didn't people think "well, hold on a second, this is a bit out of scale here"?
16. **PT:** I think most people in them days – big unions were looking after small. And I think it what real start, you know things nearing [rearing] up like racism after Enoch Powell got the dockers to walk with him<sup>2</sup>. Yeah, I think it were deep in a lot of people's minds that it shouldn't be allowed to happen, even to coloured people, you know. We'd power enough to look after ourselves, but smaller unions like that needed support. They were part of same brotherhood, like.
17. **CT:** And when you got down there – how many times did you go?
18. **PT:** I went twice.
19. **CT:** And what happened?
20. **PT:** The first time it were pretty calm, you know, usual – I don't think they got buses through then. But the second time, on the big demonstration, you could see what were going to happen because they'd run horses out, they brought police horses, and there were thousands, not only trade union members, other people from other parts of London. And there were streets like this, terraced streets, nearly every house were a coloured person, you know, shops, all the shops were. And I think it were a push by [the] government [that] had decided that that bus were going to go in on that day for a psychological victory. And it did, with mass police force under a Labour government. They were determined. And I saw the horses across the street; I just couldn't believe it. I sat on a low wall, I thought "this is not right, this." **[28:05]**
21. **CT:** Were there lessons being learned then? Were you surprised that at, say, the style of policing?

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<sup>2</sup> Refers to support given by dockers to Powell following his 'rivers of blood' speech on immigration in 1968.

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22. **PT:** Well, I'd never – obviously there were not many big disputes before then where you could see anything like that; they were to come later. But I was surprised at them turning horses out. You know, and I mean, when the bus did go through, anybody looking on a documentary on that dispute will find out the bus got through when everybody had gone and it'd finished. And some of the TUC came along and the TUC advised the pickets to withdraw, didn't they? They advised them to come away and let the bus through, so I mean that shows you how things have changed. But that's true that.
23. **CT:** Absolutely, no, I was there. Now, were you aware of other solidarity action that other trade unionists were taking at the time? I mean, like the postmen.
24. **PT:** No, I don't know. Were they in dispute at that time?
25. **CT:** The postmen were really like the most effective front-line support they had because they were refusing to handle his mail, and he was a mail-order company, and that really had him. And then, of course, their own union turned round and said "oh, you can't do that", you know –
26. **PT:** No, I didn't know about that.
27. **CT:** Yeah, that was the terrible part of the story: that the local lads in the local sorting office said "we ain't crossing a picket line."
28. **PT:** Yeah.
29. **CT:** And then they – management collaborated with Ward at that post office for him to get it himself, and then no one handled it when he tried to post it in other areas.
30. **PT:** Yeah.
31. **CT:** And then it was only eventually when the leadership of that union said "oh, you can't do that, you're breaking the law" – some Post Office delivery law – and the officials were fined. I mean, [a] terrible moment in trade union history, in my view.
32. **PT:** Oh, I believe you, yeah.
33. **CT:** So I was – anyway just to – were you, I mean, how did you think about it? Here was a legitimate trade union dispute, where nobody could argue there was wrong, you know, the right to belong to a trade union for a small, you know, exploited group of people. And you had a Labour government in office, and a Home Secretary who was in charge of the police, and yet you had some of the most violent, you know, scenes on a picket line being attacked by a police force – a special police force, the SPG<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The Special Patrol Group of the Metropolitan Police.

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34. **PT:** Yeah, yeah.

35. **CT:** So how did that ring to you at that time? What were you thinking?

36. **PT:** Being a Labour supporter over a number of years, suspicion was starting in my mind that this is not what the Labour Party does. You know, you can expect police coming in heavy-handed when there's a Tory government, same as Thatcher in eighty-four/eighty-five<sup>4</sup>, but I started to wonder why, why would a Labour Government do this? You know, trying to suppress people's right to be in a trade union. And I think it were probably the start of the change of the Labour movement into – even in them days – into what were becoming New Labour: you know, distancing itself from the trade union movement.

37. **CT:** Was it embarrassed by its trade union relations?

38. **PT:** It was, it was embarrassed, and it is now, even more, wasn't it?

39. **CT:** I think so, yeah. I mean –

40. **PT:** I mean, even now, [the] row over funding: they started distancing themselves from the trade union movement over funding. And when they found out that some of these millionaires and cash for peerages<sup>5</sup> were going, they started coming back, for money off of trade union movement.

41. **CT:** Now, looking back at it, what is your view of the role of the TUC at that time?

42. **PT:** Well, most people on the picket lines thought that they'd been betrayed, which [with the] stance they took. But I mean, the TUC has never been – really come forward in helping in any dispute, have they? I mean, even from twenty-six<sup>6</sup>, they sold out then. And I think that's the general opinion with most people that's interested in the trade union movement.

43. **CT:** Because?

44. **PT:** Well, the secretary of the TUC, he's more or less an appointee of the prime minister. It's a nod and a wink, isn't it? I know he gets elected, but, I mean, it's a nod and a wink through the Labour Party's relationship with the trade unions. We've never really had a real militant one, have we? And there's most people don't even know [their] names now, because they're that quiet, you know. But I'll tell you what it were nice to see, if I can put this in: it were nice to see so many coloured people fighting for their rights, you know, it were really good, that. Same as is happening now; I know it's nothing to do with this, but the big strikes at London Airport and that. It's nice to see

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<sup>4</sup> The miners' strike of 1984-1985.

<sup>5</sup> Scandal in 2006-2007 over award of peerages in return for political donations.

<sup>6</sup> The General Strike of 1926.

