

**Cloth Workers
Strike in
Halifax in 1925**

Halifax and the successful strike in 1925 by textile workers in West Yorkshire

Mark Metcalf - 30 September 2018

The first specific locally reported indication that a Textile Dispute might take place amongst wool-len (used for knitting) and worsted (tailoring) textile workers in West Yorkshire came with a published letter in the Halifax Daily Courier and Guardian (herein referred to as the Courier) dated 21 July 1925. It was signed by a 'Textile Worker' who urged his fellow workers to ignore the union officials and settle the dispute 'by heart-to-heart discussions between our employers and ourselves....both sides must be prepared to make some sacrifice in order to meet in the markets abroad our former enemy, who could not beat us in the war but who is capturing our trade. I do not think we should have the reduction from our pre-war wages, but only a reduction from the bonus that was given in order to carry on the war.'

The textile workers were poorly organised but had benefitted during WWI from the establishment of the Whitley Council (*), which helped to settle disputes through negotiations. In the early 20s though the employers had used the recessionary period to reduce base wages by 5 per cent.

In April, 1925 workers, fed up with falling living standards, demanded the restoration of the cut. In addition the executive committee of the largest union, the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), which was led by Ben Turner from Halifax, also proposed that the employers should - with prices rising rapidly - pay a cost of living adjustment every month other than annually.

In response most of the employers within the Wool Employers Association (WEA) decided to try and boost profits by driving down wages even further. After initially proposing a ten per cent cut the WEA stuck on demanding a five per cent cut. WEA members were encouraged to post notices of wage reductions on 24 July. In a sign that not all WEA members were united some employers chose not to post notices and the NUTW instructed its members to continue working in these establishments.

Turner criticised the employers action and called it a Lock-Out. He viewed it as part of a general attack on all workers and remarked in a pre strike rally that textile workers and coal miners (*) had been selected for the initial attack and if both were defeated then other attacks would follow.

The strike, endorsed by the National Association of Unions in the Textile Trade, commenced on Thursday 23 July. The editorial the following day in The Courier expressed hope that previous successful peaceful negotiations to settle 'the problem of wages and hours and general working conditions' would reassert themselves quickly. According to the paper 'a large amount of machinery remains in motion because the young workers are not in unions.' This was followed by a further appeal to nationalism, 'the only people who will benefit will be the foreigner...who will pour more goods into our country.'

In a lengthy article of 24 July 1925 the paper reported about 155,000 operatives had ceased work in the West Riding and Lancashire. Central (organising) councils of action were organised in each town. The demands of the strikers were for no reductions in pay.

Amongst those on strike were 10,000 in Halifax, a thousand less than in Dewsbury. There 24,000 on strike in Huddersfield and 55,000 in Bradford, where the police and strikers had clashed after the latter, believing an all out stoppage was needed, ignored appeals by their officials not to try and bring out factories where employers had not agreed to reduce wages. When the police attempted to intervene they were overpowered by several hundred strikers, some of whom threw stones that broke windows and they then forced the closure of some factories before police reinforcements arrived and dispersed the crowds.

In what was described as a complicated position, the Courier noted that not all the employers were standing by their Association and they had not posted notices regarding the proposed reduction of bonuses. In these cases work was continuing as usual. Although some operatives had not taken strike action 'the fact that some 10,000 in Halifax and districts have done so is in itself a serious thing.' Amongst those on strike were employees at Messrs Patons and Baldwins mills. At John Crossley and Sons carpet factory at Dean Clough work continued as the notices to reduce bonuses did not come into play for another 24 hours.

Arthur Dawson, local organiser for the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) announced that shop stewards were bringing in lists of members presenting strike cards and strike pay would begin from Monday next. (3 August) He announced that ten local factories were working at the existing rates and that no stoppage would take place at them unless there was any attempt to lower pay rates. In Elland, most employees at the various companies were on strike.

Dawson said: "the response in the area has been magnificent.....the spirit of the workers is one of resolute resistance." (It appears from the press report that overlookers (supervisors) were amongst the staunchest backers of the strike. Without them at work getting the machines operating was a real difficulty). Even where there had been no previous union organisation, workers had struck said Dawson, who had been the Labour candidate for Sowerby at the last general election.

The Friendly and Trades Club had become a focal point for strikers and all the men appeared in good spirits. Meanwhile 'factory girls paraded the streets arm-in-arm, conversing gaily.'

On Saturday 25 July 1925 the Courier reported that there was no immediate prospect of a conference between the WEA and the NUTW, thus quashing rumours that the employers had decided to continue paying the old rate of wages for six months, at the end of which period the matter was to be reconsidered.

