Anarcho
The London Dock Strike of 1889
August 9, 2014

Retrieved on 24th April 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com

**theanarchistlibrary.org**

# The London Dock Strike of 1889

Anarcho

August 9, 2014

# Contents

of a militant minority within struggles that can win the arguments for more radical action and aims can be decisive.

Below is a newly translated article by Kropotkin written during the strike in which he sketches its importance and urges anarchists to take part in the labour movement. It is worth reading both because it shows Kropotkin's clear revolutionary class struggle perspective (something all too often denied) and because its lessons are still all too valid today. Times have changed, of course, and it is obviously a case of not mechanically reapplying *words* written 125 years ago but rather of applying the *spirit* of those words in the context we find ourselves – particularly as the conditions of the dockers pre-strike will be familiar to many workers today in the 21st century.



This year marks the 125th anniversary of the 1889 London Dock Strike. While this strike was preceded by others which showed of a new spirit of revolt amongst the unskilled, including the match-girls strike and the unionisation of London gas-workers, the dockers' strike had more of an impact due to the numbers involved. As well as an important event in British Labour history, it also played a key role in the development of anarchism as it provided a concrete example of the power of organised labour and the importance of anarchist involvement in it.

It broke out in the Port of London on the 14th of August 1889 and its principal demand was for "the dockers' tanner", a rate of sixpence an hour but it also raised issues of unsafe conditions and casual, precarious employment contracts based on the "call-on" and the contract system.

Most workers in the docks were casual labourers taken on for the day, often just for a few hours. Twice a day there was a "call-on" at each of the docks when labour was hired for short periods. Only the lucky few would be selected, the rest would be sent home without pay. The employers wanted to have a large number of men available for work so they could pick-and-choose and to ensure that workers would not receive wages when there was no work.

The catalyst for the strike was a dispute about "plus" money during the unloading of the *Lady Armstrong* in the West India Docks on the 14th of August. The *East and West India Dock Company* had cut their "plus" rates to attract ships into their docks in response to a depression in trade and an oversupply of docks and warehousing. However, this cut in payments allowed the long-held grievances of the workforce to surface and find expression.

While largely spontaneous in its birth and organisation, the strikers had a few recognised leaders. The three most important were John Burns (1858–1943), Ben Tillett (1860–1943) and Tom

Mann (1856–1941), all of whom were working class (Tillet was a docker, the others engineers) and social democrats.

When the men in the West India Dock struck, they immediately started to persuade other dockers to join them. The *Dockers' Union* had no funds and needed help, which came when the *Amalgamated Stevedores Union* joined the strike. Not only did they carry high status in the port but their work was essential to the running of the docks. A manifesto entitled *To the Trade Unionists and People of London* called on other workers to support the strike:

> "The dock labourers are on strike and asking for an advance in wages… 6d per hour daytime and 8d per hour overtime. The work is of the most precarious nature, three hours being the average amount per day obtained by the 'docker'. We, the Union of the Stevedores of London, knowing the condition of the dock labourers, have determined to support their movement by every lawful means in our power. We have, therefore, refused to work because of the dock company employing scabs… we feel our duty is to support our poorer brothers… we now appeal to members of all trade unions for joint action with us, and especially those whose work is in connection with shipping – engineers and fitters, boiler makers, ships' carpenters, etc. and also the coal heavers, ballast men and lightermen. We also appeal to the public at large for contributions and support on behalf of the dock labourers…" (*The Great Dock Strike 1889* [London: George Weidenfield & Nicolson Limited, 1988], Terry McCarthy (ed.), 82–3)

Other workers followed the lead of the stevedores, including the seamen, firemen, lightermen, watermen, ropemakers, fish



As Caroline Cahm notes, the "continuity between Kropotkin's approach in the early eighties and his advocacy of a more active involvement in trade unionism in 1889 has not been recognised by the commentators." (*Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 279) This may be explained, in part, due to his calls in the early 1880s going mostly unheeded within a French anarchist movement too infatuated with ultra-revolutionary rhetoric and posing (funded, in part, by the French police). As he admitted in his *Memoirs*, when he asked a prosecution witness at the Lyon trial whether he had succeeded in having "the International reconstituted" and received the reply: "No. They did not find it revolutionary enough" (*Memoirs of a Revolutionist* [Montreal/New York: Black Rose Books, 1989], 420). However, the calls started in 1889 were more successful as French Anarchists joined the labour movement in increasing numbers, leading to the rise of revolutionary syndicalism in the mid-1890s. (see Constance Bantman, "From Trade Unionism to Syndicalisme Révolutionnaire to Syndicalism: The British Origins of French Syndicalism," *New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism* [Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010], David Berry and Constance Bantman (eds.), 126–140)

