

Asian Women making History in British working class

The Great depression in 1928 along with the Second World War left Britain with an economic down turn. She continued to experience unprecedented hardship until 1945 which was classed as year zero. However, with newly created opportunities for rebuilding Britain, the economy began to grow at a gradual pace. By 1950s Britain experienced a rapid economic growth. However, with loss of personell in the war and a vast number becoming disabled or too ill to work, the growth of the economy could not be sustained. British people opted for the higher paid skilled jobs leaving lower paid semi and unskilled ones unfulfilled. The British Government was left with no choice but to attract a labour force from abroad and opened job centres in many large cities of the Indian sub-continent and many African countries. While the workers from African countries filled jobs in the Health and transport sectors, the Asian male migrants workers entered Britain on a work permit to fill the jobs in heavy industry.

In the 1950s and early 1960s Asian migrant workers were primarily males, a vast majority of them were from villages in Punjab and Gujarat in India, although many Gujaraties also emigrated from East Africa. Immigrants from Pakistan were generally from Mirpur, Punjab and Azad Kashmir while Bangladeshi were from Sylhet. Being, predominantly from an agricultural and self - employed background they lacked the experience and knowledge of industrial relations. They joined different industries depending on the country of their origin and where their brethren's before them had settled. For example those from Pakistan moved to the North and went in textile industry while Indians joined the service industry in the South and motor industries, factories and foundries in the Midlands.

These male migrant workers didn't wish to settle in Britain and planned to return to their home countries as soon as they had saved enough money. However, by 1960 the British economic growth slowed down which meant the post war economic boom came to an end. Unemployment was now rising rapidly and cheap labour from overseas was no longer required. To stop mass immigration, the British Government therefore imposed racist immigration legislation in 1962 making travelling to and from Britain extremely difficult. Pre-1962, migrant workers could come and go from Britain as they pleased without restriction. Post 1962, Asian males had no option but to call their wives and children to join them in Britain. This was the first steps towards Asian communities settling permanently in Britain. Some of the challenges faced by these settlers were racism, poor housing and extreme exploitation at work. Asian workers were not supported by the Trade Unions on an equal footing despite the fact that in any workforces the majority of the workforce were Asians and they were members of these Trade Unions. In the wake of this, the Indian Workers Association (IWA) was set up, first in the Midlands then expanding to other areas of Britain. The IWA worked militantly to gain equal industrial rights and opportunities for promotion. It was the IWA that forced the then Labour Government to commission an enquiry into a corrupt firm in the Midlands. This enquiry highlighted exploitation and discrimination of Asian workers. The corrupt management in the company were found to only offer work to those Asian individuals that paid a vast quantity of cash and goods in the form of a bribe.

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Asian Women Workers

As mentioned above, the Asian workers who came from the Indian subcontinent belonged to agricultural village communities while those that emigrated from East Africa were from business communities. Asian women didn't work outside their homes although they did work as hard as their male counterparts; either on the farm or in the family business. Just as their male counterparts, Asian women were also unaware of industrial relations. As the family finances were controlled by male member, usually the head of the family, having a wage packet at the end of the week was a new experience for Asian female workers. This brought a mixed feeling of excitement, anxiety, personal liberation and a sense of economic power.

Initially, Asian women opted for home working rather than going out to work. This offered them an opportunity to earn a wage as well as continue their normal household duties. However, they soon realised that they had no work pattern and earned considerably less compared to those women working outside the home.

By the mid-seventies Asian women started moving out of home working and joined their white female counterparts in the factories. However, they concentrated in the lower paid textile and small engineering industries or in service sector jobs such as cleaning. They soon realised that not only were their earnings lower but they were treated differently to their white female counterparts. They were also subject to racist remarks made by white workers and management. In response to ill treatment and in order to improve working conditions, Asian women initiated industrial action. Imperial Typewriters, Grunwick Photo Processing laboratories, Cutters Paint Factory, Chix Bubble Gum factories, Burnsall, and Gate Gourmett Catering Firm are some examples of landmark protests in the history of the British working class struggle. These struggles were not only stance against exploitation, but were for the protection of self respect and dignity. As well as racist management, Asian women had to fight the Trade Union bureaucrats,

we will see later. The Failure of the Grunwick strike was a direct result of respected Trade Union and the Trade Union Congress betraying the workers. However, despite the defeat, the strike proved to raise class and trade union consciousness.

