

Striking Women:

Voices of South Asian women workers from Grunwick and Gate Gourmet

9 September 2009

A foyer exhibition at The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University running from 8 October 2009 will mark 30 years of South Asian women's political involvement in workplace struggles in the UK.

Striking Women celebrates the significant role played by South Asian women in two industrial disputes in Greater London – the strike at Grunwick between 1976 and 1978 and the dispute at Gate Gourmet that erupted in 2005.

On a hot August afternoon in 1976, a small number of workers walked out of a photo-processing laboratory in Willesden, initiating a two year strike that has passed into the annals of the labour movement, as one of the key events in trade union history. 29 years later, also on a hot August day in the peak holiday period, another group of workers – this time assembling airline meals rather than processing holiday snaps, also left their posts, initiating a lock out at Gate Gourmet, disruption at Heathrow at the busiest time of the year and a dispute that is still not finally settled, at least as far as some of the workers are concerned.

Through images, text and interviews, the exhibition puts these two disputes in the wider context of South Asian women's activism in the workplace and explores the similarities and differences between them, separated by thirty years but united by women's courage, their struggle against poor working conditions and low wages and by the stereotypical representations of minority women workers by the British press and in other texts of the time.

"The very idea of a shop steward in a sari was a novelty"
Dromey and Taylor, 1978, p 25

Like many other women's struggles, stereotypes and misrepresentations were common but for the women themselves both disputes were about the right to decent working conditions and dignity and respect in the workplace.

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“Later they had made ‘rules and regulations’ that you had to get permission to go to the toilets. This woman said to me that she felt ashamed to ask to go to the toilet, so she held back and was in extreme discomfort” (Grunwick)

“I had never touched meat before. In the beginning, the others helped me out, but then they were like, it’s your daily job, you find a way to do it!” (Gate Gourmet)

In their own eyes, their struggle was one in which the rights of all workers was a central element and the support of the wider labour movement was important.

“We are fighting as workers and that’s what this is all about” (Gate Gourmet)

The Grunwick workers who were not union members at the start of the strike joined APEX ; the Gate Gourmet workers were members of TGWU (now Unite). In the earlier dispute, the striking workers had huge support throughout 1977 with mass secondary picketing by a range of trade unions, antiracist organisations and feminist groups. But the violence of the picket line lost them popular support.

“Scenes of violence that shocked the nation”

Lord Scarman, 1977

By 2005, circumstances had changed in Britain and secondary picketing in support of workers in dispute with their employers was no longer legal. As the exhibition documents too, the events at Gate Gourmet were more complicated and the union support was more equivocal. A timeline round the wall of the foyer links the two strikes and shows the changes not only in labour legislation but in women’s rights and equality laws and in the numbers and treatment of economic migrants into the UK.

Both disputes finally were failures; the majority of workers who took action were not reinstated. Despite this Grunwick is seen as an iconic moment when the rights of minority women workers were accepted as equal to those of British workers and when the male-dominated trade union movement had to ask itself questions about its practices. The verdict on Gate Gourmet is not yet out.

The exhibition is in the foyer of The Women’s Library which is holding over the same period a major exhibition *Ms Understood*, celebrating forty years of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Britain.

This too explores the striking stereotypes that were common in popular representations of the wider women’s movement. South Asian women workers may not have identified themselves as ‘women’slibbers’ but their struggles are an essential part of women’s history in the UK.

There will be an accompanying event:

- A study day on 28 November 2009, featuring leading activists, feminists and researchers, assessing the impact of Grunwick and Gate Gourmet and exploring the position of minority workers in the labour market.

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Striking Women: Voices of South Asian women workers from Grunwick and Gate Gourmet

Runs: Thursday 8 October 2009 to Wednesday 31 March 2010

Press preview: Wednesday 7 October 2009, 2pm – 4pm

Contact pressinfo@thewomenslibrary.ac.uk for details.

Venue: The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University, Old Castle Street, London E1 7NT

Foyer opening times: Monday to Friday 9.30am-5.30pm (Thursday until 8pm); Saturday 10am-4pm; Closed Sunday.

Entry is free and there is no need to book.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- The exhibition is produced by **Professor Ruth Pearson**, **Dr Sundari Anitha** (University of Leeds) and **Professor Linda McDowell** (University of Oxford), based on an AHRC funded project on South Asian women's political activism in the Grunwick and Gate Gourmet labour disputes.
- Established in 1926, **The Women's Library** is an archive, museum and library housing one of the greatest collections of women's history in the world. It is part of London Metropolitan University, one of the foremost providers of undergraduate, postgraduate, professional and vocational education and training in Britain.
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