The paper reported: 'at the various mills in Halifax this morning everything was quiet. Most of the places were closed.... the number of employees affected in Halifax...original estimate of 10000 for

the town and district will not be far wrong.taking the whole dispute about 55 per cent of the operatives are women and juveniles and 45 per cent men.'

A mass meeting of around two to three thousand people was held on Saville Park on Sunday 28 July. Mr Crowther, NUTW assistant secretary to the Halifax district, said: "if workers suffered a reduction this time they might be faced with a reduction another time..... the employers would say they could earn more if they worked longer hours." He said that whilst the NUTW had not sought the 'Lock Out' it was now time for textile workers to make a stand if they were going to retain their present standard of living.

Alderman Ben Turner, J.P and President of the NUTW, made a speech in which he tried to explain the economic case for textile workers, who were being asked to take a cut in their weekly wages of 5 per cent or 3s 2d (16p today), which he contended would have limited impact on the price of finished goods and as such not produce much in the way of additional sales for companies. He showed how Britain exported more cloth than before and how imports of fabric were down by two-thirds since 1913. He criticised the biggest manufacturers in Britain for opening mills in Poland and France. He remarked upon how wages in the US textile industries were much higher than in Britain.

Furthermore, "workers could not afford a reduction of 3s 2d, which was the equivalent to one stone of flour" especially as weekly wages in Bradford averaged just £2 and in Halifax they were 4s (20p) less. He said the union was prepared to negotiate at anytime or place but would not negotiate a decrease in wages.

The Halifax Wakes/national weekly holiday commenced on Monday 3 August, 1925. Due to the dispute far fewer trains were needed with the most popular destination being London - 4 special trains were needed. More people had though preferred the road to rail and charabancs (horse drawn carriages)) ran to Blackpool, Scarborough and Morecambe. After convening at 2.30pm on the Sunday, the Textile Joint Industrial Council was still in session in late afternoon the following day, delegates having only interrupted their negotiations in order to have meals.

Although these negotiations failed to produce anything of note, the two sides reconvened for another even lengthier series of negotiations on Friday 7 and Saturday 8 of August 1925, when it was agreed that there should be established a Court of Investigation to inquire into the state of work, employment and general conditions in the textile industry. However, when the employers held out for the reduction to be applied until the Investigation was concluded this was flatly rejected by the workers' representatives. The Court was to be held in private and would report to the Industrial Council, with any recommendations as to a new wages agreement to be accepted by both sides.

Over the weekend about £45,000 was paid by the trade unions to striking members. Of this £32,000 was paid out by the NUTW, about £2000 more than the previous weekend. The increase was due to many workers from Dewsbury returning from their holidays and resuming their participation in the strike.

On Sunday 9 August there was a good attendance at the Albert Theatre, Brighouse for a meeting organised by Brighouse Trades and Labour Council at which Ben Turner was supposed to be the main speaker. However with negotiations at a delicate stage he absented himself from proceedings at which Mr F. Holroyd (President of the Trades Council) spoke and during which Mr William C. Robinson MP for Elland and former President of the United Textile Factory Workers Association between 1913 and 1919, said he was willing to abide by the outcome of the Court of Investigation. It was reported that around 600 to 700 were on strike in Rastrick.

On Tuesday 12 August it was reported that the conference in Bradford between the Northern Counties District Council of the National Wool (and Allied) Textile Industrial Council had been adjourned because the employers' new offer had been rejected by the unions. The offer was that the difference between the old and new rates should be pooled and later disbursed in accordance with the Court findings. In essence this would have meant the unions largely accepting there was a need for a wage reduction. They were not willing to do this and replied that work could only be resumed under the old wage rates.

When the conference in Bradford was adjourned no new date for it to reconvene was fixed. The Courier reported that 250,000 workers were affected by the strike and of which the Halifax figure was 8,500 and Brighouse 1,000. The unions had paid out nearly £80,000 in benefits to its members. Later in the day the employers alleged that the unions had committed a 'Deliberate Act of Deception' by refusing to get their members to return to work. The employers later sought to break the strikers unity by taking out front page newspaper adverts arguing their case.

Following the collapse of negotiations the two sides were asked by Mr Leggett, who had been present in Bradford, from the Ministry of Labour to meet him in London. Meanwhile Ben Turner, the NUTW President and W Riley travelled south to consult with the Trades Union Congress General Council. The General Council itself was only four years old and was responsible for 'keeping watch on all industrial movements.'

Prior to journeying to the capital, Turner met with the Central Council of Action in Bradford. Present were representatives of the Transport and General Workers' Union (2) who discussed calling on their members to refuse to handle certain goods. The council also discussed demands for all permits for mills to work to be withdrawn but the previous decision to allow production to continue in firms where the old rate was being paid was reaffirmed.