Imperial Typewriters

Imperial Typewriters, a large firm in Leicester, employed thousands of workers. In some departments, the majority of workers were Asian females. Their working conditions were different to those of the white female workers; their work load was regularly increased at short notice, they had an increased quota which forced them to work faster to meet their deadlines. The Management denied them a bonus if they did not meet the set target. They were also denied an official tea break so one worker from each line would go to the canteen, without the foreman's knowledge, to fetch tea for everyone else. If their manager found out, he shouted at them and insulted them in front of all other workers. In protest of these inhumane working conditions, ill treatment and racism from the management, 39 Asian workers from section 61, 27 of which were Asian women, walked out on strike. The date was on the 1st of May 1974. Within two days another 500 workers from same section joined the initial 39 workers. It soon came to light that Asian workers were paid £4 per week less than the white worker backdating to 1972.

The Trade Union refused to support the strike because the workers had not followed strike procedures and that their demands were not clear. The Union Convenor also used stereotypical language and stated that Asian workers didn't understand industrial relations and he felt sorry for them being dumped into British civilisation.

Workers returned to work having won only a small fraction of their demands. The strike was seen to be a defeat by many, while for Asian female workers it was a victory as one of the workers involved put:

"The first day I came back to work, my manager asked me what I had gained in the twelve weeks. He was making fun of me I know. I told him that I lost a lot of money but had gained a lot of things. I told him I had learnt how to fight against him for a start. I told him he couldn't push me around any more like a football from one job to another. I told him I now know things I did not know before. In the past when I used to get less money in my wage packet I used to start crying at once. I did not know what else to do. I told the foreman, next time I won't cry I will make him cry."

Grunwick Strike

In the summer of 1976, a middle aged Gujarati Lady, Jayaben Desai made a history in the British working class struggle. She single handedly challenged the bullying management which forced her to do overtime. She walked out of the Photo Processing Factory with her son who also worked there. She led the famous Grunwick Strike that attracted the attention of mass media nationally and internationally. This was the first landmark moment that shattered the methodical image of

Asian women being docile and subservient beings, only capable of making chapattis. Jayaben's challenging comments became famous worldwide. She said;

"You are not running a factory, but a zoo. There are many animals, some are monkeys that dance on your finger tips, others are lions who can bite your head off, we are those lions Mr. Manager."

Within hours of Jayaben walking out, other workers also joined her and the Grunwick strike began. Similar to the Imperial Typewriter dispute, workers at the Photo Processing firm were also Asian females forced to work in inhumane working conditions. They had limited toilet breaks, were subject to racial harassment and bullying from management. They were paid below the average national wage. Wearing a sari and a cardigan, holding a white handbag in one hand and a placard in the other, Jayaben Desai became a symbol of the Grunwick strike. She did not only stand with her son and other workers at the picket line, she visited many workers and their families encouraging them to join the strike. The strikers joined the association of Professional Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff (APEX). They faced police brutality and Jayaben was arrested. Instead of weakening the protestors, Police aggression had the opposite effect. They became more militant and stood up to the management on the picket line, answering back to their racist and derogatory remarks. They demanded an equal role on the strike committee and refused just to make tea while men stood on the picket line. Images of sari wearing protesters waving placards and grappling with police filled the newspapers and television bulletins. The strike was televised in the main national news and attracted a mass picket, gaining support from Mine Workers and many other working class entities. Arthur Scargill stood on the picket line with Jayaben.

However, the strikers soon realised that APEX was failing to adapt a strategy to approach linked firms to boycott Grunwick or to approach the Post Office Workers Union to cut off Grunwick mail supply. APEX was aware that winning without getting support from other unions was impossible but they too slow to act. The dialogue between ACAS and the management team failed with management refusing to recognise the union. Instead of taking advantage of a mass picket that reached 2500 on June 1977, APEX called for a limited picket of 500. The TUC issued a statement that violence at the picket will not be tolerated by the strikers and the police alike. Police aggression was hardly reported by the press while the images of injured police covered the national press.

