A bible of discontent:
The memoir of Hugh D'Arcy, bricklayer and trade unionist

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by Hugh D'Arcy

Edited by Linda Clarke and Christine Wall
Centre for the Production of the Built Environment (ProBE)
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For more information see project website www.buildingworkersstories.com

Cover Image: courtesy of Hugh D'Arcy shows the 'Tea Break' strikers marching through Edinburgh in 1946. Hugh is the young man third from left in the front row.

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Preamble

I visited my own union branch last night, which incidentally was the 1st of December 1986, the quarter night for voting and nominations. Although the branch was sparsely attended, I was pleased to see the officers going through the old procedure and of course - being Edinburgh Central UCATT UA305 - the branch followed what we now call the "Broad Left" recommendations on votes and nominations. I especially went that night not only because it was quarter night but to meet Charlie McManus who is the branch secretary. After the business was over, I had a drink and a crack with Charlie and as usual our conversation was about the problems of the union Labour Movement of the whole world, but in particular the state of the Communist Party in Britain.

Charlie got on to questions of organising building workers and said he thought some of our present day full-time union officers didn't have a clue about the difficulties compared with the days when he was a young bricklayer. He described an example from the mid 1930s when he was working on a site at Craigmillar Edinburgh and the union organiser came on the job, Old Neillie Dick we called him - he was put on the road by the contributions of the branch members in those days Edinburgh No 1 AUBTW. So Neillie asked one of the bricklayers, Frank Inglis, to join the union. Inglis grabbed Neillie by the throat, nearly throttled him and told him to get to F….. off the job.

Our talk wasn't just about all our yesterdays, although I told Charlie that now that I was retired from full-time employment I felt I should try and put down in writing or some way the experiences we had as building workers trying to build the union, the Communist Party and the Labour Movement in general. I especially want to put something on record about the workers themselves, our branch members and others, and all the struggles we had around hundreds of issues affecting our lives.

Charlie encouraged me to do so and now here I am making the first attempts. Certainly I have been thinking about it for some time. I spoke to Jan Druker and Judy Secker who also tried to encourage me to carry on with it (both were research workers with UCATT) and they explained all I would have to do was get a tape recorder and speak into it. Perhaps I'll try that as well, but I'm not very technical in these matters so it looks as if it will be pen pushing on my own.

I've had experience I suppose, like most union officials, of speaking on recorders. I found that was quite easy as long as someone was prompting you with questions such as Jan Druker who was working on a history of construction workers and she was taping our remarks. Jan made it very easy for us; she used to catch some of us on UCATT Executive Committee after business was over and some of us adjourned to the local pub. She would have her recording gear with her, sit beside whoever she was interviewing and that was easy. I often used to ask her if she was still recording my remarks and of course she was.

It is a far different task for the likes of me to sit down and write about the lives of people. I feel very inhibited indeed and wonder where the hell to begin and even to write feels stultifying. I now begin to feel the handicap of what we termed as an "Elementary Education" and for me that was St John's RC school Portobello. In no way do I blame the teachers for my handicap and I am certainly not handicapped personally in comparison with my school mates. As a matter of fact, I was considered quite a good writer in later school days and won a first prize for an essay on "lifeboats" among Edinburgh schools. Still, I think many of us were only at the dawn of an education when we were tossed out of school on to the labour market at the age of fourteen. It goes without saying of course that nearly all of us were glad to be finished with school, but that conclusion only proves how completely inadequate our schooling was. I don't know how many times I've said over the years and I'll keep repeating it: "We were trained to be carriers of wood and drawers of water" and some of us advanced to be able to read a foot rule and so we became bricklayers and joiners etc. Our less fortunate mates became "untouchables" and were relegated to so called unskilled jobs, such as labourers or work in factories, service industries, etc.

The dawn of education, and I mean school, began to get a bit more interesting only after we passed the "Qually", that was the Qualifying Exam which all elementary schools undertook, a test paper the children sat about the age of twelve or thirteen; those who passed went off to a senior class before leaving at fourteen years of age. At St John's our senior teachers were excellent. I can hardly avoid mentioning names like Mr Duffy and Miss Hannah - Duffy, who led us on to literature and our first introduction to Shakespeare, even enacting some of the plays in the classroom, and Miss Hannah who made arithmetic become maths and algebra and could even make it interesting.

However the new enlightenment was cut short all too soon and out we went to find what jobs we could. Some of us thought we got too much religious instruction at Catholic schools. I suppose that's true and Charlie McManus, the bricklayer, got his schooling at St Pat's school which catered for Catholics around Canongate and Blackfriars Street where he lived.

Charlie used to describe his schooldays thus:
At St Pat's this was the extent of our schooling
'Who made thee? God made me
Why did God make thee?'
Christ knows why, I've often wondered why! And, after that we were given a lump of plasticine to play for a while, and then once again.
'Who made thee? God made me
Why did God make thee?' etc. etc.

1987 Recollections of the building industry

My date of birth was the 29th September 1919, Pipe Street, Portobello, that's part of Edinburgh now and was then. My first job after leaving school was Portobello Laundry. In those days you left school at fourteen which included me, and some of my pals worked in that job and my sisters worked in the laundry so I started as a van boy in Portobello Laundry. I first started in the construction industry after I was about a year as a van boy in the laundry. My brother, who was a bricklayer, influenced me and my parents to give me an apprenticeship but my father actually got me the job, so I started as an apprentice with a firm who built a lot of houses around Portobello and Duddingston. His name was Thomas Binnie and I started there as an apprentice bricklayer.

Apprentice years

I was trained with bricklayers who worked for Binnie, local bricklayers; one of them was an English bricklayer. Thomas Binnie himself was a craftsman bricklayer who had worked all over the world and had started in business, just a very small business in Portobello. So that was my first training. I might as well go right through it. Now after that I fell out with old Binnie who, in many ways, was kind to me. I should have said that when I started as an apprentice bricklayer my wages dropped; I even had less wages when I started as an apprentice bricklayer than I had as a van boy. So it shows how keen my parents were to get me a trade. That was a very important thing in those days, it still is. I dropped in wages, I think I dropped to ten and sixpence a week, that was an apprentice's wage in those days – mind you I'm going back to when I was fifteen. So Binnie himself gave me my wage packet for my mother which was ten and sixpence, that was the official first year apprentice rate and then he gave me one and sixpence to myself which was really very kind. One wage was for my mother – "that's for your mother, not to be opened and that's for yourself, one and sixpence". So I didn't really drop much in pocket money - that was my first wage.

Later I fell out with old Binnie and I started again almost immediately, I was not idle for hardly a week. I started with another firm, Ford and Tory, a well-known firm who built a great part of all the houses around Duddingston. They were joiners and I just transferred to them, I was still an apprentice bricklayer. So that was the first part of my training. After that I became what we called a runaway apprentic; I found out later I was not the only one. Some of us ran away from our apprenticeships, in other words, without running away from the trade, we ran away from firms where we were regular apprentices. I done that as well and I ran away to London – it was a very long way. But, of course my brother was a bricklayer and told my mother to get me down there. I was still an apprentice in London – worked with a firm still on the go, Bovis, only in London I got a man's wage not a bricklayer's wage but I got the same wage as a bricklayer's labourer got in Scotland – that was two pounds fifteen shillings, that was a labourer's wage. I got that as an apprentice; I was still considered an apprentice with that firm in London, so basically that's where I got my initial training, Binnie, Ford and Tory and Bovis.

We had to buy all our own tools. Our tools were fairly basic bricklayer's tools. A joiner needs far more tools as you know and they cost the joiner plenty. A bricklayer, not an apprentice bricklayer, needed a plumb rule and in those days spirit levels were becoming popular. The old plumb bobs were made by a joiner – plum rule, they called it, which was a piece of wood straightened by a joiner which had a plumb bob – a bit of string and the lead which was really a very accurate tool for keeping walls plumb; very, very accurate. The spirit level was a speedier tool and much more fashionable with young bricklayers. So, you needed a plumb rule, a brick trowel, a brick hammer, a heavy hammer – that was a mash hammer and a bolster and some chisels. Line pins and lines, these were your basic tools – you had to buy them all yourself.

The pre-war building industry

The basic work in Edinburgh was housing – council housing was very widespread and by the time that I'd finished my time and then went into the army, the forces, we were building council housing mostly, and the alternative was generally private housing, as well as extensions to factories – such as the rubber mill, breweries, all the general commercial work around Edinburgh. Mostly, the building workers – bricklayers, joiners, all these traditional trades, would be employed on council housing or private housing.

Before the war, supervision was, generally there would be what we called an agent in Scotland, that's how they still term them – in London we called them the guv'nor. He was the main representative of the company on the site and he was called the agent. Under the agent came very often a general foreman – that was the foreman who was responsible for all trades. Under him, if I use the word 'under' you know what I mean – that's how we speak – under him there would be trades foreman which meant separate foreman for bricklayers, joiners, plasterers – these main trades. The other trades like slaters and tilers, painters – these were always subcontractors; subcontractors to the main firm. These trades - such as bricklayers, joiners, plasterers - would generally be employed by the main contractor. In those days, that was how the supervision operated.

