

**The Dynamics of Labour Relations at the Port of Liverpool,
1967-1989**

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Abstract

In the second half of the twentieth century, significant advances in pay, working conditions and labour organisation were achieved by dock workers who had historically comprised one of the most exploited, least powerful sectors of the British working-class. State-sponsored regulation of the industry ushered in a complete change in the system of employment, the dynamics of workplace bargaining and irrevocably altered the relationship between port workers and their employers. However, despite considerable research into different aspects of labour organisation, state regulation and the system of employment on the docks, very few studies have explored labour relations at a specific port in order to focus on local variation and the nature of local workplace relationships. This thesis has sought to redress this imbalance in the existing historiography by undertaking a detailed exploration of labour relations at the port of Liverpool between 1967 and 1989.

The research offers an empirical analysis and interpretation of events and disputes at the port of Liverpool during this period. This time-frame is chosen because 1967 heralded state-sponsored total decasualisation of the industry, introducing an official shop steward movement and signifying a watershed for labour relations and the modernisation of Britain's ports. 1989 witnessed the end of an era for the dock industry and those employed within. The abolition of the National Dock Labour Scheme after a decade of Conservative government ended the unique statutory protection dockers had enjoyed for many years.

This thesis concludes that labour relations on the Liverpool waterfront between 1967 and 1989 were considerably more complex than previous industry-wide studies have suggested. While certain factors are inherent to the national dock industry, there is considerable variation in the organisational character and experiences of dock workers in different ports. Liverpool developed its own brand of labour relations that was historically shaped. Local idiosyncrasies are central to a proper evaluation of labour relations and workplace relationships at the port. After 1972, the growth of clerical organisation further complicated already-nuanced workplace relationships by introducing another participant to industrial bargaining. Locality is central to understanding the intricate and composite nature of modern industrial relations at Liverpool in the decades between 1967 and 1989.

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Declaration

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CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Declaration	iii
Copyright Information	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Methodology	3
The Research: Oral interviews	3
The Research: Archives and documentary evidence	6
The historical method and the triangulation of data	8
Structure	12
Chapter Two: Theories of Trade Union Organisation, Industrial Conflict and ‘Rank and Filism’	15
‘Rank and filism’ and labour history	15
Shop stewards and the democratisation of trade unions	21
Traditional assumptions regarding ‘white-collar’ workers	26
Chapter Three: Work Culture and Labour Relations in the British Dock Industry	32
Working at the docks	36
Labour relations and trade unionism before 1967	41
Chapter Four: Liverpool’s Political, Economic and Social Development	54
The early days – Liverpool’s rise to prominence	54
The post-war period and the ‘boom’ years	63
Decline and defiance in the late seventies and eighties	70
Chapter Five: The Growth of the Shop Steward System at Liverpool Docks, 1967-1972	75
The national economic, political and industrial bargaining context	75
Modernisation, containerisation and Devlinism: Developments in the industry, 1967-1972	79
Liverpool and modernisation	85
The opening of Aintree Containerbase	96
The 1970 national dock strike	100
The implementation of Devlin Phase 2 at Liverpool	106
Conflict at Liverpool docks, 1972: The ‘blackings’ of haulage companies and the NIRC	109
The opening of Seaforth Container Terminal	120
The establishment of the A-J Committee and the deepening of the national crisis	124
The Smith-Coggins dispute	129
The imprisonment of the ‘Pentonville Five’ and the interim report of the A-J Committee	133

Chapter Six: ‘What about us?’ The Evolution of Clerical Militancy at the Port of Liverpool	143
The Smith-Coggins dispute	150
Chapter Seven: The Changing Dynamics of Labour Relations at the Port of Liverpool, 1973-1989	158
Developments in labour relations at Liverpool 1973-1979	161
The Thatcher years at the Port of Liverpool, 1979-1989	171
The T&J Harrisons dispute	175
The 1981 pay negotiations and related dispute	183
Voluntary severance and the contraction of manning levels at the port	189
The dockers’ entanglement with the Miners’ strike, 1984	195
The Isle of Man Steam Packet dispute, 1985	199
1986: The Introduction of the National Employers Release Arrangement, the closure of Aintree Containerbase and the A1 Feeds dispute	205
The withdrawal of Liverpool Maritime Terminals, 1988	214
The national context – The road to the repeal of the NDLS	218
The abolition of the NDLS	223
Conclusion	242
Appendices	
Appendix I: Employment biographies for those interviewed	262
Appendix II: Interview questionnaires	265
Appendix III: Outline descriptions/definitions of duties attached to different categories/grades of dock workers	267
Bibliography	269
Tables	
Table I: Strikes on British docks 1930-1955	45

Abbreviations

ABP	Associated British Ports
ACTSS	The Association of Clerical, Technical and Supervisory Staff
A-J Agreement	Aldington-Jones Agreement
ASLEF	Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
BNFL	British Nuclear Fuel
BSC	British Steel Corporation
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
DfE	Department for Employment
EAPL	The Employers’ Association of the Port of Liverpool
GEC	General Executive Council (of the TGWU)
JNC	Joint Negotiating Committee
LMC	Local Modernisation Committee

LMT	Liverpool Maritime Terminals
MDHB	Mersey Docks and Harbour Board (prior to 1970)
MDHC	Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (post-1970)
NAPE	The National Association of Port Employers
NASDU	The National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union
NDLB	National Dock Labour Board
NDLS	National Dock Labour Scheme
NIRC	National Industrial Relations Court
NJC	National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry
NPSSC	National Port Shop Steward Committee
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
PLA	The Port of London Authority
POW	Port Operative Worker
RDW	Registered Dock Worker
RTC	Road Transport Commercial Section (Trade group within the
TGWU)	
TGWU	The Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TUR	Temporary Unattached Register

Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis explores the growth and development of rank-and-file, steward-led organisation at the port of Liverpool between 1967 and 1989 and its impact on labour relations. It takes a multi-faceted approach to the analysis of workplace relationships at the port. Firstly, the study considers a variety of industry-specific factors such as the historic effect of work culture and custom and practice on worker perceptions, the growth of shop steward organisation, technological change and its impact on employment opportunities, state intervention and statutory regulation of the industry and how these influenced the attitudes and actions of dock workers and their representatives. What is presented therefore intersects with several broad theoretical and historiographical perspectives relating to the British dock industry, working-class organisation and ideologies, the influence of locality and local culture on labour relations and the nature and evolution of British trade unionism over the course of three decades. Secondly, although broadly addressing ideas and concepts which have already received significant academic attention across a variety of disciplines, the study seeks to contribute to knowledge by examining the nature of labour organisation at Liverpool docks, through the prism of the structural changes to the industry outlined above, in order to test existing theories on industrial conflict, intra-union discord, the development of shop steward influence and bargaining and the impact of Thatcherism on trade union effectiveness.¹

Furthermore, despite acknowledgement of divisions in working-class organisation which are present in notions of labour aristocracy and sectionalism, limited research has been undertaken to specifically explore divisions within occupational groups or amongst those workers who work side-by-side with other grades or occupations in the same workplace.² To these ends, this thesis is also

¹ These perspectives and the relevant historiography are considered carefully in Chapter 2 of the thesis.

² For further reading on sectionalism, intra-union tension and the concept of labour aristocracy see, for example: Hyman, R. 'The politics of workplace trade unionism: Recent tendencies and some problems for theory', *Capital & Class*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Summer 1979, pp. 54-67; Hobsbawm, E. 'The forward march of labour halted?' in M. Jacques & F. Mulhearn (eds.), *The Forward March of Labour Halted* (London: MLB 1981), pp. 1-19; Moorhouse, H.F. 'The Marxist theory of the labour aristocracy', *Social History*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, 1978, pp. 61-88; Goldthorpe, J.H. Lockwood, D.

orientated towards uncovering the hitherto obscured story of emerging clerical organisation at the port, with an emphasis on how these workers interacted with employers and their more historically illustrious dock worker colleagues, while investigating the effect this had on labour relations. Of those studies which have contributed to the understanding of employment and labour relations on the docks, few have focused on the role that clerical labour played in the running of ports, nor the effect that the growth of unionisation amongst this section had on workplace structure and operation more broadly.³ This approach offers new perspectives on the intricacies of local workplace relationships and an evaluation of how this might change the way we think about the dock worker stereotype.

To properly examine these intricacies and related assumptions about dock worker organisation, research is focused on examining a series of key disputes and developments relating to management of, and employment in, the local industry. The industrial tactics of the workers are significant because these demonstrate how they attempted to maintain some control over manning levels and portions of the labour process in the face of modernisation and rationalisation of the industry. An important question arising from the research asks how the changing nature of the

Bechhofer, F. & Platt, J. *The Affluent Worker Vols. 1-3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968-1969).

³ There have been several excellent surveys of the British dock industry which consider work culture, labour relations and workplace organisation in their historical context see, for example: Phillips, G. & Whiteside, N. *Casual Labour: The Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry 1880-1970* (Oxford: Clarendon 1985); Turnbull, P. Woolfson C. & Kelly, J. *Dock Strike: Conflict and Restructuring in Britain's Ports* (Aldershot: Avebury 1992); Phillips, J. 'Decasualization and disruption: Industrial relations on the docks 1945-1979', in C.J. Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979* (Cheltenham: Elgar 1996), pp. 165-185; Turnbull, P. 'Dock strikes and the demise of the dockers' 'occupational culture', *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 40, Issue 2, May 1992, pp. 294-318. Other studies focus upon the impact of technological change or the operation of the National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS) and other instances of state intervention in the industry see, among others: Wilson, D.F. *Dockers: The Impact of Industrial Change* (London: Fontana/Collins 1972); Dempster, J. *The Rise and Fall of the Dock Labour Scheme* (London: Biteback 2010); Mellish, M. *The Docks After Devlin* (London: Heinemann 1972); Turnbull, P & Sapsford, D. 'Why did Devlin fail? Casualism and conflict on the docks', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, June 1991, pp. 237-257. There are also studies which consider labour relations at a specific ports, though these are often London-centric see: Lindop, F. 'The dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, part 2: the arrest and release of the Pentonville Five', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 6, 1998, pp. 65-100; Hill, S. *The Dockers – Class and Tradition in London* (London: Heinemann 1976); Mankelov, R. *Deregulation and Privatisation: The Case of the London Dockers* (London: Institute of Employment Rights 1996), though with some notable exceptions: Davis, C. *Waterfront Revolts: New York and London Dock workers, 1946–61* (Illinois: University of Illinois 2003); Davies, S. et al (eds.) *Dock workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History, 1790-1970* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2000); Jensen, V.H. *The Hiring of Dock workers and Employment Practices in the Ports of New York, Liverpool, London, Rotterdam and Marseilles* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964); Towers, B. *Waterfront Blues: The Rise and Fall of Liverpool's Dockland* (Lancaster: Carnegie 2011).

dock industry and British trade unionism more broadly affected workers' perceptions and their relationship with each other, as well as impacting upon their ability to mount effective resistance against the erosion of previously-attained concessions and benefits by employers and the government.

Methodology

Following thorough engagement with relevant secondary literature, the primary research for this thesis was conducted through various means:

The research: Oral interviews

Research initially centred on a series of oral interviews with ex-dock workers and shop stewards. These interviews aimed to gain an insight into work culture and labour relations at the port of Liverpool beyond established knowledge and the existing historiography. The intention of this approach was to focus more specifically on the nuances of the local industry and to explore a shop-floor 'bottom up' perspective of labour relations. However, oral history remains a contentious resource in the research of labour and other histories. Some historians regard it as an invaluable research tool, whilst others consider evidence collected through such means as subjective and even misleading.

John Tosh in defining oral history as 'the raw material of social memory' argues that it reflects 'an active relationship between the present and the past, between memory and public tradition, between 'history' and 'myth''.⁴ Importantly, dock workers' social memories and the mechanisms by which they have been fashioned over time offer historians insights into past experience, the ways in which those experiences are recalled and the distortions often hidden in other forms of evidence. In this respect 'the first thing that makes oral history different... is that it tells us less about events as such than about their meaning. This does not imply that

⁴ Tosh, J. *The Pursuit of History* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Ltd 2000), p. 201.

oral history has no factual interest; interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events'.⁵

Oral evidence is by its very nature subjective as it is shaped by the questions the interviewer asks (which reflect his/her research priorities) and those factors which influence memory such as nostalgia, dominant collective memory and what Thompson has called 'the myths we live by'.⁶ Therefore it could be argued that oral testimony 'is not history but memory... searching not for the fact, but the truth behind the fact'.⁷ The influence of memory might manifest itself in a variety of ways, including the need to embellish particular moments, to highlight or play down perceived betrayals, to affirm status and/or to make sense of changes that have marked the life histories and understandings of those being interviewed. Clearly, the acute and irreversible changes that have taken place on the Liverpool waterfront within the lifetime of those who worked there cannot but have affected how they interpret the past. This is not to argue that the shaping of memory by subsequent experience and reflection is necessarily negative. Instead, oral history highlights the complex relationship people often have to the past and the impact of historical events on those who live through them.

Similarly, while emphasising the constructed nature of oral evidence, it is important also to acknowledge that other sources are equally so. Documentary evidence such as newspaper reports, trade union documents and the minutes of employers' meetings, upon which the majority of the research for historical enquiry are based, often provide only an abridged, even subjective account of events. Consequently, these caveats highlight the importance of consulting a range of different sources in order to provide the most complete account possible. This method also presents the opportunity to use these varied resources to interrogate one another, forming a reciprocal relationship between documentary and oral evidence.

At the outset it proved extremely difficult to locate or contact dockers who had worked at Liverpool during the time-frame of this study. This was partly because none of those employed at Liverpool docks up to 1989 remained in the

⁵ Portelli, A. 'The peculiarities of oral history', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue 1, 1981, pp. 96-107 (p. 99).

⁶ Thompson, P. R. *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), p. 275.

⁷ Grele, R. J. 'Movement without aim. Methodological and theoretical problems in oral history' in R. Perks & A. Thomson (eds.) *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge 1998), pp. 38-52 (p. 39).

industry. In 1995, six years after deregulation of the industry, the entire workforce was summarily dismissed and locked out for refusing to a cross picket line manned by a handful of sacked colleagues. The subsequent bitterly-contested dispute lasted twenty-eight months and although it ended with redundancy payments for most, management refused to re-instate any of the sacked dockers.⁸ This meant that the standard avenues for contact with workers at Liverpool docks, that is through the workplace itself or their union, were unavailable.

Eventually, following extensive enquiries, contact was made with a section of ex-port workers through the Community Advice Service Association (The CASA), a public bar and offices on Hope Street in Liverpool City Centre, founded by some of those who had been sacked in the 1995-98 dispute. With the help of one particularly approachable individual, access was gained to various activists and stewards from the dock workforce.⁹ Ultimately, ten individuals were interviewed, each on several occasions. All were directly involved in industrial activism at the docks. This body of evidence was supplemented by interviews with other individuals from outside the industry to gather a more general local perspective on life and culture in the city in the decades in question. From initial introductions and informal conversations, a series of recorded semi-structured oral interviews were organised which sought to glean perspectives and opinions about several different aspects of the local industry.¹⁰ For example, interviewees were questioned about work culture at the docks in the casualised and decasualised eras, the state of union representation before and after the introduction of an official shop steward movement to the industry in 1967 and their recollections of major disputes in the sixties, seventies and eighties.

A major difficulty encountered in the collection of oral evidence lay in the time that had elapsed between some of the disputes featured and the research for this thesis. For instance, many of the protagonists of the 1967 and 1972 disputes were

⁸ For more detail of the 1995-98 lock-out at the port see: Towers, B. *Waterfront Blues: The Rise and Fall of Liverpool's Dockland*, (Lancaster: Carnegie 2011), pp. 290-297; Saundry, R. & Turnbull, P. 'Melee on the Mersey: Contracts, competition and labour relations on the docks', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 27, Issue 4, December 1996, pp. 275-288; Davies, S. 'History in the making: The Liverpool docks dispute, 1995-96', *North West Labour History Journal*, Vol. 21, 1996/7, pp. 67-72.

⁹ Particular acknowledgment and thanks should be attributed to Mr. Terry Teague for this opportunity and moreover for sharing his knowledge and time, on numerous occasions, to provide invaluable insights into the complex nature of work culture and labour relations at the port of Liverpool.

¹⁰ See Appendix I of this thesis for a list of those interviewed and their work histories and Appendix II for a sample list of questions asked to prompt a broader discussion with interviewees.

deceased. Historically, dock-work was a dirty and often hazardous occupation and the handling of certain cargoes without protective clothing meant that dockers were particularly prone to industrial disease and premature death.¹¹ In order to further enrich the oral evidence perspective of the thesis, other sources needed to be identified and examined. Fortunately, in the early 1980s, as part of the research for a two-part journal article broadly concerned with the growth of containerisation in the British dock industry and the reaction of dockers to it, Professor Fred Lindop had undertaken a series of oral interviews with stewards and dockers around the country.¹² This audio tape collection was subsequently deposited with the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick and proved invaluable to research for this thesis. In particular, those interviews conducted with Liverpool's first Dock Shop Steward Committee Chairman Jimmy Symes and Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) Branch Official Lew Lloyd (both deceased), Symes' successor Dennis Kelly (deceased) and interviews with leading members of Liverpool's steward committee were particularly helpful.¹³ So, through a combination of the interviews conducted by the author and those of Lindop, a rich vein of narrative and contextual evidence was gathered which was crucial in providing an insight into work culture and labour relations at Liverpool and local perspectives on important disputes which feature in the case study section of the thesis.

The research: Archives and documentary evidence

Early archival research focused on the TGWU collection at the Modern Records Centre.¹⁴ This exhaustive collection contains a vast array of official documents, letters and memoranda concerning various trade groups across the

¹¹ For more detail on the occupational hazards of dock-work see Chapter 3.

¹² Lindop, F. 'The dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, part 1: Shop stewards and containerisation', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 5, Spring 1998, pp. 33-72; Lindop, F. 'The dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, part 2: the arrest and release of the Pentonville Five', *HSIR*, 6, 1998, pp. 65-100.

¹³ This collection of interviews can be found in the Modern Records Centre's catalogue, reference number *MSS.371*. Those with particular relevance to this study were conducted with Jimmy Symes and Lew Lloyd; Tony Burke; Dennis Kelly; 'The Liverpool Stewards' (Jimmy Davies, Jimmy Nolan, Larry Dowling and Tony Burke).

¹⁴ The TGWU collection can be found in the Modern Record Centre's catalogue, reference number *MSS.126*. The author would like to thank UNITE (formerly TGWU) for prior permission to access restricted documents.

union's mammoth membership, with a large deposit relating exclusively to the Docks section. Of particular interest was the sizeable collection of documents regarding the operation and joint-union control of the National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry (NJC), the National Dock Labour Board (NDLB) and administration of the NDLS. Some Trades Union Congress (TUC) material is also deposited at the Modern Records Centre which refers specifically to containerisation and the 1972 strike wave in the dock industry.¹⁵ Other deposits include material documenting the various government inquiries, committees and employers' associations concerned with regulation of the industry.¹⁶ These archives were extremely useful in providing an institutional outlook on major flashpoints and watersheds in post-war dock labour relations and modernisation. They also highlighted the sometimes wide chasm in opinion and attitudes between the union hierarchy and its membership.

The institutional perspective on the industry provided by the archives at the Modern Records Centre was complemented by the discovery of invaluable material deposited at the Maritime Museum Archives, Albert Dock, Liverpool. The archive holds an abundance of documents concerned with every aspect of employment at the port of Liverpool. In particular, the Employers' Association of the Port of Liverpool (EAPL) meeting minutes and the Local Modernisation Committee (LMC) and Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) minutes contributed immeasurably to understanding and conceptualising the complexities of work culture, local custom and practice and labour relations.¹⁷ Furthermore, they offered a reliable representation of and insight into, attitudes amongst port employers and the union side of negotiating committees, by extension members of the local stewards' committees, over certain matters. These meeting minutes gave a meticulously chronological overview of port operations, disputes, strikes and pay negotiations for the whole of the period to be examined by this study and form the backbone of the empirical research and interpretation.

¹⁵ Modern Records Centre catalogue, reference number *MSS. 292*.

¹⁶ Modern Records Centre catalogue, reference numbers *MSS. 178*, *MSS. 200*.

¹⁷ The LMC was a joint negotiating body between port employers and Registered Dock Workers established as part of the Devlin Reforms in 1967 while the JNC was a separate negotiating committee between clerical staff and employers, established in 1971.

The chronology and detail of disputes between 1967 and 1989 was enhanced by the local newspaper archive at William Brown Central Library, Liverpool. This archive contains every issue of the *Liverpool Echo* and *Liverpool Daily Post* on microfilm, from the eighteenth century to the end of twentieth. Due to the historic primacy of the port in the local economy all industrial disputes and pay negotiations received maximum local press coverage and so newspapers were a valuable source of reference for the timing and detail of mass meetings, employer press releases and contemporary quotes from protagonists on all sides. When combined with the archival material at the Liverpool Maritime Museum and the oral testimony created and accessed, an accurate and detailed picture of local work culture and labour relations at the port of Liverpool could be constructed. In order to grasp a national perspective on industry-wide events and disputes over the period in question, national newspaper reports were also consulted. A complete archive of every issue of *The Times* is held on microfilm at All Saints Library, Manchester Metropolitan University and other established periodicals were consulted through *LexisNexis*, a subscription-based online newspaper archive.¹⁸

The four principal resources consulted and analysed in the drafting of this study underpinned the measured and balanced evaluation of events at the port during a period of considerable upheaval in the industry. When combined with the conceptual dynamic of the rank-and-file movement *vis-a-vis* the official union hierarchy, rank-and-file/employer and clerical staff/dock worker relations and the broader institutional context, this approach provides a detailed account of the complexities and peculiarities of labour relations and workplace relationships at the port of Liverpool. In doing so it highlights the difficulties of applying broad theoretical assumptions to an exceptionally nuanced and unique workplace and local employment situation.

The historical method and the triangulation of data

Methodologically, the investigative approach to the research took on a rhythm of its own. As previously noted, the process was begun by engaging with existing secondary literature in order to gain an overview of the historiography of the

¹⁸ <http://www.lexisnexis.co.uk/our-solutions/academic/librarians/uk-newspapers/>

dock industry and broaden knowledge of theoretical perspectives relating to the development of British trade unionism more broadly.¹⁹ Once the context of the study had been established and sufficient background knowledge accrued, attention turned to adding workplace-specific detail through a series of interviews with ex-dockers who worked at the port of Liverpool during the period in question. Initial interviews were conducted in a semi-structured form, using the general context gleaned from the existing studies of the dock industry to inform direction, but also allowing scope for interviewees to pursue and present their own perspective on employment at the port. The purpose of this approach was to gain an impression of the actual experience of working life on the docks, how workers perceived themselves in relation to employers and each other and to provide a ‘bottom-up’ perspective on labour organisation and relations.

This preliminary research helped to define the contextual and conceptual framework of the study and enabled proper interrogation of archival documentary evidence. The exhaustive collection of documents at the Modern Records Centre relating to the docks gave an excellent overview of the national industry and the various schemes and agreements which administered it and these formed part of the evidence for interpretation. Furthermore, it gave access to the official union perspective on a number of flashpoints and watersheds in the industry. The relationship between dockers and the dominant trade union was far from harmonious and it was interesting and instructive to contrast the viewpoint of those interviewed with the attitude and actions of the union leadership. Similarly, the archive at the Maritime Museum in Liverpool also provided an important opportunity to contrast the institutional perspective with that of dock workers and their leaders at the port, as detailed in joint negotiating committee minutes. The evidence collected from documentary and oral sources was fused together to create a chronological narrative and survey of work culture and labour relations in the industry, which was in turn tested against existing theoretical perspectives to examine whether the form of dock worker organisation at Liverpool was distinctive, or common to that found in other ports or among workers in other industries. The purpose of this study ‘is not just a simple narrative of events, although that in itself is of historical interest, but a

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of these perspectives see Chapters Two and Three.

rigorous analysis, interpretation and assessment of the underlying social processes involved'.²⁰

As research advanced, a close reciprocal relationship between the interviewer, interviewees and documentary evidence evolved. Conflicting evidence provided from the various sources was revisited and ex-dock and clerical workers re-interviewed and/or their recollections interrogated to establish where documentary evidence was limited or incomplete or where oral testimony erred or required clarification. For example, statistics contained in the records of the National Dock Labour Board, available at both the MRC and the Maritime Museum archives, provide a detailed breakdown of strike action across the major ports – number of workers involved, days lost etc. These statistics also give an official cause for each dispute, based on the local board's appraisal of the nature of the stoppage. However, the initial or given cause of a dispute can often obscure the underlying grievance. Dockers might use a minor disagreement relating to working a particular cargo to provoke an all-out stoppage which could really be in response to management-inspired changes to working practices. The statistics presented by the NDLB records are useful in some respects but in certain cases they cannot help to untangle the complex nature of labour relations on the docks. Documentary evidence plays an important role in research and interpretation but oral evidence can also be integral in locating the story behind the story.

The major advantage of oral history is the opportunity to re-interview participants in the light of new or conflicting evidence. Indeed, 'oral testimony will never be the same twice... It is often worth the trouble interviewing the same informant more than once. The relationship between researcher and informant changes as they get to know and trust each other better'.²¹ Familiarity breeds trust which can lead to new strands emerging upon revisiting interviewees. For example, initial interviews with dockers and clerical workers from the port of Liverpool contained only tacit hints of the tensions between the two sections of worker. It was only once a degree of familiarity and trust was established between interviewer and interviewee that the more complex narrative of workplace relationships emerged. As a result, interpretation and re-interpretation of evidence was ongoing, contrasted

²⁰ Darlington, R. *The Dynamics of Workplace Organisation: Shop Stewards' Organisation in Three Merseyside Plants* (London: Mansell 1994), p. 11.

²¹ Portelli, 'The peculiarities of oral history', p. 104.

against existing historiographical analysis. Anna Green takes a similar methodological approach to labour relations on the New Zealand waterfront:

Recapturing the historical experience of working men and women can be extraordinarily elusive, for union records throw only limited light, and other documentary evidence is filtered through the prism of records left by employers or agents of the state. However, for the twentieth century oral history can provide illuminating insights into the material struggles of working people. The historian may draw upon the memories of many individuals, and in addition, compare the recollections of daily work with those parts of the documentary record which do reveal aspects of the labour process. Oral evidence provides information otherwise lost, but it also makes it possible to re-interpret the documentary sources from a perspective informed by the memories of the workers themselves.²²

Structurally, this methodology emphasises the importance of historical perspective, described elsewhere as an ‘event driven’ view of history, which prioritises investigation across the extended time period of 1967 to 1989, incorporating a number of key and secondary disputes.²³ This offers the opportunity to highlight continuities and changes that are less evident in individual analyses of a particular event or strike. By emphasising the historical complexities of labour relations at the port, proper attention can be attributed to the historical development of work culture and custom and practice in the local industry, which was vital in informing the attitudes and actions of workers and management alike. However, it is also significant that there are certain aspects of the dock industry and dock-work which are common to dockers throughout the country and elsewhere. It would be imprudent to disregard the patterns and regularities embedded in the inherent nature of dock-work and the shipping industry more broadly, especially in the context of the tumultuous changes which occurred in cargo handling methods during the period in question.

²² Green, A. ‘Spelling, go-slows, gliding away and theft: Informal control over work on the New Zealand waterfront, 1915-51’, *Labour History*, No. 63, November 1992, pp. 100-114 (p. 102). See also: Green, A. *British Capital, Antipodean Labour: Working the New Zealand Waterfront 1915-1951* (Dunedin, N.Z.: University of Otago Press 2001).

²³ Franzosi, R. *The Puzzle of Strikes: Class and State Strategies in Post War Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), p. 371.

Structure

In terms of structure, the study is divided into two sections. The first section comprises three chapters which present the contextual perspectives upon which the primary research is based. Chapter Two examines contributions to historiography that provide theoretical frameworks relating to industrial conflict, shop-floor activism and the evolution of the trade union movement in Britain. Chapter Three details an overview of employment in the dock industry and the historical development of dockland work culture and labour relations in the twentieth century through an analysis of existing literature and the interpretation of oral evidence, collected by the author and from other sources. Similarly, Chapter Four considers the historical growth and development of the port and city of Liverpool, the ideological and cultural impact of these on local inhabitants and by extension, on workplace relations, work practices and attitudes.

Having established the theoretical and contextual framework of the study, the second section, also split over three chapters, offers an empirical analysis and interpretation of events and disputes at the port of Liverpool between 1967 and 1989. This time-frame is chosen with good reason. 1967 witnessed state-sponsored, total decasualisation of the industry under the Devlin reforms, augmenting the 1947 National Dock Labour Scheme and introducing an official shop steward movement, all of which heralded a significant watershed for labour relations and the modernisation of Britain's ports more generally.²⁴ Comparatively, 1989 marked the end of an era for the dock industry and those employed within. After a decade of Conservative Party rule under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, the influence and role of trade unions in the economy and more broadly, across society, had been irrevocably altered. The Government's sustained assault on the influence of labour organisation eventually brought the abolition of the NDLS and with it an end to the unique statutory protection dockers had enjoyed for over forty years, much to the relief of port employers.

This second section is structured as follows: Chapter Five considers labour relations at the port of Liverpool leading up to the Devlin Report watershed and beyond. It documents the development of the dock shop steward system at

²⁴ *Final Report of the Committee of Inquiry under the Rt. Hon Lord Devlin into certain matters concerning the Port Transport Industry*, Cmnd 2734, August 1965.

Liverpool from its inception as an unofficial body through to its official formalisation in 1967 and its subsequent rise to prominence and activism thereafter. The study centres on various industrial disputes at the port and the actions and tactics of the increasingly-influential Dock Shop Steward Committee, in the context of the tumultuous changes being wrought on the industry through revolutionary advances in cargo-handling methods. Industrial conflict, precipitated by a series of perceived threats to dockers' employment prospects and work culture, came to a head in the summer of 1972 amidst chaotic scenes across the country. The final part of the chapter explores this strike wave and the local and national tensions which ignited it.

In a significant departure from other accounts of dockland industrial relations, Chapter Six provides an overview and analysis of the belated growth of clerical unionism at the port. As previously noted, this section of the dock workforce remains largely neglected in academic surveys of the industry, yet it played a progressively influential and disruptive role in the seventies and eighties at Liverpool. Interestingly, both the dockers and clerical workers belonged to the same union, the TGWU, albeit under the auspices of different branches and trade groups. As the second largest section of the workforce, the rationale for including clerical workers in this study is to provide a unique perspective into *port-wide* industrial relations and to emphasise the peculiarities of local workplace relationships and intra-union conflict.

Chapter Seven documents labour relations in the context of the maturation of clerical unionism and the consolidation of the Docks section's influence after 1972. As a result, employers were forced to contend with two active, well-organised trade groups at the port. This is juxtaposed against the decline and escalating rationalisation of the dock industry more broadly under the influence of a variety of pressures, culminating in the abolition of the NDLS and deregulation of the industry in 1989. Directly related to this is the question of how much the decline of trade union influence in the 1980s affected the actions and strategies of Liverpool's dock workers. As well as considering major disputes and events at the port, the chapter explores local relationships between port workers and employers and the sometimes tempestuous relationship between the dockers and clerical workers themselves.

This thesis offers a number of conclusions and emphasises that labour relations at the port of Liverpool between 1967 and 1989 were considerably more

complex than previous industry-wide studies have suggested. It argues that while dock workers across the country faced comparable challenges relating to the rationalisation of the British dock industry, the historic formation of local custom and practice and work culture influenced the attitudes and relationships of those at Liverpool. Similarly, the development and evolution of Liverpool as a city produced a parochial identity and local culture which contributed to dock workers' outlook on labour relations generally. The Devlin Report is highlighted as a watershed for labour relations at the Port, and indeed elsewhere, not only because it decasualised the industry but also because it saw the beginning of a power struggle on the docks between the TGWU Docks section and local stewards' committees. These hierarchical divisions were eventually overcome, only to be superseded by sectional tension at the port of Liverpool.

Indeed, the growth of clerical organisation after 1972 brought a new dynamic of intra-union conflict to workplace relations. This study demonstrates that these clerical workers were not typically 'white-collar' in their outlook and instead behaved and organised themselves in a much more traditionally 'blue-collar' manner.²⁵ In addition to examining the actions and strategies of the dock/clerical workers and their representatives across several distinct phases in British economic and political history, the analysis of the empirical research will reflect upon, and in some cases challenge, existing assumptions relating to 'shop stewardism', 'white-collar' organisation and the impact of Thatcherism on trade union influence and effectiveness.

²⁵ For a traditional evaluation of the organisational and ideological tendencies of 'white-collar' workers see, for example: Crompton, R. 'Approaches to the study of white-collar unionism', *Sociology*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1976, pp. 407-426; Blackburn, R.M. & Prandy, K. 'White-collar' unionization: A conceptual framework', *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 16, No. 2, June 1965, pp. 111-122; Goldthorpe et al, *The Affluent Worker*. For a revisionist account of 'white-collar' unionism that emphasises some similarities between 'blue-collar' and 'white-collar' organisation see, for example: Cook, F.G., Clark, S.C., Roberts, K. & Semeonoff, E. 'Are white-collar trade unionists different?', *Sociology of Work and Occupations*, Vol. 5, No. 2, May 1978, pp. 235-245; Hyman, R. & Price, R. *The New Working Class: White-Collar Workers and Their Organisations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1985).

Chapter 2

Theories of Trade Union Organisation, Industrial Conflict and ‘Rank-and-Filism’

This chapter explores relevant theoretical perspectives and historiographies in order to outline relevant theoretical frameworks for the primary research-driven case studies in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. Of primary significance is an examination of the historiography of British post-war labour studies, with particular regard to the rise of grassroots militancy and the subsequent ‘rank-and-filist’ turn in academic discourse. This will provide the context for the analysis of the dynamics of labour relations at the port of Liverpool 1967-1989 which is approached from a predominantly ‘bottom up’, ‘rank-and-filist’ perspective. Directly related to the advent of rank-and-file historical enquiry is the phenomenon of democratisation of trade unions in the 1960s, ushering in an era of shop steward and shop-floor influence which altered the character of British industrial relations more broadly. Due attention will therefore be directed to shop steward historiography. These two perspectives will be accompanied by a brief examination of traditional theories of ‘white-collar’ unionism and consciousness, in order to provide a theoretical prism with which to examine the somewhat atypical case of clerical worker organisation at the port of Liverpool in Chapters Six and Seven.

‘Rank and filism’ and labour history

The study of British industrial relations belatedly developed beyond an institutional or ‘top-down’ methodology. The traditional approach to ‘labour history’ focused on the policies and actions of the various centralised trade unions vis-à-vis employers and the State and is synonymous with the hegemony of positivist empiricism in British historical enquiry prior to the 1960s.¹ However, as time-honoured approaches to historical research and the concept of ‘total history’ were being challenged and eroded by relativism, post-modernism and cross-disciplinary techniques, some focus began to shift away from institutional accounts of labour

¹ The British ‘Academy’ lagged behind its peers in Western Europe in terms of embracing cross-disciplinary techniques. A sociological turn was apparent in historical discourse in countries such as Germany and France from the end of the nineteenth/beginning of the twentieth century under the influence of Durkheim, Weber etc.

history and towards the experiences of the ‘ordinary worker’ or ‘rank-and-file’ in the workplace and in society more broadly.² The emergence of this methodological evolution coincided with a downturn in Britain’s economic fortunes accompanied by an escalation of labour militancy, local shop-floor organisation and state interventionism underpinning a re-evaluation of fundamental pre-conceptions of industrial conflict and the relationship between employers, the centralised official union machinery, grassroots activism and local organisation.

Indeed, ‘rank-and-file’ has become a loaded term in reference to labour history theory. Initially coined as a generic phrase to describe the lay members of trade union membership, it has since been loosely attached to describe a sub-discipline encompassing broader theories of ‘workplace history’ or ‘the social history of the working-classes’.³ The central perspective of this branch of historical enquiry is ‘to ask... what role the actions of ordinary workers played in the historical process?’⁴ Under related theories, industrial resistance is seen as the ‘language’ of the working-class, providing an outlet for expressing economic (or political) discontent. Industrial action is considered a unique source of working-class leverage in a capitalist society and should be attributed critical importance in the study of social history.⁵ E.P. Thompson’s pioneering study is an early example of the broadening remit of labour relations history from the 1960s onwards.⁶ This ‘bottom up’, anti-institutional trend gained substantial support amongst contemporary historians. Early incarnations such as that of Thompson’s, were developed further by a new generation of academics, whose perception was also coloured by the rapidly changing cultural, political, social and technological landscape of the 1960s and 1970s. Emphasis was placed upon the ‘possibility of entry points to the study of the working-class other than the gateway of the institution... [this] presents the

² For a sample of institutionalist accounts of British labour history see: Webb, S. & Webb, B. *A History of Trade Unionism* (London: Longmans 1894); Clegg, H. *The Changing System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell 1979); Fox, A. & Flanders, A. ‘The reform of collective bargaining: From Donovan to Durkheim’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 7, Issue 2, July 1969, pp. 151-180.

³ Cronin, J.E. ‘The ‘rank-and-file’ and the social history of the working-class’, *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 34, 1989(b), pp 78-88. See also Hinton, J. *The First Shop Stewards’ Movement* (Surrey: Allen & Unwin 1973); Price, R. *Masters, Unions and Men: Work Control in Building and the Rise of Labour 1830-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁴ Price, R. “‘What’s in a name?’ Workplace history and ‘rank and filism’”, *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 34, 1989(b), p. 63 (pp 62-77).

⁵ Cronin, J.E. *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain* (London: Croom Helm 1979), pp. 8-10.

⁶ Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working-class* (London: Victor Gollancz 1963).

opportunity to bring labour history into a close conceptual relationship with such areas as the history of women and family, leisure, popular culture, popular and high politics'.⁷

However, the evolution in cross-disciplinary methodology in the 1960s was by no means embraced by all breeds of historian. This 'social' turn in labour history has predictably produced a counter-trend of neo-institutionalist enquiry and debate. Exponents of this school argue that 'it is the outcome generated by a strategy or institution which establish its historical significance, not the unrealised intentions and mistaken expectations of its original promoters'.⁸ From this perspective, too much emphasis is being placed on the experience of the 'ordinary worker' as an agent of historical change by 'rank-and-filists'. Neo-institutionalists reject the notion that employer/worker relations are fundamentally antagonistic within a class framework, instead highlighting the various sectional concerns which bind workers to their employers in a relationship of conflictual cooperation.⁹ The Marxist assumption that the accommodative nature of trade unionism within the capitalist system causes tension and conflict between a bureaucratised leadership and a rebellious membership is regarded as a fatal flaw in the underlying assumptions of 'rank-and-file' history.

Another reasonable criticism of 'from below' labour history concerns problems of definition. It is contended that there are considerable pitfalls in simple hierarchical demarcation between officialdom and rank-and-file. For example, are shop stewards to be classified as rank-and-file even though they too are implicit in the process of negotiation and accommodation with management? Moreover, there are complications in quantifying exactly how representative unionised workers can be of 'the social history of the working-classes' and how far said workers were fundamentally opposed to the capitalist order of industrial and societal

⁷ Price, "What's in a name?", p. 77.

⁸ Zeitlin, J. "Rank and filism' and labour history: A rejoinder to Price and Cronin', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 34, 1989(b), pp. 97-98 (pp. 89-102); For an example of other neo-institutionalist authors see also: Reid, A. 'Labour and society in modern Britain', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 25, 1982, pp. 489-500; Gospel, H.F. *Markets, Firms and the Management of Labour in Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992).

⁹ Zeitlin, J. "Rank and filism' in British labour history: A critique', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 34, 1989(b), p. 49 (pp.42-61); Joyce, P. 'Labour, capital and compromise: a response to Richard Price', *Social History*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, 1984, pp. 67-76; Fox, A. 'Industrial sociology and industrial relations', *Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations*, Research Paper No. 3, 1966, pp. 2-15.

organisation.¹⁰ Zeitlin argues that such an approach assumes homogeneity of working-class consciousness and experience which is inherently problematic when applied to empirical evidence.¹¹ In short, neo-institutionalism contests the primacy placed by ‘bottom-up’ historians on the workplace, community, class conflict and consciousness in the study of labour history. Instead it contends that ‘social relationships, whether in the workplace, the family or the wider community, can never be understood without reference to the operation of formal institutions, just as the latter can never be determined by reference to the objective interests of pre-existing social groups’.¹²

Despite the insinuations of neo-institutionalists, there is a good degree of variation in the ‘from below’ approach to historical enquiry. Some historians of this school prefer to offer a synthesis of different factors as agents of change while others focus on one particular aspect of working-class organisation to provide new perspectives on labour history. For example, Hinton concentrates on the relationship between working-class organisation and the idea of a socialist transformation of society.¹³ Cronin highlights the importance of ‘change, development, discontinuity’ on working-class consciousness and labour organisation, with emphasis placed on the timing and density of strikes and strike waves in relation to national economic and social pressures.¹⁴ Richard Price focuses on the ongoing struggle for workplace job control between management and workers in the dynamic of labour history, hence his terminology ‘workplace history’.¹⁵ Other theoretical perspectives include, the impact of technological change on industrial conflict and working-class organisation,¹⁶ a sociological approach to occupational structure and the role of the community in defining strike-proneness in a particular industry or locale;¹⁷ or the

¹⁰ Cronin, ‘“The rank-and-file”’, p. 78.

¹¹ Zeitlin, ‘“Rank and file”... a rejoinder’, p. 95.

¹² Zeitlin, J. ‘From labour history to the history of industrial relations’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, XL, Issue 2, May 1987, p. 178 (pp. 159-184).

¹³ Hinton, J. *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement 1867-1974* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf 1983), pp. viii-ix.

¹⁴ Cronin, *Industrial Conflict*, pp. 11-14.

¹⁵ Price, R. ‘Re-thinking labour history: The importance of work’ in J.E. Cronin & J. Schneer (eds.) *Social Conflict and the Political Order in Modern Britain* (London: Croom Helm 1982).

¹⁶ Burgess, K. *The Origins of British Industrial Relations* (London: Croom Helm 1975).

¹⁷ For early sociological analyses of industrial relations see: Goldthorpe, J.E. et al, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, Vols. 1-3 (Cambridge: C.U.P. 1968-69); Lockwood, D. ‘Sources of variation in working-class images of society’, *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1966, pp. 249-267; Kerr, C. & Siegel, A. ‘The inter-industry propensity to strike – an international comparison’, in A. Kornhauser, R. Dubin & A.M. Ross(eds), *Industrial Conflict* (New York:

link between political dissatisfaction and the strike wave as a form of working-class protest.¹⁸ Although there is consensus amongst ‘workplace’ historians that the agency of ordinary workers in labour relations and industrial politics should be paramount, there is also some disagreement about how to examine and analyse labour history through this prism. For example, Hinton criticises Price for attributing too much emphasis to one aspect or section of working-class organisation (that of work process control) in isolation from broader shifting political, social and economic forces and structures.¹⁹

It is true that the ‘rank-and-filist’ approach to historical enquiry often highlights the structural conflict inherent in trade unions as a result of their contradictory role representing working-class interests within the confines of a capitalist society. Fundamentally, from a Marxist standpoint, class conflict between employers and workers becomes moderated by the conciliatory and accommodative nature of trade unions in the workplace, thus providing a hierarchical division in interests between the official leadership and the rank-and-file. For example, Hyman stresses the conflictual nature of trade unions as working-class institutions whose ‘officials normally become committed to preserving a stable bargaining relationship [with employers and the state]... in opposition to which trade unions were originally formed’.²⁰ Such a situation encourages rank-and-file militancy as a reaction to unaddressed grievances at the local and national level whereby workers periodically rebel against management, trade union officialdom and collective bargaining.²¹

Nevertheless, while acknowledging the accommodative nature of trade unionism it is important not to oversimplify or politicise the relationship. In practice it is evident that divisions in trade unions are sometimes factional and sectional not

McGraw-Hill 1954), pp. 189-212. For a contemporary sociological perspective on labour relations in the dock industry see: Turnbull, P. ‘Dock strikes and the demise of the dockers’ ‘occupational culture’, *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 40, Issue 2, May 1992, pp. 294-318.

¹⁸ Tilly, C. & Shorter, E. *Strikes in France 1830-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1974).

¹⁹ See James Hinton’s review of Richard Price’s *Labour in British Society: An Interpretative History* (London: Croom Helm 1986) in *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 1986, pp. 36-40.

²⁰ Hyman, R. ‘The politics of workplace trade unionism: Recent tendencies and some problems for theory’, *Capital and Class*, No. 8 1979, pp. 54-55 (pp. 54-67); Hyman, R. ‘Rank-and-file movements and workplace organization, 1914-1939’ in C.J. Wrigley (ed.) *A History of British Industrial Relations, Vol. 2: 1914-39* (Brighton: Harvester 1987), pp. 129-158.

²¹ Hyman, R. *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (London: Macmillan 1975), p. 199; Zeitlin, ‘Rank and filism’... a rejoinder’, pp 89-102.

hierarchical, while workers in some industries are traditionally more conservative than others in both their outlook and action. A rudimentary conflict or latent tension construct, which focuses on the divisions between a conservative union bureaucracy and a militant grassroots membership, is a simplistic generalisation and will not suffice. Moreover, such broad categorisation is difficult to impose on the dynamics of labour relations over different time periods, unions, industries and localities, a fact recognised by exponents of 'from below' history who often provide qualifications and caveats in their work. The trend towards greater democratisation of the unions and subsequent devolution of bargaining power to the shop floor in the 1960s also renders a rigid Marxist 'class conflict' approach obsolete, especially as 'economist militancy' became commonplace.²² The main concern of rank-and-file history, despite the claims of some institutionalists, is to place the ordinary worker and his elected representatives at the centre of the study of labour history, not necessarily to emphasise 'the fundamental division between the 'bureaucracy'... or 'officialdom' on the one hand and those of the 'rank-and-file' [or] 'membership'... on the other'.²³

The multi-faceted 'from below' approach described here will inform the analysis of rank-and-file militancy at Liverpool docks 1967-1989 in the proceeding chapters. The study will be particularly attentive to traditions of union organisation and work culture in the industry locally and nationally, in order to accurately contextualise labour relations at the port against broader contemporary political and organisational trends. It will be concerned with how the changing nature of cargo-handling due to technological advances impacted on labour relations at the port and more generally and how the peculiarities of Liverpool's historical development affected working-class consciousness and workers' attitude towards managerial authority. After 1967, labour relations at the port were strongly influenced by the emerging Dock Shop Steward Committee and by both this committee and the Clerical Port Shop Steward Committee post-1972. In this context, the actions and strategies of the shop steward committees at the port will be given maximum consideration as the democratically-elected mouthpieces of the rank-and-file and the

²² Hobsbawm, E. 'The forward march of labour halted?' in M. Jacques & F. Mulhearn (eds.), *The Forward March of Labour Halted* (London: MLB 1981), p. 18 (pp. 1-19). Hobsbawm identifies the growing trend of sectional, wage-based militancy in the post-war era as detrimental to socialist ideals and the socialist transformation of society. This inclination was identified even earlier by Allan Flanders as 'narrow materialism', albeit from an opposing ideological perspective to Hobsbawm's (Flanders, A. *British Trade Unionism*, California: Bureau of Current Affairs 1948, pp. 57-60).

²³ Zeitlin, "'Rank and filism'... a critique', p. 45.

dominant force in worker representation. If labour relations at the port of Liverpool during the specified period were to be considered from a purely institutional perspective, an incomplete account would be provided because of the virtual redundancy of the official machinery of the TGWU in local policy-making and negotiations post-1967. This is not to exclude institutional forces altogether as these still played an integral part, rather to place the emphasis on local rank-and-file organisation in the examination of labour relations at the port. Indeed, if either perspective is discounted due to an ideological pre-occupation with a 'top-down' or 'from below' account of labour history, this is to the detriment of a considered evaluation – the metaphorical equivalent of 'the sound of one hand clapping'.²⁴

Shop stewards and the democratisation of trade unions

The trend towards the democratisation of the unions in the 1960s came from several sources. One major agent for change was membership pressure. The relationship between full-time officials and employers was often viewed from the shop floor with suspicion and injustice. Nowhere was this more palpable than in the dock industry, where officers of the dominant union, the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) were historically vilified by their dock membership for being too cosy with employers and unrepresentative of shop-floor opinion.²⁵ The proliferation and formalisation of local, shop steward-led bargaining signified a watershed in British industrial relations. Democratically-elected shop steward committees were gradually encouraged and empowered by a new wave of modern trade union leaders, who had themselves been influenced by the changing nature of society and industrial relations in the post-war era and modernity associated with the 'white heat of technology'.²⁶ Nevertheless, rather than promoting more harmonious industrial relations, in some industries decentralisation of bargaining had the

²⁴ Hyman, R. 'The sound of one hand clapping: a comment on the 'Rank and filism' debate', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 34, 1989(b), pp. 309-326.

²⁵ For more detail on the sometimes tempestuous relationship between the TGWU and its dock membership, particularly prior to the Devlin reforms in 1967, see Chapter 3 and 5 of this thesis.

²⁶ For more detail on the democratisation of the unions and the TGWU in particular see, for example: Jones, J. *Union Man: An Autobiography* (London: Collins 1986); Goodman, G. *The Awkward Warrior: Frank Cousins, His Life and Times* (London: Davis-Poynter 1979); Middlemas, K. *Power, Competition and the State, Vol. 2* (London: Macmillan 1990), pp. 222-224; Phillips, J. 'Democracy and trade unionism on the docks' in J. McIlroy, N. Fishman & A. Campbell (eds.) *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1999), pp. 291-292 (pp. 291-310).

opposite effect. A growing number of disputes and stoppages were increasingly initiated by local organisation. The rise in workplace militancy, when combined with a decline in the national economy, prompted the then Labour government to commission a report into the current state of industrial relations in 1965, headed by Lord Donovan.

In 1968, after many months of gathering evidence from all sectors of industry, Lord Donovan's Commission finally delivered its report on trade unions and employers' associations in Britain.²⁷ One of its major contributions was to emphasise the changing nature of industrial relations in Britain and the existence of two separate systems of negotiation and representation, the 'formal' and 'informal'. The 'formal' system of industrial relations highlighted in the final report related to the traditional institutional interaction between Union officialdom and employers or the State in national or industry-wide negotiations. The 'informal' system was identified as the relatively new experience of local, shop steward-led representation and negotiation. The Report recognised the growing significance and influence of the latter in contemporary workplace bargaining and its impact on industrial relations more broadly. It also recommended the devolution of bargaining power to the local level, a process already being expedited by trade union leaderships, as well as maintenance of the British tradition of voluntarism.

The phenomenon of shop steward-led bargaining and representation in the sixties and seventies has received considerable sociological and historical examination in recent years. Lane and Roberts' account of local organisation at Pilkingtons and Beynon's seminal work exploring the role of shop stewards at a Ford Motor Company plant in Liverpool, were amongst the first of their kind.²⁸ Beynon's notion that stewards developed a specific type of 'factory class consciousness', tailored to that particular plant through experience of dealing with management and their membership, is a persuasive one. Indeed 'they knew what their bit of the world was about and they were prepared to take on anyone who challenged it'.²⁹ This is

²⁷ *Report of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, 1965-1968* (Lord Donovan, Chairman), Cmnd. 3623 (London: HMSO 1968).

²⁸ Lane, T. & Roberts, K. *Strike At Pilkingtons* (London: Fontana 1971); Beynon, H. *Working For Ford* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1973).

²⁹ Beynon, *Working For Ford*, pp. 80-81.

certainly common to the nature of shop steward-led labour organisation on Liverpool docks from 1967 onwards, as shall be revealed in due course.

In the wake of the growing influence of shop stewards in contemporary industrial bargaining, more and more studies followed those of Lane and Roberts and Beynon. For example, Warren highlights the complex nature of the role of shop stewards stemming from the influence of three conflictual pressures that of management, officialdom and rank-and-file, an approach later expanded upon in Darlington's case study examination of organisation at three Merseyside plants.³⁰ Darlington's study also evaluates how the impact of Thatcherism affected shop steward organisation, an approach shared by this thesis. Nicholson examines the nature of shop stewardism by focusing on the social and psychological dynamics of stewards' attitude and behaviour.³¹ Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel developed the concept of a sophisticated shop steward system in their study.³² Their analysis took the view that factory class consciousness is created and cultivated by a 'quasi-elite' of 'leader' stewards, who educate their membership in the ideals of trade unionism and foster a collective solidarity based on these principles and the realities of the workplace. Kelly's mobilisation theory also highlights the vital role of workplace activists and representatives in framing and directing their colleagues' perspectives.³³ However, it has since been argued that the idea that a select few stewards manage and control the discontent of the membership, merely replaces one version of 'top down' history with another and underplays the extent to which stewards are influenced and governed by the day-to-day concerns and grievances of the rank-and-file and the actions of management.³⁴

The wave of studies which accompanied the rise of trade union and shop steward influence and militancy in the sixties and seventies was paralleled by those which examined the role of the steward after the Thatcherism watershed of the

³⁰ Warren, A. 'The challenge from below: An analysis of the role of the shop steward in industrial relations', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 1971, pp. 52-60; Darlington, R. *The Dynamics of Workplace Organisation: Shop Stewards' Organisation in Three Merseyside Plants* (London: Mansell 1994).

³¹ Nicholson, N. 'The role of the shop steward: an empirical case study', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, 1976, pp. 15-26.

³² Batstone, E., Boraston, I. and Frenkel, S. *Shop Stewards in Action: The Organisation of Workplace Conflict and Accommodation* (Oxford: Blackwell 1977).

³³ Kelly, J. *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves* (London: Routledge 1998).

³⁴ Darlington, R. 'Shop stewards' leadership, left-wing activism and collective workplace union organisation', *Capital & Class*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Spring 2002, pp. 95-126.

eighties. For example, Terry's study entitled 'How do we know if shop stewards are getting weaker?' typifies this new approach to the analysis of the changing nature of industrial relations.³⁵ The accepted contemporary wisdom proposes that the hostile economic and political climate of the eighties had weakened shop steward organisation and influence.³⁶ However, some authors are less emphatic, instead highlighting continuity and a more flexible and pragmatic approach from stewards within the political and economic context which they found themselves.³⁷ Others such as Claydon and Longstreth prefer to examine the decline of trade unionism more broadly during this period, while Metcalf considers the transformation of British industrial relations from a similarly institutional perspective.³⁸

The inclusion of this brief overview of the historiography of shop stewards' role in industrial bargaining provides context for the case study portion of the thesis. Unofficial shop-floor, or rather quayside, organisation was well-established at the port of Liverpool and others, long prior to the introduction of an official shop steward system under the Devlin reforms of 1967 and subsequently became the dominant force in labour relations. In fact, Liverpool had an unofficial Port Workers' Committee tacitly recognised by employers in the 1940s and instances of local unofficial organisation over certain matters are apparent as early as 1920, when the first registration scheme, albeit voluntary, was introduced to regulate employment at the port.³⁹ It is interesting to note that the majority of studies of shop steward organisation and influence tend to focus on the manufacturing sector. However, the nature of shop steward-led organisation in the dock industry was inherently different. One of the fundamental differences between the dock industry

³⁵ Terry, M. 'How do we know if shop stewards are getting weaker?', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 24, Issue 2, July 1986, pp. 169-179.

³⁶ Basset, P. *Strike Free: New Industrial Relations in Britain* (London: Papermac 1987); Lane, T. 'The Unions: caught on the ebb tide', *Marxism Today*, September 1982, pp. 6-13.

³⁷ Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Organisation*, pp. 2-3; Batstone, E. 'Bureaucracy, oligarchy and incorporation in shop steward organisations in the 1980s' in O. Jacobi, B. Jessop, H. Kastendiek & M. Regini (eds.) *Technological Change, Rationalisation and Industrial Relations* (Kent: Croom Helm 1986), pp. 137-160; Kelly, J. 'Trade unions through the recession 1980-1984', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 25, Issue 2, July 1987, pp. 275-286.

³⁸ Claydon, T. 'Union Derecognition in Britain in the 1980s', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 27, Issue 2, July 1989, pp. 214-224; Longstreth, F.H. 'From corporatism to dualism? Thatcherism and the climacteric of British trade unions in the 1980s', *Political Studies*, Vol. 36, Issue 3, September 1988, pp. 413-432; Metcalf, D. 'Transformation of British industrial relations? Institutions, conduct and outcomes 1980-1990', *Centre For Economic Performance London School of Economics*, CEPDP 151, 1993, pp. 1-53.

³⁹ For more detail on early unofficial organisational structures at Liverpool docks see Chapters 3 and 5 of this thesis.

and others is that it was subject to statutory regulation and, as a result, joint union-employer control at both the local and national level. This meant that many aspects which would normally have been outside the remit of worker representation such as manning, recruitment and discipline were subject to influence from shop steward committees under the auspices of the local Dock Labour Board and Local Modernisation Committees.⁴⁰ Furthermore, when combined with the unusual degree of control dockers enjoyed over the labour process because of the unique character, historical development and custom and practice of the industry it is evident that major dissimilarities emerge between the role and influence of dock stewards and those in other sectors.

Whereas Taylorism, Fordism and the division of labour had divested manufacturing workers of control over their portion of the labour process dockers, through a combination of statutory regulation and joint workplace control, maintained a strong level of autonomy in the organisation and execution of work tasks, even after the technological revolution in the industry. It is therefore likely that the collective workplace consciousness which dictated the strategies and actions of dock stewards were unlike those of factory stewards or the traditional shop steward paradigm. Moreover, because of the unique format of labour relations in the industry and the perpetuation of joint control through the National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS) and local dock labour boards, stewards and labour organisation remained relatively insulated from the broader trend towards the reassertion of managerial authority and the growth of 'new realism' in the eighties, at least until the abolition of the Scheme in 1989.⁴¹ Among other things, this study will seek to challenge and contribute to shop steward historiography by focusing on the character, actions and strategies of the Dock Shop Steward Committee at the port of Liverpool in its response to the rapidly changing technological landscape of the industry and its implications for manning levels and the future of employment therein.

⁴⁰ For more detail on the unique position of union influence, both formal and informal, on workplace control and labour relations in the dock industry see Chapters 3, 5 and 7 of this thesis.

⁴¹ Turnbull, P. 'Docks' in A. Pendleton & J. Winterton (eds.) *Public Enterprise in Transition: Industrial Relations in State and Privatized Corporations* (London: Routledge 1993), pp. 185-186 (pp. 185-210).

Traditional assumptions regarding ‘white-collar’ workers

Chapter Six of this thesis examines the growth of clerical unionism at the port of Liverpool in the 1970s and how it changed the dynamics of labour relations thereafter. Clerical workers, who dealt with day-to-day administration of cargo and shipping at the port, both in the offices of major shipping/stevedoring companies and on the quayside, were salaried staff. They were not registered like dockers and did not fall under the remit of the NDLS, at least not in Liverpool.⁴² This meant that they were subject to the standard employment relationship with management. Prior to 1969, clerical worker unionism at the port was distinctly patchy, partially because most employers were reluctant to recognise clerical unionism and partially because many staff workers were unenthusiastic, instead immersed in an archetypal ‘white-collar’ outlook towards their relationship with their employers. However, this situation quickly began to change in the seventies. In order to provide theoretical context for the factors that underpinned shifting attitudes towards trade unionism and activism which are identified and examined below, it is necessary to document some typical assumptions regarding ‘white-collar’ workers here.

In the post-war era, the growth of clerical and administrative employment prompted considerable academic debate regarding the character and ideology of ‘white-collar’ workers and their organisations.⁴³ Even prior to this, Marx and Weber had accounted for the ‘white-collar’ stratum of the labour force in their pioneering analyses of social structure. For Marx, the proliferation of ‘white-collar’ employment was a consequence of the evolving nature of advanced capitalism.⁴⁴ Unlike manual workers, ‘white-collar’ workers do not directly produce surplus value (profit) for the capitalist class, rather they assist in managing or administering the mode of production which ultimately reduces overheads, indirectly improving profitability. However, Marx insists that these workers do not form a social class of their own despite their alternate role within the capitalist system. Instead he

⁴² However, clerical staff were actually registered under the Scheme at the Port of London - Author’s interview with T.T., March 2011.

⁴³ For an excellent overview of the ‘white-collar’/class debate see: Levine, R.F. *Social Class and Stratification: Classic Statements and Theoretical Debates* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield 1998); Hyman, R. & Price, R. *The New Working Class? White Collar Workers and Their Organisations: A Reader* (London: Macmillan 1983).

⁴⁴ For a summary of the main principles of Marx’s theories of class see: Parkin, F. *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique* (London: Tavistock 1979) Levine, *op cit*; Giddens, A. *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (London: Hutchinson 1973); Tucker, R.C. *The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd Edition* (London: Norton & Company 1978).

proposed that the various grades subsumed under the heading of ‘white-collar worker’ belong either to the proletariat or the bourgeoisie, the only two classes which exist in the capitalist social order, dependent on their position in the mode of production.⁴⁵ In short, most ‘white-collar’ workers who consider themselves as distinct from, or superior to, their manual counterparts are guilty of ‘false consciousness’ and will eventually take their rightful place amongst the proletariat for the universal struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed.

Weber’s theories place more emphasis on the complexity of class structure.⁴⁶ Indeed, he acknowledged the basic division between property owners and the propertyless worker who sells his labour, but proposes that there is considerable differentiation within these categories dependent on the extent of property ownership/ownership of the means of production or the ‘market position’ of an individual, essentially the value received for the sale of labour through skill or aptitude. Weber’s image of class is far less binary than Marx’s, stressing the opaque and variable nature of social relationships and class consciousness. Class collectivism and conflict are not inevitable, instead status, prestige and ‘life chances’ play an important part in forming common identities and kinship and these were accentuated by an individual’s place in the labour market, dependent on skill or experience and the type of property they owned. According to the Weberian tradition then, social class is a far more fragmented and nuanced concept than Marxists believe.

Most modern theories on ‘white-collar’ aspirations and ideology borrow from either the Marxist or Weberian traditions. One of the earliest re-interpretations of the class position of ‘white-collar’ workers was firmly rooted in the Marxist approach

⁴⁵ Without oversimplifying a complex thesis, Marx theorised that the ‘middle-class’ or was a relic of a bygone era. Under modern capitalism, managerial and supervisory grades, who in effect performed a capitalist function by directing the labour process on the capitalists behalf, could form part of the bourgeoisie dependent on a degree of ownership of the means of production (through share ownership etc). However, the majority of ‘white-collar’ clerks had low status jobs and effectively sold their labour in the same manner as manual workers, meaning they were part of the proletariat, regardless of whether they identified with that class or not. There is indeed extensive academic debate as to exactly which types of worker can be categorised as ‘white-collar’ and the degree of organisational and ideological differentiation between these workers. For an overview see Bain, G.S. & Price, R. ‘Who is a white-collar employee?’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 10, Issue 3, November 1972, pp. 325-339. Also see Giddens, *op cit*, pp. 177-197.

⁴⁶ For more detail on Weber’s theories see, for example: Roth, G. & Wittich, C. (eds.) *Max Weber: Economy and Society* (London: California University Press 1978); Hamilton, P. *Max Weber: Critical Assessments 2* (London: Routledge 1991).

and emphasised their proletarianisation as a result of several contemporary factors – the general stagnation of wages compared with manual workers, the dilution of skills through the mechanisation of office work and the perceived loss of prestige and privilege that these caused.⁴⁷ Later, Lockwood’s innovative study of the ‘blackcoated worker’ sought to challenge the Marxist tradition by highlighting the contrasting working conditions, remuneration and benefits enjoyed by ‘white-collar’ workers and the influence these had on their outlook towards employers, manual workers and their place in the social order.⁴⁸ These theoretical perspectives were later expanded upon by a series of sociologists who emphasised the reality of a permanent ‘intermediate’ stratum of workers with its own distinct ideological and organisational tendencies.⁴⁹ In short, this perspective typically characterised ‘white-collar’ workers as having a deferential and individualistic attitude towards workplace relationships because of a direct proximity with authority, often embracing a paternalistic association with management and conferring prestige upon the nature of their work as opposed to that of traditional manual work, to some extent regarding themselves as a ‘cut above’ ‘blue-collar’ workers.⁵⁰ These attitudes are replicated in the social sphere where ‘white-collar’ workers tend to identify and associate with those from similar backgrounds and professions.⁵¹

The broader historiography regarding ‘white-collar’ workers and their aspirational and associational tendencies has prompted a related debate surrounding the nature and character of non-manual workplace organisation. This debate was inspired by the upward contemporary trend of ‘white-collar’ trade union membership density.⁵² Historians, sociologists and industrial relations academics all sought to

⁴⁷ Klingender, F.D. *The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain* (London: Martin Lawrence 1935).

⁴⁸ Lockwood, D. *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness* (London: Unwin 1958).

⁴⁹ See, for example: Urry, J. ‘Towards a structural theory of the middle class’, *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 1973, pp. 175-187; Mercer, D.E. & Weir, D.T.H. ‘Attitudes to work and trade unionism among ‘white-collar’ workers’, *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, June 1972, pp. 49-60; Giddens, *op cit*; Pennings, J.M. ‘Work-value systems of white-collar workers’, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 4, December 1970, pp. 397-405.

⁵⁰ Hyman, R. ‘White-collar workers and theories of class’ in R. Hyman & R. Price *The New Working-Class? White Collar Workers and Their Organisations: A Reader* (London: Macmillan 1983), p. 4, pp. 14-15; Mercer & Weir, *op cit*.

⁵¹ Allen, V.L. *The Sociology of Industrial Relations* (London: Longman, 1971), pp. 91-93; Mercer & Weir, *op cit*, pp. 49-50.

⁵² Bain and Price’s analysis of white collar union membership and density in the twentieth century demonstrated a significant rise in both during the 1970s, the highest increase since the membership boom after World War One. They calculated that ‘white-collar’ union membership had reached 5,000,000 by 1978, 43.1% of the national ‘white-collar’ workforce. This was compared with figures of approximately 2,800,000 members in 1966, accounting for only 29.8% of the ‘white-collar’

explain the phenomenon of ‘white-collar’ unionisation, often in the context of its character and how it compared with traditional accounts and theories of ‘blue-collar’ trade unionism. The earliest studies of non-manual unionisation stress its distinctive nature. Strauss characterised ‘white-collar’ workers as ‘essentially middle class in outlook’ and theorises that they perceive trade unionism in a very different manner from manual workers.⁵³ He argues that ‘white-collar’ workers join trade unions in reaction to the erosion of job prestige or status and had no desire to be affiliated with the ideology or methods of manual unions. Often clerical workers will organise into staff associations, deliberately avoiding the term ‘union’ and its perceived connotations.⁵⁴ Similarly, Allen identifies prestige as a highly-valued element of ‘white-collar’ work and proposes that contemporary economic conditions and technological encroachment can be regarded as the impetus behind increasing membership and activism. Once again, ‘white-collar’ workers are said to eschew traditional methods of collective action and forms of unionism.⁵⁵

Other studies have sought to challenge the categorisation of ‘white-collar’ unionism as broadly reactionary, defensive, conservative and middle class in its ideology. Indeed, Cook and his colleagues dispute the idea that ‘white-collar’ trade unionists are individualistic and inherently different from ideologically collectivist ‘blue-collar’ workers. Instead they emphasise the similarities in the way sections of both sets of workers pragmatically approach collectivism ‘instrumentally’, that is to regard trade unionism as a means to an end.⁵⁶ Similarly, Goldthorpe *et al* highlighted the instrumental nature of modern trade unionism more generally where many manual and non-manual workers have little ideological or political affinity with the traditional principles of the movement, instead regarding it as a vehicle for economic/material gain or protection, a phenomenon later described by Hobsbawm

workforce (Bain, G.S. & Price, R. *Profiles of Union Growth: A Comparative Statistical Portrait of Eight Countries* (Oxford, Blackwell 1980), Table 2.3).

⁵³ Strauss, G. ‘White-collar’ unions are different!’ *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 32, Issue 5, September/October 1954, pp. 73-82.

⁵⁴ Crompton, R. ‘Approaches to the study of white-collar unionism’, *Sociology*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1976, pp. 407-426.

⁵⁵ Allen, *op cit*, pp. 91-98.

⁵⁶ Cook, F.G., Clark, S.C., Roberts, K. & Semeonoff, E. ‘Are ‘white-collar’ trade unionists different?’ *Sociology of Work and Occupations*, Vol. 5, No. 2, May 1978, pp. 235-245. On the subject of ‘instrumentalism’ and ‘individualism’ see also Savage, M. ‘Sociology, class and male manual work cultures’ in J. McIlroy, N. Fishman & A. Campbell (eds.) *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1999), pp. 23-38.

as 'economist militancy'.⁵⁷ Mercer and Weir identify a mixture of collectivism and individualism amongst 'white-collar' workers, depending on the circumstances, resulting in a 'limited instrumentalism' approach to trade unionism.⁵⁸

Blackburn and Prandy evolved the academic debate considerably by making an ambitious attempt to construct a model for measuring the character of 'white-collar' organisations in terms of their ideology and activism, a concept described as 'unionateness'.⁵⁹ Their method uses seven measures of 'unionateness' to establish the extent to which a 'white-collar' organisation can be considered to be quintessentially trade unionist in its outlook, exploring a possible link between union character and class consciousness.⁶⁰ Blackburn later went further by describing the character of a union, as defined by 'unionateness', as 'an index of class consciousness'.⁶¹ However, this approach has since been criticised by Bain and his colleagues. Firstly, Bain *et al* have argued that the seven measures conceived by Blackburn and Prandy are extremely indeterminate and subjective.⁶² For example, TUC affiliation need not necessarily be an indication of any ideological commitment to the principles of trade unionism. Equally, how can one union be said to be more *prepared* to be militant than another when circumstances from workplace to workplace and industry to industry can differ wildly? Secondly, the character of a 'white-collar' union is compared against a somewhat traditional and idyllic stereotype of manual trade unionism, a concept which is far too simplistic and homogeneous. Both these criticisms are proceeded by a general rejection of the supposition that the level of 'unionateness' can reflect the level of class consciousness in a union.

⁵⁷ Goldthorpe, J.H., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer, F. & Platt, J. *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1968); Hobsbawm, E. 'The forward march of labour halted?' in M. Jacques & F. Mulhearn (eds.), *The Forward March of Labour Halted* (London: MLB 1981), p. 18 (pp. 1-19).

⁵⁸ Mercer & Weir, *op cit*, p. 57.

⁵⁹ Blackburn, R.M. & Prandy, K. 'White-collar' unionization: A conceptual framework', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 16, No.2, June 1965, pp. 111-122.

⁶⁰ The seven measures proposed by Blackburn and Prandy are: Whether a given body declares itself a trade union; Whether it is registered as a trade union; Whether it is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC); Whether it is affiliated to the Labour Party; Whether it is independent from employers for purposes of negotiation; Whether it regards collective bargaining and the protection of the interests of members, as employees, as a major function; Whether it is prepared to be militant, using all forms of industrial action which may be effective.

⁶¹ Blackburn, R.M. *Union Character and Social Class* (London: Batsford 1967), p. 9.

⁶² Bain, G.S., Coates, D. & Ellis, V. *Social Stratification and Trade Unionism* (London: Heinemann 1973).

So, the traditional perception of ‘white-collar’ workers as individualistic, preoccupied with the prestige of their job and their status in society and reluctant to take collective action has given way to a more nuanced analysis of the market position of non-manual workers and the character of their organisations. Whereas the academic debate once focused on the defining differences between manual and non-manual workers and their respective brands of unionism, the contemporary trend has been to examine the manner in which they differ and why this is the case, or to emphasise areas of similarity in the behaviour and outlook of both sets of worker. What most academics do agree on is that the growth of ‘white-collar’ union membership and density is the result of several interrelated pressures – the deskilling of work, limitation of promotion opportunities, increased job insecurity, general stagnation of wages compared with manual workers and the perceived loss of prestige and privilege that these have caused.⁶³ Some of these factors contributed to the growth in membership and activism in the 6/567 Branch of ACTSS in its formative years at the port of Liverpool. However, Chapter Six of this study also explores other workplace-specific influences which inspired an extremely pro-active approach by the clerical staff and their representatives post-1970, such as the location and nature of recruitment, the influence of other work groups within the same work environment and the contemporary trend towards unionisation and militancy.

The theoretical perspectives outlined above, together provide a framework within which to examine the complexities of labour relations at the port of Liverpool between 1967 and 1989, featured later. By highlighting the current academic discourse and typical assumptions relating to ‘rank-and-fileism’, the advent of ‘shop stewardism’ and ‘white-collar’ trade unionism, it will be possible to evaluate where the experience of the dock and clerical workers at the port fits, or indeed does not fit, into current historiography. Attention will now turn to examining Liverpool’s political, social and cultural development and how this may have impacted on port workers’ consciousness and attitudes towards labour relations.

