

Fighting for the Nine-hour Day

By Tom Brown

Published in the May/June 1961 issue of World Labour News

Topics: [manufacturing](#), [UK](#), [history](#), [strike tactics and analysis](#)

When I last visited my native city of Newcastle, I saw the sports shop of Stan Seymour, one-time footballer and director of a Cup-winning Newcastle United. I looked up at the heavy stone walls and recalled that the shop was a converted dwelling house, the house where my father was born, the home of my grandfather John Brown, Radical and trade unionist. Here and in a nearby dwelling he had been visited by Garibaldi. Best of all, I recalled his part in the famous Nine-Hours Strike.

Journeying along the riverside amid the clanging shipyards, I remembered the change of working hours which took place at the beginning of 1919, one stage in a long fight. Before that there had been a nine-and-a-half hour day and a 53-hour week, but unpaid meal breaks made a working day of 11 hours. Then we won the 47-hour week, after World War II the 44-hour week, then 42, but even the 53-hour, five-and-a-half day week had been a great triumph, a stage in the long climb from the depths of the Industrial Revolution. One of the best chapters of this saga is that of the “Nine Hours Strike”.

During a great part of the 19th Century, the trade union movement tried to shorten the intolerably long working day by influencing politicians to introduce “Short Hours Bills” in Parliament, as well as by some strike action. There was some limited success through Parliament, for it was sometimes possible to gain the support of Conservative politicians against the Liberals. Traditionally the Tories were “land-owning aristocrats”, the Liberals coal, ship, and factory owners, believers in “Liberty”, the liberty to work men, women, and little children to death without State interference.

The limits of this method of obtaining a shorter working day were clearly seen by 1870 and even before. Philanthropists and politicians would never agree with workmen on how far the day should be shortened. Many of the former, including Lord Shaftesbury, were opposed to trade unionism; the Bills, such as the 10-hours Bill, were obtained on the plea of the effects of the long hours on women and children — the reason why mining and textiles figure so largely in the discussions — and workers were beginning to resent gaining a shorter working day for men by pleading the case for women. As a union paper declared, “Now the veil must be lifted and the agitation carried on under its true colours. Women and children must no longer be made the pretext for securing a reduction of working hours for men.”¹

In 1874 the Tory Government introduced, against Liberal opposition, its shorter hours bill, entitled, “Factories (Health of Women, etc.) Bill”, relating chiefly to the cotton mills of Lancashire, the women securing a 56-and-a-half hour week. It should be remembered that there was no half-holiday on Saturday until the latter part of the 19th Century.

Increasingly workers were losing hope in political action and turning with stronger faith to direct action, especially to reduce the working day and week. During 1859-60-61, there had been strikes to this end in the London building trade, to be followed by action in many provincial towns, gaining for many building workers a shorter working day, without, of course, any reduction of the weekly wage. The building workers continued to enjoy a working week shorter than that of factory workers until recent post-war years, 50 against 53 before 1919, then 44 against 47 until 1947.

In 1866 the engineers of Tyneside debated a district strike for the nine-hour day, but a slump ended the discussion. In 1870 the demand was again put forward, but the Central District Committee of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, now the AEU [Amalgamated Engineering Union], cautiously decided against it.

Then, early in 1871, the engineers and shipyard men of nearby Sunderland took up the issue, decided, prepared, and acted with remarkable speed and decisiveness. All out on April 1 and no fooling. The employers, who had been very confident and had the support of the Durham County authorities, with military force to back

them, soon found themselves on the losing end. After four weeks, a short strike for those days, the workers were victorious and gained the nine-hour day.

Alarmed at the emulation that must follow such inspiring action, the engineering employers of North East England met in Newcastle on April 8 to prepare a counter-attack. Headed by Sir W.G. Armstrong, of the Armstrong Whitworth Company, they obtained the support of engineering employers throughout the British Isles, who levied themselves a shilling a head for all men employed by them.

The engineers of Newcastle and Gateshead were for strike action, but trade strength was low. There were many unions, craft unions, but even one craft might have several unions in one shop. And even these divided ranks did not contain all, or even a majority of the workers in the factories. The Webbs, with access to the well-documented records of the strike stated that “two out of three of the men in the engineering trade belonged to no Union whatsoever.”

There was the problem... a strong and wealthy foe, our side poor, divided by a multitude of unions, and two-thirds of the men non-unionists. A new, even if temporary, single-purpose organisation must be created, above the exclusiveness of trade-union brotherhood, a movement founded on a class, in class conflict.

A Rank and File Movement was formed and named the Nine Hours League. The League included all crafts and unions and all men, unionist or non-unionist. It took over, temporarily, the functions of the unions, without destroying them. Its president was John Burnett, an Alnwick man, member of the ASE district committee.