It didn't operate like that later – it changed when bonus came on the scene, bonus working, bonus incentives; it was a tremendous change in the construction industry. All the old union leadership hated any form of bonus, for from time immemorial right up until the end of the war, the second world war, they were strongly opposed to any bonus working, and incentive schemes of any kind, bitterly opposed, strongly opposed. The change came during the war – it was a very radical change; Ernest Bevin was the Minister of Labour and he was instrumental in bringing about this change which was

strongly opposed by all the building union leaderships. But he brought incentives in under government control. These were government controlled jobs. The jobs became absolutely essential for the war effort. They called it the 'Essential Works Order' in those days, that was the second wartime order, but it brought bonus working incentives into the construction industry.

It was in its infancy before the war, in Edinburgh as well, on private housing; McTaggart and Mickel were still operating in Edinburgh and Glasgow. They had bonus systems, they were absolutely unofficial, but they were the beginning of this incentive working. It became official during the war under the government schemes and the unions had to recognise it under the compulsion. Then, after the war, it was coming rapidly, it was already on the sites and it meant, for the men operating it, a substantial increase in earnings. By the way, you had to produce work for that wage, for that bonus, and on the job we knew that a bonus was coming, nobody could stop that. To stop it was like King Canute trying to stop the tide – we knew it was there and we wanted it controlled by the unions but the leadership of the unions was dominated by the right wing. They were strongly opposed to bonuses, but eventually they had to swallow it and agree because it was the only way they could get an increase in wages in the early days after the war, so supervision became different.

When you had bonus working, with squads of bonus bricklayers, the bricklayers were the first to start operating bonus generally, now all trades operate it, it meant there was not much supervision; you would have the supervision but as far as production was concerned, bonus squads organised their own production because it was half of their wages. Bonus doubled their wages. So, although you still had the squad foremen appointed by the firm, in the squad you would appoint someone who was capable, in other words you chose them by their ability. Very often foremen were chosen for their servility by companies.

In terms of the technique of laying bricks, the change was that brickwork was loadbearing mostly before the war; by loadbearing we mean the brick walls took the whole weight of the building. You also had the bigger jobs like office blocks, factories, generally big commercial jobs. You would have a steel skeleton and the steel itself would take weight but apart from that, on housing, the brickwork was all loadbearing brick, therefore walls were far thicker. When the new techniques developed, after the war, brickwork more and more became cladding only – cladding on the outside, filling in, the load was taken again by steel or prefabricated concrete structures – steel and concrete, and brickwork more and more became cladding. It's used very much as cladding now, and it's become face brickwork, finished brickwork is becoming very common, more prevalent, even in Scotland. That's a big change, because if you look at the buildings in Scotland, older ones were all stone.

One of the reasons was Scotland doesn't have a great deal of clay. Well, when you think of the Thames Valley and some of the other rivers they've got more clay in England. Scotland did not have so much good clay and consequently it didn't have such good face brick. So face brick was not as common in Scotland as it was in England. It's becoming more common now and the reason is, of course, that they transport bricks from England up here. Must be just about as cheap to transport them.

Tradesmen's wages then, in Edinburgh, strange how we can clearly remember some wages, like recently because wages changed so much or the pressure of inflation – it's not so easy to remember all the different wages, but a tradesman's wage, the hourly rate, in Edinburgh I'm speaking about, before the first World War, was one and eightpence ha'penny, which gave a craftsman, if he had a full week, gave him something like three pounds fifteen shillings, you'll have to transfer that into pence, which is easy enough. And that was a good wage comparatively and I think that a building trade craftsman in those days was just about the highest paid craftsman,

which is radically changed now, but speaking then, three pounds fifteen shillings was a good wage if you had a full week. You didn't have a full wage every week, of course, because then we were subject to idleness through bad weather; if it rained fairly heavy or steady, bricklayers, who were generally outside workers, and their labourers, they were what we called 'rained off' – we still call it that. They got no payment whatever, no guaranteed time, no standby time whatever; they were only paid for the actual time they worked. They were not paid for meal breaks either.

In those days there was very little change took place in wages. Changes came with the advent of the war and then, by the end of the war, the rate was, I remember it very well, the building craftsman's rate after the war, speaking about 1946/1947 was five pounds eight shillings, that was my wage after the war, which, I would say was in value, for what you could buy, was a greater, a bigger wage by far than what the basic wage is now.

To me, there's no such thing as a fair wage. It was Frederick Engels that taught us that. When they speak about fair wages, some trade union leaders still speak like that, but to me there's no such thing as a fair wage. There's such a thing as a good wage, a decent wage, but it never could be fair as long as you were working for an employer. You wouldn't be working for the employer unless he was making some profit out of you and as long as it happens, wages will never be fair but the five pounds eight shillings was I would say, in comparison.

We were what you call bonus bricklayers. Not all bricklayers were bonus bricklayers and taking the construction industry now throughout Britain, there's about half of the workers don't earn more than what we call the minimum earnings, which means, of course, that the other half do earn more. In those days, when I was young, just after the war, we had an idea of other people's wages. Now, a bonus bricklayer, considering he hasn't always a full week, your earnings were doubled we reckoned if it was a good bonus job and by the way we were not satisfied with our wages unless we could double them. That's double the basic wage – we considered that a decent wage. Other workers like shipyard workers, well our wages were commensurate; the highest earners amongst them perhaps were more, such as the most skilled boiler-makers were very high earners then. Our wages were probably better than the average factory-worker in those days.

Before the Second War a building tradesman had about the highest rate for the job but after the war, not so much, only the ones who were earning a good bonus, double wages, they would be earning more than generally factory workers or shop assistants or brewery workers or postmen, possibly not as much as the miners, although again, you know that not all miners earn the same.

We worked forty-four hours when I began, and that included four hours on a Saturday, that was the hours throughout the building trade although I think in England it was different. They worked longer. The hours changed radically, the official hours. What we called the Working Rule Agreement was an agreement made between the NFBTE – National Federation of Building Trade Employers – and the NFBTO, that was the term for the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives; those two bodies arrive at an agreement, which was called the Working Rule Agreement – WRA. The agreement under those hours were forty-four before the Second World War, remained the same during the war, although it was different in England – they worked, forty-six and a half. The forty-hour week had been demanded for many years. Incidentally, I would say the building workers in Britain, in Scotland in particular, were the very first of the industrial workers to achieve the forty-hour week. I was working on South Houses at the time, out at Gracemount for Miller when the breakthrough was made on the forty-hour week, to the credit of the union leaderships – it's not often I pay them a compliment – and in particular a man called Charles Brownlee.

Charlie Brownlee was the secretary of the Scottish Region, it used to be the Scottish Employers, and he was involved with the plumbers' union and was the secretary of the NFBTO in Scotland, responsible for bringing an agreement off for the Scottish Plumbers and it was a forty-hour week. Now Brownlee recognised that this was a contradiction because the Plumbers' union was part of the NFBTO. The plumbers agreement on a forty-hour week created an anomaly and Brownlee seized the opportunity to bring the forty-hour week to all building workers in Scotland – not of course without dispute and a determined struggle by those workers.

There was no sick pay and there was no payment for broken time either, which was even more important, broken time was bad weather, rainy weather. Outside workers were rained off and you were rained off not always by choice – some of the men would have worked, others wouldn't. The strongest characters and the strongest militants wouldn't but production-wise it was harmful – the mortar became so soggy that you couldn't build in very heavy rain. The other extreme case, of course, is frost. Any signs of frost harming the brickwork, the job was immediately laid off and before the war there was no such thing as a guaranteed week except, I should say, for one of the first experiences of payment for broken time for bad weather or what we called the guaranteed week - the Glasgow Direct Labour Organisation which in our opinion was a wonderful thing. The Glasgow Direct Labour, certainly in Scotland, was the example where the building workers for the first time in their lives in Scotland were paid a guaranteed week. They even used to say to them, "We guarantee you a year's work and a guaranteed week" but that was not a general agreement in the construction industry, that was only Glasgow Corporation Direct Labour Department.

There was no holiday pay whatever. You know the term "Glasgow Fair week" and "Edinburgh Trades week"? Both meant the same thing. It was common practice in Edinburgh and elsewhere, for the building workers, and not only for the building workers, this applied to other workers as well, factory workers and shipyards and so on, for the job to be closed for three days during the Edinburgh Trades week and quite a lot of the Edinburgh bricklayers used to go on their holidays and work in Aberdeen. That was their holidays.

Holiday pay came in during the war years again, where the workers were becoming more important, were necessary. And I don't say that cynically; I quite believe it was absolutely essential for workers to be given those concessions, even if it was to help the war effort. I think it started about 1942 – and the holidays with pay scheme came out which was a tremendous advance for the building workers and that scheme has been the pioneer for a lot of other absolutely essential advances which have been made. But the idea of the scheme was that all the employers paid the building worker a stamp for every week he was employed. The value of the stamps have gone up year by year but they created what they called the "Holiday with Pay Management Scheme" and it was run by a private company - their headquarters now are in Crawley in Sussex - and that was the very beginning during the war years where building workers, according to the numbers of stamps they had on their card – their holiday cards, were paid that sum for their holiday. They had to take the holiday; that was the idea. Some of the building workers remained working, some were even too poor to take a holiday and then got paid their stamps, and some of them worked elsewhere but generally they recognised the holiday and took the holiday – that was the first payment of the holidays for building workers. I think the movement of holidays with pay came from France and it came under what they called the 'Popular Front' in mid 1930s government in France. That was the first time, I think, European workers were paid and it spread to Britain.

