

Summary and transcript of interview of Jim Mortimer by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/23 part 1)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): conciliatory attitude of Conservative Party towards trade unions in the 1950s (8); value of solidarity action by workers and historical examples of it (12).

Transcript

1. **CT:** The forces that were limbering up in the background at the time: the MP John Gorst, I think, and the National Association of [for] Freedom were all supporting it. Now, prior to Grunwick's there had been the seventy-two and seventy-four miners' disputes, which had a major impact on the Conservative Party, and trade union relations and trade union issues were coming to the fore.
2. **JM:** Yeah.
3. **CT:** Margaret Thatcher had been selected as a new leader of the Conservative Party, and they were going to make industrial relations, or the reduction in trade union rights, a major issue.
4. **JM:** Yes.
5. **CT:** And this was a dispute that could exploit that. How – develop that argument, as it were.
6. **JM:** Yes, yeah. Well, you want me to respond to that point?
7. **CT:** Yeah.
8. **JM:** Yes, the Conservative Party of that period, at the time of the Grunwick dispute, was a different Conservative Party than my recollection of the 1950s, when there was a Conservative government. Walter Monkton was then Secretary of State for Employment, and my impression at that time was – because I was involved as a union official – that the Conservative Party accepted that trade unions were an essential part of the scene, [indistinct] the trade unions were strong, and they did not seek in a[n] aggressively hostile way to impede collective bargaining. But I think that there was a change, undoubtedly, and the Conservative Party took the view that trade unionism had to be weakened, and they took the opportunity – following one or two industrial disputes of which Grunwick was one, but the miners' dispute, of course, was perhaps even more significant – they took the opportunity to introduce this legislation against the unions. And, regrettably, the Labour government under Tony Blair has not yet put the clock forward; the clock was put backwards and it has remained backwards. Because the Conservative Party, historically, has responded to changes in the industrial scene. I recall that in 1906, in the big move forward in the Trade Disputes Act, the Conservative opposition did not oppose the second reading of the Trade Disputes Bill, in 1906, they didn't oppose it. When you think of that, and in comparison with their attitude in the 1980s, it's a world of difference, a world of difference. And I remember certain functions in the 1950s where particularly Walter Monkton came along, spoke to unions, at which I was present, and it was a – well, if not sympathetic it was certainly one of acceptance of collective bargaining. And I think this, strangely, may have come direct down from Churchill himself, because Churchill had a more radical background, as you know, in the early years of the twentieth century, and he was of the view – I

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think this was conveyed through a number of Tory ministers – that there was no great advantage in seeking a struggle with the unions, and that they had to accommodate them. [4:47]

9. **CT:** But now, the sea-change, if you like, now was the moment that the – there was the. . . Start that question again: but the situation now, through the Grunwick dispute being saturated in the media, there was a moment for the Conservatives to exploit what they felt was widespread public hostility to trade unionism as being mindlessly militant, and to make that the political capital to move into power.
10. **JM:** Well, I've no doubt the – some of them did feel that, and they were assisted, of course, by many sections of the national press. But on the other hand, when unions are strong and are moving forward, this also can have an effect on public opinion. After all, the miners' victories in the nineteen seventies greatly stimulated the expansion of the trade union movement, organisation, the recruitment, and so on. So the answer doesn't solely depend upon the national press and how hostile they are, and elements in the Conservative Party who want to turn the clock back, it also depends upon the effectiveness of the trade union movement.
11. **CT:** And here we'd had a loss. If they can't win a tiny little dispute like Grunwick's, for a hundred and twenty workers – what does that say? Why bother joining them if they can't even get that dispute [?right] [indistinct] and people were moving away from –
12. **JM:** That's right, that's right. And the answer to that, in my view, really is two things: one, that we have a law which is more helpful to collective bargaining, the extension of collective bargaining, recognises it as a fundamental right, and secondly, that recognises that ultimately unions have a right of solidarity with one another. You see, I think that this view that you can help a worker who is going through difficulty is not something which is socially reprehensible; it's something which expresses a lofty motivation in human beings: "I am my brother's keeper. I am prepared to help somebody who is in difficulty, and I want to do something about it." That's a good thing, and so I think the law should protect that, shouldn't say that it is evil. And I think that some of the finest pages in British history have been written around solidarity; you know, solidarity of textile workers in support of the Federal cause in the American Civil War and against slavery, that was solidarity. There are other examples, too, of efforts by workers to assist Ireland when Ireland was subject of injustice, or to call for the withdrawal of hostile military action against the Russian Revolution. All these were acts of solidarity, which I support, and which I think have set an example to other people and will inspire other people.
13. **CT:** Do you think the new politics have stopped us looking after each other as we did?
14. **JM:** Yes, yes, yeah, yeah, definitely. So I see, you know, two things: one, law which promotes collective bargaining, and two, the recognition of the right of solidarity of working people to organise and to help each other for the right of collective bargaining
15. **CT:** Terrific, terrific. I'll just, I think –