⁶³ See Price, R. ‘White-collar unions: Growth, character and attitudes in the 1970s’ in R. Hyman & R. Price *The New Working-Class? White Collar Workers and Their Organisations: A Reader* (London: Macmillan 1983), pp. 147-183, for a summary of the academic debate regarding the impetus behind the increase in ‘white-collar’ unionism in the 1970s.

Chapter 3

Work Culture and Labour Relations in the British Dock Industry

This chapter provides an overview of the development of dockland work culture and labour relations from the turn of the twentieth century up to the Devlin reforms in 1967 and subsequent decasualisation of the industry.¹ It documents the inherently volatile nature of employment and its effect on worker-management/worker-union relations through an examination of the existing historiography and interpretation of oral evidence collected by the author and from other sources, as detailed in the introduction to this thesis. The purpose of this approach is to present the over-arching context within which the disputes at the port of Liverpool, featured later, took place.

Since the 1889 dock strike and Charles Booth's seminal study of the plight of London's urban working-class, the dock industry and its workers have been a staple of sociological, historical and industrial analysis.² Typically described or categorised as 'tough, inconsistent workers... inclined to strike', an 'isolated and homogeneous mass';³ 'irregular... less stable and less desirable men', 'unemployables';⁴ workers with a 'strong proletarian social consciousness' or 'the most independent-minded, lively and bloody-minded man you can get', just why have dockers historically been considered amongst the most militant and combative sections of British workers in the twentieth century?⁵ What are the various factors at work which are characterised by the traditional propensity for industrial militancy and solidarity amongst dockers?

¹ *Final Report of the Committee of Inquiry under the Rt. Hon Lord Devlin into certain matters concerning the Port Transport Industry*, Cmnd 2734, August 1965.

² Booth, C. *Life and Labour of the People of London 1889-97*, Series 1 & 2 (London: Macmillan & Co 1902).

³ Kerr, C. & Siegel, A. 'The inter-industry propensity to strike – an international comparison', in A. Kornhauser, R. Dubin & A.M. Ross(eds), *Industrial Conflict* (New York: McGraw-Hill 1954), pp. 192-193 (pp. 189-212).

⁴ Walker, K.F. *Australian Industrial Relations Systems* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956) originally cited in Mangan, J. 'Casual employment and conflict on the docks', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1979, p. 56 (pp. 56-62).

⁵ Lockwood, D. 'Sources of variation in working-class images of society', *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 14, 1966, pp. 249-267; Ex-Prime Minister James Callaghan's comments during a House of Lords debate, 6 April 1989 originally cited in Sapsford, D. & Turnbull, P. 'Dockers, Devlin and industrial disputes', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, March 1990, p. 26 (pp. 26-35).

The historiography regarding labour relations in the British dock industry is relatively rich, partly because of its strike-prone nature. Contemporary studies of the 1889 and 1911 dock strikes pioneered research into work conditions and labour relations in the industry.⁶ This tendency re-emerged in the post-war era as academics focused more closely on the relationship between localised occupational communities and workplace solidarity/militancy.⁷ Several seminal historical accounts of British trade unionism have also considered the strike prone nature of the dock industry in the broader national context.⁸

However, there were a number of deficiencies or omissions in early studies which were not satisfactorily addressed until the 1970s. Kerr and Siegel and other early sociological analyses centred on the idea of the overlap of work and community, both geographically and socially, as a determinant in industrial solidarity. This approach provided a new, valuable tool in analysing the nature of strikes and organisation in the dock industry and others such as shipbuilding and mining. Nevertheless, such an approach only provided a partial theoretical framework within which to evaluate the reasons behind strike occurrence and fractious industrial relations, failing to lend necessary weight to the system of casual employment in the industry as a contributory factor. This sociological perspective generally characterised dockers as a homogeneous mass of ‘traditional proletarians’ whose community was isolated from mainstream society and culture, an assumption that proves problematic when the historical complexities of skill and sectional divisions in the industry are properly considered.⁹ Moreover, the perpetuation of labour militancy in the late sixties and beyond superseded the influence of the by then defunct and geographically disbanded traditional dockland community construct, suggesting that additional factors were at work in informing the attitudes,

⁶ Smith, H.L. & Nash, V. *The Story of the Dockers' Strike* (London: Fisher Unwin 1889); Booth, *Life and Labour*; Tillett, B. *History of the London Transport Workers' Strike 1911* (London: National Transport Workers Federation 1911); Sexton, J. (Sir), *Agitator – The Life of the Dockers' M.P.* (London: Faber & Faber 1936).

⁷ Kerr & Siegel, ‘The inter-industry propensity to strike’; Lockwood, D. *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness* (London: Allen & Unwin 1958); Goldthorpe, J.E. et al, *The Affluent Worker* (3 Vols.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1968-69).

⁸ Webb, S. & Webb, B. *The History of Trade Unionism 1666-1920* (London: Longman 1920); Clegg, H.A., Fox, A. & Thompson, A.F. *A History of British Trade Unionism since 1889, Volume 1* (Oxford: Clarendon 1964); Taylor, R. *The Trade Union Question in British Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell 1994).

⁹ For more detail on the concept of occupational community and its potential effect on workplace militancy see: Lockwood, ‘Sources of variation’; Kerr & Siegel, ‘The inter-industry propensity to strike’; Turnbull, P. ‘Dock strikes and the demise of the dockers’ occupational culture’, *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 40, Issue 2, 1992, pp. 294-318.

identity and solidarity of dockers.¹⁰ Similarly, some post-war historical accounts of British industrial relations lend too much weight to institutional forces in the dynamics of labour relations in the dock industry, in some cases completely disregarding the vital role played by unofficial, and later shop steward, organisation.¹¹

An understanding of the historical intricacies of the casual system of employment and workplace organisation on the docks is vital to a proper analysis of the complexities of labour relations in the post-war period. It was not until the 1970s that academics began to fuse the sociological perspective of Kerr and Siegel *et al* with more typical structural analyses of the casual system, workplace relations and occupational culture. The concept of the traditional occupational dockland community was not disregarded, rather considered in conjunction with the vagaries of the dock employment system and the attitudes it fostered. For example, Whiteside and Phillips' aptly-named *Casual Labour*, emphasises the importance of the influence of the dock labour system in forming dockers' occupational culture and workplace bonds which impacted immeasurably on modern industrial relations at the docks.¹² This approach was shared by journalist David F. Wilson's thorough examination of the relationship between escalating industrial strife and the changing nature of dock-work in the late sixties/early seventies.¹³ Later studies such as Turnbull's furthered understandings of the myriad factors and influences which informed dockers' attitudes and identity and hence their propensity for labour militancy.¹⁴

In addition to the strong historiography regarding the casual system and its impact on industrial relations, several notable monographs and journal articles have considered the complex composition of labour relations on the docks by focusing on

¹⁰ Allen, P.T. 'The class imagery of 'traditional proletarians'', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 1984, pp. 93-111; Hill, S. *The Dockers – Class and Tradition in London* (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 163-177; Turnbull, 'Dock Strikes', pp. 295-296.

¹¹ See Chapter 2 for an evaluation of the trends in historical inquiry in Britain 1950s -1970s.

¹² Phillips, G. & Whiteside, N. *Casual Labour: The Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry 1880-1970* (Oxford: Clarendon 1985).

¹³ Wilson, D.F. *Dockers: The Impact of Industrial Change* (London: Fontana/Collins 1972).

¹⁴ For example, see: Turnbull, P. Woolfson, C. & Kelly, J. *Dock Strike: Conflict and Restructuring in Britain's Ports* (Aldershot: Avebury 1992); Turnbull, P. & Sapsford, D. 'A sea of discontent: the tides of organised and "unorganised" conflict on the docks', *Sociology*, Vol. 26, No. 2, May 1992, pp. 297-298 (pp. 291-309); Turnbull, P. & Wass, V. 'The greatest game no more – Redundant dockers and the demise of 'dock work'', *Work, Employment & Society*, Vol. 8, 1994, pp. 487-506; Turnbull, 'Dock Strikes'.

a particular period, dispute, attempt at state regulation or technological advance. For example, Mellish evaluates the impact of the Devlin Report and decasualisation on labour relations and productivity in the face of modernisation and containerisation.¹⁵ Hill's study focuses specifically on work culture and the dockers' way of life in London.¹⁶ McIlroy considers 'rank and filism' and political allegiances amongst dockers in the context of the strike wave of 1945.¹⁷ Mangan examines the relationship between the casual system and the nature of conflict in the dock industry, particularly during the period 1950-66.¹⁸ Hunter provides an overview of the complex dynamics of labour organisation in the industry, considering the impact of inter and intra-union conflict on labour relations.¹⁹ Lindop's two-part paper on the dockers' entanglement with the Industrial Relations Act illustrates the primacy of local shop steward-led labour organisation in the dock industry as well as chronicling an important flashpoint in British labour history, adopting a 'from below' approach.²⁰

In order to examine and evaluate the 'militant dockers' paradigm therefore it is logical that an historical analysis of work culture and labour relations in the dock industry should be undertaken. The process will be threefold: first, a synopsis of the typical structure and stresses of dock employment as symptomatic of the traditionally casual nature of engagement in the industry. Secondly, an examination of the dockers' occupational culture and workplace relationships. Finally, an overview of the major flashpoints and watersheds in the history of dock unionism and the complexities of labour organisation pre-1967. When taken into account with the theoretical framework already outlined and the proceeding contextual chapters this method intends to provide a comprehensive contextual and theoretical basis with which to better understand the various processes and pressures at work in the disputes featured in the case studies.

¹⁵ Mellish, M. *The Docks After Devlin* (London: Heinemann 1972).

¹⁶ Hill, *Class and Tradition*.

¹⁷ McIlroy, J. 'The first great battle in the march to socialism: Dockers, Stalinists and Trotskyists in 1945', *Revolutionary History*, Vol. 6, 2/3, p. 109 (pp. 105-159).

¹⁸ Mangan, 'Casual employment'.

¹⁹ Hunter, B. *They Knew Why They Fought: Unofficial Struggles and Leadership on the Docks, 1945-1989* (London: Index Books, 1994).

²⁰ Lindop, F. 'The dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, part 1: Shop stewards and containerisation', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 5, Spring 1998, pp. 33-72; Lindop, F. 'The dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, part 2: the arrest and release of the Pentonville Five', *HSIR*, 6, 1998, pp. 65-100.

Working at the docks

The dock industry is historically prone to industrial strife and this is common throughout most of the world.²¹ Fundamentally, labour relations have proven particularly complex and conflictual due to the unique and unpredictable composition of the port transport industry. Irregular trade cycles and shipping timetables dictated by season, weather and economic conditions demand a large surplus pool of labour to cover manning requirements at maximum capacity which then contracts sharply in slack periods. Employment opportunities were consequently at best uneven and at worst non-existent. Casual employment was universal at British docks even after initial regulation of the industry in 1947, with recruitment on a half-daily 'turn' basis offering little job security. This led reciprocally to casual attitudes by both workforce and management towards their respective workplace responsibilities.²²

Traditionally dockers throughout the country gathered at their local docks twice daily for the 'call' where any number of shipping, stevedore and dock companies would each occupy a stand or 'pen'. Most dockers assembled in their chosen 'gangs' which would then be selected by company foremen to work the unloading of ships. Indeed, the gang format of recruitment was standard. All dockers had their chosen work-groups, usually comprising family members and/or close friends/work colleagues, which were practically inseparable.²³ At the call, company foremen would either shout the name of the gang leader or, more commonly, tap him on the shoulder to indicate that he and his men were selected for work. This process was obviously open to abuse and bias through favouritism, nepotism and religious allegiance – often referred to as the 'blue-eyed' system by dockers:

²¹ See, for example: Davis, C. *Waterfront Revolts: New York and London Dockworkers, 1946–61* (Illinois: University of Illinois 2003); Deery, S. 'Industrial relations on the Australian waterfront: a policy of laissez-faire', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1977, pp. 93-97; Davies, S. et al (eds.) *Dockworkers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History, 1790-1970* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2000); Jensen, V.H. *The Hiring of Dockworkers and Employment Practices in the Ports of New York, Liverpool, London, Rotterdam and Marseilles* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964).

²² Mellish, *The Docks After Devlin*, p. 1.

²³ Typically a gang consisted of eighteen Registered Dock Workers (RDWs) comprising eight holdsmen, four deckhands and six dockers on the quay. In certain circumstances, such as work on a particularly dangerous or awkward cargo, the number could be increased if claimed for by the gang and permitted by the employer, although this was rare.

In the pen I was in there was a lot of favouritism on the call stand where you have lads who just worked for one particular firm... it was the blue-eyed system where they used to give you the tap on the shoulder – that was prevalent in our area. We were known as the ‘strags’, we used to get what was left after everyone else had been hired.²⁴

Those who were not selected for employment went without a wage for that particular day and, dependent on port traffic, might struggle to earn for considerably longer. These were inherent traits of the industry and generations of dockers across the world faced the same relentless challenges ‘most notably poverty, unemployment, underemployment, unequal job opportunities, low average earnings, favouritism, bribery... and demoralisation’.²⁵ Indeed, underemployment was symptomatic of the casual and subjective selection systems and was the cause of much insecurity and hardship amongst many dockers, their dependents and by extension the dockland community as a whole.²⁶

Dock-work is generally considered manual and unskilled employment, though this assumption is fraught with inaccuracies. In fact, ‘the dockside trades... were riddled with numerous peculiars, which emerged from the singularity of a task and from familiarity with one company or work-place’.²⁷ The casual system in Britain encouraged dockers to either develop a specialist skill or attach themselves to a particular employer in their area to improve their chances of more regular employment.²⁸ There were skill/experience divisions within each gang, between competing gangs and between stevedores, holdsmen, porters etc.²⁹ It is argued convincingly elsewhere that the pre-decasualised employment market was split into a three-tier hierarchy: the experienced and special-skilled ‘aristocracy’, the intermediate ‘ordinary docker’ and the impoverished ‘residuum’.³⁰ Experience is the key word here - those with the aptitude and know-how had regularity of work and

²⁴ Author’s interview with J.D., December 2009.

²⁵ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 7.

²⁶ Wilson, *Dockers*, pp. 17-18.

²⁷ Waller, P.J. *Democracy and Sectarianism: A Political and Social History of Liverpool 1868-1939* (Liverpool: L.U.P. 1981), p. xvi.

²⁸ Turnbull & Sapsford, ‘A sea of discontent’, pp. 297-298.

²⁹ The broad difference between the duties of stevedores and dockers was simple: stevedores worked on the ship handling and organising cargoes which dockers on the quayside sent aboard, usually by sling. Both category of worker are often subsumed under the generic title of ‘dockers’.

³⁰ Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, pp. 27-28; Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 38-39.

income even in the most trying of times. It was the relatively unskilled ‘residuum’ that was synonymous with chronic underemployment and poverty, although the ‘intermediates’ were by no means immune when port traffic was slack.³¹ However, even the ‘irregulars’ had to have a degree of experience in the work processes involved, as well as some competence in the intricacies of unloading and portering of cargoes suitably, while the ‘aristocracy’ were equipped to carry out their tasks with the utmost expediency and efficiency. Speed of turnaround and maximisation of available hold space was crucial for ship-owners in the break-bulk era hence the most experienced men were highly sought after. Indeed, ‘a good stevedore was worth his weight in gold’.³² Moreover, an ‘aristocrat’ could choose to opt out of work on a particular day if the job did not fall under his specialism and thus his specialised rate of pay, an indication of craft distinction.³³ With these factors in mind, it is difficult to describe dock-work as unskilled.

There was a distinct apprenticeship system in place on the docks which also lent to the primacy of specialisation and skill. New recruits were often straight from school without any real work experience and so were restricted to simple jobs until they had gained some aptitude for general operations.³⁴ After a year on the docks, the new docker might then have been afforded the opportunity to go ‘back to school’ in order to learn a specialism and advance his employment opportunities and earning potential, although this could also be prone to favouritism.³⁵ It was this specialisation which conferred prestige, as well as precedence in the hiring queue.³⁶ The apprenticeship system of the semi-casualised era is colourfully described here:

When we first started on the docks, you went in as a quay hand. You’re working on the quay, you’re not allowed to work below [in the ships hold]... It’s like an apprenticeship, you serve your time on the quay and then your

³¹ Hill (p. 18) calculates that around fifteen percent could be categorised as irregularly engaged, while Phillips & Whiteside (p. 30) contend that the lowest stratum of dock labour may have accounted for around forty percent of the workforce (Hill, *Dockers*; Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*). The Devlin Report, which is examined in detail in the following chapter, estimated that up to fifty percent of the workforce were ‘floaters’ who were not regularly employed by a single company (Devlin, *Final Report*).

³² Author’s interview with L.D., December 2009.

³³ Turnbull & Sapsford, ‘A sea of discontent’, p. 297; Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, p. 33.

³⁴ Although boys were often recruited straight from school, they could not become RDWs until their eighteenth birthdays as this was the minimum age for registration.

³⁵ Author’s interview with M.T., December 2009.

³⁶ Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, p. 32.

aspirations are always to go down below, because that's where everything happened. It was amazing, sometimes there were men working down below who were seventy or seventy-five years old because there was no retirement on the docks then... You were on the quay, but out of interest when you sent a sling aboard you'd wanna go on the ship to have a look down the hatch and the old fellas would say 'Go on f**k off, what do you think you're looking at?' because they didn't like you watching what they were doing because that was something they were good at, something they could do. You'd have your chance, but it wasn't your turn while they were still doing it.³⁷

The nature of dock-work prior to containerisation placed the responsibility for the organisation and management of specific tasks wholly in the hands of stevedores and dockers. Stowing and handling of break-bulk cargoes (essentially loose or boxed/sacked goods painstakingly hand-loaded into a sling and winched into the ship's hold) often required considerable skill to execute proficiently and maximise available space. Once a gang was recruited by a foreman for a particular job, it was largely left to the experience and knowledge of the dockers, under direction from the gang leader, to decide how best to carry out the work. This direct or hands-on control of the labour process fostered a strong feeling of occupational identity amongst the men. Moreover, 'gangs reinforced bonds of kinship on the docks as they often comprised family members who passed on dockers' skills from one generation to the next'.³⁸ The following scenario was typical – 'Like many lads, I followed my father onto the docks as a registered dockworker... It was in our family, my brothers were on the docks, both my uncles were on the docks so it was more like it wasn't a job to us, basically it was a way of life'.³⁹

The gang format doubtlessly cultivated a sense of camaraderie, accentuated by the hazardous nature of dock-work itself and hence an 'emotional involvement' with work tasks and colleagues.⁴⁰ Prior to state-sponsored regulation of the industry, and even thereafter, working conditions at the docks were medieval. The casual system bred a lack of managerial responsibility and hence afforded little provision for health and safety or welfare facilities. Cargo handling was often dirty and

³⁷ Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

³⁸ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 39.

³⁹ Author's interview with M.T., December 2009.

⁴⁰ Turnbull, 'Dock strikes', p. 298.

dangerous, with high rates of industrial accidents, disease and fatalities.⁴¹ There was little prospect of help or arbitration for dockers working on hazardous cargoes or in insanitary conditions:

Humping beef in a fridge ship 23 degrees freezing one day, sweating in a hold full of sugar – sweat and sugar acting like sandpaper on your back – a back covered in blood – coughing and spitting with cement and paper. Working your fingers to the bone on ingots of lead and copper – discharging wet hides and smelling to high heaven – going home smothered with lamp black, red ochre and oil – subject to asthma, bronchitis, rheumatism, lumbago – with a constant stream of casualties to the hospitals.⁴²

While the system of casual underemployment caused considerable hardship and irregular earnings, the harsh realities of the industry traditionally and inversely fostered a strong identity and collective solidarity amongst dockers in their specific areas and progressively on a port-wide scale. In the British national psyche dockers are synonymous with industrial militancy, especially in the post-war era. Workplace solidarity was regarded as the only means to secure concessions from employers under the inequities of the casual and semi-casual systems.⁴³ This was despite a general lack of union accountability or effectiveness on the docks prior to the introduction of the shop steward system to the industry from 1967 onwards. Furthermore, the close relationship between community life and work life historically re-enforced the mantra of ‘one out, all out’.⁴⁴ In the days when dockers still lived in communities around the port, ostracism and victimisation was potentially the penalty for breaking ranks, certainly ‘you wouldn’t scab out the fella who lives next door to you’.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Between 1947 and 1974 over 500 registered dockers were killed at work, while between 1955 and 1967 around one per cent of the registered national dock workforce was absent through workplace injury on any given day – Turnbull, ‘Dock strikes’, p. 315, 298.

⁴² National Dock Strike Committee (NDSC), *To You, The Public, We Present Our Case* (Publicity Department NDSC, November 1945) originally cited in McIlroy, ‘The first great battle’, p. 109.

⁴³ Turnbull, ‘Dock strikes’, p. 295.

⁴⁴ Turnbull, ‘Dock strikes’, p. 299.

⁴⁵ Author’s interview with F.L., January 2011.

Labour relations and trade unionism before 1967

In order to analyse the complex relationship between the dockers and their unions and the sometimes fractious nature of labour relations in the industry, it is important to first chart a chronology of the development of labour organisation on the docks. Traditionally union/labour representation had been concerned with moderating the effects of casual labour rather than its complete abolition – the nature of the industry seemed to make some degree of casualism inevitable.⁴⁶ In Britain, relative geographical isolation and the primacy of trade made the dock industry of central importance to the national economy. A dock strike could cripple the national economy and the 1889 strike is often heralded as a watershed in unskilled unionism, securing the ‘dockers’ tanner’ basic rate and giving birth to the National Transport Workers’ Federation (NTWF), a forerunner of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the concessions gained by Britain’s dockers during the ‘great’ dock strike were quickly eroded as a combination of unfavourable economic conditions and an employer offensive re-established the previous status quo on the docks.⁴⁸ It would be another twenty-one years before Britain’s dockers undertook any substantial industrial action against the system of employment in the industry in the form of the 1911 transport strike, under the leadership of Ben Tillett and the NTWF.⁴⁹

Between 1911 and the beginning of the First World War, in the wake of the success of the transport strike, Britain’s dockers earned some relatively impressive concessions. Union recognition was now a given; the first registration scheme was introduced in Liverpool in 1912 with preference for work being given to union members (albeit voluntary on the part of both dockers and employers), while a voluntary clearing house system was implemented in several ports throughout the

⁴⁶ Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 23.

⁴⁷ Sapsford & Turnbull, ‘Dockers, Devlin and industrial disputes’. For more detail on the 1889 dock strike see: McCarthy, T.(ed.) *The Great Dock Strike 1889* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1988); Taplin, E. *Liverpool Dockers and Seamen, 1870-1890* (Hull: H.U.P 1974); Taplin, E. *The Dockers’ Union: A Study of the National Union of Dockworkers 1889-1922* (Leicester: L.U.P. 1986); Smith & Nash, *The Story of the Dockers’ Strike*.

⁴⁸ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p.10.

⁴⁹ See the following for more detail on the 1911 General Transport Strike: Taplin, E. *Near to Revolution: The Liverpool General Transport Strike of 1911* (Liverpool: Bluecoat 1994); Tillett, *History of the London Transport Workers’ Strike*.

country.⁵⁰ During World War One, the Government intervened in the management of the ports to obvious ends. Those dockers who were not drafted were employed with considerably more regularity and the major ports were subjected to compulsory registration schemes allied with almost complete state management. The combination of registration, state control, war patriotism and ‘the legal enforcement of arbitration in industrial disputes’, meant that the industrial strife synonymous with the immediate pre-war years dissolved.⁵¹

The cessation of hostilities in 1918 brought the wartime system of de facto permanence to an end. Drafted dockers were returning home and those who had been relocated to other employment by government manpower management schemes were also flooding back into the industry. Employers, freed from the shackles of state control, welcomed the re-instatement of a large surplus labour pool to ameliorate wage demands and weaken the position of unions.⁵² Although there were registration schemes still in place at major ports, these remained voluntary with no provision for maintenance pay, whilst wage rates were being eroded by the onset of world depression. Changes in unemployment insurance legislation softened the traditional hardship associated with the erratic nature of the industry, as those dockers working three days or less per week could now also claim unemployment relief from the state.⁵³ All these factors served to perpetuate the casual system on Britain’s docks throughout the interwar era and beyond.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the dockers’ lot had considerably improved from the pre-war state of affairs. The Shaw Inquiry was set up by the Government in 1920 to evaluate union claims for a nationalised wage rate and maintenance pay in the absence of work.⁵⁵ It found in favour of the proposals and went further by condemning the contemporary system of casualism and recommending proliferation of registration schemes and the establishment of a National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry (NJC) to deal with wage bargaining in the future. However, the global economic downturn in the twenties

⁵⁰ Jackson, M.P. *Labour Relations on the Docks* (Farnborough: Lexington 1973), p. 8; Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 11.

⁵¹ Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, pp. 112-117.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 149.

⁵³ Turnbull & Sapsford, ‘A sea of discontent’, pp. 297-298.

⁵⁴ Whiteside, N. ‘Public policy and port labour reform: the dock decasualisation issue, 1910-1950’ in S. Tolliday & J. Zeitlin(eds.) *Shopfloor Bargaining and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 85 (pp. 75-107).

⁵⁵ *Report of a Court of Inquiry Concerning Transport Workers’ Wages and Conditions*, Cmd 936/937, 1920 (The Shaw Report).

and early thirties prevented any meaningful progress being made on these recommendations. It was not until after World War Two that Britain's dockers began to see any real improvement in work regularity and conditions. In an important aside, employers established the National Association of Port Employers (NAPE) in the wake of the Shaw Inquiry to act as a lobby in their interests.⁵⁶ NAPE and local employers' associations were to play a central role in the industrial disputes of the post-war era.

It is important at this point to disentangle the different duties performed by the myriad companies which are often subsumed under the generic heading of 'port employer'. Port employer describes a variety of companies involved in the loading or unloading of ships and transit of cargoes such as shipping lines, master stevedore and dock companies and wharfingers/warehousemen (who provided storage and anchorage for goods and ships).⁵⁷ Prior to containerisation, the local Port Authority's role in the employment market was minimal – it provided only the facilities and upkeep thereof, levying shipping and cargo-handling companies for their usage. Normally, shipping companies would either recruit men directly at the call or use master stevedore companies to recruit for them, which were often subsidiaries of the shipping lines themselves. These dockers and stevedores were employed on the unloading/stowing of cargo on ships. Wharfingers and dock companies were not concerned with the unloading of ships, instead their responsibilities lay in the transportation of goods from quay to warehouse to be stored or sorted, repacked and labelled correctly before being transferred to the merchant or client for sale of the product/commodity.⁵⁸ Men employed for dock companies and wharfingers were also generally subject to the turn call although a section of the workforce was staff often employed in clerical or foremen roles. There could be in excess of a hundred small individual employers at a major British port and often such companies exclusively worked ships/discharged cargoes in a specific area or berth and nowhere else. This was particularly true prior to 1947 and even thereafter up to 1967, when the number of registered employers reduced

⁵⁶ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 40-41. For a detailed account of port employers in the Port of Liverpool in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century see: Bean, R. 'Employers' associations in the Port of Liverpool 1890-1914', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 21, 1976, pp. 358-382.

⁵⁸ Details of different types of port employer derived from the various interviews undertaken for this thesis between 2008 and 2010. Also see Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 40-41.

dramatically through mergers and withdrawals as part of the Devlin recommendations.⁵⁹ The extreme fragmentation of work processes and the labour market served to perpetuate attitudes engendered by the casual system beyond complete decasualisation in 1967.

Since World War Two, the dock industry has become synonymous with substantial peacetime state intervention and regulation. Again, during the war, the Government intervened in the management of the ports to obvious ends. State management coupled with measures introduced for compulsory registration for all dockers and maintenance payments for periods without work re-introduced decasualisation to the industry but at a cost of increased regulation, intensification of labour and more rigorous discipline.⁶⁰ At the close of the war, a national strike wave broke out and the immediate post-war period witnessed an escalation of industrial action across the country despite the Labour government promising a complete review and overhaul of the system of dock employment. The 'Wages Strike', which raged on and off for the much of 1945, prompted the Government to set up an inquiry headed by Sir John Foster K.C.⁶¹ The findings of the Foster inquiry coloured the structure of the Dockworkers' (Regulation of Employment) legislation in July 1947 which created the National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS). Under the new scheme, dockers and employers would be registered and work could only be carried out by registered men. The National Dock Labour Board (NDLB) was established to oversee administration and adherence to the Scheme. This was a tri-partite body including employer, union and independent representation. Twenty-two local boards were also established across the eighty-four ports covered to manage registration, work allocation and disciplinary matters.⁶² Although dockers were still casual workers hired under the same draconian 'turn' system, the size of the registered labour force was now regulated by the local board, a provision which went some

⁵⁹ When the NDLS was introduced in 1947 there were over 2000 different port employers across the national industry, varying from large international shipping companies and trans-national master stevedores with interests in every port to small, local dock companies with comparatively minor workforces and remits (Source: Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, pp. 262-263; Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 42-43).

⁶⁰ Phillips, J. 'Decasualization and disruption: Industrial relations on the docks 1945-1979', in C.J. Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979* (Cheltenham: Elgar 1996), pp. 167 (pp. 165-185); McIlroy, 'The first great battle', p. 108.

⁶¹ For more detail on the 1945 national strike see: Pennington, B. 'Docks: breakaway and unofficial movements' *International Socialism*, No. 2, Autumn 1960, pp. 5-11; McIlroy, J. 'The first great battle'; Hunter, *They Knew Why They Fought*, pp. 22-24.

⁶² Sapsford & Turnbull, 'Dockers', p. 27.

way to ameliorate the perennial challenge of underemployment.⁶³ The Scheme also guaranteed dockers ‘attendance pay’ (maintenance pay) for those who could not be employed in any engagement period, paid through the local board which levied employers.⁶⁴

After a series of government inquiries into labour conditions and relations in the industry, de-casualisation was viewed by policy-makers as the best route to more harmonious industrial relations.⁶⁵ The new system of employment, although characterised by partial de-casualisation, had apparently elevated the position of the dock-worker from casual and underemployed to comparatively well-paid and secure. However, implementation of the Scheme was greeted by a rash of strikes. The period 1947-1955 saw a spate of unofficial strike action during which the docks became easily the most strike-prone industry in the country:

Table I: Strikes on British docks 1930-1955

<i>Industry</i>	<i>Average number of man days lost annually in disputes per 1000 workers</i>	
	<u>1930-38</u>	<u>1947-55</u>
Docks	285	3134
Shipbuilding & Repair	325	890
Coalmining	1034	778
Engineering & Automotive	80	162
Construction	60	69
Textiles	1311	22

Source: *Final Report of the Committee of Inquiry under the Rt. Hon Lord Devlin into certain matters concerning the Port Transport Industry*, Cmnd 2734, August 1965.

⁶³ Turnbull & Sapsford, ‘A sea of discontent’, p. 297.

⁶⁴ Phillips, ‘Decasualization and disruption’, pp. 166-168.

⁶⁵ The Shaw Report, *op. cit.*; The Maclean Committee, *Report of a Committee of Inquiry on Port Labour* (Ministry of Labour 1931); The Ammon Commission, *Report of a Commission of Inquiry into the London Dock Dispute* (Ministry of Labour and National Service, March 1945).

Here is a further example of the complexities of work culture and labour relations in the industry. Resistance to registration under the Scheme came from two sources which policy makers and union officials failed to fathom. Firstly, the aristocracy of dock labour, that is the highly skilled and steadily employed minority, saw the registration programme as a threat to their status and specialised privileges. The dissolution of skill distinctions and registration as a general docker was an unacceptable compromise of their privileged position.⁶⁶ It effectively levelled the playing field, doing most for the 'residuum' and least for the artisans of the trade. It was therefore opposed most vigorously by the latter, also logically the most influential section of workers.

What the aristocratic minority also had in common with a much larger proportion of dockers was an affinity for the flexibility of casualism. The industry had operated under a casual system for so long that dockers were used to being selective in busy periods or to suit their specialism. Indeed, 'direction of labour and centralisation of bargaining came up against their attachment to aspects of casualism, the ability to pick and choose jobs, to work certain days and not others and to share work'.⁶⁷ The flexibility of casualism, and rhythm of life that it produced, had apparently become entrenched in dockers' work culture. Moreover, opposition to the Scheme was characterised by a much more fundamental rejection of its essence - many rank-and-file dockers resented registration because there was a traditional objection to being 'numbered and registered like cattle'.⁶⁸ These are examples of the strong culture of independence associated with dock-work, where any attempt to impose discipline or re-organise the system of employment from outside was met with defensive resistance from dockers as a challenge to their perceived/actual control of portions of the labour process. It is also important to note that sectional interests, attitudes and rivalries along skill, and sometimes religious, divides still played an influential role in dockers' culture at this time.⁶⁹ Experienced or skilled dockers with greater regularity of work traditionally formed small, sectional co-operatives strictly concerned with pay and conditions for their skill distinction in their particular area. This makes simplistic generalisations about a homogenous

⁶⁶ Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, pp. 60-61.

⁶⁷ McIlroy 'The first great battle', p. 108.

⁶⁸ Sexton, *Agitator*, p. 226.

⁶⁹ McIlroy 'The first great battle', p. 111.

rank-and-file problematic and contributed to the convulsion of strike action after the Scheme's implementation.⁷⁰

Full employment in the post-war era presented Britain's dockers with the opportunity to turn the new semi-casual system to their advantage.⁷¹ The traditional piecework system of payment, essentially a 'by the job' or tonnage rate plus bonuses and allowances (for unexpected stoppages, quick turnaround, high value commodities etc.), enabled gangs to manipulate manning and timescale requirements to earn extra money on top of the standard hourly rate, depending on the size and value of the cargo.⁷² Other unofficial 'perks' of the job became more common as the absence of the unbridled 'surplus pool' of labour essentially tipped the balance of power in favour of the docker. For example, the dockers' control of a portion of the labour process, that is autonomy in the actual planning and execution of work tasks, enabled gangs to participate in the 'welt'. The 'welt' involved one or more of the gang either leaving work early or taking a break whilst the rest cover for him/them. This would usually be done on a turn-by-turn basis amongst the gang, obviously with no loss of earnings. Similarly, manning requirements and piece rates for a particular job would often be exaggerated in order to cater for unofficial bonuses for the gang. The 'welt', playing the piecework game and occasional selective pilferage were seen by dockers as tools to improve their lot and demonstrate independence in the workplace and control over their portion of the labour process.⁷³ Indeed, the historic and timeless practice of pilfering persisted until the mechanics of containerisation made it considerably more difficult. Of course, 'you never starved on the docks'.⁷⁴ By and large, employers knew of the various exploitative schemes employed by dockers but generally turned a blind eye as long as work was on schedule and cost.⁷⁵

Increasingly post-1947, the traditional piece-rate bargaining culture was accentuated by full employment and the protection of the NDLS. The nature of the industry meant ship-side negotiations between management and workers were the

⁷⁰ See the debate surrounding 'rank and filism' in Chapter 2, particularly the argument forwarded by Zeitlin and the institutionalists and the quotations attributed to Kerr and Siegel, Lockwood et al at the beginning of this chapter.

⁷¹ Lindop, F. 'The dockers, pt 1', p. 37.

⁷² Turnbull, 'Dock strikes', pp. 300-301.

⁷³ *Ibid*, pp. 300-301.

⁷⁴ Author's interview with L.D., December 2009.

⁷⁵ Author's interview with T.T., July 2009; Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 81.

most expedient method of settlement in any dispute. Time was of the essence for shipping companies and they did not have scope in their tight turnaround schedule for the exhaustive process of official union intervention and negotiation. Employer willingness to negotiate in this manner meant that *ad hoc* stoppages became the norm as a means of industrial bargaining across the industry because of inadequate alternatives. The spike of industrial action between 1947 and 1955 could in part be attributed to these unofficial bargaining stoppages, some over minor wage or manning issues quickly settled, yet recorded as strike incidence.⁷⁶ Again, the mantra of ‘one out, all out’ meant that a dispute involving one gang over a particular grievance had the potential to escalate into a ship-wide, company-wide or even port-wide unofficial stoppage.⁷⁷ This situation persisted even after complete decasualisation in 1967 and the introduction of an official shop stewards’ movement to the industry, precisely because quayside negotiation was an inherent and historic part of worker-employer relations on the docks.⁷⁸

So, although the legislation of 1947 had given the British docker a measure of security and regularity of income, there were a number of issues which remained unaddressed. Firstly, by retaining the traditional arrangement of recruitment at the call stand the NDLS had failed to banish the memory and spirit of the casual system from the industry and consequently all pre-existing attitudes.⁷⁹ The structure of the employer-worker relationship remained unchanged – dockers were still hired on a turn-by-turn basis encouraging the perpetuation of a mutual lack of responsibility by the two parties towards labour relations.⁸⁰ Secondly, the nature of the port transport industry meant that quayside negotiations, and often short-term stoppages, were an inherent consequence of the casual system itself. A lack of a credible official union movement, proper quayside representation or expedient bargaining procedure further encouraged uneven and unregulated gang-level negotiation and added to the strike prone nature of the industry. Thirdly, by failing to consider dockers’ perception of the casual system, borne from the historical development of the industry and

⁷⁶ For example between 1947-1955, 236 strikes out of a national total of 567 were attributed by the NDLB to piecework rates, job rates and manning levels. However, although this numbers almost half of the total strikes for the period, only 9 percent of the national workforce was involved. This illustrates the primacy of small-scale bargaining stoppages at this time. (Figs. from Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 17 – Table 1.3).

⁷⁷ Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, p. 236.

⁷⁸ Lindop, F. ‘The dockers, part 1’, p. 37; Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 21.

⁷⁹ Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, p. 238-239.

⁸⁰ Devlin, *Final Report*.

employment therein, partial decasualisation was doomed to failure as labour relations and strike occurrence worsened in the industry.⁸¹

In addition to the complexities of the almost paradoxical nature of labour relations due to the traditional hegemony of the casual system of employment, there was a good degree of inter and intra-union conflict which further exacerbated labour relations in the industry. The Trade and General Workers' Union (TGWU), or 'White' union, formed from the NTWF and several unions from other industries in 1922, dominated official worker representation on Britain's docks in the immediate post-war era although it often lacked control over localised militancy as activists considered it too centralised and bureaucratic.⁸² Full-time TGWU Docks section officers were appointed by local union district committees, not elected by the docks membership. Indeed, dissatisfaction with the TGWU was widespread amongst dockers in Liverpool and the rest of the country in the post-war era due to the lack of union accountability in day-to-day labour relations on the docks.⁸³ A significant number of men were non-union having withdrawn from the 'White' in protest at its perceived undemocratic nature and intransigence in previous local and national disputes:⁸⁴

They [TGWU dock delegates] didn't want to do anything, we were upsetting the old system that they had enjoyed for years... If they did come [to the docks over a dispute] the first thing they would do is they'd go into the bosses' office to find out what was going on, instead of coming to the ship and seeing the lads and asking what their complaint was, they'd go to the employers. They were comfortable... they were comfortable with what they were doing and they didn't want to see that regime altered.⁸⁵

Although an official shop steward system was not introduced to the dock industry until the implementation of the Devlin reforms of 1967, Liverpool and other ports had long-established unofficial committees made up of cross-union and non-

⁸¹ Wilson, *Dockers*, pp. 168-170.

⁸² Around seventy-five per cent of the national dock labour force was 'White' affiliated in 1945 (Source: McIlroy, 'The first great battle', p. 107, p. 111).

⁸³ Author's interview with L.D., December 2009; Author's interview with J.D., December 2009; Author's interview with T.T., July 2009; Professor Fred Lindop's interview with Liverpool Stewards, 1981 (Modern Records Centre, The University of Warwick).

⁸⁴ Jones, J. *Union Man: An Autobiography* (London: Collins 1986), p. 163; Pennington, 'Docks', p. 5.

⁸⁵ Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

affiliated representation which organised local strike action and were elected directly from the quayside.⁸⁶ In fact, in the organisation of the 1945 strikes an unofficial national strike committee, the National Docks Strike Committee (NDSC), was formed to co-ordinate cross-port strategy in the dispute.⁸⁷ These rank-and-file dock committees were increasingly hostile to the oligarchic unaccountability of the 'White' union.

The National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union (NASDU) or 'Blue' union was formed (after several similar incarnations) in 1927 from other small, localised and sectional stevedoring unions.⁸⁸ Its influence was initially limited to the London docks although its popularity and membership began to grow elsewhere in the post-war era.⁸⁹ After a TGWU ban on Communist Party members holding union office in 1949, many rank-and-file members resigned in protest. The ban forced Communist activists into the ranks of the NASDU in London or unofficial channels in other ports, highlighted elsewhere as a likely contributory factor to the upsurge in unofficial action after 1947.⁹⁰ Already established and recognised at London's docks, the NASDU began to accumulate members at other ports in the early 1950s. During an unofficial strike at Hull which the TGWU opposed, the local unofficial committee advised a mass meeting to transfer their affiliation to the NASDU in protest.⁹¹ This resulted in over two thousand dockers (roughly half the workforce) defecting to the NASDU.⁹² A few weeks later, over ninety percent of Birkenhead's two thousand-strong workforce also left the TGWU and joined the 'Blue'. By May 1955 somewhere up to 16000 dockers in Hull, Birkenhead, Liverpool and Manchester were members.⁹³

⁸⁶ See Chapter 5 of this thesis for more information regarding unofficial shop floor organisation at the Port of Liverpool prior to Devlinism.

⁸⁷ McIlroy, 'The first great battle', pp. 108-109.

⁸⁸ Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, p. 224.

⁸⁹ Pennington, 'Docks', p. 8, estimates that the NASDU had a total membership of 7000 at London docks prior to 1954.

⁹⁰ Lindop, 'The dockers, part 1', p. 38.

⁹¹ Pennington, 'Docks', p. 8.

⁹² Phillips, 'Decasualization and disruption', p. 175.

⁹³ Pennington, 'Docks' (p. 5), gives this generous figure for NASDU membership in northern ports. Hunter, *They Knew Why They Fought* (p. 31), states that the 'Blue' claimed to have 16000 members in the north. However, *The Economist* (24 March 1956), estimates that the 'Blue' had a maximum of 10000 members there. Phillips, 'Decasualization and disruption' (p. 175), estimates that the NASDU had a membership of 7000 on the Mersey (including Birkenhead's 2000 members and most of the small workforce at Garston docks), although again this figure appears extremely generous.

The TGWU was incensed by the NASDU's alleged member-poaching and reported it to the TUC for flouting the Bridlington Agreement long before the wholesale rebellions in Hull and Birkenhead.⁹⁴ The Trades Union Congress' (TUC) response was to demand that the NASDU stopped recruitment and returned its 'poached' members to the TGWU, when it refused to heed the warning it was eventually expelled from Congress in 1959.⁹⁵ However, the TGWU's complaint about member-poaching was largely unfounded:

The 'Blue' union arose its head here in Liverpool... with the intent of being a service to the members [of the 'White'] that they weren't getting because of the reactionary bastards who controlled our union... they were invited to come up here, they didn't come and poach... I think we were all tempted to join the 'Blue' union at one time. There was also a lot of non-union men... they were trade unionists but they weren't official trade unionists... that was the reason they weren't paying [their dues] because it was the reaction of the [TGWU] officials at the time... There was tremendous amount of hostility towards them [the Union bureaucracy].⁹⁶

In the fifties, a growing number of stoppages at the major ports were due to inter-union conflict and recognition disputes. The NASDU sought representation on local boards, periodically instructing their members to walk off the job in protest, action which could precipitate a complete work stoppage as other non-NASDU dockers struck in sympathy under the traditional ideal of 'one out, all out'.⁹⁷ The TGWU was acutely aware of the threat posed by the 'Blue' and fought tooth-and-nail to defend its status as the dominant trade union in the industry.⁹⁸ Through its capacity on the national and local dock labour boards, the 'White' consistently sought to marginalise and isolate the NASDU's membership and influence in northern ports.⁹⁹ In April 1955, the NDLB's attempt to refuse book renewal to non-TGWU affiliated dockers was met with a two-day national strike.¹⁰⁰ It is also

⁹⁴ The Bridlington Agreement was signed by unions affiliated to the TUC in 1939. It was conceived as a measure to minimise and regulate competition between unions, including means for conciliation and ruling on disputes.

⁹⁵ Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 128.

⁹⁶ Lindop's interview with Liverpool Stewards (1981).

⁹⁷ Hunter, *They Knew Why They Fought*, p. 49.

⁹⁸ Jones, *Union Man*, pp. 163-164.

⁹⁹ Lindop's interview with the Liverpool Stewards (1981); Author's interview with T.T., July 2009;

¹⁰⁰ *The Economist*, 2 April 1955.

suggested that TGWU officials used their joint-control of disciplinary action under the jurisdiction of the Board to remove local NASDU activists from the industry.¹⁰¹

It was not until the late sixties that the TGWU began to broaden access and appeal by the introduction of an official shop steward movement, under influence of the recommendations of the Devlin Report. When combined with a series of factional struggles and financial scandals in the Executive of the NASDU, the 'Blue's' influence and membership in the northern ports began to recede.¹⁰² Nevertheless, the mistrust and mutual suspicion between the 'White' and its membership persisted. The death of the 'Blue' did not necessarily mean victory for the 'White', as indeed it was the new local shop steward committees which came to dominate worker representation and bargaining in the industry. Although notionally under the banner of the TGWU, local shop steward committees were often fiercely independent and democratic, as was the case in Liverpool. Within a couple of years their introduction had transformed labour relations on the docks. These events are examined more closely in the first case study chapter of this thesis as part of a broader analysis of the impact of the Devlin Report and decasualisation of the industry.

So, there were a variety of pressures and influences at work in dockers' perceptions and attitudes towards occupational identity, work culture and labour relations. From an historical attachment to the flexible aspects of the casual employment system to the unique and conflictual nature of inter-union affairs, progressive labour relations in the industry proved near impossible even after partial decasualisation in 1947. In retrospect, the Scheme was characterised by a failure to sufficiently banish the spectre of casualism from the industry. Attitudes remained unchanged because of its inability to implement a workable alternative to the by-the-boat culture of negotiation. When combined with a perpetuation of the oligarchic 'top down' tendency of trade union representation in the industry, the NDLS was fundamentally unsuccessful in appeasing the majority of British dockers and the surge in unofficial militancy thereafter is testament to their continual resistance.¹⁰³ Moreover, it failed to recognise that labour relations on the docks have also been coloured by the work culture and traditions of dock-work established over many

¹⁰¹ Pennington, 'Docks', p. 8.

¹⁰² Phillips, 'Decasualization and disruption', pp. 175-176; Lindop, 'The dockers, pt 1', p. 43.

¹⁰³ Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, p. 240.

generations. Indeed, 'with the passage of time the customs and loyalties of the workforce became an independent factor in the perpetuation of casualism; popular norms and traditions made their own contribution to the working of the labour market. Through work and beyond, moreover, they helped to mould other features of the dockers' life, and to form the special cultural identity of the waterside community'.¹⁰⁴

Despite the limitations of the Scheme, the industrial disputes of the fifties and early sixties were largely localised and typically economic or union-related by nature, with a few notable exceptions such as the NASDU recognition strike of 1955.¹⁰⁵ Another major attempt to regulate the industry in 1967 was proceeded by a considerably more militant, and progressively national, form of industrial strife inspired by the proliferation of containerisation. Thereafter localised wage militancy gave way to a more fundamental defence of the industry, occupation and way of life, described elsewhere as 'disputes of right'.¹⁰⁶ These perspectives will be considered in more detail in due course. To summarise, in seeking to understand the nature, causes and implications of post-war disputes the context in which they occurred is a necessary starting point. It is vital to locate quayside conflict relative to the complex, sometimes contradictory, often highly contingent influences of history, culture and work processes outlined above which shaped the attitudes, experiences and expectations of the Liverpool dockers in the disputes documented below.

¹⁰⁴ Phillips & Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁵ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 17 (Table 1.3); Turnbull, 'Dock strikes', p. 301.

¹⁰⁶ Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 296.

Chapter 4

Liverpool's Political, Economic and Social Development

In order to properly examine the nature of rank-and-file attitudes and organisation at Liverpool docks, it is necessary to consider not simply pressures from within the industry but also the extent to which workers were immersed in a broader shared local identity and outlook. An overview of the historical development of the city and local economy with particular focus on the post-war era is essential to highlight the origins of Liverpool's complex social, political and industrial relations character. The exceptionalism or otherwise of the post-war Liverpool experience will also be examined with reference to the growth of labour organisation and the city's belated rise to political and industrial militancy. The aim of such an approach is to consider other influences aside from the established occupational culture and workplace dynamic that may have impacted on Liverpool dockers' consciousness, identity and solidarity. Indeed, 'a number of important social and economic changes cannot be investigated satisfactorily without analysing how these processes are embedded within different distinct localities. This means, not merely that there are variations by localities in such processes, but that localities are themselves significant forms of social organisation which have been under-examined, or inappropriately examined, by the different social sciences'.¹ Fundamentally, is there something peculiar about Liverpool's historical development, which made its people more prone to industrial militancy in the post-war era, or is this experience common to other, similar, traditionally port-dominated economies?

The early days – Liverpool's rise to prominence

Liverpool was founded in 1207 but it was not until much later, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, that it began to flourish. The construction of new dock facilities in 1715 was followed by the rapid expansion of the wet-dock system over the next century.² The economic opportunities offered by the port's

¹ Murgatroyd, L. et al, *Localities, Class and Gender* (London: Pion 1985), p. 1.

² For more detail on the exponential growth of Liverpool's docks over the following 150 years see: Towers, B. *Waterfront Blues: The Rise and Fall of Liverpool's Dockland* (Lancaster: Carnegie 2011), pp. 27-51; Power, M.J. 'The growth of Liverpool', in J. Belchem (ed.) *Popular Politics, Riot and*

expansion were a predictable stimulus to immigration and the population of the town swelled accordingly. From a population of around five or six thousand when the Old Dock opened in 1715, Liverpool had expanded to around 35,000 inhabitants by 1773 and 54,000 by 1791. Such seemingly rapid growth was dwarfed by the population explosion in the nineteenth century, as the town grew to 78,000 inhabitants in 1801 and even further to 376,000 by 1851.³ Although much of this early increase was due to local migration from the surrounding north-west, the developing town also attracted a substantial Welsh community as well as a number of Scottish immigrants.⁴ Of course, the Irish later came to Liverpool *en masse* to escape the catastrophic failure of the potato crop.⁵ So, this mix of local and Celtic immigration along with a growing cosmopolitan seafaring element provided by the port, produced Liverpool's original melting pot.

Liverpool's expansion was entirely dependent on its developing status as a port of international standing.⁶ The proliferation of nascent trans-Atlantic trading links was further accelerated by the advent of the slave trade, in which Liverpool played an essential part.⁷ Around a quarter of ships which set sail from the port in 1800 were engaged in slave trading activities.⁸ Directly related to the 'Triangular Trade' was the importation of raw cotton through the port acting as an impetus to the

Labour: Essays in Liverpool History 1790-1940 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1992), pp. 21-37; Hyde, F.E. *Liverpool and the Mersey: An Economic History of a Port 1700-1970* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles 1971).

³ Lawton, R. 'From the Port of Liverpool to the conurbation of Merseyside' in W.T.S. Gould & A.G. Hodgkiss (eds.) *The Resources of Merseyside* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1982), p. 4.

⁴ Hikins, H. 'Origins of working-class politics: Liverpool 1756-1791' in H. Hikins (ed.), *Building the Union: Studies on the Growth of the Workers' Movement, Merseyside 1756-1967* (Liverpool: Toulouse 1973).

⁵ The Irish 'Great Starvation' began in 1845. However, an Irish community was established in the town much earlier due to immigration in search of work and the close geographical proximity between Liverpool and Ireland.

⁶ In 1709, Liverpool's docks handled 14,600 tons of sea-borne cargo; by 1751 the figure stood at 29,200 tons and by the turn of the century it had increased to 450,000 tons, a fifteen-fold increase in fifty years (Source: Marriner, S. *The Economic and Social Development of Merseyside*, London: Croom Helm 1982, p. 32).

⁷ For more detail on the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Liverpool's role therein see: Williams, G. *History of the Liverpool Privateers and Letters of Marque With an Account of the Liverpool Slave Trade, 1744-1812* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press 2004); Inikori, J.E. 'Market structure and the profits of the British African trade in the late 18th century', *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 41, Issue 4, 1981, pp. 745-776; Anderson, B.L. & Richardson, D. 'Market structure and profits of the British African trade in the late 18th century: a comment', *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 43, Issue 3, 1983, pp. 713-721; Hair, P.E.H. *The Atlantic Slave Trade and Black Africa* (London: Historical Association 1978).

⁸ Murden, J. 'Timeline: Liverpool 1699-2004' in L. Grant, J. Murden, R. Meegan, P. Misselwitz, P. Keiller, A. Kidd, D. Haslam, A. Brown, J. O'Connor, S. Cohen, R. Mellor, E. Ferrari, J. Roberts, A. Power, K. Mumford, C. Wong, M. Baker & N. Gallent, *Shrinking Cities: Manchester/Liverpool* (Working Papers – March 2004), p. 118 (pp. 118-129).

growth of nearby industrial centres, such as Manchester, which received the imported cotton to manufacture textiles for export and exchange for slaves, who were then traded in the Americas for commodities. As Liverpool grew in size and transport links improved, so did local manufacturing towns. Even after slaving was abolished in 1807, much to the chagrin of Liverpool's elite, the international trade links forged by it continued to fuel the growth of the town and its hinterland through cotton and commodity trading, particularly sugar and tobacco.⁹ Banking, finance and insurance associated with the trade of the port also became central to the town's economy in the post-slavery era.¹⁰

A wealthy elite of merchants and ship owners sprang from the port's extraordinary development. In fact, by the close of the nineteenth century, only London could rival Liverpool for the number of resident millionaires in an English city.¹¹ These 'Liverpolitans' became increasingly engaged with portraying the town as a leading world metropolis.¹² It had already received favourable contemporary comparisons with cities of renowned international standing, while the dock system had even been acclaimed as a modern wonder of the world.¹³ Many of the early infrastructure and port improvements were local initiatives funded by the Town Corporation, which was made up of local merchants, ship owners and entrepreneurs. Belchem contends that there was a growing sense of parochial pride amongst the first and second-generation elite families who pioneered the idea of Liverpool as a 'world city' identifying with commerce rather than manufacture, the international

⁹ For more detail on Liverpool's post-slavery trade and growth see: Burton, V. 'Liverpool's mid-nineteenth century coasting trade' in V. Burton (ed.), *Liverpool Shipping, Trade and Industry: Essays on the Maritime History of Merseyside 1780-1860* (Liverpool: Trustees of National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside 1989); Hyde, F.E. *Liverpool and the Mersey: An Economic History of a Port 1700-1970* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles 1971); Marriner, *The Economic and Social Development of Merseyside*.

¹⁰ For more detail on the establishment and growth of a banking and finance industry in Liverpool, based on the activities of the port see: Anderson, B.L. & Cottrell, P.L. 'Another Victorian capital market: A study of banking and bank investors on Merseyside', *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 28, Issue 4, November 1975, pp. 598-615; Collins, M. 'The Bank of England at Liverpool, 1827-1844', *Business History*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, 1972, pp. 144-165.

¹¹ Lane, T. *Liverpool: City of the Sea* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1997), p. 30. Also see Lane for an overview of the 'old families' of Liverpool, the wealthy merchants and ship owners who made up the developing town's elite.

¹² 'Liverpolitana' is Latin for 'of Liverpool'. Williams, P.H. *Liverpolitana* (Liverpool: Merseyside Civic Society 1971) gave usage to the term.

¹³ Muir, R. *A History of Liverpool* (London: Williams & Norgate 1907), p. 301; Lane, *Liverpool*, pp. 2-8. Liverpool was compared to New York and Chicago and the dock system likened to the Pyramids and the Great Wall of China.

rather than the provincial.¹⁴ After the municipal reforms of 1835 and the election of a Liberal Town Council, a more philanthropic attitude began to develop in the upper echelons of Liverpolitan society. Alongside further expansion of the docks, a civic construction programme was undertaken providing architectural marvels such as St. George's Hall, public museums and libraries.¹⁵

Another aspect of this emerging liberal paternalist outlook highlighted the need to improve the plight of the labouring poor. As already noted, the town witnessed a population explosion to accompany its exponential economic growth. The figure of 376,000 inhabitants in 1851 ballooned further to 704,000 by 1901.¹⁶ Such significant immigration and population growth had an obvious impact on housing and sanitation. Indeed, the opulent lives of the elite contrasted sharply with the reality of life for the majority. As the middle-class and elite families retreated out of the centre and into the suburbs so immigrants continued to pour in, exacerbating the already overcrowded conditions in the inner city. The problem was worsened by extensive Irish immigration prompted by the potato famine. In inner-city areas conditions were almost medieval. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, disease and the poverty associated with casualism prompted the Town Council to take the unusual step of appointing a Medical Officer of Health for Liverpool.¹⁷

As the nineteenth century progressed, Liverpool's economy became increasingly port-dominated. The modest eighteenth and early nineteenth century manufacturing base dwindled with the exception of the port-related processing industries, while skilled trades such as shipbuilding moved across the river to Birkenhead.¹⁸ Nearly all employment was associated with the port or the transport

¹⁴ Belchem, J. *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2000), p. 37.

¹⁵ St. George's Hall was commissioned in 1842 and opened to the public in 1854.

¹⁶ Misselwitz, P. 'Liverpool city profile' in Grant, Murden, Meegan et al, *Shrinking Cities*, p. 114 (pp. 114-117); Lawton, 'From the Port of Liverpool', p. 4.

¹⁷ Doctor Duncan was appointed Medical Officer of Health for Liverpool in 1847, concerned primarily with several cholera epidemics which had befallen the city. For more detail on the appalling housing and sanitation conditions endured by Liverpool's working-class in the nineteenth and early twentieth century see: Kearns, G., Laxton, P. and Campbell, J. 'Duncan and the cholera test: public health in mid-nineteenth century Liverpool', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, Vol. 143, 1993, pp. 87-115; Braddock, J. & Braddock, B.B. *The Braddocks* (London: MacDonald 1963); Ayers, P. *The Liverpool Docklands – Life and Work in Athol Street* (Liverpool: Docklands History Project 1987); Lawton, R. and Pooley, C.G. 'David Brindley's Liverpool: an aspect of urban society in the 1880s', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, Vol. 126, 1975, pp. 149-168.

¹⁸ Power, 'The growth of Liverpool', p. 2; Lawton, 'From the Port of Liverpool', p. 4.

and service industries it maintained.¹⁹ This inevitably resulted in an ever-increasing section of Liverpool's burgeoning working-class being reliant on the vagaries of a port-orientated economy for employment with its casual, seasonal and demand-driven nature.²⁰ Add to these factors an endless surplus of unskilled manual labour and the repercussions for the majority are apparent - irregular engagement and extended periods of unemployment, underemployment and poverty, especially in the dockland areas. The choice was simple, either chance getting work on the docks or become a seaman and work away from home. For many generations of Liverpool working men this choice was universal, even in the immediate post-war era.

Although life was difficult in working-class districts, a nascent sense of community began to emerge from the hardship. However, because of Liverpool's largely immigrant population these communities were split along ethnic, religious and occupational lines.²¹ Irish immigrants generally resided in the dockland areas and provided casual labour for the port although, as noted above, other nationalities came to be well represented in the city throughout the nineteenth century.²² Each ethnic group tended to live in their own areas of the inner city.²³ Geographical separation meant local communities were close-knit and, in the case of Irish immigrants, this perpetuated religious schisms imported from the motherland.

Sectarianism thus became an integral feature of Liverpool's political and social character during the nineteenth century and played a pivotal role in shaping the city's modern culture and identity. Although initially manifesting itself in the form of intra-community friction between Irish immigrants, sectarian identity and conflict were appropriated by the local establishment for political exploitation.²⁴

¹⁹ Muir, *A History of Liverpool*, pp. 303-305.

²⁰ Of course, work at the docks and on the ships was male-dominated. Most women were restricted to seeking employment in household service or as needlewomen. For more detail on women's place in the local pre-war/inter-war labour market see: Grant, L.M. 'Women workers and the sexual division of labour, 1890-1939', PhD thesis, The University of Liverpool, 1987; Ayers, P. 'The making of men: Masculinities in interwar Liverpool' in M. Walsh (ed.), *Working Out Gender* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1999), pp. 66-83; Lane, *Liverpool*, pp. 69-70.

²¹ Lane, *Liverpool*, p. 61.

²² 'At mid (19th) century barely half of Liverpool's population was Lancashire-born; 22.3% were Irish, 5.4% Welsh and 3.7% Scottish born' (Source: Lawton, 'From the Port of Liverpool', p. 7).

²³ Pooley, C.G. 'The residential segregation of migrant communities in mid-Victorian Liverpool', *Transactions of British Geographers*, New Series 2, 1977, pp. 364-382; Lane, *Liverpool*, pp. 87-89.

²⁴ For more detail on this well-documented aspect of Liverpool's social and political history see: Neal, F. *Sectarian Violence: the Liverpool Experience 1819-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1987); Waller, P.J. *Democracy and Sectarianism: A Political and Social History of Liverpool 1868-1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1981); Shallice, A. 'Orange and Green and

Sectarianism gradually pervaded into other aspects of Liverpool life and religious allegiance became the divisive factor among the town's working-class, especially from the 1830s onwards.²⁵ Toryism became synonymous with Orangeism, although Liberalism was not necessarily associated with Irish Catholicism, as the Irish-Catholic vote in the dockland ward went to the Irish Nationalist party.²⁶ This is not, however, to contest that ethnicity was appropriated entirely as a political tool for the local establishment. There were positive associational aspects to the parochial nature of culture in the city, reinforced by the geographical separation of immigrant communities. Catholic and Protestant support networks were at the centre of the community, especially in dockland areas.²⁷

The synthesis of politics, religion and ethnicity only served to sharpen intra-community tension and there was sporadic physical violence and rioting throughout the nineteenth century, particularly on significant days in the procession calendar such as St. Patrick's Day and the Orange Lodge's twelfth of July celebrations.²⁸ However, rather than sectarian tensions receding with the advent of labour organisation towards the end of the nineteenth century as was the case elsewhere in the country, religion and ethnicity became an even more divisive factor in working-class Liverpool. While class-based solidarity and identity had begun to take root in manufacturing towns such as Manchester after the stimuli of Chartism, Liverpool's unique social and economic character perpetuated intra-class conflict along ethnic lines, spawning 'more than one working-class' in the city.²⁹ The casual nature of employment in Liverpool's port-orientated economy 'created a vacuum of 'traditional' labour organisations, and that vacuum was filled by sectarian

militancy: Sectarianism and working-class politics in Liverpool, 1900-1914', *Bulletin of the North West Labour History Society*, Vol. 6, 1979-80, pp. 15-32; Smith, J. 'Labour tradition in Glasgow and Liverpool', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 17, 1984, pp.32-56.

²⁵ Bohstedt, J. 'More than one working-class: Protestant-Catholic riots in Edwardian Liverpool' in J. Belchem (ed.) *Popular Politics, Riot and Labour: Essays in Liverpool History 1790-1940* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1992); Neal, *Sectarian Violence*, p. 58.

²⁶ Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism*, pp. 12-14; Belchem, *Merseypride*, p. 13; Smith, 'Labour tradition', p. 39.

²⁷ For more detail on the role of religion-based community support networks see: Belchem, J. *Irish, Catholic and Scouse: The History of the Liverpool Irish, 1800-1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2007); Kanya-Forstner, M. 'Defining womanhood: Irish women and the Catholic church in Victorian Liverpool', *Immigrants & Minorities*, Vol. 18, Issue 2-3, 1999, pp. 168-188; Smith, 'Labour tradition'.

²⁸ See Bryson, A. 'Riotous Liverpool, 1815-1860' in Belchem (ed.), *Popular Politics*, pp. 98-134.

²⁹ Bohstedt, 'More than one working-class', p. 175; See Moore, K. 'This Whig and Tory ridden town: Popular politics in Liverpool in the Chartist era' in J. Belchem(ed.), *Popular Politics*, pp. 38-67, for an examination of the weakness of the Chartist movement in Liverpool.

organisations which provided both the social services and emotionally satisfying solidarities found elsewhere in labour movements'.³⁰ Even as late as 1909, Liverpool was experiencing serious sectarian violence, a cycle broken only in the post-war period. After the chaos of the 1911 General Transport Strike, the local Tory establishment was forced to abandon sectarian rivalry as a political tool fearing any episodes of public disorder could take on a revolutionary tone.³¹ However, ethnic identity and communities were well-defined and remained active and intact until they were physically dismantled in the city's post-war slum clearance schemes.

Ethnicity permeated almost all aspects of working-class life in Liverpool and was a typically divisive issue in the pre-war employment market. There were certain dockland occupations where religion could be the deciding factor in recruitment, such as the Protestant carters or the Catholic shipmen.³² Dockers in the North End docks were generally Irish Catholics, while those in the South End were generally Protestant, because these were the areas in which each community resided.³³ Skill and religious sectionalism, when combined with the casual nature of the industry and the over-arching sectarian character of social and political life in the town, meant trade unionism and socialist ideals were slow to permeate the consciousness of Liverpool's working-class. The threat of blackleg labour from the town's large surplus resulted in a protectionist and conservative attitude amongst those dockers and gangs who were employed semi-regularly within the casual system whether through merit, experience or religious allegiance. Class struggle was not yet part of their identity or 'commonsense', to use Smith's terminology.³⁴ It was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that working-class attitudes towards labour organisation started to change. Skilled unionism, in the form of small and independent craft unions, was not new to Liverpool but it catered for only a tiny and privileged percentage of the working population.³⁵ There were sporadic incidents of

³⁰ Bohstedt, 'More than one working-class', p. 203.

³¹ Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism*, p. 249; Bohstedt, 'More than one working-class', pp. 210-216.

³² Lane, *Liverpool*, p. 86.

³³ Towers, *Waterfront Blues*, p. 193.

³⁴ Smith, 'Labour tradition', p. 41.

³⁵ In fact, Liverpool had one of the earliest skilled Trades Councils in Britain, *The Liverpool Trades' Guardians Association* (LTGA), founded in 1848. For more detail on the advent of skilled unionism and the evolution of the Liverpool Trades Council see: Hamling, W. 'A short history of the Liverpool Trades Council, 1848-1948' in J. Dye (ed.) *150 Years of Struggle: The Liverpool Labour Movement, 1848-1998*, (Liverpool: Liverpool Trades Council 1998), pp. 21-39; Davies, S. *Liverpool Labour:*

labour unrest prior to 1889, though these were generally isolated and sectional.³⁶ It was the advent of unskilled unionism, particularly at the docks, which implanted the concept of labour organisation into the fragmented working-class consciousness of Liverpool.

The battle for the ‘dockers’ tanner’ and subsequent strike wave heralded an embryonic mass labour movement in the city. Although the 1889 dock strike was initiated in London, dockers at other ports quickly followed suit in demanding a wage increase from 5d to 6d an hour and reformation of the system of employment on the docks.³⁷ The dockers were successful with their demands and although the influence of the newly-formed union waned shortly after, the concessions obtained demonstrated the power of mass unskilled unionism as a vehicle for some degree of social empowerment.³⁸ Such was the impact of the 1889 dock strike, it even drew the attention of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels as a potential watershed in British working-class organisation.³⁹ Indeed, precisely because of its port-based economy and the sheer number of working men employed on the docks, it could be argued that 1889 belatedly kick-started the trade union movement in Liverpool.

The period 1909-1912 was a tumultuous time even in the context of Liverpool’s volatile social history. A wave of sectarian violence in 1909 threatened to plunge the city into anarchy and prompted a police inquiry.⁴⁰ This was followed in 1911 by a major general transport strike. What began as a seamen’s and dockers’ strike over rates and union recognition in Liverpool in June/July 1911 gained widespread support amongst other port transport workers, such as railwaymen.⁴¹

Social and Political Influences on the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900-1939, (Keele: Keele University Press 1996), pp. 53-77.

³⁶ See Taplin, E.L. ‘False dawn of New Unionism? Labour unrest in Liverpool 1871-1873’ in Belchem (ed.), *Popular Politics*, pp. 135-151; Bryson, ‘Riotous Liverpool’.

³⁷ For more detail on the 1889 dock strike see: McCarthy, T.(ed) *The Great Dock Strike 1889* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1988); Taplin, E.L. *Liverpool Dockers and Seamen, 1870-1890* (Hull: Hull University Press 1974); Phillips, G. & Whiteside, N. *Casual Labour: the Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry 1880-1970* (Oxford: Clarendon 1985), pp. 61-62.

³⁸ The National Union of Dock Labourers (NUDL) was key in organising during the 1889 dock strike in Liverpool. For more detail see: Taplin, E.L. *The Dockers’ Union: A Study of the National Union of Dock Labourers, 1889-1922* (Leicester: Leicester University Press 1986).

³⁹ See extract from Engels in *The Labour Editor* (1889) originally cited in Turnbull, P., Woolfson, C. & Kelly, J. *Dock Strike: Conflict and Restructuring in Britain’s Ports* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1992), p. 10.

⁴⁰ Bohstedt, ‘More than one working-class’, p. 173.

⁴¹ For more detail on the 1911 transport strike in Liverpool see: Taplin, E.L. *Near to Revolution: The Liverpool General Transport Strike of 1911* (Liverpool: Bluecoat 1994); Towers, *Waterfront Blues*, pp. 153-155; Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism*, pp. 254-257.

The city was brought to a standstill for most of August as a general strike involving some 66,000 workers was successfully organised with assistance from Syndicalism's national leader Tom Mann.⁴² The Town Council petitioned the Home Office for military intervention, although the drafting of troops and additional police from elsewhere in the country onto the streets of Liverpool merely inflamed the situation. Heavy-handed policing at a rally of around 80,000 people on St George's Plateau on 13 August caused city-wide rioting over several days.⁴³ Indeed, the Government seemed to take the threat extremely seriously and it is often recalled that a battleship and a cruiser were despatched to the River Mersey in response to the unrest.

The strong support for Liverpool's transport strike served as another indication that the concepts of trade unionism and class consciousness were beginning to belatedly permeate the consciousness of Liverpool's hitherto divided working-class from the turn of the century. Both Waller and Lane show that the strike contributed to a surge in union membership in the city.⁴⁴ The idea that unionism and labourism had begun to take hold is further supported by the election of seven 'Labour' councillors in the 1911 municipal elections.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, although the 1889 and 1911 strikes seemed to awaken ideals of labour solidarity, such ideals still operated in the all-pervasive shadow of traditional social divisions until the post-war era. Politically, this was reflected in the fact that the city would not return a Labour council until 1955.⁴⁶

As the twentieth century developed, Liverpool was to face major new challenges. Hyde's oft-repeated assertion that the port's fortunes were declining is illustrated by the fact that in 1914 it handled around a third of Britain's imports and exports but by 1938 this figure stood at around a fifth.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, in the early

⁴² Taplin, *Near to Revolution*, p. 12.

⁴³ Hyde, *Liverpool and the Mersey*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism*, p. 259; Lane, *Liverpool*, p. 113. Waller contends that trade union membership in Liverpool jumped from 25,000 to 91,000 in the aftermath of the 1911 strike. Lane compiled figures from local newspaper reports to calculate that membership of the Liverpool Transport Workers' Council (the local general workers' union) rose from 24,500 in May 1911 to 98,000 in November 1911.

⁴⁵ Smith, 'Labour tradition', pp. 40-41. The councillors came from various organisations – the local Independent Labour Party, Tom Mann's Syndicalists and the Liverpool Trades Council.

⁴⁶ For more detail on the challenges facing the Liverpool Labour Party in pre and inter-war Liverpool see: Davies, R.S.W. 'The Liverpool Labour party and the Liverpool working-class, 1900-1939', *North West Labour History Society Bulletin*, Vol. 6, 1979-1980, pp. 2-14.

⁴⁷ Hyde, *Liverpool and the Mersey*, p. 141.

twentieth century, Liverpool could still be considered a ‘world city’.⁴⁸ Later, the gradual decline in trade at the port coincided with the faltering of British hegemony in international trade and capital. The inter-war years were typically bleak for the whole of the world economy, yet Liverpool suffered more acutely than most places. Through the 1930s Liverpool’s unemployment persistently stood at over eighteen percent, nearly twice the national average.⁴⁹ The lucrative cotton trade upon which the port’s prosperity was largely based began to decline in line with the contraction of the Lancashire textile industry, an early example of the shift in emphasis in British industry and trade from north to south and west to east.⁵⁰ The dominance of the port transport industry in the local economy, which had for so long provided Liverpool’s wealth and stimulated its exponential growth, was to become its major vulnerability in post-war, and later post-industrial, Britain.