It was reported that a large trade union had offered the NUTW a £5,000 interest free loan and Turner declared the union had funds to "last several weeks yet comfortably." However the following day (13 August 1925) the union announced it was to reduce the lock-out pay by 40 per cent in order to conserve funds for a long struggle. Meanwhile there had been 200 applications in Halifax for poor-law relief.

In Halifax, the Heckmondwike Manufacturing Company agreed to reopen the factory at the old non reduced rates and a permit was now being sought from the NUTW to allow strikers to return.

Under the direction of the Labour Minister in the Conservative Government, Sir Arthur Herbert Drummond Ramsay Steel-Maitland, the London Conference brought together the two sides on Thursday 13 August. The discussions continued the following day.

On Saturday 15 August the Courier reported: 'Work was to be resumed at old rates of pay on Monday.'

In turn this would allow the Court of Investigation, consisting of 5 persons, to start its work. The Minister later issued a letter thanking the employers' side for being 'prepared in the general interest to waive their proposal. He also remarked on how few incidents there had been of law breaking during the strike.

When news of the temporary agreement reached Halifax it was warmly welcomed and plans to re-open most of the mills at 7am on the Monday were announced.

On Sunday 16 August 1925 a not very well attended meeting of textile workers was held on Saville Park at which G Boothroyd, described as Chairman of the local Council of Action, said he felt too much secrecy was attached to the inquiry.

James Hudson, the Labour MP for Huddersfield, praised the strikers and said securing the Investigation was entirely due to the unity and solidarity of the operatives in the textile industry. He hoped that this progress would be maintained and said: "the effort to reduce the textile workers wages was part of a world-wide attempt to reduce wages, and was part of a bigger question. The old system of capitalism was on its death-bed and the community must take every step it could to secure increased control in industry."

When the five man investigating council, consisting of an independent chair and two from the employers and trade union side respectively, reported it opted to preserve wages as they were with no cuts in pay.

Turner remarked "I am glad to have lived to see the day when overlookers, foremen and managers, craftsmen, engine tenters etc. joined together to defend labour's interests - when the offer lass, the designer, the long brat men, and the woolcombers were standing together."

Combined with a temporary solution (see below) to the then coal crisis the textile workers victory boosted the morale of the trade union movement and suggested that if trade unionists, with the assistance of the relatively new Trades Union Congress General Council, could achieve unity in action then it was possible to defeat attacks on pay and conditions.

1. The Whitley Council took its name from John Henry Whitley, (1866 - 1935) the Liberal MP for Halifax between 1900 and 1928. Related to the Crossley family, Whitley took over his uncle

Samuel Whitley's cotton spinning business, S. Whitley & Co. at Hanson Lane Mills, Skircoat, Halifax in 1884.

During WWI, in 1917, Whitley chaired a committee on Industrial Relations, which was set up in the wake of the establishment of the Shop Stewards Movement, which had in May 1917 organised an anti conscription strike by 200,000 workers in 48 towns and which was demanding 'Workers Control.' The aim of the Whitley Councils that were set up was to establish a system of regular consultative meetings between workers and employers such that good industrial relations were established and maintained.

2. The Transport and General Workers Union or TGWU is the forerunner to today's UNITE. It was on 1 January 1922 that 24 unions combined to create the TGWU.

* Miners

- April 1925 : Britain returned to the Gold Standard and this resulted in a rise in the price of goods and a subsequent reduction of coal exports. The heavy financial losses in mining thus saw the coal owners propose 13% pay cuts. However, the subsequent Macmillan Inquiry into mining favoured the miners' side. Walter Citrine became TUC General Secretary.
- 30 June: Coal owners gave notice of the termination of the national agreement with the miners which had been in force since 1924. This meant a reduction in wages and the end of the guaranteed minimum wage. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain recommended rejection of the proposals.
- 10 July: The miners' representatives put their case to the TUC General Council, which pledged its support.
- 29 July: Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin stated that the Conservative government will not grant a subsidy to maintain the level of wages in the mining industry.
- 31 July ("Red Friday"): With strike action in the offing the government was forced to climb down and offered a 9 month subsidy to the coal industry, on condition that coal owners withdraw notices of wage reductions. It was announced that another Royal Commission would be appointed to inquire into the coal industry. A union defeat four years previously was called Black Friday, hence the term Red Friday for the victory.

References

The General Strike of 1926 by Keith Laybourn

Prelude to the 1926 General Strike - the Wool & Worsted Strike by Iain Dalton

<https://leedssocialistparty.wordpress.com/2015/07/30/prelude-to-the-general-strike-the-wool-worsted-strike-90-years-on/>