

Summary and transcript of interview of Graham Taylor by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/08A part 3)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): education of the strikers in trade union procedure (8, 18, 26); autocratic manager in Grunwick mail-order department (30-32); appropriateness of APEX as the union joined by the strikers (40); support for George Ward from National Association for Freedom and consequent politicisation of Ward's outlook (48-56, 78); boycott of Grunwick mail by postal workers (60-76); initial success of mass picketing and subsequent loss of control of it by strike committee and Brent Trades Council, leading to involvement of far-left groups and incidents which damaged the strikers' cause (80-98).

Transcript

1. **CT:** Graham, we're just going to start at the beginning. How did you hear about Grunwick?
2. **GT:** Because I was on the Brent Trades Council, and Jack Dromey informed people about this minor altercation, and at first we didn't think it was, of course going to grow to the size it did get, so it was just another strike, really.
3. **CT:** I'm just going to go again on that because we had a helicopter, believe it or not, sitting over the top of that. So, just – yeah, how did it come to your notification?
4. **GT:** It came to the trades council, and at that time it was just one of several disputes that were going on in the area.
5. **CT:** And how did the trades council respond to it? And – yeah, and how did you get involved?
6. **GT:** Well, Jack was very keen to support the strikers right from the beginning, and he was secretary of the trades council. And I went round with him at the beginning of September in his car, and we went to local workplaces with the strikers, and we introduced the strikers to shop stewards and convenors all over Brent. [break]
7. **CT:** We're starting from the top. Yeah, so how did it all start?
8. **GT:** I was on the executive committee of the Brent Trades Council and Jack Dromey phoned me up. And he was very keen on the strikers' cause and we went round in his car, taking the strikers to various factories in the area, to convenors and shop stewards, introducing them. And it was very strange because the strikers, even after they'd joined [a] trade union, had no idea what a trade union was. They were complete innocents of the whole thing, and part of the taking them round by car was telling them about trade unions and how trade unions worked, so it was quite strange.
9. **CT:** Was this the first time that they'd tried to organise at Grunwick's?

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10. **GT:** It was the first time that *they* had tried to organised at Grunwick's. There had been a dispute in 1973 with T and G¹ drivers which had been defeated, but these people – the people in the mail-order department – had never thought of a trade union in the past.
11. **CT:** But as far as the trades council was concerned, did the company have a reputation that proceeded this?
12. **GT:** Yes, it did. It was thought to be an anti-union company because they'd squashed the attempt to organise the T and G there three years earlier.
13. **CT:** And was it considered [that it was] going to be a tough one? I mean, how did people view the prospect of the struggle to get the organisation in?
14. **GT:** Most people didn't know about the previous history of the company, and in any case lots of companies have various attempts at forming a trade union before one is formed, so I don't think that was a big obstacle to forming a trade union there, no.
15. **CT:** So there wasn't "oh my gosh, this is going to be a tough one"?
16. **GT:** No, no. No, no, because there were lots of companies like Grunwick where attempts had been made and failed, but it was in people's minds that they'd very stoutly resisted the T and G. It was in people's minds but it wasn't regarded as an insuperable obstacle.
17. **CT:** And what was the tactics? I mean, how did the – from the beginning, what was the tactics decided upon in terms of going forward?
18. **GT:** Jack sorted out their bulletin and APEX sent an official down and tried to get them organised and to teach them about how trade unions worked. And that took up several weeks; the strikers were still being rather undisciplined in trade union terms for some weeks after the start of the strike until they got into the swing of it.
19. **CT:** Meaning?
20. **GT:** Well, for example, the first time they walked out, on August the twentieth –
21. **CT:** Just pick up there again: the first time they walked out. Sorry, we had a bike.
22. **GT:** Alright. The first time – no, sorry, sorry, start again. To give you an idea of their ignorance of trade unions and how, sort of primitive, if you like, their ideas were, when they walked out – I'm doing this all wrong, sorry.
23. **CT:** No, no, OK. Just pick it up in your [own] time, you're absolutely fine.

¹ Transport and General Workers' Union.

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24. **GT:** Sorry, am I in the right position?

25. **CT:** Yeah, perfect.