This is still a lesson to be learned from these debates today, with a few anarchists holding ideas that offer no means of practical activity and everything is dismissed as "reformist." Yet without the confidence of winning apparently "minor" struggles (over pay, redundancies, cuts in public services, etc. – that is, things which are hardly "minor" to those involved!) people will not be in a position to want grander social change. True, involvement within popular struggles and organisations does hold the danger of anarchists becoming less revolutionary due to the pressures involved but that is no excuse for standing on the side-lines criticising. As the dockers' strike shows, the lack

of violence against representatives of capitalist society. Indeed, in October 1890, Malatesta noted that "in the wake of the recent great strikes and above all the London docks strike" anarchists had "recovered from such indifference" to the labour movement. ("Matters Revolutionary", *The Method of Freedom*, 106–7)

So from 1889 onwards, the likes of Kropotkin and Malatesta stressed the importance of anarchists to participate as anarchists within popular movements and struggles – particularly (but not exclusively) the labour movement – and had success in so doing. Moreover, they linked this to the anarchist tactics developed in the First International.

In 1884, for example, Malatesta had produced a pamphlet which listed "[s]trikes, resistance societies, labor organizations" and "encouraging workers to band together and resist the bosses" as key means of anarchist agitation and of "struggling against all the economic, political, religious, judicial, and pseudo-scientifically moral institutions of bourgeois society" ("Program and Organisation of the International Working Men's Association", *The Method of Freedom*, 58)

Kropotkin likewise noted how "Revolutionary Anarchist Communist propaganda within the Labour Unions had always been a favourite mode of action in the Federalist or 'Bakunist' section of the International Working Men's Association. In Spain and in Italy it had been especially successful. Now it was resorted to, with evident success, in France, and *Freedom* eagerly advocated this sort of propaganda, carefully taking note of its successes all over the world." ("1886–1907: Glimpses into the Labour Movement in this Country", 398) In this, Kropotkin was repeating his arguments from the early 1880s for anarchists to return to traditions of the First International (see, for example, "Enemies of the People", "The Workers' Movement in Spain" and "Workers' Organisation": all in *Direct Struggle Against Capital*).



porters and carmen. The port was paralyzed by what was in effect a general strike: by the 27th of August 130,000 men were on strike. Strikes broke out daily in factories and workshops throughout the East End. David Nicoll, an anarchist in London, wrote at the time: "The cry is still they come! The workers are poring by thousands from their workshops – printers, labourers and brass finishers. The coal heavers leave their yard in response to the shouts of their comrades. Bands of them are marching round the Northern suburbs turning-out the men at every yard. The police are powerless." (quoted John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of British Anarchists* [London: Granada Publishing Ltd, 1978], 84–5). The *Evening News & Post* reported on the 26th of August 1889:

> "Dockmen, lightermen, bargemen, cement workers, carmen, ironworkers and even factory girls are coming out. If it goes on a few days longer, all London will be on holiday. The great machine by which five millions of people are fed and clothed will come to a dead stop, and what is to be the end of it all? The proverbial small spark has kindled a great fire which threatens to envelop the whole metropolis."

The dockers formed a strike committee and demanded "the dockers' tanner" – a wage of 6d an hour (instead of their previous 5d an hour) – and an overtime rate of 8d per hour as well as the contract and "plus" systems to be abolished, "call-ons" to be reduced to two a day, that they be taken on for minimum periods of four hours and that their union be recognised throughout the port. The strike committee organised mass meetings and established pickets outside the dock gates to persuade men still at work and "blacklegs" (scabs) to come out on strike.

The strike had its impact in the community as landlords who tried to collect their rents faced resistance. Rent strikes

were organised, with one banner reading: "As we are on strike landlords need not call." (*The Great Dock Strike 1889*, 115) At first food was distributed to dockers and their families before shilling food tickets were issued and accepted by local tradesmen. However, despite successful appeals for help, not enough money was being raised to meet the needs of the increasing numbers on strike. As the strike went into its second week, there was great hardship in East London and by the end of August many dockers and their families were starving.