The post-war period and the ‘boom’ years

The end of the Second World War brought a temporary fillip to the port and the city. However, politicians and local policy makers were well aware of the structural weaknesses inherent in the local economy. Even as early as 1936 the Liverpool Corporation Act was passed in Parliament, enabling the local authority to purchase land on the city’s outskirts for industrial development in an attempt to diversify the economy.⁵¹ Although this scheme was interrupted by the outbreak of war, the intention to undertake a radical remodelling of the city’s industrial and residential structure was reaffirmed in *The Merseyside Plan 1944*.⁵² Wartime rearmament had already begun to bring a manufacturing base to Liverpool’s periphery prior to 1944. Both Kirkby and Speke, hitherto rural areas on the fringes of Liverpool, witnessed the construction of huge factories providing aircraft components and ordnance for

⁴⁸ Wilks-Heeg, S. ‘From world city to pariah city? Liverpool and the global economy, 1850-2000’ in R. Munck *Reinventing the City: Liverpool in Comparative Perspective* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2003), pp. 36-52.

⁴⁹ Lawton, ‘From the Port of Liverpool’, p. 9; Murden, ‘Timeline: Liverpool’, p.122. The figure of 18% includes a peak of 28% unemployment in 1932.

⁵⁰ Lane, *Liverpool*, pp. 22-23.

⁵¹ Meegan, R. ‘Paradise postponed: The growth and decline of Merseyside’s outer estates’ in P. Cooke (ed.), *Localities: The Changing Face of Urban Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman 1989), p. 198.

⁵² Longstreth Thompson, F. *The Merseyside Plan 1944* (London: HMSO 1945).

the war effort.⁵³ The cessation of hostilities in 1945 meant that the reorganisation of the city could begin.

The main principles of *The Merseyside Plan* were to develop a manufacturing base for the city, located away from the historic centre and to accompany the industrial reorganisation with a relocation of people to these new districts. Poor quality housing and overcrowding had been a blight on the city's traditional residential areas since the eighteenth century. These areas, located predominantly alongside the docks, were badly run down and outdated. The wartime blitz of the port had exacerbated existing problems, so in the spirit of 'homes fit for heroes' and the regional industrial reorganisation plan, an extensive construction and re-housing programme was undertaken. This basically involved the wholesale dismantling of dockland communities, demolition of 'slum' housing and dispersal of inhabitants to new housing estates located close to the areas earmarked for new industries.

Obviously, such an ambitious reconstruction programme took time and money. It was not until the 1950s that the movement of people into the new housing estates commenced and major companies started to invest in the new industrial areas under the auspices of the 'Merseyside Development Area'. Large national and multi-national companies were encouraged to set up shop in Liverpool through a series of incentives, including government grants and tax breaks. The Kirkby industrial estate witnessed the arrival of some household manufacturing and processing names such as Birds Eye, Fisher Bendix, Kraft and Kodak. Speke also benefitted from an influx of new companies including Dunlop and a host of chemical/medical firms.⁵⁴ The new factories employed some 27,000 in these two areas alone and other smaller industrial/housing estates such as Aintree provided more jobs still.⁵⁵ The early sixties brought car manufacture to the region and another wave of around 30,000 jobs, although by then some of those companies which had arrived in the fifties had begun to close.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the diversification of Liverpool's economy seemed moderately successful. The port and related service and processing industries were declining but only gradually and so the city's working-class enjoyed a temporary

⁵³ Lane, *Liverpool*, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Meegan, 'Paradise postponed', pp. 199-200.

⁵⁵ Lane, *Liverpool*, p. 22.

⁵⁶ Meegan, 'Paradise postponed', p. 200.

spell of full employment in the late fifties and early sixties. The old adage that ‘you could walk off one job on a Tuesday and into another on Wednesday’ was a reality.⁵⁷

Amidst this radical restructuring of the city, the old attitudes and prejudices of the working-class began to change. Whereas the traditional residential segregation of pre and inter-war Liverpool had perpetuated religious schisms, the dismantling of these communities seemed to reduce sectarian sentiment. Often dockland residents were not re-housed together as whole communities and although this was a matter of some discomfiture amongst those who were relocated, for the first time working-class families descended from different ethnicities and creeds were mixed together on the same street.⁵⁸ Whether this was a deliberate act by town planners to integrate the previously divided communities is unlikely but over time it certainly had the effect of largely consigning sectarianism to a disturbing footnote in the history of the city.

Although some academics propose that post-war re-housing projects broke up existing communities and the solidarities that these sustained, resulting in new estates being occupied by a ‘population of strangers’ with an individualist outlook, in Liverpool this proved not to be the case.⁵⁹ Where religious identity had once defined and divided Liverpool’s working-class, in the fifties and sixties this was gradually replaced by a belated assimilation of class-based workplace identity and solidarity, especially in the broader contemporary political climate. Indeed, even in the pre-war era, Liverpool’s dockworkers had begun to organise effectively to fight for better pay and conditions. The 1889 dock strike and the 1911 transport strike were the initial manifestations of this. It is also interesting to note that the first registration scheme in the industry was introduced in Liverpool in 1912, to better regulate employment on the docks after pressure on employers from the quayside. The 1945 national strike wave on the docks forced the government to introduce the National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS), which partially ‘decasualised’ the industry and improved pay and conditions for the majority.⁶⁰ Similarly, seamen also have a rich

⁵⁷ Author’s interview with P.C., August 2009.

⁵⁸ Meegan, ‘Paradise postponed’, p. 203.

⁵⁹ Cronin, J.E. *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain* (London: Croom Helm 1979), p. 27; Goldthorpe, J.E. et al, *The Affluent Worker*, Vols. 1-3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1968-69).

⁶⁰ For more detail on labour relations at the docks, see Chapter Three of this thesis.

history in workplace solidarity which pre-dates the arrival of manufacturing to the city.⁶¹

So, traditions of solidarity and combativeness were already apparent on the docks and the ships in the pre and inter-war periods, despite the lack of a coherent class-based identity in Liverpool. Lane contends that 'the sheer magnitude of the numbers of people who were irregularly and casually employed, and their concentration in the densely populated waterfront, meant that it was they who came to be most prominent in the shaping of the city's culture'.⁶² The dissemination of these workers to the periphery of the city with their 'casual' attitudes towards work and discipline in order to provide labour for new manufacturing concerns brought its own dimension to modern labour relations in the locality. As previously noted, the casualism closely associated with the vagaries of a port-orientated economy was an obvious cause of poverty amongst the old dockland communities. However, there were aspects of irregular employment that came to be regarded by dockworkers, all type of port transport workers and seamen, as privileges of their trade. For example, the ability to pick and choose which days to work and which hours to keep or which ship to set sail on, especially in busy periods at the port, was in stark contrast to the experience of working men in industrial towns, whose lives were often dictated by work discipline and 'factory time'.

Indeed, the traditions entrenched over many generations by forced familiarity with casualism contributed to the complex labour culture that earned the city's workforce a reputation for militancy in the sixties and seventies. The diversification of Liverpool's economy from the late fifties brought factory discipline to an increasing number of ex-dockers, port transport workers and seamen hitherto unaccustomed to strictly regimented work processes and managerial control. Although these manufacturing companies often actively discriminated against employing ex-port workers and seamen specifically because of their burgeoning reputation for militancy, it was impossible due to the composition of the city's previous occupational structure to exclude them from recruitment altogether.⁶³

⁶¹ For more detail on local seaman union organisation, see: Taplin, E.L. *Liverpool Dockers and Seamen, 1870-1890* (Hull: Hull University Press 1974).

⁶² Lane, *Liverpool*, p. 65.

⁶³ In informal conversations and interviews with ex-Ford workers who were recruited by the company in the sixties, several recounted the unusual and seemingly irrelevant questions asked by management at the job interview. Aside from asking obvious questions about work history etc., interviewers

Indeed, almost the whole of Liverpool's workforce had had some sort of association or employment history with the port. These ex-dockers, port transport workers and seamen with experience of casual employment and workplace organisation brought such ideals to the shop floors of Merseyside's new factories. Just as industrial strife on the docks increased between 1947 and 1967, so the new industrial sector in the city experienced similar challenges.⁶⁴

Large national and multinational companies with branch plants in the city were increasingly susceptible to strong rank-and-file workplace organisation and this was especially prevalent in the car plants and, even prior to their arrival, at Dunlop.⁶⁵ Aside from experiencing difficulties with entrenched casual labour attitudes, near full employment in the fifties and early sixties added to the combative nature of Liverpool's working population, giving it a self-confident and assertive edge.⁶⁶ The city later became identified as 'a hotbed of industrial unrest' with a record of 'continued industrial strife'.⁶⁷ Moreover, the growth and empowerment of the shop steward movement across the whole trade union spectrum brought a new dimension to contemporary industrial relations. The sixties and seventies witnessed the democratisation of the unions and the rise of the 'informal' system of workplace bargaining and representation at the expense of the traditional 'formal' system, dominated by union officialdom.⁶⁸ All these factors contributed to Liverpool's growing reputation for industrial militancy.

Another, less tangible factor also contributed to industrial attitudes amongst Liverpudlians in the sixties and seventies. Although Liverpool's status as a 'world'

would often ask whether the applicant had a mortgage, a car, any Higher Purchase agreements, how many children they had etc. It was perceived that these seemingly innocuous questions were used to judge if an applicant had various domestic responsibilities and as such might be less prone to industrial militancy because he had 'too much to lose' (Author's interview with E.R., March 2011 and various others).

⁶⁴ *Final Report of the Committee of Inquiry under the Rt. Hon Lord Devlin into certain matters concerning the Port Transport Industry*, Cmnd 2734 (August 1965), p. 4.

⁶⁵ For a brief overview of rank-and-file organisation at Dunlop's Speke factory in the late fifties and early sixties see Lane, *Liverpool*, pp. 122-124. For a seminal account of early rank-and-file organisation at Ford's Halewood plant in the sixties see Beynon, H. *Working For Ford* (Wakefield: E.P. Publishing 1973).

⁶⁶ The new manufacturing base in the city attracted a substantial number of women. Women had previously been excluded from the trade union movement in the city because of the male-dominated nature of traditional occupations. For an analysis of masculinities in the city in the post-war era see: Ayers, P. 'Work, culture and gender: The making of masculinities in post-war Liverpool', *Labour History Review*, Vol. 69, Issue 2, August 2004, pp. 153-167.

⁶⁷ *The Times*, 19 May 1975.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 2 for a theoretical analysis of shop stewards and industrial bargaining and conflict.

trading city was contracting with the fortunes of its port, its cultural status both nationally and globally was in the ascendancy. The city's contribution to modern British popular culture is well documented. It is, of course, synonymous with The Beatles, rock n' roll, the 'swinging sixties' and the hegemony of its football teams. As a result, the image of the Liverpoolian 'scally' as cocky and irreverent is eternally etched on public and media consciousness. Indeed, such perceptions are not completely without justification or a degree of self-projection, yet the broad 'scouse' identity, which enjoyed celebrity and notoriety in equal measures in the post-war era, evolved under the influence of the development of the port in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Liverpool's port shaped the character and culture of the city in other ways. In addition to a substantial eclectic immigrant population, there was sizeable transient seafaring element contributing further to the cosmopolitan flavour of the city. Moreover, world travel and international shipping exposed Liverpool's seamen and dockers to the influence of other cultures, particularly with the advent of trans-Atlantic passenger travel. Indeed, the arrival of 'Merseybeat' in the sixties owed some gratitude to these 'Cunard Yanks', who introduced north American pop music, culture and dress to Liverpool long before its influence was felt throughout the rest of the country and the western world.⁶⁹ When native seamen returned home they brought with them the commodities and experience of exotic lands as well as their end-of-voyage pay-offs, often to be spent over the course of a couple of nights as 'five minute millionaires'.⁷⁰ Irregular work and wages contributed to a short-term, 'live-for-the-moment' outlook amongst generations of Liverpool dockers and seamen.⁷¹ So, it is proposed that the city's culture evolved differently from other major centres in Britain, further adding to this perception from without and within of Liverpool as a city of international, not provincial, character.

⁶⁹ For more detail on Liverpool's popular culture and music scene in the sixties see: Inglis, I. 'The Beatles are coming! Conjecture and conviction in the myth of Kennedy, America and the Beatles', *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 24, Issue 2, 2000, pp. 93-108; Brocken, M. *Other Voices: Hidden Histories of Liverpool's Popular Music Scenes, 1930s-1970s* (Farnham: Ashgate 2010); Leonard, M. & Strachan, R. (eds.) *The Beat Goes On: Liverpool, Popular Music and the Changing City* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2010).

⁷⁰ Lane, *Liverpool*, pp. 70-74.

⁷¹ On the subject of identities and consciousness of working-class men in casual or unstable employment see: Connell, R.W. 'Live fast and die young: The construction of masculinity among young working-class men on the margin of the labour market', *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27, No. 2, August 1991, pp. 141-171.

This plethora of influences – the growth of trade unionism, full employment, the rich cultural currency of the sixties, the casual attitudes towards employment derived from the city’s historical development – all combined to give its workforce a progressively combative edge. The irreverent spirit of Liverpool in the sixties interacted with a work culture entrenched in casual traditions to foster an increasingly defiant attitude towards workplace relations and managerial discipline. Liverpool working men’s self-perception is clear:

Liverpool men have always considered themselves as supermen. They love being leaders whether its football, politics or trade union. We’ve created so many good leaders in Liverpool, especially in the Transport and General Workers’ Union – Lennie McCluskey, Jack Jones, even (former Prime Minister) Harold Wilson.⁷²

The sixties were an exciting time for the working-class of Liverpool, the majority of which were finally lifted out of a history of poverty and casualism. Lane argues that there was a sense of egalitarianism which had long existed in the minds of dockers and seamen, due to their occupational culture and experiences but now, mixed with the spirit of the sixties and relocated to manufacturing plants, this permeated the entire Liverpool consciousness.⁷³ Nowhere was this more tangible than in the workplace – subordination and the paternalistic work relationships of previous generations had been swept away. This is reflected in Merseyside’s record of industrial strife between 1968 and 1974 when the region had the highest incidence of days lost from work stoppages in the country, some two and a half times greater than the national average.⁷⁴ Indeed, during this period, ‘the peculiar nature of the Merseyside local economy and its social and cultural influences did help produce a particularly distinctive form of collective trade union organisation and consciousness’.⁷⁵

⁷² Author’s interview with F.L., January 2011.

⁷³ Lane, *Liverpool*, p. 125.

⁷⁴ Bean, R. & Stoney, P. ‘Strikes on Merseyside: A regional analysis’, *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 17, Issue 1, March 1986, p. 10 (pp. 9-23).

⁷⁵ Darlington, R. *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism: Shop Stewards’ Organisation in Three Merseyside Plants* (London: Mansell 1994), p. 51.

Decline and defiance in the late seventies and eighties

The 'boom' years in Liverpool were relatively short-lived. By the mid-seventies the continued decline and contraction of the dock industry, for so many years the city's lifeblood, was accompanied by a retrenchment of the manufacturing base.⁷⁶ As previously detailed, the growth of the manufacturing sector in the fifties and sixties was pioneered by foreign multinational companies, with the assistance of generous government development grants. When more austere times arrived for the world economy, these relatively new branch plants which had encountered strong workplace organisation and militancy were amongst the first to be considered for redundancies or closure. Although manufacturing was in decline across the country, Liverpool suffered more than anywhere else. Employment in the sector fell by over a half between 1971 and 1984, with somewhere in the region of 40,000 jobs cut from the local economy.⁷⁷ The 'new' housing estates and communities on the periphery, for which manufacturing was the *raison d'être*, suffered enormously from the decline. Both Kirkby and Speke saw a spate of redundancies and factory closures. In Speke, Dunlop and Triumph both closed entirely with the combined loss of seven thousand jobs. Between 1980 and 1983, Ford also shed 1500 jobs through voluntary redundancy, with the threat of more to follow. Kirkby lost around 13,000 jobs from manufacturing between 1971 and 1984.⁷⁸ These losses were accompanied by the closure of other, more historic Liverpool firms such as Tate and Lyle's and Meccano. Such closures and redundancies were to have a profound effect on those areas and the city as a whole.

Meanwhile, the celebrity that had accompanied Liverpool's status in the sixties quickly turned to a macabre fascination with its decline.⁷⁹ The Toxteth riots during the summer of 1981 led some observers to superficially condemn Liverpool

⁷⁶ The number of Registered Dock Workers (RDWs) employed at the Port of Liverpool fell from 10,500 in 1970 to 1373 in 1989. This was accompanied by a similar proportional decrease in non-registered workers at the port, as well as a decline in port-related processing jobs (Source: British Ports Association, 'Report on manpower in the UK ports industry, 1987', 1988). For a detailed examination of the contraction of both manpower and trade at the Port of Liverpool in the container era, see Chapter 7 of this thesis.

⁷⁷ Johnson, A. 'Militant and the failure of 'acherontic' Marxism in Liverpool' in C. Barker & P. Kennedy (eds.) *To Make Another World* (Aldershot: Avebury 1996), p. 144 (pp. 139-173); Murden, 'Timeline: Liverpool', p. 126.

⁷⁸ Meegan, 'Paradise postponed', p. 208

⁷⁹ See for example: *Daily Mirror*, 11 October 1982; *Liverpool Daily Post*, 6 June 1984.

as a failed city, despite several underlying factors for the disturbances.⁸⁰ For example, the Merseyside Police were subsequently blamed for a culture of over-zealous policing and racial discrimination.⁸¹ Of course, youth unemployment and disenfranchisement were also major contributory factors. Such circumstances were not unique to Liverpool and other inner-city areas such as Brixton in London, Handsworth in Birmingham and Moss Side in Manchester also experienced serious civil unrest in 1981. Nevertheless a combination of high unemployment, growing social problems and the city's recently-acquired reputation for political and industrial militancy encouraged the contemporary Conservative political establishment to consider it a virtual write-off, apparently content to consign it to a state of 'managed decline'.⁸²

If the Conservative hierarchy already regarded the city and its inhabitants with a degree of suspicion and disdain after the events of 1981, the election of a left-wing Trotskyist 'Labour' City Council in 1983 did nothing to assuage this perception. The rise of the Militant Tendency faction in the District Labour Party reflected a broader rejection of the Government's cuts-based monetarist experiment by the people of Liverpool and, indeed, elsewhere.⁸³ The escalating decline of the city in terms of jobs, funding and population was greeted with defiance.⁸⁴ If the sixties and seventies had witnessed the growth of workplace militancy and solidarity, its forced decline due to economic factors and anti-union legislation meant that political radicalism was belatedly in the ascendancy in the city. Indeed, 'the

⁸⁰ For more detail on the causes behind the Toxteth riots in 1981 see: Waller, P.J. 'The riots in Toxteth, Liverpool: A survey', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 9, Issue 3, 1981, pp. 344-353; Cooper, P. 'Competing explanations of the Merseyside riots of 1981', *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, January 1985, pp. 60-69; Rodrigues, J. 'The riots of 1981', *Marxism Today*, October 1981, pp. 18-22.

⁸¹ Bunyan, T. 'The police against the people', *Race & Class*, Vol. 23, No. 2-3, October 1981, pp. 153-170; Cooper, 'Competing explanations', p. 60.

⁸² Recent documents released under the Freedom of Information Act in December 2011 indicate that a senior minister in the Cabinet urged the Prime Minister to abandon Liverpool to a state of 'managed decline' (Source: *BBC News*, 30 December 2011).

⁸³ The rise of the Militant Tendency and the reasons behind its dominance of the city council by 1983 have been the subject of substantial analysis and study. For more detail than is provided here see: Parkinson, M. *Liverpool on the Brink: One City's Struggle Against Government Cuts* (Hermitage: Policy Journals 1985); Crick, M. *The March of Militant* (London: Faber & Faber 1986); Johnson, A. 'Militant and the failure of 'acherontic Marxism in Liverpool'; Shaw, E. 'The Labour party and the Militant Tendency', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 1989, pp. 180-196; Taaffe, P. & Mulhearn, T. *Liverpool: A City That Dared to Fight* (London: Fortress 1988).

⁸⁴ From a population high of 700000 in the 1960s it fell to 400000 in the 1980s as people left the city to find work (Source: Grant, L. 'History broke Liverpool and it broke my heart' in Grant et al, *Shrinking Cities*, p. 137).

militants... faced with the limits of workplace militancy and community politics in the face of the global slump, turned to politics, the Labour Party and the Militant (Tendency)'.⁸⁵

The argument forwarded by Belchem that the Militant Tendency seized control of a 'moribund' and ramshackle local Labour party machine and propagated its ideology from there has been challenged by other historians who highlight the attractive and popularist aspects of the Militant manifesto and subsequent local election campaign.⁸⁶ The idea that Militant was 'swimming with the tide' of contemporary local consciousness, coloured by the traditional egalitarian and democratic outlook of Liverpudlians that was intrinsically opposed to the Conservative government's economic and social experiment, the decline of the city and the rise of unemployment, is a persuasive one.⁸⁷ The local stand against central government policies gathered popular support and resulted in a landslide Labour Party victory in the 1983 local election, dominated by Militant councillors. The campaign had been waged on the principles of job creation, house construction, rent reductions and a reversal of policy-making to the local level.⁸⁸

However, the initial affinity between the people of Liverpool and the Militant Tendency was short-lived. In 1985, a budget deficit crisis caused by government funding restraints and an arguably over-ambitious spending programme led to the council announcing that it would run out of money by September. This resulted in the extraordinary step of issuing redundancy notices to *all* council employees. The response was wholesale rebellion from local trade unions covering the plethora of council occupations and a souring of relations thereafter.⁸⁹ Derek Hatton, Deputy Leader of the Council, later admitted that this was a ploy in the game of brinkmanship unfolding between the Council and the Government and acknowledged that the move was a public relations disaster from which it never recovered.⁹⁰ Accusations of corruption, cronyism and racism followed.⁹¹ All this

⁸⁵ Johnson, 'Militant', p. 143.

⁸⁶ Belchem, *Popular Politics*, p. 20. Belchem's argument is opposed by Johnson in 'Militant' (*op. cit.*) and Davies, S. 'Liverpool Labour Party and Trades Council: A Brief Introduction to the Microfilm Edition of Liverpool Labour Party and Trades Council Records, 1862-1986', *Microform Academic Publishers*, 1999, p. 22.

⁸⁷ Davies, 'Liverpool Labour Party and Trades Council', p. 22.

⁸⁸ Johnson, 'Militant', p. 151.

⁸⁹ Hatton, D. *Inside Left: The Story So Far* (London: Bloomsbury 1988), p. 89.

⁹⁰ Hatton, *Inside Left*.

was combined with wholesale public animosity between the national Labour leadership and members of the 'Labour' City Council, cumulating in a number being expelled from the Party in October 1986. By 1987, Militant had squandered the popular support which brought it to power in 1983 and the majority of its councillors had either been expelled from the Party or defeated at the local ballot box, largely ending its influence in local politics.

So, the convulsion of political militancy apparent in Liverpool in the mid-eighties had its origins in a variety of different influences. Firstly, and most obviously, austere times in the national and local economy, partly caused by a broader global recession and partly through governmental fiscal policies, lent themselves to political militancy. Indeed, Liverpool was not the only city where the Militant Tendency gained a foothold in local politics.⁹² Secondly, the relatively belated experience of workplace organisation and militancy in the city fed into an equally belated growth of political radicalism, particularly in the context of the decline in trade union influence and membership at this time. Quite simply, politics became the new medium for local working-class expression and resistance. Thirdly, there was a growing siege mentality amongst Liverpudlians in the eighties that sprang from parochial pride and the decline of their once-great city, media portrayal of the place and its inhabitants, the Council's stand-off with the Conservative government and a rejection of the principles of an unfettered laissez-faire economic policy. All these factors combined to give Liverpool and Liverpudlians a reputation for militancy and radicalism in the modern national psyche.

In the case of Liverpool's dockers, traditions of workplace and political militancy predate their dissemination into the wider populace of the city. Communist Party membership was a distinct feature of the dock industry as a whole.⁹³ Casualism and underemployment had conversely fostered unofficial workplace solidarity even in the pre-war era. The post-war period witnessed a series

⁹¹ Liverpool Black Caucus, *The Racial Politics of Militant in Liverpool: The Black Community's Struggle for Participation in Local Politics 1980-1986* (Liverpool: Merseyside Area Profile Group/Runnymede 1986); Johnson, 'Militant'.

⁹² Militant had several MPs from different areas of the country in the eighties. As well as being popular in Liverpool, it also had councilors in Coventry, London and the North East among others.

⁹³ For more detail on the influence of the Communist Party in the dock industry see: McIlroy, J. 'The first great battle in the march to socialism: Dockers, Stalinists and Trotskyists in 1945', *Revolutionary History*, Vol. 6, 2/3, pp. 105-159; Hunter, B. *They Knew Why They Fought: Unofficial Struggles and Leadership on the Docks, 1945-1989* (Index House: London 1994); Pennington, B. 'Docks: breakaway and unofficial movements' *International Socialism*, No. 2, Autumn 1960, pp. 5-11.

of gains for dockers, not least the implementation of the National Dock Labour Scheme in 1947 and the Devlin reforms in 1967. The introduction of an official shop steward system consolidated the unusual degree of workplace control and influence that dockers across the country had captured. Nowhere was this more palpable than at the port of Liverpool. Nevertheless, aside from the strong occupational identity and solidarity of the dockers it should be argued that they were simultaneously immersed in the *zeitgeist* of the city. At the high point for Liverpool culture in the sixties this undoubtedly involved embracing the idea that they hailed from ‘one of the coolest cities on the planet’, that Liverpool men were ‘supermen’ and an egalitarian belief that everyone was equal regardless of wealth or class.⁹⁴ All these factors contributed to dockers’ consciousness, their approach to labour relations and perception of managerial authority. Even in less auspicious times for Liverpool, the defensive siege mentality of the city coincided with the contraction of the dock industry and terminal rundown of manning levels. Again, during this period dockers’ consciousness could not help but be coloured by the rise of Militant and popular local political radicalism, the ideological stand-off with the Conservative government and the negative media perception of the city. Indeed, occupational identity and work culture were extremely important in shaping attitudes towards labour relations at the port but as well as being dockers they were *Liverpool* dockers. This certainly adds another dimension to consider when examining industrial relations at the port of Liverpool in the chapters that follow.

⁹⁴ McIntyre-Brown, A. *Liverpool: The First 1000 Years* (Liverpool: Garlic Press 2001), p. 11; Author’s interview with F.L., January 2011; Lane, *Liverpool*, p. 125.

Chapter 5

The Growth of the Shop Steward System at Liverpool Docks, 1967-1972

Previous chapters of this thesis have highlighted long-term trends in work culture and organisation in the dock industry and the historical development of the city of Liverpool in order to provide the contextual basis for a chronological, primary research-driven examination of labour relations at the port of Liverpool 1967-1989. This section of the thesis considers the development of labour organisation and the dock shop steward system at the port from its inception as an unofficial body through to its official formalisation under the Devlin reforms in 1967 and subsequent rise to prominence and activism. It documents the formation of the shop steward system before providing an account and analysis of significant disputes at the port thereafter, culminating in an assessment of the local and national perspectives of the 1972 strike wave in the industry. The aim of this section is to establish the dynamics of local organisation, in what could be described as an evolutionary phase in labour relations at the port in the context of the Devlin reforms watershed and subsequent decasualisation of the industry. Indeed, the causes and outcomes of several of the disputes featured here have never been properly analysed and so it is contended that this study will help illuminate the dynamics of industrial relations at the port of Liverpool and contribute to the existing academic discourse regarding dockland industrial relations, local workplace relationships and the dock industry during this period. Before the chronological analysis of events at Liverpool can commence, consideration needs to be given to the contemporary economic and industrial relations climate in which they occurred.

The national economic, political and industrial bargaining context

The end of full employment and relative stagnation of economic growth in Britain during the 1960s pushed the question of trade union influence and responsible industrial relations high up the political agenda. As governments from both sides of the spectrum grappled with balancing the demands of free industrial bargaining with the health of the national economy, the political consensus was

increasingly turning towards industrial relations reform.¹ Even during more prosperous times the Conservative Government had considered changes to the national system of industrial relations. In 1958, a Conservative think-tank policy paper, entitled *A Giant's Strength*, criticised the unions for wielding too much influence and proposed several reforms which resurfaced in later legislation.² However, at this juncture, there was no suggestion that legislative reform was imminent and the tradition of voluntarism remained omnipotent. If anything, successive governments increasingly endeavoured to include trade unions in national economic planning. Labour's election to office in 1964 served to institutionalise this policy further. Harold Wilson's election campaign was based on the Party's ability to re-invigorate and modernise the economy in partnership with the unions, a relationship formalised by the appointment of Frank Cousins (General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union) to the Cabinet as Minister of Technology. The National Plan was conceived in 1965 which contained some references to a voluntary income policy but no legislative overtones.³ A Royal Commission, headed by Lord Donovan, was also established in 1965 to review the national system of industrial relations.⁴

In the intervening period between the Donovan Commission being established and the final report being delivered, Britain's economy had deteriorated further and the Labour Government became ever more concerned with the escalating incidence of unofficial industrial action across the major industries.⁵ This was largely attributed to growing influence of the 'informal' sphere of trade unionism. Having already introduced a voluntary incomes policy in co-operation with a

¹ Taylor, A. 'The Conservative party and the trade unions' in J. McIlroy, N. Fishman & A. Campbell (eds) *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1999), pp. 151-186; Taylor, R. *The Trade Union Question in British Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell 1994).

² Inns of Court Conservatives and Unionist Society, *A Giant's Strength: Some thoughts on the constitutional and legal position of trade unions in England – A study* (London: Inns of Court Conservatives and Unionist Society 1958).

³ *The National Plan*, Cmnd. 2764 (London: HMSO 1965); House of Lords debate, 24 November 1965 (*Hansard*, Vol. 270, cc.938-1024).

⁴ See Chapter 2 of this thesis for an overview of the Commission's findings.

⁵ For more detail on the mounting problems facing Britain's economy during this period and the Government's perspective on reform of the system of industrial relations see: Blank, S. 'Britain: The politics of foreign economic policy, the domestic economy and the problem of pluralistic stagnation', *International Organisation*, Vol. 31, Issue 4, September 1977, pp. 673-721; Zeigler, P. *Wilson: The Authorized Life of Lord Wilson of Lord Rievaulx* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson 1993), pp. 251-252; Castle, B. *The Castle Diaries 1964-70* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson 1984), pp. 460-463; Cairncross, A. *The British Economy since 1945: Economic Policy and Performance* (London: Wiley-Blackwell 1995).

reluctant Trades Union Congress (TUC), the increasingly embattled Labour Government began to consider introducing legislation to better police industrial relations.⁶ The *In Place of Strife* White Paper, published in January 1969, sought to address the growing phenomenon of rank-and-file unofficial industrial action and the issue of union accountability. The proposals, which included the establishment of an industrial relations court with the power to hand down legally binding judgements, ‘cooling off’ periods, ballot provisions and union registration, was immediately unpopular with the trade union movement.⁷ Its legislative overtones were in contrast to the findings of the Donovan Commission which broadly found in favour of the perpetuation of voluntarism in industrial bargaining.⁸ This attempt to introduce legislation into industrial relations coupled with a mounting economic crisis proved to be the Labour Government’s downfall. At the 1970 General Election, Edward Heath’s Conservatives were victorious.

The Conservatives came into office having criticised the disproportionate influence of trade unions and the contemporary trend towards unofficial industrial action in their election manifesto and campaign. While in opposition, the party leadership had formulated an approach to combat the perceived disruptive influence of rank-and-file action on the health of the national economy. Initiatives proposed in various publications, such as *Action Not Words* (1966) and *Fair Deal at Work* (1969), advocated a legally-binding framework for industrial bargaining to ease inflation and stabilise the economy.⁹ The Industrial Relations Bill (1971) was the manifestation of this new legislative approach to British industrial relations.

Immediately unpopular with the trade union movement, the Industrial Relations Bill was the first comprehensive attempt to impose legislation on the

⁶ For more detail on the voluntary incomes policy negotiated with the TUC and reaction to it see: Cronin, J.E. *Labour and Society in Britain 1918-1979* (London: Batsford 1984), pp. 187-188; Taylor, R. ‘The trade union ‘problem’ in the Age of Consensus 1960-1979’ in B. Pimlott & C. Cook *Trade Unions in British Politics* (London: Longman 1991), pp. 175-199; Thorpe, A. ‘The Labour party and the trade unions’ in J. McIlroy, N. Fishman & A. Campbell (eds.) *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1999), pp. 133-150.

⁷ Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity, *In Place of Strife: A Policy for Industrial Relations*, Cmnd. 3888 (London: HMSO 1969).

⁸ Although the Report recommended that unions should be compelled to register in order to enhance responsibility, it favoured the maintenance of existing voluntary arrangements.

⁹ The Conservative Party, *Action Not Words: The New Conservative Programme*, The Conservative Party General Election Manifesto, 1966; The Conservative Political Centre, ‘Fair Deal At Work – The Conservative approach to modern industrial relations’, 18th Conservative Trade Unionists’ Annual Conference, Birmingham, 7 June 1969.

hitherto voluntary tradition of industrial bargaining in Britain.¹⁰ It bore striking similarities to the previous Labour Government's proposed programme of reform. The Bill introduced compulsory trade union registration, powers to force ballots, 'cooling-off' periods and the establishment of the National Industrial Relations Court (NIRC) which was authorised to deliver legally-binding judgements and financial penalties, especially against those unions or individuals involved in 'unfair industrial practices'.¹¹ This last provision was clearly aimed at the growing proliferation of unofficial industrial action. The Government unilaterally forced the Bill onto the statute book without meaningful consultation with the TUC, souring any possible reproach between the two institutions.

By the time the Industrial Relations Act finally became law, the Heath administration had been already been rocked by several disputes in major industries. 1970-71 saw the worst period of industrial unrest since the 1920s. In addition to a series of smaller public sector disputes, the separate 1970 dock and electricity workers' strikes twice forced the Government to declare an official State of Emergency.¹² Matters went from bad to worse in January 1972 when the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), following a ballot six months earlier, began strike action over pit closures, relative pay stagnation/fall due to the introduction of a national flat-rate wage and an overtime ban.¹³ The industry had not experienced a national official strike since the General Strike and several localised, unofficial instances of industrial action in 1969 and 1970 had equipped activists with new and highly-disruptive methods of picketing. Secondary mass pickets and flying pickets were deployed to inhibit production/transportation at ancillary sites such as coke depots or power stations, in addition to collieries themselves. The Government and the police were taken by surprise by the aggressive, pro-active tactics of the miners, aided by the support of transport unions in their refusal to cross NUM picket lines.¹⁴

¹⁰ The Industrial Relations Bill received Royal Assent on 1 March 1972.

¹¹ For further detail on the Industrial Relations Act see: Weekes, B.C.M., Mellish, M., Dickens, L. & Lloyd, J. *Industrial Relations and the Limits of the Law: The Industrial Effects of the Industrial Relations Act, 1971* (Oxford: Blackwell 1975); McCarthy, W.E.J. & Ellis, N.D. *Management By Agreement: An Alternative to the Industrial Relations Act* (London: Hutchinson 1973).

¹² Heath, E. *The Course of My Life: My Autobiography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1998), p. 403.

¹³ For more detail on the 1972 miners' strike see: Allen, V.L. *The Militancy of British Miners* (Shipley: Moor 1981), pp. 153-156; Lyddon, D. 'Glorious summer, 1972: the high tide of rank and file militancy' in McIlroy et al, *British Trade Unions*, pp. 326-352; Pitt, M. *The World On Our Backs: The Kent Miners and the 1972 Miners' Strike* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1979).

¹⁴ Heath, *The Course of My Life*, p. 350.

The severity and scale of the miners' action forced the Government into retreat, seeking negotiation. The eventual pay settlement secured a 27% pay rise over sixteen months.¹⁵

The consequences of the miners' strike had a profound effect on the attitudes of organised labour, the Government and employers in the proceeding months. Firstly, the success of the miners' innovative picketing techniques had equipped activists and militants with a new and effective disruptive tactic. Moreover, the Government's forced capitulation merely strengthened Heath's resolve to fully utilise the impending industrial relations legislation to curb the influence of unions, although many employers were happy to maintain the existing status quo in industrial bargaining.¹⁶ Finally, the whole trade union movement appeared galvanised in opposition to the Conservatives' approach to industrial relations in a manner not seen since the major nationwide industrial strife of some fifty years earlier.

So, it looked as if organised labour and the Government were heading for a showdown in the contemporary political and legislative climate. The miners' strike had set the tone and context within which the battle would be fought. The entire trade union movement was hostile to the implementation of the Industrial Relations Act and any major dispute in any sector of industry had the potential to become politicised by the intervention of the NIRC. In the event, it was a convulsion of local industrial action by Liverpool's dockers which was to be the first to test the resolve of the Act and its creators.

Modernisation, Containerisation and Devlinism: Developments in the industry, 1967-1972

Prior to 1947 and the implementation of the National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS), the dock industry had remained largely unregulated and casual employment was universal. The traditional system was characterised by inconsistent earnings, underemployment, inequitable distribution of work and ultimately poverty and

¹⁵ Taylor 'The Conservative party', p. 160-161.

¹⁶ Weekes et al, *Industrial Relations and the Limits of the Law*, pp. 42-45, 210-212.

hardship for the majority of dockers across the country. Although the Scheme introduced registration and a degree of decasualisation and regulation to the industry, many of the traditional vagaries associated with the old system remained.¹⁷ As previously noted, the NDLS did little for industrial harmony as between 1947 and 1955 the docks proved to be the most strike prone of the major industries.¹⁸

The Devlin Committee was first set up in 1956 to examine the operation of the Scheme.¹⁹ It was re-commissioned in 1965 to investigate the root causes of the perpetual industrial strife, and hence poor productivity and efficiency, in such a vital national industry. However, it was the imminent technological advances in cargo-handling which forced the issue of employment and labour relations at the docks to the top of the political agenda.²⁰ The global proliferation of mechanised cargo handling, particularly the advent of containerisation and roll-on/roll-off technology, implied a complete change in the character of dock-work. Substantial investment was required from both the Government and employers to modernise the industry and keep it competitive in the world market. However it was broadly accepted that the inherent industrial conflict, enhanced by the temporary and casual nature of employment on the docks, had to be remedied before any expensive modernisation programme could be attempted.

Lord Devlin's committee identified the limitations of partial decasualisation provided by the NDLS as the principal cause of industrial strife at the docks. It argued that the benefits of the Scheme were being eclipsed by the temporary nature of engagement in the industry. The Committee concluded that dockworkers struggled to form any ties or loyalties to a particular employer as continuous work with one company could not be guaranteed. This encouraged a mutual lack of responsibility and hence casual attitudes towards work and management by respective parties. Moreover, the perpetuation of the inhumane 'call' practice of 'turn' (half-daily) recruitment also served to disenfranchise and polarise attitudes into an 'us' and 'them' divide, simultaneously fostering a strong sense of defensive

¹⁷ See Chapter 3 for an examination of the complexities of the historical employment system on the docks and the deficiencies of partial decasualisation introduced under the NDLS.

¹⁸ *Final Report of the Committee of Inquiry under the Rt. Hon Lord Devlin into certain matters concerning the Port Transport Industry*, Cmnd. 2734 (London: HMSO August 1965), p. 4.

¹⁹ *Report of a Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Operation of the Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Scheme 1947*, Cmnd. 9813 (London: HMSO 1956).

²⁰ Wilson, D.F. *Dockers: The Impact of Industrial Change* (London: Fontana/Collins 1972), pp. 290-291.

solidarity amongst workers. The inequities of the piecework payment system were also considered by the Committee to be a contributory factor in poor labour relations and productivity. The Report argued that these factors combined to shape attitudes that were visible in the prolific record of industrial strife on the docks.²¹

The Final Report, published in 1965, predictably proposed complete decasualisation of the industry, with reforms to take place over two phases. Phase 1 (1967) introduced *de facto* decasualisation whereby the majority of dockers were assigned to an employer on a 'permanent' basis although provision was made for employers to loan/loan out men depending on company workload. However, second and third tiers of dock-worker were created – supplementary workers without a permanent employer who were employed for a limited period with a single company (on a job-by-job basis) and 'temporarily unattached' workers (registered dockers without a permanent employer); both categories remained in the employment of the local dock labour board.²² Nevertheless, these measures appeared to dispense with the historic system of stand selection synonymous with casual employment, promising much-improved regularity of work, income and job security for the majority.

The Devlin reforms were not solely about decasualisation of the industry, however. Phase 2 (1970-1972) abolished the piecework system of payment and replaced it with a minimum weekly wage and tonnage flat rate coupled with locally-negotiated productivity deals, to rationalise the industry in the context of modernisation/containerisation. The Commission recommended that the number of registered employers in each port be dramatically reduced in order to deliver stable employers with a regular flow of work and with whom dockers could be permanently employed. It was believed that the provision of standardised earnings, regular employment periods and the formalisation of working and manning practices would remove the inherent spectre of insecurity and casualism felt by dockworkers and hence foster a more progressive approach to industrial relations from all parties,

²¹ Devlin, *Final Report*, pp. 4-9.

²² Turnbull, P. & Sapsford, D. 'Dockers, Devlin and industrial disputes', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, p. 28 (pp. 26-35).

with these improvements leading reciprocally to greater efficiency and productivity.²³

However, the measures did little to advance labour relations in the short-term. The introduction of Phase 1 immediately provoked strikes in Liverpool, London, Manchester and Hull.²⁴ Although the proposed reforms undoubtedly offered dockworkers better pay and conditions, lessons remained unlearned from the experiences of 1947. There were several reasons why the Devlin reforms were resisted by some sections of the dock workforce. Firstly, the standardisation of pay and employment did least for the interests of the aristocracy of the dock labour force, those ‘blue-eyed boys’ or specialists, who could pick and choose the most lucrative jobs thus immediately alienating an influential section of workers.²⁵ Secondly, the introduction of more formalised systems of manning and time-management procedures imposed greater discipline on dockers. As noted by Phillips and Whiteside, this conflicted with their traditional attachment to some of the more flexible aspects of casualism, especially amongst some of the older dockers.²⁶ Finally, the whole process was viewed with suspicion from the quayside – modernisation and containerisation were bringing rapid change to an industry in which working practices and employment relationships had remained relatively unchanged since the nineteenth century.

Aside from the obvious teething difficulties associated with the overhaul of the system of employment in a major industry, retrospectively it is evident that Devlin’s reforms failed to address some key emerging issues. The Committee’s main focus was on the revision of the casual system and so gave insufficient consideration to the potential problems that hasty modernisation/containerisation could inflict on workplace relations. Directly attributable to the advent of unitisation was the growing trend of outsourcing of container-stripping duties, whereby cargo would pass through a port in a container and be loaded or unloaded (‘stuffed and stripped’) at depots outside the dockland area. These inland depots were often not in the vicinity of the docks and hence were not governed by the Scheme. In effect this

²³ Turnbull & Sapsford, ‘Dockers’, p. 27-28.

²⁴ Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 187; Jones, *Union Man*, p. 185.

²⁵ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 19-20.

²⁶ Phillips, G. & Whiteside, N. *Casual Labour: The Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry 1880-1970* (Oxford: Clarendon 1985), p. 256; Author’s interview with M.C., January 2011.

meant that a growing amount of the dockers' work was being done by road haulage companies at these groupage centres using cheaper labour. This became a major source of antagonism for dockers and would prove a divisive issue for the industry in the early seventies, particularly in Liverpool. Indeed, the outsourcing of container-stripping provoked broader questions about the definition of dock-work as enshrined in the NDLS.

In addition to concerns surrounding jurisdiction over 'stuffing and stripping' duties, there were a number of other factors which the 1967 reforms failed to foresee as potential flashpoints. The construction of new privately-owned and financed 'free ports', which were exempt from the provisions of the NDLS, had been ongoing since the early 1960s and this trend was accelerating with the onset of mechanisation. The cost of new-build container facilities was favourable when compared with the potential expense of renovation of facilities at existing ports. Moreover, labour costs at non-Scheme ports were considerably lower because employers were neither liable for levy payments to the NDLB nor bound by the minimum pay and conditions enshrined in national and local agreements for Scheme ports, therefore providing them with a 'hidden subsidy' and a competitive advantage.²⁷ A combination of these factors – new cargo-handling facilities, lower labour costs and changing trade patterns (increasing volume towards Europe and away from traditional export centres such as Commonwealth/trans-Atlantic countries), meant that shipping companies were directing more of their business towards non-Scheme ports.²⁸ This was another major source of dissent for dockers nationwide, though especially in Hull where the Humber estuary witnessed the construction of several smaller free ports, in direct competition with the established Scheme port.

A final cause of conflict at the docks in the late sixties/early seventies was actually created by the Devlin Report itself. The establishment of the Temporary Unattached Register (TUR) was only ever intended as a short-term measure for Registered Dock Workers (RDWs) without a 'permanent' employer for a specific engagement period. However, numbers on the register increased significantly as

²⁷ Statement by the TUC to the National Ports Council Enquiry into Non-Scheme Ports, 17 October 1972 (Modern Records Centre, The University of Warwick).

²⁸ By 1970 11.6% by weight of the nation's trade passed through non-Scheme ports (Source: Lindop, F. 'The dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, part 1: Shop stewards and containerisation', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 5, Spring 1998, p. 49 [pp. 33-72]).

employers used the TUR as a reserve pool of labour, in opposition to its intended purpose. By 1972 four percent of the total registered labour force was unattached and claiming fallback pay on the TUR.²⁹ This was a particular problem at London docks where numbers on the temporary register were higher still, resulting in the TUR becoming the focus for both national and localised industrial strife. Indeed, as Turnbull and Sapsford argue, the TUR affected ‘existing RDWs and illustrated to others the insecurity of their employment’.³⁰

Certainly, there were a number of emerging issues in the industry which the Devlin Committee failed to identify or properly address although it could be argued that such matters were outside of its remit, an observation also made by Durcan *et al.*³¹ While in theory decasualisation dealt with the perennial challenges of underemployment and inconsistent earnings, these problems were superseded by the much graver spectre of unemployment in the longer term.³² Moreover, aside from the obvious effect of containerisation on manning levels, the deskilling and relocation of dock-work also posed a new threat to the very nature of the dockers’ occupational identity and culture. The unloading of containers required no specialist handling skills in the traditional sense, hence the quasi-autonomous role of the ‘gang’ in managing and organising work tasks and processes was removed. Gang manning strengths were also under threat as the labour-intensive methods of break-bulk handling were superseded by these technological advances.³³ As Sapsford and Turnbull retrospectively calculated with their strike model, mechanisation was a fundamental threat to the dockers’ occupation and way of life and incrementally this was reflected in the nature and causes of industrial strife on the docks in the proceeding years, as dockers’ representation gradually came to recognise the impact of containerisation on employment opportunities in the industry.³⁴ When all of the above factors were infused with a new system of local shop steward representation

²⁹ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 24-25.

³⁰ Turnbull, P. & Sapsford, D. ‘Why did Devlin fail? Casualism and conflict on the docks’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 252 (pp. 237-257).

³¹ Durcan, J. W., McCarthy, W. E. J. and Redman, G. P. *Strikes in Post-War Britain* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1983), p. 304.

³² Indeed, the number of registered dockers employed in the industry fell from 51000 in 1967 to 38000 in 1971 – a 25% reduction in four years (Source: Statement by the TUC to the National Ports Council Enquiry into Non-Scheme Ports, October 17th 1972).

³³ Deegan, F. *There’s No Other Way* (Liverpool: Toulouse 1980), p. 85.

³⁴ Sapsford, D. & Turnbull, P. ‘Dockers, Devlin and industrial disputes’, *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, March 1990, pp. 26-35.

and hence greater decentralisation of bargaining, as recommended by the Devlin committee and already being rolled out by the TGWU, it is clear in retrospect that there was potential for increasingly fractious labour relations in the industry. Liverpool in particular witnessed a sharp rise in strike incidence between 1967 and 1970, becoming easily the most strike-prone port in the country.³⁵

Liverpool and modernisation

The Devlin recommendations were generally welcomed by Liverpool's port employers and the Employers' Association of the Port of Liverpool (EAPL). Local employers accepted the need to reform the system of employment in order to enable modernisation and the Association acknowledged that 'the Inquiry was fair and thorough and had gone deep to the roots of the problems of the industry'.³⁶ The EAPL even sought to voluntarily reduce the number of individual employers on the docks to comply with the Devlin Report.³⁷ Its intentions were not solely selfless, however, as the Association was extremely interested in introducing container-handling facilities to the port and in eliminating 'category A restrictive practices' as part of the modernisation programme. Of particular concern was the pre-eminence of the 'welt' at the port and employers proposed to tackle 'the failure of management which [it] represented' by establishing 'a code of practice for authorised breaks' and 'a set of acceptable timekeeping rules'.³⁸

Nevertheless, the employers' perception of the Devlin Report was not shared by the dockers and their unofficial representatives. Although an official shop steward system was due to be introduced to the dock industry as part of the reforms, Liverpool and other ports already had unofficial committees consisting of cross-union shop-floor representation.³⁹ The EAPL was shocked to learn that Liverpool's

³⁵ Liverpool's 'days lost per man annually' rate (total man days lost per year, divided by number in workforce) was 2.4 times the national average 1967-1970 (Source: Mellish, M. *The Docks After Devlin*, London: Heinemann 1972, pp. 42-43, Table III & IV).

³⁶ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 March 1965 (Maritime Museum Archives, Albert Dock, Liverpool).

³⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 10 August 1965. The EAPL recognised that the number of employers at the port would need to be reduced to around twelve to comply with the Report and asked for voluntary withdrawals and mergers amongst its members. Forty-three individual employers attended the meeting.

³⁸ EAPL meeting minutes, 10 August 1965. For more details on and an explanation of the 'welt', see Chapter 3.

³⁹ The Liverpool Port Workers' Committee was initially formed in the late 1940s (Source: Hikins, H. 'Liverpool dockers, 1967' in H. Hikins (ed.) *Building the Union: Studies on the Growth of the*

unofficial Port Workers' Committee had called for a port-wide strike to coincide with the implementation of Devlin Phase 1 on 18 September 1967. Mr. Lindsay-Alexander, Chairman of the EAPL, appealed to the dockers that 'security, stability and dignity are there for you to grasp. Grasp them and support your Union which has fought so hard for you'.⁴⁰ Despite these sentiments being echoed by the leadership of the TGWU, the Government and the National Association of Port Employers (NAPE), 'D-Day' witnessed a rash of strikes across several of the major ports.⁴¹ However, while the Devlin Phase 1 strikes elsewhere petered out within a week, Liverpool's continued unabated with the majority of its 12000-strong workforce out.⁴²

The principal source of dissent regarding the local decasualisation proposals hinged upon disparities in piecework and overtime rates between Liverpool and other ports, particularly London – average earnings were ten percent lower than the national average spread over a longer working week.⁴³ Moreover, the manner in which the local agreement was imposed on the workforce, without any real consultation with shop-floor opinion, had alienated the majority of dockers. Indeed, dissatisfaction with the TGWU was widespread amongst dockers in Liverpool at this time. The National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union (NASDU) continued to wield influence on Merseyside and, as previously noted, a significant number of men were non-union, or 'none-ers', having left the TGWU in protest at its perceived unrepresentative and undemocratic nature.⁴⁴

Workers' Movement, 1756-1967, Liverpool: Toulouse 1973, p. 184; Author's interview with J.D., December 2009; Jones, *Union Man*, p. 186).

⁴⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 16 September 1967.

⁴¹ 'D-Day' was a popular title amongst the Press for the beginning of the implementation of Devlin Phase 1, 18 September 1967. Most of the major ports were on strike to coincide with the implementation of the reforms, with the exception of Southampton and Bristol while Hull returned to work after one day out. Both the District Docks Secretary (Region 6, Liverpool) Lew Lloyd and Minister for Labour Ray Gunter were quoted in the Press promoting the benefits of the Devlin reforms (Source: *Liverpool Echo*, 16 September 1967).

⁴² Parts of London docks remained out for longer over the 'continuity' issue, i.e. men handling loading and unloading on a specific ship should be allowed to work on the job until completion. The figure of 12000 dockers employed at Liverpool's port includes some 2000 on the Birkenhead side of the river (Source: *Liverpool Echo*, 16 September 1967 Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 73; Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 186-188).

⁴³ Dock Labour Joint Committee, 'Port of Liverpool – Principal provisions of agreements governing hours of work, rates of pay and conditions applicable to Registered Dock Workers', September 1967 (Modern Record Centre); Letter from Sir Jack Scamp to the Editor of the Institute of Personnel Management detailing the final pay deal at Liverpool, 15 December 1967 (Modern Records Centre).

⁴⁴ See Chapter 3 for a history on trade unionism on the docks and the dominance of the 'White' versus the growth of the 'Blue' in the post-war era.

There were other localised issues which contributed to anti-Devlin sentiment. In particular, secondary concerns relating to the arbitrary relocation of RDWs to new permanent employers, away from their traditional areas of work, caused considerable disquiet amongst the men:

You were allocated to various employers and some people allocated to [particular] employers didn't want to go... people had worked historically in one area for years. In our area old stalwarts got shipped out who'd been there for thirty or forty years... so there was massive disruption. It wasn't done on a fair basis.⁴⁵

Although dockers had been approached by the local dock labour board regarding reallocation to particular employers, unofficial leaders encouraged men to refrain from stating a preference as this may be construed as a tacit acceptance of the reforms, meaning that some men were reallocated without their consent.⁴⁶ So, it is clear that, aside from the principal issue of pay disparities between ports, there were also local nuances relating to custom and tradition at Liverpool which contributed to rank-and-file rejection of the decasualisation restructuring. At a mass meeting of around 4000 dockers at the Pier Head on 19 September, the unofficial Port Workers Committee put forward a list of demands which included reassurances regarding redundancies, improvements in sick pay and pension contributions as well as pay increases across the board.⁴⁷ The EAPL, and indeed the TGWU, were quite surprised and dismayed by the dockers' resistance to reforms. The Association refused to negotiate over any details until there was a full resumption of work.⁴⁸ The TGWU also implored the dockers to accept the Devlin Agreement and return to work while local negotiations could begin over piecework rates.⁴⁹ Despite the employers' determination not to concede any ground under duress, the strike was

⁴⁵ Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 19 September 1967.

⁴⁸ EAPL meeting minutes, 22 September 1967.

⁴⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 18 September 1967.

estimated to be costing customers £100,000 per day as ninety-one ships lay idle in the Port.⁵⁰

However, with the strike only five days old, there was a growing divergence of opinion amongst dockers over how best to proceed. Another mass meeting of 4000 dockers on 23 September ended in a marginal vote against a return to work. This was despite some members of the unofficial committee urging the workforce to remain on strike.⁵¹ It was clear that a significant section of the men wished to heed the Union's advice. The EAPL seized on the apparently wavering resolve of the strikers by the Chairman releasing a statement which read:

The confusion at this morning's unofficial meeting is the best evidence that the dockworkers have been led up the garden path. I am confident that most of them will now realise that they have been hoodwinked and will turn up for work on Monday.⁵²

On Monday 25 September there was a further fractious mass meeting at the Pier Head attended by 6000 dockers. A return to work motion was defeated more comprehensively on this occasion but was accompanied by some acrimonious scenes as scuffles broke out amongst a section of the floor.⁵³ The local newspaper reported that five men from the crowd hustled onto the speakers platform with noses and mouths bloodied, before one declared 'they're nothing but bullies. We want to go back [to work] and this is what we get'.⁵⁴ Despite the marginal vote the previous Friday this show of hands, attended by a greater proportion of the workforce, gave a clear majority to the strike mandate. Opinions were still divided and the continuation of the strike hotly-disputed but there was no breaking ranks – if the majority was in favour then all stayed out, an example of the fierce tradition of workplace democracy apparent on Liverpool docks even before the introduction of an official shop steward system. Moreover, the divergence in opinion illustrates the

⁵⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 19 September 1967. In the same newspaper report, which was released in co-operation with the EAPL, it was estimated that the dockers were also losing a total of £27000 per day in wages.

⁵¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 23 September 1967.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 September 1967.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

complications encountered when attempting to categorise dockers as an 'homogeneous mass'.⁵⁵

As the strike deepened there were calls from the unofficial committee for the TGWU to make it official.⁵⁶ Tim O'Leary (National Docks and Waterways Secretary) arrived on Merseyside to attempt to conciliate in the dispute, without much success.⁵⁷ It took the intervention of Jack Jones (Assistant General Secretary of the TGWU) to make any headway. Because of his background and the relative unpopularity in Liverpool of London-born O' Leary, Jones was tasked with finding a solution to the strike at the port.⁵⁸ As demonstrated above, the relationship between full-time dock officials and the unofficial committee was hostile, the employers refused to negotiate and so the local dispute was at a stalemate. Jones apparently persuaded the Government and the TGWU hierarchy that an independent conciliator was the best means of securing a settlement.⁵⁹ Jack Scamp was appointed to the post due to his broad-ranging experience as an arbiter in other areas of industry and his involvement in the Devlin Committee. His Inquiry began in earnest on 16 October with the authority to 'inquire into the locally determined aspects of the system of payments and earning opportunities of registered dock workers in the port of Liverpool (including Birkenhead) and to make recommendations'.⁶⁰

The Scamp Inquiry received evidence from all sides: employers, the TGWU and the unofficial committee. However it was to glean no immediate agreement, as initially hoped. Attitudes amongst the dockers had hardened by this stage and there was little indication that a settlement was imminent. At a mass meeting on Friday 20 October, the dockers voted to stay on strike until employers had dropped their precondition that no negotiations could commence until the men had returned to work.⁶¹ The mood of the men is clear from letters written to Scamp:

⁵⁵ See Chapter 3 of this thesis for an overview of typical assumptions regarding dock-workers and their ideological and organisational tendencies.

⁵⁶ EAPL meeting minutes, 28 September 1967; *Liverpool Echo*, 28 September 1967.

⁵⁷ EAPL meeting minutes 3 October 1967; *Liverpool Echo*, 28 September 1967.

⁵⁸ James Larkin Jones was born and bred in Garston, Liverpool. He was the son of a docker and had worked on the docks himself as a young man (Source – Jones, *Union Man*).

⁵⁹ Jones, *Union Man*, p. 186; Lindop, 'The dockers, part 1', p. 41.

⁶⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 16 October 1967.

⁶¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 20 October 1967.

Dear Sir,

It has been recognised for many years by the Liverpool dockworkers that so far as pay was concerned they had become second class citizens in comparison with London and other ports. Owing to a succession of inefficient and couldn't care less trade union officials the present situation was bound to happen and the only surprise is that the dockers were able to contain themselves for so long. The employers of Merseyside have pocketed untold millions of port workers' pay during these years, and I would ask you to look upon this case in that light and not in the amount it is going to cost them now. When they meet these claims they will still be paying far less than other ports. The claims we have made from which you hear from our representatives are only the basis for a return to work, after that negotiations must continue to bring our piecework bonus earnings and differential payments to the level of London – nothing less will do... Every port would then be indeed equal, with no poor relations (i.e. Liverpool at present)... basic wages [are] being negotiated on a national scale, while other forms of pay are not – it is bordering on the farcical and will always lead to inequalities and trouble.

I am not a member of any political group and I am thirty-four years a docker in practically every department. I am sure you will take notice in your wisdom, of the sincerity of this document, which voices the feeling of all Liverpool port workers.⁶²

As the Liverpool dock strike dragged towards its sixth week, the Prime Minister was forced to intervene. Harold Wilson arrived in Liverpool, cutting short a state trip to Mexico and summoned the various parties for a meeting at his room in the Adelphi Hotel. Jack Jones, Bill Tonge (Chairman of NAPE) and a member of the unofficial strike committee arrived at the room at 4:45am where the Prime Minister stressed 'the serious consequences of any failure to reach agreement... the country could not contemplate the idea of the Port remaining on strike for a further indefinite period'.⁶³ Wilson's intervention finally encouraged Liverpool's employers to make a cash offer to end the strike. This incorporated improvements to the fall-

⁶² Letter from James Walker to Sir Jack Scamp, 16 October 1967 (Modern Records Centre). One of several letters to Scamp and the TGWU from Liverpool dockworkers contained in this archive, most authors identify inequalities in pay between ports as a principal cause of the unrest. See also for example, D. Fagan's letter to the TGWU.

⁶³ EAPL meeting minutes, 21 October 1967.

back guarantee, piecework rates and changes to the sick pay and pension schemes.⁶⁴ Although the offer was endorsed by Jones and the Union, Scamp and Wilson, Liverpool's dockers voted to remain out.⁶⁵ The employers' offer only addressed some of the concerns of the dockers and the unofficial committee remained absolutely determined that all of its demands were met. Principal amongst these remaining demands, aside from the piecework improvements, was a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies, a revision of the continuity rule for decasualisation and a £6 increase to sick pay rates.⁶⁶ James Benbow, the Chairman of the unofficial Port Workers' Committee, implored those gathered at the mass meeting on 25 October to vote against a return to work until their outstanding demands were met claiming 'we have achieved at this stage 75 per cent of what we set out to achieve... we are on the verge of victory but only if we stand fast'.⁶⁷

The breakthrough in the dispute finally came two days later. The unofficial committee's demands had been met by employers with the exception of a revision of piecework rates and incentives to attain parity with London. It was agreed that this would be negotiated upon a return to work.⁶⁸ At a mass meeting at the Pier Head on Friday 27 October attended by 6000 dockers, a return to work motion was successful. However, there were still several hundred dissidents amongst the crowd who vocally challenged the platform when the proposal to return to work was made. There was considerable objection to the absence of a concrete piecework deal and the successful motion was subject to howls of derision from a small section of the men.⁶⁹ Ultimately, the previously reticent EAPL, under considerable duress from the Government, Scamp, Jones and the economic strains of a six-week stoppage had conceded to the dockers' demands. The agreement was signed between Jack Jones (on behalf of the unofficial committee) and Lindsay-Alexander on 27 October; work resumed on the thirtieth.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 21 October 1967.

⁶⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 October 1967. At a mass meeting on 25 October, attended by 6000 dockers, the return to work motion was easily defeated with only around a quarter of the men in favour.

⁶⁶ EAPL meeting minutes, 21 October 1967.

⁶⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 October 1967.

⁶⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 27 October 1967.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Although the return to work vote was successfully carried, the strike committee faced some awkward questioning from the floor and several hundred men voted against.

⁷⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 27 October 1967; Jones, *Union Man*, p. 189.

Scamp's report was also published on 30 October 1967, after agreement had been reached on a return to work.⁷¹ It supported the Liverpool dockworkers' claim that they were the lowest earning in the industry and recommended that average earnings at the port should be increased through piecework and incentive improvements.⁷² Scamp went further by roundly condemning the effect the 'welt' had on 'an efficient system of work' and 'proper pay conditions' at the port.⁷³ However, he also acknowledged that the 'welt' was used by dockers as a means to improve earnings by creating additional overtime. He therefore recommended that incentive bonuses be negotiated to help to improve productivity, eliminate restrictive practices and prepare the port for modernisation and mechanisation, though these discussions should be conducted through the newly-established Local Modernisation Committee (LMC).⁷⁴ Indeed, the EAPL noted after the port got back to full working that 'productivity... had fallen as a result of the disincentive effect of the settlement arrived at through Mr. Scamp's conciliation. Negotiations with the Union on the revision of the Port's incentive payment system had now started'.⁷⁵

The settlement of the dispute was widely interpreted as a significant victory for Liverpool's dockers.⁷⁶ Moreover, the success of the unofficial action despite opposition from their own union, employers and the Government, gave the nascent local Shop Steward Committee considerable momentum and general support from the quayside:

In 1967 when that shop steward movement came along... the men were 100% behind [it]... the men themselves elected [the stewards] and over the

⁷¹ Scamp, A.J. *Report of Inquiry into the Locally Determined Aspects of the System of Payment and Earning Opportunities of Registered Dock Workers in the Port of Liverpool (including Birkenhead)* (London: HMSO, October 1967).

⁷² Letter from Scamp to the Editor of The Institute of Personnel Management detailing the final pay deal at Liverpool, 15 December 1967 (Modern Records Centre); *Liverpool Echo*, 30 October 1967.

⁷³ *Liverpool Echo*, 30 October 1967.

⁷⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 30 October 1967. One of the principle demands of employers during the consultative stage of the Devlin reforms was that the proposed permanent employment of dockers by individual employers be offset by modernisation in work practices to minimise inefficiency and improve profitability and productivity, especially in the face of the growing dominance of containerisation. To these ends, Local Modernisation Committees were established at every Scheme port to link improved output and efficiency to pay negotiations. These committees were made up of equal employer-union representation. The union side was made up of representatives from the local shop steward machinery plus the District Dock Secretary. There was also a National Modernisation Committee established.

⁷⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 13 November 1967.

⁷⁶ *Financial Times*, 18 November 1967; *Lloyds List*, 18 November 1967.

period of two years [two-year terms] the men could change their opinion... and so there was all sorts of factors which created a powerful movement. A very powerful movement.⁷⁷

The traditionally fragmented nature of labour organisation at Liverpool docks, previously characterised by sectionalism, inter-union conflict, selective non-unionisation and even sectarianism, was to undergo a significant transformation over the next few years. Essential to the process of shop steward empowerment was the broader re-orientation of trade union policy on a national scale. Jack Jones became permanent TGWU General Secretary in 1969 and was firmly committed to the democratisation of the union through the devolution of bargaining power to shop stewards, a policy which began under Frank Cousins.⁷⁸ In Liverpool, Lew Lloyd had been appointed as TGWU District Docks Secretary in 1964, succeeding Jimmy O'Hare. He was native to the city and the industry, having worked on the docks prior to becoming an officer. He shared Jones' outlook on democratisation, assisting in the transition towards an effective local shop steward system in the wake of Devlinism.⁷⁹

Shop steward elections in the industry were free and inclusive. There was no restriction of choice to TGWU members and this had several ramifications. Whereas the TGWU had traditionally banned Communist Party members from holding union positions and sought to marginalise the 'Blue' union wherever possible, stewards were elected by the workforce of each company in each dock area regardless of their union affiliation or political persuasion.⁸⁰ Lindop argues that this led to the integration of militants into the official structure of representation on the docks, leading to worse rather than better industrial relations post-1967.⁸¹ When combined

⁷⁷ Lindop's interview with Liverpool Stewards.

⁷⁸ Jack Jones' speech to TGWU Biennial Delegate Conference 1969, *TGWU Biennial Conference Report 1969* (Modern Records Centre).

⁷⁹ Professor Fred Lindop's interview with Lew Lloyd and Jimmy Symes, 1981.

⁸⁰ Indeed, the Communist Party was traditionally popular amongst dockers and many were members. For more detail on the influence of the Communist Party in the dock industry see: McIlroy, J. 'The first great battle in the march to socialism: Dockers, Stalinists and Trotskyists in 1945', *Revolutionary History*, Vol. 6, 2/3, pp. 105-159; Hunter, B. *They Knew Why They Fought: Unofficial Struggles and Leadership on the Docks, 1945-1989* (Index House: London 1994); Phillips, J. 'The postwar political consensus and industrial unrest in the docks, 1945-55', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1995, pp. 302-319; Pennington, B. 'Docks: breakaway and unofficial movements' *International Socialism*, No. 2, Autumn 1960, pp. 5-11.

⁸¹ Lindop, 'The dockers, part 1', pp. 37-38.

with the spectre of rapid modernisation and concerns about the long-term future of the industry, this could help to explain a spike in strike action thereafter.

Although shop steward elections were conducted in late 1967 at Liverpool, it took twelve months for the system to develop properly. There were some initial organisational difficulties related to the geographical spread of different dock areas over approximately ten miles of waterfront and the representation of workers across the various port employers. At the outset the shop steward system operated in an ad-hoc area-by-area fashion, with no real synchronisation. Eventually, late in 1968, a coherent system emerged with a central committee and regular port-wide shop steward meetings attended by as many as one hundred and twenty shop stewards.⁸² Indeed, the Committee quickly became the ascendant force in bargaining and policy-making at Liverpool docks, completely superseding the influence of union officials and ultimately dominating the TGWU Docks District Lay Committee.⁸³ The newly-formed official Port Shop Steward Committee comprised largely of the unofficial leaders of the decasualisation strike, subsequently elected as stewards.⁸⁴

In recent years considerable research has been undertaken to establish how workplace organisation is cultivated and sustained.⁸⁵ Kelly, Franzosi and others have attempted to advance theories of industrial action based on the process by which workers are bound into a collective actor.⁸⁶ These theories of mobilisation emphasise the importance of workplace leadership, usually in the form of shop stewards, in framing issues and encouraging collective action where there is thought to be a grievance with the behaviour or policies of management. However, labour organisation amongst RDWs at Liverpool differs distinctly from the experience of

⁸² The details of the initial post-Devlin development of the local Shop Steward Committee are derived from author's interviews with J.D., December 2009 and L.D., December 2009. Also see Lindop's interview with the Liverpool Stewards.

⁸³ Many shop stewards from the local committee were later elected onto the TGWU's district and national lay committees meaning that official Branch policy gradually came to mirror that of the Shop Steward Committee's. This will be considered at greater length later (Source: Author's interview with F.L., January 2011; Author's interview with L.D., December 2009; Lindop, 'The dockers, part 1', pp. 43-44).

⁸⁴ Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

⁸⁵ For an overview of the present state of the historiographical debate, see Chapter 2.

⁸⁶ Kelly, J. *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves* (London: Routledge 1998); Franzosi, R. *The Puzzle of Strikes: Class and State Strategies in Post War Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995); Tilly, C. *From Mobilisation to Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill 1978); Klandermans, B. *The Social Psychology of Protest* (Oxford: Blackwell 1997).

workers in other industries, particularly factory workers, upon whom the majority of previous case studies are based.⁸⁷

Whereas factory workers enjoyed contracts of employment and established working patterns, dockers were prone to acute underemployment and casualism prior to 1967. The unofficial Port Workers' Committee operated in extremely adversarial conditions prior to formalisation of an official shop steward system in the industry, yet it still managed to effectively mobilise opposition to the Devlin reforms, as well as in several other earlier disputes. One possible explanation for this lies partially in the manner in which work was carried out on the docks. Company foremen devolved responsibility for the execution of tasks to the 'gang', each with its own 'leader' who organised and represented the other men.⁸⁸ The arrangement of the industry, although rooted in the inequities of the casual system, therefore effectively established a surfeit of leaders, responsible for their gang and practised in negotiating with management over piecework rates, bonuses etc. These leaders, experienced in *ad hoc* bargaining and formulating and conveying grievance, formed the backbone of the unofficial movement. The historic intransigence of the TGWU officers towards dockers' grievances merely strengthened their resolve to fight their own corner and contributed to the mobilisation of workers across different gangs, particularly those working on the same ship, or in the same area of the port.

So, whereas factory collectivism is thought to be fostered and maintained by a small and select group of activist and leader stewards it could be argued that, because of the influence of casualism and the peculiar structure and independence of work groups, there was a much larger pool of these figures available to frame issues and direct grievance on the docks. This encouraged a strong and fiercely democratic unofficial movement to emerge at the port despite the obvious impact casualism had on effective organisation, the principles of which were transposed onto the official shop steward system post-1967 and helps to account for the dockers' propensity for workplace activism and militancy. Of course, these structural realities of the

⁸⁷ See, for example: Batstone, E., Boraston, I. and Frenkel, S. *Shop Stewards in Action: The Organisation of Workplace Conflict and Accommodation* (Oxford: Blackwell 1977); Lane, T. & Roberts, K. *Strike At Pilkingtons* (London: Fontana 1971); Beynon, H. *Working For Ford* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1973); Darlington, R. *The Dynamics of Workplace Organisation: Shop Stewards' Organisation in Three Merseyside Plants* (London: Mansell 1994).

⁸⁸ For more detail on the pre-1967 system of employment and various disputes, see Chapter 3.

industry were not restricted to Liverpool and the same can be said for other major ports in the country experiencing similar changes such as London.⁸⁹

The opening of Aintree Containerbase

One of the first major challenges for the recently-established Port Shop Steward Committee was the imminent opening of Aintree Containerbase. The Aintree base was a mere few miles from the Liverpool dock estate, one of several new container 'stuffing and stripping' depots constructed by the Containerbase Federation across the country.⁹⁰ The company was undoubtedly on the leading edge of the container revolution and their purpose-built bases were amongst the first to be opened. In 1968, the TGWU and the Federation held discussions over union representation at the depots. It was decided by both parties that negotiations regarding recruitment should be conducted with the Road Transport Commercial (RTC) section of the TGWU and an agreement was signed in May 1968 to these ends.⁹¹ Container groupage work was disputed as it did not fall categorically under the jurisdiction of the NDLS and the definition of dock-work. However, mindful of how the container-stripping depots would be perceived by the Docks section, provision was made in the agreement that 'preference will be given to Registered Dock Workers' when recruitment began but significantly that 'consideration will also be given to other suitably qualified workers'.⁹²

The Liverpool Shop Steward Committee was extremely concerned that a container-stripping facility was being built close to the dock estate and that exclusive right to employment at the depot was not reserved for RDWs.⁹³ Worse still was the perception that preference had been given to the RTC section of the Union ahead of their own, especially since container-handling was more synonymous with dock-work. Despite the Union moving to reassure dockers that preference would be given

⁸⁹ For more detail on labour relations in the port of London around this time see, for example: Hill, S. *The Dockers – Class and Tradition in London* (London: Heinemann, 1976); Lindop, F. 'The dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, part 1: Shop stewards and containerisation', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 5, Spring 1998, pp. 33-72.

