

Summary and transcript of interview of Mary Davis by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): support for strike by National Union of Mineworkers (2-22); impact of the defeat of the strike (28); significance of involvement of non-white women (30); strikers' hunger strike outside TUC headquarters (41-52).

Transcript

1. **CT:** How significant was it that the miners came to the picket line and supported the dispute?
2. **MD:** I think it was significant symbolically. It wasn't that coal was being delivered, or anything like that, but as a show of solidarity, I think that was fantastic, absolutely fantastic, because it reflected a major shift in the National Union of Miners [Mineworkers], in the politics of the National Union of Miners, when Gormley's¹, you know, exit and now Scargill². Very, very different kind of attitude which, you know, this notion of the, you know – there is a commonality to all workers' struggles. Now, which all sounds terribly, you know, twee and so on, but it's not, it does mean something. So I think it was, you know, the NUM was regarded as the best organised union and so on, and it was prepared to, you know –
3. **CT:** But there are those that say, you know, up until Saltley³, you know, the miners, you know, solidarity like that was unheard of. It was when solidarity was provided for them that it turned them.
4. **MD:** Well, Grunwick proved otherwise, though, didn't it?
5. **CT:** No, no, that was them returning the favour. The engineers of Birmingham turned out to stop Saltley.
6. **MD:** Yeah, yeah, but that Saltley was after Grunwick.
7. **CT:** No.
8. **MD:** Course it was.
9. **CT:** No it wasn't.
10. **MD:** Yes, it was; it was during the miners' strike.
11. **CT:** Yeah, which one?

¹ Joe Gormley, president of the National Union of Mineworkers, 1971-1982.

² Arthur Scargill, president of the National Union of Mineworkers, 1982-2002.

³ Mass picket at Saltley Gate fuel storage depot in Birmingham during miners' strike of 1972.

Summary and transcript of interview of Mary Davis by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

12. **MD:** [Laughs] Yes, which one? Yeah.
13. **CT:** It was the one that produced – that killed Heath⁴. That had happened previously.
14. **MD:** Seventy-four. Yeah, you're right, you're right. But it was also eighty-four as well.
15. **CT:** Yes, but the whole issue of –
16. **MD:** I'm sorry, yeah, yeah –
17. **CT:** - solidarity, and people flying around the country, and people coming out in support of other strikers, well it was, the best demonstration ever was at Saltley, resulted in the fall of the Heath government, and the miners suddenly found out the importance of other workers supporting them. And so when other disputes, "hey, hey, this is what we all do now: we support each other."
18. **MD:** Well, that's all right.
19. **CT:** Yeah, yeah, no, no.
20. **MD:** It's good; it means that people learn from struggle, that's fine by me. Whatever their motives, the fact is that it had a very – I remember when they came and it had a terrific –
21. **CT:** So, you couldn't just start again: I remember the miners –
22. **MD:** I remember when the miners came, the first day they came, and it had a terrific impact. I mean, every group of workers who came was – but, you know, there they were with their wonderful banners and, you know, the sort of proud labour movement tradition bothering to support, you know, a group of Asian workers in this backstreet factory. I mean, it was terrific, and with bands and things. I mean, it was excellent, you know. It was the sort of thing you need because you do need a bit of a boost on a very cold morning very early on a picket line, it's great. **[3:03]**
23. **CT:** But now, for the first time on a large scale, we had large numbers of unions, that had previously appeared to have no other interest in, you know, other trade union activities, supporting each other. How frightening was that for the state?
24. **MD:** Well, I think that was the most frightening thing: that's what I was saying before. It's this whole solidarity thing, which of course with the postal workers resulted in the mail not being delivered. But the fact that what it was showing was that a united working class could be a very, very powerful element in the fight against a rogue employer, even if it might not have succeeded in toppling him completely, was I think very, very important. And I think that's why they had to break

⁴ Edward Heath, prime minister, 1970-1974.

Summary and transcript of interview of Mary Davis by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

those picket lines, why Merlyn Rees⁵ ordered [the] Special Patrol Group to come, and why Labour did everything it could to try and get this strike resolved – well, not resolved but ended. Resolved would be one thing; taking George Ward to court and stick[ing] him in prison would have been a great outcome, really.

25. **CT:** Terrific. Were you involved in any way in any of the meetings that the strikers went to to talk to other workers in terms of telling them what was happening on the picket line and asking, obviously, to support the picket line? Did you organise any of those, or were aware of any of those?
26. **MD:** I was aware that they were, but I had to go back to work, and I had a young child, so I just did my morning picket duty. But I was aware that it was happening and, you know, Brent Trades Council were doing a good job in informing people through trades councils and union branches and so on, so it was well publicised.
27. **CT:** Summary points: what signal do you think was sent out when the dispute was actually lost?
[5:00]
28. **MD:** Well, disappointment but not despair, because I genuinely do think it was at this boom time for the growth of trade unionism. And that it was, “OK, so they might think they’ve got away with it there, but they won’t get away with it elsewhere.” So I think there was disappointment; I mean, there had to be – I mean, two years and, you know. But I do think that it helped to engender a spirit of militancy because what it showed was that the machinery for dealing with recalcitrant employers didn’t work. And so, quite rightly, people said “what’s the point of all these things that the government set up when actually, when it comes to it, there’s no powers of compulsion to make an employer abide by what after all is the law on recognition?” I mean, you know, it wasn’t the law that exists today on recognition, which is just diabolical; I mean, recognition’s recognition. So I think there was disappointment, but – yeah, great disappointment.
29. **CT:** And the positives?
30. **MD:** I think I mentioned some of the positives. I mean, this, at long last, an awareness that the working class wasn’t white and male solely. There were, you know, black women at the forefront of the struggle, you know, who couldn’t just be patronised – people did like to try and do that, actually, that really got on my nerves during the dispute: you know, “little Mrs Desai⁶” sort of thing. But, I mean, she wasn’t like that; you know, she was absolutely fiery, feisty sort of woman, and so they all were, you know – not all, I don’t know them all, but, you know, ones I did know. But I think the positives were, I think I’ve mentioned them: you know, this linking of the hitherto completely separate spheres of class, race and gender, albeit for a brief period, but I think was really important. I can’t think of any other dispute led by black workers which was so significantly supported by white workers, white males included, and females, but I mean, you know, it presented a completely different image of the trade union movement, and one which those of us who are conscious of