In the protest of Bureaucratic approach by APEX and the TUC, four members of the Strike Committee (including Jayaben Desai and Yasu Patel) went on strike in front of TUC Headquarters. They were all suspended from APEX and their strike pay was withdrawn.

Although the union did not get recognition by the management of Grunwick, Jayaben said she was proud of her actions for leading the historic strike. She added; they wanted to break them but

they were not broken. Their action enabled Asian women to join trade unions and take industrial action to this day.

Jayaben was honoured with a Woman of the Year Award in 2006 on the 30th anniversary of the Grunwick Strike.

Burnsall

16 years after the Grunwick Strike, Asian women in Burnsall, stood up to management who denied them respect and dignity. They stood up to inhumane working conditions, racial harassment and illegal wage deductions. They walked out in protest in on 15th June 1992.

Burnsall is a metal finishing company that supplied multinational car firms Jaguar, Rover, and Ford. The total workforce was 29 in 1992 of which 26 were Asian women. They constantly came in contact with dangerous chemicals, such as sulphuric and nitric acid, but were not supplied with any gloves or other protective clothing. The workers were denied cleaning facilities and the toilets were cleaned every four weeks. They were forced to work overtime and worked an average 60 hrs per week earning just over £2 per hr, £30 -£40 less per week than male workers. They were often prevented from going to the toilet and were denied health checks even when they were injured at work. On one occasion a pregnant woman was refused time off for anti-natal appointments and also refused lighter work. She lost her baby three months into the pregnancy.

The protesters joined the General, Municipal and Boilermakers union (GMB) in March 1992 and two union officials visited the management that refused to recognise the union. All 26 Asian female workers stopped work and went on strike. The Union head office immediately declared the strike official and began strike pay to the strikers. However, the union was not prepared to go beyond lodging claims for equal pay and unlawful deductions. Its action plan did not include improved working conditions and health and safety at work. The GMB did not publicise the strike in local or national press nor did they make an effort to approach linked company workers to boycott accepting supplies from Burnsall. GMB's other branches were not aware of the strike. Workers were not issued membership cards nor were they invited to branch meetings. The strike committee meetings were conducted in English and were always chaired by a white union official. English was not the striker's first language and hence the discussions were not always understood by them.

By January 1993 the union started to put pressure on the strikers to call off the strike, but they refused to back down unless their demands for better working conditions were met. Despite abuse from management, police harassment and the bitter cold British winter, the women workers continued picketing. Five months into the strike, news began to filter through to the Asian Communities; the result of which two support groups were formed; one in Birmingham and another in London. Both of these groups were very effective in taking the strike action into the public eye. Publicity material was produced and distributed, regular meetings were held and other campaigning organisations including Women Against Pit Closures, and Refugee

Organisations were approached for support. With the support of these two groups as well as Asian Community Activists such as Indian Workers Association, the strikers began to build their own momentum to control tactics and demands. The Union officials felt threatened and made every effort to prevent community activists to have any involvement in the strike. They became hostile to the strikers and insisted to chair the strike committee meetings. The union official went as far as giving an ultimatum to the protesters that they stop all contacts with the action groups and community activists or leave the GMB. The Union official became so paranoid by the strikers being empowered that they ended the strike without any consultation with the strikers. Just two weeks prior to calling off the strike, the first anniversary of the strike was celebrated and was attended by massive picket. Initially the GMB opposed the celebration but realising the mass support, they were left with no option but to support it. It was on the anniversary celebration that it was decided that a mass protest involving all supporting bodies was to take place on the 3rd of July 1993. The GMB used bullying tactics, similar to the management as one of the strikers recalled:

“The union officials told us that they had closed the strike and there was nothing we could do about. If we agreed with them that was o.k. if not then it was too bad. They said if we criticised them, talked about it or attended the demonstration on 3rd July, they will drop the industrial tribunal cases They said if we went on the picket line on the 3rd July Demonstration, then we will be arrested by the police and the union will not help us. We said we should be given two weeks to discuss things and decide about the strike. They said they had already closed the strike, it was up to us to agree with them.”