The men of Newcastle and Gateshead struck, it was a hard strike, as my grandmother often told me, for I loved to listen to her stories over a winter's fire, with the wind howling down from the Cheviots, or across the angry North Sea when she later lived near the Scottish Border. I have since checked the details of these stories with the records and works of historians. It is remarkable that the tales of actual events experienced by such old people always seem to stand the test.

The national executives of the unions were lukewarm, but the local men were full of fight. “The five-month strike... was, in more than one respect, a notable event in Trade Union annals” wrote the Webbs in their dry manner. “One of the most memorable strikes on record,” said G.D.H. Cole. The strikers were mostly non-unionists and unused to organisation. “Upwards of 8,000 men had struck, whereas only 500 of them belonged to our society and very few to any other,” said the ASE Abstract Report of Council Proceedings.²

But the League organised them — meetings, processions through the city streets and to neighbouring towns, demonstrations on the Town Moor, factory pickets, organisation of relief, everyone seemed busy. Agents of the League went to distant towns and villages, sometimes walking many miles, sometimes going to Hull, Leith, and London by coasters for a few shillings, for the strike funds were guarded with miserly care, “Every possible penny must go for food.”

Although the majority of workmen could not then read or write, the need of printed propaganda was understood. There was a minority who had received a rudimentary education at Church and at “Penny” schools, or who had taught themselves to read and write. From them came a team of writers, men who learned to read the hard way and loved their diet of the “classic novels”, Shakespeare, Tales of the Border, and poetry. This reading, combined with a notorious Northumberland love of narrative, now served them well.

John Brown was deputed to seek the aid of the Radical Joseph Cowan, owner of an excellent local press, the Newcastle Daily Chronicle, to the weekly edition (the Newcastle Weekly Chronicle) of which Kropotkin was a regular contributor (Kropotkin often stayed with Dr. Spence Watson at Gateshead). Gripping John Brown's hand, Cowan promised to open the pages of his papers to the strikers.

But the Chronicle had little more than a local circulation. The workers' correspondents aimed further afield, too. The Webbs, usually lofty towards anything short of a university education, wrote: “The tactical skill and literary force with which the men's case was presented achieved the unprecedented result of securing for their demands the support of The Times and Spectator.”³

Armstrong (Lord) wrote a howling protest to the Times: “We were amazed... we really felt that, if the

League themselves had possessed the power of inspiring that article, they could scarcely have used words more calculated to serve their purpose than those in which it is expressed. The concurrent appearance in the Spectator of an article exhibiting the same bias adds to our surprise.”⁴

The poor man could never believe that some of the articles were written by some of his fitters.

The strike lasted for five months, during the first three of which money came in slowly, afterwards in a flood. The flood of donations from so many parts of the country heartened the men and dismayed the employers. Writers then and historians since have attributed the financial success to the skill and eloquence of the now unknown writers.

Blacklegs were brought in from the extremes of the British Isles, then hundreds were recruited from Europe. To stop the latter source of labour, the assistance of the International Workingmen’s Association was called, with some success. Then the IWMA’s Danish secretary in London, Kohn, was sent to Europe to complete the job. European members of the IWMA came to Tyneside and persuaded many blacklegs to return to their home countries.

Five months gone, the League was growing stronger, the employers capitulated and granted the nine-hour day, 54-hour week, without reduction of the weekly wage. Afterwards, instead of six days of nine hours each, it was agreed to have five of nine-and-a-half hours and one of six-and-a-half hours, finishing at 1 p.m. on Saturday.

A later struggle knocked off one hour, blowing the factory whistle at 12 o’clock for the week-end.

The victory caused the Tynesiders’ struggle to be emulated throughout England and in Scotland and Ireland, in other trades, especially building, too. On the Clyde, shipbuilding workers were offered, instead of a 60 hour week, 54 hours and a rise in wages. The rise they refused and forced from the employers a 51 hour week at the old weekly wage, though in a later depression they were forced to accept a 53 hour week.

From then on not political action but direct action was the method used by the workers to secure a shorter working day and week — a fight that is not yet over. The strike ended, the leaders of the struggle went back to the lathe, the bench, and the shipyard — with one exception. Burnett became General Secretary of the ASE. The names of the others are unknown to history. I have the word of one old lady that is how they wanted it to be.

Endnotes

1. *Cotton Factory Times*, May 26, 18?3. [18?3 is the year given in Kate Sharpley Library’s publication; it may be 1873. —Syndicalism.org eds.]
2. June 1, 1870 to December 31, 1872, page 184.
3. *History of Trade Unionism*.
4. *Times*, 14.9.71.

Additional Information

Taken from Kate Sharpley Library’s “[British Syndicalism: Pages of Labour History](#)” (1994) by Tom Brown. We moved the original in-text citations to endnotes.