

ON THE CENTENARY  
OF THE GREAT LOCK-OUT  
**A HUNDRED  
YEARS OF  
FARMWORKERS'  
STRUGGLE**

Edited by Joan Maynard



This pamphlet is published in commemoration of IWC Councillor Jack Dunman and of Les Shears who dedicated so much of their lives to the farmworkers' cause and for the Centenary of the Great Lock-Out of 1874.

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# A HUNDRED YEARS OF FARMWORKERS' STRUGGLE

## The Way Forward for Farmworkers

*by Joan Maynard*

Farm workers have a proud history of struggle in the Working Class Movement, starting of course with the famous Tolpuddle Martyrs, who clearly did not know the evil and powerful forces they were up against. These forces are just as evil today, though generally they hide their evil intent behind soft words and a gloved hand. We have the cleverest ruling class in the world. They have long known the art of giving a bit and keeping us quiet. This was much easier for them when they had the wealth of our mighty Empire to draw on; today it is more difficult to placate the workers. The ruling class have less room to manoeuvre now, their Capitalist System is in a bad way. However most important the workers are better organised and more powerful: they understand their power better than they did, though still not well enough.

In recent years one of the most important developments has been the sit-ins and work-ins, when particular shipyards or factories have been taken over, and there has been an attempt to close them down all in the interest of rationalisation and profit. Or alternatively their firm has gone bankrupt. Whatever the reason, workers have refused to be thrown on the scrap-heap at the whim of the system, or in the interests of profit. They have said our goods are required, we have the machines and men to make them, we are perfectly capable of running our firm, factory or shipyard. They have not only demanded workers' control, they have put it into practice. This can best be described as a quantitative change in the forms of struggle. It shows that workers are no longer willing to be made redundant, to take their cards, protest but be thrown on the scrap-heap nevertheless.

Farm workers have always faced special difficulties, and these are clearly set out in this pamphlet. In many cases they work in very small numbers and in close relationship with their employers. Farm workers therefore lack the feeling of strength, solidarity and confidence which numbers bring. The boss is not some remote figure it is easy to dislike, he is the man who works beside you most days of the week.

However the structure of agriculture is changing. The pattern of the future is likely to be the smaller farms run by family labour, and the bigger farms may be owned by a company, or one of the financial institutions. As inflation has grown, big money has moved into land. Farming is becoming more and more big business. In these circumstances the boss becomes and *is* more remote, his interests are looked after by a manager who has a far more impersonal relationship with the men. This means that eventually in agriculture the relationship between worker and employer will become more like it is in industry.

The Agricultural Wages Board was introduced when there was an abundance of labour in the industry. Today's conditions are very different. There is now a shortage of skilled men, especially stockmen. This shortage can be exploited to the full, first on the big units and also in conjunction with the ancillary industries, Chicken Processing, Pea Vining, Mushroom farms, Dairies, Canning Factories.

Vertical integration has not gone anything like so far in England as in America, but it is developing. Jack Eastwood now has farms and factories.

At the Union's Biennial National Conference in 1974 a resolution was passed saying we should look at Food and Agriculture as a whole unit, right from Production through Distribution to the Retail End, then bring the unions involved together to see if we can work out a plan of campaign and action to win better wages and conditions. This I believe is the way forward for farm workers, this is the way to overcome their isolation. Other interesting points brought out by this pamphlet include how farm workers have always been helped by other workers, Railwaymen, and independent Craftsmen in the villages.

The need to raise the consciousness of farm workers is as great as ever. As a group they have been oppressed for longer than any other workers, isolated and of course confined and restricted by the Tied Cottage System. Their contentment, a blessing in one sense, has also been their great enemy. The Tied Cottage System has kept them quiet and it has held down wages in the industry. For farm workers it is the key issue: once a Labour Government has abolished the Tied Cottage System, then farmers will have to pay the rate for the job or the men will go and work in better paid industries . . .

On militancy and strike action they have been successful when they have had confidence in their leaders and when the leadership has backed them up. Strike action was successful too when limited to a relatively small locality where conditions were favourable, and at periods when agriculture was expanding. Militancy also led to an expansion of Union Membership. There is an important lesson here for the present leadership.

The women of Ascott-under-Wychwood, in being convicted under the Criminal Law Amendments Act, in fact came up against the Industrial Relations Act of their time. They — like many people today — were attacked for picketing. Also this struggle clearly illustrates the tie up between the Law, the Church and the Local Aristocracy which was evident at the time of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, and has in fact been clear throughout working class history. Really it is four-cornered: The State, the Law, the Church and the Ruling Class, all united against the workers and all carried on the backs of the workers too.

Jack Dunman and Les Shears, both Dorset men, were wonderful fighters for farm and rural workers. This pamphlet is dedicated to them. In some ways they were very different. Jack was a scholarly man, very cultured, keen on music and intellectual pursuits, but absolutely committed to the cause of farm workers. An obvious leader, an eloquent spokesman, I can hear him now making the opening speech at the 1972 Biennial Conference of the Union, the last he attended, when he moved the resolution about the agricultural industry and its future. He put all his skill and intelligence at the disposal of farm and rural workers and his Union work was a great joy to him. Like some other outstanding comrades he was a Communist and this made



for certain difficulties for him with the Establishment in the Union, but the rank and file recognised his great qualities and he was a leading spokesman for them at many biennial conferences. His outstanding contributions were greatly missed at our last conference in May 1974. Interested in agriculture as an industry, and devoted to the cause of the men who work in it, his life and work for our Union are commemorated by this little pamphlet.

Les Shears, County Chairman for Dorset for more years than I care to remember, a manual worker who spoke clearly and boldly for his people, the working people. A man of sterling worth, a pearl without price. When Les spoke you heard the authentic voice of rural workers. A bitter opponent of the Agricultural Tied Cottage System. A man of complete integrity who gave his all to our Union. He not only understood the problems of farm and rural workers, but had a deep understanding of what the wider struggles in the working-class movement were all about. He was for many years a magnificent Chairman of the famous Tolpuddle Rally, linking always the struggles of our members with those of other workers; this was very important in view of the general isolation of farm workers. It will be a long time before we see the like of Jack Dunman and Les Shears again, they are greatly missed. We honour them in this pamphlet, but in particular we honour them by continuing the struggle, side by side with our comrades in the Union, for better wages and conditions, abolition of the Tied Cottage System, public ownership of land, a Socialist Society where people come first, not profit. Confident that we shall win through "They conquer who believe they can."

