

Summary and transcript of interview of Vipin Magdani by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/20)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): strikers' largely unsuccessful attempts to persuade those still working to join them (1-6); support from miners (8-14); doctor's refusal to treat Magdani for injuries sustained on picket line (8); reasons for calling off the strike (16-22); the useful experience and pride derived by Magdani from his involvement (22-26, 30); assistance given by Jack Dromey and Tom Durkin of Brent Trades Council (31-34); largely inadequate support from TUC and APEX (35-42, 52); reaction of Asian community to failure of strike and the community's attitude to trade unionism (57-65).

Transcript

1. **CT:** Did you have any contacts with the workers that were still working inside? And what sort of discussions did you have with them to try and persuade them to join you? And was that outside the factory or inside the factory?
2. **VM:** What we did was go to the Indian community, the local community, asking them to visit those people who was carrying on working to persuade them to join the strike. So that type of pressure was going on through the community every day, like: meeting them [at] functions [at] the weekends, like, you know. And over the strike period, over the two years, there was always one or two coming out and joining the strike, but [it] wasn't enough. Yes.
3. **CT:** I mean, how were they applied? Was it a sort of "look, if we all do this together" or "look", you know, as a solidarity thing, "you're taking some – if you're working you're making our job more difficult"?
4. **VM:** What came out very strongly while we were speaking to these people who were carrying on working, as we had come out on strike, and as time went by, George Ward was rewarding them, and they had increased their salaries and the conditions were getting better. So the guys who was carrying on, or the ladies who [were] still carrying on working were saying "look, we're getting whatever we want, and the conditions are much better, we're getting paid more now, and some of us have got promoted," like, you know. So that's the tactics George Ward did, which wasn't there when we were working. So a lot of people got promoted, their salaries got increased, they were getting bonuses, and they were well looked after. So that made [it] difficult for us to ask them to join the strike.
5. **CT:** Did they feel guilty about that?
6. **VM:** Some of them did, but not all of them because at the end of the day they said "look, I'm getting what I'm getting, so why should I?" Yeah.
7. **CT:** Jump forward now. The impact of the miners coming: what was that like and how significant was it?
8. **VM:** I think [the] miners coming on the picket line – I remember the mass picket on the eleventh, and I was with the miners on the picket line and it was [a] great feeling. And again, it was outside

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this world, to have that feeling. And I was in the forefront of that picket line on that day, and there was a lot of pushing and shoving going around, and in fact I fell over, and next thing I could see was total darkness. I got trampled over because the police were trying to hold onto miners breaking through the cordon. And next thing I remember I was in Northwick Park Hospital, and when the doctor came to see me and said “are you one of the strikers?” And I said “yeah”, and he said “I don’t think I’ll treat you,” and he walked away from it. And that was really annoying and hurtful, like, you know. [At] the end of day I’m a patient, and he shouldn’t be doing that, like, you know. But [at] the end of the day the miners’ support was brilliant, it was outside this world, and you can never do that again, that will never happen again. From [a] personal point of view it was brilliant.
[3:10]

9. **CT:** Terrific, terrific. I mean, presumably when – because initially the miners came down before, just a few came down.
10. **VM:** Yeah, there was as a small – I think it was about five thousand came down, and that was good as well.
11. **CT:** Terrific, terrific.
12. **VM:** Again, we visited a lot of mines up and down the country while we were in the strike.
13. **CT:** Talk about that, the visits to the mines.
14. **VM:** Mines and the committee meetings in the evenings, where we were looked after, and the support we were given, like, you know, it was outstanding.
15. **CT:** Now, when did you start to feel that this dispute wasn’t going to be won?
16. **VM:** I think after the mass picketing had ended, and the Cricklewood post office action was stopped, and there was no commitment, or there’s no commitment from [the] TUC coming to cut off the electricity, the water, and at that time we said “we’re getting nowhere, and we’re not going to win.” And at that time people were just drifting away from the strike, looking for other jobs, but then we still carried on, the core people still carried on, until the decision was made to call it off.
17. **CT:** And how was that made?
18. **VM:** Again, we looked at the whole process, the time, what we had done, the pressure applied, mass picketing didn’t achieve anything – well, it achieved a lot of support; we showed, you know, the country that the minority people can be supported by trade unions, so there were a lot of lessons learned and a lot of history made. But then it came to a point that we did that, we didn’t get anywhere; we applied a lot of pressure on the government, we didn’t get anywhere; applied a lot of pressure from the TUC, we haven’t got anywhere, so it’s time to call it off, like, you know.
19. **CT:** And how emotional was that final meeting? I mean, how did the –