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them. While our class, our working-class people, is leaving the unions in droves, coloured people are taking over. They realise the value of it.

45. **CT:** Absolutely. Just establish why you think the principles of the strike were so important.

46. **PT:** Well, the principles of that dispute in particular should ring true with any trade union member. I mean, you can't be in a massive union and think that other people can't be in a lesser one, smaller union. Because all you're doing [is] using your muscle power to get better conditions and wages, and distancing yourselves from them people that can't fight. And I think it always should be a united union; that's why the Labour Party were formed in the first place. It's no good sectionalising and thinking "I'm in the NUM" or "I'm in the T and G<sup>7</sup>, and it don't matter [about] everybody else." You know, "small unions, sod them!"

47. **CT:** Yeah, absolutely.

48. **PT:** Any trade unionist worth his salt, he don't only think of his own union, and blind loyalty to it. He thinks of the whole movement, doesn't he?

49. **CT:** On the picket line, I mean, there were MPs arrested.

50. **PT:** Yeah.

51. **CT:** The president of the NUM, Arthur Scargill, was arrested, other major leaders of trade unions. What was that saying to you?

52. **PT:** I'm a bit cynical because if you look at history, prominent people in the Labour Party then were leading demonstrations and going on picket lines, and these same people are now [in] the House of Lords and condemning people that's on strike. But what they've managed to do with this minimum wage and that, they've cut the number of strikes, because if you are in a factory, there's a hundred people there and ninety per cent of them are on guaranteed income, and you're a married man with one wife and a child, and you think you should be getting five pound rise, and they have a strike, they're all not going to vote to strike because their money's guaranteed. They'd be striking for nothing, you know. And they've managed to engineer a situation where there's no need for militancy, you know, is there? Hardly at all. [36:28]

53. **CT:** Let's go for a basic [one]: why do you think the dispute was lost?

54. **PT:** To Grunwick? For a start, they couldn't sustain the number of pickets, and every situation reaches a flashpoint, no matter what it is, miners' strike or anything. And once that flashpoint you get to that – like an incident in the miners' strike when they dropped that slab of concrete onto that taxi – that were the end of it, or if a policeman had have been killed that would have been the end

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<sup>7</sup> Transport and General Workers' Union.

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of it. A thing gathers so much momentum, all of sudden, bang! That incident happens and all the heart is ripped out of it because people don't believe in these sort of things happening.

55. **CT:** Did you think the trade union movement punched below its weight?

56. **PT:** Oh, definitely, at the top, yeah. We had individuals that tried hard, and individual MPs that's never changed their colour, you know, like Skinner<sup>8</sup> and Corbyn<sup>9</sup> and them: never changed their colour, stuck up for what they believe in, no cash for honours or nothing. And that's why they're not ministers.

57. **CT:** What do you think we've learned from that?

58. **PT:** From Grunwick?

59. **CT:** Yeah.

60. **PT:** We've learned that people can stick together if they're informed of what's happening, and they realise that the only way they can achieve owt [anything] is with solidarity. I mean, you've got – there's that may people now [with] no time to be in a union, but you go out and tell them that doctors are in a medical association, lawyers – all the top people have got their unions, and they know the value of them, working people don't. But if it's good enough for them – some of the biggest rises in union membership now is middle class, innit? Because they can see the value. Once you're out on your own, you're dead: pick you off, one at a time. That's what I think, anyway.

61. **CT:** Do you think it was a turning-point for trade unionism?

62. **PT:** I can't think of anything before that that set the trend. I think the trend was set there on mass picketing, because it were a success even though the bus got through. The bus didn't get through when the pickets were there. And if the TUC hadn't had a word with most of the unions involved in the picketing and tell [told] them to call them off, I think it'd've been a victory for the pickets. All they needed were for that bus to get through once and the strike's over then. It's a psychological victory; it's a symbolic victory, isn't it? To get that through.

63. **CT:** Were you aware of the forces that were supporting the owner and boss, George Ward?

64. **PT:** No, but I can understand that there would've been right-wing and top Tories. It were to their advantage politically to kill the unions, or neuter them, and that were one of the pieces in the jigsaw. That had got to be shown to fail, and I can understand that. But it were up to us to make sure we won, you know.

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Skinner.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Corbyn.

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65. **CT:** Do you think the trade union movement sort of walked away from it thinking “look, actually, we should have won, it’s sad, it was a deserving cause, but actually it’s not a problem. Let’s just quietly, you know, get back to business as normal with the Labour government”?
66. **PT:** Yeah, I think some of them did. But, I mean, if they’d have thought that in twenty-six – that example – there’d have never ever been a strike or serious action, would there? You know, you don’t get beat, you just get knocked back, and then you have another go, because it’s that important to people, even your own kids and grandkids, it’s that important to know that you’re not only protecting your own conditions you’re protecting them of your children [and] grandchildren. And it’s whether you think that that’s a positive way of doing it, you know, through going on the streets, militant action. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. [Indistinct] Poll Tax<sup>10</sup> it worked, didn’t it? But it depends on numbers, if you get enough numbers. And it of course depends on who’s in power. Now it don’t make no difference because the same team’s in power no matter who gets in: powers that be.
67. **CT:** Yes, I mean, my view is that I think if the Post Office had just stayed on it he couldn’t have operated at the end of the day. And the forces that were supporting him would have only supported him for so long, and in the end he wasn’t going to bankrupt his business.
68. **PT:** No.
69. **CT:** And if the Labour government had giv –

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<sup>10</sup> Refers to demonstrations leading to the government’s abandonment of the Community Charge in 1991.