# Agricultural Trade Unionism and Structural Change

by Howard Newby

“Exning, September 26th, 1872 — Sir, We, the undersigned, do hereby jointly and severally agree to call your attention to the following requirements for our labour — namely, fourteen shillings for a week’s work, and no longer to conform with the system of breakfasting before going to work during the winter quarter.

Hoping you will give this your consideration, and meet our moderate requirements amicably. — Your humble servants . . . .”

This polite request, signed by seventeen workers, was received by the farmers of Exning, near Newmarket at the height of the trade union agitation of the 1870’s — the celebrated ‘Revolt of the Field’. Unwittingly these seventeen “humble servants” were to reap a whirlwind of bitterness, distress and downright oppression that was to sweep the eastern counties a little over a year later. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the events of the Great Lock-Out of 1874, together with the reminder of the realities of rural power presented by the Norfolk strike of 1923, have influenced the strategy and tactics of agricultural trade unionism ever since. *There has emerged an apparent consensus among the leadership of the NUAAW that any strike action on a national or even regional level is ultimately futile. The problems of organisation are so immense, the production cycle in agriculture so lengthy and the organisation and solidarity of the employees so secure that the strike weapon has been removed from the armoury of trade union negotiation.* The corollary has been to work through the official channels of the Agricultural Wages Board and the Labour Party, at the same time exerting the maximum moral pressure on both farmers and the general public alike by pursuing a vigorous verbal attack coupled with the occasional exploitation of isolated local cases of oppression (principally tied cottage evictions).

On the centenary of the Great Lock-Out, the time has come for a re-appraisal of the situation. *Has the social situation of agricultural workers altered so little over the past one hundred years that the lessons of the Great Lock-Out can still be applied today?* For a great many years after 1874 the answer to this question would be “Yes”. We can observe this from the experiences in Norfolk in 1923. Here, in what was then the NUAAW’s strongest area, and provided by a group of farmers who had their eyes on government intervention rather than the crushing of trade unionism, only a limited success was achieved — out of 20,000 strike notices sent out, the largest number of members who stopped work was only 5,000 and the strike nearly bankrupted the union. There are many still in the union, and even among the union leadership, who were involved in the events of 1923. It is perhaps not surprising that they have left their mark on union policy.

However, no one connected with agriculture needs to be reminded of the fundamental changes that have overtaken British farming since the Second World War. These changes have occurred at almost every level — technological, economic, social — and, of course, they continue. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest



that we are entering into a period in which changes in the structure of British agriculture could be almost as revolutionary in their effects as those wrought by the internal combustion engine since 1939. Not all these changes, however, have been beneficial to agricultural trade unionism, nor have they all contributed to a heightening of the consciousness of farm workers of their position. It is therefore necessary to consider the current trends in the social situation of the agricultural worker in some detail.

Looked upon from the outside *no one could deny the exploited position of the great majority of farm workers*, even within the terms of a capitalist economic system. While the farming press may be able to point to the odd herdsman earning £3,000 a year, *farm workers remain the lowest paid group covered by the Department of Employment's six-monthly earnings surveys*. One still recalls the former Prices and Incomes Board's conclusion that

"the concentration of low-paid workers is higher than elsewhere . . . Few industries, if any, provide for all payments above the minimum (other than overtime) within such a narrow span."

*The problem as far as agricultural trade unionism is concerned has been to raise the farm worker's consciousness of his position and then to persuade him that such a situation is not his fatalistic "lot" but is amenable to change through socialism.* Hence the emphasis on education that has been a keystone of union policy since its foundation; hence also one of the first steps the union took in its early days was to remove the notorious "limited horizons" of farm workers which plagued its advance and which enabled early union leaders to be branded by farmers with these devastating epithets, "agitators" and "outsiders".

It is important to realise that these "limited horizons" were not due to the psychological make-up of individual workers but arose out of their common social situation. The vast majority of agricultural workers were and are employed in units whose numbers are tiny compared with other industries. The social relationship between "gaffer and man" is therefore often personal and informal, rather than by reference to a formal set of rules and regulations as in industry. Put simply, farmer and worker treat each other as individuals rather than as categories — as Bill and Fred rather than boss and worker. Any conflict that emerges from time to time is hardly likely to be put down to the fundamental contradictions between employer and employee under capitalism, but to the fact that, "That's just Bill's way" or "Bill's in a bad mood today". *At the same time the constant face-to-face contact of farmer and worker means that the latter is constantly provided with interpretations of his situation that are commensurate with the employers' point of view.* Thus the farm worker is not regarded as being exploited by the extraction by the farmer of the surplus value of his labour. Instead the farm worker is considered as a partner — albeit a necessarily inferior one — in an organic enterprise. Constant exposure to such a view, without the presentation of any alternative, eventually results in the farm workers' own adherence. He now considers his position a "natural" one — for what alternatives are there?

This issue — which is simply the Marxist notion of "false consciousness" as applied to agriculture — holds the key to the effectiveness of trade union policy. Its effects go extremely deep. For example, there is a widespread belief among most agricultural

workers that, since the Second World War, their standard of living vis-a-vis industrial workers has dramatically improved. On the contrary, it has *deteriorated* – hourly earnings in 1949 were nearly 70 per cent of those of industrial workers; by 1971 they were down to just over 60 per cent. *Yet it is their belief about their situation which will determine the action of workers, not the real situation.* Trends since the war have not aided matters here. Those farms which have not been amalgamated have drastically reduced their labour force due to mechanisation. This has enabled those workers that remain to have much closer relationships with their boss. In addition, workers have less contact with each other, both at work – driving a tractor being nowadays a very lonely job – and in the village. The wholesale takeover of the agricultural community by a predominantly urban middle class – commuters, weekenders, retired people – has priced agricultural workers out of the private housing market (owned or rented) and increased their dependence on tied housing. *More than half of the agricultural labour force is now in tied cottages, which are predominantly sited away from the village and close to the workplace.* Here, contact between employer and employee is reinforced (the farmer is now not only the boss and landlord but a neighbour, too) while the worker is physically and often socially cut off from an increasingly alien village population.