⁹⁰ The Containerbase Federation had constructed new depots in London, Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester as well as Aintree.

⁹¹ EAPL meeting minutes, 1 July 1969.

⁹² *Liverpool Echo*, 30 June 1969.

⁹³ Author's interview with L.D., December 2009; Author's interview with F.L., January 2011; Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

to RDWs, the Committee announced that it intended to ban the handling of all containers through the port until agreement was reached over manning at Aintree.⁹⁴ After a three-hour meeting on 28 June 1969 between stewards, the District and National Docks Secretaries and the District Docks Committee, Lloyd was forced to announce that 'the shop stewards refused to accept the District Committee decision and we couldn't persuade them to change their minds'.⁹⁵ The 'blacking' of all port-wide container-handling was frostily-received by the EAPL, which claimed that the dispute was solely between the Containerbase Federation and the sections of the Union involved.⁹⁶ It announced that 'the Liverpool employers have every sympathy with the TGWU Docks section that these operations should be carried out by RDWs' but also that 'there is no dispute involving the port employers and no basis for any strike action or any general blacking of containers'.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the Shop Steward Committee announced after the Saturday meeting with TGWU officials that the blacking action would be replaced by strike action from Tuesday 1 July 1969.

For their part, the Containerbase Federation expressed unease at the prospect of guaranteeing all work for RDWs. The company protested that 'if dockworkers were given the work, they questioned whether the Road Transport Section would continue to deliver cargoes by lorry'.⁹⁸ Moreover, Containerbase management felt that 'if after spending millions of pounds [on the bases] dockers were introduced into them, all the bad practices would be taken with them and discipline would come under the NDLB... it was not just a local strike in Liverpool that was threatened but a national disaster'.⁹⁹ This last assertion made it clear that, although the original agreement with the RTC section of the Union made provision for the employment of RDWs at Containerbase depots, the company wanted to keep dockworker recruitment to a minimum because of their reputation for militancy and the statutory protection they were afforded by the Scheme.

So, in the absence of guarantees that all work at the Aintree depot would be the preserve of RDWs, the Shop Steward Committee brought the port to a standstill

⁹⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 1 July 1969.

⁹⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 28 June 1969.

⁹⁶ 'Blacking', derived from the term 'blacklegging', was the name given by dockers to a ban on containers with a specific origin or container traffic generally.

⁹⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 28 June 1969.

⁹⁸ EAPL meeting minutes, 1 July 1969.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

on 1 July. Around 8000 dockers had stopped work by 1pm across every area of the port, with Birkenhead joining the action the following day.¹⁰⁰ This was a vital show of strength for the Committee and it was not found wanting. It placed the utmost importance on protecting the definition of dock-work against the encroachment of container-stripping depots outside the dock estate. The reasoning amongst stewards was that ‘we knew that if they set it up in Aintree, they’d set it up elsewhere’.¹⁰¹ The wholehearted response to the strike from rank-and-file dockers indicates that the Shop Steward Committee had begun to operate effectively on a port-wide basis by 1969 and enjoyed general support from the quayside.

The effectiveness of the strike call led to a hasty intervention from the Union and once again Jack Jones was forced to mediate in a local dispute at the port. He, Tim O’Leary, Ken Jackson (TGWU National Secretary, RTC Section) and Sir Andrew Crichton (Chairman of the Containerbase Federation) met at Transport House in London to discuss the developing situation. Despite calls from Jones for the dockers to return to work while negotiations were conducted the men remained intransigent, voting at a mass meeting on 3 July to continue the strike.¹⁰² These were the same officials who endorsed the May 1968 manning agreement for Containerbase depots, but on this occasion the Union had been placed in a precarious position. It was eager to avoid a high-profile fissure occurring between the two trade groups. At the discussions, Jones argued that Containerbase should unilaterally tear up the previous agreement and state that all work at Aintree was dock-work and that the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board (MDHB) should operate as agents to provide RDWs for Containerbase.¹⁰³ This was almost a complete *volte face* by the Union, which insisted on Containerbase dispensing with the agreement unilaterally so that the union hierarchy could not be accused of taking sides.

Meanwhile at the local level, the Liverpool Shop Steward Committee was encouraged by the Union to meet members and shop stewards of the local district RTC section. These rank-and-file meetings proved to be extremely fruitful. While the Union hierarchy treaded softly to avoid inter-section conflict, a frank exchange

¹⁰⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 1 July 1969.

¹⁰¹ Author’s interview with J.D., December 2009.

¹⁰² *Liverpool Echo*, 3 July 1969.

¹⁰³ EAPL meeting minutes 1 July 1969.

of views locally eventually led to a cordial understanding being reached between the Shop Steward Committee and the local RTC section:

It was hard going at first... [but] in the end we developed a good relationship with the Road Transport section because they seen it was for their benefit as well. The problem they were suffering was that there were a lot of non-union drivers. So, down the docks, if anyone came in [driving a lorry] we could do a [union] card check... and if they never had a card, we could say we're refusing to either load or discharge you... That's how the blacking list originally came out.¹⁰⁴

Co-operation and agreement was reached between the two trade groups regarding containerisation as a challenge for both industries that would be met with a united front. A joint Docks-RTC liaison committee was established thereafter to deal with matters which concerned both parties. The strike was called off on Friday 4 July after the meeting between Union officials and Containerbase management in London ended with an agreement that the twenty existing workers at Aintree would be given registered docker status and that all future recruits would come from the local register.¹⁰⁵ The Containerbase Federation became licensed as a registered employer with the local Dock Labour Board. Once elected, the shop stewards for Aintree would sit on the Port Shop Steward Committee.¹⁰⁶ Containerbase had been forced to concede the dockers' demands and found itself in exactly the position it feared – compelled to exclusively employ RDWs and bound by the restrictions of the Scheme.

The Aintree dispute had a two-fold effect on local labour relations at the port: it further emboldened support from the quayside for the Shop Steward Committee and demonstrated its ability to pursue its policies without support from the TGWU, thus increasingly consigning the official machinery of the union to virtual redundancy in local negotiations and policy making. The Union had undoubtedly been forced into an inauspicious u-turn by the voracious nature of the dockers'

¹⁰⁴ Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

¹⁰⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 4 July 1969; *Liverpool Echo*, 30 June 1969; Deegan, *There's No Other Way*, pp. 104-105 (The *Echo* reported that Aintree Containerbase had 20 existing workers. Deegan claims that 26 workers at the depot were granted RDW status after the agreement).

¹⁰⁶ Author's interview with L.D., December 2009.

action, having authorised the Containerbase manning agreement only a year earlier. Furthermore, the Aintree dispute illustrated the difficulties shipping and cargo companies would face if actively seeking to circumvent the Scheme locally by outsourcing container-stripping duties. A prominent member of the Committee emphasised the importance of the Aintree settlement, 'I think once [employers] realised that they had to employ Registered Dock Workers to work [in container-stripping depots] they were useless anyway'.¹⁰⁷

Indeed prior to Aintree, Liverpool's port employers had already been approached by the Shop Steward Committee regarding container-stripping duties *on* the dock estate - 'we had agreements in the early days with the dock company management when they suggested to us that they were going into containerisation... on a 100% understanding that all ancillary work would be ours'.¹⁰⁸ If there was any lingering hope amongst employers inside and outside the port that they might use containerisation to dilute dockworkers' statutory jurisdiction over cargo-handling, the Aintree dispute certainly extinguished it. The 'stuffing and stripping' issue heralded a major point of future conflict in the industry both nationally and locally, a fact clearly not lost on the Liverpool Shop Steward Committee. They had moved quickly to impose their interpretation of the Scheme onto this emerging threat to employment in the industry, namely that 'anything within... a five mile radius [of the docks] was dock-work as far as we were concerned'.¹⁰⁹ The consensus reached with the local Road Transport section meant that any disputes over the outsourcing of container-stripping duties would be met with a united front, a development which would prove important in the future. By 1969 in Liverpool therefore, it appears that a strong, influential and well-organised Shop Steward Committee had come to the fore, pro-active in the defence of their local industry and prepared to defy employers, their union and the Government if necessary.

The 1970 national dock strike

Although bargaining in the dock industry was being rapidly decentralised to the local level, the TGWU was still responsible for negotiating the national basic

¹⁰⁷ Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

¹⁰⁸ Lindop's interview with Jimmy Symes and Lew Lloyd.

¹⁰⁹ Author's interview with L.D., December 2009.

weekly time rate.¹¹⁰ Prior to the Devlin reforms the Union submitted an annual pay claim at the National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry (NJC), a tradition which persisted in the medium term.¹¹¹ Negotiations in 1968 and 1969 concluded with an increase in holiday entitlement, improved employer pension contribution and the weekly minimum guarantee being calculated on a daily basis.¹¹² The TGWU, having failed to secure an increase in the weekly rate in previous years, lodged a claim for a substantial increase at the NJC in 1970.¹¹³ This was strongly resisted by NAPE because the ongoing local negotiations over the implementation of Devlin Phase Two would account for any increase in the time rate on a port-by-port basis. NAPE and the EAPL's stance on the issue was clear:

Since 85% of men [across the industry] were covered by talks currently proceeding on modernisation, employers were not prepared to increase the basic rate of £11.1.8 because of the consequential effect on piecework etc, which would set modernisation back for some years.¹¹⁴

NAPE was mindful that any rise in the basic rate was customarily accompanied by improvements in piecework and overtime premiums.¹¹⁵ Pre-empting the Phase Two negotiations by agreeing a nationally-dictated time rate increase would likely escalate the cost of settling local modernisation negotiations. In the face of a total rejection of the Union's claim, a TGWU National Dock Delegates Conference endorsed a call for a strike and tended twenty-eight days strike notice which was to commence on 14 July 1970.¹¹⁶ However, despite the threat of a national strike NAPE was determined not to concede a national pay rise that would be closely

¹¹⁰ The weekly time rate was a basic minimum wage for RDWs before piecework and bonus payments.

¹¹¹ The National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry consisted of an equal number of employer and union members. It was founded in 1920 as part of the Shaw Inquiry recommendations (an early Government inquiry into the casual system of employment on the docks) and dealt with establishing and administering the port industry's national minimum wage, overtime rates and holiday pay.

¹¹² Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 273.

¹¹³ The existing minimum weekly wage was £11.1s.8d. The Union sought an increase to £20/week (Source: *Liverpool Echo*, 15 July 1970; Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 273).

¹¹⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 10 July 1970.

¹¹⁵ Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 274.

¹¹⁶ TUC, 'Report of meeting between the Secretary of State for Employment and representatives of the TUC – Re: Dock Dispute', 15 July 1970 (Modern Records Centre).

followed by a local rise. A game of brinkmanship played out between the two right up until a couple of days before the strike was due to commence.

Although the Government had initially expressed indifference to the dispute, as the deadline neared Robert Carr, Secretary of State for Employment, was forced to intervene by arranging tri-partite talks for 10 July.¹¹⁷ At these talks, Jones and O'Leary argued that the Union had attempted to negotiate a basic time rate increase in previous years and had been stonewalled by NAPE. For the employers' part, Bill Tonge (Chairman of NAPE) contended that the national basic time rate would soon become superfluous once local Phase Two deals had been agreed and that even if employers were to sanction such a rise it would only benefit those RDWs at small ports where modernisation talks were not applicable.¹¹⁸ Tonge did actually approach the NAPE Executive for authority to raise the basic rate from £11.1.8 to £13.1.8 if it would secure an agreement, but his request was refused.¹¹⁹ Employers were, however, willing to make concessions in other areas. They suggested increasing the basic rate to £20 for those RDWs at smaller ports not covered by Phase Two negotiations. A further £1 per week was offered on top of the weekly modernisation payment for all RDWs. In addition they offered increases to fall-back pay, also to be applied to holiday pay.¹²⁰ These last two provisions ensured that the proposed deal would offer an improvement on take-home pay for all RDWs without prejudicing local negotiations over Phase Two.¹²¹ Carr also promised to set up an inquiry into the basic rate discord. On this basis, at the tri-partite discussions, the Union side agreed to seek deferment of the strike.¹²²

These last-ditch talks did not conclude until late on Monday 13 June. With just hours remaining until Britain's ports would grind to a standstill, Jones took to the television to appeal to dockers to postpone their strike action until a Dock Delegates Conference could reconvene on 15 June to debate the employers' offer.¹²³ Nevertheless, Jones' appeal was either too late or largely ignored. At the port of

¹¹⁷ TUC, 'Report of meeting between the Secretary of State for Employment and representatives of the TUC – Re: Dock Dispute', 15 July 1970; Jones, *Union Man*, p. 222.

¹¹⁸ Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 276.

¹¹⁹ EAPL meeting minutes, 10 July 1970.

¹²⁰ TUC, 'Report of meeting between the Secretary of State for Employment and representatives of the TUC – Re: Dock Dispute', 15 July 1970; EAPL meeting minutes, 10 July 1970.

¹²¹ Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 275.

¹²² TUC, 'Report of meeting between the Secretary of State for Employment and representatives of the TUC – Re: Dock Dispute', 15 July 1970.

¹²³ *Liverpool Echo*, 14 July 1970.

Liverpool, only approximately 1000 dockers out of 12,000 turned in for work and the port was brought to a halt.¹²⁴ At a mass meeting at the Pier Head attended by 3000, which was originally arranged as the first of a series of strike meetings, the dockers voted for an immediate return to work starting with the night shift that evening. Jimmy Symes, Chairman of the Port Shop Steward Committee, told the gathered rank-and-file 'we are as confused as you are'. Lew Lloyd took to the platform to apologise for the perplexity, blaming the last-minute nature of the deal and Jones' appeal, stating 'we had no opportunity to get this across to you'.¹²⁵

The final hour agreement reached on 13 June seemed to avert the first official national dock strike since 1926. However, when Jones addressed the recalled Dock Delegate Conference on 15 June to request that the strike mandate be deferred by four weeks while the employers' offer was examined, the motion was marginally defeated.¹²⁶ Instead, the original motion endorsing strike action 'until the claim for a higher national basic rate is achieved' was refloated and was successful.¹²⁷ The national strike was back on and commenced the following day. This development encouraged the Government to bring forward the Inquiry into the pay claim, which was to be headed by Lord Pearson.¹²⁸ NAPE registered its disapproval of the strike by releasing a statement which read:

The employers greatly regret that there should be a national dock strike in view of the offer already tabled. Following the [Dock Delegates] conference Mr. Jones asked employers for talks on the claim for a higher national basic rate. The employers are prepared to hold talks only in the event... that the strike is withdrawn.¹²⁹

However, Liverpool's Port Shop Steward Committee seemed determined that strike action should be taken to secure the increase in basic rate. The delegates from

¹²⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 14 July 1970.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 15 July 1970; Jones, *Union Man*, p. 222. Jones' motion was defeated by 43 votes to 39.

¹²⁷ TUC, 'Report of meeting between the Secretary of State for Employment and representatives of the TUC – Re: Dock Dispute', 15 July 1970; *Liverpool Echo*, 15 July 1970. The strike motion was passed by 48 votes to 32.

¹²⁸ Department of Employment Press Release, 'National Dock Strike – Statement by the Secretary of State for Employment, Robert Carr', 16 July 1970 (Modern Records Centre).

¹²⁹ NAPE Press Release, 15 July 1970 (Modern Records Centre).

Liverpool who attended the recalled conference voted overwhelmingly for the original strike mandate to be carried.¹³⁰ The mood of the Committee is clear from a telegram sent to Jack Jones from the Treasurer, Frank Deegan:

Merseyside dock stewards support the Docks' Conference rejection of the employers' disgusting offer. We call on [TGWU] Executive Council support in our determined stand for a £20 basic wage, nothing less. The employers are responsible for this fight – let's give them one. We call on the Executive Council to instruct dockers to prepare, if necessary, for [a] long struggle.¹³¹

Lord Pearson commenced his inquiry with a fair degree of urgency on 21 July as the Government declared a State of Emergency.¹³² The strike was proving solid and even TGWU members at non-Scheme ports such as Felixstowe had stopped work under instruction from the Union.¹³³ Both employers and the Union had elected to wait until the Pearson recommendations were known before resuming talks. It was in this context that a hurried Inquiry was conducted, lasting just one week. The Report was published on 28 July and it found broadly in favour of the Union. The claim for a £20 per week basic rate was not endorsed; instead take-home pay was increased by enhancing the overtime premium. However, a £20 per week minimum fall-back guarantee broken down into a £4 per day was recommended, accompanied by a minimum £1 per week increase in modernisation payments.¹³⁴ The employers agreed to abide by Pearson's recommendations, particularly since they had not been forced to concede the basic rate increase.¹³⁵ Essentially, the strike had failed in achieving its stated aim although all RDWs saw improvements in their take-home pay. At a Dock Delegates Conference on 29 July, a return to work

¹³⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 16 July 1970. Liverpool had 12 delegates at the conference.

¹³¹ Telegram from Frank Deegan (Treasurer, Liverpool Port Shop Steward Committee) to Jack Jones, 16 July 1970 (Modern Records Centre).

¹³² Although the Government declared a State of Emergency it did not use many of the powers available under the Emergency Powers Act. The Army was not used to handle cargo. Medical supplies and perishable goods were still handled by dockers, with their wages being donated to charity (Source: Letter from Jack Jones to Home Secretary Reg Maudling, 22 July 1970, Modern Records Centre).

¹³³ Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 277.

¹³⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 29 July 1970; EAPL meeting minutes, 28 July 1970; Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 277. The £20/week or £4/day minimum fall back guarantee was not the same as the basic rate because it only applied where no work was available for an RDW. Most RDWs earned far in excess of £20/week after modernisation, bonus and piecework rates were accrued.

¹³⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 28 July 1970.

motion was successful by fifty-one votes to thirty-one.¹³⁶ The fact that the basic rate had not specifically been adjusted was not lost on some activists, who voiced their disapproval as delegates left the conference at Transport House with shouts of ‘you’ve sold us out’ and ‘we want Jack Jones’.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, at a mass meeting on 31 July at Liverpool Stadium, local dockers accepted the deal and followed other ports back to work on 3 August.

The first national dock strike in forty-four years had been ended by yet another government-sponsored public inquiry. However, the strike had been a rather strange and unconventional affair from the start. Although the original action was pursued by the official leadership in furtherance of its national wage claim, its attempts to call off the strike at the final hour were defeated by a more militant section of the Dock Delegates Conference. So why did the official leadership of Jones and O’Leary briefly lose control of events despite being the initial architects of the dispute? Both Lindop and Wilson attribute the strike to a number of militant delegates from the two major ports who wished to broaden its remit to contest the impact of technology on job prospects in the industry.¹³⁸ Indeed, the strike was strongly supported by delegates from the ports of London and Liverpool yet their constituencies had the least to gain from an increase in the basic time rate because earnings once Phase Two negotiations were completed would far outstrip this figure. One possible but unlikely egalitarian explanation for the dispute could be that dockers’ leaders from these ports wanted to ensure that those smaller ports not included in Phase Two negotiations also enjoyed a fair deal.¹³⁹ Another possible interpretation, and one that this study offers, is that the rebel delegates intended to up-stage the leadership to illustrate where the power in the ports now lay, that is in the hands of local committees. Certainly, as Wilson also contends, the hi-jacking of the return to work conference was a feat of opportunism by more militant members, although the Union leadership was able to quickly bring the dispute back under its influence through the intervention of the Government and the establishment of the

¹³⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 29 July 1970.

¹³⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 29 July 1970.

¹³⁸ Lindop, ‘The dockers, part 1’, p. 52; Wilson, *Dockers*, pp. 273-277. Interestingly, there is a conspicuous gap in historiography relating to the 1970 national dock strike. Both the aforementioned dedicate only brief analysis to the dispute and other academic accounts are practically non-existent. Jones, *Union Man* (p. 222), acknowledges that his return to work motion was defeated at the recalled Dock Delegates Conference on 15 July but fails to offer an opinion as to why this was the case.

¹³⁹ Around 7000 RDWs across the country out of a total of 47,000 were excluded from Phase Two negotiations (Source: Pearson Inquiry Report, 28 July 1970, Modern Records Centre).

Pearson Inquiry.¹⁴⁰ The intra-union power struggle interpretation seems to hold good since the recurring question of who held the influence in the Docks section of the TGWU manifests itself again later as the dockers came into conflict with the Industrial Relations Act.

The implementation of Devlin Phase 2 at Liverpool

At most ports around the country, Devlin Phase Two was implemented in late 1970. Modernisation arrangements were negotiated at port-wide level through Local Modernisation Committees in order to tailor deals to the specific needs of each. However, for a number of reasons, Liverpool's Phase Two negotiations did not begin until mid-1970 and were not concluded until over a year later. Primarily, both employers and dockers were indifferent to further reforms. The dockers were enjoying previously-unrivalled earning potential and conditions under the first stage of Devlin through improvements to local piecework deals. For their part the employers were eager to ensure the continued smooth running of operations, especially as local industrial strife had been minimal since the 1970 national strike. Indeed the EAPL noted as late as May 1971 that 'the labour force in Liverpool had hung back over Devlin II and perhaps some employers were not too unthankful after seeing the results of modernisation in some other ports... The Chairman said that most men were apparently quite content with the current working of the Port'.¹⁴¹

Furthermore, despite escalating labour surpluses at other major ports, Liverpool's employers bucked the industry-wide trend by applying to the NDLB for additional recruitment to the local register. The initial application for a significant influx of seven hundred and thirty-two new RDWs was made in February 1969, although the process was delayed well into 1971 because of shop stewards' insistence that the Union nominate one hundred percent of the intake.¹⁴² Agreement between the Union and employers regarding future recruitment had been reached in July 1968 on a ratio of sixty/forty in favour of the Union. Nevertheless, stewards reneged on the deal, making it clear that no recruitment would be considered unless nomination was wholly in their hands. This stalemate had persisted for two years

¹⁴⁰ Wilson, *Dockers*, p. 273.

¹⁴¹ EAPL Annual General Meeting minutes, 3 May 1971.

¹⁴² EAPL Committee of the Association meeting minutes, 29 January 1971.

with neither side willing to concede to the other's demands.¹⁴³ However, with the labour shortage at the port becoming more acute, the employers need for additional men forced them to re-open negotiations. The serious situation of manning at the Port was debated, at length, by the EAPL:

People were talking about the rundown of labour because of containerisation but the Port was turning away practically every day shipping lines which wanted to come to Liverpool. This was because neither labour nor the required turnaround could be guaranteed... If they failed to take up the 732 men, even though they had to forego their principles to do so, the Port would become more difficult to keep afloat.¹⁴⁴

Despite the debilitating effect the shortage was having on attracting new business to the port, some employers remained extremely hostile to the notion of allowing shop stewards to effectively hold them to ransom. Foremost amongst their concerns was that conceding the issue 'would be seen as caving in by employers' and that 'new entrants would identify shop stewards, rather than employers, as being in command'.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, following a frank and heated exchange of views the Committee of the Association, by a narrow majority, agreed to one hundred percent nomination by the Union.¹⁴⁶ The labour shortage at Liverpool, which was uncharacteristic of the industry as a whole, is another example of the disparities between major Scheme ports, thus emphasising the need for more focused local study of the type which this thesis provides.

Meanwhile, running almost parallel to the protracted recruitment dispute, tentative discussions were underway regarding the implementation of the Phase Two. Initially, employers hoped to achieve an agreement on shift working, night and Sunday working and the abolition of overtime and piecework, to be replaced with an incentive-based bonus system.¹⁴⁷ However, early reactions from the Union side of the LMC indicated that Sunday working was unacceptable and 'while older men

¹⁴³ EAPL Committee of the Association meeting minutes, 29 January 1971.

¹⁴⁴ EAPL Committee of the Association meeting minutes, 15 March 1971.

¹⁴⁵ EAPL Committee of the Association meeting minutes, 15 March 1971.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ EAPL Committee of the Association meeting minutes, 1 July 1970.

might be more favourable disposed, the younger men did not like the loss of [piecework] and the restriction of earnings to £35 [per week]'.¹⁴⁸ As negotiations progressed, consensus was almost reached regarding basic pay with the employers' offer of £25 for a forty hour week. The Union side of the LMC agreed to a two eight-hour shift working pattern but insisted the basic pay offer should be raised to £27 and that piecework should be retained.¹⁴⁹ This was eventually agreed by employers. The basic weekly wage would be supplemented by incentive-based and piecework bonuses which could considerably enhance earnings as well as weekly modernisation allowances.¹⁵⁰ In the context of the unrest which accompanied the introduction of Devlin Phase One in 1967, the Phase Two negotiations had proceeded relatively quickly and quietly. The Agreement was ratified at a mass meeting of RDWs on Saturday 21 August.¹⁵¹ However, because some small issues remained outstanding, its implementation was delayed until 2 October 1971.¹⁵²

The case of implementation of Devlin Phase Two at Liverpool illustrates the complex and inconsistent nature of the local industry. Whereas other ports saw piecework scrapped as part of the Phase Two modernisation Liverpool, having only recently negotiated a satisfactory piecework system under Phase One, retained it. Indeed, Liverpool's piecework rates were a significant contributory factor to the industrial strife which surrounded the implementation of Phase One. Local Modernisation Committees were given considerable scope to negotiate their own Phase Two deals as necessary to boost productivity and such was Liverpool dockers' affinity for the potential enhancement in earning opportunities which piecework offered, the employers dare not scrap it despite initially being in favour of doing so. Nevertheless, employers had gained some concessions by formalising hours of work into shift-patterns and attaining a degree of workforce flexibility. Yet again, these negotiations demonstrate that local labour relations and work culture were inherently complex and underline the dangers of attempting to apply industry-wide assumptions or theoretical generalisations to an exceptionally nuanced situation. As shall be revealed in due course, the formalisation of piecework rates at Liverpool at the dockers' behest did little to suppress industrial strife at the port. Both Wilson and

¹⁴⁸ EAPL Committee of the Association meeting minutes, 10 July 1970.

¹⁴⁹ EAPL Committee of the Association meeting minutes, 16 July 1971.

¹⁵⁰ EAPL Committee of the Association meeting minutes, 17 December 1970.

¹⁵¹ EAPL Committee of the Association meeting minutes, 27 August 1971.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

Mellish argue that, since London's strike record improved notably after decasualisation whilst Liverpool's worsened, the highly conditional nature of piecework can be regarded as significant in determining strike proneness.¹⁵³ However, this supposition has since been challenged by Turnbull and Sapsford, who contend that mechanisation and its consequences for manning levels and the definition of dock work, was the most significant impetus to industrial unrest post-Devlin.¹⁵⁴

Conflict at Liverpool docks, 1972: The 'blacking' of haulage companies and the NIRC

The story of the London dockworkers' encounter with the Industrial Relations Act has been relatively well-researched and documented.¹⁵⁵ Unofficial industrial action, organised by the local stewards' committee, principally picketing Midland Cold Storage and Chobham Farm groupage depots, resulted in an extraordinary series of events in the summer of 1972 leading to the imprisonment of five dockers at Pentonville gaol under a warrant of contempt by the National Industrial Relations Court. This crisis shook the whole country, leading almost inconceivably to a TUC call for a General Strike and forcing the Conservative Government into a significant retreat via a very visible political intervention into the institution of the judiciary. However, while the most dramatic episode of this docks dispute occurred in London and has predictably attracted the most interest, the whole affair had its origins in the industrial action taken by Liverpool's dockers earlier that year.

The Liverpool dockers' blacking campaign against haulage companies considered to be undertaking container 'stuffing and stripping' duties without registered labour was the first major challenge to the Industrial Relations Act and the NIRC, providing the catalyst for later events in London. Liverpool's role in this dispute is often under-played or omitted completely, in favour of a London-centric or

¹⁵³ Wilson, *Dockers*, pp. 295-296; Mellish, *The Docks After Devlin*, pp. 134-135.

¹⁵⁴ Turnbull & Sapsford, 'Why did Devlin fail?', p. 252.

¹⁵⁵ Lindop, F. 'The Dockers and the Industrial Relations Act, part 2: The arrest and release of the "Pentonville Five"', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 6, Autumn 1998, pp. 65-100; Lindop, 'The dockers, part 1'; Weekes et al, *Industrial Relations*, pp. 278-294; Lyddon, D. 'Glorious summer', pp. 326-352.

institutional approach.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, running concurrently with the broader national furore were a series of local disputes relating to the opening of the brand-new container-handling facility at the Royal Seaforth Docks Complex. The object of this section is to analyse more closely the actions and strategy of the Liverpool Port Shop Steward Committee in its campaign for jurisdiction over local container-stripping duties and the sequence of events this set into motion both locally and nationally.

Labour relations in the dock industry became increasingly fractious in the early 1970s. As previously noted, the implementation of Devlin Phase 2 was dogged by delays, 1970 had brought the first national dock strike since 1926, containerisation was in the ascendancy and related employer abuse of loopholes in the Scheme were escalating. Add to these factors the growth of increasingly defensive and influential local shop steward committees, the formation of the unofficial National Port Shop Stewards Committee (NPSSC), fears about redundancy and the broader national industrial relations climate as previously detailed, and it appeared that all the ingredients for a potential flashpoint of militancy in the dock industry were present.

The defence of manning levels and perpetuation of job opportunities in the face of containerisation were of paramount concern for local shop steward committees. In London, the unchecked growth of the TUR and the outsourcing of container-stripping were the major sources of consternation. Similarly, in Liverpool the issue proved to be jurisdiction over ‘stuffing and stripping’ duties. A meeting of the NPSSC was arranged for December 1971 to debate the broader national strategy of job defence in the industry. It agreed on a three-point policy: that all ‘stuffing and stripping’ of containers, regardless of the location, should be the preserve of registered dockworkers; that all unregistered ports should be brought into the Scheme; that the TUR should be abolished in every port.¹⁵⁷ However, there were divisions amongst the delegates regarding how to proceed. London proposed a national strike a few months later as more stevedoring companies pulled out of the port, leaving their workforces on the burgeoning local TUR. This was resisted by

¹⁵⁶ Clegg, *The Changing System*, pp. 325-327; Moran, M. *The Politics of Industrial Relations: The Origins, Life and Death of the 1971 Industrial Relations Act* (London: Macmillan 1977), pp. 138-140, 186-189; Lyddon, ‘Glorious summer’; Weekes et al, *Industrial Relations*. However, Lindop ‘The dockers, pt. 1’ does document the industrial action at Liverpool as a precursor to the later events in London.

¹⁵⁷ Lindop, ‘The dockers, pt 1’, p. 54.

Liverpool, where the local steward committee was more interested in formulating a local campaign on the ‘stuffing and stripping’ issue, especially since the construction of the up-river Seaforth Container Terminal was continuing apace, due for unveiling in 1972.¹⁵⁸

Having witnessed the growth of local steward-led militancy at the port, the EAPL was enthused by the change of government in June 1970. At the Association’s Annual General Meeting in May 1971, the Chairman celebrated the Conservative’s entry to office as heralding the death of the spectre of nationalisation of the dock industry. Moreover, the employers’ optimism was further enhanced by the announcement of the introduction of the Industrial Relations Bill. The Bill was seen as a means to control the influence of the local steward committee at the port and was ‘welcomed by the Association as legislation which was badly needed by the Port of Liverpool... and must inspire them all with hope for the future’.¹⁵⁹ Such was the belief amongst employers at the port that the legislation would help to restore managerial prerogative, the Chairman of the Association encouraged its members to ‘redouble their efforts to seek new business in the faith that fair industrial weather was ahead’.¹⁶⁰

However, the Association’s hope that improved industrial relations might result from the punitive aspects of the Industrial Relations Bill was found to be somewhat premature. The legislation had caused considerable alarm at the official national level of the trade union movement but had little impact on the Liverpool stewards’ intention to pro-actively defend the local industry against the outsourcing of container-stripping duties. Although assurances had been received from port employers and the Port Authority regarding container ancillary work, several independent haulage companies were undertaking ‘stuffing and stripping’ operations at their depots outside the dock estate.¹⁶¹ As previously detailed, the 1969 Aintree Containerbase dispute was significant because it was the first test of the local steward committee and was characterised by co-operation between the dock shop stewards and the local Road Transport Commercial section. As a result, a joint docks-RTC liaison committee had been established and had operated locally

¹⁵⁸ Author’s interview with L.D., December 2009.

¹⁵⁹ EAPL AGM minutes, 3 May 1971.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Author’s interview with L.D., December 2009.

thereafter. So, in the context of more and more haulage companies endeavouring to engage in their own container-stripping duties, the joint-liaison committee formulated a strategy to compel them to use RDW labour at their depots or transfer these operations inside the dock estate.

In February 1972, the joint committee drafted an unofficial agreement to be signed by all haulage companies using Liverpool docks, specifically stating that all 'stuffing and stripping' of containers would be carried out by either registered dockers or unionised workers on the same terms and conditions.¹⁶² The deadline to sign was set for Monday 20 March. All haulage firms using the port were presented with the document upon arrival at the various dock gates. Faced with the option of being turned away and blacked thereafter, most of them conceded to the demands and signed the agreement. However, a select few were not so co-operative. Heaton's of St. Helens refused to sign the document by the deadline and were the first to be blacked at the port - one of their trucks was immediately turned away at the gates of Gladstone dock on 20 March.¹⁶³ Heaton's management continued to refuse to concede to the dockers' demands and instead reported the TGWU to the National Industrial Relations Court, applying for a temporary order to force dockers to load/discharge their vehicles. The hearing took place on Wednesday 22 March, despite the non-attendance of the TGWU.¹⁶⁴ The president of the NIRC, Sir John Donaldson, ordered that the TGWU 'must stop [the] unfair industrial practice' at Liverpool docks, issuing an interim order to cease the blacking of Heaton's and inviting the Union to present its argument the following Monday when the court reconvened.¹⁶⁵

Heaton's willingness to immediately report the TGWU to the NIRC took the joint committee by surprise.¹⁶⁶ However despite the court's order, the blacking continued and was extended to other reticent companies. In fact, before the NIRC

¹⁶² Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

¹⁶³ National Industrial Relations Court, 'Complaint of unfair industrial practice under section 101 of the Industrial Relations Act 1971 – Heaton's Transport (St. Helens) Ltd: Details of compensation for Traffic Lost sought under paragraph 3 of the Complainants Application for Relief', April 1972 (Modern Records Centre).

¹⁶⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 24 March 1972. The Union refused to attend because of the TUC's policy of non-recognition of the NIRC, agreed at a Special Conference in March 1971.

¹⁶⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 24 March 1972. Sir John Donaldson was an ex-Conservative minister, who participated in the drafting of *A Giant's Strength, A Fair Deal At Work* etc. He was apparently a strong advocate of legal intervention in industrial relations.

¹⁶⁶ Lindop, 'The dockers, pt 1', p. 57.

even had the chance to reconvene on Monday 27 March another haulage company, Bishop's Wharf of Warrington, had applied to the court claiming they too had been denied entry at Liverpool docks for refusing to sign the joint committee's agreement.¹⁶⁷ The TGWU again boycotted the court on 27 March where another temporary order was issued, this time to desist in blacking activities against Bishop's Wharf. The Union was once more summoned to explain itself before the NIRC on Wednesday 29 March. On this occasion, its non-attendance was viewed more dimly: the NIRC imposed a fine of £5000 on the TGWU for contempt of court, suspended for two weeks.¹⁶⁸ It also threatened possible sequestration of the union's assets if it continued its policy of boycott and non-recognition.

The threat of sequestration shocked the TGWU into action. Although the TUC boycott of the NIRC was still in effect, the judgement had placed the Union in a precarious position. Jack Jones appealed to the Liverpool stewards to suspend their action while negotiations with the haulage companies could be conducted. The attitude of the dockers is clear from Jones' account:

I myself was opposed to the blacking activities... I personally made appeals by telephone to shop stewards in Liverpool docks. They listened to my views and in response told me that the docks were at boiling point; the work was moving away from dockland 'like butter melting in the sun'.¹⁶⁹

The £5000 fine for the Union brought no change in approach from the Liverpool dockers. At a mass meeting called immediately after the judgement, they voted unanimously to continue the blacking action.¹⁷⁰ In the meantime another haulage firm, Craddock's of Wolverhampton, had been added to the blacking list at Liverpool docks for refusing to sign the joint committee's agreement and had also applied to the NIRC for a temporary order.¹⁷¹ The dispute had reached an impasse and the case was due for resumption at the NIRC imminently. The TGWU maintained its boycott of the court and the pressure was building towards a potentially divisive watershed in contemporary industrial relations. This view is

¹⁶⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 28 March 1972. Bishop's Wharf applied to the NIRC on Tuesday 21 March.

¹⁶⁸ Denning, A. (Lord), *The Closing Chapter* (London: Butterworth 1983), p. 167.

¹⁶⁹ Jones, *Union Man*, p. 246.

¹⁷⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 30 March 1972.

¹⁷¹ *Financial Times*, 14 April 1972.

reflected by comments made in the House of Commons by Walton (Liverpool) Labour M.P. Eric Heffer:

Is it not clear that the operation of the Act must be becoming a great embarrassment to the Government, particularly in view of the situation developing in Liverpool where the dockers are carrying out what in their view is a traditional trade union activity? Is it not advisable for the Government to advise employers not to rush into the use of this Act where the result can be large-scale industrial action which could have been avoided by normal industrial practice? Do not the Government recognise that they have got themselves into a very dangerous and difficult situation?¹⁷²

The pending NIRC judgements were nervously anticipated by several parties. The TGWU and TUC were persevering with their policy of non-attendance, though were privately expecting the worst.¹⁷³ Even some sections of the Government watched on with unease at the potential chaos a harsh judgement could wreak, especially over such a comparatively minor and localised dispute. A Government source expressed anxiety at the situation, commenting that 'we were hoping the Act would stay in the background... now there will be dozens of nutty employers queuing up to have a go at their militant shop stewards'.¹⁷⁴

There was considerable pressure from all sides for the Liverpool Shop Steward Committee and Heaton's to negotiate. It appeared that neither the Government nor the TGWU wanted the comparatively minor dispute to escalate. To these ends, the Department of Employment arranged for tri-partite negotiations between Heaton's, the TGWU and a delegation of Liverpool stewards at Transport House Liverpool on 10 April 1972.¹⁷⁵ However, on Sunday 9 April at a mass meeting of 5000 at Liverpool Stadium, the dockers voted overwhelmingly in favour of the continuation of the blacking strategy.¹⁷⁶ The local committee therefore refused to attend, standing up the TGWU officials and Heaton's management. Robert Heaton, joint Managing Director of Heaton's Transport, is quoted as saying

¹⁷² *Liverpool Echo*, 11 April 1972.

¹⁷³ Jones, *Union Man*, p. 247.

¹⁷⁴ *The Sunday Times*, 26 March 1972. Quote is attributed to 'a senior Government conciliator from the Department of Employment'.

¹⁷⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 10 April 1972.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

that ‘we have bent over backwards to try and meet the dock shop stewards... but [none] turned up’.¹⁷⁷ However, behind the scenes, the Liverpool stewards painted a wholly different picture of Heaton’s alleged willingness to negotiate. Indeed, Jimmy Symes recollects a somewhat hostile previous meeting between Heaton’s management and the Committee regarding the unofficial ‘stuffing and stripping’ agreement:

Bob Heaton [junior] had that pen in his hand... he was about to sign the agreement and for whatever reason... he said ‘I’ll just have to clear up one or two points and I will be back tomorrow’... When Heaton’s came back the next day [it] was a different group of people... it was his father then, it was old Bob Heaton... he said ‘who are you, a little Communist bastard like you, dictating to me and the Road Haulage Association and everyone else, over my dead body will we sign that form’. We said ‘well, if it’s a fight to the finish then you’ll be dead before we are Bob’... and then we really started putting pressure on Heaton’s when they were coming down to the docks. We set up blacking them and we then started getting writs all over the place and so forth... this is the game old Bob Heaton played and we suspected he had then become a front man for the Haulage Association... He was prepared to make himself available at meetings, [but] I think that’s all it was. It was a charade and he was really coming down in order to say to people ‘I’m doing my best’... [but] there was just no move [on Heaton’s behalf]. Now all we ever said to Bob Heaton was... we don’t want no arguments, we don’t want to fight you... we don’t want to put you out of business, in fact we want to get an agreement with you whereby your business will be protected. Now the only way we can do that is by you signing the appropriate form, and we advised him that he was not setting a precedent [because] at that point in time we had just done a hundred genuine... well-established companies who had signed those forms.¹⁷⁸

The idea that Heaton’s was a front for a broader collusion between employers’ associations, and even the Government, was popular amongst shop stewards.¹⁷⁹

Certainly, the Road Haulage Association was in favour of the abolition of the NDLS and had lobbied members and the Government to these ends.¹⁸⁰ The Confederation

¹⁷⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 10 April 1972.

¹⁷⁸ Lindop’s interview with Jimmy Symes and Lew Lloyd.

¹⁷⁹ Author’s interview with F.L., January 2011; Author’s interview with T.T., July 2009.

¹⁸⁰ Road Haulage Association, ‘Memorandum submitted to the Department of Employment, Re: the NDLS’, 8 May 1972 (Modern Records Centre).

of British Industry (CBI) also rallied against attempts by dockworkers to preserve all container work for themselves.¹⁸¹ Similarly, NAPE and the local dock employers' associations harboured a traditional hostility to the statutory protection offered to dockers and its bearing on managerial prerogative. The Heaton's affair was undoubtedly a test-case not only in the climate of the Industrial Relations Act but also in the context of the evolving definition of dock-work and control of the increasingly lucrative 'stuffing and stripping' sub-industry created by the proliferation of containerisation. Whether there was a concerted effort by those companies involved or their associations to challenge the dockworkers' privileges via the Heaton's case is uncertain, however at the very least it is clear that there were a number of parties with a vested interest in the outcome and its potential implications.

So, in the absence of any meaningful negotiations between Heaton's and the joint Dock-RTC committee and the inability of the TGWU to dissuade stewards from their blacking action, the company re-applied to the NIRC complaining that its interim order was being ignored. On 20 April the Court imposed another fine of £50,000 and threatened the union with sequestration of assets for repeated contempt.¹⁸² The date for payment of the fines was set at the 4th May.¹⁸³ Members of the Liverpool Shop Steward Committee met union leaders at Transport House (Liverpool) the following day to discuss the response to the fines.¹⁸⁴ The judgement had obviously caused alarm with all directly and indirectly involved. A couple of days earlier, prior to the NIRC's second judgement, Jack Jones had written to Vic Feather (General Secretary of the TUC) requesting advice on the boycott policy in relation to the original contempt fine.¹⁸⁵ The 20 April ruling sent Feather 'rushing' over to Transport House (London) to urgently discuss the potential ramifications for the trade union movement.¹⁸⁶ Jones feelings on the situation were clear: 'the union was caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. From the dockers there were

¹⁸¹ CBI circular to members entitled 'Container Dispute', 10 May 1972 (Modern Records Centre).

¹⁸² Denning, *The Closing Chapter*, p. 167.

¹⁸³ *Liverpool Echo*, 21 April 1972.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ TGWU letter to the TUC, 'Re: Complaint of unfair industrial practice under Section 101 of the Industrial Relations Act 1971 – Heaton's Transport (St. Helens) Limited', 19 April 1972 (Modern Records Centre).

¹⁸⁶ Jones, *Union Man*, pp. 247-248.

increasing calls for a national strike; on the other hand the threat of sequestration posed a challenge to the very existence of the TGWU'.¹⁸⁷

In response to the NIRC judgement, Jimmy Symes commented that he deplored the 'vicious' fine but significantly vowed that 'at this stage [it] is not going to influence our decision [to continue blacking]'.¹⁸⁸ At a hastily-arranged meeting of the TUC General Council, the official trade union movement considered its response. While the TGWU wanted to maintain its policy of non-cooperation with the NIRC, the General Council appeared to be contemplating the lifting of the boycott.¹⁸⁹ Eventually, the TUC advised the TGWU to pay the fines (with financial assistance from Congress) and then appeal against the judgement, though crucially this meant recognition of the Court.¹⁹⁰ A motion by Jones to convene a Special Congress in order to co-ordinate a united strategy towards the Industrial Relations Act was also rejected when put to a vote.¹⁹¹

With the threat of sequestration looming and the collapse of the TUC boycott, the TGWU finally sent legal counsel to the NIRC for the hearing on 3 May. Peter Pain Q.C., representing, asked for a review of the fines but his plea was rejected by the court.¹⁹² He argued that the Union had done all it could to dissuade the Liverpool shop stewards from their course and had considered withdrawing their credentials, but felt this would only exacerbate the situation further.¹⁹³ The TGWU was forced to pay the fine but immediately took its case to the Court of Appeal; the hearing was set for the 13 June.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, although the Union had paid the fines, the NIRC's order to desist in blacking Heaton's was still being ignored by the Liverpool dockers. On 12 May, after a further complaint from the company that the court order was not being heeded, the NIRC reconvened and threatened the TGWU with 'unlimited sequestration' if it did not discipline its members who were flouting the ruling. It gave the union twenty-one days to co-operate.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁷ Jones, *Union Man*, p. 247.

¹⁸⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 21 April 1972.

¹⁸⁹ Jones, *Union Man*, p. 248.

¹⁹⁰ Denning, *The Closing Chapter*, p. 167.

¹⁹¹ Taylor, R. *The TUC: From the General Strike to New Unionism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2000), p. 195. The call for a Special Congress was defeated by 15 votes to 11.

¹⁹² Denning, *The Closing Chapter*, p. 167.

¹⁹³ *Liverpool Echo*, 3 May 1972.

¹⁹⁴ Denning, *The Closing Chapter*, pp. 167-168.

¹⁹⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 12 May 1972.

The manoeuvring in the institutional echelons still did not alter the Liverpool stewards' blacking strategy, however. Indeed, the blacking of Heaton's and other haulage companies continued unabated at Liverpool docks right up to the deadline set by the NIRC for the TGWU to appear in court. Their approach was increasingly drawing the dockers into conflict with the official machinery of the TGWU.¹⁹⁶

We couldn't move [from our position]... we did have a confrontation, we did have visits from the [Union's] legal people and we were told the hazards and dangers and we said 'well, that's unfortunate you know'. I think if I had to spend one night in one of Her Majesty's prisons, I probably wouldn't be there the next morning. But on that occasion [in relation to the Heaton's case] it did look as if someone in Liverpool was likely to be the first taken [to prison]... we were prepared to do that and yes we were prepared to say to the union hierarchy 'no sorry we're not moving, this is one we can't lose, this is one we're not going to lose'... therefore at that point in time, yes, we were prepared to defy the national people of our union.¹⁹⁷

In fact whilst the original cases were being heard, the stewards had decided on 4 May to extend the blacking to a further thirteen uncooperative firms.¹⁹⁸ The Liverpool stewards' committee was concerned with escalating the action further, not calling it off. For its part the EAPL, which had previously remained indifferent to the action insisting the issue was between those companies involved and the stewards, was now reluctantly drawn into the dispute because 'the extended blacking could cover 5% of lorry traffic [at the port]'.¹⁹⁹ It initially elected to keep a watchful eye on the situation, however, acknowledging that any disciplinary intervention in the dispute could bring the whole port to a standstill.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Although the stewards' strategy was drawing them into conflict with the Union leadership, the blacking action was in fact officially endorsed by the local District 6 TGWU District Docks Committee. However, this was more a reflection of the fact that the District Committee of the Union was by now dominated by shop stewards from the port (Source: Author's interview with F.L., January 2011; Author's interview with J.D., December 2009; Lindop, 'The dockers, part 2', p. 68).

¹⁹⁷ Lindop's Lew Lloyd and Jimmy Symes interview (Jimmy Symes).

¹⁹⁸ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 (9am). There were two meetings of the EAPL on this day. The first was at 9am, the second at 4pm to report on the developments of a meeting of the LMC. This reference is from the earlier meeting.

¹⁹⁹ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 (9am).

²⁰⁰ In the event, the EAPL was not forced to intervene because the majority of the thirteen new additions to the blacking list quickly agreed to sign the 'stuffing and stripping' agreement (Source: EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 [4pm]).

By late April, the blacking action instigated by the Liverpool stewards had spread to other major Scheme ports in the country. Stewards at Hull and London began a blacking campaign of their own related to the ‘stuffing and stripping’ issue and both the Union and individual stewards were later called before the NIRC to explain their actions.²⁰¹ As the TGWU argued its case at the NIRC on 3 May regarding the Heaton’s fine, the National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry (NJC) met in London to discuss possible solutions to the container-blackening action.²⁰² However, it struggled to make any meaningful progress and at a special conference in London the next day TGWU Dock Delegates voted in favour of a national strike, tending twenty-eight days notice.²⁰³ The Government was pushed into action with the official notification of a national dock strike. The TGWU had followed the procedure enshrined in the Industrial Relations Act regarding proper notification of strike action, thus making the proposed strike within the law.

On 17 May the Secretary of State for Employment, Maurice Macmillan, convened a meeting with employers to discuss the containerisation dispute, having met with Jack Jones the day before. This meeting was attended by Bill Tonge (Chairman of NAPE), Sir Andrew Crichton (Chairman of Containerbase) and representatives from the Road Haulage Association and the Industry of Freight Forwarders.²⁰⁴ The employers expressed their stern opposition to any attempt to extend the Scheme to inland depots and non-Scheme ports – ‘any suggestion that some of their members would be required to use dock labour for stuffing and stripping was a non-starter; this was work which their members had been doing for many years’.²⁰⁵ The Department of Employment was mindful of the dockers’ perception of the ‘stuffing and stripping’ question, commenting that ‘this was of great emotional significance’ to the workforce.²⁰⁶ It appeared that the dispute was in deadlock with neither side willing to negotiate on the core issue.

²⁰¹ For more detail on Hull and London’s blacking campaign and their entanglement with the NIRC see: Lindop, ‘The dockers, pt 1’, pp. 65-66; Lindop, ‘The dockers, pt 2’, pp. 67-73; Denning, *The Closing Chapter*, pp. 166-168; Lyddon, ‘Glorious summer’.

²⁰² *Liverpool Echo*, 3 May 1972.

²⁰³ *Liverpool Echo*, 4 May 1972.

²⁰⁴ Department of Employment, ‘Containerisation dispute - Notes of meeting between Secretary of State for Employment and Employers concerned’, 17 May 1972 (Modern Records Centre).

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Department of Employment, ‘Containerisation dispute - Notes of meeting between Secretary of State for Employment and Employers concerned’, 17 May 1972.

The opening of Seaforth Container Terminal

While the blacking dispute continued at Liverpool and its consequences were being felt across the country in relation to the NIRC, another container-related issue threatened normal operations at the port. Seaforth Container Terminal was due to open for business in May 1972. This new container-handling facility took several years to build at enormous expense to the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC), successive governments and private investors.²⁰⁷ The Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, formerly the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board (MDHB), was the Port Authority and, prior to 1972, a fairly insignificant employer of RDW labour. However, its role within the port was to undergo drastic changes. This was partially because, by the end of the 1960s, the MDHB was in dire financial trouble. The Board was a public trust dating back to its creation under an Act of Parliament in 1858 and as such was costing the Government and taxpayers a substantial amount in annual losses. The new Conservative Government elected to sell the MDHB into private ownership in 1970 and it was listed on the London Stock Exchange. As part of the deal which saw the company privatised the Government waived its debts, which were in excess of £100 million, in return for a twenty percent ‘golden share’ in the renamed and refinanced Mersey Docks and Harbour Company.²⁰⁸

Prior to the MDHB’s privatisation, the Government had begun to invest millions of pounds in modernising the port to prepare for containerisation and investment continued apace after privatisation. This involved renovating existing facilities at the Gladstone and Hornby docks, but the majority of investment was ploughed into the construction of a series of brand new purpose-built docks, the Royal Seaforth Docks Complex. Seaforth was perceived as the future for the port and consisted of four technologically-advanced docks, the largest for container-handling and three others each geared towards specific commodities.²⁰⁹ Obviously, the opening of the first dedicated container terminal in the port of Liverpool was of prime concern to the local steward committee.

Manning and conditions for the container terminal had been discussed at length by management and the Union well in advance of the proposed opening date.

²⁰⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 8 May 1972. The final cost was estimated to be £50million in the local press.

²⁰⁸ Carden, M. ‘Staff trade unionism and industrial decline: The 6/567 ACTSS Branch and the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company’, MPhil Thesis, The University of Warwick, September 1983, pp. 2-10.

²⁰⁹ The Royal Seaforth Docks Complex consisted of a meat, timber, grain and container terminal.

Agreement had been reached on arrangements for those areas to which container traffic was to be introduced. However, the implementation of Devlin Phase 2 at the port had altered piecework, bonus and incentive payments which meant the agreements in place for Gladstone, Hornby and Seaforth terminals had to be updated. The arrangements relating to these areas were altered in November 1971 after talks at the Local Modernisation Committee (LMC) between the EAPL and the Union. The new conditions were approved by the Union side of the negotiating committee in principal but significantly its representatives refused to sign the agreement despite considerable pressure from the employers to do so.²¹⁰

At a meeting of the Liverpool Shop Steward Executive Committee on 27 April, also attended by Lew Lloyd, some stewards voiced serious reservations regarding the opening of the container terminal at Seaforth and its impact on manning levels across the whole of the port.²¹¹ It was thought that the technologically-advanced nature of the terminal meant that there would inevitably be a run-down of labour both there and eventually in other areas of the port as the trend towards container supremacy continued. The Executive instructed Lloyd to approach port employers with a list of additional demands which would need to be added to the new agreement before it would be signed. Principal amongst these were concrete guarantees that there would be no redundancies arising from the growth of container-handling at the port and that all containers handled at the port should be 'stuffed and stripped' by RDWs.²¹² It was also proposed that the working week at the Terminal should be shortened to thirty-five hours per week as a means to utilise more labour, as well as insisting that a special basic wage, sick pay and holiday entitlement package should be negotiated to be applied to container-handling areas.²¹³ The registration of *all* workers at the terminal had already been agreed in

²¹⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 (9am).

²¹¹ The Shop Steward Executive Committee was made up of a select few stewards from each area of the port who formulated policy and strategy for the main Port Shop Steward Committee. These strategies were adopted and ratified on the strength of a vote of the main committee. If successful, they would be proposed as a motion at mass meetings where they would be subject to a show of hands vote from the floor.

²¹² *Liverpool Echo*, 8 May 1972; EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 (9am).

²¹³ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 (9am); EAPL meeting minutes, 9 May 1972.

November 1971 and the Committee expected that this assurance would also be upheld.²¹⁴

The EAPL was mortified that with just eleven days to go until the official opening of Seaforth its unveiling was threatened by these belated demands, especially since the terminal already had RDWs allocated to it as the MDHC conducted dry-run tests of the new facility a couple of weeks in advance of its 10 May opening date. These dockers had been working under the terms and conditions of the existing unsigned agreement, revised in November 1971. The MDHC stated that since Hornby and Gladstone dock had been working normally under the November revised terms and work at the container terminal at Seaforth had also commenced under these conditions, the agreement was valid.²¹⁵ RDWs had worked at the container terminal on Tuesday 2 and Wednesday 3 May but following ratification of the Executive's claim by the rest of the Port Shop Steward Committee, their labour was withdrawn on the Thursday and Friday.²¹⁶ At a mass meeting that Sunday of around 6000 dockers, a motion supporting the shop stewards' claim was successful at a show of hands.²¹⁷ This was followed by a successful motion not to provide labour for Seaforth until new negotiations with management on terms and conditions relating specifically to the terminal were undertaken.²¹⁸

Despite the EAPL maintaining that 'there was a Seaforth agreement in existence and the fact that it was not signed did not affect its validity', the reality was that they were in dubious waters.²¹⁹ The Association privately admitted that 'it was questionable whether they could get the blacking of Seaforth lifted without making some concessions'.²²⁰ However, after an emergency meeting of the LMC at 11am on 8 May, little progress was made. Negotiators for the employers' side reported that 'the Union had been seeking guarantees on redundancy which obviously no employer could ever give'.²²¹ In light of the limited progress made at the LMC meeting, the MDHC was forced to announce that the opening of Seaforth Container

²¹⁴ Clerical staff employed at the terminal were also to become RDWs. Because of the terminal's technologically-advanced nature, a proportion of the workforce would be clerical staff.

²¹⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 (4pm).

²¹⁶ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 (9am).

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 8 May 1972.

²¹⁹ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 (4pm).

²²⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 (9am).

²²¹ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 May 1972 (4pm).

Terminal had been postponed.²²² George Brimyard, Managing Director of the MDHC, was insistent that the earlier agreement covered Seaforth and thus condemned the action as threatening the very future of the city's port by delaying the terminal's new customers:

We have found that as a result of the trouble this week at Seaforth we are having diversions [of traffic to other ports]. There is no reason at all why any container cannot be taken by a number of other ports... At the moment, nobody is saying Liverpool is not going to do the job, but there is already the fear they may not and exporters are not prepared to risk it... All that blacking does is to create adverse publicity for the Port of Liverpool, which must preserve its reputation for stability if its future security is not to be threatened... I think that the dockers, like the rest of us, are very conscious of the vital importance of Seaforth.²²³

Indeed Liverpool's stewards knew only too well the vital importance of Seaforth.²²⁴ At further talks on 9 May, the Union side of the LMC was adamant pay and conditions were improved and that guarantees were required relating to redundancy and container-stuffing.²²⁵ As the Managing Director of the MDHC suggests in his comments to the local press, the company was extremely eager to ensure the smooth opening and operation of Seaforth without any further delays and were under considerable customer pressure to do so. In this context, the company conceded to most of the dockers' demands at the discussions on 9 May. It was agreed that 'a 35 hour week with consequential adjustments of basic rates' would be introduced in the last quarter of 1972 to utilise more labour at the terminal and soothe the dockers' concerns about redundancies.²²⁶ However, guarantees that all containers passing through the terminal would be 'stuffed and stripped' by RDWs could not be given because the MDHC argued this was beyond the realms of practicality – it could not police the myriad of customers and shipping lines which provided containers to be loaded and discharged at the port.²²⁷ Nevertheless, the Union side of the LMC promised to return to the Shop Steward Committee and

²²² *Liverpool Echo*, 8 May 1972.

²²³ *Liverpool Echo*, 6 May 1972.

²²⁴ Author's interview with J.D., December 2009; Lindop's Jimmy Symes and Lew Lloyd interview.

²²⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 9 May 1972; *Liverpool Echo*, 10 May 1972; EAPL meeting minutes, 9 May 1972.

²²⁶ EAPL meeting minutes, 10 May 1972.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

recommend acceptance of the offer. The deal was endorsed by the Committee on 10 May and normal working at the terminal commenced the following day.²²⁸

The Seaforth settlement again illustrated the determination of Liverpool's stewards to protect manning levels and job opportunities at the port in the face of containerisation. As was the case with Aintree, the Shop Steward Committee moved to ensure that a strong precedent was set with employers in any sphere which would be affected by container-handling. The final agreement for Seaforth kept manning levels artificially high through the introduction of a thirty-five hour week and the maintenance of existing break-bulk job quotas, as detailed here:

In the early days on Seaforth we did great on the manning. We more or less had the same manning on a container ship as we had on a general cargo ship. On the big gantry cranes [used to load/unload container ships] we had two drivers per shift on each crane and one driver relieving them. There was three drivers per crane per shift, so for the four working cranes [operating at Seaforth when it initially opened]... there was twelve drivers employed. On the old overhead cranes [used to handle break-bulk cargoes] we never had that so it was an improvement straightaway. We kept the old holdsman levels as well even though there was no need for them.²²⁹

So the MDHC and the EAPL were forced to concede most of the dockers' demands over Seaforth. A combination of solid support for the initiatives of the Shop Steward Executive Committee and the escalating cost of delays both in terms of the port's reputation and lost revenue resulted in a satisfactory settlement for the dockers and their representatives. The EAPL's assertion in 1971 that 'fair industrial weather was ahead' because of the pending introduction of the Industrial Relations Act had proven considerably premature.

The establishment of the A-J Committee and the deepening of the national crisis

Although negotiations over Seaforth ended satisfactorily, the blacking action against haulage companies which refused to meet the dockers' demands continued

²²⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 11 May 1972.

²²⁹ Author's interview with T.T., July 2009.

unabated in other areas of the port. The TGWU again appealed to the Committee to suspend its action pending the outcome of the Heaton's case and the Court of Appeal judgement. At a meeting at Transport House (Liverpool) on 24 May, attended by TGWU officials and one hundred Liverpool dock stewards, the union's plea was rejected. Lew Lloyd commented after that meeting that 'the men said that while they were sympathetic to the Union's point of view, the blacking would remain'.²³⁰ The Committee's strategy continued to put it in conflict with the Union, employers and the State, making the imminent court judgements of vital significance.

At the national institutional level the TGWU, the Government and employers were tasked with finding a solution to the current impasse before the deadline for the national strike. At tri-partite negotiations between Jack Jones, Bill Tonge and Maurice Macmillan, Jones argued that the establishment of a joint special committee to investigate the dockers' primary concerns might be the best way of securing a negotiated settlement.²³¹ It was agreed that a committee should be made up of representatives of each of the major port authorities, TGWU Dock Delegates and two rank-and-file leaders. The joint chairmen of the committee would be Jones and Lord Aldington, a former Conservative minister now Chair of the Port of London Authority.²³² However, the prospective success of the new committee, dubbed the A-J or J-A Committee, was heavily dependent on the legal cases to be heard in the interim. At a Dock Delegates Conference on 1 June, Jones proposed that the deadline for the official national strike should be extended by two weeks to allow the A-J Committee time to gather evidence and testimony from interested parties.²³³ This motion was successful and the extension granted, although to the chagrin of more militant delegates. Jimmy Symes summarised the mood amongst the more militant section by commenting, 'I am not happy. The meeting did not go our way'.²³⁴ Meanwhile, the evolving unofficial blacking action at London and Hull threatened the official effort to control the course of events.

The Royal Docks dockers' picketing of Chobham Farm haulage depot was in danger of becoming a flashpoint in the broader battle of trade unionism versus the

²³⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 24 May 1972.

²³¹ Jones, *Union Man*, pp. 249-250.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 250.

²³³ *Liverpool Echo*, 1 June 1972.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

Industrial Relations Act.²³⁵ The details and chronology of this episode have been documented elsewhere and so do not require extensive re-iteration here, except for a couple of key developments.²³⁶ Principal amongst these developments was the clash between the TGWU Road Transport section and London's Port Shop Steward Committee. Whereas in Liverpool the local stewards' committee and the transport section had a co-operative arrangement dating back to the Aintree Containerbase dispute and the establishment of a joint committee, London had no such collusion. Instead, the London dockers' action in picketing several depots using non-registered labour increasingly brought them into conflict with the local Road Transport section, whose members were performing container-stripping duties there. After the failure of mediation attempts by TGWU officers, the Chobham Farm *stewards* (not the company) applied to the NIRC to prohibit the Royal Dock stewards from blacking the depot. The application named individual dock shop stewards and the London Shop Steward Committee, not the TGWU or the NASDU.²³⁷ This meant that Donaldson's order on 12 June was against the individuals involved, compelling them to attend court to explain themselves.

The crisis worsened with the Court of Appeal judgement. The NIRC had previously ruled that the TGWU was liable for the actions of its members despite protestations to the contrary by the union's legal representation and so refused to review the £55000 in fines levied for breaking the court's orders under a charge of contempt. Consequently the Union had paid the fine and then petitioned the Court of Appeal where the hearing was set for 13 June. Lord Denning (Master of the Rolls), heading a three-man panel of appeal judges, acknowledged and sympathised with the dockers' diminishing employment opportunities in the context of containerisation but pointedly restricted the remit of the court to the legal ramifications of unofficial blacking of haulage companies in Liverpool and Hull.²³⁸

²³⁵ Lindop, 'The dockers, pt 1', pp. 69-70; Lyddon, 'Glorious Summer', p. 335. It was actually a group of stewards from the Royal Docks who began to picket Chobham Farm, against the advice of the rest of the London shop stewards committee which was in favour of keeping the blacking action to Midland Cold Storage and Dagenham Cold Storage depots as agreed at a prior national shop stewards meeting.

²³⁶ Particularly Lindop, 'The dockers, pt 2', but also Weekes et al, *Industrial Relations*; Lyddon, 'Glorious Summer'; Jones, *Union Man*; Deegan, *There's No Other Way*.

²³⁷ Denning, *The Closing Chapter*, p. 170; Lindop, 'The dockers, pt 1', pp. 70-71.

²³⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 13 June 1972.

According to the law as I believe it to be, a union, registered or unregistered, is not responsible for the actions of its shop stewards when they call for industrial action, if in doing so those shop stewards are acting outside the scope of their authority. On the evidence in this case I hold that the shop stewards at Liverpool and Hull were acting on behalf of their own work groups and not on behalf of the union. They were acting outside the scope of their authority from the union. They are undoubtedly liable themselves but the union is not.²³⁹

The court ruled that the Union was not liable for the actions of its stewards and so set aside the fines imposed by the NIRC. However, the judgement paved the way for the imprisonment of individuals involved in 'unfair industrial practice' if in contempt of a court order. Indeed, Denning also commented that 'ever since the blacking policy has been in effect, those engaged have been guilty of an unfair industrial practice against the three companies'.²⁴⁰ The judgement was widely regarded as explosive.²⁴¹ On the one hand, the Industrial Relations Act and the NIRC (and by extension the Government) had been undermined by the ruling; on the other, there was the prospect of large-scale industrial rebellion if any trade unionist was committed to gaol for undertaking industrial action. The haulage companies being blacked at Liverpool were as stunned by the judgement as the trade unions. Heaton's challenged the ruling by appealing its case to the House of Lords because it believed that the gaoling of individual stewards would do little to help its predicament.²⁴²

To compound matters further, another TGWU Docks Delegate Conference had been convened to discuss a further postponement of the proposed official national strike until the A-J Committee had had the opportunity to make an interim report, a motion which was carried by 49 votes to 32 on 14 June.²⁴³ Around 30,000 dockers, roughly three-quarters of the national workforce, were already out on an unofficial one-day strike organised by the NPSSC to coincide with the Conference in

²³⁹ Court of Appeal, 'Heaton's Transport (St. Helens) Ltd. v Transport and General Workers' Union; Craddock Bros. v TGWU; Panalpina Services Ltd. and Another v TGWU and Others', 13 June 1972, *Managerial Law*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, 1973, pp. 1-47.

²⁴⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 13 June 1972.

²⁴¹ *The Times*, 14 June 1972; *Liverpool Echo*, 14 June 1972; *The Guardian*, 14 June 1972.

²⁴² *Liverpool Echo*, 20 June 1972.

²⁴³ *Liverpool Echo*, 14 June 1972.

protest against the proposal to delay the official strike deadline again.²⁴⁴ At Liverpool the whole of the 8000-strong workforce were out.²⁴⁵ The conference at Transport House (London) was being picketed by the NPSSC with the intention of pressurising delegates not to concede a further postponement of the strike.²⁴⁶ News of the successful motion caused angry scenes outside the meeting, also prompting some protestors to storm Transport House, and was greeted by cries of ‘scabs!’ and ‘you have sold us out!’²⁴⁷

A further unofficial one-day strike was organised by the NPSSC for Friday 16 June in response to the NIRC’s order against three London stewards involved in the picketing of Chobham Farm. Because the Court of Appeal judgement effectively made individuals liable, there was a possibility that the three could be imprisoned for contempt if they failed to appear before the NIRC.²⁴⁸ As a result, approximately 35,000 dockers were on strike on Friday.²⁴⁹ In the event, despite refusing to attend the NIRC to explain themselves and a warrant being issued for their arrests, the three stewards were spared gaol by some creative legal conjuring.²⁵⁰ The failure to execute the NIRC’s imprisonment order was viewed as a victory for the dockers and so Liverpool and the other ports voted to return to work on Monday 19 June.²⁵¹ Nevertheless, the issue had only been temporarily circumvented as the blacking action continued at Liverpool, London and Hull leaving open the possibility that the NIRC could issue another arrest warrant against stewards involved in the action. By this stage, the dock industry in Britain was in chaos, convulsed by a series of unofficial one-day strikes, the threat of imprisonment for stewards and the possibility of an official national strike in due course.

²⁴⁴ *The Times*, 15 June 1972; *Liverpool Echo*, 14 June 1972.

²⁴⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 14 June 1972.

²⁴⁶ Deegan, *There’s No Other Way*, p. 104.

²⁴⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 14 June 1972.

²⁴⁸ Denning, *The Closing Chapter*, p. 170.

²⁴⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 16 June 1972.

²⁵⁰ For a detailed account of the series of events that ended with an unprecedented collusion between the Court of Appeal, the Official Solicitor and Peter Pain Q.C. representing the TGWU see Lindop, ‘The dockers, part 2’; Lyddon, ‘Glorious Summer’.

²⁵¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 19 June 1972.

The Smith-Coggins dispute

While the national crisis developed in the summer of 1972, the port of Liverpool experienced several localised disputes which further contributed to the disruption of port operations. As already detailed, a strike broke out over manning and conditions associated with the opening of Seaforth Container Terminal in May. When considered in the context of the ongoing blacking of rogue haulage firms, the action at Seaforth demonstrated that the Liverpool stewards were prepared to broaden their strategy of defending manning levels and job opportunities to any area they perceived to be affected by the trend towards containerisation of cargo-handling. Just two months after the blacking of Seaforth ended with a satisfactory settlement for Liverpool's dockers another strike arose, partly because of a minor dispute relating to cargo discharging manning quotas and partly because major changes were taking place locally associated with the opening of Seaforth, the closure of older docks and facilities and the allocation of labour.

As construction neared completion on Seaforth, manning quotas and arrangements came under discussion. The major stevedoring companies, which had historically provided dock labour for the loading/discharging of cargo at the various docks of the port, approached the MDHC to discuss their role in manning the complex. Major employers of labour such as A.E. Smith-Coggins and Port of Liverpool Stevedoring amongst others, had always assumed that their services would be required to provide labour for the various Seaforth berths. However the MDHC and its shareholders, having invested millions in the complex's construction had already decided that it would bring stevedoring operations and manning in-house so as to minimise overheads and maximise profitability.²⁵² This decision took the other major employers at the port by complete surprise and they began to realise the implications for the viability of their operations at the port. Containers were clearly the future for the industry and the port and so the prospect of being frozen out of Seaforth was too much to accept. Smith-Coggins, Port of Liverpool Stevedoring and Ocean Port Services began to seriously consider their future. It was announced that formal discussions were taking place regarding the merger of the three companies with the MDHC.²⁵³ Predictably, the proposed merger raised questions about

²⁵² Author's interview with T.T., November 2010.

²⁵³ EAPL meeting minutes, 18 July 1972; *Liverpool Echo*, 17 July 1972.

redundancies. In fact, as a result, two-hundred and seventeen clerical staff were issued redundancy notices.²⁵⁴ Although all RDWs received assurances that they would all be reallocated to the MDHC, the possible disappearance of two stalwart employers from the port made dockers and their representatives extremely nervous.²⁵⁵

Amidst this uncertainty, a minor manning dispute escalated into a port-wide stoppage. Again it was linked to the tumultuous changes taking place at the port. Aside from the opening of Seaforth, by mid-1972 the various docks in the south end of Liverpool were being prepared for closure.²⁵⁶ All port operations were to be consolidated at the north end of the dock estate and the final date for closure was set for 1 September 1972. The reasons for the closure of the south end were simple. Firstly, the decision was taken in 1970 when the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board was in serious financial trouble and so the closures were part of a cost rationalisation programme.²⁵⁷ Secondly, in the future the majority of shipping would call at the north end docks because facilities were newer and the three container-handling facilities were located there.²⁵⁸ Finally there were several issues relating to the physical geography of the River Mersey that had an impact on the decision. For example, considerable routine maintenance work was required to keep the south docks de-silted, which was less of a problem further up the river. Also, the tide was particularly extreme in the south end of the river which meant that shipping arrivals and departures were more prone to disruption, again this was less of a problem in the north end.

Dockers' representation acquiesced to the closure of the south end docks on condition that all RDWs employed there would be reallocated to the north end. Larger port employers operated at docks throughout the estate and so it was agreed that RDWs would be redeployed for the same companies on their north end operations. All the relevant arrangements, including transfer of the workforce, took place well in advance of the proposed closure date and the integration process had

²⁵⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 17 July 1972. For more detail on the clerical workers' strike see Chapter 6 of this thesis.

²⁵⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 17 July 1972.

²⁵⁶ The ten south end docks were Canning, Albert, Salthouse, King's, Queen's, Coburg, Brunswick, Toxteth, Harrington and Herculaneum.