The employees were intent to starve the strikers out and although the port was at a standstill and their companies losing money they believed that giving into the dockers' demands would set a dangerous precedent. The strike reached crisis point at the beginning of September and the Strike Committee issued an appeal drafted by Mann entitled the *No work Manifesto*:

> "In our former manifesto we urged workers of trades not directly connected to the docks to remain at work, and to avoid causing inconvenience to the general community, Our studied moderation has been mistaken by our ungenerous opponents for lack of courage or want of resources…
>
> "We now solemnly appeal to workers in London of all grades and of every calling to refuse to go to work on Monday next unless the directors have before noon on Saturday, 31st August, officially informed this committee that the moderate demands of the dock labourers have been fully and finally conceded." (*The Great Dock Strike 1889*, 125)

This was a call for a general strike across London from Monday 2nd September but, at Tillett's demand, it was swiftly



from all across the world meet (the CGT was noticeably absent as it declined to attend due to being in the Second International's trade union organisation, the only syndicalist union to be a member). The same year also saw the end of the ISEL as the tide of industrial unrest convinced many members that the time for a propaganda grouping was at an end and the need was now for a syndicalist union to be formed. The ISEL was won to a dual unionist position and was dissolved in favour of the *Industrial Workers of the World*. Those who opposed dual unionism in favour of working within existing trade unions formed the *Industrial Democracy League*.

Sadly, Mann returned to Social Democracy in 1917 and joined the Communist Party after the First World War due to a willingness – shared by many radicals – to justify or deny the failures of Bolsheviks. Needless to say, his influence in the British Labour movement was nowhere as large as in his libertarian days. However, of all the leaders of the strike he was the only one to remain a socialist of any sort – in part, no doubt, to remaining a trade unionist and not a politician.

## Conclusion: The Rise or Return of Syndicalism?

The 1889 London dockers' strike played a key role in the rise of the British Labour movement but it also played a key role in the development of anarchism. The example of the strike was used by those anarchists who wished to see a return by libertarians to working within the labour movement. It is important to stress the word "return" as syndicalism was not, as commonly asserted in academic and Marxist circles, a response to the failure of "propaganda by the deed" of the early 1890s. Rather, Anarchist arguing for participation in unions predated by over two years the period in France from March 1892 to June 1894 when it became indelibly defined as individual acts

> social destiny." (quoted by Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900–1914 Myths and Realities* [London: Pluto Press, 1976], 65)

A year later, he declared that "political action is of no use whatsoever" (quoted by Holton, 65) and charged himself with foolishness in the past for looking to parliament for labour's emancipation.

This was the product of years of activism within the labour movement but the key development was seen on his return from Australia in 1910 when he produced a pamphlet entitled *The Way to Win* that argued that socialism could be achieved only through trade unionism and co-operation. The same year saw the creation of the *Industrial Syndicalist Education League* (ISEL) which was created after Guy Bowman and Mann travelled to France and visited members of the syndicalist *General Confederation of Labour* (CGT) in May 1910. The monthly newspaper *The Industrial Syndicalist* was launched in July and contacts were made with other leading British syndicalists (like Peter and James Larkin). Formed in November at two-day conference in Manchester attended by 200 delegates representing 60,000 workers, the ISEL was the largest syndicalist propaganda group in Britain. It was not a new union centre but rather disseminated syndicalist ideas within the labour movement.

Mann took a leading role the 1911 Liverpool General Transport Strike and in 1912 was convicted under the Incitement to Mutiny Act 1797 of publishing "Open Letter to British Soldiers" urging them to refuse to shoot at strikers (this was later reprinted as a leaflet entitled *Don't Shoot*). His prison sentence was quashed after public pressure. In 1912, the ISEL held two conferences with 235 delegates representing 100,000 workers and it began to create a formal organisation with branches and a constitution. The following year it hosted the First International Syndicalist Congress in London which saw syndicalists



withdrawn. Yet without funds – or expropriation – it seemed that the strike could not continue. Then, from the beginning of September money arrived from Australia. The first instalment of £150 was sent by the Brisbane *Wharf Labourers' Union*. The press reported that "Meetings at which resolutions of sympathy with the strikers are passed are being held nightly throughout Victoria, and a similar movement is on foot in Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Hobart." (*The Pall Mall Gazette*, 5th of September 1889). This was the first instalment of over £30,000 raised by the Australian dockers and their allies and it arrived at just the right time: it ended worries about feeding the strikers and their families.