26. **GT:** To give you some idea of how innocent they were, when they walked out on August the twentieth they had no idea of forming a trade union, and what they considered doing was letting down the tyres on Malcolm Alden's car – he was the manager in that department. And it was only when Jayaben² pushed the idea of a trade union that they started to think in those lines, and even then they didn't really know what a trade union was, and they had the idea of, sort of, talking to their friends who were still inside and getting them to come out on an informal basis in a sort of ad hoc sort of way. And APEX and the trades council had to just tell them how these things worked. And they had a problem, for example, with the newsletters; they produced a couple of newsletters that Grunwick's lawyers would have had a field-day with, because they were full of all sorts of gossip that couldn't be substantiated, and Jack had to sort of make sure that these were destroyed and proper newsletters were issued. That sort of thing. **[6:56]**

27. **CT:** So, just to go back one step, though, because, talking to some of the strikers – the men – some of them said "well, we actually only came out in support." They knew what was going on in the mail-order department was particularly grim, but in their own departments things were all right. They – you know, one said "oh, my manager was absolutely fine" – Johnny Patel.

28. **GT:** Yes.

29. **CT:** And I just wondered if you would have heard that story at the time. How many of them were directly involved and how many came out because of it was particularly bad in the mail-sort department?

30. **GT:** A lot of the managers were OK, and there were no difficulties. The problem was the mail-order department, and in the mail-order department they had the sort of logistical difficulty of achieving a quick turnaround of the photographs that were being processed. This was the basis of the business as far as Grunwick was concerned. And they employed in that department a manager called Malcolm Alden, who was very autocratic, and his job was to achieve the quickest possible turn-round. And for that end, in the summer months, they used compulsory overtime, and he imposed this compulsory overtime in a not very sensitive way, and this caused all sorts of frictions in that department. So certainly this was a problem for the mail-order department, and if it hadn't been for that manager in that department there wouldn't have been a strike in my opinion.

31. **CT:** And is it true that other people in other departments came out in support? Why was that?

² Jayaben Desai, later treasurer of the strike committee.

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32. **GT:** They did because they felt sympathy for the people in the mail-order department. Malcolm Alden had a reputation around the company, so they came out in solidarity, not because they had any particular grievances themselves.
33. **CT:** Now, meanwhile, back in the first days into the strike, how was the strike committee formed, and who got elected? And how did they become, as it were, a sort of disciplined trade union force?
34. **GT:** I wasn't involved in that. Jack did all of that with Len Gristy.
35. **CT:** Did you see the strike committee in operation?
36. **GT:** Yes, because they met in the trades hall.
37. **CT:** Just talk through, you know, what would happen at a strike committee meeting.
38. **GT:** I only went to one or two. And Jack was often there, and at other times they met on their own, and Jack became their big advisor, along with Len Gristy, the APEX official, those two. And, as far as I could see, by the time I went to one, they were well organised and they took minutes, and there was obviously quite a lot of agreement. But I didn't go to one in September, this was later on.
39. **CT:** Were you aware of how APEX came to be chosen as the union that they joined?
40. **GT:** Yes, Sunil phoned up the TUC and they recommended APEX. APEX was for white-collar workers, a photo finishing mail-order department sounded white-collar, so the TUC recommended it. I think also in the TUC's mind would be the fact that APEX had fifty per cent women in its membership, which was higher than nearly every other trade union in the country, and so from that point of view it was a very good choice. In fact, if Grunwick hadn't been such a recalcitrant employer, I think it was the correct choice. It was only later, with hindsight looking back, that we wished they'd joined the T and G, because the T and G was better organised and more militant and more experienced than APEX was. But probably at the time it was a reasonable recommendation.
[11:31]
41. **CT:** A lot of people say that Jack Dromey sort of led it, it was his strike, you know. How do you respond to that sort of position?
42. **GT:** Well, the strikers were very articulate and committed. In East Africa, many of them had run their own businesses. These were self-confident, middle-class people, and people like Jayaben Desai, whose husband had his own factory in Tanzania, they wouldn't have been pushed around by Jack Dromey, any more than they were pushed around by George Ward.
43. **CT:** So, yeah, talk through – I mean there was a year before it came to anybody's notoriety at all. It was only those intimate to the activities on Brent Trades Council and specifically –
44. **GT:** No, no, that's not correct, no. In November it was discussed in parliament, and this was because of the intervention –