²⁵⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 21 August 1972.

²⁵⁸ As previously noted, the three container-handling docks were Gladstone, Hornby and of course Seaforth.

proceeded without major disruption. However, trouble was to flare regarding custom and practice peculiar to the south end docks. Wharfage clerical work, that is quayside tallying and administrative duties, were generally carried out by clerical staff in the south docks because ‘RDWs in the South End did not consider themselves competent to undertake [this work]’.²⁵⁹ This was a grey area in manning quotas because, although wharfage administrative work essentially fell under clerical categorisation, in the north end docks ‘90% of this type of clerical work was carried out by RDWs’.²⁶⁰ This is an illustration of how manning arrangements could vary wildly from area to area or company to company and were often tacit and unofficial in nature, dictated by historic custom and practice.

A.E. Smith-Coggins had recently moved its south end business to the north end of the port and used the RDWs from its southern operations to work on all the usual ships and cargoes which had been diverted permanently to the north. However, this caused some teething problems relating to contrasting manning arrangements in different areas of the port. When a ship called the *Cavtat* arrived at the port on Wednesday 12 July, Smith-Coggins deployed their standard south end manning quota to discharge the vessel. They used one staff wharfinger, one staff wharfinger’s clerk and a RDW to carry out the quayside clerical work. Dock stewards from Smith-Coggins’ north end operations objected to this manning arrangement, claiming that the RDW concerned was forced to perform two duties, that of tonnage clerk and window clerk.²⁶¹ Smith-Coggins management refused to add another RDW to the wharfage manning quota stating that ‘according to the Definition of Dock Work it was clear that this type of work could be carried out by either staff or RDWs. There was, therefore, no breach of any existing agreement’.²⁶² Nevertheless, all RDWs on the ship withdrew their labour in protest. This action quickly escalated into a company-wide dispute and all 1590 men employed by Smith-Coggins went on unofficial strike.²⁶³

²⁵⁹ EAPL meeting minutes, 18 July 1972. Tallying duties involved documenting the weight or quantity of cargoes discharged from a vessel.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ For definitions of the duties of wharfingers, wharfinger’s clerks, window clerks and tonnage clerks see Appendix III.

²⁶² EAPL meeting minutes, 18 July 1972.

²⁶³ *Liverpool Echo*, 17 July 1972.

In the talks between the Union and the company which followed, Smith-Coggins maintained that ‘the Definition of Dock Work gave priority to staff employees in respect of the type of work in dispute’ and that ‘RDWs were engaged for these jobs as convenient’.²⁶⁴ In the absence of any flexibility on the company’s behalf, a mass meeting at the Pier Head on 18 July voted for a port-wide strike in support of the Smith-Coggins claim; the action would begin on Friday 21 July.²⁶⁵ The EAPL was aghast that a comparatively minor issue could cause a port-wide stoppage but believed that a vital principle was at stake. They considered that ‘the [dock] stewards were attempting to engineer a position whereby priority would be given to registered dock workers over clerical staff in the manning of office jobs’ and that ‘if the principle... was conceded the repercussions on the Port’s competitive position would be far reaching and existing flexibility would be lost’.²⁶⁶ Similarly, in the context of the significant uncertainty surrounding the port, Liverpool’s dock stewards felt that if precedent was not set over this matter it could, in the future, leave them open to further manning reductions by stealth.²⁶⁷ One of the major issues at stake here was the principle of ‘one man, one job’, which was tightly guarded by the Shop Steward Committee and the Union as a means to ensure proper utilisation of the workforce.²⁶⁸ The deployment of one RDW to carry out two duties had contravened this principle. It appeared that neither side were likely to compromise their position.

The EAPL moved swiftly to establish a tri-partite standing sub-committee, consisting of RDW, clerical staff and employer representation to discuss the dispute. However, in the event, this local manning dispute was superseded by events in London and the arrest of the ‘Pentonville Five’. The committal of the five dockers provoked an unofficial national strike and the EAPL observed that ‘the urgency for a decision on any concession in the local dispute had now been removed by national developments’.²⁶⁹ Nevertheless, further issues relating to Smith-Coggins, the allocation of labour at Seaforth and compulsory redundancies were to resurface in the near future, causing yet more local industrial turbulence.

²⁶⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 18 July 1972.

²⁶⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 20 July 1972.

²⁶⁶ EAPL meeting minutes, 20 July 1972.

²⁶⁷ Dock Labour Joint Committee – Standing Sub-Committee meeting minutes, 19 July 1972.

²⁶⁸ Dock Labour Joint Committee – Standing Sub-Committee meeting minutes, 19 July 1972.

²⁶⁹ EAPL meeting minutes, 21 July 1972.

The first manifestation of the Smith-Coggins dispute reflected the extreme uncertainty surrounding the local industry at this time. The challenges posed by containerisation and rationalisation all came to a head in the summer of 1972 and each individual concern combined to leave dockers at the port feeling extremely apprehensive about the future. This is displayed in their increasingly militant and defensive approach to any threat to manning levels at the port, regardless of how minor it might seem. For stewards to successfully provoke a port-wide stoppage over what effectively amounted to jurisdiction over four jobs demonstrates that by this stage the mood amongst rank-and-file dockers was anxious, hostile and combative.²⁷⁰ The proposed changes to the structure of port employers aggravated the situation and, when combined with the transformation of the industry, the EAPL observed that ‘there was a fear of redundancy in the Port... and the prospect of mergers reinforced this fear’.²⁷¹ The ever-escalating incidence of industrial action at the port was symptomatic of this fear. As previously noted, the insecurity felt by dockers during this period of rapid and tumultuous modernisation and mechanisation is highlighted as a major factor behind industrial militancy in Sapsford and Turnbull’s study and their findings are supported by the nature of both the Seaforth and Smith-Coggins disputes at Liverpool.²⁷²

The imprisonment of the ‘Pentonville Five’ and the interim report of the A-J Committee

In London, blacking of and picketing at Dagenham Cold Storage and Midland Cold Storage continued as agreed at port-wide and National Port Shop Steward Committee (NPSSC) level.²⁷³ Although these premises and the companies using them had been blacked since May, Midland management applied to the NIRC on 4 July for an order instructing the London Shop Steward Committee, not the

²⁷⁰ To make it explicit, the crux of the dockers’ argument was that all the quayside clerical jobs involved (wharfinger, wharfingers’ clerk, tonnage clerk and window clerk) should be carried out by RDWs and that the deployment of one RDW to undertake two roles contravened the ‘one man, one job’ policy.

²⁷¹ EAPL meeting minutes, 18 July 1972.

²⁷² Turnbull & Sapsford, ‘Dockers, Devlin and industrial disputes’, pp. 32-34.

²⁷³ The NPSSC was founded by shop stewards from the various ports after the Devlin reforms. It was completely unofficial and had no affiliation with the TGWU and instead functioned as a forum to devise strategy in matters of industry-wide importance.

TGWU, to desist in its unfair industrial practice.²⁷⁴ The Court named seven individuals in the order, issued on Friday 7 July which compelled them to cease their action forthwith. Nevertheless, the blacking continued. After the previous victory at the Court of Appeal, the NIRC's order was perceived as largely impotent, especially in relation to the possibility of imprisonment.²⁷⁵ However, whereas the June crisis had been averted at the last minute due to the Denning's intervention this had upset some in the Government, not least Edward Heath who thought the Court of Appeal had overstepped its remit and authority.²⁷⁶ Moreover, a call from dock employers to declare a State of Emergency over the paralysis of London docks could have convinced the Government to come down hard on the perpetrators of the blacking. Consequently, on this occasion, when the NIRC issued warrants for the arrest of five dockers on Friday 21 July, they were quickly executed. Three of the five (Cornelius Clancy, Tony Merrick and Derek Watkins) were arrested picketing outside Midland Cold Storage depot in Hackney, East London.²⁷⁷ Bernie Steer was arrested at his home that evening, while Vic Turner was arrested the following day, picketing Pentonville gaol.²⁷⁸

The imprisonment of the 'Pentonville Five', as they were later dubbed, provoked wide-scale rebellion. By Saturday morning several of the major ports had stopped work and by Monday all the country's 42000 dockers were out on strike.²⁷⁹ Mass pickets had assembled outside Pentonville gaol and Midland's Hackney depot while the London Shop Steward Committee despatched delegates and flying pickets to lobby other sectors of industry.²⁸⁰ Liverpool's Shop Steward Committee met immediately upon news of the London stewards' committal and organised a coach convoy to travel to London in order to man picket lines and show solidarity.²⁸¹ A mass meeting at the Pier Head on 25 July voted to remain on indefinite strike until they were released.²⁸² On Wednesday 26 July, the day the men were released, a

²⁷⁴ Lindop, 'The dockers, part 2', pp. 75-76.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁷⁶ See Ted Heath's account in Heath, *The Course of My Life*, p. 406.

²⁷⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 22 July 1972. Out of the five only Vic Turner and Tony Merrick were TGWU members. The other men involved were members of the NASDU.

²⁷⁸ Lindop, 'The dockers, pt 2', p. 81.

²⁷⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 24 July 1972. However, Liverpool was already out on strike before the Pentonville Five were arrested because of the local Smith-Coggins dispute.

²⁸⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 22 July 1972.

²⁸¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 22 July 1972; Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

²⁸² EAPL meeting minutes, 26 July 1972.

major unofficial strike was underway with around 250,000 workers across various industries out in solidarity.²⁸³ Even the usually passive TUC threatened an official general strike, although its hand was undoubtedly forced by the spontaneity of the unofficial action.

The wholesale revolt of the trade union movement against the imprisonment of the five dockers was a politically-charged and emotive affair but their release did not resolve the underlying causes behind the committal. Blacking action was still being pursued by stewards' committees at Liverpool, London and Hull, while the A-J Committee attempted to gather evidence and deliver a report which it hoped would bring to a close a summer of extreme turmoil in the industry. On 25 July, the day before the men were released from gaol, the A-J Committee released its interim report. The main recommendations of the report stipulated that the TUR should be eliminated in every port and that all dockers should be permanently allocated to an individual employer irrespective of whether he was surplus to requirements; that negotiations should take place between port employers, the Union and other employers regarding the preservation of container groupage work for RDWs; that improved voluntary severance terms, footed by the Government, should be made available to dockers to reduce the manpower surplus in the industry.²⁸⁴

The Report was frostily-received by some employers but was accepted at the national level by NAPE as a means to end the intermittent industrial strife of the previous months.²⁸⁵ Indeed, some members of the EAPL were 'appalled with the terms of the Report' and registered their official disapproval with the national association.²⁸⁶ Despite reluctant acceptance by employers through necessity, it was rejected by a Dock Delegates Conference on 27 July.²⁸⁷ This, of course, meant that the twice-postponed national strike was now back on and scheduled to start the following day. Clearly, the tumultuous events of the previous few days had reinforced a mood of militancy amongst dockers and their representatives, as it

²⁸³ Lyddon, 'Glorious summer', p. 336; Lindop, 'The dockers, pt 2', pp. 84-85.

²⁸⁴ Joint Special Committee on the Ports Industry [The Aldington-Jones Committee], 'Interim Report of the Joint Special Committee on the Ports Industry', 25 July 1972 (Modern Records Centre). Voluntary severance was actually introduced under the Devlin reforms but the sum was relatively modest at £1500. Nevertheless, around 13000 RDWs (approximately 25% of the workforce) elected to take voluntary severance between 1967 and 1971.

²⁸⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 26 July 1972.

²⁸⁶ EAPL meeting minutes, 28 July 1972.

²⁸⁷ House of Commons debate, 8 August 1972 (*Hansard*, Vol. 842, cc. 1580-627); *Liverpool Echo*, 27 July 1972. The A-J report's recommendations were rejected by 38 votes to 28 with 18 abstentions.

appeared that the Report went some way to addressing major concerns about the TUR and redundancy in the industry. The strike went ahead, commencing on 28 July and received strong support from the major ports. In Liverpool fifty-one ships were stranded and the EAPL reported that the entirety of the 8000-strong workforce on the Liverpool side of the river was on strike.²⁸⁸

The A-J Committee continued to work towards a formula to end the dispute in a series of meetings from 31 July.²⁸⁹ However, progress was slow and on 3 August the Government was forced to declare a State of Emergency because of critically low levels of animal foodstuffs.²⁹⁰ Meanwhile, the NPSSC and local steward committees were escalating their disruptive action. Some non-Scheme and British Rail ports were continuing to work throughout the official strike.²⁹¹ Stewards believed that these ports were undermining the effectiveness of the strike and so a programme of direct action was formulated to disrupt operations there. Huge delegations of flying pickets were organised from London and sent to various ports and container bases across the country. A small non-Scheme port at Keadby in Lincolnshire had been working normally throughout the strike and was consequently picketed by the NPSSC. Emotions ran high and clashes occurred between pickets and the police.²⁹² This scenario was repeated in Scunthorpe where police officers were hospitalised and pickets arrested.²⁹³ In Liverpool, stewards appealed to British Rail ports in the locality to stop work and support the strike. When their plea was ignored these ports also became subject to widespread picketing and further clashes with the police occurred.²⁹⁴ If anything it appeared that attitudes were hardening amongst dockers and the action was escalating.

In the face of a worsening situation, the A-J Committee redoubled its efforts to come up with a peace formula. On 14 August Jones called for a Dock Delegates Conference to take place in two days time.²⁹⁵ At the recalled conference on 16

²⁸⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 28 July 1972. As previously noted, Liverpool had already been on strike since 21 July over the manning dispute involving Smith-Coggins' workforce.

²⁸⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 31 July 1972.

²⁹⁰ House of Commons debate, 8 August 1972.

²⁹¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 31 July 1972.

²⁹² *Liverpool Echo*, 14 August 1972.

²⁹³ *Big Flame* (Merseyside Socialist Newspaper), 'The dockers' struggle 1972', (Liverpool: Big Flame, September 1972) (Modern Records Centre).

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*; *Liverpool Echo*, 14 August 1972. The two local British Rail ports which continued to work normally and were subsequently picketed were Heysham and Glasson in Fleetwood.

²⁹⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 15 August 1972.

August the Committee submitted its revised report for consideration. The Report retained all its original provisions and also made some additional assurances. Principal amongst these was the promise of an inquiry into non-Scheme ports, a proposal to levy extra handling charges on containers that had not been ‘stuffed and stripped’ by RDWs, an undertaking by Lord Aldington as Chairman of the Port of London Authority that all container-stripping work at the port would in future, wherever practical, be carried out by RDWs and a reiteration of the pledge that no compulsory redundancies would arise from modernisation in the industry.²⁹⁶ When a motion to accept the augmented interim report and return to work was put to the vote at the delegates conference it was successful by fifty-three votes to thirty.²⁹⁷

The NPSSC had organised a rally outside Transport House to coincide with the Dock Delegates Conference and more than a hundred dockers gathered to await its outcome. The announcement that the strike had been called off was met with angry scenes. A group of protestors stormed the building and burst into the conference room. Objects, including a large free-standing metal ashtray, were thrown at the platform narrowly missing Jones and O’Leary, while another officer was punched. A barrage of verbal abuse followed before the men involved ordered all journalists out of the room under intimidation and the threat of violence. After the Press had left, order was restored somewhat and Jones and O’Leary fielded questions and accusations from the protestors. The two Secretaries were allowed to leave after over an hour and a half of questioning.²⁹⁸ Outside the meeting departing delegates were jostled and mounted police were forced to intervene as scuffles broke out.²⁹⁹

The furious reaction to the decision to return to work illustrates just how strongly many activists and stewards felt about the challenges facing the industry from containerisation, the outsourcing of container-stripping duties and the threat of redundancy. Jones’ description of an encounter with a shop steward after the

²⁹⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 16 August 1972; Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 28.

²⁹⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 16 August 1972.

²⁹⁸ The preceding details of the unsavoury scenes that occurred after the return to work vote are derived from Jack Jones’ report to the General Executive Council of the TGWU, ‘Re: Incidents associated with the Docks Delegate Conference on August 16th, 1972’ (Modern Records Centre). Jones also names NASDU members involved in the fracas, several of whom had been jailed at Pentonville three weeks earlier. Many of the details from his report to the General Executive Council are also recounted in his autobiography, *op. cit.*

²⁹⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 16 August 1972.

conference is oft-repeated but demonstrates exactly how seriously dockers regarded the tumultuous changes that were taking place in the industry:

As I left Transport House that day one of the shop stewards from the London docks came up to me. He was holding his little son by the hand. 'What about my future?' he asked. 'You've got a permanent job as a result of this agreement', I replied. 'Ah', he said, 'but what about the boy?'³⁰⁰

The comments of this shop steward demonstrate how employment in the industry was perceived from the inside. Many dockers considered their job to be their birthright, often passed down from the generation before and in due course, to be passed on to their children. Containerisation and the rationalisation of the workforce were not just a threat to dockers' jobs but to their son's jobs and indeed their way of life.³⁰¹ It is unsurprising therefore that emotions surrounding the dispute and modernisation more generally were so acute.

Just hours after the Dock Delegates Conference, the NPSSC held a meeting which rejected the return to work vote. It vowed to continue the strike unofficially and put forward a four-point list of demands to be satisfied *before* action would cease.³⁰² However, despite some stirring rhetoric at the NPSSC meeting, Tilbury, Southampton and Felixstowe all voted to return to work the following day at local mass meetings.³⁰³ The rest of London docks and Hull quickly followed suit on 18 August, leaving just Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow out on unofficial strike. At a mass meeting at the Pier Head on 17 August, Liverpool's dockers voted overwhelmingly to support the NPSSC's demands and remain out.³⁰⁴ However, once Manchester and Glasgow voted to return to work on 19 August, Liverpool was isolated and pursuing a strike that could not be won.³⁰⁵ At a mass meeting on Sunday 20 August, Liverpool's dockers reluctantly voted to return to work.³⁰⁶ The

³⁰⁰ Jones, *Union Man*, p. 253.

³⁰¹ See Chapter 3 of this thesis for an analysis of work culture, custom and practice on the docks.

³⁰² The four-point plan basically read the same as the provisions of the A-J interim report: No compulsory redundancies, a retention and extension of the NDLS, container groupage work to be classed as dock-work and TUR workers to receive the ports average pay (Source: *Liverpool Echo*, 17 August 1972).

³⁰³ *Liverpool Echo*, 17 August 1972. Tilbury was the container terminal area of the Port of London.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 19 August 1972.

³⁰⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 21 August 1972.

national dock strike was over. However, industrial strife at the port of Liverpool continued.³⁰⁷

On the surface, the A-J agreement apparently represented a peace deal for the industry which addressed all of the major concerns of RDWs. The proposed abolition of the TUR and permanent employment with a single employer meant that dockers now enjoyed unrivalled job security – or ‘jobs for life’ as it has since been termed.³⁰⁸ Its rejection by the stewards’ movement must be regarded in relation to concerns surrounding the future of the industry and in the context of the militant mood established because of the summer of unrest. Although the NPSSC rejected the Dock Delegates Conference’s decision to return to work, its list of demands was practically identical to those already proposed by the A-J Committee. The difference was simple: the NPSSC wanted these changes introduced before dockers returned to work so that they could not be diluted or compromised later, especially since the agreement was purely advisory in its capacity and would not become integrated into the existing statutory provisions of the Scheme. This effectively meant that it was a voluntary, non-legally binding agreement between employers and the Union and as such could conceivably be unilaterally derecognised by management at a later juncture.³⁰⁹ It could also be argued that more militant stewards across the country resented and rejected the official attempt to call off a summer of unofficial-led action.

Another major area of contention related to the primacy of voluntary severance in the A-J agreement. There was considerable discomfort amongst stewards about the nature of the voluntary severance scheme because of its implications for manning levels. Clearly, the campaign of disruption throughout the summer had been aimed at safeguarding jobs and manning levels in the industry, yet one of the A-J agreement’s defining principles was a reduction of the workforce. As highlighted in Turnbull and Sapsford’s study, voluntary severance and the incessant

³⁰⁷ See Chapter 6 ‘Clerical militancy at the Port of Liverpool’ for further information.

³⁰⁸ Finney, N. ‘Repeal of the National Dock Labour Scheme: Britain’s ports in an era of industrial relations change’, *Employee Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1990, pp. 10-16; Davis, D. ‘Clear the Decks: Abolish the National Dock Labour Scheme’, *Centre For Policy Studies*, November 1988.

³⁰⁹ In fact, during disputes in the 1980s, the EAPL referred several times to the voluntary nature of the A-J agreement and argued that it could therefore be disregarded if necessary. The furious reaction from dockers to such a suggestion meant that the EAPL were forced to continue to abide by the Agreement but nevertheless the employers’ attitude towards it was clear (Source: EAPL meeting minutes, 11 August 1980; EAPL meeting minutes, 17 January 1986).

whittling down of the register proved to be a source of great insecurity for dockers and a major impetus behind future industrial unrest, particularly during the eighties as will be explored later.³¹⁰ A leading Liverpool steward recalls the local committee's attitude towards the voluntary severance scheme:

We'd encourage lads not to take the cash because we could see the jobs disappearing and not being replaced... [but] lads had never seen that sort of money. It was like becoming millionaires overnight. It's alright you telling them not to take it but you don't know what responsibilities they've got. I'm sure the employers and the Government realised that when they threw the carrot out there.³¹¹

The fact that the voluntary severance sum would be paid entirely by the Government in the first instance meant that employers encouraged as many men as possible to take the money. It also gave the impression that employers and the Government were on the same side in running down employment levels in the industry. Several accounts from stewards at Liverpool state that, such was the instant uptake for redundancy money, the port actually suffered from a labour shortage for some time thereafter, especially of key specialist grades.³¹²

The effect of the delegates' decision to accept the A-J agreement at the conference on 16 August, the lure of the severance money for a section of the national workforce and a summer of extreme turmoil with considerable financial cost to the individual combined to divide the ports and bring an end to the national dock strike. There was also a fundamental divergence in opinion between stewards within the same port and between different ports. More militant stewards wanted to stay out on strike until all the NPSSC's demands were implemented and rejected the A-J agreement in its entirety, while others thought it was the best that could be achieved in the circumstances. Jimmy Symes, Chairman of the Liverpool Port Shop Steward Committee, later expressed a somewhat moderate view:

³¹⁰ Turnbull & Sapsford, 'Why did Devlin fail?', pp. 249-252.

³¹¹ Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

³¹² Author's interview with F.L., January 2011; Lindop's interview with Jimmy Symes and Lew Lloyd. Symes estimated that around 2800 Liverpool RDWs took the money and left the industry shortly after the severance scheme was enhanced.

We didn't get everything we thought we should have on the J-A agreement, but I can say this – in all my years on the docks, I have never got back off a dispute or strike [where] I felt we've got what we could have got... Jack Jones and his Aldington Committee did a good job... but we were let down in fact by politicians of our own party [Labour]. People can turn around and say they should have immediately [recommended] nationalisation, which is what I want in the industry anyway, but they dealt with it in the right way - first of all let's take into the orbit of the Scheme the unregistered ports, let's establish those areas outside of the dock which are doing groupage work as dock-work... and [then] we was in the position where the industry could have transitionally moved over to nationalisation, unfortunately that didn't happen but I'm not a critic of Jones-Aldington.³¹³

Other stewards on Liverpool's committee shared the view that the A-J agreement made the best of a difficult situation, 'I wouldn't bear no grudges with [Jack Jones] over [the A-J report] because the pressure on him must have been enormous'.³¹⁴ However, some were less charitable about the Agreement arguing that 'it upset us... the actions of Jones. We never accepted [the A-J agreement] but in the end we had to recognise it because we could see the way the industry was going in respect of a rundown of labour'.³¹⁵

Despite the rancour surrounding the A-J agreement and its indifferent reception by dockers, it had made some progress in documenting and addressing the major challenges for the industry. On the one hand, it abolished the much-maligned TUR, guaranteed no compulsory redundancies and perpetuated the unrivalled degree of workplace control enjoyed by dockers. The Agreement also set up an inquiry into the role of non-Scheme ports and raised the possibility of nationalisation of the industry. Although voluntary severance provisions led to a significant exodus from the industry, there was no way that British ports could have remained competitive without shedding a proportion of their workforces to allow for the cold reality of containerisation.³¹⁶ Maintenance of pre-container break-bulk manpower was simply

³¹³ Lindop's interview with Jimmy Symes and Lew Lloyd.

³¹⁴ Author's interview with L.D., December 2009.

³¹⁵ Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

³¹⁶ In 1972 there were 41200 RDWs working at Scheme ports. By 1975 the number had fallen to 32000 and by 1980 only 23000 RDWs remained in the industry. See Chapter 7 for more detail and analysis regarding the reduction of the register at Liverpool and nationally (Source: British Ports Association, 'Report on manpower in the UK ports industry, 1987', 1988; Statement by the TUC to the National Ports Council Enquiry into Non-Scheme Ports, 17 October 1972; Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 47).

unsustainable, although dockers' representation endeavoured to keep manning levels as high as possible. This is indeed what they continued to do at the port of Liverpool and elsewhere throughout the seventies and eighties by a combination of negotiation and strike action. In fact, the A-J agreement later proved a useful shield for dockers as it consistently scuppered employer attempts to wrest workplace control and prerogative from their hands. Certainly, the port employers always resented the enhanced employment protection and bargaining position it provided.³¹⁷ In similar fashion to the Devlin reforms of five years earlier, over time the Agreement made the transition from resisted and reluctantly-accepted by dockers to wholeheartedly-embraced and jealously-guarded, as shall be demonstrated in due course.

The events of 1972 were obviously tumultuous and brought major changes to the dock industry. Indisputably, the protection now afforded registered dock workers at Scheme ports was unparalleled and the balance of power heavily skewed away from management and towards the quayside. However, although RDWs currently enjoyed unrivalled job protection, serious challenges remained for future employment prospects in the industry in the context of the proliferation of containerisation at the expense of traditional, labour-intensive break-bulk cargoes and the introduction of a relatively lucrative voluntary severance scheme. The TGWU and local port-wide labour organisation were by now acutely aware of the impact containerisation was likely to have on the industry and prepared themselves for a rearguard defensive action against job cuts, using the Scheme and the A-J agreement as a barrier against wholesale changes in working practices and the run-down of manning levels. As highlighted by Turnbull and Sapsford, the consolidation of the NPSSC between 1970 and 1972 also strengthened dockworker solidarity across the industry and raised the prospect of further 'multi-port' industrial action in defence of the industry, the manner of which had been witnessed in the summer of 1972.³¹⁸ Undoubtedly, Aldington-Jones was a double-edged sword which heralded a significant watershed in the industry.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 26 July 1972; EAPL meeting minutes, 11 August 1980; Finney, 'Repeal of the National Dock Labour Scheme'; Davis, 'Clear the Decks'.

³¹⁸ Turnbull & Sapsford, 'Why did Devlin fail?', p. 253.

³¹⁹ Further evaluation of the impact of the A-J agreement is undertaken in Chapter Seven.

Chapter 6

‘What about us?’ The evolution of clerical militancy at the port of Liverpool

This thesis has already alluded to several potential weaknesses in the current historiography of labour relations in the British dock industry. Wide-ranging research and publication has been undertaken in the area but it has tended to focus on national trends and flashpoints or institutional accounts of the provision and operation of statutory employment protection afforded to Britain’s Registered Dock Workers (RDWs) in the form of the National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS). As previously argued, more attention needs to be given to the development of labour relations, local work culture and grassroots activism in specific ports in order to better understand the factors that influenced militancy and solidarity amongst dockworkers. However, there is another section of the workforce which remains largely neglected in academic surveys of dockland industrial relations, yet which played a progressively influential and disruptive role in the seventies and eighties, particularly at the port of Liverpool.

The Association of Clerical, Technical and Supervisory Staff (ACTSS) was the clerical section of the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU). At the port of Liverpool, several different grades of port worker fell under the auspices of this section – storekeepers, timekeepers, ship’s planners, wharfingers, ‘counter-offs’, quay foremen and ship’s foremen. Most grades of worker were support staff for RDWs, either concerned with providing services directly associated with the administration of dock-work and dockworkers or with the provision of ancillary services for customers such as cargo inventory, port logistics etc.¹ This eclectic mix of occupations which fell under the heading of ‘staff’ accounted for a significant section of the total workforce at the port in the late sixties and early seventies.² The 6/567 Branch catered purely for those clerical workers employed within the dock estate, usually attached to the offices of the various shipping/stevedoring companies.³

¹ For clarification of those grades whose duties are not self-explanatory, see Appendix III.

² There were over 1000 staff workers at the port during this period (Source: Author’s interview with E.R., July 2011).

³ Most shipping companies had an office within the dock estate and one in the city centre. Those clerical workers employed in the town offices had their own branch within ACTSS and are excluded from this study.

Prior to 1969, unionism amongst clerical staff at the port was severely restricted. Staff workers had no shop steward representation, no recognised negotiation body and limited official union recognition or representation across the bulk of the employers at the port.⁴ The Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS) was recognised amongst a minority of employers but membership was poor as it did not cover most grades of clerical worker.⁵ The Port of Liverpool Staff Association (POLSA) also had minor representational powers for its membership, although similarly this was mainly made up of middle management from the town offices of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board (MDHB).⁶ There was no machinery for clerical staff to enter into negotiations with employers over any matter and wages and conditions varied wildly from employee to employee and company to company, due to ‘completely individualised contracts of employment’.⁷ This had been the status quo at the port for staff for many years. Even in the post-Devlin era when dockers began to achieve some progress in pay, conditions and representation, staff workers were subject to the perpetuation of this traditional paternalistic workplace relationship:

Wages were determined by personal negotiation, the working week included Saturday morning and for the majority of workers overtime was unpaid... wage increases, if payable, came from the Head of the Department who would call you aside and inform you that management had agreed to pay an extra ten shillings; he would then tell another employee that they could only afford a five shillings rise and tell another he was getting nothing... We finally managed to persuade about 80% of the wharfage department to disclose their wages... and we found twenty-seven different rates for seventy-five employees.⁸

This scenario made effective workplace organisation extremely difficult. However, amidst the broader trend of trade union growth and influence in the late sixties and

⁴ ACTSS was already recognised by two of the larger companies prior to 1970 (MDHB and Smith-Coggins) but there was no company/port-wide agreements relating to pay and conditions and membership levels were low.

⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 10 July 1970.

⁶ Author’s interview with T.N., March 2011; Author’s interview with T.T., Jan 2011.

⁷ Author’s interview with E.R., July 2011.

⁸ Former ACTSS Branch Secretary Eric Ankers recalls the arbitrary nature of staff pay and conditions prior to the formation and consolidation of the Branch in Carden, M. ‘Staff trade unionism and industrial decline: the ACTSS 6/567 Branch and the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company’, Unpublished MA thesis, University of Warwick, September 1983, pp. 13-14. Carden was himself a clerical worker and shop steward at the Port and later Chairman of the MDHC stewards between 1983 and 1988.

the explosion of militancy at the docks, staff workers gradually began to assert their right to workplace representation and bargaining.

Predictably, this was a hard-fought and drawn out process. It was in fact a small cadre of ex-RDWs from A.E. Smith Coggins, a major employer at the port, who provided the impetus to form the local ACTSS branch. Before a RDW could accept a staff job they were required to give up their 'books' (i.e. registration as a dockworker with the National Dock Labour Board) which would most frequently but not exclusively, occur when a RDW was offered a foreman's post in a particular company. Although ex-dockers who had joined the clerical grades often retained their membership of the local TGWU Docks Branch, it was not recognised by employers for their staff workers. Ex-RDW staff men were essentially in limbo as far as workplace representation was concerned, as not only would employers refuse to recognise the Docks section of the TGWU in the office but the Docks section also, paradoxically, proved somewhat ambivalent towards members who were perceived to have switched allegiances. These workers, experienced in trade unionism and workplace militancy, found the status quo described above unacceptable and in 1964 established the 12/67 Branch of the National Association of Clerical, Technical and Supervisory Staff, a trade group within the TGWU.⁹ They attempted to persuade their colleagues at Smith-Coggins and other companies to join and a full-time officer, Mr. J.D. Charters, was appointed to the branch by the Union. However, some employers were initially strongly opposed to general staff unionism and actively sought to discriminate against, and even dismiss, workers attempting to unionise.¹⁰

Initial progress for the Branch was painfully slow. Between 1964 and 1969 it struggled to broaden its membership beyond a couple of hundred workers out of a staff workforce of well over one thousand.¹¹ A large section of the staff was completely unfamiliar and uncomfortable with trade unionism. They were often older, more 'starchy types' with archetypal 'white-collar' ideals and aspirations who identified more closely with managerial prerogative and individualism than

⁹ The 12/67 Branch would later become the 6/567 Branch after the TGWU overhauled its regional structure. The early history of the Branch is based on author's interviews with A.D., May 2011; T.T., January 2011; E.R., July 2011 and Carden, 'Staff unionism', pp. 12-15.

¹⁰ Author's interview with T.T., January 2011. Liverpool Maritime Terminals and T&J Harrisons were particularly noted for their anti-union attitude.

¹¹ Carden, 'Staff unionism', p. 15.

workplace collectivism.¹² Moreover, the Branch was faced with a fragmented potential membership split geographically up and down the length of the port, across various companies and along occupational grades. Nevertheless, in the context of the wholesale changes being wrought on the industry by the onset of containerisation and the growing influence of trade unionism in Britain more broadly, the clerical movement at the port began to gain some momentum. In 1969 the first shop stewards were elected on a grade-by-grade basis - each occupation, for example the 'counter-offs' or store men, were represented by a steward in each area of the port.

In July 1970, J.D. Charters resigned as Branch Officer to take up another post. His replacement, Eddie Roberts, was a newly-recruited TGWU officer who had cut his teeth first as an activist at Dunlop's, then as a shop steward in Ford's Halewood (Liverpool) Plant before being elected as Convenor there. His first appointment was as officer for ACTSS and saw a change of direction for a branch previously beset by 'relative conservatism', low membership and non-recognition amongst a number of employers.¹³ This new approach began with a pro-active recruitment drive and fresh shop steward elections, attempting to broaden membership across the multitude of companies at the port by minimising the hitherto majority of the 'none-ers' amongst clerical staff.¹⁴ One account of how ACTSS shop stewards began to aggressively assert the branch's new recruitment policy is instructive:

The day they come they come to [T&J] Harrisons was the day they joined the union, we never let anyone past. If anyone tried to avoid joining we made sure they'd be blackballed. We'd ostracise them, nobody would talk to them and within weeks they'd be back asking to join. And so our numbers were shooting up and we'd well passed the amount of none-ers.¹⁵

Moreover, the Branch began to lobby the Employers' Association of the Port of Liverpool (EAPL) for 'rights of consultation and negotiation in respect of clerical and supervisory staffs... [for] grades not covered by the existing machinery of the

¹² Author's interview with E.R., July 2011.

¹³ Carden, 'Staff unionism', p. 44.

¹⁴ 'None-ers' was local dockside/union slang for those workers with no union affiliation or membership.

¹⁵ Author's interview with T.T., March 2011.

Dock Labour Joint Committee'.¹⁶ The Association acknowledged that 'the stage had been reached where staff unionism had to be recognised' but significantly also accepted 'that certain companies were opposed to the Association carrying out negotiations with staff grades and an attempt would be made to provide for their exclusion [from negotiations]'.¹⁷ So, while in principle the EAPL conceded that provision would have to be made for joint negotiation on port-wide pay and conditions, similar to that established with the dockers, it also significantly recognised the right of individual companies to abstain from its agreements.

The strengthening of the clerical workers' branch, whilst predictably opposed by some employers, was not necessarily welcomed by all sections of the RDW workforce either. There existed a peculiar and complex relationship between RDWs and clerical workers at the port. Those clerical workers whose duties were carried out on the quayside were often regarded with hostility, especially by older dockers who viewed all quayside jobs as the preserve of registered men:

We started to form the Union and it was hard at first... We had to deal with the dockers' old prejudices – because you're not registered, you shouldn't be on the quayside, a stupid attitude. I was in a good position though because I'd say 'there's twenty-five of my family on the docks [as RDWs], you go and tell them that'.¹⁸

Furthermore, amongst a certain section of RDWs, clerical workers were treated with a degree of contempt and suspicion. The fact that ACTSS 6/567 branch included the supervisory grades, ship and quay foremen, amongst their membership did not help the situation. Even amongst the younger, more moderate dockers who generally supported the awakening of clerical activism there was an acute sense of 'us' and 'them'. Some viewed clerical workers as having relatively safe, easy jobs 'sitting on radiators' and, whilst dockers undertook 'the hard work', staff were gaining concessions from employers 'on their coat-tails'.¹⁹ Indeed, 'there was always a division between staff and dockers and that's not just at Liverpool docks. There's always a divide between the office and the shop floor in any industry in the world –

¹⁶ EAPL meeting minutes, 10 July 1970.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Author's interview with T.N., March 2011.

¹⁹ Author's interview with M.C., January 2011.

if you're not digging a hole, you're not working'.²⁰ For the new generation of clerical workers who were beginning to organise relatively quickly and effectively, this sort of attitude was considered unhelpful. One ACTSS shop steward retorted that 'there was a common misconception about clerical workers in that somehow they had no link with dock-work. Most of the clerical workers you would find that their father's were dockworkers and that getting a job in the office instead of on the quay might be seen as moving up a bit'.²¹ Indeed, prior to the implementation of the Devlin reforms and total decasualisation of the industry, a job in the office was often perceived as a step up the occupational ladder on the docks, despite the frosty relationship between the two trade groups:

Some senior dockers saw it as a betterment to bring their sons to the quayside, not as scruffy-arsed dockers who were casual workers but as staff men who were going on a salary and so they were quite elite by comparison. It was only with the advent of Devlin that dockers began to wield some power and considerably enhanced their earning opportunities.²²

By the late sixties the demographic of staff workers had begun to change and with it attitudes towards unionism and activism. As the older 'starchy' types retired from the industry they were usually replaced either by ex-RDWs or young recruits straight out of school, often with relatives already working on the docks. With recruitment to the register (as a Registered Dock Worker) becoming increasingly restricted due to the proliferation of containerisation and its related reduction in manpower requirements, employment in the 'office' became the new route for nepotism on the docks. This was a major contributory factor in the evolution of industrial attitudes and the progress of the Branch as young staff workers from working-class backgrounds came into contact with seasoned trade unionists, recently transferred from the Docks section.

So having gained recognition from the EAPL, received assurances regarding port-wide bargaining and gradually improved membership levels, ACTSS 6/567 branch had begun to establish itself at the port in the early seventies. The first port wide agreement on terms and conditions was eventually signed on 23 November

²⁰ Author's interview with T.N., March 2011.

²¹ Author's interview with M.C., January 2011.

²² Author's interview with E.R., May 2011.

1971, nicknamed the ‘grey book’ by workers. A Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) was also established between the employers’ association and the Branch similar to that which existed for dockers. The Branch followed up its success by issuing a list of six points that it wished to negotiate with management including, most notably, a ‘no recruitment without consultation policy’ and a campaign to obtain registration for all staff workers under the NDLS.²³ This ambitious shopping list seemed to indicate a new-found assertive edge for the Branch under the leadership of Roberts and the recently-elected Shop Steward Committees. The campaign for registration, while audacious was not without precedent because at the Port of London all clerical workers were registered and afforded the same rights and protection as RDWs.²⁴ However, the initiative met with a mixed reaction from the Docks section, which had long campaigned for all workers employed on the docks to come from the register, but had reservations about all existing staff workers being issued with books:

The dockers jealously protected their books and they weren’t particularly keen on the notion of extending that protection to these people who they viewed with the utmost suspicion and absolute distaste in many regards... they viewed them with utmost suspicion because some [of the membership of ACTSS] were management grades and there was history there.²⁵

Aside from making progress at the workplace, the Branch also began to broaden its influence within the Union by gradually increasing its representation on regional, national and trade group committees. Moreover, it successfully lobbied for a ‘no compulsory redundancies’ Branch policy, mirroring statutory protection afforded RDWs, which was ratified at the National Executive Committee level of the TGWU.²⁶ This was to prove an important statement of intent for future disputes and illustrates the growing confidence of the workforce, the stewards and the Branch.

The organisational structure of the Branch, established after shop steward elections lent itself to enfranchisement of its membership and, as a result, an increase in numbers, participation and activism. Each occupation, for example the ship’s

²³ Carden, ‘Staff unionism’ pp. 17-18. The only major employer of five to abstain from the first port-wide agreement was T&J Harrisons, although a smaller employer, Liverpool Maritime Terminals, also refused to implement it. The major employers who signed up to the agreement were the MDHC, Ocean Port Services, Port of Liverpool Stevedoring, A.E. Smith Coggins and West Coast Stevedoring.

²⁴ Author’s interview with T.T., March 2011.

²⁵ Author’s interview with E.R., May 2011.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

foremen or wharfingers, would vote for shop stewards in their area of the port on a biennial basis.²⁷ An area shop steward committee would then be formed from the elected stewards of the various grades. The area committees were semi-autonomous in their nature but also reported to a port-wide clerical stewards committee. This structure was similar to that which existed in the Docks section at the port.²⁸ However, whereas by 1972 most dock stewards were full-time and did not carry out dock-work duties, all ACTSS stewards were ‘working’ stewards. This ensured constant contact with the membership and direct involvement in day-to-day workplace matters.²⁹ Moreover, area lay committees were established which further enabled accountability and participation, fostering the growth of ‘shop floor trade unionism’ amongst the clerical staff.³⁰

The Smith-Coggins dispute

Despite the progress made by the Branch, major challenges lay ahead. In June 1972, with all employers in the industry attempting to rationalise their RDW and non-registered workforces in the context of the reduced manpower requirements of the container-era, A.E. Smith-Coggins and Ocean Port Services issued redundancy notices to two hundred and seventeen non-registered employees at the port.³¹ The decision was the first clear challenge to ACTSS’ no compulsory redundancy policy as a total of fifty of their members were under threat.³² Moreover, the redundancy notices were shortly followed by an announcement that merger talks were taking place between the MDHC and Smith-Coggins, Ocean Port Services and Port of Liverpool Stevedoring Services, raising the possibility of further job losses on the clerical side.³³ In fact, the EAPL acknowledged that ‘there was a fear of redundancy in the Port’ due to the prospect of company mergers and

²⁷ Prior to 1972 when the South End docks closed and Seaforth opened there were five main geographical areas of the port of Liverpool. These were the North Area, the South Area, the Middle Area, the Coast Area and Birkenhead.

²⁸ Authors interview with J.D., December 2009; Author’s interview with L.D., December 2009.

²⁹ Carden, ‘Staff unionism’, p. 48.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 21.

³¹ EAPL meeting minutes, 18 July 1972. The category of ‘non-registered’ employees basically encompassed all workers at the port who were not RDWs. This broad terminology covered all ancillary workers such as clerical staff, shoregang, shipwrights, tugboat men, gigboat men etc.

³² Twenty ACTSS members at Smith-Coggins and a further thirty at Ocean Port Services were threatened with redundancy.

³³ See Chapter 5 for an overview of the reasons behind the merger.

‘the figure of 950 [non-registered] redundancies had been floated’.³⁴ The insecurity felt by clerical workers was exacerbated still by an unrelated manning dispute between Smith-Coggins and its dockers, taking place at the same time.

The Docks Shop Steward Committee was threatening to undertake port-wide strike action in furtherance of its claim that certain types of quayside clerical work should be carried out by RDWs. As previously noted, clerical workers who worked on quayside operations were often resented by some dockers who wanted all such jobs preserved for registered men. In this case, the manning arrangements for the unloading of a ship had employed only one RDW on quayside administrative work where the Docks section argued that at least one more should have been used.³⁵ Dock stewards had already been pressing employers for guarantees that ‘priority would be given over clerical staff in the manning of office jobs’ and that ‘when a staff member died, retired or resigned he would be replaced by a registered dock worker’.³⁶ For their part ACTSS stewards were growing increasingly concerned about RDWs being employed in roles which were traditionally clerical and in the wake of the latest manning dispute asked for a statement from the EAPL ‘concerning their position vis-a-vis registered dock workers in view of their encroachment on staff jobs’.³⁷

This combination of pressures on clerical jobs led to increasing calls for strike action. In this context, a mass meeting was convened on Saturday 15 July attended by three hundred ACTSS clerical workers. After an in-depth discussion regarding the future of clerical employment at the port, a motion to give one week’s notice of strike action from Monday was overwhelmingly approved, targeted particularly at the redundancy notices issued to ACTSS members.³⁸ The dockers also voted at a separate mass meeting on 18 July to begin strike action from 21 July over the Smith-Coggins manning dispute.³⁹ The EAPL, faced with a double threat of strike action, established a tri-partite standing sub-committee consisting of RDW, clerical and employer representation to discuss manning arrangements at the port.

³⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 18 July 1972. The 950 redundancy figure covered all non-registered jobs at the port, a significant proportion of which would fall in the clerical category.

³⁵ For more detail on the July manning dispute at Smith-Coggins see Chapter 5.

³⁶ EAPL meeting minutes, 18 July 1972.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 17 July 1972.

³⁹ EAPL meeting minutes, 20 July 1972; *Liverpool Echo* 18 July 1972.

At the first tri-partite committee meeting, dock stewards argued that ‘work presently carried out by staff clerks should be done by RDWs’.⁴⁰ In response, clerical stewards took the opportunity to further their case for all dock estate clerical workers to become registered.⁴¹ They argued that this would alleviate fears amongst their membership regarding redundancy and satisfy RDW claims that all quayside workers should be registered. However, although employers recognised that ‘if the staff were to become registered and the registered dock workers were to support them, then the present problem would possibly be solved’, they were predictably reluctant to see another section of the port workforce afforded the blanket protection of the Scheme.⁴² Indeed, ‘it [was] unlikely that there was any general support for such a measure either amongst employers or the Government because of the wider implications of such a move’.⁴³ Nevertheless, the EAPL feared that the prospective strike action might only be solved by some movement on this point. It acknowledged privately that ‘the demand might arise for the registration of all dock jobs’.⁴⁴

In the event, the jailing of the Pentonville Five superseded the proposed local strike action and hence the EAPL observed that ‘the urgency for a decision on any concession in the local dispute had now been removed by national developments’.⁴⁵ As previously detailed, the spontaneous reaction to the imprisonment of the five London dockers brought the country to a standstill. However, the release of the dockers did not witness a return to work at the port of Liverpool because rejection of the Aldington-Jones report by a Dock Delegates Conference on 27 July resulted in a reaffirmation of the official national dock strike mandate.⁴⁶ Similarly, although ACTSS’ strike action over the proposed Smith-Coggins and Ocean Port Services job losses had also been eclipsed by widespread industrial action relating to the committals at Pentonville, clerical workers had already gone out on strike as agreed and refused to return to work afterwards. At a mass meeting on 28 July, clerical staff

⁴⁰ Dock Labour Joint Committee – Standing Sub-Committee meeting minutes, 19 July 1972 (Liverpool Maritime Museum). Staff clerks were those clerical workers which carried out quayside clerical duties.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; EAPL meeting minutes, 18 July 1972.

⁴² EAPL meeting minutes, 18 July 1972.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 20 July 1972.

⁴⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 21 July 1972.

⁴⁶ For more detail on the RDW dispute and the A-J report see Chapter 5.

voted to remain on strike until the redundancy notices served on their membership were reversed. As a result, around eight hundred were out on indefinite strike.⁴⁷

While the clerical workers and RDWs remained on strike over their respective grievances, worse news was to follow. On 7 August, Smith-Coggins announced to the EAPL that it 'would not renew its stevedoring license when it fell due on 18 September'.⁴⁸ The company's decision to withdraw from the port entirely rather than merge with the MDHC meant that many more than the original fifty ACTSS jobs were now under threat. The withdrawal announcement was not, however, completely unexpected. Smith-Coggins' management was extremely displeased about the manner in which they had been excluded from Seaforth.⁴⁹ When added to the economic impact of a summer of severe industrial strife and a decline in trade, the company had apparently decided to cut its losses. The MDHC signalled its intention to take on the business and customers of Smith-Coggins at the port, subject to Government approval.⁵⁰ However, it also made it clear that 'the question of redundancy in the clerical section would now cover a much wider field. No assurances could be given other than to registered dock workers'.⁵¹

The MDHC was adamant that there would be extensive redundancy amongst clerical workers at Smith-Coggins because they simply did not require 'duplication' of existing jobs.⁵² No other port employer registered an interest in recruiting additional clerical labour and without the Scheme for protection the majority of Smith-Coggins' five hundred staff were facing redundancy.⁵³ Despite the Docks section resuming work on 21 August in the wake of the conclusion of the official national strike, on 23 August ACTSS voted to stay out in the absence of any reassurances regarding their members.⁵⁴ This in turn meant that although the port reopened, operations were severely limited without some grades of clerical worker

⁴⁷ The *Liverpool Echo*, 28 July 1972 reported that 850 clerical staff were on strike which constituted the vast majority of the workforce. However, Carden states that the total membership of ACTSS numbered only 300 at this time. It would appear that, although not members of the ACTSS branch, the rest of the workforce had also gone on strike in protest against the proposed redundancies (Carden, 'Staff unionism', p. 73).

⁴⁸ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 August 1972.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 5 for an account of manning arrangements for the new Royal Seaforth Docks complex.

⁵⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 8 August 1972. As noted in Chapter 5, the Government held a 20% 'golden share' in the MDHC.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² EAPL meeting minutes, 11 August 1972.

⁵³ *Liverpool Echo*, 19 August 1972.

⁵⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 23 August 1972.

such as timekeepers, ships' foremen etc. By 24 August, the clerical staff had been on sustained strike for a total of thirty days. Although dockers were working forty-three vessels at the port, sixteen were lying idle and a further fourteen were stranded at the Mersey Bar awaiting berth space.⁵⁵ The EAPL warned of 'serious quayside congestion' as a result.⁵⁶ Furthermore, none of the ships being worked by dockers could leave the port without certain grades of clerical worker being present to administer the relevant paperwork.

Having apparently brought to an end months of local intermittent industrial strife with the dockers' settlement, the news that the clerical workers were to remain on strike was greeted with anger by employers.⁵⁷ The dockers were also keen to get the port back to full working again after a significant spell out and the related personal financial cost. Over the next few days 'all the focus was on a group of clerical workers who'd never been in the spotlight before' and immense pressure was put on ACTSS to return to work and enable the full re-opening of the port.⁵⁸ Similarly, the remaining port employers were under considerable duress to find a settlement and so negotiations began out of necessity. However, the Branch was sticking to its 'no compulsory redundancy' policy, insisting that 'anyone who wants to take the money [enhanced voluntary severance], we'll talk money but anyone who wants a job must be... reallocated to another employer'.⁵⁹

Most companies still insisted that it was impossible to absorb so many staff jobs into existing workforces and so the burden was left to the MDHC, as the new major employer in the port, to make an offer to re-employ a significant portion of those made redundant. However, the initial offer was laden with conditions. The MDHC proposed that it would employ around seventy-five percent of the surplus staff, 'but there was certain elements they didn't want and that was some of the activists'.⁶⁰ The negotiating party for the union side rejected any form of selective recruitment, especially on the grounds of activism.⁶¹ Nevertheless, such was the pressure from within the Union hierarchy and elsewhere that when the MDHC

⁵⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 24 August 1972.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 22 August 1972.

⁵⁸ Author's interview with T.T., January 2011.

⁵⁹ Author's interview with E.R., May 2011.

⁶⁰ Author's interview with T.T., January 2011.

⁶¹ Author's interview with E.R., May 2011.

returned with a final offer in which they agreed to employ all clerical workers except those over sixty years old, it was put to the vote at a fractious mass meeting at the Pier Head baggage halls on Friday 25 August. Under the terms of this new offer only twelve over-sixty ACTSS members would be affected.⁶² Several shop stewards and activists objected strongly to the over-sixties being sacrificed as part of the settlement but amidst the accusations and the unusual suppression of questions from the floor, a show of hands returned a two-to-one majority in favour of the offer.⁶³

Eventually, the pressure mounting from all sides to end the dispute told as ‘panic started setting in’ amongst striking clerical workers.⁶⁴ The majority of them were totally inexperienced in high-pressure industrial battles and the vote for a return to work illustrated that there was limited appetite for a potentially drawn-out conflict, particularly having already been out on strike for over a month. The negotiating committee for the union side reluctantly admitted that ‘to prolong the strike could prove severely damaging to the future job security of our members’, despite some stewards and members believing the MDHC would eventually concede reallocation of the entire workforce.⁶⁵ Similarly the Branch Official, Eddie Roberts, reflected upon the return to work vote by commenting that ‘I bitterly regret the situation that... the over sixties are facing. In any battle there are casualties and in any battle we even face the possibility of defeat. Yes, we have got casualties but we are not defeated’.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the manner in which the motion was hurried through the meeting without the usual due process left a sour aftertaste for some activists, with one shop steward describing the affair with retrospect as ‘a stain on our Branch’.⁶⁷ Another steward recalled that ‘the stewards had the right to vote for it or not. I chose not to... but it was pushed through under enormous pressure’.⁶⁸

Despite the failure of ACTSS to maintain its recently-ratified branch policy of no compulsory redundancies, the campaign for reallocation could be considered a relative success. Notwithstanding massive pressure from the Government, port

⁶² *Liverpool Echo*, 23 August 1972. Although scores of clerical staff over the age of sixty were to be made compulsorily redundant, only twelve of these were actually ACTSS members.

⁶³ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 August 1972; Author’s interview with A.D., May 2011; Author’s interview with M.C., January 2011; Author’s interview with T.T. January 2011.

⁶⁴ Author’s interview with T.T., January 2011.

⁶⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 August 1972; Carden, ‘Staff unionism’, pp. 74-75.

⁶⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 August 1972.

⁶⁷ Author’s interview with T.T., January 2011.

⁶⁸ Author’s interview with A.D., May 2011.

employers, the dockers, and indeed the bureaucracy of their own union, little short of five hundred jobs had been saved. It is also important to note that only a small fraction of the workforce was discriminated against solely on the grounds of age and forcibly made redundant and that their severance sum was enhanced considerably beyond the statutory requirement to £4800 as part of the final settlement.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the episode had signified that ACTSS was now a player in industrial relations at the port and, more importantly, illustrated that it had a *de facto* veto on port operations. If they went out on strike, the port ground to a virtual standstill:

The clerical workers realised that they were key men and that they could halt the port. It was the realisation that, for the first time... dockers were back at work but the port couldn't function properly because the staff were on strike... The 1972 dispute was pivotal for the branch. It brought to the fore the younger element. Their eyes lit up when they saw what could be achieved.⁷⁰

The growth in membership and recognition, coupled with a new official and the election of an emerging wave of young, idealistic and pro-active shop stewards had transformed ACTSS 6/567 branch from a non-entity into a 'fighting force' on the docks within just a few short years.⁷¹ The relative success of the campaign for reallocation had several repercussions. The dispute had brought forward the younger generation of activists and shop stewards, some the sons of dockers and indoctrinated with more traditional combative 'blue-collar' values and attitudes, changing the character of staff unionism at the port considerably. It also encouraged ACTSS stewards to become more progressive in their efforts to improve pay and conditions for the membership. Out of the new stance adopted came a renewed campaign for all clerical workers to become registered which persisted on and off for the remainder of the decade. The EAPL was to note much later that 'the staff could be even more militant in their actions than the RDWs'.⁷² The solidarity displayed in the Smith-Coggins dispute was to become more rule than exception thereafter and industrial relations at the port had been altered irrevocably, although this only

⁶⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 23 August 1972; *Liverpool Echo*, 25 August 1972; EAPL meeting minutes, 25 August 1972.

⁷⁰ Author's interview with E.R., May 2011.

⁷¹ Author's interview with T.T., January 2011.

⁷² EAPL meeting minutes, 11 August 1980.

became apparent with the passage of time. The progress made by the new breed of clerical union activist is well-illustrated here:

The lads became very self-sufficient after the 1972 dispute. Whereas there was a great reliance on me as full-time officer in the first couple of years, once flush with success they found their feet. They took [union] education classes and there were some articulate lads amongst them. From then on they didn't need me there every five minutes – they were quite capable of getting on and doing the business themselves and began fashioning their relationship with employers and the dock shop stewards in a much more meaningful way.⁷³

Nevertheless, despite the moral victory for the Union over reallocation for the majority of its Smith-Coggins members to the MDHC, staff workers at Ocean Port Services were still threatened with redundancy.⁷⁴ On 7 October an ACTSS 6/567 branch meeting passed a resolution which read 'guarantees of employment should be given for members threatened with redundancy in Ocean Port Services... otherwise all ACTSS members in the Port would withdraw their labour from Monday 30th October'.⁷⁵ After three weeks of negotiation at the JNC and only four days before the strike was due to commence it was agreed that the redundancy notices would be withdrawn and those under threat would be reallocated to the MDHC.⁷⁶ Doubtlessly, clerical unionism was here to stay and employers now took ACTSS seriously. A final measure of how pivotal the Smith-Coggins dispute had been in the direction of the Branch is illustrated by the upsurge in membership thereafter. From around three hundred members before the dispute, numbers jumped to eight hundred and thirty by late 1973 and one hundred percent membership of over one thousand staff workers was reached just one year later.⁷⁷ For employers, now faced with two well-organised trade groups at the port, bruising battles were in prospect as the need for rationalisation and reorganisation of the industry accelerated.

⁷³ Author's interview with E.R., May 2011.

⁷⁴ As previously noted, thirty ACTSS members at Ocean Port Services were threatened with redundancy in the initial wave of notices served in June.

⁷⁵ Minutes of 6/567 ACTSS Branch, 7 October 1972, reproduced in Carden, 'Staff unionism', p. 76.

⁷⁶ EAPL meeting minutes, 27 October 1972.

⁷⁷ Carden, 'Staff unionism', p. 77.

Chapter 7

The Changing Dynamics of Labour Relations at the Port of Liverpool, 1973-1989

The role played by Britain's dockworkers in the events of the summer of 1972 has been well-documented in the preceding chapters. However, while the seminal national rebellion against the Industrial Relations Act was widely interpreted as an example of the strength of labour organisation on the docks generally, the challenges which precipitated it persisted. Containerisation continued to cast a long shadow over manning levels and employment prospects in the industry and authority over 'stuffing and stripping' duties outside of the dock estate was still hotly-contested. The Aldington-Jones agreement, while on the one hand guaranteeing permanent employment for Registered Dock Workers (RDWs) with an individual employer by rendering the Temporary Unattached Register (TUR) obsolete, was also conversely concerned with shedding a significant number of the national registered workforce through voluntary severance. Similarly, modernisation of the industry carried a significant threat to ancillary workers such as clerical staff, whose future was inextricably linked to that of the dockers. So, despite the upheaval created in the summer of 1972 and the subsequent departure of the Conservatives from government in 1974, significant challenges were still apparent for all workers remaining in the industry.

For the port employers, their ability to properly restructure and rationalise the industry to accommodate the proliferation of containerisation remained inhibited by the continuing existence of the National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS) and the protection afforded RDWs by the Devlin reforms and A-J agreement. The A-J agreement was certainly resented by employers.¹ It was largely conceded as a means to end the persistent industrial strife of 1972 and, unlike the Devlin reforms and the Scheme, it never became statutory. Employers always took exception to the 'job for life' provision and sought to discard the Agreement and even the Scheme when the time was right, with the initial intention that it be supplanted by a voluntary

¹ Employers Association of the Port of Liverpool (EAPL) meeting minutes, 26 July 1972 (National Maritime Museum, Albert Dock, Liverpool); Finney, N. 'Repeal of the National Dock Labour Scheme: Britain's ports in an era of industrial relations change', *Employee Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1990, pp. 10-16. Finney became Director of the National Association of Port Employers (NAPE) in 1980.

arrangement with the Union.² It appeared that the opportunity to do so would present itself following the Conservative victory at the 1979 General Election, encouraging the National Association of Port Employers (NAPE) and the various local employers' associations to begin to lobby for the Scheme's replacement and to attempt to re-assert managerial prerogative. However, where the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) had previously been accused of complacency and inaction by its Dock section membership, the eighties saw a hardening of its stance particularly in relation to the defence of the NDLS and A-J agreement.³

In the national sphere, the defeat of the Heath government at the 1974 General Elections and the subsequent unveiling of the victorious Labour Party's much-heralded Social Contract with the Trade Union Congress (TUC) seemed to indicate a re-invigoration of the relationship between organised labour and its natural political ally.⁴ However, after an initially positive start, economic realities forced the Government to first negotiate and later impose wage restraint policy on the trade union movement.⁵ By the winter of 1978, amidst widespread industrial unrest, another attempt at corporatism and socialist economic planning lay in tatters, destroyed by a faltering economy, oppressive inflation and disastrous pay round increases.⁶ With retrospect, the resultant Conservative victory in the 1979 election is

² Turnbull, P. Woolfson, C. & Kelly, J. *Dock Strike: Conflict and Restructuring in Britain's Ports* (Aldershot: Avebury 1992), p. 84.

³ This lean to the left could at least in part be attributed to the increasing dominance of regional and national trade group committees by local dock shop stewards and the members of the National Port Shop Stewards' Committee throughout the seventies (Source: Author's interview with F.L., January 2011; Author's interview with M.C., January 2011; Lindop, F. 'The dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, part 1: Shop stewards and containerisation', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, Vol. 5, Spring 1998, p. 49 [pp. 33-72]; See also Chapter 5 of this thesis).

⁴ It is worth noting that the February 1974 General Election returned a hung parliament and Labour assumed power without a majority. The October election returned a slender majority of three for Labour. For more detail on the Social Contract see: Taylor, R. *The TUC: From the General Strike to New Unionism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2000); Wilkinson, F. & Tarling, R. 'The Social Contract: Post-war incomes policies and their inflationary impact', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 1, 1977, pp. 395-414; Undy, R. 'The TUC: From the General Strike to New Unionism', *Employee Relations*, 2001, Vol. 23/ 3, pp. 290-302; McIlroy, J. & Campbell, A. 'The high tide of trade unionism: mapping industrial politics 1964-79' in J. McIlroy, N. Fishman & A. Campbell (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1999), pp. 93-132.

⁵ For more detail on the introduction of incomes policies by Labour see: Taylor, R. 'The trade union 'problem' in the Age of Consensus 1960-1979' in B. Pimlott & C. Cook *Trade Unions in British Politics* (London: Longman 1991), pp. 175-199; Wilkinson & Tarling, 'The Social Contract'; Boston, J. 'The theories and practice of voluntary incomes policies with particular reference to the British Labour government's Social Contract 1974-1979', PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 1983.

⁶ For more detail on the events of the 'Winter of Discontent' see: Hay, C. 'Narrating crisis: The discursive construction of the 'Winter of Discontent'', *Sociology*, Vol. 30/2, May 1996, pp. 253-277;

widely regarded as a watershed in British political, economic and industrial relations history. Over the course of the next decade, through a combination of monetarist *laissez-faire* fiscal policies, piecemeal industrial relations legislation, high unemployment, economic recession and an apparent electoral mandate in favour of reform, Thatcher's government succeeded in irrecoverably changing the nature and influence of trade unionism in British political and industrial culture.

The Thatcherism paradigm has been well-scrutinised and thoroughly documented by the various branches of historical enquiry and other disciplines. It is not the intention of this study to recount in detail the general context of 1979-1989 or the unrelated policies of the Conservative government, as these have already been comprehensively researched elsewhere.⁷ Of course, it is difficult to properly analyse the challenges facing the Liverpool registered dock/clerical workers and their representatives without some reference to the major pieces of legislation that considerably restricted the scope and effectiveness of industrial action for all description of labour organisation. It is therefore a secondary objective of this chapter to evaluate if and the extent to which the changing landscape of voluntary bargaining impacted upon the dock and clerical workers' industrial attitudes and ability to mobilise effectively throughout the eighties at the port of Liverpool, cumulating in an examination of the campaign against the abolition of the NDLS in 1989.

It is in these dual contexts - the changing nature/modernisation of the dock industry and the impact of political policy on union organisation post-1979 - that this chapter considers labour relations at the port of Liverpool between 1973 and 1989. The chapter comprises a chronological assessment of significant disputes at the port during this period, some involving the Docks section, some involving the Association of Clerical Technical and Supervisory Staff (ACTSS) and others involving both trade groups. It aims to not only shed light on the local relationships between port workers and management but also on the sometimes tempestuous

Thomas, J. 'Bound in by history': The Winter of Discontent in British politics, 1979-2004', *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 29/2, March 2007, pp. 263-283.

⁷ For more detail on the evolution of the Conservative government's policies see, for example: McIlroy, J. *The Permanent Revolution: Conservative Law and the Trade Unions* (Nottingham: Spokesman for the Society of Industrial Tutors 1991); Taylor, A. 'The Conservative party and the trade unions' in McIlroy et al, *British Trade Unions*, pp. 151-186; Freeman, R. & Pelletier, J. 'The impact of industrial relations legislation on British union density', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 28, No. 2, July 1990, pp. 141-164.

relationship between dockers and clerical workers themselves. The causes and outcomes of many of the disputes featured have never been properly examined. Thus it is therefore contended that this study will help illuminate the true picture of industrial relations at the port of Liverpool and contribute to the existing academic discourse regarding dockland industrial relations, local workplace relationships and the impact of Thatcherism on labour organisation.

Developments in labour relations at Liverpool 1973-1979

By 1973, the Docks section was well-established at the port and had enjoyed several successes in confronting management and haulage companies over proposed changes to working practices and the outsourcing of container-stripping duties. To further exacerbate the local employers' predicament, the Smith-Coggins dispute also signified the consolidation of clerical unionism and as ACTSS 6/567 Branch continued to establish itself and strengthen its membership, it became increasingly apparent that management would be forced to deal with two active and well-organised trade groups at the port. When these local factors are added to the broader industry-wide challenges, it would appear that the prospect of any real measure of industrial harmony remained as remote as ever.

Indeed, although the events of the summer of 1972 had proven to be a politically-charged affair, the subsequent A-J agreement did not address the major concerns of Liverpool's RDWs namely the definition and scope of dock work, the contraction of manning levels and the growth of non-Scheme ports, all of which had triggered the broader national furore over the blacking issue. The Dock Shop Steward Committee remained pro-active in their defence of manning levels, especially following the introduction of the industry's National Voluntary Severance Scheme (NVSS) and its implications for the potential shrinking of the local register.⁸ After the Smith-Coggins settlement, both the dock and clerical stewards were encouraged to press employers for further concessions regarding manning. The next

⁸ The NVSS was introduced as part of the A-J agreement amidst employer demands to rationalise the workforce in the face of containerisation. The initial amount available to RDWs was £4000. Although there had been a severance scheme in operation under the Devlin reforms, the relatively small severance sum of £1500 attracted only modest interest.

opportunity to act progressively on this issue came with negotiations over the opening of Seaforth Grain Terminal.

As previously noted, the opening of the Seaforth Container Terminal was delayed by the Union side of the Local Modernisation Committee (LMC) seeking guarantees regarding redundancies and sole jurisdiction over container-stripping duties.⁹ Agreement was eventually reached in 1972 regarding the allocation of RDWs to the terminal, although negotiations had been ongoing since 1970. However, the opening and operation of Seaforth Grain Terminal, located on the same site as the container terminal, was delayed well into 1974 because of a protracted dispute regarding manning, terms and conditions.¹⁰ Seaforth Grain Terminal had been purpose-built to handle the largest of bulk grain carriers, featuring modern equipment and a 100,000 tonne silo, and so massively improved the port's capacity.¹¹

An employer-union liaison committee, the Grain Committee, had initially been established in 1972 as a vehicle to negotiate pay and conditions. From the start of discussions, shop stewards on the union side insisted on registration of *all* workers at the terminal, including clerical staff, as a precondition for any other negotiations.¹² However, the registration of clerical workers was rejected out-of-hand by the Employers' Association of the Port of Liverpool (EAPL), representing the interests of those companies concerned.¹³ Employers were compelled to use RDWs for quayside work at the terminal but unsurprisingly 'were not prepared to extend registration to any other class of worker on the docks'.¹⁴ Aside from the short-term financial inconvenience the registration of staff workers at the Grain Terminal might cause, the long-term consequences of such a deal could have left port employers open to a deluge of similar claims for registration by other sections of the non-

⁹ See Chapter 5 for more detail on the construction and opening of the Seaforth Container Terminal and the establishment of Local Modernisation Committees in every Scheme port in Britain as part of the 1967 Devlin reforms.

¹⁰ The Royal Seaforth Docks Complex contained a number of different terminals - meat, timber, grain and container terminals. The Grain Terminal was the last on the site to open.

¹¹ House of Commons debate, 25 July 1974 (*Hansard*, Vol. 877, cc. 1978-88).

¹² EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 5 Nov 1973. This was not without precedent because the manning agreement for Seaforth Container Terminal stipulated that all employees there would be registered.

¹³ The MDHC was the major employer at the Grain Terminal, and indeed in the port as a whole, having absorbed the workforces of Smith-Coggins, Port of Liverpool Stevedoring and Ocean Port Services in late 1972 – see Chapter 5 for more detail.

¹⁴ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 12 Nov 1973.

registered dock workforce or in other areas of the port. At a meeting of the Grain Committee on 8 November 1973, representatives of the EAPL/Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC) informed the union side that the registration of staff workers at the terminal was a non-starter. In response, the shop stewards once again made it clear that no negotiations could proceed on any other issue relating to the terminal until they were guaranteed that all workers would be registered, 'at that point the lay members of the union side walked out of the meeting'.¹⁵ This stalemate persisted for several months.¹⁶

As in the case of Seaforth Container Terminal the MDHC, as both Port Authority and majority employer, came under substantial pressure from customers intending to use the facilities at the Grain Terminal. Shipping interests and grain processors, some of whom had invested in new mills adjacent to the terminal, were pushing for an agreement and threatened the permanent transfer of their operations to rival ports.¹⁷ Eventually, despite serious misgivings on the employers' side, a settlement was reached through the machinery of the National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry (NJC) whereby 'it was agreed that in this case and this case alone - not setting any precedents for any other part of the port, or any other port - the clerical workers on the computer side of the Grain Terminal should be registered dockworkers'.¹⁸ On the surface this agreement appeared to represent a victory for both ACTSS and the Docks section – for the staff it provided a precedent regarding registration, something which was already being actively pursued by the branch; for the dockers, it maintained their policy of extending the register and sphere of influence wherever possible.

However, agreement over registration of all workers at the Grain Terminal was only the first hurdle in negotiations. When discussions began over manning levels and pay and conditions, the MDHC was subject to an unpleasant shock. The company assessed that the operation of the terminal required two seven-hour shifts

¹⁵ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 12 Nov 1973.

¹⁶ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 12 Nov 1973 – 1 March 1974.

¹⁷ House of Commons debate, 25 July 1974. Kelloggs and Allied Mills both opened new premises next to the terminal.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* The National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry consisted of an equal number of employer/union members. It was founded in 1920 as part of the Shaw Inquiry recommendations (an early Government inquiry into the casual system of employment on the docks) and dealt with establishing and administering the port industry's national minimum wage, overtime rates and holiday pay.

of between thirty-two and thirty-seven men per shift to achieve maximum profitability (total sixty-four to seventy-four), 'it believed that was the correct figure in the interests of the port if it was to push up throughput and bring additional benefit to the Merseyside docks'.¹⁹ Clearly, because of the sophisticated nature of the new grain handling facility, the figure proposed by the company fell well short of the conventional numbers required for the handling of grain at other berths in the port. The Dock Shop Steward Committee, upholding its central policy of maintaining manning levels, saw this as reduction of the workforce by proxy.²⁰ The Union's counter-proposal stipulated that one hundred and twenty-three workers were required per shift on a three-shift rota.²¹ Yet again, the Grain Committee fell into stalemate and the issue was referred to the NJC.²²

On this occasion, the NJC also became deadlocked and internal assessors were appointed to advise. Their findings set the manning levels at fifty-eight workers to cover two seven-hour shifts per day, with additional men on duty for cleaning and store keeping, a total of one hundred and sixteen men.²³ Management accepted the recommendation, but again the union side argued that such a figure would equate to a relative loss of jobs on previous grain handling levels.²⁴ Instead the Union proposed that the two sides met half-way on their initial manning estimates, equating to eighty men to cover two shifts per day, a total of one hundred and sixty.²⁵ There was also further disagreement over shift lengths and weekly pay guarantees.

Eventually, the Grain Committee agreed on £67 for a thirty-five hour week but it took several more weeks of negotiations before a mutually suitable arrangement was agreed regarding manning levels. At a meeting of the Grain Committee on Friday 13 September, the Union side finally agreed to a total of one hundred and thirty two men split across an early and late shift, each working a thirty-five hour week.²⁶ The final manning settlement represented almost double the initial

¹⁹ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 1 March 1974.

²⁰ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 1 March 1974.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Such was the growing rancour surrounding the affair, it featured in a House of Commons debate. See House of Commons debate, 25 July 1974.

²³ EAPL – TGWU Seaforth Grain Committee meeting minutes, 5 June 1974.

