

## Summary and transcript of interview of Norman Mullings by Chris Thomas, 2007 (803/03A part 2)

Approximate timings given in minutes and seconds in various places.

### Summary

Subjects include (transcript paragraph numbers given in brackets): reasons for involvement of Brent Community Relations Council in the dispute (4, 12); apparently racist remark by George Ward (4, 52); policing of the picket (4-6, 8); support from local and other labour activists and individual MPs (16, 30, 32, 36, 54, 60); role of Jayaben Desai (20, 58) solidarity shown by people of different backgrounds (38, 54, 60); cutting off of essential services to Grunwick as a possible means of winning the dispute (41-46).

### Transcript

1. **CT:** OK, so just talking to me, really, that's absolutely fine. Occasionally I might just lean across and check the camera, but that's all – that doesn't mean to say I'm not interested in what you're saying, it's just because I'm doing all jobs, basically.
2. **NM:** Yes, yes.
3. **CT:** OK, how did you first hear about the Grunwick dispute?
4. **NM:** Well, I used to be a community worker in Brent. I worked for the Community Relations Council, and myself and Bob Walker and Phil Seeley, all of us were very concerned when it just started out because this is a part of our centre, this centre used to be part of our activities from the Brent Community Relations Council days, and Grunwick is just down in Chapter Road, just around the corner. And when we heard about the – it started when we heard that there were some Asian ladies who were working in this photo processing plant and they wanted to join a trade union, and the manager, the owner of the company, wouldn't hear of it, and because they decided that they wanted to join a trade union he decided to sack all of them. And I remember his, you know, his phrase was that he can afford, he can buy as many Asians as he wanted, that was part of the story as it started. And so the whole matter was picked up the trades council as I remember then, and it was drawn to our attention by Jack Dromey<sup>1</sup>, who was then the secretary of the trades council, and indeed, what we as an organisation did was to mobilise a lot of the black people who work[ed] in local factories: Heinz and McVities. A number of these workers decide[d] that they would come along to support this cause. And it just swelled, you know, it just went on and it got bigger. And then we had, you know, the miners came, I remember Audrey Wise – she was the MP for Coventry if I remember rightly – and she came in this very room and there was a meeting, we made her some tea, and she went to the picket line and I think she got arrested that day. Fortunately for a lot us, although we were, you know, marched off the picket line, I don't think a lot of us got arrested. I wasn't arrested at any time but quite often I was told by the police to move on.
5. **CT:** What did you think of the policing of the picket?
6. **NM:** At the time, I would say that the policing it was fairly – it was very high, it was – a lot of police were there: police and police horses. But from my memory I think the police were – at some time I think they were, they over-reacted, that I think that they were ensuring that, not just to maintain

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<sup>1</sup> Secretary of Brent Trades Council.

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peace, or maintain law and order, but I think also because people were coming who had nothing to do with it locally, and some of the police who came were not necessarily local police, they were police officers from other forces that joined them. So I don't think – I mean, overall, I wouldn't say – I mean, it is fair to say on some occasions that the police did over-react, but not in general.