I've made I don't know how many speeches, at the Trades Union Congress as well, on the accidents in the construction industry. Just before I retired, every week there was a construction worker killed which meant the figures were down to about 70. Well, now fatal accidents have increased again in construction so it's up – latest figures show something like 150 killed each year. An extremely dangerous job and when you consider there was no protective footwear, bar what you bought yourself, we'd never heard of steel-capped shoes or boots then. There was no protective clothing and certainly helmets, the hard hats as the building-workers call them, there was no such thing, so accidents were very prevalent. Every building worker without exception would be able to tell you about a fatal accident that he has witnessed or serious accidents. It's extremely dangerous.

Before the war, on housing, bricklayers worked off scaffolds that were primitive and they built the houses from the inside, they didn't have the scaffolding on the outside which is common enough now; but even in England, in London, they worked from outside scaffoldings. The building worker in Scotland, the bricklayers in particular and masons, they worked what they called "overhand": they built the houses up to the first lift four feet six, second lift took it to the wall head level, that was ceiling height; the joists were put on the inside and you started again from the inside. They worked from four feet trestles and batons; that's what we called them. Nowadays tubular scaffolding is far more prevalent – much safer, although you see the accident rate is still going up, but it was an extremely dangerous job. Things like falling objects, falling men, falling objects were the greatest cause of accidents: men falling from scaffolds, bad scaffolds sometimes – what they called traps. Have you ever heard of that one about the Irishman who built the scaffold? Sometimes if a baton had no support, it was loose; he stood on the plank, we called them batons, down it went and this bricklayer said to the Irish labourer who was scaffolding "Look, that plank that you've just put down there, that's a trap." And the Irishman said "It's not a trap, just don't you stand on it. It was not a trap as long as you didn't stand on it." Of course, that was common, and accidents, fatal accidents, serious accidents were very common: many men climbing ladders and in those days they had ramps in Scotland; they built ramps for the labourers – the hod carriers, they had hod carriers then. That's almost a thing of the past in Scotland; they still have them in England and they still work very efficiently in England. In Scotland they used to have these ramps, they built a ramp from the ground with trestles and batons, like a wooden road and they used to run up there. Of course the baton could only go so high and after that it was all ladder work.

And then it was all ladder work, hoists were almost unheard of in those days but then they became widespread. During the war and after the war, mechanical aids like hoists, you would call them lifts, were introduced which took the materials up to the men on each floor and then, of course, more elaborate hoists were there in the multi-storey buildings. Accidents were very, very common.

Even as an apprentice, even in those days when I worked with Ford and Tory, the men who worked with the bricklayers, a lot of them, certainly not all of them, but a lot of them were already in the union. They had a system – I don't know what they called it – shop-steward or the card steward. They used to have card stewards and he would take their contribution up to the branch so even when I was a boy, an apprentice, the men I worked with on the Edinburgh scene, many of them were members of the union.

The AUBTW – Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers –was the bricklayers' union which, of course was the masons and bricklayers amalgamated. They organised tradesmen – bricklayers, masons, tile-fixers, terrazzo workers – that was that union. The joiners were in the ASW, the Amalgamafed Society of Woodworkers, that was the joiners' union.

When I was a boy certainly there was no compulsion, it was voluntary. In Edinburgh then, they had an organiser – his name was Neilly Dick, he was an old man in my time, when I was a boy I thought he was a very old man. He was not even full-time, he was part-time, and his wages were paid for the by the branches in Edinburgh – the branches of the AUBTW. There was Number One Branch, Number Two Branch, which was mostly masons and there was a Number Three Branch, which was mostly masons – there were more masons before the war, as you can imagine and there was Leith Branch. Apart from the money that went to the National Union, and it was a national union, a British Union not just Scottish, so the Edinburgh branches they levied themselves. I don' remember what the levy was but it was quite substantial so they put that man Neilly Dick on the road and his job was to go round the sites and convince or force the bricklayers into the union. When I was a boy I remember him – funny he didn't bother about apprentices, they left it up to yourself although some of them encouraged you to join but some of the bricklayers used to hide from old Neilly Dick, used to hide when he came on the job. Of course, other ones who were in the union would tell him "So and so's there and so and so's there. You'd better get them in."

The ones that were in the union were really quite strong and the branches were far better attended in those days. Wages were very local indeed, you know, they had different rates, even in Scotland. Wages and conditions were negotiated locally so at a branch meeting more people attended because it was very important in their life if they had a complaint about the employer of if they had not been paid their proper wages or were entitled to certain rights, like fares, travelling time. It was not compulsory but if there was a very strongly-organised job - and there were such jobs, I remember hearing one about Leuchars aerodrome when that was built, certain jobs had strong unionisation – it was compulsory for the bricklayers, some of them had to join the unions. They didn't have to be a union member to get on the job, on strongly organised jobs, once they were on it they had to join.

Union activity

I was active in the branch, then I became a shop steward when I came out of the Forces before the end of the war. As soon as I came out, the first job I landed in was in Peterhead, thirty miles north of Aberdeen working on an aerodrome. The first job I was on after I came out of the army I was elected shop steward. By the way, I joined the union when I was an apprentice in London and that was voluntarily. I joined when I was an apprentice under the influence of my brother. As soon as I came out the Forces, the first site I landed on was direction of labour. Direction of labour was still prevalent, in other words when you signed on as unemployed, you were directed if there was any work and of course – you had to accept it. If you didn't accept that, you got no dole money, so I was a shop steward in the first job in Peterhead. From then on, I was always active in the union and served every position in the branch from a shop steward to the federation steward, which was a convenor and officially recognised as shop steward - which meant your credentials were issued by the regional organiser for the NFBTO as these were official appointments, though unpaid - and then from Branch Committee to Branch Chairman, Branch Secretary then Delegate to the National Conference. I became a delegate and then was elected to the Executive of the AUBTW from 1964. It was a lay Executive, a rank and file Executive, but the National Officers, they were full-time. Then later on I was elected from that body to the new Union, UCATT, a new merged union. I became an executive member of that for the remainder of my time. I was elected Chairman of the Union and President of the Scottish Trade Union

Congress, so I was an active member from an early age.

I was an active member of the Communist Party as well from when I came out the forces and I've remained a member of the Communist Party up till now; I'm not likely to leave. There's one good reason why I'll never leave – I don't think I'll get into heaven if I ever left the Communist Party.

My brother influenced me, even as a bricklayer, to learn the technique. I used to read a lot of his notebooks on brickwork, various bonds, the bricklayers always speak about bonds. It was far more important then, brickwork being load-bearing and various bonds were very important; they still are for strength and also for decoration. So he influenced me that way but he also, without a doubt, influenced me politically as well and influenced me to join the union. First time I joined the union was in London, joined Willesden branch and I was just an apprentice. I volunteered to join; I went down to the branch and joined. Portobello had quite an active Communist Party there, very active, and the people concerned, Donald Renton who became a nationally known person in the unemployed workers' movement and also later became an Edinburgh councillor, although he left the Communist Party and joined the Labour Party, before the time in Hungary - I think about 1955, '56. My brother influenced me to master the trade -, I'm now the chairman of the Brickwork Committee for the whole of the Britain, the Construction Industry Training Board, which draws up the curriculum for the training programme for all apprentices.

So my brother influenced me, first of all to master that trade and then I think he influenced my politically as well and then, after that, of course I started going to all the meetings. We used to go to the meetings in Edinburgh, when we'd just left school, we used to go to the Mound in Edinburgh and listen to the speakers there and then of course during the war some of us became very influenced by the war and against Fascism. We were very well aware of Spain, what was happening in Spain before the war and we knew of people who volunteered to go to Spain. Some of us at my age were a wee bit young for that. Of course I used to go to the meetings in London as well.

Before the war and after the war, after I became active, the relationship with "nons" as we called them, we persuaded them to join the union and the union membership was stronger. So if you were a shop steward, or even if you were not a shop steward, you would try and persuade people to join the union and you would use persuasion such as you would tell them the benefits. Without the union, they could do nothing, the most obvious one is, they could have a serious accident any day, even a fatal accident, and without the union there was very, very little they could do about that, very little. With the union behind them, they could do plenty, that was very elementary, but quite important. And the other thing is, we tried to persuade them that union membership meant better conditions, such as a tea break, even then, even after the tea break had been won, still there was a lot of places where firms didn't operate it.

Tea break strike – May 1946

The tea break strike was a very widespread, well-known dispute that struck all the headlines of the day; the Scottish and the Edinburgh papers. During the war, the tea-break became a custom in British Industry so that everyone had a tea-break as a matter of course, there was government legislation.