²⁴ House of Commons debate, 25 July 1974.

²⁵ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 1 March 1974.

²⁶ EAPL – TGWU Seaforth Grain Committee meeting minutes, 13 September 1974.

estimate by employers and an increase of sixteen on assessment provided by the NJC. The terminal eventually opened on 28 October 1974, some two years after negotiations regarding manning and conditions had commenced. As in previous negotiations over the container terminal, the union side had played a waiting game in refusing to allocate labour and hence allowed financial and customer pressure to mount on the MDHC, which ultimately resulted in an enhanced and satisfactory settlement. The MDHC, shorn of the usual powers of coercion available in a standard employment relationship, were stymied by the tactics utilised by the Union side of the negotiating committee.²⁷ These tactics were rooted in an intimate knowledge of the statutory protection afforded them and the time-hungry nature of the shipping and dock industries, not entirely dissimilar to the tailored ‘factory class consciousness’ cultivated by stewards in Beynon’s study of Ford workers, who ‘knew what their bit of the world was about’.²⁸ It is evident that early battle lines were being drawn here in the broader contest of modernisation/containerisation versus the local industry and the maintenance of those all-important manning levels.

Meanwhile in the national sphere, several new initiatives for the dock industry were unfolding. In the wake of the 1972 national dock strike, the A-J Committee had recommended an overhaul of the Dock Labour Scheme to better deal with the litany of challenges posed by modernisation. The recently-elected Labour government, led by Harold Wilson with Michael Foot as Secretary of State for Employment, was considering implementing either an extension of the NDLS or nationalisation of the port industry.²⁹ On 15 July 1974, Foot announced a proposal in a House of Commons statement to significantly extend the Scheme. The details of the proposal did little to raise morale at the National Association of Port Employers (NAPE) and the EAPL. Aside from stating that the NDLS should be extended ‘to all significant cargo-handling activities at ports and wharves which have not been covered up to now’, the plan made provision for the implementation of the ‘five-mile’ rule, a redefining and strengthening of the definition of dock-work and a perpetuation of the industry joint control arrangements through the National Dock

²⁷ The Union side of the negotiating committee consisted of stewards appointed by the Dock Shop Steward Committee plus the District Docks Secretary, Lew Lloyd.

²⁸ Beynon, H. *Working For Ford* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1973), pp. 80-81.

²⁹ EAPL meeting minutes, 27 August 1974.

Labour Board (NDLB), local boards and the machinery of the NJC.³⁰ The reaffirmation and augmentation of the Scheme was the worst possible scenario for employers. At Liverpool, the EAPL even considered nationalisation as the lesser of two evils, an indication of exactly how strongly the employers felt about any extension of the Scheme's powers.³¹ Indeed, it was suggested at a Policy Committee meeting that 'one of the conditions of nationalisation should be the complete abolition of the Dock Worker's Scheme and that dockworkers should take their place in the industrial field under exactly the same conditions as other workers in other industries, this is fundamental'.³² Similarly, NAPE asked the Department of Employment 'why extend the Dock Labour Scheme when it was not necessary anyhow?'³³

The Government published its final document on dock-work on 21 March 1975. However, the consultative process did little to alter the initial provisions of the Bill, which retained all of the major points announced in the original notification of extension of the Scheme and received its second reading in the House of Commons in February 1976. The 'five-mile' rule was a central issue of contention, especially amongst freight and road haulage companies. The events which transpired in the summer of 1972 were largely a consequence of haulage companies refusing to recognise 'stuffing and stripping' as dock-work and therefore any legislation which preserved all container groupage work within a five-mile radius of Scheme ports for RDWs was bound to be hotly-disputed. So, not only was the Bill strongly resisted by port authorities and employers, it was also challenged by major haulage companies who vociferously made their feelings known to the

³⁰ Department for Employment Press Release, 'Proposal to extend the Dock Labour Scheme announced today', 15 July 1974 (The University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre). Although Scheme port employers had previously lobbied for the extension of the NDLS to non-Scheme ports on the grounds of unfair commercial advantage, the other provisions contained in the proposal strengthened dockworkers' employment rights further. The 'five-mile' rule basically stipulated that all container groupage work ('stuffing and stripping') which took place within five miles of any Scheme port gates was deemed dock-work and hence had to be carried out by RDWs.

³¹ In fact, the MDHC was already part-owned by the government. The badly debt-laden MDHB was sold to the private sector in 1970 with the government assuming 20% of the company as compensation for writing off public debts of around £100m (see Chapter 5 for more detail). Indeed, the Royal Seaforth Docks complex was mostly financed by Government loans and grants (Source: House of Commons debate, 25 July 1974).

³² EAPL meeting minutes, 27 August 1974.

³³ EAPL meeting minutes, 'Re: Consultative Document 'Dock Work', 1 July 1975.

Government.³⁴ It was in this context that the Bill marginally passed its second reading in the House of Commons. However, it was savaged in the House of Lords and was returned to the Commons with a series of amendments proposed, most notably that a public inquiry should be held before it was passed into law.³⁵ In response, the Government tabled a motion disagreeing to the public inquiry amendment recommended by the House of Lords. This was carried by an ultra-slender 310 votes to 309, requiring the Speaker of the House's vote to break the deadlock.³⁶ Nevertheless, two similar motions opposing the Lords' amendments, relating to replacing the 'five-mile' rule with a scaled-down half mile boundary, were defeated.³⁷

The final outcome of the exhaustive debate and voting at the Commons was that a considerably diluted Act received Royal Assent on 22 November 1976.³⁸ The 'five-mile' rule, which was a central tenet of the unofficial National Port Shop Steward Committee's (NPSSC) demands over the previous few years, had been voted down in the Commons with a significantly more modest half-mile boundary being founded in its place.³⁹ No new Scheme was established immediately, instead the Act gave an undertaking that the Secretary of State for Employment would 'prepare in draft... a new Dock Labour Scheme to replace the 1967 Scheme' after consultation with all sides of the industry.⁴⁰ The only real immediate change was a re-shuffle and enlargement of the NDLB with four new members appointed by the Secretary of State for Employment.⁴¹ Indeed, the final Act was considered somewhat of a 'dud' by dockers.⁴² The Bill had started with lofty ambitions but failed to implement either of its proposed major reforms partly because of the Government's wafer-thin majority and partly because of strong opposition from

³⁴ See various correspondence to the Department for Employment regarding the consultative stage of the Dock Work Bill from concerned parties - The Institute of Freight Forwarders, 20 Jan 1976; Christian Salvesen (Cold Storage) Ltd, 9 Jan 1976 etc. (Modern Records Centre).

³⁵ House of Commons debate, 10 November 1976 (*Hansard*, Vol. 919, cc.487-602). The 1946 Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Act, which founded the original NDLS, contained reference to the need for a public inquiry if the Act were to be revised considerably or replaced.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ House of Commons debate, 10 November 1976.

³⁸ *Dock Work Regulation Act 1976* (London: HMSO November 1976).

³⁹ Although vague provision was made for the Secretary of State for Employment to extend this half-mile boundary 'if it appears to him necessary in the light of local circumstances affecting any particular definable dock area', Department for Employment, 'The Dock Work Regulation Act 1976' (Retrieved 19 August 2011 - <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1976/79/contents/enacted>).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Author's interview with F.L., January 2011.

employers within the dock and road haulage industries. This was effectively the last battle in the campaign to preserve container-stripping rights for RDWs. The inability of the Government to force through the reforms represented a significant defeat for the dockers' movement and an acceleration of the trend towards the outsourcing of container-stripping.

Meanwhile, at the port of Liverpool, where dockers and staff had wrung a series of concessions from employers, especially in relation to the Seaforth terminals, a period of relative industrial peace ensued. Nevertheless ACTSS, having gained recognition from the majority of employers and the EAPL in 1970/71, was still involved in a struggle for recognition from other employers at the port.⁴³ Two companies steadfastly resisted despite concessions from every other employer; these were Liverpool Maritime Terminals and T&J Harrisons. T&J Harrisons in particular was described by ACTSS stewards as 'fiercely anti-union', initially threatening any staff employee who joined the union with dismissal.⁴⁴ By 1976, these two employers were reluctantly brought to the negotiation table amidst union efforts to ramp up the pressure through the threat of industrial action. ACTSS stewards demanded that they recognise the union and implement the Port Agreement on terms and conditions for their workforce.⁴⁵ Despite pressure from the Union and the EAPL, Harrisons remained indifferent. Eventually they were forced to recognise the Union and accept the port-wide pay agreement after ACTSS took the company to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) in early 1977.⁴⁶

This enforced recognition was a reflection of the growing strength and influence of ACTSS. As previously noted, not all RDWs welcomed the awakening of clerical militancy, especially when their actions encroached on the dockers' sphere of influence or authority. The Smith-Coggins affair had been a case in point. There was further rancour connected to a proposed week-long boycott of South

⁴³ See Chapter 6 of this thesis for an account of the implementation of the port-wide agreement for clerical workers.

⁴⁴ Author's interview with T.T., March 2011.

⁴⁵ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 12 January 1976. The Port Agreement on pay and conditions for staff mirrored the RDWs negotiation structure – the EAPL and the Union negotiated terms on an annual basis which applied to every company and clerical worker throughout the port.

⁴⁶ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 17 January 1977.

African goods in January 1977.⁴⁷ An EAPL meeting reported that ‘it appeared that the week boycott of South African goods supported by the TUC should pass without difficulty as far as RDWs were concerned. However, the Association had been approached by ACTSS which asked for a stop work meeting to discuss the call for a boycott with their membership’.⁴⁸ On this occasion the ACTSS meeting voted against boycotting South African cargoes or ships in solidarity, although sympathetic political action was increasingly on the agenda for ACTSS stewards. The mere fact that clerical workers were considering an independent stoppage over a political matter was greeted with anger by dockers’ leaders, who had already voted against taking action because it had not been officially adopted as policy by the TGWU.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the ACTSS stewards were reminded from within the Union that ‘you’re only the junior partners in the port and you can never do anything in isolation from the dockers – you’ve got to keep them on board’.⁵⁰ An official liaison committee had been established between the dockers and clerical workers in August 1973 but the meetings were infrequent and sometimes fractious with little being resolved – ‘half the time you’d go to these liaison meetings and they’d just end up as fisticuffs’.⁵¹

Despite the initially strained and somewhat hostile relationship, the dock and ACTSS stewards gradually began to work together over certain matters. The proposed closure of Dunlop’s tyre factory in Speke (Liverpool) brought a united response of solidarity from both parties.⁵² This was part of a broader trend towards secondary sympathetic action by shop stewards at the port. Indeed the EAPL noted that ‘there had recently been several examples of dock workers responding to approaches from workers in other industries to have goods or services of their

⁴⁷ Some trade unions in Britain encouraged their members to boycott handling or transporting South African goods throughout the seventies and eighties because of the Apartheid government in that country.

⁴⁸ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 17 January 1977.

⁴⁹ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 17 January 1977.

⁵⁰ Author’s interview with T.T., November 2010.

⁵¹ *Ibid*; Carden, M. ‘Staff trade unionism and industrial decline: the ACTSS 6/567 Branch and the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company’, Unpublished MA thesis, University of Warwick, September 1983, p. 79.

⁵² For more detail about the closure of Dunlop’s, see for example: McGovern, T. ‘Why do successful companies fail? A case study of the decline of Dunlop’, *Business History*, Vol. 49, Issue 6, 2007, pp. 886-907; Willman, P. ‘Leadership and trade union principles: some problems of management sponsorship and independence’, *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 11, Issue 4, November 1980, pp. 39-49.

employers blacked in the Port'.⁵³ The 'blacking' of Dunlop's products had been sanctioned indirectly at the national level of the TGWU.⁵⁴ The Union had encouraged its membership to co-operate with the Dunlop Action Committee, set up by the company's employees and union representatives in the wake of the closure announcement. The Dunlop Action Committee 'had asked that Dunlop products be blacked on Liverpool docks and RDWs and ACTSS had agreed to act on this request'.⁵⁵

The slightly more co-ordinated approach between RDWs and staff could at least be partially attributed to a change of personnel in the branch hierarchy. Eddie Roberts, the officer accredited with reviving the fortunes of the 6/567 ACTSS branch by making it more inclusive, representational and pro-active left his post in 1977 to take up another appointment within the Union. The man who replaced him as official responsible for the clerical staff at the port was none other than Jimmy Symes, someone who was a household name amongst dockers and across the dockland community as a whole. Symes was an ex-RDW who had been 'poached' by the TGWU to become an official and whose pedigree on the docks was considerable. He was Chairman of the Dock Shop Stewards Committee from its inception in 1967 until 1977, playing an influential part in the series of disputes referred to in the last chapter and the broader evolution of labour relations at the port following the implementation of the shop steward system in the wake of Devlin Phase 1.⁵⁶ While Roberts was respected on the docks for his ability as a negotiator and organiser, especially from within his own ranks, Symes was a son of the industry and was held in very high regard by most RDWs. This made for an interesting appointment and, in theory, the possibility of a thawing in relations between the two trade groups at the port.

However, Symes' tenure at ACTSS was short-lived because in February 1979 he became TGWU District Docks and Waterways Secretary, returning to the section where he originally forged his reputation. His successor as ACTSS 6/567

⁵³ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 12 April 1979.

⁵⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 6 April 1979.

⁵⁵ EAPL Policy Committee minutes, 10 April 1979. Ultimately, the campaign to save the factory fails with the loss of over 2500 jobs (Source: Meegan, R. 'Paradise postponed: the growth and decline of Merseyside's outer estates' in P. Cooke (ed.) *Localities: The Changing Face of Urban Britain*, London: Unwin Hyman 1989, p. 208).

⁵⁶ Symes was replaced by Dennis Kelly as Chairman of the Dock Shop Steward Committee.

Branch Official was Lennie McCluskey, a man who enjoyed fervent and widespread support from within his own branch.⁵⁷ He was an extremely popular choice because he had graduated through the port clerical shop steward system, had spent all his working life on the clerical staff at the port and understood the complexities of the challenges facing the Branch.⁵⁸ In the long term McCluskey's appointment did nothing to help the relationship between dockers and clerical staff as he and his branch shop stewards increasingly sought to pursue improvements and safeguard members' jobs regardless of how their actions were perceived by the Dock section or the TGWU bureaucracy.

The Thatcher years at the port of Liverpool, 1979-1989

The defeat of Callaghan's Labour administration in the 1979 General Election brought an extra dimension, beyond the obvious, to labour relations at the port of Liverpool. As previously noted, from 1975 to 1979 the Labour government operated an incomes policy, initially with the consent of the unions and later without, which restricted annual wage round increases despite the impact of rapidly escalating inflation on the cost of living.⁵⁹ The pay freeze policy had expired during the last months of Labour's administration and was immediately dismissed and discarded as a mechanism for inflation control by the new Conservative government, which considered such measures an affront to free market economics. This, of course, signified a return to free collective bargaining for the first time in five years. Unions, having witnessed their members' standard of living and take home pay decline in real terms over that period, were eager to secure annual pay deals which exceeded the rate of inflation.⁶⁰

At Liverpool, port-wide pay negotiations for RDWs took place through the vehicle of the Local Modernisation Committee (LMC), established as part of the Devlin reforms, which consisted of an equal number of employer and union representatives. Clerical staff had their own pay negotiation committee, the Joint

⁵⁷ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 23 February 1979. Lennie McCluskey is, of course, the current General Secretary of UNITE (which includes the merged TGWU).

⁵⁸ Author's interview with T.N., March 2011; Author's interview with T.T., November 2010.

⁵⁹ Thorpe, 'The Labour Party and the trade unions' in McIlroy et al, *British Trade Unions*, p. 143. In 1975 inflation stood at a crippling 26.9% and although the rate fell thereafter it remained over 15% until 1978.

⁶⁰ Inflation jumped from 13.4% in 1979 to 18% in 1980 (Source: <http://safalra.com/other/historical-uk-inflation-price-conversion>; <http://www.whatsthecost.com/historic.cpi.aspx>).

Negotiating Committee (JNC) which met other EAPL representatives. As the major player at the port, the Docks section was always first to negotiate with port management in the annual pay round followed by clerical workers and other ancillary staff. For example, if the LMC agreed on a ten percent annual wage rise, ACTSS and other ancillary workers would usually expect their pay deal to be roughly comparable. This arrangement was formalised in a grade parity agreement with employers in 1974.⁶¹ So, the status quo at the port was that the RDW pay deal set the bar for other sections of port employee. However, as ACTSS became more independent and pro-active in its pursuit of members' interests, it increasingly disregarded the status quo and began to negotiate aggressively for its own individual claim. This approach was perceived in some quarters as challenging the established hierarchy at the port:

The dockers would say 'hang on, we've just done our deal – you can't get more than us'. But why not? We were a separate branch [of the Union] with separate negotiating bodies... we met one set of employers' representatives, the dockers met a different set and we had our own committees. Because we got a few successes in getting better deals, the dockers would have a right go at us. In the end, they went back to the employers and said 'although we're the first in in any negotiations... if you make a higher settlement with any other section in this port, we'll be coming back to you because we expect at least the same as them'.⁶²

Again, this instance of the clerical workers acting independently of dockers was frostily-received. The idea that the 'junior partners' in the port could trump the dockers in pay negotiations was interpreted as encroachment on their sphere of influence by some elements in the RDW camp. Sectionalism was undoubtedly alive

⁶¹ The growing number of RDWs employed in clerical roles was due to the local ACTSS branch ratifying a 'no new recruitment' policy in the wake of the 1972 Smith-Coggins dispute. It was conceived with the intention of protecting existing jobs and furthering the campaign for registration. However, a by-product of the policy meant that when a vacancy appeared in the clerical ranks due to natural wastage it was filled by a RDW. As a result ACTSS lobbied employers to introduce a parity agreement to ensure that those higher clerical grades who worked side-by-side with RDWs commanded similar salaries to their counterparts. Interestingly, whereas prior to 1972 any RDW who went to work in the office was forced to give up his 'book' (i.e. registration under the Scheme as a dockworker), this was no longer the case and those RDWs 'on loan' to the clerical side retained their registration with the local dock labour board and membership of the Docks section of the Union (Source: Carden, 'Staff unionism', pp. 79-81; Author's interview with T.T., March 2011).

⁶² Author's interview with T.T., March 2011.

and well in the local industry, a phenomenon which has previously been highlighted by Hyman as a potential by-product of strong, local shop steward organisation.⁶³

Pay negotiations in 1979, spurred on by the return to free collective bargaining, reaped an inflation-equalling 13.35% rise for RDWs.⁶⁴ However, at a time of increased financial pressure for employers, the rise was reluctantly absorbed. The union side of the LMC had also demanded an increase in fall-back pay and a shortening of the working week to thirty-five hours in all areas of the port.⁶⁵ This was rejected by the EAPL as 'unrealistic' and it pointed to the perilous state of port finances as evidence that the pay rise was the maximum affordable. In the case of ACTSS and the 1979 pay round negotiations, its delegates had insisted on the formalisation of a parity formula into the agreement which related the staff grades' rates of pay to an RDW checker employed on office work.⁶⁶ In other words, all ACTSS grades of pay were at the very least to be linked to the pay of RDWs involved in 'checking-off' duties.⁶⁷ This guaranteed de facto Scheme-dictated pay for the clerical staff who, despite not being afforded the protection of statute, were gradually mirroring some of the benefits derived from it through their own negotiations with management. Furthermore, by linking the salaries of dock workers and clerical staff pay and conditions now became an area of joint interest, and potentially of co-operation.

Collaboration between the two trade groups on other matters did indeed appear to be on the rise, perhaps illustrated by a co-ordinated port-wide stoppage in sympathy with steelworkers in March 1980. As in the case of Dunlop's, the action was triggered by a TGWU ruling requiring its membership to support steelworkers in their national dispute. On 20 March, gangs working a Russian cargo ship refused to load manufactured steel for export, resulting in around one hundred men being put

⁶³ Hyman, R. 'The politics of workplace trade unionism: Recent tendencies and some problems for theory', *Capital & Class*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Summer 1979, p. 55 (pp. 54-67).

⁶⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 30 April 1979. The pay rise was made up of an £8 per week increase on the basic rate and an increase in holiday pay of £24.57.

⁶⁵ A thirty-five hour week was already in operation at Seaforth's Container and Grain Terminals.

⁶⁶ The 1979 parity agreement was an augmentation of the 1974 agreement as it guaranteed *all* clerical grades' pay would be linked to RDWs on 'checking off' duties.

⁶⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 30 April 1979. In some areas of the port 'checking-off' duties were carried out by RDWs not clerical staff. This was dependent on agreements already in place relating to manning allocation in individual areas of the port.

‘off-pay’, one of the few disciplinary weapons available to management.⁶⁸ The following day, flash mass meetings at the dock gates provoked a complete walk-out of the five thousand-strong RDW workforce.⁶⁹ ACTSS quickly followed suit after their own mass meeting on 21 March and the port was brought to a complete standstill.⁷⁰ Dennis Kelly, Chairman of the Dock Shop Steward Committee following Symes’ departure, outlined the details of the current impasse:

We explained to the lads that the instruction to load the steel was contrary to a directive from the TGWU Executive... It is entirely up to the employers whether we return to work. We will work every other cargo but the steel and that means we’re willing to do 99 per cent of the work on the docks. We think they [the employers] are under pressure from the Government...⁷¹

The inference that the MDHC and other employers were being lent upon by the Government as part of a broader campaign against the twelve week-old steelworkers strike seemed to be given credence by the port employers’ apparent unwillingness to negotiate over a return to work on all other cargo.⁷² Furthermore, the action initiated in Liverpool spread to other Scheme ports where steel products and materials were also being boycotted. There was even talk of a national dock strike.⁷³ Yet again, pressure from port users came to bear as the MDHC struggled to justify their decision not to re-deploy dockers on all cargoes except steel in order to circumvent the TGWU ban. Indeed, one Managing Director of a Liverpool-based shipping agent described the MDHC’s handling of the dispute as ‘disgusting’.⁷⁴ The return to work eventually took place on 2 April after a complete *volte face* by management whereby guarantees were given that dockers would not be expected to

⁶⁸ As previously noted, nearly all disciplinary matters had to be referred to the local Dock Labour Board and NDLB for consideration, removing managerial disciplinary prerogative.

⁶⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 21 March 1980.

⁷⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 24 March 1980.

⁷¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 21 March 1980.

⁷² For more detail on the 1980 steelworkers strike see, for example: Blyton, P. ‘Steel: A classic case of industrial relations change in Britain’, *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 29, Issue 5, September 1992, pp. 635-650; Bacon, N., Blyton, P. & Morris, J. ‘Among the ashes: Trade union strategies in the UK and German steel industries’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 34, Issue 1, March 1996, pp. 25-50; Sadler, D. ‘Works closure at British Steel and the nature of the State’, *Political Geography Quarterly*, Vol. 3, Issue 4, October 1984, pp. 297-311.

⁷³ *Liverpool Echo*, 27 March 1980.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

work any steel cargoes whatsoever.⁷⁵ Industrial peace at the port was, however, relatively short-lived.

The T&J Harrisons dispute

The next major dispute to take place at the port sprang from a challenge to the vigorously and vociferously-defended manning levels. This took the form of the announcement of the closure of T&J Harrisons' stevedoring operations in June 1980, followed shortly by notification of withdrawal from the port by Bulk Cargo Handling Services.⁷⁶ The withdrawal of Harrisons could at least in part be considered in the context of its failed attempt to remain outside of the port-wide staff pay agreement, due to the ACAS ruling in 1977. Such was the company's inferior wage structure, the conciliation service's enforced ruling meant that some staff workers at Harrisons enjoyed a one hundred percent pay rise to bring them in line with the rest of the port.⁷⁷ It is clear that ACTSS stewards considered this hard-fought victory to have a bearing on the company's decision to cease operations at Liverpool. The ACAS ruling 'had an impact on the decision [to leave the port]... they [Harrisons management] just couldn't handle it, the staff being in the union'.⁷⁸ In addition to possibly considering the ruling an affront to its managerial prerogative, Harrisons must have also struggled to come to terms with the economic burden of subscribing to the port-wide agreement, all contributing to the decision to withdraw from cargo-handling.

The Harrisons' announcement left other employers at the port in an uncomfortable position. It was a significant employer of labour with one hundred and seventy-eight RDWs and one hundred and forty-two non-registered workers on its books and the onus fell on those remaining to absorb the surplus dockers under the terms of the A-J agreement.⁷⁹ Bulk Cargo Handling had also notified the Association of their intention to cease operations within the next calendar month,

⁷⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 2 April 1980.

⁷⁶ The announcement of Harrisons withdrawal was made on 20 June, the date was set for 30 September (*Liverpool Echo*, 9 August 1980).

⁷⁷ As an example, the weekly wage for one timekeeper jumped from £44 per week to £92 per week in the wake of ACAS' ruling (Author's interview with T.N., May 2011).

⁷⁸ Author's interview with T.N., May 2011.

⁷⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 10 August 1980.

shedding thirty-one jobs in total.⁸⁰ However rather than seeking to enhance their workforces, the employers stated the ‘need to reduce the register in Liverpool by something in the order of 800-900 men’.⁸¹ Indeed, the closure of Harrisons and Bulk Cargo left the register surplus at Liverpool at an eye-watering eighteen percent.⁸² Moreover some smaller employers stressed that ‘if they were forced to take labour they would no longer be viable entities and could find themselves in the position of T&J Harrisons’.⁸³ This has been described elsewhere as the ‘domino effect’ of the A-J agreement, whereby the mandatory reallocation of RDWs from one failing port employer causes another to become unsustainable, and so on.⁸⁴ Times were proving increasingly desperate for port employers as a combination of declining trade, surplus labour costs and associated voluntary redundancy payments took their toll.

In the initial discussions following the notification of withdrawal, port employers suggested that the men affected should be transferred to the Temporary Unattached Register (TUR) which since 1972 had been rendered virtually obsolete by the A-J Agreement, aside from use in exceptional circumstances, such as disciplinary or unexpected bankruptcy-related reallocation cases.⁸⁵ Predictably this suggestion was rejected out-of-hand by the Dock Shop Steward Committee, with Dennis Kelly commenting that ‘if any attempt is made by the port employers to break the Aldington-Jones agreement we will ask the National Docks and Waterways Committee to call an all-out strike of dockers in the Scheme ports’.⁸⁶ This threat was echoed by TGWU officialdom, which stated that any attempt to revive the TUR in Liverpool would doubtlessly provoke a national strike call.⁸⁷ To further exacerbate the possible economic burden facing individual employers if they were forced to absorb the surplus, the EAPL acknowledged that ‘there were other groups of people in Harrisons – ACTSS, shoregang, shipwrights – who had trade union organisation behind them and were equally adamant about their rights. These

⁸⁰ Ten RDWs and twenty-one staff were to be made redundant by the closure of Bulk Cargo Handling.

⁸¹ EAPL meeting minutes, 11 August 1980.

⁸² The Department for Employment, ‘Employment in the ports: The Dock Labour Scheme’, Cmnd. 664, April 1989.

⁸³ EAPL meeting minutes, 11 August 1980.

⁸⁴ Turnbull, P. ‘Capitalist restructuring and socialist strategies for the port transport industry’, *Capital & Class*, Vol. 18, 1994, p. 73 (pp. 61-88).

⁸⁵ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 85.

⁸⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 10 August 1980.

⁸⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 11 August 1980.

other groups presented the same problem, though on a smaller scale, as the RDWs did and the same time scale applied. None of these people could be offered employment by other companies'.⁸⁸ Clearly, the context and dynamics of the situation had the potential to develop into a major port-wide, and indeed nationwide, dispute.

In response to the wholesale rejection of any suggestion that the TUR might be utilised, the EAPL instead proposed that compulsory redundancies might instead be required.⁸⁹ Again, this was flatly rejected by the Dock Shop Steward Committee and the TGWU. In the absence of any progress between the Union, the EAPL and the local Dock Labour Board, the case was referred to the NDLB for consideration at its September meeting. Meanwhile, the Department for Employment (DfE) encouraged employers and the Union to shed as many jobs as possible through voluntary means, although the EAPL argued that the severance sum was far too low to attract a substantial number of applicants.⁹⁰ There was stalemate and attitudes on both sides were hardening. Liverpool's port employers saw this dispute as an opportunity to take a stand against binding statutory regulation of the industry and hoped that the new Conservative Government might be sympathetic to their cause. Indeed, the *Financial Times* ran an article with the headline 'A Crucial Time for Overmanned Ports' and the EAPL anticipated that the repeal of the NDLS might finally be elevated to the political agenda.⁹¹ It stated that the employers it represented 'hoped the Government would not intervene and that the industry was allowed to bring this problem [compulsory reallocation of RDWs] out into the open... it was not solely a Liverpool issue, it was a national issue'.⁹²

After much deliberation at a series of meetings week commencing Monday 8 September, the NDLB proposed that the port's remaining employers concede reallocation of the surplus RDWs, which the EAPL described as 'not acceptable' and 'urged the Board to think again'.⁹³ Such was the gulf between the parties that the NDLB failed to secure an agreement and the matter was referred to the DfE to

⁸⁸ EAPL meeting minutes, 11 August 1980.

⁸⁹ EAPL meeting minutes, 15 August 1980.

⁹⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 15 August 1980. The Voluntary Severance Scheme lump sum for RDWs stood at £8,500 in 1980.

⁹¹ *Financial Times*, 15 August 1980.

⁹² EAPL meeting minutes, 15 August 1980.

⁹³ *Liverpool Echo*, 13 September 1980.

consider. After a meeting between NAPE and the DfE, it was agreed that the Government would loan additional funds to the National Voluntary Severance Scheme to enhance lump sum settlements from £8500 to £10000 per man, exclusively for Harrisons and Bulk Cargo Handling's RDWs at the port of Liverpool.⁹⁴ However, the modest increase in redundancy pay failed to attract much interest. The offer was later extended to every company at the port in an attempt to create room for the one hundred and seventy-eight men soon to be left without an employer.⁹⁵ Problems continued to mount for the EAPL as calls for an indefinite national strike were formalised at a TGWU Shop Steward Delegate Conference in London on 15 September, with the strike due to commence one week later if no agreement had been reached regarding reallocation by this date.⁹⁶ The impact of affirmation of the national strike call was accentuated by news that the EAPL had been roundly condemned at a meeting of NAPE:

Mr Fitzpatrick [Chairman of the EAPL] said it had been made clear to him during national discussions... that no other port would support Liverpool in its stand against reallocation. The view had been expressed that over a period of years other ports had accepted reallocation of labour and as a result were carrying a surplus greater than Liverpool and that right was on the men's [RDWs] side. He had been told that Liverpool [Employers' Association] had no right to take them to the brink of a national dock strike and that they would be disowned totally and completely.⁹⁷

So, in the conspicuous absence of moral or material support from the Government or NAPE, the EAPL's stand against reallocation seemed doomed to failure. With time running out on the national strike commencement deadline and the closure of Harrisons and Bulk Cargo Handling imminent, the EAPL was compelled to accept the reallocation of one hundred and sixty-nine RDWs amongst its members.⁹⁸ As had been the case with Smith-Coggins the MDHC, as the

⁹⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 12 September 1980.

⁹⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 22 September 1980.

⁹⁶ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 86.

⁹⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 19 September 1980.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* Both Harrisons and BCH were due to cease trading on 30 September. The final number of RDWs reallocated from both companies was 169. This was due to a small percentage of the original 188 threatened with redundancy (178 Harrisons and 10 BCH) either accepting voluntary severance or being recruited selectively by other employers at the port because of job specialisation.

majority employer and port authority, was forced to absorb the majority of the surplus. To add further injury, the dockers also sought a written guarantee from the employers that RDWs would only be transferred to the TUR in disciplinary cases as a pre-condition for withdrawal of the strike notice. A recommitment by employers to the provisions of the A-J agreement was absolutely necessary in the eyes of the dockers and the stewards' committee. This demand was bitterly swallowed by the EAPL and on Sunday 21 September the national strike was called off at a second shop stewards' conference.⁹⁹

Despite the settlement of the RDW side of the dispute, employers at the port were still confronted with the significant problem of Harrisons and Bulk Cargo Handling's non-registered employees.¹⁰⁰ The EAPL recognised that 'time was running out' in relation to finding a solution before the two companies ceased trading and that 'employers did not want to be in a position of having found a solution to RDW problem, albeit not the one they would have sought, then be faced with a port problem which nobody wished to know about'.¹⁰¹ For its part, ACTSS made it absolutely clear to employers at meetings of the JNC that their 'no compulsory severance policy was sacrosanct and would be defended to the best of their means'.¹⁰² Harrisons had been slow to define exactly what severance terms were available to its clerical staff and ACTSS negotiators complained that they were unable 'to estimate how many of their members wished to volunteer for severance and how large a problem they were left with' in relation to reallocation of those remaining.¹⁰³ Harrisons' management responded by making an offer of enhanced redundancy equivalent to that for RDWs. However, this amount was only available until the company withdrew from the port on 30 September; thereafter it would revert back to the statutory sum as dictated by the Redundancy Payments Act.¹⁰⁴ This at least enabled both parties to take stock of exactly how many clerical workers required reallocation, although the EAPL maintained that just because 'the Branch was determined to hold a certain policy [no compulsory redundancies], it did not

⁹⁹ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 86.

¹⁰⁰ However, none of Bulk Cargo Handling's employees were members of ACTSS (Source: EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 12 September 1980).

¹⁰¹ EAPL meeting minutes, 19 September 1980.

¹⁰² EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 12 September 1980.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 15 September 1980.

mean that the employers had to accept or implement that policy'.¹⁰⁵ As in previous reallocation episodes, surplus clerical workers were regarded as *personae non gratae* and the EAPL stressed that it was not its responsibility to make provision for reallocation of non-registered workers, rather that it was up to individual employers to decide on manpower requirements. Predictably, 'all had indicated that they had no requirement to recruit labour'.¹⁰⁶

So, with the closure of Harrisons imminent it appeared that the two sides were at an impasse. ACTSS had made it clear that it would not hesitate to call an indefinite strike of all its members at the port if an agreement was not reached to redeploy Harrisons' clerical workers with other employers.¹⁰⁷ For their part, the EAPL and individual employers pointed to the already-pernicious state of the port's finances as evidence that, on this occasion, reallocation could not be permitted. In order to avert what would likely be a damaging strike for the port's prospects as well as for relations between the Branch and RDWs and the Branch and port employers, ACTSS proposed a compromise. It proposed that the voluntary redundancy terms offered to Harrisons' clerical staff be expanded to include those at the MDHC and other smaller employers.¹⁰⁸ By doing so it was hoped that additional applicants for severance would be achieved and that these jobs could be filled by those clerical staff from Harrisons who wished to remain in the industry. Initially, after consultation with its members, the EAPL rejected the compromise on the grounds that clerical workers were skilled and experienced in operations and procedures which were peculiar to each individual company and 'did not wish to swap labour around'.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless with the closure of Harrisons just days away and possible strike-related financial disaster looming the MDHC, yet again the body at the port which stood to lose the most, offered voluntary redundancy to a section of its clerical staff.¹¹⁰ Having received thirty applications, the company agreed to take on the

¹⁰⁵ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 12 September 1980.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 15 September 1980.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*; EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 12 September 1980.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ However, the MDHC refused to offer redundancy to staff who it considered had a specialism or shortage skill.

twenty-nine Harrisons' ACTSS members left without an employer and who did not wish to accept redundancy.¹¹¹

The conclusion to the Harrisons affair once again plainly illustrated where the power lay in the port of Liverpool. Despite a determined consensus to resist RDW reallocation, the remaining ten port employers had been forced into a hasty retreat in the face of fierce opposition from the Dock Shop Steward Committee and the National Docks section of the TGWU.¹¹² Doubtlessly, the EAPL and its members had seriously overestimated the level of support their 'stand' against reallocation would receive from NAPE and the Government. The MDHC failed even to make a principled stand against absorbing Harrisons' clerical staff, despite being overtly hostile to the idea. Although the NDLS went against every ideological principle of the new Conservative Government, it appeared that it had absolutely no intention of taking on the dockers locally or nationally at such an embryonic stage in its political/economic experiment.¹¹³ As Turnbull contends, the apparent insulation dockers enjoyed from the blossoming state-driven programme of deregulation and privatisation of industry owed substantial gratitude to their strong employment protection, enshrined in statute.¹¹⁴

This was the first major port-wide dispute at Liverpool since 1972, yet it quickly became clear that the Liverpool dockers and clerical staff had lost none of their appetite or capability to defend manning levels at the port and easily out-muscle management, regardless of how determined the EAPL was in resisting reallocation. Nevertheless, the employers' stand was illustrative of shifting attitudes amongst

¹¹¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 September 1980.

¹¹² White Paper 'Employment in the Ports: The Dock Labour Scheme', presented by the Secretary of State for Employment (Norman Fowler) to Parliament, April 1989, p. 17. According to the paper, ten individual employers remained at Liverpool after Harrisons' departure, although most employed only a handful of workers with the MDHC accounting for the majority of RDW and staff labour at the Port. The second largest employer at the port by this stage was Liverpool Maritime Terminals who employed around 400 RDWs and fifty clerical workers out of a total workforce of 2,500 and 800 respectively (Source: *Liverpool Echo*, 7 October 1981; Carden, 'Staff unionism', p. 53).

¹¹³ The idea that the Conservative government's reform of industrial relations was piecemeal and opportunistic is popular in historical discourse, see the following for example: Undy, R., Fosh, P., Smith, H. & Martin R. *Managing the Unions: The Impact of Legislation on Trade Unions' Behaviour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996); McIlroy, *The Permanent Revolution*; Brown, W., Deakin, S. & Ryan, P. 'The effects of British industrial relations legislation, 1979-1997', *National Institute Economic Review*, Vol. 161, No. 1, July 1997, pp. 69-83; Thornley, C. 'Labour Market Policy and Inequality in the UK', in D. Coffey and C. Thornley (eds.) *Industrial and Labour Market Policy and Performance: Issues and Perspectives* (London: Routledge 2003) pp. 83-108.

¹¹⁴ Turnbull, P. 'Docks' in A. Pendleton & J. Winterton (eds.) *Public Enterprise in Transition: Industrial Relations in State and Privitized Corporations* (London: Routledge 1993), pp. 185-186 (pp. 185-210).

management and a growing willingness to challenge the Union's stranglehold at the port in the context of the changing political and economic environment of the time.

Harrisons' decision to pull out of the port was symptomatic of increasingly austere times in the dock industry and especially at Liverpool. The omnipotence of containerisation and its associated Scheme and surplus-related costs, coupled with a general decline in trade at the port caused by the shift from north to south and west to east in trading patterns, meant that most companies at the port were struggling to survive. MDHC Chief Executive James Fitzpatrick illustrated the extent of contracting trade at the port by commenting that 'before containerisation Liverpool handled four times more Far East trade than any other port... Now, we handle none'.¹¹⁵ The financial pressure the port was under in 1980 is plainly illustrated by the fact that the Government was forced to inject £14 million in loans in the first six months of 1981 to prop up the MDHC, yet it still recorded trading losses of £2.5 million over the same period.¹¹⁶

At the beginning of May 1981, Huskisson Transit Company announced its intention to withdraw from the port of Liverpool at the close of the month. It cited 'the cessation of the importation of Commonwealth sugar and the consequent closure of the Tate & Lyle refinery [in Liverpool]' as the principle factor behind its decision.¹¹⁷ On this occasion, the announcement of the proposed withdrawal resulted in a large proportion of its workforce applying for enhanced voluntary severance. Huskisson's 'register of RDWs had already been reduced by severance to 36 and they had 15 [other] outstanding applicants'.¹¹⁸ The EAPL did not challenge the reallocation of such a small number of RDWs, but were quietly encouraged by the percentage of the workforce who had immediately applied for severance.¹¹⁹ With the chastening Harrisons' ordeal still fresh in the mind of port employers, the EAPL acquiesced that 'in accordance with... the ruling of the previous year, the RDWs who remained at the end of May would be returned to the local Dock Labour

¹¹⁵ Cargo Systems International, 'Container technology, volume 5: Proceedings of the 5th Container Technology Conference held in London 4-6th December 1984' (Modern Records Centre).

¹¹⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 16 September 1981.

¹¹⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 5 May 1981. For an account of Tate & Lyle's Love Lane (Liverpool) Refinery, its closure and Liverpool's role in the international sugar trade more broadly see: Noon, R. 'Liverpool Love Lane Refinery Lives', *North West Labour History*, No. 32, 2007-2008, pp. 40-50.

¹¹⁸ EAPL meeting minutes, 5 May 1981.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Board for reallocation within the Port'.¹²⁰ It would appear that, in the short term at least, the EAPL and its members had lost their appetite for challenging the Scheme or the local register surplus.

The 1981 pay negotiations and related dispute

Following hot on the heels of the Huskisson closure came the 1981 pay round negotiations and further trouble for employers. The EAPL was determined to make any pay rise conditional on dockers accepting changes in work practices in order to improve flexibility in the labour force and reduce operating losses.¹²¹ This was resisted by the Docks section which insisted that any pay offer should be unconditional. In the absence of any willingness to negotiate from the employers' side, since April the dockers had undertaken three one-day port-wide stoppages in protest.¹²² They vowed to continue and possibly escalate the programme of disruption if employers did not drop the conditions from the pay offer. Similarly, ACTSS promised to give full support to the dockers by joining them in any future protest stoppages and furthermore gave an undertaking that clerical workers would boycott weekend work with effect from 20 June, badly inhibiting operations at Seaforth Container Terminal.¹²³ Once again, the EAPL 'had stressed the serious financial position of the Port generally' and were determined not to concede on the need for changes to working practices.¹²⁴

This stalemate persisted for several months and as a result, the port was subject to several more instances of one-day disruption. The EAPL attempted to force the issue by making an enhanced 'final' offer which was rejected at a mass meeting at Liverpool Stadium on 3 September on the grounds that 'the issue was not money, it was the terms and conditions upon which the pay increase was based, particularly on changes to gang manning strengths'.¹²⁵ However, amidst rumblings

¹²⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 5 May 1981.

¹²¹ EAPL meeting minutes, 12 June 1981. The principal change in work practices insisted upon by employers was that labour could be deployed in any area of the port as management saw fit. This was resisted because it meant that gangs could be split up and dockers made to work away from their traditional areas of employment. Employers also wanted a reduction in standard gang manning numbers, which was similarly strongly resisted by the rank-and-file.

¹²² EAPL meeting minutes, 12 June 1981.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 19 June 1981.

¹²⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 4 September 1981.

of an escalation of industrial action in pursuit of their pay claim, agreement was eventually reached. Employers dropped one of the conditions attached to the deal and the new offer was put to another mass meeting on 16 September, where it received a close majority in a show of hands.¹²⁶ Despite marginal approval of the deal, many dockers remained resentful of the gang manning reductions which employers had managed to force through. Following the meeting, Dennis Kelly summed up the atmosphere amongst RDWs by commenting that ‘there has been a lot of heart searching but the way shipping is leaving the port, we will try and make it work’.¹²⁷

Expecting to be successful in its efforts to attach conditions to the RDW pay award, the EAPL pressed other sections of port employee to fall in line. In preliminary negotiations with ACTSS at the JNC in May 1981, the Union side was informed of the changes which the Dock section was being asked to accept and insisted that the clerical staff would be expected to do likewise as part of any pay rise.¹²⁸ As previously noted, the ACTSS membership had already voted to ban overtime in co-ordinated action with the Docks section as protest against employer demands. Clerical workers had also followed dockers out on strike in a series of lightening one-day stoppages.

Despite dockers voting to accept the pay deal in September, ACTSS’ negotiations dragged on into November. This was because of a dispute over back pay and disquiet amongst members at Seaforth Container Terminal who argued that the majority of manning reductions and flexibility arrangements were targeted specifically at them.¹²⁹ When a ‘final offer’ was tabled by employers on 30 November 1981 that proposed a compromise on back pay, it was put to a vote at a mass meeting. Although stewards recommended that the offer be rejected on the grounds that it was particularly onerous for those one hundred members employed at

¹²⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 16 September 1981 reported a 60-40 majority in favour of a return to work. One of the conditions of the original pay deal was the abolition of rotation of labour into Seaforth Container Terminal. The rotation system was part of the original manning agreement which accompanied the opening of the terminal in 1972 and guaranteed dockers a certain amount of time working there, where average earnings were higher. Employers dropped this condition from the offer which was approved by dockers at the mass meeting on 16 September.

¹²⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 16 September 1981.

¹²⁸ Carden, ‘Staff unionism’, pp. 96-97.

¹²⁹ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 10 November 1981.

the container terminal, it was successful at a show of hands.¹³⁰ However, the clerical staff and stewards at the terminal rejected the decision. They refused to implement the changes in manning and flexibility and were put 'off-pay' by the MDHC. This disciplinary action provoked a walk-out of all clerical workers there. The Seaforth stewards involved offered their resignations to the Union in response to the manner in which they were being forced to undertake changes in working practices.¹³¹ In the absence of support from the rest of the Branch, the sectional strike was short-lived lasting only two days. Although ACTSS stewards from other areas of the port sympathised with their counterparts at Seaforth Container Terminal, illustrated by their failed recommendation that the pay deal be rejected, they were bound by the democratic decision taken at the mass meeting. The clerical workforce at the terminal returned to work and was forced to implement the changes in manning arrangements.

The employers were in quite buoyant mood having, for the first time, managed to attach significant conditions to a pay deal. Furthermore, the EAPL also celebrated its achievement in breaking 'new ground in negotiating the Port Industry's first two year pay agreement. Similar pay agreements were negotiated with ACTSS and other ancillary workers'.¹³² In addition to implementing a biennial pay review structure, the negotiations with ACTSS had also precipitated a degree of in-house conflict which would have doubtless been welcomed behind closed doors.

The discord apparent amongst ACTSS members regarding these pay negotiations illustrates the difficulties apparent in the application of general theories of organisation to the realities of real-time negotiations. This study has documented the growth of clerical worker unionism at the port and emphasised its increasingly pro-active and combative nature through united action in several major disputes. To use the terminology of Kelly's theory of mobilisation, there can be little doubt that since the early seventies stewards of the branch had established the strong leadership necessary to 'imbue workers with a sense of grievance, create a sense of social identity, urge collective action and legitimate such action in the face of hostile

¹³⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 1 December 1981.

¹³¹ Carden, 'Staff unionism', pp. 98-99. Their resignations were not accepted.

¹³² EAPL AGM minutes, 'Statement of Accounts for 1980, 1981 & 1982', 23 October 1983.

criticism', yet in this dispute they were unable to influence the membership to resist management changes to working practices.¹³³

Even in the context of the well-developed and coherent collective identity displayed by clerical workers at the port, it is evident that a degree of sectionalism can still flourish. The staff workers at the container terminal were the aristocracy of the clerical workforce – they were registered under the Scheme and enjoyed higher average earnings than workers elsewhere in the port.¹³⁴ The advantages enjoyed by container terminal staff could be perceived as contributing to the uncharacteristic indifference of their colleagues and emphasises how the nuances of a particular workplace can create caveats and affect broader theoretical notions of mobilisation, collective identity and militancy, also demonstrating the sometimes uneven nature of the exercising of collective action.¹³⁵ Furthermore, it highlights problems in attempting to categorise rank-and-file membership as passive and homogeneous, subject to influence and manipulation by stewards with a greater grasp of 'factory class consciousness' and the balance of power in the workplace.¹³⁶ As Darlington notes, the relationship between stewards and the rank-and-file is a two-way interaction and it is necessary to consider not only stewards' attempts to influence the membership, but also members' expectations and their attempts to influence the stewards, which in turn is often directly affected by managerial behaviour. Indeed, whilst 'the subjective element in industrial relations is inextricably *linked* to the role of leadership, this should not be taken to imply it is simply *reducible* to it'.¹³⁷

A mere three weeks after the contentious pay deal was agreed, conflict erupted over the new gang manning levels forced through by employers. On 7 October, the *Keta Lagoon* entered Huskisson Dock at the port of Liverpool complex. During the voyage its cargo of cocoa butter had slipped and stowage had collapsed. RDW gangs employed by Liverpool Maritime Terminals (LMT) were due to discharge the cargo but once the damage was inspected a claim was submitted to

¹³³ Kelly, J. *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves* (London: Routledge 1998), p. 49.

¹³⁴ For more detail on the manning agreement at Seaforth Container Terminal, see Chapter 5.

¹³⁵ Batstone, E., Boraston, I. and Frenkel, S. *Shop Stewards in Action: The Organisation of Workplace Conflict and Accommodation* (Oxford: Blackwell 1977).

¹³⁶ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of 'rank and filism' and the current state of the historiographical debate.

¹³⁷ Darlington, R. 'Shop stewards' leadership, left-wing activism and collective workplace union organisation', *Capital & Class*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Spring 2002, pp. 100-102 (pp. 95-126).

management to double the gang manpower below deck, to ensure safe working.¹³⁸ The gang insisted that, due to exceptional circumstances, the number working in the hold should be increased from four to eight. Management refused, instead allowing for only two additional dockers to work below to discharge the cargo. This was deemed unacceptable by the gang which claimed that the recently-ratified changes in working practices allowed provision for the additional manpower in such circumstances. By the close of the day, LMT's entire four hundred-strong RDW workforce had gone on unofficial strike over the matter.¹³⁹

The unofficial stoppage persisted for four days, with management adamant that it would not permit eight men to work below deck on the cargo. LMT's RDWs were equally resolute that work would not recommence on the cargo until management yielded to their demand. It appeared that this relatively small issue was regarded by both sides as a precedent for how the new working conditions, created as part of the recent pay settlement, were to be interpreted and implemented. On 11 October, the Dock Shop Steward Committee organised a mass meeting at which a port-wide stoppage was discussed.¹⁴⁰ The following day, the whole RDW workforce was out on strike and the port had been brought to a standstill. The EAPL condemned the action as 'totally unjustified' and said that the strike 'could mean the difference between survival and disaster'.¹⁴¹ Dockers' leaders were steadfast in their resolve, claiming that 'we have honoured the agreement on cutting gangs and we will stay out until the employer starts talking sensibly... the new arrangements accepted by the men took full account of any exceptional circumstances such as this'.¹⁴² Yet still the dispute dragged on. The deadlock caused consternation amongst port users especially since the September pay deal had apparently ended five months of intermittent disruption. The Chairman of the Liverpool Steam Ship Owners' Association commented that 'the present strike, following the recent jointly-approved pay and manning deal, must cause all port users to consider the long-term future of the Port and to seek alternative arrangements for their vessels and cargoes'.¹⁴³ By 12 October twelve ships lay idle in the port and again it

¹³⁸ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 8 October 1981.

¹³⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 7 October 1981.

¹⁴⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 10 October 1981.

¹⁴¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 12 October 1981.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Liverpool Echo*, 13 October 1981.

appeared that customer pressure was beginning to mount on port management and LMT because, at a Local Modernisation Committee meeting scheduled for that afternoon, the EAPL began to seek compromise over interpretation of the new working conditions and stated that ‘in circumstances where shop stewards believed additional men were required, a case could be made to local management and that each job would be judged on its merits...’¹⁴⁴

Still this did not placate the Union side of the LMC because the final decision on any given case remained in the hands of the employers. The strike dragged on and continued to cause damage to the port’s trade and reputation. It was not until 19 October that the dockers voted to return to work. Interestingly, this was in the absence of any concrete agreement regarding interpretation of the new working practices. It was the damage which was clearly being inflicted on the port’s future prospects which encouraged the men to return.¹⁴⁵ Instead, Dennis Kelly told of an interim arrangement whereby ‘if we can’t come to an agreement now on the interpretation of the rulebook, we have agreed take it to the National Joint Council [for the Port Transport Industry] for their ruling’.¹⁴⁶ As part of the return to work terms, talks were to continue at the LMC on implementing the changes agreed in principle in the pay negotiations in September. The dispute had ended out of necessity rather than compromise with a heavy financial cost to the port and to individual dockers themselves through loss of earnings. An MDHC spokesman summed up the mood of both sides by saying ‘the strike was damaging... the only victory at the end of the day is for common sense in that we are back to work – nobody else wins’.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, 16,950 man days were lost as a result of the stoppage.¹⁴⁸

It is noteworthy that this twelve-day long dispute was ended by dockers without management capitulating to their demands. Clearly, the damage that was being done to the port’s future prospects encouraged dockers’ representatives to recommend a return to work in the absence of a concrete agreement. This is another example of the nuances of a particular situation at a particular time in a particular

¹⁴⁴ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 13 October 1981.

¹⁴⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 19 October 1981.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 19 October 1981.

¹⁴⁸ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 87.

workplace. The strength of dockers' organisation and their previous record for direct action would seem to indicate that this dispute would be pursued until a satisfactory agreement was reached, especially since the issue involved controversial changes to working practices – 'a dispute of right'.¹⁴⁹ However, because of the changing nature of the dock industry more broadly and the difficulties faced by the port locally, on this occasion a degree of pragmatism appears to have been exercised by the dockers and their representatives. The future viability of the port in an increasingly austere context illustrates the conflicting issues which can bind workers to their employers, despite the level of workplace organisation or activism.¹⁵⁰ They had a vested interest in the survival of the port and this stifled their previous inclination towards victory at all costs, wholly apparent when the port's viability was not in doubt and the industry was not suffering from escalating rationalisation and increased competition at home and abroad. The actions and outcomes of this dispute were dependent on the peculiarities of the local industry in that particular context and time, emphasising the highly contingent, uneven and unpredictable character of collective action and demonstrating the problems faced when attempting to apply broad theoretical approaches to practical situations, especially in the case of such a complex and historic industry.

Voluntary severance and the contraction of manning levels at the port

Despite the rancour surrounding the *Keta Lagoon* incident, from an industrial relations perspective the beginning of the eighties appeared to be rather productive for the dockers and clerical workers of the port of Liverpool. They had challenged and defeated the employers over reallocation and pay and conditions and seemed as willing and able as ever to cause major disruption in the defence of their (local) industry if necessary. The balance of power at the port was indisputable, albeit in the context of an increasingly resolute and combative approach on behalf of management. However, despite the best efforts of the Dock Shop Steward Committee and ACTSS and their emphasis on maintaining manning levels, the port of Liverpool was haemorrhaging jobs as quickly as money. For example, the

¹⁴⁹ Wilson, D.F. *Dockers: The Impact of Industrial Change* (London: Fontana/Collins 1972), p. 296.

¹⁵⁰ Zeitlin, J. 'Rank and filism' in British labour history: A critique', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 34, 1989(b), pp.42-61; Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, p. 25.

register in Liverpool had contracted by more than half from 10449 RDWs in 1970, to 4614 in 1980 and the decade thus far had seen several high-profile closures of long-established stevedoring firms.¹⁵¹ Worse still, by the end of 1981 the EAPL claimed that only 2352 remained on the register in Liverpool.¹⁵² Nearly all of these jobs had been lost to voluntary redundancy under the National Voluntary Severance Scheme, although at huge cost to port employers and successive governments.¹⁵³ Clearly, the severance scheme was concerned with minimising the large RDW surplus at Britain's ports (which ran at all-time highs in 1980 and 1981) and meant that these jobs were lost to the industry forever.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Liverpool's employers were equally eager to shed their surplus clerical staff. The MDHC, which carried a significant surplus of clerical workers, had already offered severance terms akin to those afforded RDWs under the Scheme.¹⁵⁵ Employers could also take heart from the decline in man days lost due to industrial action at the port – 46645 in 1980, falling to 36935 in 1981 and 21771 in 1982.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the insecurity which voluntary severance and falling manning levels engendered was a major cause of industrial unrest throughout the eighties. Turnbull and Sapsford's statistical model clearly shows a correlation between the surplus labour rate, voluntary redundancy levels and strike action during this period as a by-product of the effect of modernisation and mechanisation.¹⁵⁷

Still the cut was not deep enough and there remained a considerable labour surplus, particularly in Liverpool and London. It was in this context that employers at these two ports made an offer at the National Joint Council for the Port Transport

¹⁵¹ British Ports Association, 'Report on manpower in the UK ports industry, 1987', 1988. Although the Pearson Inquiry Report put the figure for RDWs at Liverpool at 11300 in 1970 (Source: Pearson Inquiry Report, 21 July 1970).

¹⁵² EAPL AGM minutes, 'Statement of Accounts for 1980, 1981 & 1982', 28 October 1983.

¹⁵³ The cost of port of Liverpool employer severance payments to the NDLB was £2 million in 1980 and £2.4 million in 1981 and 1982 (Source: EAPL AGM minutes, 'Statement of Accounts for 1980, 1981 & 1982', 23 October 1983).

¹⁵⁴ The national RDW surplus was 16.75% of the national workforce in 1980 and 18.21% in 1981, which were the highest since the 1967 Devlin reforms (Source: National Dock Labour Board, 'NDLB statistics 1967-1988: Surplus Labour', Modern Records Centre).

¹⁵⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 15 April 1982. By April 1982 ACTSS' membership at the majority employer at the port (the MDHC) had dropped to 427 from a high of 750 in 1972 immediately after the Smith-Coggins reallocation. This drop in membership was due to shrinkage of the workforce through natural wastage and voluntary severance (Source: Carden, 'Staff unionism', p. 103).

¹⁵⁶ EAPL AGM minutes, 'Statement of Accounts for 1980, 1981 & 1982', 28 October 1983. It is important to note, however, that the fall in man days lost to industrial action must partly be attributed to the decline in manning levels more broadly, as detailed above.

¹⁵⁷ Turnbull, P. & Sapsford, D. 'Why did Devlin fail? Casualism and conflict on the docks', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, June 1991, pp. 248-251 (pp. 237-257).

Industry (NJC) to enhance redundancy payments for a limited period under the auspices of the Special National Severance Scheme. This was, of course, partially funded by the Government and offered a maximum of £22500 to RDWs under sixty-three years old with fifteen years or more service on Liverpool and London docks only.¹⁵⁸ The offer was scheduled to run for a six-week period from 19 April to 28 May 1982. The EAPL hoped to shed a minimum of 715 men from the register.¹⁵⁹ But the MDHC sought to go further, by offering similar redundancy terms to all non-RDW employees, ‘out of a total staff of 5000, the MDHC were looking for a reduction of 1500, roughly divided between RDWs and non-RDWs... [although] a large proportion of non-RDWs would come from the Engineering department’.¹⁶⁰ This non-registered severance campaign received one hundred and ninety-seven applications from ACTSS members at the MDHC. However, the uptake took the company a little by surprise as it only wanted to shed one hundred and thirty-seven clerical posts, resulting in some applications being refused.¹⁶¹

The problem for the Docks section and ACTSS was how to stem the exodus from the port. After all, every individual was free to ‘take the money’ if they chose to do so and there was no way of legislating against that. Some shop stewards in both the Dock Shop Steward Committee and ACTSS took a dim view of their colleagues accepting redundancy. A leading dock steward reflected in retrospect that ‘they were selling their job and it wasn’t their right to sell that job – it had been passed down from their Dad, and even Granddad... it was their birth right’.¹⁶² Similarly, one prominent ACTSS steward commented that the uptake in severance could be attributed to ‘greed’, ‘...people took the bag of money. That was the choice they made – to sell their job’.¹⁶³ Others were more philosophical – ‘I haven’t got anything against the lads who took the money, but I think it badly weakened the stewards’ movement’.¹⁶⁴ So, despite Liverpool’s RDWs and clerical workers

¹⁵⁸ TGWU National Docks & Waterways Circular (Number 78985), ‘Re: Severance Arrangements’, 16 April 1982 (Modern Records Centre).

¹⁵⁹ EAPL meeting minutes, 15 April 1982. Voluntary severance removed 1063 RDWs from the Liverpool register in 1982 (Source: EAPL AGM minutes, ‘Statement of Accounts 1983/84’, 1 August 1985).

¹⁶⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 15 April 1982. Because the MDHC was partially owned by the Government a deal was brokered whereby the cost of non-registered severance would also be partially-funded by the State, similar to the arrangements for RDWs.

¹⁶¹ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 17 June 1982.

¹⁶² Author’s interview with L.D., December 2009.

¹⁶³ Author’s interview with M.C., January 2011.

¹⁶⁴ Author’s interview with F.L., January 2011.

winning the major battles at the port regarding pay, reallocation etc. it appears that they were losing the war in the broader context of manning levels through a combination of forces - namely contraction of labour requirements in the dock industry and the national severance programme - that were ostensibly beyond their control. A similar picture was also unfolding at other major Scheme ports across the country.

In the national context, the Docks and Waterways Committee of the TGWU increasingly regarded an extension of the Scheme to all non-Scheme ports as the only way to safeguard their members' jobs. To these ends, pressure was exerted on the Government to draft a new Scheme, long-overdue under provision made in the 1976 Act.¹⁶⁵ On behalf of the Union, the trade group committee had approached the Government several times since it gained power to urge it to fulfil its commitment to the 1976 Act.¹⁶⁶ On each occasion, the Department for Employment was less than enthusiastic. By early 1982 the Union was considering undertaking national industrial action to force it to think again. A National Docks Delegate Conference took place on 21 April at which it was proposed that 'a total withdrawal of dock labour takes place in all ports, Scheme and non-Scheme... from 10 May 1982 in support of the extension of the present 1967 Dock Labour Scheme to all non-registered ports and wharves'.¹⁶⁷ This resolution received almost unanimous support and hence the Government was given notice of pending national strike action.¹⁶⁸ In response the Government, clearly eager to avoid a national stoppage, expressed a willingness to consult with the Union over the extension of the Scheme and indicated that they would be happy to consider the case of each non-Scheme port on its individual merits, as and when presented by the Union.¹⁶⁹ This drew the sting out of the national strike call and encouraged the Union to compile a list of likely

¹⁶⁵ Letters from John Connolly (TGWU National Docks and Waterways Secretary) to Norman Tebbit (Secretary of State for Employment), 'Re: Draft of a new Dock Labour Scheme to replace 1967 Scheme', 7 October 1981 & 22 April 1982 (Modern Records Centre).

¹⁶⁶ See, for example: Letter from Tom Cronin (Connolly's predecessor as National Docks and Waterways Secretary) to M. Wake (Department for Employment), 'Re: NAPE's paper on the drafting of a new Dock Labour Scheme under the 1976 Act', 28 May 1980 (Modern Records Centre)

¹⁶⁷ TGWU National Docks & Waterways Circular (Number 79068), 'Re: Proposed Industrial Action 10/05/82 - Dock Labour Scheme', 4 May 1982 (Modern Records Centre).

¹⁶⁸ Vote was carried at conference by 81 votes to 3 with 3 abstentions (Source: *Ibid*).

¹⁶⁹ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 86-87.

candidates for entry into the Scheme; the strike was suspended at a subsequently recalled Docks Delegate Conference on 8 May.¹⁷⁰

Although the national labour surplus had fallen to its lowest since 1977, port employers continued to forge ahead with the most effective weapon available in their limited armoury.¹⁷¹ In September 1983 the Special National Severance Scheme was re-opened, offering enhanced payments of £22500 to Liverpool and London dockers under the same terms and conditions as the April 1982 scheme, except on this occasion its availability was limited to a four-week window.¹⁷² At the same meeting of the NJC, NAPE also made a proposal to repeal the NDLS and enter into a joint voluntary agreement with the TGWU, 'to change the functions of the NJC so that it can effectively supersede the NDLB and to introduce by negotiation a new national framework agreement'.¹⁷³ The proposal was discussed at both the official and unofficial level by the Docks and Waterways National Committee and the NPSSC, although it was rejected in its entirety.¹⁷⁴

1983 was actually the most strike free year in the industry since the early 1950s, while the labour surplus stood at its lowest rate for six years.¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, it was clear that reform of the NDLS was on the employers' agenda, whether to be replaced by a voluntary agreement with the Union or dissolved altogether. At the local level, the EAPL was also enjoying a period of relative industrial peace with man days lost having continued to fall year-on-year since the beginning of the decade.¹⁷⁶ This encouraged a more pro-active mood and approach from employers in planning for the upcoming 1984 pay negotiations, where they were determined to

¹⁷⁰ This proved a dead-end for the Union however, as every non-Scheme port which was approached to be submitted to the Government for consideration rejected its overtures (Source: Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 86-87).

¹⁷¹ The national labour surplus had fallen to just under 12%, the lowest since 1977 and a drop of over 6% on 1981 figures (Source: National Dock Labour Board, 'NDLB statistics 1967-1988: Surplus Labour').

¹⁷² National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry, 'Re: Severance arrangements London and Liverpool', 1 September 1983 (Modern Records Centre). Voluntary severance removed only 167 RDWs from the Liverpool register in 1983 (Source: EAPL AGM minutes, 'Statement of Accounts 1983/84', 1 August 1985).

¹⁷³ Letter from John Connolly 'To Docks and Waterways Committee members and members of the National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry', 2 September 1983 (Modern Records Centre).

¹⁷⁴ Letter from Jimmy Symes (TGWU District Secretary [District 6 – Liverpool], Docks and Waterways Section) to John Connolly, 13 September 1983; Letter from John Connolly to Michael Fenn (London Port Shop Stewards' Committee), 7 October 1983; NPSSC statement in reply to NAPE's proposals, 3 October 1983 (Modern Records Centre).

¹⁷⁵ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 88; National Dock Labour Board, 'NDLB statistics 1967-1988: Surplus Labour'.

¹⁷⁶ EAPL AGM minutes, 'Statement of Accounts for 1980, 1981 & 1982', 28 October 1983.

perpetuate the biennial format as well as insist that any increase in wages should be accompanied by improvements in workforce flexibility.¹⁷⁷ In March, the TGWU submitted its local pay claim which required an increase of £10 per week on the basic rate.¹⁷⁸ This figure was calculated with the two-yearly structure firmly in mind. The EAPL responded to the claim by presenting a paper to the union side of the negotiating committee detailing changes in flexibility and manning arrangements which would be attached as conditions of any pay rise.¹⁷⁹ The Union later informed the Association that, having discussed the conditions with their members, they were increasing their pay claim to an £18 per week increase in basic rate, if the suggested changes were to be implemented.¹⁸⁰ On 27 April, the employers made a counter-offer of a £6.50 per week increase with conditions still attached. The Union responded by stating that ‘this would not be sufficient even if [the offer] was unconditional’.¹⁸¹ It was clear that the two sides were a significant margin apart in their estimations. At a mass meeting on 24 June 1984, a motion was adopted which permitted the use of industrial disruption if compromise was not reached imminently. The Chairman of the EAPL reported at the next Association meeting that ‘it was obvious that the temperature was rising’.¹⁸² The dockers’ attitude is illustrated here:

There was a good deal of resentment building because RDWs felt that they had been badly treated during the [previous] two-year pay deal... They had made sacrifices, given the employers the changes they desired [in gang manning strengths and flexibility]... but employers had failed to recognise their efforts. Looking at the national position it was an understatement to say that RDWs at Liverpool were at the bottom of the earnings league.¹⁸³

However, although industrial action over the local biennial pay negotiations looked increasingly likely it proved to be superseded by the eruption of a national strike, ignited by the actions of the British Steel Corporation (BSC).

¹⁷⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 9 February 1984.

¹⁷⁸ EAPL meeting minutes, 6 March 1984.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 21 June 1984.

¹⁸¹ EAPL meeting minutes, 21 June 1984.

¹⁸² EAPL meeting minutes, 25 June 1984.

¹⁸³ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 12 June 1984.

The dockers' entanglement with the Miners' strike, 1984

The miners' strike had been ongoing since March in response to a Government-proposed programme of pit closures and although the TGWU and other major unions had not struck in solidarity, there had been some instances of sympathetic action such as railwaymen refusing to transport imported coal.¹⁸⁴ Liverpool's RDWs, and those at other ports, had refused to handle coal imports from the beginning of the miners' dispute.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, the National Union of Miners (NUM), in co-operation with the TGWU Docks section, had set quotas for foreign coal importation through British ports.¹⁸⁶ These quotas had been agreed between the TGWU, the NUM and the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) and were used by the miners as a means to prevent their campaign being undermined by an increase in coal imports for industry. Although quotas had initially been respected by the BSC, by May it seemed increasingly inclined to circumvent the agreement. It was accused of unloading imported coal at Hunterston by 'free-grabbing', clearly in contravention of both the NDLS and the established coal quotas.¹⁸⁷ In response, the Union threatened a stoppage of all work at Hunterston with the possibility of escalation into a national dispute.¹⁸⁸ On this occasion, the BSC beat a hasty retreat at a meeting with the TGWU on 16 May and gave an undertaking not to repeat its actions.¹⁸⁹ The proposed industrial action, scheduled for 21 May, was subsequently called off.

Nevertheless, as the miners' strike deepened its bite on British industry, BSC again tried its hand. On 3 July members of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) and the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF)

¹⁸⁴ The major trade unions were doubtlessly mindful of the penalties for secondary action and liability for civil action enshrined in the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts. For more detail on the 1984 Miners' Strike see, for example: MacGregor, I. *The Enemies Within: The Story of the Miners' Strike, 1984-85* (London: Collins 1986); Winterton, J. & Winterton, R. *Coal, Crisis and Conflict: The 1984-85 Miners' Strike in Yorkshire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1989); Adeney, M. & Lloyd, J. *The Miners' Strike, 1984-5: Loss Without Limit* (London: Routledge 1988).

¹⁸⁵ TGWU Circular (Number 841273/A), 'Re: M.V. Ostia – Hunterston (Ayrshire)', 29 August 1984 (Modern Records Centre).

¹⁸⁶ TGWU Central Office Inter-Departmental Memo from John Connolly to the General Secretary, 'Re: Hunterston/Ravenscraig – Miners' Dispute', 21 May 1984 (Modern Records Centre).

¹⁸⁷ Hunterston was a port on the Clyde where coal was imported for use at BSC's Ravenscraig Steelworks. 'Free-grabbing' basically involved using mechanical means to scoop coal directly from a ship's hold. This method infringed upon the NDLS because RDWs had not been used to discharge the cargo.

¹⁸⁸ TGWU Central Office Inter-Departmental Memo from John Connolly to the General Secretary, 'Re: Hunterston/Ravenscraig – Miners' Dispute', 21 May 1984.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

refused to deliver iron ore from Immingham because miners had established a picket line outside the port.¹⁹⁰ The BSC in turn advised the TGWU that they intended to change their normal rail delivery to road delivery operations, which in normal circumstances was not unusual if there was rail disruption. However on 5 July, in the context of the miners' strike, the TGWU ordered dockers at the port not to load any iron ore for road transportation.¹⁹¹ On 6 July, BSC completely disregarded the Union's ruling and went ahead with loading its lorries, making a delivery by road to its Scunthorpe works.¹⁹² Contractors' equipment and men were used to load the ore, although this was a previously-established arrangement at the port under Clause 10 of the Scheme which meant that RDWs were on pay as 'ghosts' for contractors.¹⁹³ Despite this 'ghosting' agreement the BSC had flouted the Union's ruling by stealth and, at a mass meeting on 9 July, RDWs at Immingham decided to withdraw their labour.¹⁹⁴ At 2pm the same day BSC loaded more lorries destined for Scunthorpe except on this occasion, because all RDWs were already on strike at the port, there were no dockers on pay for 'ghosting' contractors and the Scheme had clearly been breached by the use of non-registered labour.¹⁹⁵

The breach of the Scheme was seized upon by the Docks section of the TGWU which immediately called an indefinite national strike amongst all members at Scheme and non-Scheme ports. The strike lasted two weeks and the whole unionised dock labour force of approximately 25000 dockers came out in support, only 13400 of whom were RDWs.¹⁹⁶ The Dock Shop Steward Committee declared a port-wide stoppage from 10 July and all other ancillary workers at the port of Liverpool followed suit.¹⁹⁷ The rapidity with which the strike spread and the depth of support it received surpassed employer and government expectations and illustrated the appetite of dockers and their union to defend the Scheme as the last

¹⁹⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 19 July 1984.

¹⁹¹ TGWU Circular (Number 841099), 'Re: National Dock Strike', 25 July 1984.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ The practice of 'ghosting' allowed for non-registered labour to be employed on cargo-handling activities at Scheme ports after prior arrangement with the local Dock Labour Board under Clause 10 of the Scheme. This usually occurred if specialised equipment or skills were required to load/unload a specific cargo and obliged the company involved to pay for RDWs to 'ghost' the contractors used to handle the cargo. The RDWs would not be required to participate in actually handling the cargo and instead were deployed in a 'stand-by' capacity.

¹⁹⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 19 July 1984.

¹⁹⁵ TGWU Circular (Number 841099), 'Re: National Dock Strike', 25 July 1984.

¹⁹⁶ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 89. Approximately half of the strikees were dockers from non-Scheme ports.