Other things being equal, these changes would lead to a growth of identification on the part of the worker with his employer. As an example of this, one may cite the disappearance of the rural underworld activities – poaching, rick-burning etc. – which were an essential part of the guerrilla class warfare of the nineteenth century countryside. Today poachers are more likely to be motorised wide-boys from the nearest town and the farm worker is as likely as not to be seen standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his employer defending their stock! But, of course, other things are not always equal – in the long run the inherent contradiction in capitalist agriculture between the paternalistic control of the workforce and the demands of a market-oriented productive system will emerge. They will emerge either from within agriculture itself *or from the links which agriculture possesses with the capitalist system in general.* In either case opportunities for raising the consciousness of agricultural workers will present themselves and it is important that agricultural trade unionism is ready to meet this challenge.

In the past the contradiction between the paternalism of the farmer and the goal of “efficiency” demanded by the market has been resolved only when it is too late as far as the individual agricultural worker is concerned. That is to say it has resulted in either redundancy or a tied cottage eviction – or both. *The tied cottage situation has over the years highlighted this contradiction in its starkest form. It demonstrates that given a choice between the paternalistic concern for his workers – the “organic” partnership – and the demands of market efficiency, the farmer’s first loyalties are to the latter.* (One cannot always blame the individual farmer of course, it is the system which demands it and which offers him virtually no choice.) *The tied cottage issue can, in a moment, destroy all the farmer-worker loyalty built up over perhaps years of face-to-face contact.* It is an issue on which the NUAAW has, rightly, concentrated a great deal of its energies, for not only does it bring home to the farm worker the reality of his situation, but represents a major obstacle to any attempt by the union to sanction its demands by the withdrawal of labour.



Most of the pressures which are resulting in rapid changes in agriculture come from outside the individual farm. However, the current momentum of amalgamation and rationalisation of holdings is *likely to be increased by Britain's entry into the EEC*. Already the amalgamation of holdings is resulting in a growing number of enterprises where no pretensions are made towards paternalism and where modes of control so long eschewed by farmers as alien to agriculture are being introduced. Among the new breed of "prairie" arable farms in Eastern England contact between farmer and worker is slender and often mediated through managers and foremen and by means of two-way radios placed in tractor cabs. The division of labour is much greater — a tractor driver is a tractor driver. Rules and regulations posted on official notice boards replace the personal touch. *The "farmer" indeed is as likely as not to be a limited liability company* run by a board of directors responsible to its sometimes anonymous shareholders. As far as the workers are concerned their work situation is likely to be one that has long been familiar to many industrial workers; they are considered much more as impersonal factors — "numbers", "labour inputs" — than as individual human beings.

If present trends continue, it seems likely that in lowland Britain, where the bulk of the hired workers are situated, the structure of farming will gradually polarise into small units run almost entirely by family labour which have decided against amalgamation, and huge units producing the vast majority of the farming output of the UK *and employing most of the labour force*. Because of the exigencies of their situation workers on these farms will be much easier to organise, but they might also require changes in the structure of the NUAAW. Out would go the old village branch and there would be an extension of workplace branches and of plant bargaining. The Agricultural Wages Board would play a much more secondary role as a "safety net" than hitherto and *much more to the fore would be house agreements negotiated locally at plant or company level*. Nor is this just "pie-in-the-sky". The recent astronomic inflation in farm prices threatens to put the family farm out of business through crippling estate duty, while only the very large farms can afford (or are sufficiently credit-worthy) to become even larger. Under the impact of the EEC the pace of these structural changes may quicken considerably during the next few years.

The recent general inflationary tendency of the British economy has also resulted in the emergence of a situation which, if continued, would be very significant indeed for the structure of British agriculture. Finance capital has moved into agriculture with increasing speed over the past two years or so. No statistics are yet available, but a very significant number of recent farm sales in eastern and southern England have been to non-agricultural finance companies, often on a 'lease-back' basis. It seems likely that 1972 will be the first year since the Great War when the percentage of owner-occupation of English farms declined. As yet it is too early to say how far this will go. At present the institutions of finance capital are mostly content to remain "sleeping" partners, interested in capital appreciation rather than yield, but many farmers already regard their interest with deep suspicion. If capital appreciation tails off, will they "wake up" and take an active interest in the yield of their investment by means of active managerial intervention? Will they precipitate a bout of farm purchase on the part of the large food processors (Unilever, Imperial Tobacco, etc.) anxious to safeguard their supplies? It is too early yet to answer these questions,

though we should notice that the degree of vertical integration in British agriculture is far behind that of most other advanced capitalist societies. Certainly the significance of the transformation of the British farmer from being owner and entrepreneur to being employee and manager should not be lost on all who take an interest in the plight of agricultural workers.

It is apparent, then, that the structure of rural society has changed enormously during the hundred years since the men of Exning had the impertinence to ask for fourteen shillings a week. *The next ten years are likely to present a challenge to the organisation of agricultural workers greater than at any time over the last fifty. It may mean some fairly fundamental changes in the structure and methods of agricultural trade unionism, but at the same time it will open up opportunities for the old methods to be re-appraised. The men of Exning were eventually defeated. But there is no need for defeatism today.*



# The Chipping Norton Case

by *Louis Rushforth*

The Story of the Women of Ascott-under-Wychwood, May 1873.