With defeat through hunger now unlikely, on 5th of September, the fourth week of the strike, the Lord Mayor of London formed the Mansion House Committee to bring both sides together to end the strike. It persuaded the employers to meet practically all the dockers' demands. After five weeks the Dock Strike was over and the workers returned to work on the 16th of September. The dockers then formed a new *Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers' Union* with Tillett elected its General Secretary and Mann its first President. Nearly 20,000 men joined in London alone.

Victory in the Dockers' Strike was a turning point in the history of trade unionism in Britain. Workers throughout the country, particularly the unskilled, gained a new confidence to organise themselves and carry out collective action. From 750,000 in 1888, trade union membership grew to 1.5 million by 1892 and to over 2 million by 1899. The strike symbolised the growth of what was termed "new unionism", that is the creation of unions of casual, unskilled and poorly paid workers in contrast to the craft unions for skilled workers already in existence. As Burns explained:

> "The gain in wages… is not the most important result to be considered… labour throughout the

whole East End of Lonson has… been placed upon a higher and more substantial footing with regard to capital than it has ever stood before. Still more important perhaps, is the fact that labour of the humbler kind has shown its capacity to organise itself; its solidarity; its ability. The labourer has learned that combination can lead him to anything and everything. He has tasted success as the immediate fruit of combination, and he knows that the harvest he has just reaped is not the utmost he can look to gain… he has learned that he can conquer the world of capital whose generals have been the most ruthless of his oppressors.

"[…]

"As a Trade Unionist, my own notion as to the practical outcome of the Strike is that all sections of labour must organise themselves into trade unions; that all trades must federate themselves, and that in the future, prompt and concerted action must take the place of the spasmodic and isolated action in the past.

"As a Socialist, I rejoice that organised labour has shown how fully it can meet the forces of Capitalism, and how small a chance the oppressor of labour has against the resolute combination of men, who having found their ideal, are determined to realise it." (*The Great Dock Strike 1889*, 236–7)

Tillet began an alderman on the London County Council from 1892 to 1898 and became a Labour Party MP in 1917 after standing unsuccessfully for Parliament at four general elections. Burns was elected to Parliament in 1892 as the candidate



become bourgeois… For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them." There was "but a single path, that of *emancipation through practical action*," which "has only one meaning. It means workers' solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means *trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds*." ("The Policy of the International", *The Basic Bakunin: Writings 1869–1871* [Buffalo, NY: Promethus Books, 1994], 108, 103) In other words, what became known as syndicalism a quarter of a century later.

## Tom Mann and British Syndicalism

While anarchists did not play a role in the strike, one of those who did – Tom Mann – played a key role in the rise of British syndicalism in the first two decades of the next century. A friend of Kropotkin (whom he called "our grand old comrade" in 1913), Mann was initially a Marxist (Social Democrat) but as a result of his experiences as a union organiser moved towards anarchist conclusions and finally rejected all forms of "political action" in favour of direct action. As he put it in May 1911 when he resigned from the Marxist Social Democratic Federation:

> "My experiences have driven me more and more into the non-Parliamentary position… I find nearly all the serious-minded young men in the labour and socialist movement have their minds centred upon obtaining some position in public life such as local, municipal or county councillorship… or aspiring to become an MP… I am driven to the belief that this is entirely wrong… So I declare in favour of Direct Industrial Organisation, not as a means but as THE means whereby the workers can ultimately overthrow the capitalist system and become the actual controllers of their industrial and

demands and this would "secure them the victory." In a subsequent letter he asserts that bourgeois sympathy was due to the "knowledge *that the Dockers are voters*" but he predicted that they would return labour candidates. (*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 48, 371, 377)

In short, for Engels the lessons of the strike pointed to the use of the ballot box and the formation of a Socialist Political Party. Yet, as Kropotkin lamented in 1907, this aspect of its legacy was a confirmation of anarchist fears than Marxist hopes:

> "But a third lesson, too, was deduced from the Dockers' Strike by the Labour and Socialist politicians. Some of the Socialists… could reckon with certainty upon being elected to Parliament at the next election…
>
> "This was the beginning of the decay of the whole Socialist movement in this country… the whole tone of the movement suddenly went down. Petty electoral considerations took the place of the outspoken revolutionary language of the previous years. To preach revolution became a crime. To speak of Socialism pure and simple was to indulge in Utopias… a compromise with the middle classes for sharing political power with them in a middle-class State… took the place of Socialism." ("1886–1907: Glimpses into the Labour Movement in this Country", 396)

This re-affirmed Bakunin's prediction that when "common workers" are sent "to Legislative Assemblies" the result is that the "worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will



of the Battersea Liberal Association before joining the cabinet as President of the Local Government Board in December 1905. Mann's subsequent activities will be discussed later.