The words of that one time popular song went:

I like a nice cup of team in the morning
Just to start the day you see
At half past eleven my idea of heaven
Is a nice cup of tea

But those words stuck in the gullet of the Scottish National Federation of Building Trade Employers in 1946 and so they came to the conclusion that they would stop the tea break of the building workers in Scotland. Consequently they issued directions to all their affiliates and the notices were posted up on the sites to the effect that there would be no tea break from 12th May 1946. That was there decision! However the building workers decided different.

Just imagine we had not long finished the great war against Nazism, the tea break had become a recognised custom throughout the whole of British Industry, we had the Atlee Labour government in office and a great many of us on the building sites were still wearing battledress and here was one of our first awards by the employers: "No more tea breaks". Incidentally, we only had a morning tea break, the mid-day break 12.30 till 1.00pm was unpaid.

I was shop steward for the AUBTW on Southfield site of Scottish Orlit; Jimmy Kerr was Federation steward. We had a fairly well organised site with a stewards committee from all trades. It was a contract involving 400 houses for Edinburgh City Council and it was a period when a very extensive housing programme was underway throughout Scotland and the whole of the UK. The tea break notices took us by complete surprise, as there was no warning through the official channels of the unions.

There was another building site in the same area of Southfield, I think McAndrew was the main contractor and I believe they were erecting about 100 prefabs (prefabricated temporary dwellings). When they saw the notice they "downed tools" immediately and, when we heard about this, Kerr and myself met their stewards, a brickie and a joiner; we suggested we would hold a meeting next on the bigger site and that we should coordinate any action. We held our site meeting next day, after we had had a discussion with our stewards committee which recommended we contact all sites in Edinburgh and call for a stoppage on all sites for Wednesday 8th May, with a demonstration preceded by a march through the centre of the city to Parliament Square. I put that proposal to the meeting which was agreed without dispute. I was then given the task of contacting as many jobs as I could cover and we only had three days to organise it.

It was not just a question of contact; in order to get a response from the men it meant meeting wherever possible, and meetings could only be held at the tea break or lunch break and sites were scattered throughout the city and usually on the outskirts. I had a good response on all jobs covered and word spread rapidly through the grapevine. Remember we had no cars in those days except for some Union Officials. What surprised us at the demonstration on the 8th May was the number of workers from small jobs and firms and many from well outside the city. We had agreed we would work on the forenoon of the 8th; that was tactical, so that we would have the workforce ready assembled and no drifting off home. That meant as well fairly long marches from sites into the centre; Southfield was nearly 3 miles from the city centre. It should be taken into account that this was the very first demonstration on an individual issue by workers in Edinburgh, possibly in Scotland, in the immediate post war period and for almost all of those workers the first time in their lives they had taken industrial action against the employers.

The media derided us "how stupid and irresponsible could we be, imagine causing a strike over a paltry issue like a cup of tea". Those were the days of sneering jokes about the laziness of building workers, such as one joke went as "I walked along this street I looked up at a building and was surprised to see a line of stationary figures, I thought they were statues, and then it dawned on me they were bricklayers" etc.etc.

They were also days of widespread shortages of all kinds of material and building components because of an economy that had only emerged from the war effort, which was still on food rationing and there were many hold ups on construction programmes. We were enthusiastic towards the housing drive and supportive towards the Atlee Labour government. We had after all worked hard to put that government in, the whole Labour Movement, by which we mean Communist Party, Labour Party, Trade Unions, Coop Movement and - as Harry Pollitt used to term it - "all serious minded workers", welcomed the return of a Labour government, and the activist building workers were keen to see the expanded housing drive succeed. Certainly those of us who were Communist Party members had supported the Communist candidates in the General Election, such as William Gallacher in West Fife, but we had also actively supported the Labour candidates everywhere else; we worked our eyeballs out in that election. For example, Jimmy Kerr, the Federation steward at Southfield, and myself, among other things plastered the walls galore with posters advertising Ernest Bevin's public meeting in Wood Park's football ground; neither of us had any time or respect for Bevin then or since, but it was the local Labour candidate and party we were helping.

So perhaps it was no coincidence that our main slogan on the biggest poster on the march was "The tea break helps production"; certainly not a very revolutionary demand. On the other hand, one can not imagine a more backward looking, primitive, greedy set of employers than the Building Employers Federation. They grudged even a cup of tea to men, many of whom left their homes as early as 6.30am in the morning

and often in the most bitter winter weather conditions, some travelling in open trucks or trucks with tarpaulin covers where the draft would blow your brains out. You would need your brains blown out to suffer such conditions! But if you wanted that job, you had to grin and bear the indignity of such travel.

So we organised the protest to bring public pressure to bear on the employers and, as luck would have it, for it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, the musicians union was on strike in Edinburgh at this juncture. So we got a band from their ranks which they quickly organised under the guiding hand of Tony Fusco, well known band leader of that time.

The day came, a perfect day of sunshine and after a long trek from different sites we all met at the Mound, that famous public forum in the middle of Princes Street. Well the weather and the gods were on our side, but unfortunately but not surprisingly the police were not. We had planned for the meeting to be at Parliament Square in the High Street and we had the Magistrates permission, but the police chief called me over to his group - there were not many of them, I think about twenty officers at the Mound - and told me we would have to take a route to Parliament Square up the Mound to avoid traffic congestion in Princes Street and the Bridges. I went back to the shop stewards and reported what he said. "Not on" shouted Tiger Weir "he is not on" echoed the others. "We haven't come this far to be put up a quiet diversion, Princes Street it is, and I went back to the chief and said we are going along Princes Street", he told me I would be held responsible and could be charged with obstruction or a breach of the peace. "So be it" I said, but that was our decision and Princes Street it was. With the musicians union band at our head, we led one of the most cheerful and enthusiastic demonstrations ever seen in that famous street where there was a friendly welcome from the crowds of shoppers and the shop and the hotel workers in the upper storey cheered us on our way.

At the GPO we turned up North Bridge and right turn again at the Tron and up the High Street to Parliament Square where the meeting was to be held. We had a platform ready in front of the main entrance door of St Giles Cathedral. Our platform was a four-wheeled cart which had enough chairs for the stewards - the chairs came from the union branch rooms in Meldrum Place - and thereby lies a drama. We had hired a horse and cart from a well know character of Portobello, Dick Webber. Dick had a little shop in Pipe Street and also a one man business of contracting with his horse and cart, so he readily agreed to place his cart in Parliament Square just at the right time. Now Dick had far more respect for money than he had for policeman and I suppose little sympathy for unions, and ironically he was nearly arrested for causing an obstruction with his horse and cart; he told us the police were threatening to charge him - we said "Don't worry, we'll look any fines". I don't think Dick was worrying about his reputation. Parliament Square was packed solid with building workers and general public. The meeting went ahead to a successful conclusion, but this was only the beginning of a more protracted struggle.

The employers, true to their word, stopped the tea break (strange how they are always true to that kind of word). We expected this and we organised a shop stewards' committee to carry forward what we had started. We met every week. I was made the chairman. We had decided that, where we had steward organisation, the stewards would blow the whistle for the ten-minute tea break, and elsewhere we called on the workers still to take their break as usual.

On the biggest jobs, the whistle stop continued however. The employers replied by stopping a quarter of an hour each day off our wages; that was one and a half hours docked every week, a substantial cut in earning at that time - and that is how vindictive and determined they were, the employers, to stop the morning tea break. The stopping of time out of wages undoubtedly gave us problems keeping the men together.

A difficulty arose at the Southfield site, where Arnott McLeod had sub contracted work from Scottish Orlit. One of our stewards for labourers was promoted to a ganger, an old trick of the employers, and by the use of intimidation and deceit he managed to get the labourers with McLeod to ignore the tea break whistle and continue working. We had a meeting of the stewards after I spoke to the labourers concerned, but the ganger was adamant and it came to fisticuffs, not such an unusual occurrence on building sites.

Most of the men and jobs were however loyal to the shop stewards, including all over the city, and the struggle continued for many months, spreading to areas all over Scotland. This movement of protest about the tea break strike and the continuing dispute was unofficial but, like many other unofficial movements affecting construction workers, become recognised by the leadership structure of the unions and eventually the operative side of Scottish National Joint Council of the Building Industry achieved the recognition of the morning tea break in the Working Rules of that body.
Here is the extract from page 9:
Working hours, Working Rule 2, note re tea breaks – The Scottish Regional Joint Committee of the National Joint Council has decided to adopt the declaration made by the National Joint Council for the Building Industry on the 3rd March 1947 with regard to tea breaks, namely The Council agreed that the claim as tabled (that a forenoon break of ten minutes be allowed and paid for by the employer) should be withdrawn on a declaration of the Council, that the taking of tea at the place of work is not considered a breach of the present rules.

This was not the end of the issue and, although we achieved recognition in the Working Rules in Scotland, this was not the case in England and Wales, and many disputes broke out in later years over tea breaks. This only proves that all improvements in working conditions, no matter how trivial they seem, have to be wrung from employers and thereafter have to be protected by extreme vigilance by the workers concerned and a readiness to take industrial action to safeguard any reforms.