## THE WOMEN

Lavinia Dring

Elisabeth Pratley

Fanny Honeybourne

Eileen Pratley

Mary Pratley

\* Amelia Moss

\* Martha Smith

\* Ann Susan Moss

\* Mary Smith

\* Charlotte Moss

\* Rebecca Smith

\* Caroline Moss

\* Alleged ringleaders sentenced to 10 days  
(the remainder sentenced to 7 days)

Jane Moss

Martha Moss

Mary Moss

Jane Pratley was charged but found  
not guilty

## THE FARMER

Mr. Robert Hambridge

## THE MAGISTRATES

The Rev. Thomas Harris

The Rev. W.E.D. Carter

## THE BLACKLEGS

Hodgkin and Miller

“... the condition of the cottages held by farm labourers is very bad indeed and in many instances is simply horrible and a disgrace to a Christian country. It would take the pen of a Dickens to properly describe three cottages I saw today. Imagine a narrow place like a coal-cellar, down which you go three steps, no flooring except broken stones; no ceiling, no grate, rough walls, a bare ladder leading to one narrow bedroom about six feet wide, containing two bedsteads for a man, his wife and three young children. The whole place wretchedly bad and miserable as imagination can conceive and only divided by a rough wooden partition not reaching to the roof but over which you may look into the next house, equally wretched and miserable, with the additional evil that the only way to the bedroom of the third house is through the bedroom of No. 2 house, and in No. 2 house lives a man, his wife and six children ...’

So wrote Christopher Holloway, Chairman of the Oxfordshire District of the Agricultural Labourers’ Union, in a letter to *The Times* of 7th June 1873. The houses

he described were in the village of Ascott-under-Wychwood, where lived the women involved in the case, headlined in the press as the "Chipping Norton case". An event which in addition to receiving much attention in the news editorial and correspondence columns of the local and national press, led to questions and statements in Parliament and was a source of embarrassment to the Government of the day.

The whole of North Oxfordshire had been in a ferment for the previous 12 months. Farm workers were everywhere forming branches of the newly established Agricultural Labourers' Union. When in February 1872 Joseph Arch set off to walk from his village of Barford in Worcestershire to the neighbouring village of Wellesbourne, he commenced a march into history. He had given a promise to some labourers of Wellesbourne to speak at a meeting in that village. It was a chilly night, with slush on the ground, and Joseph had expected to speak at the most to thirty or forty people. No hand bills had been printed and no posters nailed up. All the publicity had been done by word of mouth from the time of the previous day when Joseph had given his promise. There were no buses or cars to transport the people, but they marched in from all the surrounding villages, some having to walk ten miles. Two thousand were assembled when Joseph spoke to the crowd on the necessity of forming a Trades Union. At this meeting a flame was lit, and nowhere did it burn more brightly than in the north of Oxfordshire. In addition to forming branches in many villages, the Union held public meetings in dozens of towns and villages. The reports in the local press make it clear that not only were the workers prepared to attend these meetings, but many were prepared to speak or act as Chairmen.

Wages in the county were, at that time, eight or nine shillings per week, and everywhere demands were being made for an increase. Strikes and threats of strikes resulted in increases of two shillings, but demands were made for wages ranging from fourteen to sixteen shillings for a week's work.

In Ascott-under-Wychwood, the workers employed by Mr. Robert Hambridge made a demand for an increase for all labourers. Mr. Hambridge, who farmed some 700 acres, *attempted to split the workers by offering an increase to a section of workers*, but nothing to the younger and older ones. The workers refused to be split; all gave due notice, and after seven days, withdrew their labour. A carter, who was not involved in the demand for higher wages and who had not given the statutory seven days' notice, showed his solidarity by also coming out on strike. Hambridge took the carter to court and obtained damages against him, an action which embittered the strikers. Pressures were brought to bear on the strikers and their families, but all remained firm in their determination to continue the strike.

Two blackleg labourers, named Hodgkin and Miller, were introduced by Hambridge. These two young men were from the village of Ramsden, some few miles from Ascott, and although their presence in the village caused resentment, there is no evidence that they had been intimidated. However, on the morning of May 12th, the women of the village decided to take a hand.

Little could these women have foreseen the consequences for themselves or their village which would result from their actions; or that they would be honoured in their village a hundred years after the event. The women assembled at the gate through which the blacklegs had to pass. It was later claimed that some of the women carried sticks, but this was denied by the women, and no-one ever suggested that the sticks

were used or that the men suffered any violence. The women seem to have alternated between giving vent to some strong opinions on the role of blacklegs and attempting to cajole the men to come to the village Inn for a drink — there being no licencing laws then! However, Hodgkin and Miller walked unharmed to the farmhouse, from whence they were escorted to work in the fields by a single constable.

The women returned to their homes and the matter, like so many incidents when strikes take place, would have been forgotten but for the action of Mr. Hambridge, who had not been at home when the incident occurred. With the other farmers in the village he had set off in the early hours of that morning to visit a horse-fair at Stow-on-the-Wold, some 12 miles from Ascott. The absence from home of all the farmers of the village throws doubt on their subsequent statement "... The peaceful and orderly conditions of the village had long been disturbed by the Unionists ...".

Farmer Hambridge laid complaints against seventeen of the women and charges were brought under the Criminal Law Amendment Act, *which could be described as the Industrial Relations Act of one hundred years ago*. The first part of the Act made it an offence "... to threaten or intimidate a person in such a manner as would justify a Justice of the Peace, on a complaint made to him, to bind over the person threatening or intimidating, to keep the peace ...". The women were summoned to appear before the Magistrates at Chipping Norton on Wednesday, 21st May.

The Labourers' Union sent its representative with cash to pay any fines, believing that if the women were found guilty, they would be bound over or fines imposed. The Bench was occupied by *two Clergymen*, the Rev. Thomas Harris and the Rev. W.E.D. Carter. The complainant was represented by a local Attorney, named Wilkins, *but the women were unable to obtain legal representation* and they all pleaded not guilty to the charges. After hearing the evidence, and what they claimed was lengthy consultation, the Reverend Gentlemen found sixteen of the women guilty and *sentenced them to terms of imprisonment with hard labour. Nine were given seven days and seven alleged ringleaders were given ten days.*

These cruel sentences were imposed on women, two of whom were breast-feeding children of a few months old, and others with small children at home. No opportunity was given to them to make arrangements for the care of their children before they were taken into custody to await transport to Oxford Gaol.

News of the amazing sentences quickly spread through the town and the surrounding villages. When word was received in the villages the people quickly made up contingents and marched into Chipping Norton. The police station, where the women were detained, was quickly surrounded by an angry crowd. The building was soon under siege, and an actual attack was made on the building. The door and windows were damaged and some tiles ripped from the roof. Superintendent Larkin, in charge of the police, thought it expedient to wire for assistance from Oxford.