¹⁹⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 10 July 1984.

bastion of protection for jobs in the industry. For their part BSC, having grossly miscalculated the response its actions would provoke, quickly moved to make amends by training RDW drivers to use specialist loading equipment so that non-registered labour was no longer required for ore handling at Immingham.¹⁹⁸ However, the strike dragged on for a further week because of wrangling between NAPE and the TGWU regarding proper procedure for the use of non-registered labour on specialised operations at non-Scheme ports.¹⁹⁹ Agreement was reached at the NJC on 20 July and endorsed by a recalled Docks Delegates Conference the same day – the return to work commenced from midnight on Saturday 21 July.²⁰⁰

So, the two-week July strike highlighted the commitment of the TGWU and rank-and-file dockers to vehemently defend the Scheme. Nevertheless, more industrial strife was on the horizon just a few weeks later, again associated with the on-going miners' strike. On this occasion BSC attempted to exceed the quotas established between the NUM, the TGWU and the ISTC for coal importation through Hunterston, in a similar situation to that which occurred in May. After the TGWU refused to co-operate in the berthing and unloading of the *Ostia*, BSC took the decision to use non-registered labour to berth the ship before 'free-grabbing' the coal.²⁰¹ Since all TGWU members were advised not to assist, BSC used contractors to replace boatmen in order to moor the vessel. This was interpreted by the Union as BSC using 'scab' labour in order to circumvent a trade dispute and so another national dock strike was called.²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ EAPL meeting minutes, 19 July 1984.

¹⁹⁹ The TGWU was insisting that in every instance where non-registered labour was to be used across the country, prior agreement should be sought with the Union. However, Clause 10 of the Scheme stipulated that this duty should be carried out by the local Dock Labour Board concerned. NAPE refused to subscribe to the Union's version of the clause, claiming that it gave it 'free-pass as interpreter of the Scheme'. Agreement was finally reached in a five-point formula at the NJC on 20 July wherein NAPE reaffirmed its commitment to Clause 10 and sought to remind its members of their obligations without consenting to the Union's 'prior agreement' wording (Source: TGWU memorandum, 'To TGWU Parliamentary Group, Re: Docks Dispute', 23 July 1984; EAPL meeting minutes, 20 July 1984).

²⁰⁰ TGWU memorandum, 'To TGWU Parliamentary Group, Re: Docks Dispute', 23 July 1984.

²⁰¹ TGWU Circular (Number 841273/A), 'Re: M.V. Ostia – Hunterston (Ayeshire)', 29 August 1984 (Modern Records Centre).

²⁰² *Ibid.*

Liverpool RDWs withdrew their labour indefinitely on 26 August 1984, despite having only just reached agreement on the biennial pay deal.²⁰³ However, the picture in the rest of the country was far less emphatic than had previously been the case, prompting the EAPL to observe that ‘total support had not been given to the call for action and over 50% of the ports were still working’.²⁰⁴ On this occasion most non-Scheme ports elected to continue working and even at some Scheme ports support for the strike was erratic. NAPE and local employers’ associations were quietly encouraged by the lack of cohesion from the start of the strike and took matters into their own hands as the dispute dragged on. For example ‘in some ports, notably London, the employers had taken a public stance of encouraging dockworkers to defy the Union’s national strike call’.²⁰⁵ This was surprisingly successful, with a section of RDWs at Tilbury container base voting for a resumption of work and a significant number of Bristol RDWs ignoring the initial strike call altogether.²⁰⁶ In the case of Liverpool, the EAPL observed that, despite the MDHC and Liverpool Maritime Terminals writing directly to their workforces outlining the consequences of continuing the dispute at the port, ‘there was little prospect of persuading Liverpool dockworkers to return to work in defiance of the Union... there was a tradition of solidarity and one could not hold out any hope that there would be a break in the strike’.²⁰⁷ In fact, pickets from Liverpool travelled to other ports in the country to provide assistance where support for the strike was dwindling or a return to work had begun.²⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the Association also noted that ‘local union representatives were very unhappy – they were observing a national strike call and could see the Port’s trade and their members’ jobs drifting away to East Coast ports’.²⁰⁹

Although the strike did not peter out, lasting over three weeks before an agreement was reached with BSC regarding coal quotas and the re-instatement of TGWU boatmen dismissed during the dispute, it was hardly the ringing endorsement

²⁰³ EAPL meeting minutes, 30 August 1984. The two year pay deal negotiations, which were postponed due to the outbreak of the first national dock strike in July, came to a satisfactory conclusion and the settlement was approved at a mass meeting at Liverpool Stadium on 22 August.

²⁰⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 30 August 1984. *The Guardian*, 29 August 1984, ran a story entitled ‘More than half defy order to down tools – Response of individual ports to the dock strike’.

²⁰⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 6 September 1984.

²⁰⁶ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 91

²⁰⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 6 September; EAPL meeting minutes, 10 September 1984.

²⁰⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 13 September 1984.

²⁰⁹ EAPL meeting minutes, 10 September 1984.

of solidarity which had resonated throughout the July strike.²¹⁰ There were a number of possible reasons for the lukewarm reception the second national strike call received. Most obviously, the proximity of the first strike to the second, and the associated financial cost to the individual, might have diminished support.²¹¹ More importantly, the fact that the dispute was ignited by one minor secondary employer in the dock industry, specifically concerned with moving specialist resources through a select few ports in the country, lent itself to the perception that this was not an attack on the Scheme or the industry *per se*. Indeed, the EAPL was informed that ‘the Union had no argument with employers or anyone else in the Port of Liverpool... and, as soon as agreement was reached with BSC, there would be a return to work’.²¹² Additionally, ‘the consensus view was that port authorities were an entirely innocent party and that the issue was between the TGWU and the BSC’.²¹³

Employers encouraged the perception that the second strike had more to do with the mines and less to do with the docks, illustrated by the BSC undertaking ‘a national publicity campaign... condemning the strike as a political exercise in support of the NUM’, an accusation first made by the Government during the July strike.²¹⁴ Nevertheless, the erratic support for the strike surely gave some future encouragement to NAPE and local employers’ associations, supporting the notion that if the issue at stake was unclear or muddled, support for national action initiated by the TGWU would not be automatic at every Scheme port and certainly not at non-Scheme ports.²¹⁵

The Isle of Man Steam Packet dispute, 1985

After the upheaval of the summer of 1984, the remainder of that year and beginning of the next passed without a major dispute at the port. However, trouble flared again in early 1985 over the withdrawal of the Isle of Man Steam Packet

²¹⁰ *The Guardian*, 19 September 1984.

²¹¹ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 92.

²¹² EAPL meeting minutes, 10 September 1984.

²¹³ EAPL meeting minutes, 30 August 1984.

²¹⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 6 September 1984. This accusation was first made by BSC in *The Guardian*, 18 August 1984. The Government had argued that the first strike in July was politically motivated (*The Guardian*, 17 July 1984).

²¹⁵ *The Guardian*, 19 September 1984.

Company from the port. Isle of Man Steam Packet and its stevedoring company, Ireman Stevedoring Services, provided freight, vehicle and passenger transportation services between Liverpool and Douglas. Its decision to withdraw from Liverpool and relocate to Heysham was due to a pending change of ownership and its dire financial position.²¹⁶ In February, redundancy notices were served on forty-four RDWs and sixteen clerical staff, twelve of whom were ACTSS members. The MDHC, fearing it would again be forced to absorb the bulk of reallocated labour, made a joint approach to the company with the TGWU. They offered to trim its RDW workforce from forty-four to twenty-one in order to keep the company viable, with the surplus labour being reallocated to the MDHC.²¹⁷ Despite the innovative and novel nature of the plan, the company refused and the Isle of Man Steam Packet/Ireman Stevedoring Services confirmed its intention to leave the port.²¹⁸ The forty-four RDWs facing redundancy were reallocated to other port employers as per the A-J agreement. However, a familiar scenario emerged for the clerical staff left without an employer. The MDHC refused to absorb them into their workforce, informing the EAPL that they ‘already had a surplus of clerical and supervisory staff... and were unable to provide jobs’.²¹⁹

Obviously, the clerical workers and their representatives had foreseen their predicament because of the past experiences of colleagues at other firms. On 28 February, the twelve ACTSS members threatened with redundancy physically occupied the Isle of Man freight vessel the *Peveril*, which was moored at Hornby dock in the port of Liverpool complex.²²⁰ ACTSS announced that ‘as far as [these] men were concerned... the Union would pursue a policy of ‘no compulsory redundancies’ and would insist that its twelve members are offered jobs by the MDHC’.²²¹ The unusual step of staging a sit-in on one of Isle of Man Steam Packet’s freight ships certainly brought the campaign for reallocation some publicity and doubtlessly applied some pressure on the company and the EAPL to find an

²¹⁶ The Isle of Man Steam Packet Company was in the process of being bought by its competitor Manx Line and the two companies were due to merge. Manx Line operated out of Heysham and opted to move the Steam Packet Company’s operations there because that port was non-Scheme and hence costs were considerably lower.

²¹⁷ EAPL minutes, 4 April 1985.

²¹⁸ The Company was even a victim of a shareholder revolt over its decision to redirect services to Heysham.

²¹⁹ EAPL minutes, 4 April 1985.

²²⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 2 April 1985.

²²¹ EAPL meeting minutes, 4 April 1985.

agreement.²²² Nevertheless, both the MDHC and the Association were steadfast in their resolve. The EAPL's Executive Secretary highlighted the strength of the opposition to reallocation amongst employers by observing that 'if these twelve men achieve their purpose of being taken on by another port employer, all other non-registered groups in the port would expect no less than a job for life'.²²³ Instead, under duress, the Isle of Man Steam Packet made an offer of enhanced redundancy to its clerical staff: £1000 per year for up to twenty years service, equating to an average payment of £18000 per man compared with an initial offer of £8000.²²⁴

In the context of a hardening of the employers' stance regarding reallocation, ACTSS organised a walk-out and indefinite strike of all its three hundred and fifty members at the port from 1 April.²²⁵ Furthermore, the Branch threatened to picket the dock gates in support of the sit-in, something which had not happened at Liverpool since the 1955 'Blue' Union (NASDU) versus 'White' Union (TGWU) strikes.²²⁶ Despite eight of the twelve clerical workers indicating that they were prepared to accept the enhanced redundancy terms, on 3 April ACTSS stewards assembled their picket lines.²²⁷ The clerical stewards' committee was convinced that, if they conceded even one compulsory redundancy, it would be the beginning of the end for the Branch – they could be 'wiped out overnight'.²²⁸ The MDHC was carrying a significant surplus of clerical workers and it was feared that the company would quickly use any compulsory settlement as precedent to begin mass redundancies.²²⁹ ACTSS' actions brought a hostile reception from employers and dockers alike. Aside from breaking the dockers' tradition of never picketing the dock gates, the fact that so few staff workers were involved meant the issue was regarded as too insignificant to warrant stopping the whole port. Dennis Kelly, Chairman of the Dock Shop Steward Committee, outlined their opposition to the

²²² See *Liverpool Echo*, 27 February 1985; *Liverpool Echo*, 2 April 1985; *Liverpool Echo*, 4 April 1985.

²²³ EAPL meeting minutes, 4 April 1985.

²²⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 4 April 1985. The minimum severance amount to be paid was £14000.

²²⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 2 April 1985.

²²⁶ 'We never bothered with picket lines at Liverpool after 1955... we didn't need picket lines, there was a ghost line that done the same job. Our attitude was 'go to work if you want but you know the consequences...' (Author's interview with F.L., January 2011).

²²⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 4 April 1985.

²²⁸ Author's interview with T.N., March 2011.

²²⁹ Author's interview with T.T., March 2011; Author's interview with T.N., March 2011.

clerical workers' action and recommended that dockers cross picket lines in order to report for work:

The recommendation has been made to save the port from disaster. If we were to go on strike in support of the clerks, within three weeks the MDHC would be out of business and there would be no jobs for anyone. We have been advised by the Union that the pickets on the dock gates were not official and had the dockers refused to cross lines, the Dock Company would have started immediate lay-offs.²³⁰

Indeed, neither the strike nor the picket line was legally official because no ballot had been organised.²³¹ So, on the advice of the Union and the Dock Shop Steward Committee some dockers returned to work, crossing picket lines. Others, whether the issue was regarded as spurious or not by their stewards, were unwilling to cross picket lines under any circumstances.²³² Of course, the decision by the Committee to advise the dockers to return to work was met with outrage by the clerical staff. There were angry and unsavoury scenes at the gates as some dockers chose to cross lines and return to work. One of the ships to be worked by the dockers that had returned was the *Peveril*. Although it was still being occupied by the twelve clerical workers, it was due to be loaded with freight and released with immediate effect. The consensus amongst clerical stewards was that 'if the dockers work this ship we're finished'.²³³ This was regarded as a defining moment in the survival of the Branch and desperate times made for desperate measures:

We agreed that we had to do something to prevent the *Peveril* being worked. [One of the ACTSS stewards] went and got a JCB from another part of the dock, drove it across and parked it at the back of the ship. He took the keys out and disabled it... It was a roll-on/roll-off freighter and this stopped anyone loading it.²³⁴

²³⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 4 April 1985.

²³¹ EAPL meeting minutes, 4 April 1985.

²³² EAPL meeting minutes, 4 April 1985.

²³³ Author's interview with T.N., March 2011; Author's interview with T.T., March 2011.

²³⁴ Author's interview with T.N., March 2011.

This action brought a visit and reprimand from the port police but illustrates the lengths to which ACTSS stewards were willing to go to defend their branch policy of ‘no compulsory redundancies’. For their part, the MDHC was seriously considering legal action to force an end to the strike, citing recent legislation which forbade secondary and unballoted action.²³⁵ In the event, such was the pressure from port employers, dockers and the Union that the four clerical workers who had previously rejected the enhanced redundancy offer decided to accept the terms on 5 April.²³⁶ They were never instructed by their own branch to accept redundancy however, as stewards and their official remained committed to securing reallocation for the men – ‘it is not for us to accept or reject severance terms... it is up to the individuals themselves’.²³⁷

The Isle of Man Steam Packet episode caused a fair degree of bitterness between the two major trade groups at the port and within the Union hierarchy. The fall-out from the dispute is described here:

There was a big internal dispute within the Union itself - it went all the way to the Executive Council. When we did put picket lines on the dock gates a lot of dockers walked past us, a lot of dockers didn't, but it caused so much friction that our relationship was never the same again.²³⁸

Aside from causing a new rift and air of mistrust between dockers and clerical staff, the dispute highlighted the determination of ACTSS 6/567 Branch to safeguard its members' jobs. Its leadership was willing to risk an illegal strike, direct action to cause disruption of port operations and divisive confrontation with the Union, employers and dockers in order to maintain its policy of ‘no compulsory redundancies’ in an extremely unfavourable context. The whole affair was a demonstration of exactly how far the Branch had developed and how militant it was prepared to be, bucking the national trend for trade union influence and power

²³⁵ The MDHCs clerical workers were on strike despite there being no primary dispute between the company and its staff. The action could therefore be regarded as secondary, which was illegal under the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts. Furthermore because no ballot had been held prior to strike action commencing, the strike was unofficial and therefore illegal under the provisions of the 1984 Trade Union Act.

²³⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 5 April 1985.

²³⁷ Len McCluskey (District Secretary of ACTSS) quoted in the *Liverpool Echo*, 2 April 1985.

²³⁸ Author's interview with T.T., January 2011.

which, it is generally acknowledged, was deteriorating considerably around this time.²³⁹ An ACTSS steward summarises their attitude towards the Docks section at this juncture:

In my opinion 6/567 became more progressive than the dockers on a national and port-wide basis. If someone was going to lose their job, we went into dispute... simple as that. We didn't ask the dockers 'can we go into dispute?' If the dockers didn't like it, they didn't like it. We were looking after our own just as they looked after theirs. I had a lot of good friends amongst dockers and their stewards but at times things could get a bit hairy.²⁴⁰

Indeed, although Carden contends that 'much of the argument between both sections takes place within the confines of liaison meetings and is never allowed to take place in front of the employer or the membership', his account is restricted to events pre-1984.²⁴¹ By 1985, however, it appeared that the two trade groups' relationship was deteriorating amidst desperate times for the port and the industry as a whole.

The Isle of Man Steam Packet dispute raises some interesting questions relating to the source of ACTSS' leverage at the port. Foremost of these is if RDWs were 'insulated' from the effects of Thatcherism by their statutory employment protection, as argued earlier in this chapter and elsewhere, why and how did clerical workers manage to mimic their colleagues without the backing of the Scheme?²⁴² One likely answer lies in the concept of 'environmental' or structural influences, raised by Martin in his study of the disposition of bargaining power in the workplace.²⁴³ As already established, because of the nature of the dock industry, with its emphasis on quick turnaround of ships and potentially perishable cargoes, labour stoppages were extremely expensive and particularly distressing for customers at both ends of the chain, applying pressure on dock employers to come to

²³⁹ See the following for an appraisal of the decline in trade union membership, power and influence in the 1980s: Disney, R. 'Explanations of the decline in trade union density in Britain: an appraisal', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 28, Issue 2, July 1990, pp. 165-177; Beaumont, P.B. *The Decline of Trade Union Organisation* (London: Routledge 1987); Machin, S. 'Union decline in Britain', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 38, Issue 4, December 2000, pp. 631-645; Freeman & Pelletier, 'The impact of industrial relations legislation'.

²⁴⁰ Author's interview with A.D., May 2011.

²⁴¹ Carden, 'Staff unionism', p. 68.

²⁴² Turnbull, 'Docks', pp. 185-186.

²⁴³ Martin, R. *Bargaining Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992).

expedient solutions to disputes. Moreover, as had become apparent during the Smith-Coggins dispute, certain grades of clerical staff were integral to the functioning of the port, effectively 'skilled' workers who could not be easily replaced nor their duties circumvented. In this respect, by rigorously pursuing a non-negotiable redundancies policy with the full backing of its membership, the Branch had created *de facto* employment protection. Despite the fact that there was a considerable surplus of clerical workers at the port, employers (particularly the majority employer, the MDHC) were fearful that an outright confrontation, even in the contemporary political and legislative context, would cause significant economic damage to the port's future prospects. All these influences were structural, that is peculiar to the employment situation at the port and in some aspects in the dock industry more broadly and provided clerical workers with an imposing power resource which also insulated them from rationalisation and re-assertion of managerial prerogative, as witnessed in other industries.

1986: The introduction of the National Employers' Release Arrangement, the closure of Aintree Containerbase and the A1 Feeds dispute

In the national context, the growing clamour from employers for the Scheme to be superseded led the Government to propose a compromise regarding voluntary severance. As previously noted, the severance scheme was costing employers millions of pounds in contributions under the fifty-fifty deal, whereby they and the Government split the cost equally. However, with the Government reluctant to address employer demands for abolition of the Scheme until after the next General Election it bought off NAPE's protestations by proposing a new severance scheme in October 1985, under which the Government would pay one hundred percent of redundancy costs until 31 March 1986.²⁴⁴ This of course encouraged employers to seek to shed as many jobs as possible under the first stage of the arrangement and led to accusations of 'moral blackmail' by the TGWU over the manner in which some dockers, particularly older men, were being put forward for redundancy.²⁴⁵ The

²⁴⁴ TGWU Circular (Number 85155), 21 October 1985 (Modern Records Centre); Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 92. Under the new severance scheme, named the National Employers' Release Arrangement, the Government would pay 100% of severance costs until 31 March 1986, then 75% of costs until March 1987 and 50% until March 1988.

²⁴⁵ TGWU Circular (Number 85166), 7 November 1985.

Docks and Waterways Committee called on all local modernisation committees and dock labour boards to ‘examine in detail all demands by employers for reductions in the register... and ensure that any name put forward by employers is one that has come forward purely voluntarily and not because of pressure by the employer concerned’.²⁴⁶ Another contentious aspect to the new severance scheme was that the Government committed to pay one hundred percent of costs for registered employers who ceased trading at any Scheme port until March 1988.²⁴⁷ This obviously encouraged smaller port employers to cease operations without having to face the prospect of paying a considerable amount to release its RDW employees and so further increased the burden on medium and large employers by lumbering them with reallocated men who refused to take redundancy, the so-called ‘domino effect’ as described earlier.²⁴⁸

A familiar pattern of decline was by now emerging at the port of Liverpool in the mid to late eighties, characterised by a spate of company closures and withdrawals and accelerated by the new severance scheme. January 1986 brought notification of the closure of Aintree Containerbase. As shown in Chapter Five, its opening in 1969 had been the scene of a significant dispute involving the newly-established Dock Shop Steward Committee, the Road Transport section of the TGWU and Containerbase Federation management relating to container-stripping and the use of unregistered labour. The container base was one of the first dedicated container-handling facilities in the country to be built outside a dock estate, employing fifty-one RDWs in 1986 and more at its height.²⁴⁹ Its demise was due to the increasing trend of transshipment through European ports, the primacy of Seaforth in local container handling and the general contraction of trade at Liverpool. The company notified the EAPL of its intention to cease trading completely on 7 February 1986.²⁵⁰

Since the port was still carrying a labour surplus of around ten percent, employers were again predictably reluctant to accept reallocation of Containerbase’s

²⁴⁶ TGWU Circular (Number 85166), 7 November 1985.

²⁴⁷ TGWU Circular (Number 851557), 21 October 1985.

²⁴⁸ Turnbull, ‘Capitalist restructuring’, p. 73.

²⁴⁹ Aintree Containerbase employed 25 RDWs initially, which was later increased to 50. The company intended to employ 150 RDWs at the site by the mid-seventies but the number never rose much above 80 (Source: *Liverpool Echo*, 30 June 1969; Author’s interview with L.D., December 2009).

²⁵⁰ EAPL meeting minutes, 17 January 1986.

workforce amongst them.²⁵¹ Several companies such as Liverpool Grain Storage threatened to cease stevedoring operations altogether if they were forced to absorb any of the surplus.²⁵² The stage seemed set for another showdown as ‘the Chairman summed up the feelings of the registered employers, saying that the consensus was to resist reallocation. He agreed that NAPE must be advised of the decision’.²⁵³ Although the EAPL had been defeated before in high-profile reallocation cases, clearly it felt the climate had changed and that its campaign might on this occasion draw some sympathy from NAPE and indeed the government. As usual, the Dock Shop Steward Committee was adamant that employers adhered to their responsibilities under the A-J agreement. With neither side willing to concede ground in the dispute, the case was referred to the local Dock Labour Board in the first instance and when agreement could not be reached it was referred to the NDLB for deliberation at its March meeting.²⁵⁴ There, an unusual settlement was negotiated between NAPE, the EAPL, the Government and the TGWU.²⁵⁵

A minor employer at the port, UML Bromborough, had ceased to trade in November 1985 and their small RDW workforce had been reallocated amongst other employers.²⁵⁶ The company’s stevedoring licence with the local Dock Labour Board was still valid and it was proposed that it be transferred to the EAPL with the intention of the Association employing the thirty-six ex-Containerbase RDWs directly.²⁵⁷ This of course meant that the EAPL had essentially become *a port employer of last resort*. The Association was to be referred to as a ‘shell’ employer and its thirty-six dockers were to be divided and transferred between other port employers as required. In such an event, the company temporarily employing the dockers would be liable for their wages. Where no work was available, the men

²⁵¹ ACTSS members were not affected by the closure of Aintree Containerbase because, as part of the settlement negotiated between the Dock Shop Steward Committee and company management in 1969, all workers to be employed at the site had to be registered regardless of whether they performed clerical duties or not. Thereafter these registered clerical workers had their membership transferred to the Docks section.

²⁵² EAPL meeting minutes, 17 January 1986.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ In the meantime the closure of Aintree Containerbase was postponed to allow time for consultation.

²⁵⁵ EAPL meeting minutes, 4 March 1986.

²⁵⁶ UML Bromborough ceased to trade at the port on 15 November 1985. 19 RDWs were left without an employer. 18 were reallocated and 1 took voluntary redundancy (Source: EAPL meeting minutes, 15 November 1985).

²⁵⁷ EAPL meeting minutes, 4 March 1986. Out of the original 55 RDWs left without an employer by the closure of Aintree Containerbase, 19 opted to take voluntary severance leaving 36 to be reallocated to the EAPL.

would be paid fall-back pay as dictated by local agreements, which would be covered by a levy on all employers at the port.²⁵⁸ The technicalities of the settlement ensured that companies were not compelled to accept reallocation of the dockers permanently, instead using them as and when required and that costs would be spread more evenly and gradually. Its ad hoc nature again demonstrated the still impregnable position of the NDLS and the A-J agreement for employers and the ‘insulation’ of dockers from the programme of restructuring of industrial relations being undertaken by the Conservative government.²⁵⁹ Moreover, the outcome also indicated that despite a radical decline in manning levels and therefore membership, the influence of the Docks section at the port was as weighty as ever.

The first few months of 1986 witnessed considerable activity at the port. Running almost parallel to the Containerbase standoff, a dispute had developed at the Grain Terminal. Dockers there had refused to load lorries destined for A1 Feeds, an animal feedstuffs processor whose plant was located close to Gladstone dock. It transpired that A1 Feeds management and the local TGWU were locked in a battle over union recognition for its workforce. Its workforce was on strike and picketing access to the plant but the company had resisted pressure to concede recognition and was engaged in ‘anti-union’ strikebreaking activities.²⁶⁰ The workers had appealed to the Dock Shop Steward Committee directly for assistance. In the context of the Union’s dispute with the company and the plea to the dock stewards, Jimmy Symes had instructed the dockers responsible to refuse to service delivery for A1 Feeds. Its cargo was waiting on the quayside but the Union feared that ‘the company would seek to break the picket line with lorries loaded at S2 [the Grain Terminal]’.²⁶¹ The EAPL was dragged reluctantly into the dispute because it claimed that the MDHC could be facing legal action from A1 Feeds over ‘its failure to supply the customer with his own goods’.²⁶² It informed the Union side at the LMC that it would be forced to put those dockers who refuse to load A1 Feeds’ cargo ‘off-pay’. Furthermore, the Association deplored the action as ‘bad for the prosperity of the

²⁵⁸ EAPL meeting minutes, 4 March 1986.

²⁵⁹ Turnbull, ‘Docks’, p. 185-186.

²⁶⁰ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 21 January 1986. The company had apparently shipped workers in from its Scottish plant as strike-breakers.

²⁶¹ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 21 January 1986.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

port', arguing that 'the press would inevitably have a field day expounding on the problems which beset Liverpool'.²⁶³

The sympathetic and secondary nature of the action meant that it was indeed prone to legal challenges in the contemporary legislative climate, as the EAPL had feared. The Chairman of the Association informed the Union side at the meeting of the LMC on 4 February that A1 Feeds 'had now taken out an injunction to prevent the TGWU from impeding their normal activities in secondary industrial action which lay outside legal immunities for trade unions'.²⁶⁴ The MDHC was in an extremely uncomfortable situation. It now had to be seen to make efforts to discipline the dockers involved and attempt to deliver the cargo to A1 Feeds. If not, A1 Feeds might pursue legal action against them. However, if it did seek to move the cargo without the agreement of the Union it recognised that this might provoke a port-wide stoppage, 'either way the MDHC stood to lose a great deal of money'.²⁶⁵ To the relief of management at the MDHC, it was clear that the TGWU was already amply aware of the injunction that had been issued against it. At the same meeting, Jimmy Symes advised the employer's side of the LMC that 'the Union had revised its stance as a result of the Court Order and the stewards had already advised the RDWs at the Grain Terminal to work normally'.²⁶⁶ Although dockers' employment protection had kept the realities of Thatcherism at bay, the exercising of sympathetic or political industrial action was now dependent on the appetite of companies from outside the industry to utilise recent changes to employment legislation.

Further to the two disputes, March 1986 brought the beginning of the biennial pay round negotiations. As usual the two sides were some distance apart in their estimation of a satisfactory award. At the LMC, the Docks section put forward its pay claim – a twelve and a half percent increase in basic pay, holiday pay and bonuses. The EAPL again stressed the need for changes in manning levels and workforce flexibility and the importance of making any pay rise self-funding.²⁶⁷ Dennis Kelly outlined the reasons why the Docks section should be afforded a 'no strings' pay award, 'RDWs wages have fallen behind those paid to ACTSS and the

²⁶³ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 21 January 1986.

²⁶⁴ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 4 February 1986.

²⁶⁵ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 4 February 1986.

²⁶⁶ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 4 February 1986.

²⁶⁷ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 4 April 1986.

national industry average... savings from the substantial severances achieved by employers [under the new release arrangement] should enable companies to pay their dockworkers a reasonable wage'.²⁶⁸ The employers' counter-offer comprised a four percent increase that year followed by a further four percent in 1987 with manning reductions in certain areas, particularly the Seaforth Container Terminal.²⁶⁹ This was rejected at a shop steward meeting on 5 May and, in the absence of an improved offer, plans were made for industrial action to increase pressure on the employers. At a Docks section shop stewards' Executive Committee meeting at Transport House, a motion to seek a membership vote on an immediate indefinite port-wide stoppage was narrowly defeated.²⁷⁰ Instead, at a later mass meeting at Liverpool Stadium, a vote for an overtime ban returned an overwhelmingly positive result.²⁷¹ This was not immediately implemented, however, as talks with the EAPL continued.

The EAPL reacted to the notice of an overtime ban by threatening the closure of the loss-making timber terminal at Seaforth, potentially affecting one hundred RDW and twenty clerical jobs.²⁷² This was dismissed by the Union as brinkmanship but employers were adamant that closure could be imminent. In fact, the Association took the extraordinary step of offering the timber terminal to the Union to run in return for 'a nominal rent... since the Union considered the Terminal a going concern. The Union could employ the men, organise their wages etc. Any profits which were made, they could keep'.²⁷³ The MDHC maintained that this was a serious and formal offer and required a formal response. The Union side replied that the offer would be considered in due course but pointedly remarked that it had absolutely no bearing on the pay negotiations.²⁷⁴

Debate and negotiation at the LMC continued but was growing increasingly acrimonious. The EAPL persistently argued that it could not possibly afford a twelve and a half percent across the board increase unless it was accompanied by manning reductions or changes in work practices.²⁷⁵ Despite these familiar employer

²⁶⁸ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 4 April 1986

²⁶⁹ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 6 May 1986.

²⁷⁰ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 21 May 1986.

²⁷¹ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 28 May 1986.

²⁷² EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 22 May 1986.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁴ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 22 May 1986.

²⁷⁵ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 4 June 1986. The flexibility arrangements sought by employers, particularly the MDHC, would have enabled them to move labour

protestations, Jimmy Symes recalled that ‘just recently the MDHC had released their figures for last year and had made a profit of £1.9million... as far as the Union was concerned, this clearly indicated that the Port was able to stand an unconditional pay increase’.²⁷⁶ In response, the MDHC argued that the profit made for that financial year had already been re-invested into new equipment and facilities at the port.²⁷⁷ The war of words escalated as Symes accused employers of ‘not recognising the achievements and sacrifices of RDWs in the last four years’.²⁷⁸ All this sabre-rattling came to a head at a meeting of the LMC on 8 July where, in the absence of meaningful progress, both parties withdrew from negotiations.

The LMC remained on extended hiatus for four weeks. During this time, attitudes hardened further. When the Committee finally reconvened on 5 August, the Union side opened by warning that ‘if no progress was made in the next few days, the Union would be forced to take action’.²⁷⁹ To these ends, the overtime ban was finally implemented on 28 August, accompanied by the threat of escalation.²⁸⁰ The EAPL responded by withdrawing from all talks until the ban was removed. However, a mere week later, employers returned to the table and asked the Union side to lift the ban so that a serious discussion could take place to finally bring an end to the marathon wage negotiations.²⁸¹ Nevertheless, the two sides were still some distance apart. The Union side remained absolutely determined to secure an unconditional deal, while employers argued that the port simply could not afford it.

A breakthrough did not arrive until November. Eventually a formula was agreed upon whereby voluntary redundancy would be offered to a small section of the RDW workforce to facilitate funding for an unconditional twelve and a half percent rise across the board.²⁸² After further disagreement regarding the terms and scope of the voluntary redundancy scheme, a shop stewards’ meeting voted on 17

around the different areas at the port as and when they saw fit. Existing manning agreements made it difficult for employers to remove gangs from their traditional areas of work and place them on other operations elsewhere in the port, even temporarily, unless as part of a negotiated rotation agreement such as that which existed for Seaforth Container Terminal.

²⁷⁶ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 22 May 1986.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 17 June 1986.

²⁷⁹ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 5 August 1986.

²⁸⁰ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 28 August 1986.

²⁸¹ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 4 September 1986.

²⁸² EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 7 November 1986.

December to accept the deal.²⁸³ The agreement brought to an end nine months of difficult and sustained intercession.²⁸⁴ However, this was only the first hurdle in the annual pay round. ACTSS had basically shelved their pay negotiations until the outcome of the RDW deal was known. This meant that employers then faced another round of tortuous negotiations with other groups at the port, all equally determined to secure an unconditional deal.

It is in this context that ACTSS began its talks with employers in January. The EAPL's opening offer was similar to that which satisfactorily concluded RDW negotiations, perhaps indicating that employers were eager to avoid another protracted debate. Employers offered an £8 per week increase on basic pay but sought clerical manning reductions at the container and timber terminals.²⁸⁵ The Union side agreed in principle on the pay rise but predictably refused to accept any manning reductions. It also asked for written assurances regarding compulsory redundancies.²⁸⁶ In response the EAPL stated that 'they believed that a large gulf in negotiations had been created' because of ACTSS' 'refusal to consider manning reductions... and until that position had changed the employers would not be prepared to make concessions'.²⁸⁷ Negotiations over the next two months were slow and, as a result, the JNC was broken down into two sub-committees to discuss manning changes at the two terminals in question.²⁸⁸ Still there was no movement from either side, leading Lennie McCluskey to comment that 'negotiations were now further from agreement than before'.²⁸⁹

By May, negotiators on the Union side were growing increasingly restless and an overtime ban was proposed and ratified.²⁹⁰ The overtime ban spurred the EAPL into action as it began to affect operations at Seaforth. The Association proposed that manning flexibility be implemented in place of manning reductions and as a result it appeared that an agreement was near.²⁹¹ However, differences remained over the retrospective payment of increases back to March when

²⁸³ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 22 December 1986.

²⁸⁴ The agreement gave RDWs an extra £8/week on their basic rate, £10/week on holiday pay and £20/week on sick pay.

²⁸⁵ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 9 January 1987.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 29 January 1987.

²⁸⁸ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 24 March 1987.

²⁸⁹ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 14 April 1987.

²⁹⁰ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 12 May 1987.

²⁹¹ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 12 May 1987.

negotiations began. The overtime ban continued while the details of the settlement were hammered out in full.²⁹² Finally it was agreed that half the outstanding monies would be paid as a lump sum while the other half would be donated to a charity of the union's choice. The offer was put to a mass meeting of the membership on 3 June where it was accepted.²⁹³

The prolonged and tightly-contested nature of the 1986/87 pay negotiations indicated that both employers and workers were closing ranks. Employers were concerned with continually minimising the register surplus at the port while simultaneously attempting to renegotiate manning agreements in the face of declining traffic and tonnage. For their part, port workers were alarmed by the increasing erosion of manning levels in every area and the ongoing exodus from the industry via the plethora of voluntary severance schemes. The battle to protect jobs was confronted with the battle to cut costs and neither side believed they could afford to concede ground. Once again, both clerical workers and RDWs had brought pressure through industrial action and it was only once both trade groups implemented an overtime ban that employers began to negotiate seriously over the major stumbling block of manning reductions. Despite its best efforts, the EAPL failed to attach manning reduction conditions to the final agreement indicating that the impetus still largely lay with the shop floor even though manpower, and thus membership, was declining sharply.

Another Special Severance Release Arrangement was opened at the port of Liverpool in January 1987. Despite the first phase of the National Employers' Release Arrangement having expired in March 1986, whereby the Government would be liable for one hundred percent of severance costs, the second phase still guaranteed state-funding for seventy-five percent of RDW voluntary redundancy sums until March 1987. It was in this context that a new severance sum of £35000 was offered to RDWs at the port, mirroring an offer made at the port of London the previous year. However, the only employers who declared surpluses were the MDHC and EAPL and even they indicated that applications would not be accepted from those with key or skill shortage specialisms.²⁹⁴ In fact consideration for redundancy was extremely selective and mainly restricted to older dockers. Under

²⁹² EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 18 May 1987.

²⁹³ EAPL meeting minutes, 5 June 1987.

²⁹⁴ EAPL meeting minutes, 6 November 1986.

the two-week Scheme, which commenced on 12 January 1987, two-hundred and fifty-five RDWs left the port.²⁹⁵ This was a significant blow to already-dwindling ranks: by 1988 only approximately 1,400 remained on the register at Liverpool.²⁹⁶

The withdrawal of Liverpool Maritime Terminals, 1988

Further damage appeared to be inflicted on Liverpool's prospects in early 1988 as Liverpool Maritime Terminals (LMT), a company with a considerable history at the port, announced its decision to withdraw from stevedoring operations. It was no coincidence that the decision to withdraw coincided with the pending cessation of the National Employers' Release Arrangement.²⁹⁷ LMT was a significant employer of RDW labour, employing two hundred and forty-two dockers.²⁹⁸ The prospect of absorbing such a high surplus of labour into existing workforces was daunting for those employers remaining, particularly the MDHC which had just recently managed to shed a similar number from its books through the Special Severance Release Arrangement. Fortunately, bucking the trend at Liverpool and elsewhere in the industry, the EAPL had received applications for stevedoring licenses and local board registration from two new companies. Merlin Stevedores Limited and Liverpool Stevedoring Limited had applied to begin trading at the port specifically with the intention of undertaking LMT's work once the company had withdrawn and so it was proposed that they be allocated those surplus RDWs who did not wish to take severance. In the meantime, the closure of LMT was postponed until 21 February to allow provision for severance applications and the orderly transfer of labour.²⁹⁹

Despite the RDW reallocation on this occasion being settled without the threat of industrial action, Jimmy Symes, the District Docks Section Secretary, stressed that 'if a full solution was to be achieved, the employers would have to give

²⁹⁵ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 12 June 1987.

²⁹⁶ TGWU Ballot Returns Records, 7 October 1988 (Modern Records Centre).

²⁹⁷ As previously noted, the National Employers' Release Arrangement committed the Government to pay one hundred percent of costs for registered employers who ceased trading at any Scheme port until March 1988. LMT announced its intention to withdraw from the port just three months before the close of the Arrangement and ergo was not liable for any of the costs of voluntary severance for its RDW workforce.

²⁹⁸ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 8 February 1988.

²⁹⁹ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 8 February 1988.

consideration to any ACTSS members who did not wish to accept severance'.³⁰⁰ By 1988, LMT did not employ many clerical staff and the majority of those it did employ were happy to take an enhanced severance package linked to each individual's period of service. After several meetings of the Joint Negotiating Committee it became apparent that only five ACTSS members employed by LMT wished to remain in the industry.³⁰¹ One of the five clerical staff involved recalls the situation:

In 1988 LMT went to the wall. I'd been there since I was fifteen years old. I was entitled to redundancy... I had £18,500 built up. But there were five of us out of maybe thirty-two/thirty-three staff at that time who said 'no, I don't want to go', which threw up problems because there was nowhere for us to go, no jobs for us... We had a [joint-liaison] meeting with the dock stewards at which we made it clear that we wanted to be transferred to another company.³⁰²

Inevitably, ACTSS once again made it absolutely clear to employers that these men must be reallocated within the port. Equally unsurprising was the response from port employers that they did not require any additional clerical labour. The stage seemed set for a re-run of the somewhat acrimonious Isle of Man Steam Packet dispute. In order to avoid a repeat of that scenario ACTSS and the Docks section proposed that a solution be tailored similar to that which had achieved a satisfactory settlement for reallocation of Aintree Containerbase's RDWs, when it had ceased trading in 1986.³⁰³ It appeared that, on this occasion, the employers were as eager as ACTSS to avoid a potentially damaging dispute and so it was agreed that the five men would be employed by the EAPL, again in a 'shell' capacity.

On this occasion however, the settlement contained an even more interesting twist. Whereas the RDWs employed by the EAPL were transferred between port employers on an 'as required' basis, there were no conceivable circumstances whereby clerical workers would be needed by other companies. The EAPL would therefore be encumbered with five men for whom it had no work but still had to pay.

³⁰⁰ EAPL – TGWU Local Modernisation Committee meeting minutes, 5 February 1988.

³⁰¹ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 25 February 1988.

³⁰² Author's interview with A.D., May 2011.

³⁰³ EAPL meeting minutes, 4 March 1988.

At the next meeting of the JNC, the Chairman of the Clerical Port Shop Steward Committee requested the details of the terms and conditions applicable to the five ACTSS members currently being employed by the EAPL. The Chairman of the EAPL replied ‘that the five men were undertaking a training programme and were to be listed... for registered dock-work through the inter-employment transfer system’.³⁰⁴ This in effect meant that the five clerical workers were to be retrained to become registered dockers under the Scheme. Clearly, this was a most unusual occurrence since the register had been closed at Liverpool for over fifteen years. The solution was entirely unique. Once again, the make-shift and unparalleled nature of the settlement indicated that management remained acutely aware of the strength, determination and disruptive power of ACTSS even as late as 1988 and dared not impose compulsory redundancy, on as few as five non-registered workers, for fear of the reprisals this would provoke. As previously noted, the organisation of the port and structural factors inherent in the dock industry meant that clerical workers, through solidarity in several watershed disputes and an acute comprehension of their position in the operation of the port, had developed their own *de facto* employment protection which also insulated them from the deregulation and restructuring witnessed by other sectors of industry. The reallocation of the five surplus LMT clerical staff and extraordinary retraining as RDWs is testament to this.

Further evidence of the exceptional position and influence of Liverpool’s RDWs and clerical staff, even this deep into the Thatcher era, is provided by the ban on the handling of Namibian Uranium Hexafluoride at the port. The initiative, pioneered by ACTSS stewards, sought to boycott the movement of the commodity through the port because of ongoing military action in Namibia.³⁰⁵ Initially, dock

³⁰⁴ EAPL – ACTSS Joint Negotiating Committee meeting minutes, 25 February 1988; EAPL meeting minutes, 4 March 1988.

³⁰⁵ The campaign to ‘black’ Namibian Uranium Hexafluoride at the port stemmed from a ban imposed at the United Nations on the extraction of minerals from the country in 1987 because of the ongoing South African Border Wars and anti-Apartheid struggle in Namibia at the time. Despite the UN ban, Uranium was still being mined and exported from the country. The Liverpool dock and clerical stewards’ committees had been approached by the Namibian Support Committee several years earlier requesting information on any consignments of Namibian ‘Hex’ which might have passed through the port. However, the ‘Hex’ was being trans-shipped via Holland and then being mixed with other consignments from other countries for enrichment at Springfield before arriving at the port so it was impossible to discern the provenance of the processed material. For more detail on the South African Border Wars and the trade in Namibian Hexafluoride see: Roberts, A. *The Rossling File: The Inside Story of Britain’s Secret Contract for Namibian Uranium* (London: Namibia Support Committee 1980); Schruver, N.J. ‘The UN Council for Namibia v Urenco, UCN and the state of the Netherlands’, *Leiden Journal of International Law*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 1988, pp. 25-47. For a short overview of the

stewards were indifferent to a potential boycott as it was perceived that such overtly political action could damage already-dwindling trade at the port.³⁰⁶ Nevertheless, having been approached by the Namibian Support Committee, ACTSS stewards were determined not to handle a cargo which was being extracted and shipped in ethically questionable circumstances and used their port veto to effectively 'black' any containers or ships carrying Uranium Hexafluoride from Namibia. An ACTSS steward outlined the process by which clerical workers could passively prevent the movement of a particular cargo within the port:

We had the power, because we did the paperwork, to refuse a container or ship to be loaded. Whereas the RDWs needed [the support of] forty, fifty, sixty men to stop a ship, ours was more of an individual thing. For example, if I was a customs clerk and I wanted to stop a South African container going on a ship, all I had to do was refuse to sign it off and that's exactly what we used to do – refuse to sign the C88 Release Forms.³⁰⁷

After several discussions about the policy at joint-liaison meetings, the Docks section gradually warmed to the boycott.³⁰⁸ However, because Namibian 'Hex' had already been processed with batches from elsewhere before reaching the port it took significant research before its presence could be identified.³⁰⁹ Eventually, on 22 February 1988, Liverpool's dockers and clerical staff identified and stopped a consignment of containers from being loaded at the port. They contained Uranium Hexafluoride from British Nuclear Fuel's (BNFL) Springfield plant where it had been partially enriched and was destined for further enrichment in the United States.³¹⁰ The dockers and clerical staff requested documentation to prove that some of the mixed 'Hex' had not originated from Namibia. When BNFL could not provide proof, the cargo was 'blackened' and the company was informed that these shipments would no longer be handled at Liverpool docks. As the dockers had initially feared, BNFL's response was to divert operations permanently to

dockers' ban on handling Namibian 'Hex' see: Pilger, J. *Hidden Agendas* (London: Vintage 1999), pp. 354-356.

³⁰⁶ Author's interview with T.N., May 2011.

³⁰⁷ Author's interview with T.N., May 2011.

³⁰⁸ Author's interview with T.T., January 2011.

³⁰⁹ Author's interview with G.D., July 2012.

³¹⁰ 'Mersey Beats Nukes!', *Counter Information*, No. 19, May/June 1988 (<http://libcom.org/files/ci19.pdf> - Retrieved 11 July 2012); Author's interview with G.D., July 2012.

Felixstowe, a non-Scheme port.³¹¹ The provenance of Namibian Uranium Hexafluoride and its ethical implications had already been raised by ACTSS and the District Docks section at the local and national level of the Union. This led to a motion from the National Docks and Waterways Committee calling on the General Executive Committee of the TGWU to ‘implement a ban called by the UN... [and ensure] that there is a complete handling ban on Namibian minerals in all ports of the UK’.³¹²

The boycott was not the first of its kind at the port of Liverpool – Chilean and South African cargoes of various description had previously been ‘blackened’ at the behest of ACTSS and dock stewards because of the political situation in those countries.³¹³ This brand of political sympathy action was practically unparalleled in other industries and again illustrates the influence enjoyed by the two major trade groups at the port right up until the abolition of the Scheme in April 1989, despite a seemingly unfavourable environment for labour activism elsewhere.

The national context – The road to the repeal of the National Dock Labour Scheme

The Scheme came under mounting duress in the final years of the eighties. In May 1986, NAPE commissioned a report into the probability of success an abolition campaign might have. Its findings, in March 1987, were positive and encouraged NAPE to commence a full-scale repeal drive.³¹⁴ At the local level, this emboldened some employers who initiated attempts to circumvent the Scheme. Both 1987 and 1988 witnessed national strike calls from the TGWU over breaches at different ports. In January 1987, Hapag-Lloyd withdrew from the port of Greenock and transferred operations to Liverpool.³¹⁵ Its dockers were left without an employer and, in the absence of willing recipient companies, it was proposed that the men be placed on the Temporary Unattached Register. The suggestion that the men would not be reallocated was greeted with the threat of industrial action from the TGWU.

³¹¹ ‘Mersey Beats Nukes!’, *Counter Information*.

³¹² TGWU Docks and Waterways National Committee meeting minutes, 21 January 1988 (Modern Records Centre).

³¹³ Author’s interview with G.D., July 2012; Author’s interview with T.T., November 2010.

³¹⁴ The National Port Employers Association, ‘The History of the Dock Labour Scheme – NAPE campaign timetable’, April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

³¹⁵ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 94.

However, the employers at the port were immovable in their stance and so the Union balloted members for a national dock strike.³¹⁶ The result was positive and a national strike was narrowly averted by a last-minute climb-down by employers that saw some of the twenty-four RDWs reallocated amongst existing companies at the port and the remainder employed by a newly-registered company, Strathclyde Stevedoring Services.

In November 1987 NAPE's repeal campaign began to pay dividends as Jacques Arnold, Conservative MP for Gravesham, tabled Early Day Motion Number 275 calling on the Government to repeal the Dock Labour Scheme and labelling it 'an anachronism which both endangers the viability of jobs in Scheme areas and acts as a deterrent to job creation by new ventures'.³¹⁷ On the first day, sixty-nine MPs signed the motion with two hundred and twenty-eight Conservative MPs pledging support by the end of the parliamentary session.³¹⁸ This initiative was opposed by elements within the Labour party and Early Day Motion Number 332, tabled in December, called for the Scheme to be retained.³¹⁹ To the growing frustration of port employers and some Conservative MPs, the Government still resisted committing itself to repealing the Scheme.³²⁰ The Government's persisting reticence, even as late as May 1988, was illustrated by the defeat of a Ten Minute Rule Bill introduced by David Davis MP imploring abolition.³²¹ Although Labour MPs voted overwhelmingly against the Bill, it required the assistance from some within the Government to successfully vote it down.³²² Nevertheless, it was clear that the campaign for abolition was gathering momentum as right-wing think tanks and academics published a series of papers roundly condemning the Scheme.³²³ Having marginally avoided a national dock strike in early 1987, it appeared

³¹⁶ Press statement by John Connolly (National Docks and Waterways Secretary) 'Re: Ballot for national strike over TUR use', 24 July 1987 (Modern Records Centre).

³¹⁷ House of Commons debate, 10 March 1988 (*Hansard*, Vol. 129, cc. 521-33).

³¹⁸ NAPE, 'The History of the Dock Labour Scheme'.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.* However, the motion only received the support of 76 MPs.

³²⁰ House of Commons debate, 10 March 1988. Patrick Nicholls, Under-Secretary of State for Employment, insisted during the debate that 'there are no present plans to abolish or amend the Scheme'.

³²¹ NAPE, 'The History of the Dock Labour Scheme'.

³²² Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 96.

³²³ See, for example: Hanson, C. 'Time to end the National Dock Labour Scheme', *Economic Affairs*, June/July 1988, pp. 34-36; Davis, D. 'Clear the Decks: Abolish the National Dock Labour Scheme', *Centre For Policy Studies*, Policy Study Number 101, November 1988; Rosewell, R. 'Locked in a time warp – Must we keep Britain's docks as an industrial museum?', *Aims of Industry*, September 1988.

increasingly likely that the next dispute in the industry could provoke all-out war between the Union and employers over the future of the Scheme. Opportunity for confrontation quickly arrived with the annual review of the National Docks Agreement in late 1987 and a dispute relating to the use of unregistered labour at the port of Glasgow in 1988.

The Annual Review took place under the auspices of the NJC and over recent years NAPE had been reluctant to discuss anything beyond peripheral matters such as sick rate pay. Indeed, the majority of important negotiations regarding pay, overtime rate etc. were by now devolved to the local level, as was the case at Liverpool. At the review in November 1987, the Union pushed for a commitment to a reduction to the working week from thirty-nine to thirty-five hours, an increase in holiday entitlement from twenty-two to thirty days per annum and an increase in the sick pay rate.³²⁴ However, the employers remained adamant that any claims raised by the Union should be the subject of local negotiations to enable them to be linked to productivity/flexibility deals at individual port level.³²⁵ In response, whereas in previous years the Union had not maintained pressure on employers to come to a *national* agreement regarding improved terms and conditions for RDWs, on this occasion, possibly in the context of NAPE's escalating abolition campaign and hostile posture, the Union stated that 'if an improved, acceptable offer, is not made on those items made in our claim for a review of the National Dock Agreement 1987... a recommendation for industrial action will be made to the docks membership'.³²⁶ Following meetings of the NJC that took place throughout 1988, the employers eventually made an offer to increase sick pay by 4.4% and to enhance the holiday entitlement by one day to twenty-three days per annum. However, the offer was made with one significant condition attached: the implementation of a cashless pay system for holiday pay in any port where it was required by the employer. Both elements of the offer were rejected by the workers' side of the NJC, along with a wholesale rejection of the cashless payment proposal.³²⁷ The scene therefore seemed

³²⁴ TGWU Circular (Number 881157), 'To all Docks and Waterways Officers, the National Docks and Waterways Committee and Dock Shop Stewards', 18 August 1988 (Modern Records Centre).

³²⁵ TGWU Circular (Number 881157), 18 August 1988.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

³²⁷ *Ibid.* Wages and hours were still tallied manually across the bulk of the industry in 1988. Wages and bonuses were also paid in cash, which was obviously a laborious process. Employers were eager to modernise their wage administration by introducing cashless payment to the industry, whereby workers would be paid by cheque.

set for a showdown over the annual review. On reflection, it can be argued that the dispute represented a battle of wills between the TGWU and NAPE.

On 1 September 1988, the TGWU began a ballot of its dock membership for industrial action. All eyes were on the outcome and its implications for the industry and the NDLS.³²⁸ The proposed strike action was to take the form of one twenty-four hour stoppage per week until a satisfactory offer was made by employers. However, when the result was released on 7 October, it made disastrous reading for the Union. In a turnout of 6895 RDWs out of a possible 9430 across the country, the 'no's' had it by 3777 votes to 3118.³²⁹ John Connolly, TGWU National Docks and Waterways Secretary, in a masterful display of understatement, remarked that the outcome was 'disappointing'.³³⁰ Nicolas Finney, Director of NAPE, was far less restrained in his assessment commenting that 'the dockers' decision indicates that the days of automatic support for any national call for strike action in the docks are over'.³³¹ The Union had virtually staked its reputation on the ballot and was found wanting. Despite arguing that the result had little relevance to the dockers' and Union's determination to defend the Scheme, it was nothing short of a public relations calamity and encouraged those who supported abolition to believe that the time was right. In an interesting aside, the result of Liverpool's ballot bucked the national trend. Of 1390 RDWs, 490 voted yes and 363 no with 532 ballots unused and five unreturned.³³² However, even in the case of Liverpool, the sizeable chunk of men who did not vote, and those who voted against, seemed to indicate a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the issue at stake. Overall, the call for industrial action at that point and in respect of this issue appeared to be a gross miscalculation by the Union.

Running almost parallel to the national annual review dispute was another localised dispute which threatened to escalate into a national strike call. In May 1988 Sheppard (Group) Limited set up a scrap metal export operation in the port of Glasgow.³³³ Despite initially reassuring the Union that it would employ RDWs, upon commencing work it refused to do so. The local Dock Labour Board made it

³²⁸ *Financial Times*, 1 September 1988; *Lloyds List*, 1 September 1988.

³²⁹ TGWU Ballot Returns Records, 7 October 1988 (Modern Records Centre).

³³⁰ TGWU Press Release, 7 October 1988 (Modern Records Centre).

³³¹ NAPE Press Release, 7 October 1988 (Modern Records Centre).

³³² TGWU Ballot Returns Records, 7 October 1988.

³³³ The following details of this dispute are contained in TGWU Circular (Number 881649) 'Port of Glasgow dispute – Dock Labour Scheme – Use of non-registered labour', 15 December 1988 (Modern Records Centre).

clear that the work the company was undertaking was dock-work yet it continued to refuse to employ RDWs. The issue was referred by the local board to the NDLB where, in the absence of co-operation from Sheppard, legal proceedings were issued to prevent the company from continuing in breach of the Scheme. However, its attempt to gain an injunction failed and the NDLB subsequently appealed the court's decision. The Board also applied to an Industrial Tribunal to rule on the Sheppard dock-work issue.

All the while Sheppard continued its operations in the port using non-registered labour. This encouraged another two scrap metal exporters working out of the port, J.R. Adams & Sons and Arnott Young, to follow suit and they signalled their intention to cease employing registered men after 1 December 1988. On 2 and 7 December, ships were discharged by these two companies without utilising RDW labour. On the second occasion, all RDWs at the port withdrew their labour indefinitely in protest at such a blatant breach of the Scheme. Before the official movement could devise a response to the evolving situation, the port authority applied to an Edinburgh court seeking an injunction against the Union as a consequence of the RDWs withdrawing their labour without following proper strike notification procedure. The injunction was granted on 10 December, although successfully challenged by the Union on 13 December, albeit on the proviso that no further industrial action would be taken until a ballot of the members involved had been carried out and that forty-eight hours notice of the ballot be provided to Clyde Port Authority. The RDWs returned to work while the Union prepared a ballot of its port membership. In the interim, the Dock Labour Board was successful in securing an injunction against the two companies involved for using non-registered labour on its operations.³³⁴

The upshot of the whole affair was that, although the local ballot received a positive result and was followed by a successful motion to ballot for a national stoppage at a subsequent National Docks Delegate Conference, the strike was postponed until the Industrial Tribunal ruled on the original Sheppard case.³³⁵ This dragged on into the following year and as a consequence was superseded by the announcement of the abolition of the Scheme. The legal wrangling surrounding the

³³⁴ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 96.

³³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 96-97.

case was an appetizer for the restrictions which would handicap the TGWU's attempts to call a national stoppage over the abolition announcement and seemed to illustrate that by the end of 1988 some employers were beginning to flout the Scheme in anticipation of its demise.

The abolition of the NDLS

On Thursday 6 April 1989 Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Employment, announced to the House of Commons the Government's intention to abolish the National Dock Labour Scheme on 16 July. The Dock Work Bill was accompanied by a White Paper detailing the reasons behind the Government's decision.³³⁶ It was largely based on previous research undertaken on behalf of NAPE and regurgitated many of the statistics and facts already in the public domain.³³⁷ In short the Government cited the costs of Scheme-related surplus labour and severance, the inefficient practices which its protection encouraged, joint industry control and its impact on managerial prerogative and discipline, the commercial disadvantages compared with non-Scheme ports, the statutory monopoly over dock-work by registered dockers and how a combination of all these factors acted as a disincentive to investment and development of the industry.³³⁸ The White Paper also referenced the case of the forced reallocation of T&J Harrisons' RDW workforce at Liverpool in 1980 as an example of all that was wrong with the Scheme.

Not surprisingly, the announcement was warmly-received by major dock employers and centre-right commentators. *The Times* summarised the mood by leading with an article entitled 'Free Ports At Last'.³³⁹ Keith Stuart, Chairman of Associated British Ports (ABP) which owned and ran several British ports including Southampton, Hull and Cardiff, could hardly disguise his satisfaction commenting that:

³³⁶ The Department for Employment, 'Employment in the ports'.

³³⁷ The National Association of Port Employers, 'The case against the Dock Labour Scheme' (London: NAPE 1988); Wharton Econometric Forecasting Associates, 'The consequences of the abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme – Employment and Output', June 1988; Hanson, 'Time to end the National Dock Labour Scheme'; Davis, 'Clear the Decks: Abolish the National Dock Labour Scheme'; Rosewell, 'Locked in a time warp – Must we keep Britain's docks as an industrial museum?'.

³³⁸ The Department for Employment, 'Employment in the ports'.

³³⁹ *The Times*, 7 April 1989.

ABP has strongly supported the campaign for the abolition of the Dock Labour Scheme and we are very pleased that the Government has announced its intention to bring the Scheme to an end... The abolition of the monopoly right of RDWs to handle cargo will enable new working arrangements to be negotiated to the benefits of the ports, our customers and our employees.³⁴⁰

The MDHC gave a more measured response but was nevertheless enthused by the announcement of abolition. Trevor Furlong, Chief Executive of the company, highlighted the positive implications for the competitiveness of the port:

The proposed legislation gives Liverpool the chance to compete more aggressively against other ports in both the UK and Europe. We have been successful within the Scheme. We are confident that Liverpool will be able to enhance its position still further without the Scheme.³⁴¹

The repeal of the Scheme had long been feared by RDWs across the country, yet the timing came as somewhat a surprise in the context of the Government's frequent statements to the contrary.³⁴² It is possible that the Government's hand was forced by the threat of a national strike over the Sheppard dispute and a general escalation of hostilities between the TGWU and NAPE. Nevertheless, the dockers response was almost instantaneous. At Liverpool, the RDW and clerical workforce walked out soon after the news broke.³⁴³ Indeed, ACTSS 'pledged to give our full support to the Docks section in any action they chose to take' in response to the abolition announcement.³⁴⁴ The unofficial stoppage was short-lived, however, as the Union implored all dockers to continue working until provision was made for official action which was within the law. A TGWU spokesman was categorical in stating that 'as far as unofficial action is concerned, our view from here is that there shouldn't be any'.³⁴⁵ Liverpool's dockers returned to work on Monday 10 April, having been convinced by the District Docks Secretary Jimmy Symes that unofficial wildcat

³⁴⁰ ABP Press Release, 6 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

³⁴¹ Mersey Docks and Harbour Company Press Release, 11 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

³⁴² TGWU Press Release, 'Abolition of the National Dock Labour Scheme', 6 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre); Author's interview with F.L., January 2011.

³⁴³ *Liverpool Echo*, 7 April 1989.

³⁴⁴ Author's interview with T.T., October 2011.

³⁴⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 10 April 1989.

action simply could not be sustained in the current legislative context. He commented, 'the men are very angry about this. They didn't want to return to work this morning but we urged them to go back'.³⁴⁶

The Liverpool Dock Shop Stewards Committee and dockers nationwide were assured that the Union was organising to mobilise an official and legal campaign against abolition and to these ends a meeting of the National Docks Committee was convened for 10 April, followed by a recall of the General Executive Committee of the Union on 14 April and a meeting of the workers' side of the NJC on 15 April.³⁴⁷ At these meetings it became apparent that all involved were acutely aware of the legal restrictions within which any campaign would have to be conducted. There was also an acknowledgement that the Docks section had to avoid 'a split between the Trade Group and the rest of the Union'.³⁴⁸ The final outcome of these discussions was that, despite the fact that 'a number of the [National Docks] Committee had been mandated [for a national strike ballot] and... will have to justify the change in their position when they go back to their ports', negotiations with NAPE would be exhausted before a ballot of the membership would take place.³⁴⁹ Although at its meeting on 14 April the National Docks Committee heavily favoured an immediate ballot, Turnbull contends that it was essentially overruled by Ron Todd (General Secretary) and the General Executive Council of the TGWU and persuaded to reluctantly consent to the leadership's strategy at another meeting the following day.³⁵⁰ The summit with NAPE was scheduled for 18 April.

At that meeting on 18 April the Union maintained that national negotiations should take place to establish 'conditions of employment no less favourable than at present'.³⁵¹ However, the negotiating party for NAPE made it absolutely clear that its members had no intention of reaching any agreement at the national level and that all future negotiations regarding terms and conditions should be conducted on a local

³⁴⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 10 April 1989.

³⁴⁷ NJC (Workers' Side) meeting minutes, 15 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre). The National Docks Committee also subsequently met on 14 and 15 April.

³⁴⁸ NJC (Workers' Side) meeting minutes, 15 April 1989.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁰ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 116.

³⁵¹ TGWU correspondence, to Nicolas Finney (Director of NAPE) signed by Ron Todd (General Secretary of the TGWU), 19 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

port-wide basis.³⁵² NAPE accused the TGWU of manoeuvring towards a 'political campaign' against employers by insisting on national negotiations.³⁵³ The only undertaking given by employers at the meeting was that there would be 'no return to casual employment systems after the repeal of the Scheme'.³⁵⁴ So, the faint hope retained by the TGWU leadership that employers might be willing to negotiate on a national voluntary arrangement with the Union was quickly expunged. Whether Ron Todd and John Connolly honestly thought that employers would consider a quasi-Scheme replacement for the NDLS or whether this was merely an exercise in demonstrating that the Union had exhausted all avenues before balloting for strike action, is another matter. Having gained precious little ground at the meeting with NAPE on 18 April, the Union decided to write to each individual port employer directly seeking assurances regarding the maintenance of terms and conditions for RDWs and their endorsement of the perpetuation of national and joint bargaining machinery.³⁵⁵ The TGWU also wrote to all registered dock workers apprising them of the current situation and advising them that, in the absence of a satisfactory response from port employers or NAPE, preparations were being made for a ballot of the trade group membership to undertake industry-wide strike action.³⁵⁶

The response of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company to the Union's correspondence was predictable. It merely repeated NAPE's assertion that 'no national machinery is necessary'.³⁵⁷ The company went further by writing directly to Jimmy Symes stating that 'there will be no adoption... of any casual system of employment' and that 'our cargo-handling activities require a skilled, permanent workforce and this is what we fully intend to maintain'.³⁵⁸ The letter also emphasised the company's belief that the future of the port could be put at risk by 'threatened industrial action on a parliamentary matter which is entirely outside the

³⁵² The National Association of Port Employers, Letter to Ron Todd signed by Nicolas Finney, 18 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ The National Association of Port Employers Press Release, 'No new Dock Labour Scheme say employers', 18 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

³⁵⁵ TGWU correspondence 'To all registered port employers', 24 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ Letter to Bill Morris (TGWU Deputy General Secretary) from Bernard Cliff (Port Operations Director MDHC), 27 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

³⁵⁸ Letter to Jimmy Symes from Trevor Furlong (Managing Director and Chief Executive of the MDHC), 26 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

MDHC's control'.³⁵⁹ This was clearly a statement of intent by the MDHC, indirectly asserting that any industrial dispute could be considered as secondary action under the provisions of the 1980 and 1982 Employment Acts and echoing NAPE's declaration that any national action would be considered political.

In the absence of any meaningful co-operation from employers at any level and in the context of the Bill to abolish the Scheme receiving a second reading in the Commons, the Union finally decided to begin preparations for a strike ballot on 27 April.³⁶⁰ The actual ballot of members was to take place 10-17 May with the national count from 19 May and the result to be announced thereafter.³⁶¹ However, before the Union could even issue ballot papers the employers went on the offensive. On 8 May, ABP and the Port of London Authority (PLA) applied to the High Court for an injunction restraining the Union from inducing its members to breach their contracts by engaging in political action where no primary trade dispute was apparent. The MDHC followed suit on 11 May.³⁶² At the initial hearing the Union gave assurances that it would not call for strike action, regardless of the result of the ballot, until the court had chance to consider the applications by the employers concerned.³⁶³ The cases were due to be heard in full on 18 May.

While the legal jostling began, the ballot results were counted. On 19 May, the TGWU announced that, of approximately 9300 RDWs, 6333 voted in favour of national strike action and 2191 against, with a turnout of 90.8%.³⁶⁴ By now, shop stewards at some of the more militant ports were itching to begin action. The unofficial National Port Shop Stewards Committee met on 20 May to discuss the present situation and devise future strategy. After considerable debate and a clear divergence of opinion between representatives from the various Scheme ports, it was agreed that strike action must wait until for the outcome of the court case.³⁶⁵ On 27

³⁵⁹ Letter to Jimmy Symes from Trevor Furlong (Managing Director and Chief Executive of the MDHC), 26 April 1989.

³⁶⁰ TGWU, 'TGWU Ballot', 27 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

³⁶¹ TGWU correspondence 'To all Regional Secretaries – Re: Ballot of registered dock workers', 28 April 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

³⁶² *Liverpool Echo*, 12 May 1989.

³⁶³ Associated British Ports and others v Transport & General Workers Union [1989] *Industrial Relations Law Reports*, 291 (Retrieved from LexisNexis online library, 30 October 2011 – www.lexisnexis.com:80/uk/legal/results/tocBrowseNodeClick.do?tocCSI=289948&rand=0.46290199824278044&clickedNode=TAAXAAHAAF).

³⁶⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 20 May 1989. NAPE stated that there were 9239 dockers on the register in April 1989 (Source: NAPE, 'The History of the Dock Labour Scheme').

³⁶⁵ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 122-125.

May, the High Court delivered its verdict which found in favour of the Union. However, the employers involved immediately announced that they would appeal against the decision at the Court of Appeal and the TGWU again gave an undertaking to the court not to proceed with strike action until the application had been heard.³⁶⁶ In the interim, the Dock Work Bill had received its third reading in the Commons.³⁶⁷ It was becoming increasingly apparent that time was not on the dockers' side. The protracted legal wrangling meant that the pressure was on in relation to the expiry of the strike ballot mandate and the abolition of the Scheme.³⁶⁸

The Court of Appeal convened on 1 June to consider the employers' application. On 7 June it delivered its judgement which found in favour of ABP, the PLA and the MDHC. It reversed the High Court decision and granted an injunction against the TGWU preventing the Union from implementing its ballot and expediting the strike mandate.³⁶⁹ The creative nature of the judgement left the Union, the dockers and some political commentators astounded.³⁷⁰ *The Guardian* editorial described the decision, in the light of the TGWU's efforts to remain within the law, as 'the humiliation of responsible trade unionism'.³⁷¹ Eddie Loydon, MP for Garston (Liverpool) remarked that 'this shows it is virtually impossible for a trade union to take industrial action'.³⁷² After the verdict, the rank-and-file activists could no longer be controlled. There were spontaneous walk-outs at several ports.³⁷³ On 8 June at Liverpool, about seven hundred RDWs on the morning shift withdrew their labour, with the final five hundred expected to join the action in the afternoon. By the following day the whole of Liverpool's RDW workforce was on strike and

³⁶⁶ ABP and others v TGWU [1989] *Industrial Relations Law Reports*, 291.

³⁶⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 May 1989. The Bill had received its second reading on 17 April under guillotine thus restricting the debating time it would receive in the House of Commons.

³⁶⁸ The 1984 Employment Act restricted the validity of a strike ballot to twenty-eight days after the announcement of the result. Once this period had expired a fresh ballot had to take place before strike action could be undertaken.

³⁶⁹ ABP v TGWU [1989] *Industrial Relations Law Reports*, 305 (Retrieved from LexisNexis online library, 30 October 2011 – www.lexisnexis.com:80/uk/legal/returnTo.do?returnToKey=20_T13117335149).

³⁷⁰ In short, the Court of Appeal judgement interpreted one particular clause of the NDLS (Clause 8[5]) as meaning that the all RDWs had a statutory duty to be available for work. In the Court's eyes, therefore, RDWs had never had any right to strike in any capacity since the Scheme was introduced. For a detailed analysis of the broader implications of the extraordinary Court of Appeal judgement see: McIlroy, *The Permanent Revolution*, pp. 174-179; Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 125-129; *The Guardian*, 8 June 1989.

³⁷¹ *The Guardian*, 8 June 1989.

³⁷² *Liverpool Echo*, 8 June 1989.

³⁷³ *The Times*, 9 June 1989. Part of the workforces of Liverpool, Tilbury, Bristol, Garston and Lowestoft walked out on 8 June.

2800 were out across the country.³⁷⁴ The Union urged restraint, having immediately appealed the Court of Appeal decision to the House of Lords. A TGWU spokesman stated, 'we know the men are frustrated but we want them to stay calm and let us do this through the proper channels'.³⁷⁵ However, by this juncture, the legal process was regarded by dockers at Liverpool as a sham.³⁷⁶ Speaking in the wake of the announcement of the verdict, Jimmy Nolan (Chairman of the Liverpool Dock Shop Steward Committee and the NPSSC) stated that 'the High Court's decision is a disgrace and it is one that Liverpool dockers will not tolerate. We will break the law if we have to'.³⁷⁷

The unofficial action was declared 'ill-judged' and 'suicidal' by NAPE, with Nicolas Finney commenting that 'the shop stewards are living in dreamland if they think that unofficial action will alter either the Government's or employers' decision'.³⁷⁸ Nevertheless, such was the furious reaction to the Court of Appeal verdict that Liverpool's dockers could not be talked down. Ron Todd argued that the unofficial strikers should tow the Union line but also pointedly acknowledged that 'you can't instruct people to go back to work, you can only urge them'.³⁷⁹ At a mass meeting on Sunday 11 June at the Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool's RDWs voted overwhelmingly to continue the unofficial stoppage amidst some tub-thumping rhetoric.³⁸⁰ The local meeting had been preceded by a fractious summit of the NPSSC on Saturday 10 June at which London and Liverpool, the two ports where the action was having the most success, implored other reticent ports to join the unofficial strike. Both Hull and Southampton had held votes over whether to take action but in both cases the result was negative.³⁸¹ Liverpool's stewards were growing increasingly frustrated with the duality of their counterparts at Southampton in particular. There was a sense amongst some Liverpool stewards that 'although the

³⁷⁴ The *Liverpool Echo* reported on 9 June that 1200 RDWs were on strike in Liverpool and Garston. However, Turnbull et al assert that by 9 June 917 were on strike in Liverpool and 76 in Garston (Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 129).

³⁷⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 8 June 1989.

³⁷⁶ Author's interview with J.D., December 2009.

³⁷⁷ *The Times*, 8 June 1989.

³⁷⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 12 June 1989.

³⁷⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 9 June 1989.

³⁸⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 12 June 1989.

³⁸¹ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 132-133.

stewards at Southampton were talking tough at the NPSSC, they were already talking to management behind the scenes'.³⁸²

Even if support for the strike across the country was patchy, at Liverpool it was undoubtedly wholehearted. There were reports that employers might begin to seek injunctions against individual unofficial leaders if the action persisted.³⁸³ On 13 June, although the strike at Liverpool was in its fifth day and showed little sign of abating, the rest of the country witnessed a slow drift back to work. By the weekend of the sixteenth, only Liverpool, Garston and a section of Tilbury remained out.³⁸⁴ The unofficial action was finally called off on Monday 19 June.³⁸⁵ Its erratic and incomplete nature illustrated that not even the traditionally representational and combative NPSSC could rely on cross-port solidarity, highlighting the divisions within the rank-and-file movement and the challenges facing the TGWU if it ever managed to free itself from the legal fetters inflicted upon the official campaign for strike action.

