

London Metropolitan Archives

Information Leaflet Number 63

The Great Dock Strike, 1889



The Dock strike

In 1889 the London docks were convulsed by a strike which captured the imagination not only of Britain but also of many parts of the Empire. Thousands of dock labourers had walked out, demanding the famous “dockers’ tanner”, and changes in the way men were hired. While most dock labour had its grievances, the “casuals” were at the core of the strike. These labourers had to compete against their fellows to be employed for a few hours or a day at a time, and were at the mercy of the contractors and foremen, who hired and fired at will.

The strike began on the 12th August and quickly gained massive support. The main organiser was Ben Tillett, and the strike committee included such well known figures as John Burns, Tom Mann and Will Thorne. An avoidance of violent clashes helped the strikers gain the support of much of the public and the press. However, the cost of providing meals and clothing for thousands of men and their families looked as though it might lead to the collapse of the strike. At this crucial point massive financial help began to arrive from the Australian Labour movement. The final accounts of the strike relief fund reveal that of £48,000 raised £30,000 came from Australia - a contribution without which the strike might well have been lost.

It was now the turn of the employers, increasingly under pressure from the shipowners and divided amongst themselves, to feel alarmed. Attempts at conciliation led by Cardinal Manning were successful in bringing about an end to the strike on the 14th September. The dockers had their tanner from the 4th November, and all their other terms were met. The dockers’ triumph was one of the major victories of the ‘New Unionism’, which saw trade unionism spreading from the skilled groups of ‘labour aristocrats’ into the wider semi-skilled and unskilled working population.

London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) has a particular connection with John Burns who later became MP for Battersea, and in 1906 became the first working man to achieve cabinet office when he joined the Liberal government. Upon his death in 1943 the large and valuable library he amassed was donated to the Members Library of the London County Council, now part of LMA.

Reading list

The following is a guide only and it is suggested that the relevant sections of the library catalogue are consulted for the complete holdings.

BROWN, K.D. *John Burns*. Royal Historical Society, 1977. (18.49 BUR).

CHAMPION, H.H. *The Great Dock Strike in London August 1889*. Swan Sonnenschein, 1890. (37.4 BUR) (Burns Collection).

LOVELL, John. *Stevedores and Dockers : a study of trade unionism in the Port of London*. Macmillan, 1969. (37.4 LOV).

MCCARTHY, T. *The Great Dock Strike 1889*. Weinfeld and Nicolson, 1988. (32.2 MCC).

PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS. Command Paper C 6176. *Report of the Strikes and Lock-outs of 1889 to the Board of Trade*.

SCHNEER, Jonathan. *Ben Tillett*. Croom Helm, 1982. (18.49 TIL).

WASP, D and DAVIS, A. *The Great Dock Strike 1889*. Longman, 1974. (37.5 WAS).

WHEELER, A.F. *Cardinal Manning and the London Dock Strike of 1889*. Ph.D. Thesis, 1979. University Microfilms, 1979. (37.5 WHE).

In addition to these volumes LMA has access to *The Times* online on the public OPAC and the *Illustrated London News* (67.0 ILN) covering the period, as well as a selection of books dealing with social and working conditions in London at this time.

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