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20. **VM:** It was very disappointing, and there was a lot of people crying as well, and it was [a] sad day, that day, very sad day. [5:17]
21. **CT:** I mean, were there those that wanted to go on whatever?
22. **VM:** I wanted to carry on, but then I had to be realistic and say “look, we’re not going to get nowhere.” But the good part was, OK, we lost the strike, but the support we had achieved, the friends we made through the trade union, the things we learned through the process. And, as I said earlier, you could go to any college or any university, you would never, ever learn that. And I think that was [a] benefit and [an] achievement, and we were proud of that. Even if we lost the strike we were proud of it.
23. **CT:** The high point for you personally in the whole dispute.
24. **VM:** I think the strike, the dispute, made me a better man. If I look over the years now, if I didn’t have that, I don’t know what type of person I would be now, but that has made me a different person.
25. **CT:** Any residing memories that you have that just will always be with you from the dispute.
26. **VM:** I think until I die the dispute will be still there. And like [a] few months ago when we went to Kilburn Town [?Hall], and that was memories brought back, and again, after so many years, you can see so many people still so much interested in the strike, and it was fantastic. And the history, this history’s not going to die, it will be there.
27. **CT:** I was just thinking of you standing on the picket line and what memories you have of that, the sort of high moments of solidarity.
28. **VM:** I think [the] high memory is to have so many people on the picket line supporting the minority of people, that was the biggest. I couldn’t believe it, and you could never have thought that that could happen, but it did.
29. **CT:** What happened to you after the strike?
30. **VM:** I looked for a job, and I went for quite a few interviews and, “where did you work last?” “Grunwick’s”, “don’t want to know you.” But Barry Jackson, the T and G¹ district officer, got me a job for a local company in Park Royal, a company called Expandite, and then I became a shop steward and become a union convenor. Because of my lessons and skills and the knowledge I achieved during the strike, helped be to become a good convenor, and I negotiated for my members in the workplace, and I was very good at my job.

¹ Transport and General Workers’ Union.

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31. **CT:** Terrific, terrific. A lot of people at the time said “oh, it’s Jack Dromey² who’s leading this dispute, and it’s all Jack Dromey.” And what do you have to say about that?
32. **VM:** If people were not involved with the strike committee, that’s the perception people got, but every decision which was made was made by the strike committee. Jack gave us a lot of advice, and we took his advice on board, listened to other people and then made the decision. But Jack was a pillar of the strike at the time because the support he gave us, the advice he gave us was good advice, but [at] the end of the day the strike committee made the decisions.
33. **CT:** And what was your knowledge and understanding of Tom Durkin³?
34. **VM:** Tom Durkin was brilliant again. And again, Brent Trades Council gave us so much support: we used their facilities, and every time we had issues we could go to Jack or Tom and they would be there to help us out.
35. **CT:** Terrific, terrific. Did you ever have a meeting with the TUC leadership, with Len Murray⁴? What happened?
36. **VM:** Yeah, as I said earlier in the interview, we visited to TUC House⁵ on several occasions, met Len Murray person-to-person round the table with APEX national officers, I think one meeting Mr Grantham⁶ was there as well. And again, as I said, we were getting [a] lot of lip-service but there was no action following that.
37. **CT:** What did they actually say to you? I mean, what were the. . . ?
38. **VM:** Again, we were given [a] lot of support: “we’re going to do this for you, you’ve got the TUC behind you, you’re not alone, we will win this dispute.” And it was fantastic, brilliant lip-service. Yeah.
39. **CT:** And when did you start to feel “these guys actually are all talk and no delivery”?
40. **VM:** I think the time we went on hunger strike outside [the] TUC, that’s the time. [Indistinct] just lip-service, no action. The only way we can [could] change their minds and ask them to do something different was by going on hunger strike.

² Secretary of Brent Trades Council.

³ Chairman of Brent Trades Council.

⁴ General secretary of the Trades Union Congress.