As an added insult, the strikers were told that some other firms, with similar working conditions to Burnsall, had approached the union with offer of jobs.

Similar to the Grunwick, the Burnsall strike also ended without achieving better working conditions or union recognition. The workers at all three strikes felt betrayed by their respected trade unions. However, though the strike failed the strikers triumphed. They felt empowered by being on the picket line in adverse weather, yelling at strike breakers and challenging the management. They attended mass rallies delivered speeches making their children proud of them struggling for workers' rights. One worker proudly said:

“We are not tired, we are happy, yesterday at the demonstration we saw our bosses going past with their heads down, they have never done this before Our kids will be really pleased with us Even if what we have done does not help us, the kids will get something out of it.” This echoed with what Jayaben Desai had said after the end of Grunwick Strike in 1978.

Gate Gourmet

The legacy began with Jayaben Desai, continued by the Asian female workers fighting for decent working conditions, a living wage, freedom from racial harassment, self respect and dignity.

Although workers at Gate Gourmet did not receive the same level of attention and publicity enjoyed by Grunwick workers, its importance was not any lesser. Again Asian women, primarily Punjabis, paralysed the corporate giant, British Airways, with their industrial action. In contrast to sari wearing Gujarati women, Salwar-Kameez became the common sight on the picket line. Holding placards and shouting slogans for fair pay brought back memories of the Grunwick strike. The Gate Gourmet strike continued for 11 months ending in workers winning their goal for equal pay. This was one of the few times that the strikers' demands were actually met.

Other Struggles by Asian Workers

Asian women did not only fight on the industrial relations front. They fought against barbarian racist policies such as the virginity test that brought such a blow to the British Civilisation Britain has been proudly portraying to the world. 33 years later the British Government has not apologised to the victims of the virginity test. The woman who brought it to the media's attention was a doctor who herself underwent the test. If it was not for her this practice could have continued for years to come. The practice was banned immediately. The Home Office admitted to three cases and yet some researchers have found 81 cases in the Home office's confidential files. It is suggested that there may have been many more such cases. True numbers of the virginity test many never be known.

Immigration Laws

The British Government introduced a law in 1969 restricting male fiancées from the Indian Sub-Continent and African Countries from entering Britain. Asian women joined the struggle initiated by the Indian Workers Association together with other black and white anti-racist organisations. As a result of this struggle the law was repealed in 1970. However, it was reintroduced by the Thatcher Government as part of the Nationality Act 1983. Initially it only applied to male fiancées but when the European Court of Human Rights ruled it being sexually discriminatory, the rule was applied to both males and females. The rule was famously known as PRIMARY PURPOSE, which meant that the applicant's primary purpose was not marriage but to enter Britain. This clause was used to turn down a vast number of applications. This rule was repealed by the Labour Government in 1997 replacing it with a PROBATIONERY PERIOD, first for one year increasing to two in 2002. This means that the couple has to prove, with evidence, that they are still married before the spouse from abroad is granted permission to remain (PR). He or she has no human rights other than to work and to use the health service. After a long struggle by many organisations such as the Southall Black Sisters, foreign spouses have been granted permission to apply for PR under Domestic Rule and they have recently been granted limited protection from domestic violence.

Domestic Violence

Kiranjit Allowalia's case was fought by the Southall Black Sisters. The landmark judgement was not only a victory to Asian women but also brought relief to all victims of domestic violence. As

a result many women who were imprisoned have been released. Kiranjit now campaigns for other victims of domestic violence.

Conclusion

It is clear that first generation Asian women worked in appalling working conditions, faced racial and gender discrimination and harsh exploitation. However, they were not prepared to continue to bear it passively. They decided to fight for better working conditions and other workers rights. Although they did not manage to achieve their goals and were betrayed by the respective trade union, they came out triumphant and their actions made history in the British working class struggles.