7. **CT:** Let me just adjust this light a second . . . Yup, that's perfect, that's perfect. [4:19]
8. **NM:** At first, some of our local people were reluctant because, as black people, when we more or less go on any picket line, we can always know the consequences: we're first going to be picked out in a way. But we were there in fairly sizeable numbers, and I don't think that in terms of how the police carried out their duties, I don't think black people were singled out more than anyone else. Anybody who were on the line they would tell you to move. Well, if you didn't move then more than likely they would arrest you, but when they tell us to move we move on.
9. **CT:** In terms of - how was George Ward viewed as an employer as far as your work on the –
10. **NM:** From my recollection, I mean, the way he was treating those women was that he had no regard for the people who were employed there. That was the view that appears to come through, because, I mean, all those women were asking for is the right to belong to a trade union to protect their rights, and for an employer to blatantly, you know, disregard that, which I would consider a reasonable request. And I wouldn't say that he was a, you know, one of those employers who was enlightened.
11. **CT:** Was it an issue for the community council because of the employment of Asian immigrant women?
12. **NM:** Well, we were concerned about equality as well, and we just wanted, I mean, if those were all white women would they have been treated the same way? Or maybe they wouldn't be doing that job. But that was also part of our concern that, as members of the ethnic minority, those women were being discriminated against. Not only were they denied their rights, to have a right to join a trade union, that's their right, but I feel also they were being treated less favourabl[y]. And that was part of our remit that we were standing up against that.
13. **CT:** George Ward was himself from India, an Asian.
14. **NM:** I think he probably was, but I think all he shared with those women is the pigmentation of his skin. They did not have the same – that's where it all ends, because he was a businessman and he wanted his pound of flesh by the look of things.
15. **CT:** What was the high-point for you in the dispute?
16. **NM:** I think probably the high-point, I think, was when, I think, when it came towards an end when – I think it went on for so long, and I think at one stage I don't remember whether I was still around or I went off to do something else – but I think that it was when the whole labour movement – and that was another good thing because, I don't know, maybe, I'm still, you know, sad to say probably,

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but I'm still a member of the Labour Party, but [in] those days the support from a labour back – you know, the support from the council, the support from individual MPs, the support around those women was to me that the high-point of what came out of it.

17. **CT:** Could I ask the question again just to make it a little bit shorter? It's just a little point I could make at the beginning of the film, a little –
18. **NM:** I think that the high-point was the recognition of those women and the support, the rank-and-file support that was there. The high-point of what I think came out of that.
19. **CT:** Terrific. In terms of the solidarity that was provided for them, what was the most important in your view?
20. **NM:** I think it was to show that these were not highly educated women but they were treated with dignity and respect. To me that said it all, because it wasn't – you know, they were not high-profile people, but the, you know, coming together, it shows what could have [?been] achieved. I think Mrs Desai<sup>2</sup>, I think, went to one of the Labour Party conference[s], if I remember rightly. And those, you – my recollection of that is yes, it was worth it, it was worth it.
21. **CT:** Who were the forces that were supporting George Ward, and what did they stand for?
22. **NM:** Well, I mean, basically, he – they were all – he was supported by people who feel that, you know, we must never allow trade unions. I think those who want to bash the unions were more or less his supporters, he would have found support within that, because if he was prepared at the time to allow those women to become members of a trade union, I don't think they would have [had] any strike, they wouldn't have had to go down that road. I think that's what started it, so it is clear that the argument was that he wasn't going to back down and those ladies are not going to back down again; they wanted to be recognised. [9:56]
23. **CT:** Did you think this dispute could be won?
24. **NM:** Well, in a sense. I think that dispute, it went wide, and the point it proved is that basic rights is important. And I think if only, you know, people like Mr Ward and others were to recognise that everybody has a right, and I think that's, you know, if only that he recognised that right we would never have had that dispute.
25. **CT:** I understand you were involved with the drivers. Can you tell me about that?
26. **NM:** I can't recollect, no. I mean –
27. **CT:** The T and G<sup>3</sup> drivers coming out? Were you – is that a memory you have?

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<sup>2</sup> Jayaben Desai, treasurer of the strike committee.

<sup>3</sup> Transport and General Workers' Union.