⁵ Congress House.

⁶ Roy Grantham, general secretary of APEX.

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41. **CT:** I mean APEX, in terms of the union, had no experience in running an industrial dispute, a long-term strike. I mean, I don't think they'd run a serious strike.
42. **VM:** That was very evident as the strike went along, that APEX was not the right union to be joining, and it would have been better if we were T and G, because they knew how to run the disputes. And when I did become a convenor and shop steward in my next job it was T and G. The advice and the knowledge, the professionalism – I think the T & G would have been a better union.
43. **CT:** Was it just purely a coincidence that you joined APEX?
44. **VM:** Again, I think, if I remember correctly, when we did come out on strike, [a] lot of unions thought this is a good ground to increase their membership, and if we can win this dispute that will be the starting-point of getting all ethnic people in the union, and it would have been a big thing if we had won the strike. [11:12]
45. **CT:** That's interesting, isn't it? I mean, did you have various options, then, which union?
46. **VM:** There were quite a few unions at the time asking us to join, and we said "we've joined APEX already."
47. **CT:** That's interesting, I didn't know that, I didn't know that.
48. **VM:** The unions thought that way. They thought that by getting these people onto the union the strike will just probably end up in a couple of months' time, and then the rest will follow, like, you know. Nobody anticipated that this strike will carry on for two years, and the amount of money they spent, because APEX did spend a lot of money, they did.
49. **CT:** Absolutely. Did Roy Grantham come down to Brent Trades Hall?
50. **VM:** Yes, he did.
51. **CT:** To talk to you? What did he say? And how was he greeted?
52. **VM:** Again, in [the] early days, every time he came people were glad that at least he's down, and he gave his moral support, gave all the support, said the right things at the time, and it was brilliant. But as the time went by, we started to learn and understand that only certain things were coming forward. But from [a] financial point of view we got hundred per cent support from APEX, like, you know.
53. **CT:** Terrific. One question about when the strike – when you knew the strike was lost: was there a moment when you actually thought "we really aren't going to win this one"?
54. **VM:** I think the first year we thought we were going to win it, but when we went into the second year, and there was still a hope, and every day there was a hope that something will happen. But then as time went in the second year, then we said "we're just not going to win it."

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55. **CT:** Did you ever believe that the scale of the thing had got out of control, and that would never work in your favour?
56. **VM:** No, no. I thought that by getting out of control is [a] good thing for us: that we got the publicity, the publicity would put more pressure on Ward to give in, like, you know, so it was going towards the right way. Yes, so [we] never thought that by exhalation [sic] of the publicity it would go against us, no.
57. **CT:** Terrific. Do you think there were consequences within the Asian community for losing dispute, or that the dispute wasn't won?
58. **VM:** Probably yes, yeah, yeah, because [the] amount of publicity, and [the] amount of people who stayed on the picket line and stayed on the strike, and the only reason they supported the strike and carried on on the strike [interruption by sirens]
59. **CT:** Just wait for this. I'll ask the question again.
60. **CT:** The fact that the strike failed in its objective [of] union recognition, do you think that had consequences within the Asian community? [14:12]
61. **VM:** Yes, yeah, because initially to have Asian women still be on strike for two years, and the only reason they carried on was because they had support from the community, from their families. And if they didn't have that support, or the support from families or the community, then they would have just walked away from the strike. But because they carried on for two years, and it was disappointing for the community as well.
62. **CT:** How do you think – do you think trade unionism is viewed differently now by the Asian community?
63. **VM:** I think as time has gone by, and if you look at the unions in [the] seventies and eighties were much [?]more powerful, and if you look at them now they're not [as] powerful [as] they used to be. So probably that has happened.
64. **CT:** I mean, that's general within everybody's attitude towards trade unionism; it's no longer the forefront that it was; it's been allowed to be marginalised, I would say. And I just wondered if that effecting, sort of, recruiting patterns, or is it no different with any community?
65. **VM:** No, it's the same. Like, you know, you saw that strike on British Airways recently – was it six, seven months ago? – Gate Gourmet⁷. So again, [the] majority of workers were Asians, yeah, and I did work for Gate Gourmet for [a] short period of time, for three months.

⁷ Refers to industrial dispute involving the company which provided in-flight meals for British Airways.