When the telegram was received a force of police under an Inspector was despatched the nineteen miles. The journey was made in a dray and four, a stop being made at Woodstock to pick up Superintendent Bowen. At this stage the story begins to read like a film script, with the dash through the night, and the horses clattering through the villages on the main Oxford-Birmingham road. Towards the end of the journey the driver swung his carriage off the main road and down a side road, and with a

final rush came down the hill into the main street of Chipping Norton and the relief of the besieged police station.

Although it was two in the morning when the police reinforcements arrived a hurried Council of War was held. The police claimed that the situation was so menacing that they dare not let the women remain in Chipping Norton any longer (the intention having been to send the women by train the following morning). In spite of it being a cold night, and two of the women having very young children in their arms, the women were loaded into the wagon in which the police had arrived and sent on the four-hour journey to Oxford. They arrived desperately cold and miserable at six in the morning and were lodged in Oxford Gaol.

*No doubt the Reverend Magistrates Carter and Harris slept well that night, and thought they had taught the turbulent farm workers and their families a lesson.* In this they underestimated the strength of feeling of the workers and the calibre of their leader, *Christopher Holloway, Chairman of the Oxfordshire District of the Agricultural Labourers' Union.* Christopher Holloway lived at Wooton, near Woodstock. He was a very able man, *a Methodist preacher and glove-maker who had thrown in his lot with the farm workers.* Although living almost in the shadow of Blenheim Palace, Christopher had shown himself quite fearless in standing up to the Duke of Marlborough, and those who followed the Duke's lead in opposing the Agricultural Union. To understand how great was the courage of this man, we have to recognise the conspiracy carried on under the Duke's leadership to bring the striking workers to heel. Strikers were turned out of their homes; *the press and the pulpit were used to distort the aims of the workers and their Unions;* bribes were offered to the workers to try and get them to betray their comrades and *the more active workers were blacklisted.*

On the day the women were sentenced, Christopher wrote a letter to *The Times* giving the facts of the case. The letter was published two days later under the heading "Impossible". *The Times* sent one of its reporters to the district to check on the facts. Writing of Christopher Holloway's letter, the reporter had this to say,

"Mr. C. Holloway of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union gave a substantially accurate account of the circumstances under which the justices dealt with these women, but falling into an error not uncommon with Unionists, Mr. Holloway called what is in reality a strike on the part of the agricultural labourers a lock-out on the part of the masters."

He then went on to give a very full account of the events leading up to the trial itself, and the journey to gaol. He added,

"such a sentence staggered the poor women; and well it might, for it has staggered the whole county. The indignation at its severity is deep and outspoken. . . The labouring population of the village (Chipping Norton) were astounded when they heard the sentences, but they bore it quietly until about nine o'clock at night, when the roughs of the neighbourhood, in which there is a manufactory, assembled in considerable force."

This latter sentence earned him the wrath of Mr. W. Bliss, who, in a letter published on May 27th, claimed to be the proprietor of the only manufactory in Chipping Nor-



ton and denied that his workers were involved. *The Times* report ended with these words,

"The more respectable portion of the population believe that Mr. Bruce will feel it his duty to send down an order for the immediate discharge of the whole of the women who have now been in confinement since Wednesday afternoon."

The Mr. Bruce mentioned was the Home Secretary in the Liberal Government, who was to appear several times in the drama of "The Chipping Norton Case".

Of the sixteen women, thirteen were married, one was a common law wife, two were single. Many of the women had young children, but were allowed no time to arrange for their welfare. As is so often the case in working-class communities, the children of families in difficulties become the responsibility of the street or village. The *Daily News* of Wednesday, 28th May gives a vivid picture of what happened in Ascott.

*"The humble cottagers in Ascott are shocked at the callous indifference displayed by their well-to-do neighbours as to the welfare of the children left for the time motherless.*

A little orphan was pointed out to me this afternoon, whose only relative, an aunt, was taken to prison. Not an enquiry was made about the child by any of the so-called well-to-do classes. *The Unionists however combined together to feed the hungry.* At first the food was brought from a neighbouring village. The deserted little ones, to the number of a score or over, were fed on the village green, under the shadow of the spreading chestnuts, which added picturesqueness to the grey old church. A hint was given to the kind-hearted working people who had taken the children under their charge that this al fresco display was hardly en regle; so that afterwards the meals were eaten in a small cottage, opposite the village wheelwright's shop, and presided over by an old woman who put upon herself that special duty, and who was only too pleased at having the opportunity to do so."

Throughout the country, protests were made at the savage sentences. Of course the Agricultural Labourers' Union was in the forefront in this campaign. It so happened that the first annual conference of the Union opened at Leamington on May 28th. The chairman adjourned the ordinary business of the conference while Joseph Arch moved an emergency resolution.

As part of the campaign of the Trades Unions against the Criminal Law Amendment Act, a monster demonstration had been arranged for Whit Monday, June 2nd. The Act had been passed in the previous year and it was under this Act that Ascott women had been charged. The Act had been used on several occasions to intimidate workers on strike. *Sentences of a month or more had been passed on pickets who had called "blackleg" after a strike-breaker.* The police had arrested strikers and held them in custody for several days on charges which were dismissed by magistrates when the workers were brought before the bench. Although the charges were dismissed, the purpose in locking away leading pickets and intimidating others had been achieved. *It is ironic that a hundred years before the Industrial Relations Act, the working class were campaigning against "The Act".* The Whit Monday demonstration had been arranged long before the events in Ascott-under-Wychwood. The sentences

on the sixteen gave the Trades Unionists new cause to hate what the manifesto issued for the demonstration called "the invidious, unjust and cruel *Criminal Law Amendment Act*". In its report of the demonstration *The Times* of 3rd June said

"... Every district in London probably sent its contingent to yesterday's gathering, meeting at different hours and all concentrating upon the Embankment about noon; each section on its arrival having its position indicated by mounted members of the committee whose broad bands of ribbon betokened their authority. Looking at the list of trades given it would be difficult to specify any trade that was unrepresented ...