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45. **CT:** You couldn't just start with the date: November seventy-six that would have been.
46. **GT:** Yes.
47. **CT:** OK.
48. **GT:** Right, yes, in November seventy-six it was discussed in parliament, and the reason was that the National Association for Freedom intervened. And the reason that they intervened was because the postal workers agreed to boycott the Grunwick mail, which of course hit this mail-order department which was the crux of their business. George Ward went to his MP – a bloke called Gorst – and Gorst was in the National Association for Freedom, which was a pressure group inside the Conservative Party, and they intervened by giving George Ward legal advice and by raising the issue in the House of Commons. So that was early November, and that was when it first came to wide attention.
49. **CT:** That brings up the point. So George Ward found NAFF, or did NAFF find George Ward?
50. **GT:** George Ward didn't know much about trade unions, and so he contacted his MP – his Conservative MP, John Gorst – and it was Gorst who put him in touch with the National Association for Freedom.
51. **CT:** And was he up for the sort of titanic struggle, and possibly the sacrifice of his company?
52. **GT:** I don't think he was at first, but as soon as NAFF intervened then he had several people advising him, and it seemed then – if you judge by George Ward's own book – it was then that he came to see himself as a standard-bearer for the freedom of employers everywhere.
53. **CT:** Did he like being embraced by the right-wing establishment?
54. **GT:** Well, he denies it. I mean, he says that he was very ambitious and that he wanted to get on – this is a phrase that recurs again and again in his book – and he just wanted to make lots of money and become as rich as his father was. And so I don't think he had any political aspirations or political perspective at all when the strike broke out.
55. **CT:** But as it got more involved and the support became stronger?
56. **GT:** I think he was slowly converted to taking a political stance. After all, these people were giving him free legal advice, they were raising things in parliament on his behalf, they were giving him all sorts of assistance, so naturally he identified with them.
57. **CT:** Now, just – we're touching on there the postmen. How did that postal boycott come about, and who did it and what effect did it have?
58. **GT:** The postal boycott came about because APEX –

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59. **CT:** Sorry, you couldn't start that again saying in November seventy-six, the postal boycott. It's just that there's so many because they came on and off; we'll just begin with the first one.
60. **GT:** Yeah, the first postal boycott in the November of seventy-six, that came about through APEX and Jack Dromey contacting people in the postal workers' union, particularly Tom Jackson³, but also because of contacts at the Cricklewood postal sorting office in the locality through Brent Trades Council. So basically, Jack Dromey, through Brent Trades Council, was contacting the postal workers locally, and APEX nationally was contacting Tom Jackson, so the two together made an impact on the UPW.
61. **CT:** So was it an initiative of support from Tom Jackson advising Cricklewood, or were Cricklewood taking the initiative?
62. **GT:** I think Cricklewood postal workers were the first ones to be contacted, and it was from the bottom upwards to Tom Jackson that the initiative came.
63. **CT:** Was Tom Jackson uneasy about it?
64. **GT:** I've no idea.
65. **CT:** Well, it was just I ask in the light of subsequent events.
66. **GT:** I think most of the trade union movement was bent over backwards to help the strikers in the autumn of seventy-six. At that time there was a big issue around recruiting immigrant workers to trade unions, and also about reducing the fears of white trade unionists who felt that they were being undercut or jobs were being stolen. And so the TUC and all the trade unions were very keen to help in the autumn. So we got tremendous support initially.
67. **CT:** And Ward responded to the boycott how?
68. **GT:** As far as I can make out, Ward felt devastated when he heard the news of the boycott because his entire business and all his profits depended on this one mail-order department, and if the mail was stopped his business was stopped. But that was when, in despair, he contacted his MP and the National Association for Freedom swung into action.
69. **CT:** And how long did that boycott remain?
70. **GT:** Only a few days, because the National Association for Freedom not only raised it in parliament they got a legal team on it and they questioned whether such a boycott was legal under the Post Office Act, and I think Tom Jackson backed off a little bit because there was a prospect of legal action. And what happened was that a deal was struck, and that Tom Jackson and the postal

³ General Secretary of the Union of Post Office Workers.

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workers said to Grunwick “we’ll end the boycott if you agree to co-operate with ACAS⁴, the government mediation service,” and that’s what happened.