Guaranteed week/the struggle to achieve it

Mention has been made of the housing drive by the Labour government of that time and that the Building Unions in the NFBTO (National Federation of Building Trade Operatives) welcomed this effort. For our pains, however, came another setback: we lost the guaranteed 44 hour week in March 1947, following one of the worst periods of cold weather we had experienced in our lifetime with the winter of 1946-47. On the Southfield site in Edinburgh we were frozen out for 8 full weeks, an experience suffered by practically all building workers throughout the UK. That was a terrible winter, when even rail points froze at pit heads and coal could only be moved under great difficulties. Emmanuel Shinwell was Energy Minister then and he came under vicious attack from the media and the Tories; even the bad weather was blamed on Labour. Later on it became fashionable, after the cold war started and following Churchill's Fulton speech, to blame it on the Russians.

As far as construction men, the positive side was that we were on the 44 hour guarantee, the greatest blessing we had ever known - unbroken wages in bad weather! The Agreement most of us were still working under was called the "EWO" Essential Works Order. This agreement was a further development of the "Uniformity Agreement" of 1940, which was an attempt to try and solve the contradictions caused by having two sets of differing national conditions covering building workers: the Working Rules of the National Joint Council for the Building Industry and the rules drawn up by the Civil Engineering Conciliation Board. Disputes took place on many sites to determine what set of rules should apply. The Civil Engineering rules were strongly resented, especially by building craftsmen, as inferior, for example paying lower fares and travelling time as well as lower rates for overtime. This was a contention the war-time government could not afford because of the priority building programmes for the war effort. The Uniformity Agreement provided for a general set of working conditions on all priority jobs specified by the Ministry of Labour and operated by a joint board responsible for applying the Agreement.

Whilst the Agreement introduced more general practices throughout the industry during the war years, in the opinion of the government it did not go far enough. George Hicks, president of the NFBTO and member of the AUBTW had been appointed by the government as Minister of Works and Building at an early stage of the war. This appointment was looked on by unions in construction as a move to bring the industry under direct control by Parliament, to ensure that its total material and manpower resources would be used primarily for the war effort. This was confirmed by the passing of the Essential Work (Building and Civil Engineering Contracting Industries) Order 1941, what we called the EWO, despite the opposition of the unions.

The most important provisions of the EWO were the introduction of Payment by Results (PBR) (Bonus Schemes) and a guaranteed week of 44 hours wage clause, and these applied to all scheduled contracts under the order. There were many other provisions and those interested should refer to "A Union to Build. The Story of UCATT) by Les Wood, General Secretary of UCATT (1978 to 1985). We will come back to the effect many of those changes had on the lives of the building workers, but at this stage I want to deal with the effect the ending of the EWO had on us.

One of the greatest setbacks was the loss of a fully 44 hour guaranteed week and the introduction of the 32 hour guaranteed week. It is a sad reflection on the top national leadership of the construction unions at that time, 1947, in a period of practically full employment, extensive demand for skilled labour, a strong bargaining position prevalent, an optimism of confidence among the membership, and a rising membership, that serious inroads were being made into working conditions from the employers' side.

The union leadership at National level was dominated by the right wing, out of touch with the rank and file at job level, even hostile toward the movement at what has come to be termed 'grass roots level'. Even when the full 44 hour guaranteed week was lost, it did not dawn on the national leadership that this was a setback; in answer to strong criticism from the membership, they continued to describe the 1945 32 hour guaranteed week agreement as an advance.

Luke Fawcett, General Secretary AUBTW, described it thus:

Here, probably is our biggest gain. We have for the first time in our history the guaranteed week.

What a sell out in comparison with the 44-hour guarantee of the EWO!

The leadership argued, the EWO was a wartime measure and could not automatically be retained in the National Working Rules, whilst the active membership at site level argued "Why not"? We were strong enough to enforce it on the employers, we were in a strong bargaining position, as proof of which we quoted the example of 1945 when the unions demanded a 4d per hour increase in wage rates - up to that time, in the history of the building unions, the largest single sum put forward by the operative side of the National Joint Council for the Building Industry. The full demand was conceded by the employers' side in January 1946. Mind you, the demand was reinforced by the greatest demonstration in living memory of building workers, who turned out in London's square. Led by Harry Weaver, Bill Smart, Joe Roots and their comrades, the Londoners were joined by thousands employed in that area under the Emergency Repairs Drive which brought to London building operatives from all over the country to tackle the damage on buildings caused by Hitler's bombers during the war years.

Nevertheless we lost the 44 hour guaranteed week, and later on the details of the negotiations between the unions and employers emerged. The 32 hour week agreement was first concluded with the Civil Engineering unions, led by the general unions TGWU and GMWU; the others unions had to follow suit. That division caused by the existence of two separate agreements led directly to the loss of the 44 hour guaranteed week and would continue to be a weakness among the unions and a menace to the interests of the building workers. The cause of the division is the determination of the leadership of the general unions to maintain a hold on the industry by retaining the controlling seats and votes on the Civil Engineering Conciliation Panel.

Many years were to pass before the full guaranteed agreement was conceded by the employers and many bitter struggles at job level took place during these ensuing years all over the country. The struggle of building workers and their unions for a guaranteed week and payment for time lost through inclement weather has been one of the most prolonged and bitterly fought issues affecting their lives and is by no means over and settled; it will in my opinion still be a bone of contention just as long as we have inclement weather alongside what is still an inadequate agreement on the conditions of the guaranteed week.

The official history books on building workers usually deal with the top level discussions on this subject, and of course these discussions are absolutely vital for progress to be made, providing of course any change in Working Rules means advancement for workers. Why do we say advancement for workers? Well, let us try and understand the principal issue here. Why is it in this day and age and for a long time past, that a worker, and here we mean a building worker who is ready and able to work and in the employment of an employer, can be deprived of his living through inclement weather? - an imposition unknown to workers in many other industries.

We have developed building materials of almost miraculous qualities, such as concrete and steel beams, which can support a roof span as wide as Euston Station or steel wire three millimetres thick which supports the Forth Road Bridge even in gusts of wind up to 150 mile per hour. And we can build hotels etc. where the inside astrosphere is that of a pleasant summer sunny afternoon in severe frost outside. But a building worker's livelihood can be cut off with the sudden onset of inclement weather, just like a bird of the air or a beast of the field.

I recall the days when I was an apprentice bricklayer, when there was no payment at all for lost time through bad weather; men could be rained off, frosted off, even winded off, and they were with no compensatory payment whatever. Severe frost – which meant freezing temperatures - resulted in almost certain idle unpaid time and no start again until a real thaw set in and until the thaw cleared the frost from materials like sand and bricks, which meant weeks of broken time every winter, and broken time as well in any part of the year through heavy rain and other inclement weather. These conditions affected the bricklayers and their labourers worst of all, because most of their work was outside in the exposed elements, hence the reason as well why the bricklayers and their union, the AUBTW, were the most conscious of the need for a guaranteed week and the foremost in the struggle to achieve it.

The winter of 1963 - 4

One of the worst winters was that of 1963-64 when some of us were working on the Southhouse site near Captain's Road Edinburgh. The main contractor was James Miller & Partners and the contract was for council houses for Edinburgh Corporation. I had been a shop steward on the site along with Charlie McManus, and we could not see eye to eye with the site agent. There was a number of skirmishes, not too serious, and then another one over bonus measurement, where we reckoned we were given short measure for one squad. The disagreement did not lead to any stoppage but it caused continual frictions between us. The outcome was that Jimmy Stewart, the AUBTW district organiser, came out to the site and appealed to McManus and me to stand down as stewards, which we reluctantly agreed to for the sake of some peace and two new stewards were elected. This incident preceded what was to be probably the worst winter since that of 1947, the winter of 1963. Building workers like farm workers or seamen will always remember really severe weather conditions because they have to work exposed to the elements and their livelihood can depend on the weather, as Jimmy Kerr, bricklayer and active union member, often said: "it's as simple as that".

I remember taking a walk along the sea front at Seafield, near Leith during that winter of 1963, when the very sea was frozen on the beach, it took the form of iced foam and the effect on bird life was devastating. Scattered along a stretch of about 300 yards among the debris of flotsam and jetsam were hundreds of dead seabirds and others; every box or tin, of wood, plastic, metal, cardboard etc. had a dead bird within, which had perished in its attempt to shelter from the weather. This winter of 1963 was one in which we building workers fought yet another battle around the struggle for the guaranteed week and here I relate that story.

In 1963 some of us were on the Southhouse site employed by James Miller & Partners Building and Civil Engineers who were carrying out what was called then "A negotiated contract" for Edinburgh Corporation. The "some of us" means quite a few activists in the union, Communist Party and Labour Party members and others not members of any party. The weather began to turn bad very early on, and we were worried that, if the job closed down, we would not get started again until well into the New Year and this was only the beginning of December. The firm's management was keen to continue working and many innovations were started on that job, which were quite unique at the time. For example, a central mix was organised which meant all mortar for all bricklayer squads was prepared from one large mixer, as an alternative to each individual gang having its own mixer.

All concrete was prepared by a central mixer, the water used by the central mix was heated to boiling point, all materials - such as bricks, blocks, sand, aggregates - were protected from rain and frost, fires burning discarded timber and rubbish were kept burning near green brickwork etc. All the work was covered up each night, everything was done to keep the job working and so work continued, through very low temperatures under freezing point. Our level of output was not so high as normal working, but we still made the bonus, which meant our production was still higher than the basic quotas. To work all day in such freezing conditions was a grim experience, but we were quite prepared to do it rather than be laid off and have to suffer the dole, for how long no one could tell.