Most of the large towns in the country had sent delegates to the gathering and among them were two representatives of the ALU. One of them, Mr. Banbury of Woodstock, said that he attended at the unanimous invitation of 70,000 labourers. He lived in the district where the women had been sent to prison, and on their release he told them that they were martyrs in a good cause *and that their imprisonment would do more to procure the repeal of the law under which they had suffered than all the talking in the world*. He had been asked by *The Times* of that day to say what it was the labourers required and he would at once give the answer. They desired the repeal of all the clauses of the Criminal Law Amendment Act which pressed unjustly on the labouring classes, *and to have the laws of the country administered by men who understood them and who were not influenced by local prejudices and local friendship*. They desired that those who had to obey the laws should help to make them. ... Finally, they desired electoral districts, the exclusion of bishops from the House of Lords, that parsons should confine themselves to preaching the Gospel instead of taking women to prison ...'

Questions were asked in Parliament and it was obvious that the Government was embarrassed by the ham-fisted actions of the Oxfordshire Clergymen Magistrates. However, this did not prevent many of the Oxfordshire bigwigs, led by the Duke of Marlborough, from rallying to the support of the Reverend Carter and the Reverend Harris. There was a letter in *The Times*, from the churchwardens and other local dignitaries of Ascott extolling the generosity of the farmers in their dealings with their workers. They further claimed that most of the cottages in the village were good, "and the general condition of the labouring poor above the average of that class". It was this statement which caused Christopher Holloway to reply with the description of some of the houses with which this account commences.

In spite of all protests, the women completed their sentences in Oxford Gaol. The conditions described by the two women who had young babies with them, showed a callousness on the part of the authorities. After the cold and wearisome journey through the night in an open cart, they were lodged in cells which they described as "cold and damp". They further complained that they were fed on bread and skilly and that their children were not properly fed. These charges were denied by the authorities, but the sworn statements of the two mothers have the ring of truth.

When the first nine women were released after seven days, they were met at the prison gates and were taken to the house of the local branch secretary in the Botley Road. After being given breakfast they were sent back to Ascott by train, the tickets being bought by the Labourers' Union.

Three days later, on Saturday May 31st, the remaining seven were released. They

too were given a ceremonial breakfast, but they were sent back in a carriage and four. At each village through which they passed they were feted and applauded. That evening a meeting was held in Ascott and "Jacksons Oxford Journal" gave the number present as between two and three thousand. This figure gives an idea of the strength of feeling which the case had aroused. The Union was quick to link the case with all the other demands of the workers. Among these demands were Manhood Suffrage, repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the abolition of Clerical Magistrates. *The demand for universal manhood suffrage reminds us that the agricultural workers were not allowed to vote.*

On the evening of Friday 20th June, Joseph Arch, accompanied by the Rev. Attborough, again visited Ascott. The purpose of this visit was to present each of the women with the sum of £5.00 and a dress length. Five pounds was a considerable sum in those days — equal to two months' wages for an agricultural worker. The £80 pounds had been raised in collections by the Unions.

Criticisms of the Chipping Norton magistrates continued and on August 9th the correspondence between Lord Selbourne, the Lord Chancellor, and the Duke of Marlborough, Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire, was published in "Jacksons Oxford Journal". The Duke had continued to defend the actions of the magistrates, but Lord Selbourne in his final letter showed his impatience with the Duke. His letter concludes with these words,

"Concurring in the desire which your Grace evidently and justly feels to support as far as possible the authority of the County Magistracy when acting within their proper jurisdiction and also to recognise the integrity of purpose with which the Justices at Chadlington acted in this matter, I nevertheless feel obliged to adhere to the opinion which I originally formed that the authority of the law would have been in this case better vindicated by a different and more lenient course, and at the same time to express my hope that if circumstances should again occur calling for the application of similar principles, the views which I thought it my duty to submit to your Grace (and which your Grace will doubtless deem it proper to communicate to the Justices) will receive more consideration than appears to have been given to them on this occasion."

An interesting question arises as to why, after passing repressive legislation against Trades Unions, a Government becomes embarrassed when it is used. There is an interesting parallel in the attitude of the recent Tory Government, when the five dockers were brought to court under the Industrial Relations Act.

Anti-Trades Union legislation is meant to intimidate the workers. The law is successful if the workers can be frightened into acceptance of repressive measures. If on the other hand the law is challenged and the penal clauses are invoked, then the penal clauses become an albatross around the necks of the Government. Sending workers to prison can have no other result than to raise the militancy of the working class. Anti-Trade Union Laws have failed in their purpose immediately a real challenge is made against them. It was so in 1873, and it is still true.

# A Hundred Years of Farmworkers' Struggle: Strike Action

by R. Fieldhouse

After Tolpuddle in 1834 there was little organised protest amongst farm workers for thirty years, until the economic boom of the 1860's raised the expectations of the farm workers above their depressed state. Small unions began to form in Berkshire, Kent, Buckinghamshire, Herefordshire, Hertfordshire and Lincolnshire before Joseph Arch's Warwickshire Agricultural Labourers' Union was formed in 1872. They enjoyed the support of the blossoming urban trade union movement which hoped an improvement in the rural standard of living might stem the drift to the towns. And they won the support of the middle-class radicals and charitable-liberals who sympathised with their honest anti-establishment, nonconformist and sometimes millennial search for the "just society". Also, these agricultural trade unionists of the 1860's and 1870's benefited as much as the rioters of 1830 from the advice and leadership given by the village craftsmen and tradesmen. Many local branch secretaries, as well as more senior union officials, were drawn from this more independent section of the rural working class. Just such a man was Joseph Arch himself.

It was largely due to the driving personality of Arch that the Warwickshire union grew into a semi-national farmworkers' union within two years, with nearly one and a half thousand branches. The main aim of the union was better wages and shorter hours, but it also advocated more allotments, the cultivation of waste land, co-operative farming, *land nationalisation*, better education and the parliamentary franchise. The tactics of the union were threefold: 1) Appeals to justice, which were unlikely to make much impression on the farmers, but won considerable middle-class support. 2) Migration or emigration from the low-wage areas — "We shall shift the men off until the farmers feel the want of them and come to our price". This tactic enjoyed some success, although at a time when the industry was naturally discarding labour it was quite easy for the farmers to take up the slack. Moreover, Arch himself expressed doubts about migration because it often removed the most militant union members and left the "drones" behind. 3) Limited strikes against selected farmers supported by contributions from neighbouring unionists still at work.