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28. **NM:** No, I can't recollect much on that score because over the years we have been in so much marches and, you know, it was hardly a week that there was not a march of some kind, and we would go along to show solidarity.
29. **CT:** What did you think about the role of the Labour government at that time?
30. **NM:** Locally I think they were very supportive. Locally, I mean, if I remember, Tom Durkin<sup>4</sup>, and when I recollect with Tom Durkin and Jack Dromey and the trades council, they were able to muster a lot of heavyweights, and I think they were very – the Labour Party, at the time, was very supportive of what was going on.
31. **CT:** But what about the government at the time?
32. **NM:** I don't think central government was all that – I think, like most governments, I think they – it wasn't, as it were, backed by the government as such, but it was backed by a number of MPs in their own right. I don't think that that support would be here today because I think [in] those days there were socialist members of parliament, but I think that's something that is probably dying out.
33. **CT:** Do you think they were embarrassed by the dispute?
34. **NM:** I think – I don't know if it was embarrassment. As it were that, people didn't want, as it were, [to] turn into a sort of a national issue. You know, I think some people may have thought that if you let it lie, if you stay local, then it maybe [will] peter out and it will go away. And maybe it was a – it was something that was a[n] irritant which grew out of proportion.
35. **CT:** Do you think they put pressure on the TUC to quieten it down, hoping it?
36. **NM:** I would not be at all surprised but, I mean, I have no evidence, so – but I would not be at all surprised if from time to time there weren't told to, you know, "those people at the trades council are a little bit too boisterous, probably you could have words with them." It's how things happen. But it must always be said that I don't think anybody could, as it were, rope in Tom Durkin and, to some extent, Jack Dromey. They were not going to be anybody's whipping-boy, they were not going to take counselling from anybody.
37. **CT:** Terrific. What message do you think the failure of the dispute sent out to the black and Asian community?
38. **NM:** I think one of the things that came out of it was also that it showed that people can work together. That was something that – sadly, that lesson – I mean, it's thirty years ago, and so those who may be around will remember. But the way of the world has changed a lot, but what it did

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<sup>4</sup> Chairman of Brent Trades Council.

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was to show solidarity – you can build solidarity with different grouping[s], with different – colour, creed or race didn't come into it, it was solidarity for the working class. [14:13]

39. **CT:** Terrific. But nevertheless the dispute failed. Do you think that had an impact on the black community's commitment to trades unionism?
40. **NM:** I don't think it has a – the effect on it is not that people would not join a trade union because of that. But I believe also that the powers – there was a lot of things militating against trade unions, and you mustn't forget that at one stage, you know, the trade unions were considered that they were too, as it were, big for their boots, and under the Thatcher administration she neutralised them. But that didn't deter people from joining a trade union. It was just one of those – you know, it was a dispute, it went on, it went on, it tends to probably lose its momentum. And so, whilst it may not have been, you know, seen as a success, in terms of people coming together some valuable lessons were learned from it.
41. **CT:** But one of the lessons, I mean, towards the end, with the morale slipping away and the strikers getting desperate, there was a hunger strike outside the TUC, because their request was to make the demand from the TUC for the principle unions that supplied his services – essential services, the post, electricity, wa[ter] – that should be turned off, that the situation is such a fundamental right, the situation is so grave, he is laughing at us, we have to use our collective industrial strength to bring this to a successful conclusion, and they failed to do that. What message did that send out?
42. **NM:** Well, you have to remember, you know, I hear what you're saying, but don't forget also that the postmen, the people who work for the water board, the people who supply all those other service[s]. I mean, there were some of those trade unions that, as it were, support[ed] the women and the whole campaign, but it's difficult when you have to feed your family, you have to pay your rent, you have to pay your mortgage. And I think what they were asking the TUC to do to – everybody out, you know, more like the General Strike of 1922 [1926], I don't think that was going to happen in those days.
43. **CT:** And so they were being realistic. However, having said that, the postmen themselves, locally here in Cricklewood, took a heroic stand, and that in itself, most of the strikers say, was the single most effective action that was taken that was crippling George Ward, and they had been pulled off, and [it was] insisted that the post was delivered. And even if that one service had been stopped he may well have listened.
44. **NM:** It's a possibility, but for how long? Because I think he was supported by other backers who, if I remember, they were having the processing as opposed to using the Post Office. There were other companies who were taking stuff all around the place for him. So although, yes, it was a heroic step that the postmen took, that in its own wasn't going to get George – what's his name – Ward to his knees. I think he was able to, as it were, fight it out because he had backers who were prepared to – when you're prepared to put a bus there to take workers from this plant to other plants, and you have police escort to take your bus there and take your bus back, you're onto a winner. [18:10]
45. **CT:** What would've made him recognise the union?