⁵ Home Secretary at the time of the dispute.

⁶ Jayaben Desai, treasurer of the Grunwick strike committee.

Summary and transcript of interview of Mary Davis by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

needing to change the image of the trade union movement have continued to use. And I think that's a powerful image, you know, and one that I don't think will be forgotten or lost, although it's still an uphill struggle. **[8:08]**

31. **CT:** Just talk a little about any of the strikers you knew, and what you knew of them and their qualities.
32. **MD:** Well, I mean, I heard them as speakers and they were extremely powerful. I mean, Mrs Desai was – and there was several events that I went to subsequently. I can't remember them all, to be honest, I mean, no I really can't remember all of them.
33. **CT:** Your one residing powerful memory.
34. **MD:** Oh, my poor feet! Still give me trouble. Bloody police! If I ever needed any lessons on the role of the state in an industrial dispute my feet tell me it. But I can't personalise it, but I mean, they do give me trouble actually. And I just wish we'd been able to get these – oh, they were wicked! But, over and above my personal memory, I think the sheer elation of seeing the potential, the possibility for a mass unity to support workers in struggle, I mean, it really was. When you saw all the banners, all the bands, all the mass. I mean, it was phenomenal; no wonder they wanted to ban us picketing! But, I mean, it really was that there were mass demonstrations. They weren't just all pickets; I mean, you were only allowed just a few pickets but, I mean, it was incredible.
35. **CT:** Just what I wanted to clear up was on the day that the SPG attacked you, do you remember when that was? Was that early on?
36. **MD:** Very early in the morning. Oh, early in the dispute –
37. **CT:** - because there was the first picket, mass picket that was called, was actually a women's picket, and I just wondered if it was there. And that was when a lot of people were arrested, and there was a lot of violence, but it wasn't the SPG.
38. **MD:** No, it wasn't that. It wasn't the women's picket.
39. **CT:** And it was the SPG attack, which I filmed, was on November the seventh, which was the attempt to resurrect the picketing after the July the eleventh, which is the super picket, and then everyone, you know, thought it was all going to happen, the TUC were going to push the government, der, der, der, der, der. And then it all faded, and the postmen were pulled off and [?no] talk of other industrial action to support, and the strikers were pretty desperate and the, you know, the 'Day of Reckoning' it was called, November the seventh. And that's when the flying wedge came down the road, and that was formally known as the day of the SPG attack. I'm just wondering it that was [indistinct] you remember.
40. **MD:** It must have been then; it must have been then. Because I know it was the first day of the SP – I was told by other police that that was the first day they'd been there, but I don't know where it

Summary and transcript of interview of Mary Davis by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

fitted into in the history of it, because you just go and do your thing and blah-di-blah, so I don't know the chronology.

41. **CT:** Right, I think I can, I mean, just using the footage. Later, after that, the SPG attack on November the seventh, and the situation was getting very grim for the strikers, and they were putting pressure on the TUC: "come on, let's crank it up, what's happening to [it]?", you know. They started a hunger strike outside the TUC. Were you aware of that? And what was your response to it?
42. **MD:** Well, I was certainly aware of it and – well, it was desperate, wasn't it? I mean, it was – I never think that hunger strikes actually do anything, win the day, because in a way it's a reflection of desperation. I mean, and, unfortunately, isolation. I could completely understand them doing it, but I didn't think it had a hope in Hell of succeeding.
43. **CT:** It was there to shame the TUC.
44. **MD:** I know, I know, but it didn't. Shameless. [12:25]
45. **CT:** They certainly didn't want it and put an enormous amount of pressure for them not to do it.
46. **MD:** Sorry?
47. **CT:** The TUC certainly didn't want this hunger strike outside their door. Put a lot of pressure on them not to do it.
48. **MD:** No, no.
49. **CT:** Why was that?
50. **MD:** I don't know the detail, I don't know the detail. Well, I can imagine why, though.
51. **CT:** Go on.
52. **MD:** Well, they don't want to be shown up, do they? I mean, as being, you know, complicit in not supporting work[ers]. I mean, it looks so bad, doesn't it? You know, women in saris on hunger strike outside Congress House. It's not good for the image.
53. **CT:** There's Mrs Desai's famous quote, isn't there?
54. **MD:** What?
55. **CT:** Mrs Desai's famous quote is "support from the TUC is like honey on the elbow: you can see it and smell it but you can never taste it."
56. **MD:** Mm, mm.

Summary and transcript of interview of Mary Davis by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/19 part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

57. **CT:** Let me just stop.