This was the job of that legend we later described as:
One day after we had been working all day in sub-zero temperatures when we came down the ladder at finishing time, imagine our surprise to see six polar bears lying frozen to death in the snow.

The point is we did continue production on that site and, because of all protective measures that were taken, none of the work suffered frost damage at all and we were a bit taken aback when the shop stewards were informed by the management that there might be a lay off if the weather did not improve. The AUBTW stewards at the time were Peter Quinn and John Puickbie and I think it was on a Wednesday when the stewards were given notice of this by the agent, so when they told me I said to them "right, don't say another word to anyone, just leave it at that and we will wait till Friday". Friday came and the stewards were told by management "if there is no improvement in the weather over the weekend, tell the men not to turn out on Monday".

This of course was a blatant attempt by management on site to circumvent responsibility for paying the guaranteed wage during inclement weather. Well I made the case to the stewards and later on that Friday to the men on the site. I had already discussed it with Charlie McManus, Jimmy Williams, Jimmy Lynch and others among the activists. The case was based on our interpretation of the WRA:
if notice was to be given even for a temporary stoppage, then that notice should be given to each individual concerned personally; it wasn't good enough just to give a general notice to the stewards.

The deadline was two hours before finishing time on Friday. The deadline passed, and there were no individual notices given, so we held a meeting after knocking-off time, and asked all the workers to turn up for work on Monday morning as usual, whatever the weather. And further, we said they were entitled to a full guaranteed week's pay the following week, provided of course that they fulfilled the conditions of the guarantee, that is to make themselves available for work. Well we convinced them. We had a bit of a job convincing John Gallacher of Musselburgh. John was a bricklayer squad foreman, and he was not convinced of our case, but he said: "I'll stand by the decision of the meeting and I'll turn up like everyone else" and he did and also became one of our most stalwart supporters in the dispute.

Came Monday morning and snow had fallen fairly heavily over the weekend, but temperatures were no worse than we had worked in over the previous weeks. The workers turned up alright, to a man. I think there would be about a hundred men, mostly bricklayers and general operatives, the ones affected by the suspension. We checked in for work, at least we tried to check in, but the timekeeper had been told not to check anyone in. We had an answer for that "every man here, give your names to the shop stewards as evidence you have turned up for work".

This was done. We then advised every one to report to the Ministry of Employment to safeguard their unemployment benefit. Most of the lads signed on at Tollcross Labour Exchange in those days and we found when we got there that it was packed out with building workers from numerous sites throughout the city, also laid off with the weather.

We didn't take it lying down, we held meetings every day at the Tollcross Exchange, we organised demonstrations at the city chambers and the councillors and housing officials heard a deputation, where we demanded that sites under their jurisdiction be opened up for work - and here we meant contracts being carried out for the Corporation by private contractors. We organised a march from the Exchange to the offices of the Scottish Regional Council of the National Federation of Building Trade Employers in Melville Street. They refused to hear a deputation, so we held a meeting outside and some of us addressed the meeting from the steps of their offices, so no doubt they heard our demands loud and clear.

We demand you open up the jobs and we demand the guaranteed week.

The gods were on our side again and the weather was not bad; the Council officials supported us and pressure was brought to bear on those firms who had contracts with the Housing Department of the Corporation. I think the authorities were keen to get us off the streets. The result was some of the biggest contracts opened up after a closure of two weeks.

But a great many never started for two months. What about payment for the idle time? We continued our case with James Miller & Partners and, by the way, the operatives from the Southouse site of this firm continued to check in every morning of that first week. It was now up to the branches of those members to pursue the case through the official machinery of the union. Accordingly, we attended the branch meeting of Edinburgh Central AUBTW. There were also present at that meeting members from other branches including branch secretaries and there ensued quite a fierce debate on the claim.

Jimmy Stewart the local organiser believed we did not have a case and said so at the meeting and I began to get worried that he would be successful in persuading the members not to pursue our claim. I made a contribution aimed specially at the branch secretaries and, when I sat down, I was more than pleased when a number of secretaries spoke in support of the claim and said they would pursue it through their branches. It goes without saying that activists like Charlie McManus, Jimmy Kerr, Jimmy Williams, Jimmy Lynch, Peter Quinn supported the claim, but it was even better that others outside Edinburgh, like Pat O'Brian, Prestonpans, Hamilton Fleming and Jock Gallacher Musselburgh and others gave their support.

The claim went through procedure via the local National Federation of Building Trade Operatives (NFBTO) branch to the National Joint Council for the Building Industry Edinburgh and Lothians. Our claim was upheld and James Miller & Partners had to pay up.

Just in case anyone reading this may think its "All our yesterdays" and a thing of the past, as I write, one of those special winters has struck again in the weeks of January 1987. Temperatures dropped to minus 16 degrees centigrade and every news bulletin described the chaos all over the country. Suspensions took place immediately, by Wimpey etc. On the very first day of this bad weather, almost to prove the point I made earlier, it was announced that "the guaranteed week could only mean one week's guaranteed wage". Construction firms put workers on suspension, so here we are in 1987 and building workers' livelihood and wages are still being disrupted by the onset of inclement weather.

It was of great interest to me when I heard about JCB drivers on a certain job who had started their machines before normal starting time (which was 8.00am) and before the agent had time to tell the foreman to prevent any workers from starting work that Monday morning. Having started work that morning, it meant the JCB drivers could not be put on temporary suspension that week.

Prep school – some school days; my parents – my dad in west calder sheriff Jamieson's court; Portobello in the early 1930s; sister Bessie lost her arm

I now understand the meaning of Maxim Gorky's titles to some of his works such as "My Apprenticeship" and "My Universities". Although he became one of the world's greatest literary masters, he never had any formal education whatever and certainly never had the opportunity of attending any university. His strong desire to become a university student reminded me of my own longing to be a university student, possibly a longing that was fed by a familiarity with some of the university buildings in Edinburgh because my grannie lived in Hill Place, a street near the Surgeon's Hall, opposite St Patricks Square, and I spent a lot of my days there as a boy. However, it was in later years as a teenager that this university longing developed, but it was a hopelessly forlorn daydream, such a road was absolutely barred to such as I and all the members of my family and nearly all the children of the working class at that period. I had to be content with occasional visits to places such as Surgeon's Hall (although that didn't make me content either), but the descriptions of these visits to my pals certainly impressed them as they hadn't even heard of such places let alone visited them. Yes that is true; they didn't know of the Surgeon's Hall or the university buildings past the South Bridge. Most of those boys never saw anything outside the street in which they lived in Portobello with the exception of a school outing, once a year to a city park like Spylaw Park, Colinton, or alternatively a visit to some spot in the country a few miles outside Edinburgh. Those once a year trips were the highlight of the year; you went as a family party and joined up with all the other families. The mothers had to get all the children prepared and that took a great deal of organisation and especially financial outlay. Whether your dad was on the dole - and most of them were - or whether he had a job, the kids had to be fitted out, the ritual and the rigmarole were laid down by custom and practice and the observance of that custom was paramount.

Each mother made certain her children would be rigged out so as not to compare unfavourably with any others. The dress was just like a uniform, explicit in the last detail and mostly brand new. The boys wore: sand shoes (rubbers) and stockings; Jersey and tie; one tinny with tape (a tin cup). If it was Spylaw Park, transport was by tramcar and the whole school population boarded the tramcars that lined up in Porobello High Street, and that was the prelude to the most exotic tramway journey of a lifetime. It seemed like a hundred miles and at times you got glimpses, such as when the trams

ascended Leith Walk, of an endless line of tramcars in procession, with thousands of paper streamers flying from every window and that unforgettable thrill of passing the shop in Princes St with three stuffed bears on top, advertising fur coats, which no mother in that gathering would ever possess. Then on and up Lothian Road to Tollcross and past the canal basin; the route seemed to go forever, at last the Redford Barracks and we were getting near journey's end at Colinton. Finally disembarkation and the walk down to the park and my best memories of those Spylaw days are the times when they were sunny and that sun could certainly shine down there in that sheltered place where the Water of Leith ran through the valley.

All the families found a place to sit, on the grass mostly, and the kids ran amok, around the park, in the water, across the water to the thickly wooded slopes, but all confined to the area. Spylaw was well confined; there was no place that attracted us out of the park. There was a high wall at one end and on the other side there was an old paper mill, so we were told. I thought it was the Balerno paper mill in those days of adolescence, but of course the Balerno paper mills were much further away up the Water of Leith pass Currie. The main reason the children never wandered was because of the attraction of the races and even more so the bags of buns and goodies and our milk rations ladled into our tinnies. Milk has never tasted so sweet or better since those picnics, but then milk was a luxury to most of us in those hungry days. The tea was made from urns of water boiled on huge fires and the kettles were passed around the adults by the teachers and their voluntary helpers, also from among the adults.

When the joyful repast was over, the races were organised, starting with the youngest. We were all divided into age groups, fives and sixes constituted a group, and so on up to the eldest at fourteen years of age. The sexes were also divided and the competitions were straightforward sprints, the length varied according to ages and the whole programme went ahead, starting line to finishing line, "Ready, steady, go" and first, second, third past the finish were picked out by the judges.