## The Strike and the Anarchists

Anarchists were not directly involved in the dispute but nevertheless it played a key part in the development of anarchism in the following decades. This was because the strike helped win the argument within the movement for a return to active participation within the labour movement that laid the basis for the rise of syndicalism in the mid-1890s first in France and then across the globe.

So while anarchists may not have played a leading role during the strike, they saw its importance and learned from it. They pointed to it as an example of their ideas during the strike itself in a debate with Marxists:

> "We Anarchists have a line to work upon, to teach the people self-reliance, to urge them to take part in non-political movements directly started by themselves for themselves… Look at the strike now in progress. When the Anarchists have said that as soon as people learn to rely upon themselves they will act for themselves, it has been disregarded. But their words have come true. We have an example of this truth in London now. The strike has gone upon the old Trade Union lines but had it started on the lines of expropriation, who knows how rapidly it might have spread. We teach the people to place their faith in themselves, we go on the lines of self-help. We teach them to form their own committees of management, to repudiate their masters, to despise the laws of the country – these are the lines which we Anarchists

> intend to work along." (John Turner, quoted by Quail, 87)

Errico Malatesta, on his return from South America and informed by his union organising there, immediately saw the importance of this strike and its relevance to his ideas. He wrote an article for the Italian anarchist press arguing it "proved especially instructive" in showing that "labor agitation in strike is the most important" way a revolution can come. However, if it showed "how easily a revolution may come about" it also showed how easily "the opportunity can be allowed to slip away." The need was for anarchists to get involved in the labour movement: "let us spark and let us organise as many strikes as we can; let us see to it that the strike becomes a contagion and that, once it erupts, it spreads". Anarchists had to use tactics which "will bring us into direct and unbroken contact with the masses" as the masses "are led to big demands by way of small requests and small revolts". ("About a Strike", *The Method of Freedom* [Edinburgh/Oakland/Baltimore: AK Press, 2014], 71, 74, 76–7)

Unsurprisingly, Peter Kropotkin argued along similar lines. He wrote an article during the strike that noted its revolutionary potential and now "the workers felt how much they are the masters of society." It confirmed anarchist views about the general strike and on the "strength of the workers". It showed beyond doubt "what a strike is" and so the importance of the labour movement to anarchism. He looked forward to "the day when those anarchists who exhaust themselves in empty discussions will do like Tillet, but with firmer and more revolutionary ideas – the day when they will *work* within the workers to prepare the stopping of work in the trades that supply all the others, they will have done more to prepare the social, economic Revolution, that all the writers, journalists, and orators of the socialist party." ('Ce que c'est qu'une gréve', *La Révolte*, 7th of September 1889)



He returned to the strike in an 1897 in a pamphlet jointly written with John Burns entitled *La Grande Grève des Docks* (*The Great Dock Strike*) which has, sadly, never been translated into English . Ten years later, in 1907, Kropotkin pointed to the strike as the turning point in the fortunes of British socialism and sketched its lessons:

> "The strike was a wonderful lesson in many respects. It demonstrated to us the practical possibility of a General Strike.
>
> "Once the life of the Port of London had been paralysed, the strike spread wider and wider, bringing all sorts of industries to a standstill, and threatening to paralyse the whole life of the five millions of Londoners.
>
> "Another lesson of this strike was — in showing the powers of the working men for organising the supply and distribution of food for a large population of strikers. The demonstration was quite conclusive." ("1886–1907: Glimpses into the Labour Movement in this Country", *Direct Struggle Against Capital* [Edinburgh/Oakland/Baltimore: AK Press, 2014], 395)

Interestingly, while the anarchists saw the potential for a general strike – even a revolution – Engels was less keen, arguing in a letter on the 1st of September 1889 that the call for a general strike was "casting away wilfully all the sympathies of the shopkeepers and even of the great mass of the bourgeoisie who all hated the dock monopolists." It was, moreover, a "declaration of despair" but "[f]ortunately they have thought better of it" and called it off. He also said that the workers had "acceded to the demands of the wharfiners" to reduce the strike's