Arch's attitude to strikes was well expressed many years later when he was interviewed in 1909 by Tom Higdon. When Higdon said his union did not believe in strikes, Arch replied "Oh, we did *then*". "You ordered a strike sometimes I suppose?" asked Higdon. "I don't know about ordering a strike," said Arch. "The men would go on strike themselves in various places — then they would come to me and I always supported them."

"Would you advocate strikes now?" asked Higdon.

"Certainly. What else can you do to get wages up?" replied the old man.

There is much to be learnt, even today, from Joseph Arch's priorities and his tremendous loyalty to his members. Also from the fact *that the strikes were localised rather than national*. Given an enthusiasm at grass-roots level and a leadership which



the members knew would support them, these local strikes won some resounding victories, despite the ease with which farmers could find alternative labour. The defeat came in 1874 when the farmers instigated a lock-out in East Anglia and forced the union to take on a large-scale strike situation which it did not have the experience or resources to handle. And the middle-class support ebbed away as the conflict became too militant for their paternalistic liberalism. This is reflected in the despairing resolution which the National Executive passed on 27th July 1874.

“That in the face of the harsh and prolonged lock-out in the Eastern Counties, this Committee cannot feel justified in supporting the labourers in enforced idleness indefinitely; nor can they seek public support continually while the harvest is waiting to be gathered in. The Committee therefore resolve to place migration and emigration at the disposal of the labourers or the alternative of depending wholly on their own resources.”

This signalled the real defeat for Arch's union. But it might have been different if the agricultural industry had not been entering a long depression, when farmers were only too pleased to economise by reducing both wages and their labour force. This was the period when the permanent depopulation of rural England really became inevitable. These were far from ideal conditions for militant action.

Agricultural trade unionism was minimal during the next thirty years until George Edwards founded the Eastern Counties Agricultural Labourers' and Smallholders' Union in 1906. Over the next four years it expanded under the wing of the Liberal party, but in 1910 a split occurred when members of the St. Faith's branch struck for a shilling per week increase and a Saturday half day. During the six-month strike 1,000 new members were enrolled, but then in November the EC decided to end the strike with nothing gained, partly because of the expense and partly because they were anxious to sweep the dispute under the carpet before the general election in December. (The Liberals were anxious to gain farmers' votes, and believed they could count on the farm workers anyway!) In fact the negotiators, George Nicolls and Richard Winfrey, both Liberal MPs, accepted terms which not only failed to improve the wages and hours, but also left 43 of the 76 strikers out of work. But at the Union annual conference the following February a resolution condemning the dishonourable way the strike had been concluded was carried by a large majority *and most of those responsible were voted off the EC*. The Union escaped from the clutches of the Liberal party and became more militant in its demands for higher wages and shorter hours. In 1912 it became the National Agricultural Labourers' and Rural Workers' Union.

In May 1913 the newly organised Union in SW Lancashire demanded a 24 shillings minimum wage, 6 pence per hour overtime rate, a Saturday half-day and recognition of the Union. The farmers dismissed their men, and gave notice to those in tied cottages to leave their houses. They refused to recognise or negotiate with the Union, but the dockers' and ship stewards' unions helped by picketing boats bringing black-legs from Ireland, and the Ormskirk branch of the NUR refused to handle any produce from strike areas. When the strike was settled, the strikers got nearly all they had demanded.

The following February a small but significant dispute arose at Helious Bumstead in Essex. The farmers provoked the dispute by dismissing and evicting union mem-

bers, unless they surrendered their union cards. The men refused and put in a counter claim for a 2 shillings weekly increase, and the union subsequently made further claims relating to a minimum wage, overtime rates, harvest pay, a weekly half holiday, bank-holidays and security in tied houses. Although it was technically a lock-out, eight men were prosecuted for leaving their work without proper notice. They refused to pay their fines and presented themselves at the local police station but the police declined to arrest them. After the lock-out had dragged on well into the summer, the Union declared a strike and brought out 400 men. It was finally settled after another two months, on 3rd August 1914! The result was a 2 shilling rise, an agreed minimum wage and harvest pay and an important stipulation that men would not be laid off during wet weather.

Meanwhile a strike on the royal estates at Sandringham in March, although not completely successful, led to a general rise in wages in many parts of Norfolk. Another, rather different, strike which broke out in Norfolk in the spring of 1914 was the Burstons School strike in support of Tom Higdon, the local teacher, who had been fired because he helped to organise a Union branch in the village. (He later became national treasurer of the Union.) The full story is well told by Reg Groves in *Sharpen the Sickle*: the result was that Higdon and his wife were able to continue teaching the village children first in a rented room and then in a new school built in 1917, whilst the church school remained empty. This victory was made possible by financial help from the railwaymen and miners, the local co-ops, trades councils and the ILP, as well as the determination of all concerned not to be beaten.

The results of all this militant activity during 1913 and early 1914 were improved conditions and impressive increases in union membership. The struggle attracted new members in large numbers. When Lord Lilford provoked a dispute on his estates at Thrapstone, Northants, in April 1914 by dismissing seven men who refused to leave the Union, the effect was electric. Support was widespread and membership mushroomed in the area and adjoining counties.

But then came the war, which put an end to militant activity.

In 1917 the Corn Production Act, which gave farmers their first Guaranteed Prices, established the wages board, and the general feeling was that negotiation would replace strike action, and the optimism which the wages board stimulated gave a tremendous impetus to trade union organisation and recruitment of farm workers. NALU membership increased eightfold between 1917-19. One newspaper described it as the "most startling increase" of any single union after the war. But the optimism was short lived: *disillusionment with the wages board was widespread by 1919* when it fixed a 6 shillings and 6 pence wage increase in the face of a claim for £1 which was widely felt to be justified by the rising cost of living.