71. **CT:** If it’d kept up, if they hadn’t taken the boycott off then with the threat of legal action, do you think the dispute would’ve been won then?
72. **GT:** It’s hard to say because, judging from what happened subsequently, it seems that the National Association for Freedom might have been able to prove in the courts that the Post Office would have been in breach of the Post Office Act, and so therefore I don’t think it would have made any difference. [19:58]
73. **CT:** But, if he postal workers, despite it being an illegal act, had maintained it on a local, if you like, ‘wildcat’ basis.
74. **GT:** You see, that didn’t arise at the time because it wasn’t a big nationwide strike, you know, it hadn’t received the publicity that it later received. There were lots of strikes like Grunwick; London was full of these sorts of employers who were exploiting cheap labour, and so therefore there was no reason why at that stage postal workers should have put their jobs on the line just for this one dispute and not for many others that were taking place.
75. **CT:** I asked that because I’ve asked most people was there a moment when the dispute could have been won, and was it that, in your view? Was it at that time?
76. **GT:** No.
77. **CT:** When was the moment you thought the dispute could have been won?
78. **GT:** I think that after the National Association for Freedom intervened the dispute could never have been won because I think that the National Association for Freedom was backed by an awful lot of politically powerful and financially powerful people, including Mrs Thatcher. And I think that they had a very high political agenda worked out: they were going to repeal the Labour Party’s employment legislation, they were going to wreck ACAS, and they were going to get a Conservative right-wing government elected, and that was their agenda right from the beginning.
79. **CT:** Others have said the trade union movement boxed below its weight, and if it boxed its full weight as a co-ordinated force it could have won.
80. **GT:** It depends what you mean by boxing below its weight. I myself thought it boxed above its weight because I think that at various times it went over the top and alienated public opinion unnecessarily, and it should have boxed within its weight.
81. **CT:** For example by?

⁴ Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service.

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82. **GT:** Well, I think the mass picketing was mishandled. I think after the first week of the mass picketing – from June the thirteenth to seventeenth – they should've kept to what had previously been agreed and had been voted on by the strike committee: of suspending it and then saying "perhaps in a month's time we'll have another mass picket," and then waited to get the results of that first week. But by endorsing indefinite mass picketing they then let the strike go out of their control because anybody in the country could turn up on that picket line from then on and do whatever they liked. And the strike committee had no control over that, Brent Trades Council had no control, APEX had no control, and the result was some ugly incidents occurred which didn't help the strikers at all but only benefitted the agendas of various far-left political groups. [23:26]
83. **CT:** They and some would argue, and others have argued that I've interviewed, well actually, the mass picket was no more than actually a demonstration outside a factory, and it was confrontational policing tactics that actually produced the violence, and it was about how many people could stand on the picket line, random selective arrests plucked out from people in the crowd. This produced the tension, the aggravation and the newspaper headlines that was to give mass picketing such a bad press.
84. **GT:** You have to distinguish between the first week of mass picketing and the subsequent weeks. In the first week of mass picketing all the sympathy was going towards the strikers. The mass picketing started with a so-called women's picket – women only – and the police had obviously been instructed to take a firm line, and they piled in, but because it was a women's picket the photographs that emerged for the press looked terrible for the police and looked terrible for the authorities, looked terrible for Grunwick, looked wonderful for the strikers, looked wonderful for the pickets. And all of that first week it was all up-beat as far as the strikers were concerned, and on the Friday there was another confrontation with the police because this SPG – Special Patrol Group – was ordered in, and they made a number of quite brutal arrests at the rear of the factory. And there again, the newspaper coverage was quite favourable to the pickets and the strikers. Now, it was at that point, on the Friday, that I think the original decision of the strikers should have been kept. If the mass picket had been called off on that day, which is what they'd voted for, then they would have got several benefits from that week of mass picketing, and they would have lost all the bad publicity they got from the subsequent mass picket. For example: that weekend was the weekend –
85. **CT:** I'm just going to stop you. We've just got a lorry reversing with a very loud – let's see if it goes [break]
86. **GT:** The first mass picket was a women's mass picket, and the police had obviously decided to take a very firm stand, and they went in in a very heavy-handed way. And so all the pictures that came out of that, and all the publicity on that first day was very favourable to the strikers and to the pickets, and a lot sympathy was gained. [break]
87. **CT:** OK, we're picking up from the first picket.
88. **GT:** Right. The first picket was a women's picket, and – I'm sorry, I've lost track.

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89. **CT:** No, that's OK. It was the mass picket really, wasn't it? The first mass picket.