Nevertheless, amidst the growing gloom for the dockers was a chink of light. On 21 June the House of Lords upheld the TGWU's appeal, overturning the Court of Appeal judgement. Indeed, the Law Lords expressed considerable disbelief that Clause 8 of the Scheme could ever have been interpreted as a statutory requirement for dockers to be available for work at all times, thus removing the right to strike.³⁸⁶ The Union was finally able to make arrangements for industrial action. However, conveniently for employers and the Government, the initial twenty-eight day strike mandate had recently expired and the Union was forced to organise another ballot of its members in the Docks section. Meanwhile, the Government announced that the date for Royal Assent of the Dock Work Bill had been moved forward from 16 July to 3 July.³⁸⁷ Clearly this was an attempt to ensure that any official strike could not begin prior to the Scheme being abolished, thus removing some of the legal protection from strikers and enhancing the employers' hand. It appeared that the

³⁸² Author's interview with F.L., January 2011. This view was also expressed by other stewards in interviews with the author.

³⁸³ *Liverpool Echo*, 13 June 1989; *The Times*, 10 June 1989.

³⁸⁴ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 133.

³⁸⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 20 June 1989.

³⁸⁶ ABP v TGWU [1989] *Industrial Relations Law Reports*, 399 (Retrieved from LexisNexis online library, 30 October 2011 – <http://www.lexisnexis.co.uk/store/uk/Industrial-Relations-Law-Reports/product>).

³⁸⁷ McIlroy, *The Permanent Revolution*, p. 177.

chances of a national dock strike being successful in achieving its goals were receding.³⁸⁸

Ballot papers were issued to RDWs on 22 June. The result would not be counted for at least a further two weeks and in the interim employers did their utmost to encourage as many dockers as possible to apply for the lucrative £35000 severance package which would soon be on offer. In some ports, employers also intensified their campaign to commence local negotiations with shop stewards in order to divide the potential official national strike action.³⁸⁹ On 7 July, four days after the Dock Work Bill had received Royal Assent, the ballot results were made public. The result mirrored that from the initial ballot: a 90.3% turnout returned 6067 in favour of strike action and 2111 against.³⁹⁰ It was a welcome fillip for both the dockers and the TGWU. The strike was scheduled to begin at midnight on Monday 10 July.

The abolition of the Scheme before strike action could begin was a huge blow to the prospects of the dockers. There was more than a hint of inter-institutional collusion between the Government and judiciary as a series of legal obstacles and the speeding up of the legislative process combined to ensure RDWs would go on strike without the protection of the Scheme. In Liverpool, worst fears were confirmed within hours of the Dock Work Bill receiving Royal Assent. Sixty-nine dockers had been put on the Temporary Unattached Register at the end of May when Liverpool Grain Storage Company went into voluntary liquidation.³⁹¹ The fact that the TUR had been used in Liverpool for the first time since the interim A-J agreement had been introduced in 1972 was an indication of the treatment dockers would be facing at the hands of buoyant and re-invigorated management. The very same day that the Scheme was finally abolished these sixty-nine RDWs were immediately notified that they were being made redundant. They were given four weeks' notice and although they were entitled to the redundancy payments of

³⁸⁸ The TGWU's stated goals being to maintain 'the national collective bargaining machinery... and secure that their arrangements... are no less favourable post-abolition than they were pre-abolition' (Source: TGWU correspondence to Nicolas Finney signed by Ron Todd 19 April 1989).

³⁸⁹ NAPE Press Release, 'Local talks should go ahead say employers', 7 June 1989 (Modern Records Centre).

³⁹⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 5 July 1989.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

£35000, only twenty out of the sixty-nine wished to leave the industry.³⁹² Clearly port employers, even the relatively more moderate MDHC, were revelling in the re-affirmation of managerial prerogative and could hardly wait to mete out some sobering treatment to ex-RDWs.

The official national strike began at midnight on Monday 10 July and all the major Scheme ports came out in support. In an act of impeccable timing NAPE announced prior to the commencement of the strike that it was to disband and that no equivalent structure would be taking its place.³⁹³ A TGWU spokesman described this move as a 'gimmick... it's not going to alter our determination to get a national agreement'.³⁹⁴ Nevertheless, this was part of the employers' broader strategy of ensuring that local deals would replace the national framework, regardless of the outcome of the strike action. Another indication of the new cold reality of the industry occurred at Garston, where all fifty-eight registered dockers employed there immediately took the severance money, effectively leaving the dock without a workforce.³⁹⁵ Further grim news followed as port employers estimated that by Tuesday 11 July 1400 out of the 9000-strong national RDW workforce had already took the money.³⁹⁶ Reports of ruthless managerial action across several Scheme ports in which dockers were summarily dismissed added to the gloom and uncertainty felt by those who wished to remain in the industry.³⁹⁷

The problems confronting the strike were further exacerbated by the inability of the TGWU to instruct non-Scheme ports to stop working due to legal restraints on secondary action. These restraints also applied to any unofficial action being taken, such as physically picketing the gates of non-Scheme ports. The NPSSC expressed an interest in mounting pickets at non-Scheme ports but the Union's reluctance to provide strike funds for transportation meant that a substantial amount of cargo was still getting in and out of the country, effectively undermining the impact of the

³⁹² *Liverpool Echo*, 5 July 1989.

³⁹³ *Liverpool Echo*, 10 July 1989. NAPE wound up all of its functions but remained in existence for the duration of the strike as a media mouthpiece for port employers. It is also interesting to note that records of the EAPL meeting minutes, upon which large sections of this thesis are based, are not deposited at the National Maritime Museum in Liverpool for the period beyond the beginning of 1989.

³⁹⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 10 July 1989.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁷ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, pp. 141-143.

strike.³⁹⁸ So, even by the end of the first week prospects for the strike were not promising. Some smaller ports had returned to work and the number of dockers taking the redundancy money was rising by the day.

The employers' attack on solidarity continued. Daily updates by NAPE detailed the numbers of dockers who had already taken redundancy and those who had resumed normal working at some ports. By the end of the second week, it was estimated that 2000 dockers had returned to work and that thirty-two out of the sixty Scheme ports were now working normally.³⁹⁹ At Tilbury, management took the initiative by notifying sixteen leading shop stewards that they were being made compulsorily redundant.⁴⁰⁰ This scenario was not repeated at Liverpool, however, where the MDHC was more discreet in its approach. It insisted that local talks should take place but stopped short of issuing redundancy notices to any of its ex-RDW employees.⁴⁰¹ However, as the strike persisted into a second week the MDHC wrote directly to each of their 1000 employees, warning them that they were in breach of contract and that jobs could be at stake.⁴⁰² In another blow to morale at Liverpool, it emerged that twelve of the fifty-eight dockers who had taken redundancy from Garston docks were planning to form their own stevedoring company to tender for work there under casual conditions.⁴⁰³ The Dock Shop Steward Committee immediately issued a warning to these rebel dockers that they would face picketing if attempting to work while the strike was still in progress.⁴⁰⁴ Jimmy Symes' somewhat diplomatic statement emphasised that 'we would expect them not to be involved in any activities at Garston until the strike is satisfactorily concluded', although privately both the Union and the stewards' committee were absolutely livid.⁴⁰⁵

Nevertheless, despite these setbacks stewards at Liverpool stepped up their programme of disruption. It is important to note that the clerical stewards were fully included in strategic planning. They were invited to all meetings of the Dock Shop

³⁹⁸ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 146.

³⁹⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 July 1989.

⁴⁰⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 July 1989; McIlroy, *The Permanent Revolution*, p. 179.

⁴⁰¹ Letter from Trevor Furlong (Managing Director and Chief Executive of the MDHC) to Ron Todd, 26 July 1989 (Modern Records Centre); *Liverpool Echo*, 25 July 1989.

⁴⁰² *Liverpool Echo*, 25 July 1989.

⁴⁰³ *Liverpool Echo*, 19 July 1989; Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 141.

⁴⁰⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 19 July 1989.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid*; Author's interview with L.D., December 2009.

Steward Committee as both sets of stewards recognised that the abolition of the Scheme had changed everything.⁴⁰⁶ No longer would there be divisions and sectionalism between the two trade groups as the reality was that all skill, job and grade distinctions were being swept away and that everybody employed in the industry would now likely be categorised as ‘port workers’. Locally, the stewards’ committee attempted to build support for the dockers’ struggle by canvassing workers of nearby port-orientated industries. The intention was to disrupt any operations which were still generating revenue for the MDHC. Flying pickets were also assembled to prevent work at Garston and the Freightliner depot in Speke.⁴⁰⁷ Moreover, the stewards signalled their intention to take their fight abroad and to seek solidarity from foreign dockers as part of a NPSSC initiative.⁴⁰⁸ A demonstration of the new atmosphere of unity between stewards from the dock and clerical trade groups is signified by the leading role played by a clerical steward in co-ordinating and planning the international strategy. Indeed, this senior clerical steward set about producing leaflets in four different languages to make their colleagues in other countries aware of the struggle taking place on Britain’s docks.⁴⁰⁹ Liverpool’s dockers and the more militant section of the NPSSC were still determined to broaden their stand, even if support elsewhere was beginning to waiver.

As the third week of the strike began, employers stepped up their ‘divide and rule’ campaign. At Tilbury, one hundred and forty dockers had been added to the sixteen shop stewards made compulsorily redundant.⁴¹⁰ Most of this number were activists or stewards. Clearly the management had declared all-out war on trade unionism at the port. Indeed, such hard-line tactics sent shockwaves through those who had not been dismissed but were still on strike. On 25 July, those who remained were issued with new employment contracts and an ultimatum – sign them or go.⁴¹¹ This ruthless move had the desired effect from the employers’ point of

⁴⁰⁶ Author’s interview with T.T., October 2011.

⁴⁰⁷ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 157.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p. 147.

⁴⁰⁹ Author’s interview with M.C., January 2011. A delegation of stewards from the NPSSC, including several from Liverpool, also visited the major ports in Europe to bolster support. In fact, links already existed between the Liverpool dockers and their counterparts in Germany, Holland, France and Spain, which had been originally forged by the Dock Shop Steward Committee over issues arising from specific cargoes and ships.

⁴¹⁰ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 163.

⁴¹¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 25 July 1989.

view as the strike at Tilbury began to crack. The ultimatum encouraged a drift back to work and an acceleration of those accepting the redundancy money.

For their part, Liverpool's dockers were horrified to learn of the situation at Tilbury. The London dockers had always displayed strong determination and solidarity and were regarded by Liverpool's stewards as their closest allies.⁴¹² The news that a drift back to work was occurring prompted the Liverpool stewards to organise a flying picket to the gates of Tilbury docks. One hundred and thirty Liverpool dockers formed a picket line accompanied by some of the Tilbury stewards who had been summarily dismissed but, amidst some emotional scenes, they were unable to prevent their counterparts from returning to work.⁴¹³ A Liverpool steward bluntly summarised the challenges facing the strike in the face of the merciless employer strategy developing at some ports, particularly Tilbury:

A letter in the post containing their P45 and a cheque for £35000. The sack is a great leveller. People start panicking, thinking about themselves and their families, which is only natural of course...⁴¹⁴

Worse news was to follow. Over the weekend of the 28/29 July, having also been issued a Tilbury-style ultimatum, both Hull and Southampton had voted to return to work.⁴¹⁵ Once again Liverpool's stewards dispatched a flying picket to both ports but to no avail.⁴¹⁶ The national strike was floundering badly and looked set to collapse. Indeed, at a meeting of the TGWU General Executive Council (GEC) on Tuesday 2 August, worst fears were realised and the official strike was called off.⁴¹⁷

At Liverpool, in the wake of the collapse of the official strike, the MDHC began to ratchet up the pressure on the striking dockers. Trevor Furlong, the company Managing Director and Chief Executive, had already written to Ron Todd

⁴¹² Author's interview with M.T., January 2010; Author's interview with J.D., December 2009. Liverpool's dockers always had a reciprocal affinity for their counterparts in London. Over the years, the ties forged at the NPSSC developed beyond a professional relationship and many of the stewards became firm friends. To this day, ex-stewards from Liverpool and London still meet socially twice a year.

⁴¹³ *Liverpool Echo*, 28 July 1989.

⁴¹⁴ Author's interview with F.L., January 2011.

⁴¹⁵ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 167.

⁴¹⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 31 July 1989.

⁴¹⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 3 August 1989.

on several occasions imploring him to encourage Liverpool's shop stewards to begin local negotiations. The company also intensified its campaign in the local press in the context of the drift back to work elsewhere, warning that 'if a prolonged strike leads to the loss of major customers, it must affect manpower needs'.⁴¹⁸ Once news of the TGWU GEC's decision was released, the MDHC wasted no time in issuing its remaining employees with a new, non-negotiable contract of employment.⁴¹⁹ The contract was practically identical to that which existed prior to abolition of the Scheme, except with a few significant changes. It offered 'the same pay, the same hours and the same holiday and sickness pay' but crucially removed all reference to joint-negotiating machinery, ended workforce rotation, moved the disciplinary process wholly into the hands of management and was deliberately vague on the role of the Union and shop stewards.⁴²⁰ In an act of extreme symbolism, the contract dissolved all skill and grade distinctions, including those between clerical staff and ex-RDWs and categorised all labour at the port under the title 'Port Operative Worker' with a 'deliberately chosen' acronym of 'P.O.W.'⁴²¹

In the context of these new contracts, by 3 August nearly a quarter of the MDHC's 1000-strong workforce had applied for redundancy.⁴²² A mass meeting was organised for Friday 4 August to decide where to go next. It was suggested in the local press that the new contracts offered by the MDHC would be discussed and that the Liverpool dockers could follow other major ports and vote to return to work immediately.⁴²³ However, such predictions proved to be wildly inaccurate. At the mass meeting on Friday at the Philharmonic Hall, attended by the entire 1200 dock workforce, an overwhelming majority voted to reject the new contracts and remain out on strike. In fact, at a show of hands, just five of all those gathered voted for a return to work.⁴²⁴ Jimmy Nolan outlined the reasons behind their determination to fight on - 'the men have made it very clear that we cannot accept these contracts... It

⁴¹⁸ *Liverpool Echo*, 2 August 1989.

⁴¹⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 2 August 1989.

⁴²⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 2 August 1989; Author's interview with T.T., March 2011.

⁴²¹ Author's interview with F.L., January 2011; Author's interview with T.T., March 2011.

⁴²² *Liverpool Echo*, 3 August 1989.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁴ *Liverpool Echo*, 4 August 1989.

is not a question of being isolated. We have fought very hard over the years to achieve our agreements and we will not see them disappear'.⁴²⁵

Nevertheless, behind the comprehensive mandate for continuation of the strike, it appeared the resolve of many dockers was fading. It was obvious that the cessation of the official strike left Liverpool completely isolated. In the charged climate of the mass meeting, few dared show weakness but in reality a steady flow of men began to sign the non-negotiable contracts tabled by the MDHC. By 5 August, the company claimed that four hundred had already agreed to the new terms and conditions and had signed the contract.⁴²⁶ Smelling blood and an expedient end to the local dispute, the MDHC imposed an extended deadline for the contract offer to be accepted. Those who did not sign by 5pm on Monday 7 August and return to work the following day would be deemed to have dismissed themselves and would not be entitled to severance payments.⁴²⁷ All attention turned to an official TGWU mass meeting at the Philharmonic Hall arranged for Monday which was to be addressed by Ron Todd and John Connolly.

At said meeting the atmosphere was particularly tense. The previous meeting on 4 August had been conducted in an unofficial and extremely combative tone, so much so that even Jimmy Symes as representative of the official movement refused to speak up and tow the union line by recommending a return to work. However, this meeting had been called by the TGWU and would be strictly controlled by the General Secretary, the National Docks and Waterways Secretary and local officials. The course of events is vividly described here:

The first meeting we called ourselves... [but] within two days the Union had called their own meeting where no shop stewards would be allowed onto the platform, only officers. Invites to all dockers were sent by special delivery direct from the Union... When we got there, we found officers who'd been great mates for years acting as bouncers to make sure that the meeting was properly policed... It was made absolutely clear that there would be a number of speakers, there'd be a statement and then there'd be no debate from the floor. Well, it was a very hostile meeting, a terrible meeting. The people

⁴²⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 4 August 1989.

⁴²⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 5 August 1989.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.* The MDHC had already set a deadline for 5pm on Friday 4 August but in the context of the overwhelming majority at that day's mass meeting and the scheduling of an official TGWU mass meeting for the following Monday, the company decided to extend it to Monday.

who we wanted to speak on our behalf, our leaders, were stymied. We tried to hold a meeting outside, in the car park [of the Philharmonic Hall]... but by that time the game was up. There were such divisions and people were worrying about their own futures.⁴²⁸

Amidst the acrimony and accusations, a return to work motion was successful by a majority of three-to-one.⁴²⁹ Todd had spelt out the hopeless position of the dockers and, in the absence of effective argument and rebuttal from local stewards, had managed to convince the majority that the fight was over.

On Tuesday 8 August at 7:30am, Liverpool's POWs met at Canada Dock and began to march down the Dock Road carrying banners aloft, following a lone piper.⁴³⁰ Liverpool Registered Dock Workers' last convulsion of militancy had kept the port out on strike for a week beyond the cessation of the official strike and other major ports returning to work. The bitterness at their forced capitulation was palpable and recriminations towards the Union continued. Jimmy Nolan claimed that the return to work vote was misleading because 'most men did not vote' and that the motion was carried on a 'limited' show of hands.⁴³¹ For some stewards the whole affair had been too much to take:

When we came back in August, we had five senior stewards leave [take voluntary redundancy] on the first day back... They marched in behind the banner and went straight upstairs [to the employers' office] and were told that they could go immediately. The rest of the lads were very down heartened.⁴³²

Amongst the stewards who immediately took redundancy were the Secretary and the Treasurer of the now-defunct Liverpool Dock Shop Steward Committee. Despite belated attempts by the stewards remaining to enter into negotiations with management over terms and conditions of the new contracts, employers made it clear

⁴²⁸ Author's interview with T.T., November 2010.

⁴²⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 7 August 1989. Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike* (p. 173) claims that the vote was closer and returned a two-to-one majority in favour of a return to work.

⁴³⁰ *Liverpool Echo*, 8 August 1989. The main banner read 'Merseyside Dock Labourers Shop Stewards Committee – Unity is Strength'.

⁴³¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 8 August 1989.

⁴³² Author's interview with F.L., January 2011.

that ‘the men were given the chance to negotiate locally last April. They refused. Now it is too late – the contracts are not negotiable’.⁴³³ It was common knowledge amongst stewards that post-Scheme managerial strategy and employment contracts had been painstakingly developed on behalf of the MDHC by a team of expensive, high-flying employment law experts.⁴³⁴ On the surface, the new contracts of employment were ostensibly similar to those which preceded the abolition of the Scheme. Rates of pay remained unaltered, including holiday and sickness pay. The MDHC was also at pains to stress that there would be no return to casual working or conditions.⁴³⁵

Nevertheless, behind the sound-bites there were several important changes. Foremost amongst these was the inevitable revision of disciplinary procedures whereby all joint worker-management arbitration was removed.⁴³⁶ Crucially, this now returned managerial prerogative to the employer. Furthermore, a questionnaire circulated during the strike asked workers to stipulate the area in which they would prefer to work.⁴³⁷ Each terminal at the port was separated into an individual concern, complete with its own workforce, management and subsidiary company.⁴³⁸ The employment law specialists recruited by the MDHC were concerned with making the port strike-proof and by breaking operations down into specialised and individualised subsidiary companies throughout each area of the port they sought to inhibit future port-wide solidarity by rendering it illegal under secondary action legislation.

Also, the questionnaire had a further effect of discriminating against activists by stealth. Around one hundred and fifty men, most of whom were stewards refused to state which terminal they wished to work at.⁴³⁹ The MDHC then used this to its advantage by assigning these men *en masse* to the general cargo terminal, thus isolating the rank-and-file leadership from its membership.⁴⁴⁰ This was accompanied by de-recognition of port-wide bargaining machinery and the Dock

⁴³³ *Liverpool Echo*, 8 August 1989.

⁴³⁴ Author’s interview with T.T., October 2010; Author’s interview with F.L., January 2011.

⁴³⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 2 August 1989.

⁴³⁶ *Liverpool Echo*, 8 August 1989.

⁴³⁷ *Liverpool Echo*, 2 August 1989; *Liverpool Echo*, 3 August 1989.

⁴³⁸ The Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, *Port of Liverpool Handbook and Directory, 1991-1992* (Liverpool: Mediafine 1992), p. 8.

⁴³⁹ *Liverpool Echo*, 3 August 1989.

⁴⁴⁰ Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*, p. 173; *Liverpool Echo*, 3 August 1989.

Shop Steward Committee. Although shop steward representation was permitted, it would be recognised solely on an area-by-area basis.⁴⁴¹ In an interesting aside, the ACTSS 6/567 Branch disbanded and merged its membership with the Docks section.⁴⁴² This represented a widespread recognition that the new blanket categorisation as POWs made previous job distinctions obsolete.

So, in the wake of the collapse of the national strike port employers across the country had set about enthusiastically restoring the managerial prerogative and drastically restructuring their businesses and workforce. By comparison with some other ex-Scheme ports around the country, Liverpool had had it relatively easy.⁴⁴³ There had been no compulsory redundancies arising from the restructuring of the MDHC and there was still a degree of worker representation.⁴⁴⁴ Nevertheless, after decades of disenfranchisement the company had gone to extreme lengths to use the opportunity to finally tip the balance of power at the port in their favour.

However, despite the best efforts of management to minimise solidarity henceforth, many of the stalwarts of the dock remained and the spirit of combativeness and irreverence persisted amongst the men to a degree. In fact, only months after the return to work a dispute broke out relating to the disciplining of two workers. It appeared that these men were certain to be sacked and resulted in the whole port workforce threatening a walk-out over perceived mistreatment. This forced management to think again and ultimately to fully re-instate the men.⁴⁴⁵ Further gains were made by Liverpool's port workers in the twelve months following abolition of the Scheme. Whereas the MDHC were initially adamant that the new contracts of employment were non-negotiable, several concessions were wrung from management in the interim including 'an acceptance of no compulsory redundancies, no casual labour and the maintenance or improvement in rates of pay'.⁴⁴⁶ Several other subsequent minor disputes were broadened to include the

⁴⁴¹ *Liverpool Echo*, 7 August 1989.

⁴⁴² Author's interview with T.T., October 2011.

⁴⁴³ Tilbury had seen a purge of activists and stewards as well as a formal de-recognition of the shop steward committees and the TGWU itself. Other ports such as Cardiff also witnessed selective, compulsory redundancies. At several smaller ports, the entire RDW workforce had been dismissed as soon as the Dock-Work Bill received Royal Assent (Source: TGWU National Committee minutes, 19 April 1990, Modern Records Centre; Turnbull et al, *Dock Strike*).

⁴⁴⁴ The only compulsory redundancies at the port of Liverpool occurred on 4 July when the sixty-nine dockers who were on the TUR received compulsory severance.

⁴⁴⁵ Author's interview with T.N., November 2010; Author's interview with T.T., October 2011.

⁴⁴⁶ TGWU National Committee minutes, 19 April 1990.

whole workforce, despite the MDHC's best efforts towards divide and rule.⁴⁴⁷

Indeed, this eventually cumulated in a bitter and prolonged twenty-eight month battle which began in 1995, after over five hundred dockers were summarily dismissed for refusing to cross a picket line.⁴⁴⁸ The Liverpool dockers' unrivalled employment protection and workplace influence may have suffered badly as a result of the abolition of the Scheme in June 1989 but the attitudes and organisational skills these fostered over decades of shared work experience, activism and solidarity lived on.

⁴⁴⁷ In July 1992, the MDHC attempted to transfer the contracts of employment of a handful of its employees to Pandoro (better known as P&O). Those workers involved resisted and a five day port-wide strike ensued (Source: Towers, B. *Waterfront Blues: The Rise and Fall of Liverpool's Dockland*, Lancaster: Carnegie 2011, p. 292).

⁴⁴⁸ The 1995-1998 lock-out at Liverpool docks has received limited academic attention. The only extensive account of the dispute is provided by Lavalette & Kennedy although it is less than rigorous as it was published in 1996, before the dispute had even concluded. Brian Towers' new book, *Waterfront Blues*, provides the best concise overview of the strike (pp. 290-297), despite some minor errors relating to the employment history of some of the protagonists, while the introduction to Saundry and Turnbull's 1996 article gives an accurate overview of the causes of the strike. There are a couple of other short journal articles dedicated to aspects of the strike but a full, analytical account is unfortunately lacking. This represents a glaring gap in the historiography of the local and national industry. Nevertheless, for more detail on the 1995 strike at the port of Liverpool see: Davies, S. 'History in the making: The Liverpool docks dispute, 1995-96', *North West Labour History Journal*, Vol. 21, 1996/7, pp. 67-72; Lavalette, M. & Kennedy, J. *Solidarity on the Waterfront: The Liverpool Lock-Out of 1995/96* (Birkenhead: Liver Press 1996); Saundry, R. & Turnbull, P. 'Melee on the Mersey: Contracts, competition and labour relations on the docks', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 27, Issue 4, December 1996, pp. 275-288; Towers, *Waterfront Blues*; Carter, C. Clegg, S. Hogan, J. & Kornberger, M. 'The polyphonic spree: The case of the Liverpool dockers', *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 34, Issue 4, October 2003, pp. 290-304; Castree, N. 'Geographic scale and grass roots internationalism: The Liverpool dock dispute 1995-1998', *Economic Geography*, Vol. 76, Issue 3, July 2000, pp. 272-292.

Conclusion

In the second half of the twentieth century, significant advances in working conditions and labour organisation were achieved by dock workers who had historically comprised one of the most exploited, least powerful sectors of the British working-class. The importance of the dock industry to the recovery and growth of the post-war national economy ensured that dockers emerged as key beneficiaries of government legislation which regulated pay, conditions and the labour market. State-sponsored regulatory intervention represented a complete change in the dynamics of workplace bargaining and irrevocably altered the relationship between port workers and their employers. This revolutionary shift in the balance of power on the docks did not go unnoticed. Contemporary social scientists, journalists and, subsequently, historians and academics across a range of disciplines have devoted considerable attention to the changing nature of labour relations in the dock industry during this period, establishing a body of research that was an invaluable and inevitable starting point for this study. Engagement with this secondary literature, the re-visitation of evidence drawn on in earlier studies and research undertaken on previously unexplored sources, all interpreted within a framework that emphasised the importance of an historical approach, has shaped the methodology of the research for this work.

This thesis concludes that labour relations on the Liverpool waterfront in the years between 1967 and 1989 were considerably more complex than previous studies have suggested. The findings summarised below cumulatively support this conclusion. Primarily, it is argued that, while there are certain factors and pressures which are inherent in the nature of the dock industry, there is considerable variation in the organisational character and experiences of dock workers in different ports. Liverpool developed its own brand of labour relations based on historic custom and practice, local culture and identity and workplace relationships that were peculiar to the local industry. These local idiosyncrasies are central to a proper evaluation of labour relations and workplace relationships at the port, particularly regarding union/rank-and-file and employer/worker relations. Furthermore, the dynamics of labour relations at the port were affected by the growth of clerical organisation post-1972. This phenomenon further complicated already-nuanced workplace

relationships by introducing another participant to industrial bargaining at the port, complete with its own outlook on labour relations and its own membership to represent. The atypical case of ‘white-collar’ organisation and the historically-anchored dynamics of workplace relationships at the port are fundamental to understanding the intricate and composite nature of port-wide industrial relations at Liverpool in the seventies and eighties. Several studies, such as Jackson, Turnbull *et al* and Phillips, provide useful overviews of labour relations in the dock industry but, as is the nature of such surveys, they fail to identify the nuances which distinguish individual ports.¹ Above all else, the research for this thesis has emphasised the importance of a detailed examination and analysis of workplace relationships to better understand the various processes and influences at work in shaping dock/clerical workers’ industrial attitudes at the local level.

What is offered throughout the thesis contributes to existing knowledge in a variety of ways. At its most fundamental, it examines the growth and development of rank-and-file steward-led organisation at the port of Liverpool between 1967 and 1989, something which has attracted only limited attention within the existing historiography. While Liverpool has been the focus of a small number of other projects, these often provide only a short overview of labour relations or concentrate on one aspect of employment at the docks in isolation from other historic or contemporary influences and none consider the relationship between Registered Dock Workers and their clerical colleagues. There have been several MA theses that focus on labour relations at the port of Liverpool in the post-Devlin era but these are limited by their brevity and the related narrowness of consulted sources.² Moreover, because these studies were undertaken prior to the abolition of the NDLS in 1989, they do not have the benefit of placing the experiences of port workers in their historical context. Other surveys such as Hikins’ focus solely on the Liverpool dockers’ opposition to the introduction of the Devlin reforms in 1967, while Carden and Critchley’s doctoral theses concentrate on specific aspects of labour relations

¹ Jackson, M.P. *Labour Relations on the Docks* (Farnborough: Lexington 1973); Turnbull, P. Woolfson, C. & Kelly, J. *Dock Strike: Conflict and Restructuring in Britain’s Ports* (Aldershot: Avebury 1992); Phillips, J. ‘Decasualization and disruption: Industrial relations on the docks 1945-1979’, in C.J. Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979* (Cheltenham: Elgar 1996), pp. 165-185.

² See, for example: Wells, C. ‘The industrial relations of the port of Liverpool since 1967’, Unpublished MA thesis, The University of Warwick, 1986; Chapman, P.W. ‘Industrial relations in the port of Liverpool: A study of the major developments affecting relations between employers and registered dock workers since 1970’, Unpublished MA thesis, The University of Warwick, 1981.

such as working practices and malpractices in the case of the latter and the relationship between dock stewards and the centralised machinery of the TGWU in the former.³

In the case of this study, the use of port employers' minutes allied to oral evidence made it possible to establish the chronology and meaning of events at Liverpool from the perspective of both the employers and workers. By providing a narrative and analytical account of the development of the dock shop steward system post-1967 and the rise of clerical activism from 1972 through to the abolition of the NDLS in 1989, the thesis has uncovered or highlighted several overarching historical factors and contemporary influences which shaped and characterised labour relations at the port of Liverpool during this period; something which has previously been absent from related contributions to historiography. These factors and influences have prompted a wider reflection on established theoretical assumptions relating to 'shop stewardism', 'white-collar' ideology and organisation and state intervention in industrial relations. This final chapter provides an opportunity to summarise key findings and re-emphasise the perspectives that have been important throughout but which have sometimes featured only sporadically and tacitly. This will be accompanied by an assessment of where these perspectives and arguments challenge or concur with interpretations and conclusions offered elsewhere in studies relating to both the dock industry itself and British trade unionism more broadly.

Historically, the irregular nature of the British dock industry coupled with the system of employment made progressive labour relations difficult. This study and others have demonstrated that the historic development of the dock industry more

³ Hikins, H. 'Liverpool dockers, 1967' in H. Hikins (ed.) *Building the Union: Studies on the Growth of the Workers' Movement, 1756-1967* (Liverpool: Toulouse 1973); Carden, M.J. 'Union democracy and incorporation: A case study of the Transport and General Workers' Union, Merseyside Division, with particular reference to the dock industry', Unpublished PhD thesis, The University of Liverpool, 1993; Critchley, D. 'Working practices and malpractices in the ports of Liverpool, London and New York, with special reference to the period 1945 to 1972', Unpublished PhD thesis, Liverpool John Moores' University, 2003. Carden's thesis is primarily concerned with testing theories of incorporation (i.e. documenting the position of the shop steward within union organisation) and dedicates the majority of its focus to these ends. Although the dock shop steward system provides the case study portion of the thesis, there is only limited attention paid to the causes of disputes at the port such as the perpetuation of attitudes engendered by the casual system, the campaign for a piecework pay system and the reasons behind it and the attitudes and tactics of dockers and their representatives in light of developments in the local and national industries. Critchley's thesis is more concerned with a criminological approach to work practices in those respective ports rather than any detailed examination of the nature of labour relations and restricts the majority of its focus to the pre-containerisation era.

broadly, and the work culture which it engendered, impacted immeasurably upon the attitudes of workers and management alike. In particular those studies by Phillips and Whiteside, Turnbull, Wilson and Simey have contributed immeasurably to our understanding of work culture and custom and practice and its influence on labour relations in the dock industry.⁴ Similarly, there is a substantial strand within the historiography relating to the entirely unique employment situation that arose from state intervention in the industry. Surveys by Mellish, Dempster and Sapsford and Turnbull all direct attention to the ways in which major instances of state regulation affected labour relations and workplace attitudes.⁵ It is precisely because dockworkers enjoyed unrivalled workplace control and protection post-1967 that the industry was like no other in Britain. These are factors which characterised the British dock industry as a whole and were not peculiar to Liverpool. Nevertheless, this thesis has shown that these historic, industry-inherent pressures had a major impact on how Liverpool dockers and port clerical workers conceptualised their workplace relationships and how their representatives approached labour relations. The studies detailed above are an invaluable starting point for understanding these pressures and their impact on labour relations. However, generic industry-inherent factors only tell part of the story when attempting to comprehend Liverpool dockers' burgeoning reputation for militancy in the sixties and seventies. This thesis reaches beyond such explanations with a focused and detailed study that emphasises the locally-inspired factors which lent themselves to strong labour organisation and the increasingly confrontational stance adopted by Liverpool's port workers and their representatives.

For example, in addition to the evolution of the local industry and the distinctive brand of workplace relations it produced, the inimitable development of the city of Liverpool also influenced industrial attitudes. The history of the port and the city are irreversibly intertwined and logically had a reciprocal influence on each

⁴ Phillips, G. & Whiteside, N. *Casual Labour: The Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry 1880-1970* (Oxford: Clarendon 1985); Turnbull, P. 'Dock strikes and the demise of the dockers' occupational culture', *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 40, Issue 2, May 1992, pp. 294-318; Wilson, D.F. *Dockers: The Impact of Industrial Change* (London: Fontana/Collins 1972); Simey, T.S. *The Dock Worker: An Analysis of Conditions of Employment in the Port of Manchester* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1956).

⁵ Mellish, M. *The Docks After Devlin* (London: Heinemann 1972); Dempster, J. *The Rise and Fall of the Dock Labour Scheme* (London: Biteback 2010); Turnbull, P. & Sapsford, D. 'Why did Devlin fail? Casualism and conflict on the docks', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, June 1991, pp. 237-257.

other that cannot be ignored. Chapter Four of this thesis charts the growth of the port and the evolution of Liverpool's social and cultural character and outlines how this impacted on Liverpool dockers' attitudes towards workplace relations and industrial solidarity. It concludes that Liverpool's dockers were immersed in a broader parochial identity which partly expressed itself through labour, and later political militancy, in the seventies and eighties. As well as being dockers, they were *Liverpool* dockers. By combining an analysis of local culture and identity with the occupational culture of the dockers, this study has contended that industrial consciousness and activism can be influenced by specific factors outside the workplace without resorting to outmoded 'occupational community' or 'port-orientated economy' concepts, such as those forwarded by Kerr and Siegel and Lockwood.⁶

There have been several recent studies that have sought to untangle the myriad factors which lent themselves to the relatively belated development of labour and political militancy in the city of Liverpool. Foremost of these is Brian Towers' book which provides a comprehensive and admirable attempt to link the historic development of the city and the port with the attitudes and outlook of its inhabitants, an approach partially shared by this thesis.⁷ It is mainly concerned with the social and cultural development of life in the dockland districts where, prior to the slum clearances and relocations of the post-war era, the majority of Liverpool's working-class resided. There is some attention paid to major developments at the port, particularly the two penultimate chapters which consider the rise and fall of the NDLS and the impact of the Devlin reforms. However, while these constitute perfectly acceptable overviews of the watersheds in the industry, the book fails to provide a detailed account and explanation of why and how Liverpool's port workers continued to resist its restructuring; an absence this thesis addresses through a focused chronological approach. Other studies such as Waller, Ayers, Lane and Hyde all contribute to the contextual knowledge of the development of Liverpool and how this impacted on the attitude of its inhabitants towards workplace

⁶ Kerr, C. & Siegel, A. 'The inter-industry propensity to strike – an international comparison', in A. Kornhauser, R. Dubin & A.M. Ross (eds), *Industrial Conflict* (New York: McGraw-Hill 1954), pp. 189-212; Lockwood, D. 'Sources of variation in working-class images of society', *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 14, 1966, pp. 249-267.

⁷ Towers, B. *Waterfront Blues: The Rise and Fall of Liverpool's Dockland* (Lancaster: Carnegie 2011).

relationships, managerial authority and the local social and cultural currency of the twentieth century.⁸ Again, these contributions are a valuable resource for establishing the general context upon which this thesis is founded, the defining difference being that what is offered here attempts to link the broad influences highlighted by these authors specifically to the attitudes displayed by Liverpool's port workers and how these impacted upon labour relations at the port.

By extension, these issues raise the question of whether the experience and organisation of Liverpool's dockers/clerical workers was unique and peculiar to the locality or whether theirs was similar to that of port workers elsewhere. This study did not seek to categorically prove that there was an exceptionalism to workers and labour relations at the port of Liverpool because without undertaking similar studies in other localities, this is impossible to discern. It has, however, emphasised the crucial need for this type of detailed analysis to be applied to other ports to properly explore the nuances of local organisation. There are several studies which focus specifically on local developments in the dock industry and others which deploy a comparative approach to assess similarities in the experiences of dockers in different ports. For example, Lindop's rigorously-researched review of the London dockers' entanglement with the Industrial Relations Act is a prime demonstration of how detailed local analysis, albeit limited to a relatively short time period, can contribute enormously to contemporary and historical understanding.⁹ Similarly, Hill's book provides a thorough exploration of the work culture and local custom and practice of London's dockers in its historical context. Hill's approach is undoubtedly one that is shared by this thesis, placing the local development of the industry and labour organisation as paramount in dictating the form and course of workplace relationships and relations at the port.¹⁰ Although Liverpool and London are the ports which have attracted most academic attention by virtue of their size, importance to the national economy and propensity for militancy, there are other

⁸ Waller, P.J. *Democracy and Sectarianism: A Political and Social History of Liverpool 1868-1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1981); Ayers, P. *The Liverpool Docklands – Life and Work in Athol Street* (Liverpool: Docklands History Project 1987); Lane, T. *Liverpool: City of the Sea* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1997); Hyde, F.E. *Liverpool and the Mersey: An Economic History of a Port 1700-1970* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles 1971).

⁹ Lindop, F. 'The dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, part 1: Shop stewards and containerisation', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 5, Spring 1998, pp. 33-72; Lindop, F. 'The dockers and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, part 2: the arrest and release of the Pentonville Five', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 6, 1998, pp. 65-100.

¹⁰ Hill, S. *The Dockers – Class and Tradition in London* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

studies of individual ports in Britain, such as Turner's account of labour relations at the port of Hull during the tumultuous period of 1972 to 1973, Davies' survey of the history of the Hull dockers, 1870-1960 and Bassett and Richardson's articles on the effect of deregulation on the port of Bristol.¹¹

International comparative studies of various ports seek to provide a point of reference for an assessment of how dock industries operate across the world, the common challenges and pressures faced by dock workers and how labour relations in individual ports differ from one another. Jensen's exploration of hiring practices in the ports of New York, Rotterdam, London, Liverpool and Marseilles was one of the earliest attempts to compare the employment experiences of dockers in an international perspective. This has since been expanded upon by Davies *et al.*, Turnbull and Sapsford and Davis among others.¹² Although these comparative studies often seek to explore similarities in the experiences of dockworkers, they simultaneously highlight the local nuances present at individual ports and so reveal the value of focused port-wide studies to better explain and understand exactly why and how industrial relations, the labour process and work culture can vary from place to place.

So, what exactly were the nuances which developed at Liverpool and how did these differentiate the experiences and expectations of its dockers from others in Britain? As previously noted in Chapter Five, the Devlin reforms in 1967 were a watershed for the entire industry and seemed to imply a new dawn in employment security and pay and conditions for Britain's dockers. However, the reforms, when combined with the rapid modernisation and rationalisation of the industry, had the opposite of their intended effect at Liverpool. The Devlin Report's *raison d'être* was

¹¹ Turner, T. *Diary of the Docks Dispute 1972-1973* (Hull: The University of Hull Industrial Studies Unit, 1980); Davies, S. 'The history of the Hull dockers, c.1870-1960' in S. Davies, C.J. Davis, D. De Vries, L. Heerma Van Voss, L. Hesselink & Weinbauer, K. (eds.) *Dockworkers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History 1790-1970* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2000); Bassett, K. 'British port privatization and its impact on the port of Bristol', *Journal of Transport Geography*, Vol. 1, Issue 4, December 1993, pp. 255-267; Richardson, M. 'State intervention and the abolition of the National Dock Labour Scheme: The Bristol experience', *Centre for Employment Studies Research*, April 2008, pp. 1-4.

¹² Davies *et al.* *Dockworkers*; Turnbull, P. & Sapsford, D. 'Hitting the bricks: An international comparative study of conflict on the waterfront', *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 40, No. 2, April 2001, pp. 231-257; Turnbull, P., Morris, J. & Sapsford, D. 'Persistent militants and quiescent comrades: Intra-industry strike action on the docks, 1947-1989', *Sociological Review*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 1996, pp. 710-45; Davis, C. *Waterfront Revolts: New York and London Dockworkers, 1946-61* (Illinois: University of Illinois 2003).

to improve labour relations in the industry to prepare it for modernisation, yet Liverpool experienced an increasing strike rate and became easily the most strike-prone port in the country thereafter. There are several interrelated explanations for this phenomenon, some rooted in structural factors and others related to contemporary developments.

The 1967/70 two-phase decasualisation reforms sought to dispense with piecework payment systems, as these were highlighted by Devlin and his committee as a major cause of restrictive practices and industrial unrest in the industry. It was thought that by formalising pay and conditions and permanently assigning dockers to a single employer, the spectre of casualism, and the industrial strife it helped to sustain, would peter out. However, Liverpool was an unusual exception to the rule. The port had operated on a time rate basis for many years prior to Devlin and Liverpool's dockers perceived themselves as poor relations compared with their counterparts at piecework rate ports. This is clear from the evidence received by the Scamp Inquiry, as detailed in Chapter Five. Since Phase Two modernisation agreements were largely devolved to the local level, Liverpool's dockers were adamant that recently-introduced piecework and bonus rates for which they had campaigned for many years, should remain. Therefore, when the rest of the industry moved to time rate in 1970, Liverpool witnessed a reversal, retaining a system of payment with a piecework element.

The formalisation of piecework rates at Liverpool at the dockers' behest did little to suppress industrial strife at the port. Piecework agreements necessitate a degree of impromptu bargaining which can encourage short-term stoppages and disputes, adding to Liverpool's strike record. Indeed, the role of pay systems in creating or moderating industrial strife on the docks has already been identified by several authors. Both Wilson and Mellish argue that, since London's strike rate improved notably after decasualisation whilst Liverpool's worsened, the highly conditional nature of piecework can be regarded as significant in determining strike proneness.¹³ However, this supposition has since been challenged by Turnbull and Sapsford, who contend that mechanisation and its consequences for manning levels and the definition of dock work, was the most significant impetus to industrial unrest

¹³ Wilson, *Dockers*, pp. 295-296; Mellish, *The Docks After Devlin*, pp. 134-135.

post-Devlin.¹⁴ Certainly, the outsourcing of container handling in the early seventies was a cause of much consternation for the Liverpool dockers and several key disputes directly resulted from challenges to the definition of dock-work. The container revolution was the driver of mechanisation and the constant threat to manning levels that it represented was undoubtedly at the root of Liverpool's volatility post-1967. However, the same circumstances existed for dockers at other ports across the country so Liverpool's increased strike proneness cannot be blamed on mechanisation alone. Similarly, the extreme, progressive reduction of employment levels in the industry, fuelled by the increasingly lucrative terms of voluntary severance, added to insecurity not just in Liverpool but also elsewhere.

In the case of Liverpool, the particularly rapid decline of the local industry was the cause of significant uncertainty amongst the workforce. The port was confronted with a reorientation of trade patterns away from the traditional centres of Liverpool trade, such as North America and the Commonwealth, and towards Europe and the southern ports, in tandem with the broader rationalisation that was taking place across the industry. Dockers' fears were exacerbated further by the Liverpool employers' frequent bulletins regarding the parlous state of the port's finances. At every possible juncture, particularly in pay negotiations as documented in Chapter Seven, the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC) and Employers' Association of the Port of Liverpool (EAPL) used the port's contracting trade as a bargaining tool. However, while this provided employers with a defensible short-term excuse to limit pay rises and renegotiate existing agreements, it also had the effect of creating a sense of overwhelming uncertainty and insecurity for workers.

Similarly, the Harrisons dispute can be regarded as a tangible example of growing insecurity amongst the workforce which doubtlessly contributed to Liverpool's strike record. The concerted effort by the MDHC and EAPL to resist reallocation confirmed the suspicion that the Aldington-Jones agreement was dispensable in the eyes of employers. Insecurity contributed to a siege mentality amongst RDWs and clerical workers and encouraged militancy as a form of defence. Often, as in the case of negotiations over manning at the Grain Terminal and the withdrawal of Harrisons, dockers and their representatives made a stand over what

¹⁴ Turnbull & Sapsford, 'Why did Devlin fail?', p. 252.

they regarded a matter of principle in the context of the escalating decline of the local industry. Nevertheless, it is clear from the *Keta Lagoon* dispute, where the dockers returned to work without a resolution, and their indifferent response to ACTSS' plight during the Isle of Man Steam Packet withdrawal, that the employers' message regarding the precarious position of the port's fortunes was making an impact on the dockers' approach to labour relations.

So, it was likely a combination of local factors – the consistent forecasts of doom by employers, the existence of a piecework element to the pay agreement, the reorientation of British trading patterns, the influence of the Harrisons dispute on dockworker perceptions – which in turn interacted with those industry-wide structural pressures identified by Turnbull and Sapsford's statistical model, such as mechanisation and the terminal run-down of manning levels via voluntary severance, to instigate and maintain Liverpool's increased strike rate.¹⁵ Indeed, as Turnbull and Sapsford contend, while 'industry-level variables may predispose dockworkers to strike, they represent insufficient data to explain the actual pattern of industrial conflict on the waterfront'.¹⁶ Event-driven local nuances are the missing connection that can establish and distinguish the militancy of dockers at particular ports.

Having identified the influences which differentiated the experiences of Liverpool's dockers from those elsewhere and contributed to the port's escalating strike record, attention will now turn to how workplace organisation was cultivated and sustained on the docks.¹⁷ In recent years, considerable research has been undertaken to create a theoretical foundation to help explain the structures which facilitate strong workplace organisation. Kelly, Franzosi and others have attempted to advance general theories of industrial action based on the process by which workers are bound into a collective actor.¹⁸ These theories of mobilisation emphasise the importance of workplace leadership, usually in the form of shop stewards, in framing issues and encouraging collective action where there is thought to be a grievance with the behaviour or policies of management. However, labour

¹⁵ Turnbull & Sapsford, 'Why did Devlin fail?', pp. 248-251.

¹⁶ Turnbull & Sapsford, 'Hitting the bricks', p. 234.

¹⁷ For an overview of the present state of the historiographical debate, see Chapter 2.

¹⁸ Kelly, J. *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves* (London: Routledge 1998); Franzosi, R. *The Puzzle of Strikes: Class and State Strategies in Post War Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995); Tilly, C. *From Mobilisation to Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill 1978); Klandermans, B. *The Social Psychology of Protest* (Oxford: Blackwell 1997).

organisation amongst RDWs at Liverpool, and the dock industry more broadly, differed distinctly from the experience of workers in other industries, particularly factory workers, upon whom the majority of previous case studies are based.¹⁹

The Devlin reforms revolutionised labour organisation and representation in the industry. Previously, workplace relations were characterised by unofficial organisation, *ad hoc* bargaining and stoppages and by dissatisfaction with the inaction of union officialdom. Whereas factory workers usually enjoyed contracts of employment and established working patterns, dockers were prone to acute underemployment and casualism prior to 1967. The unofficial Port Workers' Committee at Liverpool operated in extremely adversarial conditions prior to formalisation of an official shop steward system in the industry, yet it still managed to effectively mobilise opposition to the Devlin reforms and several other earlier disputes, as detailed in Chapter Five. After 1967, one of the fundamental differences between the dock industry and others was that it was now subject to statutory regulation and, as a result, joint union-employer control at both the local and national level. This meant that many aspects of workplace bargaining which would normally have been outside the remit of worker representation such as manning, recruitment and discipline were subject to influence from shop steward committees under the auspices of the local Dock Labour Board and local modernisation committees. Furthermore, when combined with the unusual degree of control dockers enjoyed over the labour process because of the industry's historical development and the work culture and custom and practice it engendered, it is evident that major dissimilarities emerge between the role and influence of dock shop stewards and those in other sectors.

Aside from the protection and influence that statutory regulation provided dock stewards, the manner in which work was carried out on the docks prior to complete decasualisation was undoubtedly a contributory factor to strong workplace organisation and leadership. Company foremen devolved responsibility for the execution of tasks to the 'gang', each with its own leader who organised and

¹⁹ See, for example: Batstone, E., Boraston, I. and Frenkel, S. *Shop Stewards in Action: The Organisation of Workplace Conflict and Accommodation* (Oxford: Blackwell 1977); Lane, T. & Roberts, K. *Strike At Pilkingtons* (London: Fontana 1971); Beynon, H. *Working For Ford* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1973); Darlington, R. *The Dynamics of Workplace Organisation: Shop Stewards' Organisation in Three Merseyside Plants* (London: Mansell 1994).

represented the other men.²⁰ The arrangement of the industry, although rooted in the inequities of the casual system, therefore effectively established a surfeit of leaders, responsible for their gang and practised in negotiating with management over piecework rates, bonuses etc. These leaders, experienced in *ad hoc* bargaining and formulating and conveying grievance, formed the backbone of the unofficial movement. The historic intransigence of Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) officers towards dockers' grievances merely strengthened their resolve to fight their own corner and contributed to the mobilisation of workers across different gangs, particularly those working on the same ship, or in the same area of the port.

So, whereas Batstone et al, Kelly and Beynon, among others, contend that factory collectivism is fostered and maintained by a small and select group of activist and leader stewards it could be argued that, because of the influence of casualism and the peculiar structure and independence of work groups, there was a much larger pool of these figures available to frame issues and direct grievance on the docks. This encouraged a strong and fiercely democratic unofficial movement to emerge at the port despite the obvious impact casualism had on effective organisation, the principles of which were transposed onto the official shop steward system post-1967. These historic, industry-specific influences help to account for the dockers' propensity for workplace activism and militancy. When combined with the fillip that the introduction of the shop steward system and the protection of statute provided, it is clear that the form and nature of workplace leadership and organisation on the docks was significantly different from that in other sectors. Of course, these structural realities of the industry were not restricted to Liverpool and the same can be said for other major ports in the country experiencing similar changes, such as London. Nevertheless, by providing an insight into the actions and strategies of the Liverpool Dock Shop Steward Committee, this study has added to existing knowledge by emphasising the various forms shop steward organisation can take depending on workplace circumstances and demonstrated that those theoretical assumptions relating to factory workers and their representatives cannot be readily applied to dock workers and the dock industry.

Directly related to these industry-specific dynamics of 'shop stewardism' is the nature of intra-union tension and conflict on the docks. The period 1967-1972

²⁰ For more detail on the pre-1967 system of employment and various disputes, see Chapter 3.

was characterised by a significant but underlying power struggle, which coloured labour relations across the whole industry, including Liverpool. It can largely be conceptualised as a rank-and-file rebellion against TGWU officialdom amidst the transformation of labour representation in the industry. As detailed in Chapter Three, historically the relationship between rank-and-file dockers and the dominant union in the industry was extremely fraught. The undemocratic nature of worker representation on the docks lent itself to selective non-unionism, unofficial militancy and the rise of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union (NASDU) as an alternative to the oligarchic structure of the TGWU.²¹ The Devlin Reforms finally democratised labour representation on the docks and once local shop steward committees had established themselves they sought to challenge the Union over many centralised initiatives and policies, especially those concerning rationalisation of the industry. In both 1970 and 1972 the TGWU was upstaged by local activists, intent on expressing their concerns and impressing their influence on the changing nature of the industry. Similarly, even prior to the implementation of the shop steward system, the Devlin Reforms met with considerable resistance from unofficial organisation, despite official TGWU endorsement of the proposals.

The struggle for influence over bargaining and policy-making was at its most acute in the early seventies and, allied to the tumultuous technological changes in cargo-handling methods, contributed to the sustained industrial strife visible over this period. However, as the decade wore on, internal conflict and tension within the Docks section began to recede. Once shop steward committees became firmly established as the dominant force in the industry, their influence began to trickle into the machinery of the TGWU. Over time, more and more stewards were elected onto the District and National Lay Committees of the trade group and even onto the General Executive Council of the union. These leading stewards usually held a dual role, elected to both the Liverpool Dock Shop Steward Committee *and* the District and National Docks Lay Committee of the TGWU. As a consequence, by the mid-to-late seventies Union policy began to reflect that initiated at the local and National

²¹ For more detail on inter and intra-union strife in the dock industry see: Chapter 2 of this thesis; Hunter, B. *They Knew Why They Fought: Unofficial Struggles and Leadership on the Docks, 1945-1989* (London: Index Books, 1994); Phillips, J. 'Democracy and trade unionism on the docks' in J. McIlroy, N. Fishman & A. Campbell (eds.) *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1999), pp. 291-310; Pennington, B. 'Docks: breakaway and unofficial movements' *International Socialism*, No. 2, Autumn 1960, pp. 5-11.

Port Shop Steward Committee levels. Indeed, conflict at the national and district levels of the trade group began to evaporate, instead replaced by a new dynamic created by the terminal decline of the industry and subsequently, local inter-section conflict with clerical workers. These developments highlight the distinctive nature of the progress of representation and further serve to demonstrate the differences between labour organisation in the dock industry and other sectors.

Directly related to the relationship between RDWs and their union are differences in structure and function between dock and clerical organisation at the port. As noted above, because of the historical development of labour relations in the local industry, the Dock Shop Steward Committee became the foundation of rank-and-file dockworker representation, often in conflict with the centralised machinery of the Union. However, the fissure between the official and rank-and file movement did not occur in the clerical section. This was because the relatively new experience of clerical organisation was developed under the influence of industry-wide rationalisation. Its character was derived from an immediate necessity to defend against redundancies and the erosion of manning levels. The ACTSS 6/567 Branch was formed specifically for this reason and as a result, once established and operational, its goals and outlook reflected those of its stewards and members. There was no internal power struggle like that which occurred in the Docks section in the early seventies, based on years of antagonism and mistrust. Although this study explicitly distinguishes between the Union and the Dock Shop Steward Committee throughout because of these factors, there was little cause to differentiate between the Clerical Port Shop Steward Committee and the local ACTSS branch as the two organisations acted in almost complete harmony. These perspectives have added to the historiography relating to shop steward and local organisation and the internal politics of particular sections within the TGWU.

The growth of clerical organisation and activism from 1972 did indeed bring a new dynamic to labour relations. This thesis contributes to the existing academic discourse by examining the hitherto neglected experience of clerical staff at the port alongside that of their more historically illustrious dockworker colleagues. Chapter Six documented the growth of clerical unionism and the somewhat atypical ideological and organisational tendencies of these 'white-collar' workers. 'White-collar' workers are often characterised as identifying with an individualistic outlook

towards industrial relations in contrast to their 'blue-collar', 'collectivist' counterparts. Certainly, prior to the 1970s, clerical unionism at the port was extremely limited and bore many of the hallmarks associated with archetypal 'white-collar' attitudes. However, amidst the broader trend of trade union growth and influence in the late sixties and the explosion of militancy at the docks, staff workers gradually began to assert their right to workplace representation and bargaining.

The changing composition of recruitment to the 'office' on the dock estate assisted enormously in this process. As older, more typical clerical workers retired from the industry they were increasingly replaced with ex-RDWs or young recruits straight from school, often with relatives already working on the docks. Indeed, once recruitment to the register (as a RDW) was stopped altogether in the early seventies, employment in the office became the new route for nepotism in the local industry. This was a major contributory factor in the evolution of industrial attitudes and the progress of the Branch as young staff workers, indoctrinated with the traditional 'blue-collar' values of their families, came into contact with seasoned ex-RDW trade unionists, beginning to organise in the office.

The structurally industry-inherent dynamics and local factors that predisposed Liverpool's dockers to increased strike-proneness post-1967 also coloured the perceptions of their clerical colleagues. The fate of clerical workers was inextricably linked to that of the RDWs and the rationalisation of the dock industry. However, clerical workers were even less secure in their jobs without the protection of the NDLS and the A-J agreement. The Smith-Coggins dispute, detailed in Chapter Six, undoubtedly proved to be a watershed for clerical unionism at the port. In addition to revealing the industrial influence that the clerical workers could wield, it also demonstrated to the significant majority of 'none-ers' the necessity and benefit of union representation, leading quickly to one hundred per cent membership thereafter. Without the short, sharp shock of the Smith-Coggins dispute, clerical unionism probably would have continued to plateau at a relatively low percentage of the workforce. Even amongst those remaining clerical staff with more traditional attitudes towards workplace organization and managerial prerogative, the widespread threat of redundancy acted as a forceful wake-up call to the cold realities of the industry in this period of extreme and continuing

rationalisation, exposing the nature of paternalistic employment relationships to scrutiny.

As noted in Chapter Six, the awakening of clerical unionism was not necessarily welcomed by dockers. Historically, both sections of worker had treated one another with a degree of disdain and suspicion, particularly since ACTSS represented the supervisory grades, and attitudes were slow to change. Increasingly, in the context of the escalating decline of the industry, the pursuit of defensive sectional policies and strategies by clerical workers was perceived by some in the Docks section as potentially compromising their control over the industry, and indeed their livelihoods, creating tensions across the labour force. The growing sense of fatalism in the context of the terminal decline of the port encouraged militancy from both sections of workers and also exposed historically-rooted divisions between dockers and clerical staff. In addition to the historic schisms between the two sections of workers, Hyman hypothesises that sectionalism can also be accentuated by strong workplace organisation.²² This sectionalism was at its most acute during the 1985 Isle of Man Steam Packet dispute where ACTSS' defence of its no compulsory redundancy policy was confronted with indifference from the Docks section and hostility from the MDHC.

Furthermore, tensions and divisions between dock and clerical workers, between them and the centralised union machinery and also the fundamental dichotomy between workers and management emphasise the complexity of workplace relationships at the Port of Liverpool. This dynamic of intra-union tension has provided a unique perspective from which to consider labour relations at the port because this type of approach to *port-wide* labour relations is conspicuously lacking in the existing historiography. Prior to this study, the significance of clerical workers to port-wide industrial relations had been largely overlooked. Therefore, this thesis has expanded the parameters of the academic discourse by identifying and properly documenting the complexities of workplace relations through focusing on the experiences of, and relationship between, the two main categories of worker in the local industry. It has also demonstrated, through a close examination of the action and strategies of the clerical workers and their representatives, that 'white-

²² Hyman, R. 'The politics of workplace trade unionism: Recent tendencies and some problems for theory', *Capital & Class*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Summer 1979, p. 55 (pp. 54-67).

collar' workers can inversely exhibit organisational, behavioural and ideologically collectivist tendencies that might be more closely and traditionally associated with 'blue-collar' workers because of prevailing local factors such as the location and nature of recruitment, job insecurity and the influence of other work groups within the same work environment. In summary, this study concludes that 'white-collar' workers can organize in a manner more associated with traditional trade unionism if structural factors and workplace circumstances create and sustain it.

So, in the context of the maturation of clerical unionism and the presence of two active and well-organised trade groups at the port, Chapter Seven considered the changing dynamics of labour relations between 1973 and 1989. There were several distinctive features of labour relations during this period. The nature of workplace relationships, labour organisation and conflict at the port is explored in the context of a trend of increasingly hostile and defensive sectionalism in the late seventies and eighties caused by the inexorable decline of the industry. Containerisation and mechanisation precipitated a terminal rundown of manning levels, a trend which was accelerated in the eighties via an extremely lucrative state-sponsored voluntary severance scheme. This chapter of the thesis documents how Liverpool's dock/clerical workers and their representatives went about defending manning levels and custom and practice at the port in the face of a variety of pressures and factors. In particular it highlights how they cajoled and pressurised port employers, road haulage and container companies into guaranteeing and reserving container-related work for RDWs in the early years of containerisation and how they later fought against further rationalisation of the industry in the form of manning cuts, changes in work practices and voluntary redundancy schemes.

The dichotomy between the two trade groups and their attitudes towards employers was also reflected upon in the context of the unfavourable contemporary political and trade union environment. By considering the scope and effectiveness of industrial action taken by dockers and clerical workers in the eighties, the study has also sought to test existing assumptions regarding the impact of Conservative employment legislation and the 'assault' on trade unionism. The conclusion is that, whereas unions in other major industries witnessed severe restrictions on their ability to mobilise effectively as a result, statutory regulation of the industry and the strong labour organisation that had developed meant that dock workers remained insulated

from the broader trend towards the reassertion of managerial authority and the growth of ‘new realism’ in the eighties, at least until the abolition of the Scheme in 1989. This perspective is shared with Turnbull’s study and challenges the traditional assumption that Conservative employment legislation had a major impact of the efficacy of trade union organisation across the country.²³

Clerical workers also remained relatively sheltered from the experiences of trade unionists in other sectors at this time, despite effectively being subject to a standard employment relationship. Because of the essential role some grades of clerical worker played in the running of the port and the strong organisation established by ACTSS, enshrined in its ‘no compulsory redundancies’ doctrine, management proved reluctant to impose compulsory redundancies or use new employment legislation to its advantage. Even as late as 1988, when employers were lobbying hard for the abolition of the Scheme and normalisation of the employment relationship in the industry, the MDHC declined to use the opportunity to impose compulsory redundancy on those Liverpool Maritime Terminal clerical staff who refused to go voluntarily. As detailed in Chapter Seven, rather than instigate industrial strife over such a small number of jobs, the MDHC instead took the most unusual step of effectively re-opening the RDW register to accommodate the men. Such events underline the unique position of the dock industry in the British economy and the trade union movement more broadly and demonstrate how RDWs and clerical staff at Liverpool enjoyed significant employment protection because of a combination of statutory and *de facto* protection and a reputation and tradition of strong workplace organisation.

To summarise, by examining labour relations at the port of Liverpool from a ‘bottom up’ and historical perspective, this study has highlighted the value of such an approach and some deficiencies in the existing historiography. Several accounts of the dock industry consider labour relations from a solely institutional standpoint or in reference to the operation of the NDLS. As has already been documented above and elsewhere, local steward-led organisation was the dominant force in worker representation on the docks post-1967 and any perspective which discounts or underplays this dynamic is fundamentally flawed. This is not to disregard the role

²³ Turnbull, P. ‘Docks’ in A. Pendleton & J. Winterton (eds.) *Public Enterprise in Transition: Industrial Relations in State and Privitized Corporations* (London: Routledge 1993), pp. 185-210.

played by various institutions in bargaining, regulation and administration of the industry, rather to emphasise the importance of rank-and-file organisation in labour relations. In fact, this study has taken a dual approach. It has focused on rank-and-file organisation but in the broader context of political, economic and institutional forces.

Even more universal has been the tendency towards producing industry-wide surveys of work culture and labour relations. Certainly, there are inherent characteristics in the nature and experience of dock-work which are encountered and shared by all dockers, wherever located. Nevertheless, industry or occupation-wide assumptions should be perceived as extremely problematic when the complex, sometimes contradictory, often highly contingent influences of local custom, practice and work culture are properly considered. This thesis has identified and interpreted these local nuances, revealing the extent to which they influenced the distinctive nature and character of labour organisation at the Port of Liverpool in the decades after 1967. Of course, as noted above, because of the relative scarcity of studies with a similar approach it is impossible to be definitive, although the interpretation offered here is highly suggestive that the character of labour relations at the port was intricately structured and hence exceptional in many small but important aspects. The introduction of a piecework payment system, the particularly rapid decline of the local industry, the emergence of strong clerical organisation and the influence of local identity and culture were unique to the port and all contributed to differentiate the experience of Liverpool's port workers from those elsewhere.

However, even in relation to Liverpool's waterfront workers, the author is aware that more research is needed. This study has focused on the two largest sections of workers at the port but there were several other, smaller groups of workers – shoregang, shipwrights etc. – who were well-organised and fought their own battles against rationalisation of the industry, the dissolution of skill divisions and the rundown of manning levels, further adding to the rich and complex dynamics of labour relations on the waterfront. Similarly, a section of the clerical workforce was employed at the town offices of major shipping lines but is omitted from this study as they formed a different branch of the TGWU. They too faced rationalisation-based employment challenges but apparently exhibited completely different ideological and organisational tendencies from their counterparts on the

dock estate, indeed those more commonly associated with archetypal ‘white-collar’ workers. It is imperative that more work of the sort undertaken for this thesis is initiated, not only to add to our knowledge and understanding of a largely under-researched labour force but also to assist in interrogating the interpretation offered here and to provide new frameworks, questions and evidence for future academic research.

Appendix I

Below is an alphabetised list of those interviewed for this thesis and their employment details/background:

Mike Carden

Started in the dockside offices in 1970. Trained as a 'counter-off' from 1972. Chairman of MDHC Clerical Stewards' Committee in 1983 until 1988.

Patrick Craig

Joiner's labourer and TGWU union activist who worked at various building sites across Liverpool between the late 1950s and early 1980s.

Jimmy Davies

Started on Liverpool docks in 1960 as a Registered Dock Worker, aged eighteen. Shop steward at the MDHB/MDHC from 1969 until 1982, Pier Head area of the dock. Resigned from the Committee in protest at changes to gang manning strengths and flexibility in 1982, re-elected in the late eighties. A member of the various workers' side joint regulatory bodies in the industry and the district and national trade group committees of the TGWU.

Larry Dowling

Registered Dock Worker 1965-1989 across various areas of the port, initially for Smith Coggins and later for the MDHC. Shop steward 1969 until 1982. Resigned from the Committee in protest at changes to gang manning strengths and flexibility in 1982, left the industry shortly after the abolition of the NDLS in 1989. A member of the various workers' side joint regulatory bodies in the industry and the district and national trade group committees of the TGWU.

Greg Dropkin

Worked for an independent production company, Open Eye Film & Video, in Liverpool 1983-1990. Open Eye made 'Namibia Nuclear Reactions', a film about the dockers' blockade of Namibian Uranium Hexafluoride at the Port of Liverpool. Also an active anti-Apartheid campaigner and member of the Namibia Support

Committee throughout the eighties.

Andy Dwyer

Joined the dock workforce as a trainee storesman in May 1962, aged fifteen. Worked for Liverpool Maritime Terminals until it went bust in 1988, when he transferred to the MDHC where he worked until 1995. Elected shop steward for Huskisson Dock storesmen at LMT in 1970 until 1988.

Frank Lannigan

Started on the docks as a Registered Dock Worker in 1970 for Raes Bulk Handling. Elected as shop steward 1978, remained on the Committee until 1995. A member of the various worker's side joint regulatory bodies in the industry and the district and national trade group committees of the TGWU.

Tony Nelson

Came to the docks straight from school in 1973 as a clerical grade timekeeper for T&J Harrisons. Elected shop steward in 1978, transferred to the MDHC when Harrisons withdrew from the Port. Remained on the Clerical Port Shop Steward Committee until 1989.

Eddie Roberts

Union activist at Dunlop's Speke Plant in the early sixties until he joined Ford's. He quickly became a steward and later Convenor for the Paint, Trim and Assembly workforce in Ford's. In July 1970, he became District TGWU Official for ACTSS, a position which lasted until 1977 when he became Regional TGWU Organiser for District 6 (Merseyside).

Billy Taylor

RDW at Garston Docks from the late fifties until 1976 when he took voluntary redundancy from the industry.

Terry Teague

Joined T&J Harrisons dockside clerical workforce in 1967 straight from school as a messenger boy, later became a clerical Quayside Foreman. Elected as shop steward in 1972. Transferred to the MDHC when Harrisons withdrew from the port in 1980. Elected as Chairman of the Clerical Port Shop Steward Committee 1982. Remained at the MDHC until 1995 when it dismissed its entire dock workforce.

Mick Tighe

Started on Liverpool docks in 1973 as a Registered Dock Worker for the MDHC. He was one of very few recruits to the register after 1972 and was given his father's book under special circumstances. Worked on the docks until 1995.

Appendix II

Interview Questionnaires

Below is a sample list of questions/themes explored in all initial interviews with former Registered Dock Workers.

- 1: Introduce yourself – what years did you work on the docks? What years were you steward (if applicable)? Which part of the dock did you work in?
- 2: Did you have family members working on the docks?
- 3: Did you live near the docks? What are your recollections of your neighbourhood?
- 4: Discuss your recollections of the casualised pre-Devlin system of employment and recruitment (if applicable) – gangs, occupational identity, sectarianism?
- 5: How did you feel when Devlin was implemented (if applicable)? How did you feel about it later?
- 6: What about the impact of containerisation on the industry?
- 7: Relationship between dockers and the TGWU, influence of the ‘Blue’ (NASDU) in Liverpool/elsewhere? Impact of the introduction of shop steward system as part of Devlin?
- 8: Opinion of organisation and solidarity at Liverpool compared with other ports in 1970s and 80s.
- 9: Recollections of major disputes (where applicable) e.g. 1967 Devlin Phase One; 1969 Aintree Containerbase; 1972 strike wave; 1980 withdrawal of Harrison’s; decline of the industry 1980s to abolition of NDLS 1989; Campaign against abolition, 1989 national dock strike.
- 10: Relationship with clerical stewards, attitude towards clerical unionism?
- 11: Liverpool in the 1980s – Labour/political militancy; the impact of Thatcherism on labour organisation.

A similar set of questions/themes were explored in initial interviews with all clerical workers, although with several tailored to the major disputes and milestones of the Branch. See sample below.

- 1: Introduce yourself – what years did you work on the docks? What years were you steward (if applicable)? Which part of the dock did you work in?
- 2: Did you have family members working on the docks?
- 3: Did you live near the docks? What are your recollections of your neighbourhood?
- 4: What was the initial reaction of employers to clerical unionism? What about dockers?
- 5: Impact of the appointment of Eddie Roberts as official?
- 6: Reflect on growth of the Branch in the 1970s
- 7: Recollections of the Smith-Coggins dispute 1972 and the final settlement; the withdrawal of Harrisons 1980; 1985 Isle of Man Steam Packet dispute.
- 8: Labour relations in the eighties – relationship with Docks section.
- 9: Recollections of 1989 NDLS abolition and strike
- 10: Liverpool in the 1980s – Labour/political militancy; the impact of Thatcherism on labour organisation.

Appendix III

Outline descriptions/definitions of duties attached to different categories/grades of dock/clerical workers

Stevedores and dockers

Both category of worker are often subsumed under the generic title of ‘dockers’, particularly after decasualisation minimised skill divisions. However, prior to decasualisation, stevedores were considered the labour aristocracy of the dock workforce. Broadly, the difference between the two centred on the location of their work and aptitude at certain tasks. Stevedores worked on the ship handling and organising cargoes in the hold. These duties generally required advanced organisational and handling skills and hence they were often the most sort after and experienced section of the workforce. Dockers worked on the quayside preparing and organising cargoes to be painstakingly hand-loaded into a sling and winched aboard, at least prior to modernisation and mechanisation of the industry.

Wharfinger

This category of worker was effectively manager of clerical staff involved in the loading of a ship. He was responsible for making sure all the documentation was in order once the cargo was loaded (e.g. manifests, bills of loading, ship’s plans etc). He also liaised between the shipping agents and the stevedoring company.

Counter-offs

A ‘Counter-off’ (or Tally Clerk as they were called in London and elsewhere) essentially performed the same duties as a Wharfinger. The only difference between the two was that Counter-offs were solely employed on discharging imported cargoes from a ship, whereas Wharfingers were concerned with the loading of export cargoes.

Wharfinger's Clerk

This category of worker was concerned with compiling the ship's manifest and signing-off shipping notes and other related documentation.

Tonnage Clerk

A Tonnage Clerk kept a daily record of proceedings in a particular berth or area of the port. This included recording the type of cargo shipped and the weight of the cargo as well as calculating the piecework bonuses of dockers working at a particular ship.

Window Clerk

A Window Clerk checked in cargo brought by road haulage to a particular ship or dock shed. He would receive shipping notes from the haulage driver and then pass them onto a Checker who would sign-off the cargo as received and stow it until ready for loading onto the relevant ship.

Timekeepers

Timekeepers were employed to record RDW work patterns and movements at the quayside. Their duties included documenting the hours worked by dockers on different ships/berths and calculating wages, bonuses etc.

Ship's Planners

Ship's Planners or 'Plan men' were particularly prominent prior to containerisation and subsequently on remaining general cargo areas. Their main job was to document which cargoes had been loaded onto the ship and whereabouts in the hold they were located, often this took the form of a diagram called the ship's plan.

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