Concurrently with the sprints the fun races took place as the age groups finished the formal events. The barrow race was a favourite, the conditions were: one person acted the barrow and had to run with their hands along the ground, while the mate had to support the legs – either handles of the barrow. I learned the secret of winning this game and it was my mother who told me; where she learned it I'll never know, I doubt she'd ever been the "barrow", probably had it from her brothers at the Miners' Gala in their young days. The knack was as follows, you got your mate to support your legs by holding them above the knees, now generally all children will support the barrow by holding it by the ankles, and adults do this as well, the result is the barrow is supporting the whole weight of the body on their own arms and hands. The alternative described takes some of the body weight by the mate, so the advantage is obvious and this method will always win the barrow race.

The fun races varied from the "barrow" to the sack race, the three legged race, the egg and spoon race and also the mothers' races, the fathers' races, the horse-back race and so the day progressed, hectic, exciting, certainly never a dull moment, although always the drama of some kind of an accident, a fall from a tree or a wall, someone cut by glass or some person suffering from an epileptic fit. When the time came for the trek back to Portobello, there were sunburn victims galore, especially among many mothers who were not too used to being outdoors for a whole day in the sun.

Outings such as the St John's school described above were also organised by the Portobello British Legion which in those days was mainly a centre for the unemployed men and youths, and carried on activities such as woodwork classes, domino and card schools, as well as providing facilities for billiards, snooker, dances were a regular

weekly feature for the adults.

The women of Pipe Street, mostly mothers, organised their own weekly meetings, in the Women's section of the British Legion, which was also a social occasion and my mother was a regular attender. I also attended another annual event, not so pleasant as the "outing picnics" but certainly memorable in a different way and this event affected the very poorest of the poor in Edinburgh, the "Handout of Police Boots and Clothing". This took place every year at just about the onset of the winter months and the provision of these boots, stockings, and other clothing, came from a police fund. Whether that fund was subsidised by the Local Authorities, I don't know, but it was certainly administered by the Police from Police Headquarters off the High Street in Edinburgh. Those of us who wore "Police Boots" were a bit ashamed of having to do so. They set you apart from your school mates and pals who didn't wear them, so they must have been better off. Nevertheless, it was still good to have a decent pair of boots to wear although the stigma of "As cold as charity" was stamped on that footwear. More than stamped, because the boots were pierced by five holes in this symbol, which meant in working class folklore - and which all wearers knew by heart meant - "Do not pawn these boots".

Looking back now, I curse the humiliation and degradation those mothers (and some fathers) were forced to suffer in taking their children to that place of misery in the High Street, and then having to wait in a queue, in a passage, then on a stair for hours on end, and I mean hours. We used to catch the tram in Portobello about 9am and we didn't get back till late afternoon after spending all that time in that crowded queue of undignified submission to cold charity. And yet, while I curse the insult to those parents, I deeply admire their courage and fortitude that enabled them to endure such indignity for the sake of their children's welfare and repeat it year after year, and to survive that day sometimes without even a cup of tea to sustain them until they got back home.

Of course for us kids at the time, we didn't really notice the indignity of it for the parents. We enjoyed the tram car and ran up and down those stairs and passages in the Police Station. And it was also a day off school, which was highly prized. Neither did we notice our desperation, because in that tumultuous crowd of children, we were all in the same boat. We were just about as ragged and down at heel as each other, yes just about, and yet I found out there were some families poorer than us, how on earth could that be possible? Well some of the families after they had been supplied with their boots and stockings, shoes for the girls, went further up the stairs to other rooms where they were fitted out with other garments, but that didn't happen to us; all we got was the footwear and then we left the building.

My dad was on the Means Test and that meant (relying on memory) twenty six shillings (130p) for a married couple and two shillings (10p) for each child in the family per week – so how could any family be poorer than that? Well they must have been, otherwise they wouldn't have got extra clothes. It reminds me of what my father often told us about his early years in West Calder, about one of his mother's sayings. She would say to him when he remarked on their poverty in the mining village: "Never you mind Elana, blessed are the poor for they shall see God", and he would reply: "Well mother, we shall certainly see God – for nobody on this earth could be poorer than us". I hope sincerely my Dad and those families who went further up the stairs in the High Street have seen or will see that God, because if poverty was the criterion to see God, they were certainly well and truly qualified.

My mother often used to say when some of us in the family were grown up "I don't know how on earth you survived" and well might she say that. She had twelve children to my father. She lost one child, Maurene at four years old, who died from diphtheria and at times in downhearted moments, you would have thought she lost the world, when she recalled the tragic loss of her little girl. My birth followed Maurene's and I

was the sixth child, the first who was born in Pipe Street Portobello, to be followed by another six brothers and sisters. All our names were, from the eldest to the youngest, Charlotte, James, Catherine, Elizabeth, Maurene, Hugh, Molly, Anna, Michael, Isa, Tommy, Maurene. So we survived except for one, while all around us in that street and area families were decimated by deaths from the prevalent diseases of the time, such as Tuberculosis, Diphtheria, Measles, Scarlet Fever.

So how did we prevail? My dad was unemployed most of his life following the 1926 General Strike and the Miners' Strike, which continued for another nine months. We were just as poor, or poorer, than those around us. As the older members of the family started work, they were supportive. Charlotte especially played this role, and she worked in Gray's Pottery in Pipe Street; then she went into what we termed as "service", a good description of hotel work, where most of the time she lived in. I think we survived as a family because of my mother's background and the family in which she was reared. Her father was a miner and so were all her brothers, five of them, and her early training paid off; she learned how to make meals out of very little money.

My mother told us about an experience, when one of her children, perhaps it was me, was ill, and one of her neighbours, Mrs Murray, in the stair at Pipe Street Portobello, said of the young one "that child is suffering from malnutrition and should be given a cup of milk every day". My mother said: "that was the first time I had ever heard the word malnutrition expressed or understood its meaning". However, a cup of milk each day was far beyond any possibility of provision in our circumstances.

It has often puzzled me just how so many black Africans were so tall in spite of the starvation and dreadful living conditions they were reared in. I think I've found the answer in Nelson Mandela's autobiography "Long Walk to Freedom" where he writes about the food of the children in his village at an early age: "Unlike mealies, which were sometimes in short supply, milk from our cows and goats was always plentiful". Is this the reason why so many of his people are so tall and why so many of our people in Scotland were not, particularly from the slums of our cities of the early 20s and 30s; was it a lack of calcium that stunted the growth of bones? And was it that deficiency that resulted in the development of rickets and that cruel insulting description termed in Scotland as "Glesca legs" (Glasgow legs)?

Milk was certainly in short supply in those times, and yet in my experience, bread wasn't, certainly not in my family. We had a regular supply, and one of the main reasons for this was that my mother always kept in hand enough ready cash to purchase what we termed as "old bread". Old bread from various bakers would not be much older than two days, but to buy it the purchaser had to be up early in the morning on certain days of the week and be prepared to wait in a queue as early as six o'clock; the shop did not open before 7.30am and, if you were near the head of the queue, you would generally be lucky enough to get your purchase. When I was about 12 years old, it was my responsibility in the family to undertake this errand. I told my mother repeatedly to waken me earlier so that I could be at the head of the line in front of Mrs Young and Mrs Cassidy, who were always first at Smith the baker in the High Street Portobello. But she never had the heart to waken me that early.

The so called "old bread" was a real bargain. For the sum of four pence (old money) the girls who worked in the baker's shop would fill a pillow slip with as many loaves as the slip would hold, usually five or six loaves of various quality, but mostly plain. Another advantage about the first of the queue or near enough was you could get "tea bread", that is cakes and buns as well for another two pence. This practice of buying "old bread" was a phenomenon that carried on all over working class Edinburgh and it was a common sight to see unemployed men on bikes and with their pillowslips of bread. Mind you, it was a bit of a trial on cold bitter winter mornings to suffer the wait in those circumstances but, in the case of Smith's the baker, we were able to shelter in a passage at the side of the shop.

Soup of various kinds was a constant part of our diet. When I was school age, we could get a message bag full of vegetables for two pence, leeks, carrots, turnip, cabbage, and we got a marrow bone, sometimes free with other butcher meat, and my mother made a large pot, more like a cauldron of soup. That cauldron was almost forever in use and it sat on the hob at the side of the fire when not in use. It was also used to make cloutie dumpling, which was huge, and wrapped in a piece of linen sheet. The cloutie dumpling was very popular; I don't know the recipe but I do remember the spices whose aroma made your teeth water, the currants, raisins, I think treacle, flour of course and many other ingredients all mixed together, placed in the sheet, with water in the pot to produce the steam which baked the dumpling and placed on the coal fire, before the days when we had acquired a gas cooker.

When it was steamed sufficiently it was lifted off, the water poured away, the dumpling taken out of the sheet. Incidentally, the sheet had a huge knot on top, which helped to shape the dumpling and keep it firm inside the cloth (clout). When taken out of the cloth it was placed on a huge oval dish and dried for a period in front of the fire. The drying process formed a shining skin and, when she judged it dry enough, our mother would cut off the slices and share them out around the table. The dumpling was so large it lasted for more than one meal. It was also rich in fruit and no matter how much one relished it, you were soon satisfied. It had another quality; although it tasted best when new and steaming, still it was delicious when fried later on.