90. **GT:** The first week of the mass picketing was very favourable to the strikers. The first day of it – the Monday – was a women's only picket, and the police had obviously been told to take a firm stand on the first day, and they went in in a very heavy-handed fashion. And there were pictures in the newspapers of women being seized by police officers and being dragged into police vans, and all the publicity was favourable to the strikers. And in fact the whole of that week the publicity was good, and on the Friday at the end of the week, the Special Patrol Group – the SPG – repeated the police's blunder on the Monday and went in again at the back of the factory and removed lots of pickets, including many women, in a very rough, even violent, fashion. And again, there were reports in the newspapers that created a lot of sympathy for the strikers. Now, the mass picketing had only been decided on for that one week – that's what the strike committee had voted – but on the Friday it was decided to extend the mass picketing into the following week, and it was that decision, I think, that was probably an error because, in the subsequent weeks, the strikers didn't gain any more sympathy. In fact, they lost sympathy, whereas at the end of the first week they'd won a lot of support. And it was that weekend that the government ministers first discussed the idea of a court of enquiry, which became the Scarman Enquiry before the end of June, before the end of that month. And also, on the Monday following the Friday picket, the Cricklewood postal workers voted to impose a boycott on the mail. So the boycott of the mail, and the probability of a court of enquiry, had both been gained at the end of that first week because it'd been so successful and had generated such sympathy and support, even in government circles, for the strikers, and Grunwick had become quite isolated. The problem with extending the mass picketing indefinitely, in effect, was that then all sorts of people from all over the country, and all sorts of ultra-left groups, arrived on the picket line in the following weeks, and the strike committee had no control on this. They tried, but they really couldn't control it, and the trades council couldn't control it, the TUC, APEX, felt that the whole thing had gone out of control. And there were all sorts of incidents then occurred which either did put the pickets in a bad light or were used by the media to put the pickets in a bad light. And all that goodwill that they'd generated in the first week was dissipated in the remaining two or three weeks of June. And there were incidents, for example, in the following week where a policeman was hit by a bottle thrown by we don't know who from a crowd. And it wasn't just that: there were all sorts of incidents filmed and reported in the paper in the following week of pickets abusing police and abusing people they thought were blacklegs and threatening people. And all these people doing the abusing and the threatening, they were nothing to do with the strike or the strikers. These were people we'd never met before who suddenly appeared near the picket lines, and there were even allegations that some of them were agents provocateurs who were in there to cause trouble for the strikers, but that was never of course proved. The thing that we did know for certain was that the strike was running out of control.

91. **CT:** But Jack Dromey, at the time, was aware that there could be a Scarman Report, was saying "keep up the mass picketing. Thank you the miners for coming down, thank you all the trade union delegations that came [from] throughout the country to give them support, because we know, as soon as it drops out of the public eye, things have a tendency to go against us, and we want the support there at the time of the enquiry so that we have maximum impact, because once we're all back at work, that's the cooling-off, that's the traditional time that things tend to go against us."

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92. **GT:** This was after the enquiry started. I think the enquiry was set up at the end of June, and that's when people often said "well, we must keep the mass picket going," but even then it should have been kept going in a controlled way, not in the sense of indefinite picketing. There could have been dates fixed for controlled demonstrations, and that would have kept it in the public eye. It would have been quite easy, for example – at the end of that first week, which was so beneficial – to have fixed a next mass picket for July the eleventh, and focussed on that. And that would have allowed the court of enquiry to be set up, it would have allowed the postal workers to go ahead with their boycott, and we could have seen the results of that. And the pressure would still have been there because everyone would have known that another mass picket was coming up the following month. So there wouldn't have been any release of the pressure, but the whole thing would have been done in a much more controlled way.
93. **CT:** So you think the continuous picketing that led up to July the eleventh was a mistake.
94. **GT:** Yes, I do, yes, simply because it was not in the control of the strike committee.
95. **CT:** But they weren't stopping it, were they? They were encouraging it, they did want people to come. People weren't coming despite the strike committee they were coming –
96. **GT:** There were lots of people urging them on. There were lots of people on the far left, but not just on the far left, there were people who were just interested in discrediting the Labour government and wanted to make some sort of protest against the government's policies. And so they just wanted the picketing to continue. They thought the first week had produced good results, the first week had produced great results, so lots of people on the left said "well, let's continue with it then." But even at the time I was uneasy about it, and I think it was a case of hubris. Once you've made such good gains it was a time to draw back and consolidate those gains, while keeping the idea of a mass picket hanging in there like the Sword of Damocles.
97. **CT:** So do you think the trades council made an error, then?
98. **GT:** Yes, the trades council made an error, definitely. I think the trades council, like a lot of other people, got carried away with the success of that first week. There was a very interesting meeting at that time which was this: that some of the Indian women strikers raised the idea, with the trades council and on the strike committee, of using their traditional tactics, the tactics of Gandhi of passive resistance. And we had a big discussion –