In August 1920 farm workers in Holderness in the East Riding of Yorkshire went on strike in support of a claim for £5 harvest pay; £1 more than the figure fixed by the wages board. The farmers retreated behind the skirts of the statutory body, claiming that *they* had voted against the wages order, and therefore the men had only their own union representatives to blame. Nearly 3,500 men came out on strike and with the harvest rotting in the fields there was a good chance of success if the strikers had been given wholehearted support by the leadership; but the government began putting pressure on the Union and on 3 September the EC resolved

that "should all attempts at a settlement fail during the next week, the strike should be closed down." This lack of determination led to the strike ending in defeat on 8 September.

In 1921 agricultural prices began to decline and the industry entered a severe depression. The government abolished the wages board, together with the price guarantees of the 1917 act. This is not the place to judge the effectiveness of the wages board; nor is the period 1917-21 the best test, for it was established when agricultural prices were rising and the industry enjoying a boom, and removed at the first signs of depression, when it might have been some help. As it was, the farmers reduced wages and increased hours unhindered. Where the Union tried to resist it had little success. Typical was the situation in the East Riding, where the NUAW instructed its members to resist an underhand agreement made between representatives of the NFU and the Workers' Union to cut wages in February 1922. Unfortunately, the situation was far less auspicious for a strike then than 18 months earlier; and the farmers, wishing to reduce their labour force anyway, were only too happy to instigate a lock-out. The men began to drift back to work as best they could. Other local disputes fared equally badly.

However, in February 1923, when the farmers demanded a reduction to 22 shillings and 6 pence for 54 hours in Norfolk, the Union determined to resist and the following month brought 10,000 men out on strike. Although the strike (which is fully described by R. Groves in *Sharpen the Sickle*) was far from a total victory, and the strikers suffered a *stab in the back from Ramsey Macdonald, who was anxious to win middle-class support in the forthcoming general election, nevertheless, it did much to stem the tide of falling wages.*

So even in unfavourable conditions, a strike proved partially successful if undertaken with a determination to win through against all odds. This is one of the factors which undoubtedly distinguishes many of the successful from the unsuccessful strikes. So also does a confidence in the leadership, such as that engendered by Joseph Arch between 1872-4, or as a result of Lloyd George's campaign for a £1-a-week minimum wage in 1913-14, which gave farm workers such confidence immediately before the war. The other characteristics of the more successful farm workers' strikes were that they were usually limited to a relatively small locality where conditions were particularly favourable and the strike would make the most impact; and they took place during periods of agricultural expansion and boom rather than stagnation or depression.

Since 1923 the NUAW has come to rely more and more on the wages board, and the myth has grown up that farm workers cannot strike. But even a cursory investigation of their history over the last 150 years shows that they can, and frequently have, with success — providing certain conditions prevail.

# Jack Dunman

*Ted Lomas, Chairman, Berks & Oxon County Committee, recalls Jack Dunman and their work together.*

Jack and I joined the Union at about the same time in 1941. Jack proceeded to build up a branch centred on Charlbury which soon became the largest in Oxfordshire. As I was very busy in Brize Norton and surrounding areas where there were, at that time, no other branches, we didn't meet until the Spring of 1942 when a special County Conference was convened at Oxford.

This was attended by Billy Holmes, then General Secretary, Sid Winterbone (Organiser) and about forty representatives of such branches as then existed.

At this Conference the County Committee was re-constituted, elected by a show of hands, there being no District Committees at that time. Of the nine members elected, Jack became County Secretary. I took the Chair and the late Mrs. Uzzell, a long-time worker for the movement, became Treasurer.

Of this Committee, Jack Wilson became a Norfolk Organiser, Len Kinch is still secretary of the Chadlington branch and I have been elected Chairman of the new Berks. and Oxon. Area. In spite of war-time problems such as restricted transport, the "black-out", Home Guard and Civil Defence duties and much overtime-working County Committee meetings were held at regular quarterly intervals in a photographic studio owned by Mrs. Dunman, and the Annual Conferences gradually improved.

The great need, at this time, was for recruitment and with Jack's drive and enthusiasm as an inspiration, considerable progress was made. Despite his commitments in other fields Jack was always willing to mount his push-bike and travel to any district where help was needed. I recall some occasions when he helped me in my large area; on one occasion when he was guest speaker at my branch meeting he had to share my bed and catch the early morning train to London. His energy seemed inexhaustible which was very fortunate considering we had been arguing politics until two in the morning.

Those were busy days and we were fortunate in that Jack was able to represent us at several Biennial Conferences and would report to any meetings, large or small, on the decisions and policies which had been adopted. He was, of course, a first-rate speaker and never in need of a microphone, while his skill in the rapid composition of a resolution had to be seen to be appreciated.

The passing years saw many changes in Union organisation and many new faces on District and County Committees but it is very pleasing to record that, whereas in 1942 Jack was County Secretary and I was Chairman; thirty years later, at the final meeting of the Oxfordshire County Committee and of the Conference, we were still together but had, in the passage of time, changed chairs. It was a pleasure to work with him but more than a pleasure to have been one of his friends.



# Les Shears

*Joan Jordan, ASTMS, writes of Les Shears.*

I moved to Dorset in 1947 — on joining the NUAAW. I very soon came to know Les and was to become closely associated with him for the next 16 years.

I was immediately impressed with his drive and enthusiasm for the Union, his untiring efforts and time given to improve the lot of his fellow-workers in any way that he could.

Over these early years we were to see the Union membership in Dorset increase from some 2½ thousand to 4,000. This was achieved through many campaigns and events in practically every village and town in the county which were organised for recruiting new members along with the organiser, Arthur Jordan, Les played no mean part in this big achievement.

Annual Union outings were arranged each year. What a fine sight it was to see anything from 25 to 30 coaches leaving from all parts of Dorset, whether to visit Cardiff, Isle of Wight or London.

I can well imagine the pride that Les must have felt at seeing so many hundreds of members and their families coming together on such occasions. This feeling can only come about if one is involved in Trade Union activity such as Les was.

Les had many commitments in the Union. Branch Secretary, District Committee, County Vice-Chairman and in the latter years County Chairman. He also played an active roll in his local village affairs, being a Parish Councillor and School Governor.

Les was highly respected by everyone that he came in contact with, even those that did not agree with his views always.

It was indeed a pleasure to have been one of his friends.

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