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46. **NM:** If, for example, if he was unable to get anybody out, nothing coming in, nothing coming out, if he was sort of cut off completely, then yes. But that is an impossible task; [it] wasn't going to happen. And of course, he would probably argue that, well, he's paying for these services and he's entitled to them, and he pays his tax and he's entitled to police protection.
47. **CT:** But from where you're putting it, it almost sounds like it was an unwinnable dispute.
48. **NM:** Probably was, it probably was, but, as I said, you know, valuable lessons have been learned, and yes, maybe the whole area of negotiation need to be refined, and over the years I think that has been refined, because maybe, on reflection, the way that they wanted recognition and the way that they went about it, maybe if we have to do it all over again, maybe we would do it another way.
49. **CT:** In terms of the employment and the attitudes by George Ward, was there a whiff of racism about it?
50. **NM:** I would say yes, there was. If it wasn't racism, I mean, it was mainly he was exploiting those women, because I think if the conditions were reasonable and – because quite often people will work without union recognition or union support. But those conditions were appalling and that's why the women wanted the trade union to get involved.
51. **CT:** Were there any statements that he made that, you know, made you think “hold on, that's –”?
52. **NM:** Yes, I think the statement where he said he can buy – I forget what he said – the price of an Asian or something to that effect. It's thirty years ago, I can't remember exactly what he said, but he made some statement to that [effect] as I recollect, and that was blatant racist.
53. **CT:** Thinking back, if you were to tell somebody about the dispute, your one positive strong memory, what would it be?
54. **NM:** The memory was how local people could – how they came together. It was heartening to see people of different persuasion[s] leaning together for a common cause that people should never be exploited, and to me that was the important lesson we learned from that.
55. **CT:** Negative thought, the negative?
56. **NM:** Yes, there are some negative things that, it went on so long that it is impossible when you have a campaign going on that long for it not to start to fail because nobody can live so long outside of employment and, you know, trying to keep it going. You have a family, it is a matter that they have to be fed, and if you have anything that run[s] that long then it's bound to start having, you know, a negative effect.
57. **CT:** The heroes of the dispute?

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58. **NM:** Well, I don't know if there was any – I think Mrs Desai will always be regarded as a heroine because people remember her name. And yes, I suppose even some of her critics, and some of them who may have thought that it was, you know, those activists that stir her up. People may say many things, but yes, she stood her ground, and I think for that people always remember that lady, those people who were around then. I don't know how much of it will pass on to the generation that is coming, but when history is, you know, written, her name will be there, because she started it.
59. **CT:** Terrific! Absolutely terrific! The well-known people that you were aware of, who were they that came and supported it?
60. **NM:** Arthur Scargill<sup>5</sup> [indistinct] Arthur Scargill came, the miners came, some notable trade unionists came. And, as I said, I remember Audrey Wise coming down from Coventry, and [a] number of people, even people who were not local but who happened to be in the area, we would encourage them to come along with us to show solidarity. And I think the trade council, they are to be congratulated for the work they put in, and in particular Jack Dromey and the late Tom Durkin. There was never a day that they were not out there drumming up support from people far and wide. At one stage, we used to let some of the miners come in and some of the people who came from far, they used to come in and use our toilet facilities and cook them a breakfast, and I remember having some, within our community, a couple of people who feel that “this is encouraging,” you know, “these activists, you shouldn't encourage them too much,” but I think it petered out because we were not going to back away from that. That was our role; we felt it was a duty, I still do, I still believe we did right.
61. **CT:** Terrific! Absolutely terrific! The philosophy of looking after –

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<sup>5</sup> President of the National Union of Mineworkers Yorkshire Area.