Another mainstay of our diet was tripe, sheep's tripe, which could be bought in the Kirkgate in Leith for sixpence for a sheep's bag. I was a regular messenger to that street where my purchase was two sheep's bags, and they were quite heavy. They were cheap because they were undressed and had to be cleaned at home. My mother steeped them all night in the wash basin, which we called a bunker, and then cleaned them by hand. She maintained that sheep and cattle were clean animals because they fed on grass. Therefore their stomachs (tripe) were clean, and only required washing thoroughly. Not all families or mothers would go to this much bother to provide food, and many of them didn't know how in any case. Many a mother in that area never even made a pot of soup and didn't know how.

I think my mother came from what I would describe as the "organised working class", that section of the working class who were organised for survival, which brings to mind one of those sayings attributed to Darwin "the survival of the fittest". Her family were not strangers to Charles Darwin's' writings, because her youngest sister Kate, my auntie Kate, had read some of Darwin's works and shook her elder brothers in arguments and discussions over his theories. Darwin's "Voyage of the Beagle" and his theories about the development of life on the planet may be commonplace to some of us now, but they must have been an uncommon subject for discussion in working class families when my mother was young, although her mother could not read, having had very little schooling, her schooldays only lasted for one year in Howgate, Penicuik. All the family were voracious readers and they also took turns to read through complete novels to their mother, my maternal Granny, who was actually well informed and the Sunday papers were read over to her as well. "A book at bedtime" was a well-known experience to me, as I often heard the stories being read to my Granny, especially by my mother and her younger sisters, long before I could read myself.

For example, I was knowledgeable about a story "The Rat Pit" which made a lasting impression on me, although I had never read it at all. But I didn't know the author's name until I was adult, when Jimmy Kerr of Portobello told me it was Patrick McGill, the Irish novelist. I then read it again from Portobello library and also his books "Children of the Dead End" and "Moleskin Joe", which did not impress me as much as the Rat Pit.

I was familiar with other stories, such as Victor Hugo's "Les Misérables" and Dickens' "Oliver Twist", long before I actually read them as I often stayed with Granny when she lived in Hill Place, near the Surgeon's Hall in Edinburgh. The reading I heard was when I was lying in bed as a child and I remember they were all delivered in monotone, which was solemn and sad. I suppose that was a good introduction to reading, and my mother introduced us to many books, mostly to be got from the local library, such as Tolstoy's Resurrection, which I read while still at school. When her funeral took place at Seafield Crematorium, Jack Ashton, the secretary of Scottish Committee of the Communist Party GB, delivered the oration. Jack is our brother-in-law and knew my mother well. He said in his address she was one of the most widely read women he had ever met.

She started work at fourteen years of age in the Cotton Mill at Musselburgh, then moved later with her younger sister Mary to work on the tables at Newcraighall colliery, I think the English miners called them screens. This was hardly an improvement in the job, but the wages were better. Possibly nowadays only the miners will know what the tables were, but they were like a conveyer belt where stones and rubbish were separated from the coal by hand and they were high above ground level. I never worked in the pits, but as boys we sometimes roamed through the surface workplace, and I thought what a god-awful place to work the tables must have been, high up, with howling drafts blowing cold, and dust laden from every corner! So that's where my mother worked as a young girl.

The Newcraighall colliery was, I believe, owned by the Niddrie & Ben Har Coal Company. It was known locally by the name of "The Klondyke", after the historical gold rush, but, for all the gold the miners found at "Klondyke", Newcraighall, like the Irish immigrant in London, might as well have been "where the mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea". I've mentioned the tables at Newcraighall Colliery (Klondyke) where my mother worked as a young girl and I recall a social evening at the Jewel Miners Club which was held regularly to give the senior citizens a happy night out. My mother was invited and on this occasion Abel Moffat, the Scottish NUM President, was a special guest and we introduced him to my mother. She said to him "Oh aye son, I ken you alright and I can tell you I worked in the pits as well, I worked on the tables at the Klondyke when I was a wee lassie". Abe was visibly impressed and sat down beside her and she told him about the wages and conditions of those days with which she was quite familiar; I think Abe would have been about sixty five years old. He made a great fuss of my mother that night and he said she must have been one of the very few living survivors of the girls who worked on the tables.

I believe my parents met and courted in Newcraighall and my mother was 19 when they married. She often told us her father, whose name was Hugh McDonald, wouldn't even let my dad into their house in their courting days. But eventually Jim, my dad, broke the barrier. Thereafter he was cordially welcome because Hugh McDonald loved to hear him singing an Irish song that always brought her dad to tears. We were all familiar with that song in later years, and it's hauntingly sad, yet a beautiful melody. The words described the plight and the agony of a poor Irish widow and her numerous children evicted from her home for failure to meet the landlord's rent, "cast upon the snow" were some words.

The opening went like this:

Far far away, on the banks of the Nile,
so far away, near two thousand miles.
There stood a young soldier, an Irish Dragoon,
who read his mother's letter by the light of the moon
and the tears rolled down his sun-burned cheeks,
to fall upon the letter in his hand,
Isn't it true? Too true, more trouble in my native land.

And so my father whose name was James D'Arcy, always known by locals as Jye Dee, gained entrance to my grandfather's house. But, if his song brought tears to Hugh McDonald's eyes, you can bet he would also be brought to tears of laughter by another of Jye Dee's repertoire, "McCartney's Party":

Chorus
At McCartney's Party everyone was hearty
Till Burke struck Maloney on the nose
With the handle of a broom, McCartney cleared the room
Then the riot arose, ta-rah-rah.

Murphy and his cousin, paralysed a dozen,
Striking soft and hard
There's a number of the boys, will never make a noise,
For they are lying in the old church yard.

Chorus –repeat – At McCartney's Party etc.

Rosie opened her mouth, East West North and South.
For all the world like an alligator,
Tim he took his fist, closed her trapdoor shut,
Then the riot arose, tah-rah-rah

Chorus –repeat – At McCartney's Party etc.

Murphy and his cousin, paralysed a dozen
Striking soft and hard
There's a number of the slain will never fight again,
For they're lying in the old church yard

Chorus –repeat – At McCartney's Party etc.

McCartney's Party was a firm favourite, not only with Jye's contemporaries but with all my brothers, sisters and then our sons, daughters, cousins, etc. whenever there was a family party. It was a tradition in our family and all the McDonald families that, whenever there was a family party like Hogmanay, every person present would be expected to do a turn, song, poem, joke, something and everyone. I suppose the practice springs from the days when there was no other means of family entertainment in the home, long before radio, television, even gramophones, an old tradition now fading rapidly and replaced by canned music, videos, discos, etc. And have you

noticed the blaring, ear-splitting cacophony of sound in discos, even pubs. I sometimes think younger people hide underneath this shelter of noise, as if they were trying to hide their own personality, am I getting old and cynical? I trust not because I can still enjoy some of the disco dancing at the weddings or birthday celebrations.

So to get back to McCartney's Party scene, I could well imagine such a scenario when I think about the tales my dad used to tell us about life in the old mining villages. Before he came to the coalfields of East Lothian, he lived and worked in West Calder. I believe that's where he was born. He told us he was the main breadwinner in his mother's family. His father had deserted them, Jye never told us this, but my mother did. He said when he first worked down the pit – and the story went:

When I first took a job down the pit, I would be thirteen years old. We lived in the 'happy land' in West Calder, sometimes called the Clippors, a collection of the worst hovels in the whole place; houses had even been abandoned by the more regular miner, for example.

And here he would paint a picture:

The floor was bare flagstones laid on earth. Do you know what our linoleum was? My poor old mother would get a lump of pipeclay and chalk the joints of the flagstones, that was our linoleum. My grannie lived with us then, she was about as Irish as the shamrock, but she could tell us great stories as we sat huddled round an open hearth with a fire. She told us ghost stories about the Banshee in Ireland where on stormy nights her family in turns huddled round a peat fire in their cabin and, when they heard a dog howling on the night wind, someone in that village would surely be dead before the morning light dawned. I sat there on the hob with my brother Mick at the other end, like two monkeys, but black as soot with smoke of the coal fire. I couldn't get far enough into the corner of the fireplace, fascinated and terrified by the power of that Banshee, which we could certainly hear, whining through the cracked panes of our broken windows. I had brothers and sisters Annie, Mary, Ann, and Mick.

Jye continued:

I was the eldest, so I started work down the pit. Do you know where I got my pit boots? I picked them out of the midden, a pair of woman's button boots, and a pair of trousers, made out of material like an umbrella. The boots lasted me a day and the trousers about the same length of time so I paid plenty of visits to the midden before I could afford to buy a decent pair of pit boots.

When he was even younger, he was a favourite of the local doctor, Doctor Young and he acted as his caddie for golf. This was told to me by my mother when I was still at school and was later confirmed by an old miner, Baldy Kerr of Kings Road Portobello, who also lived in the West Calder area at the same time as my dad. Old Kerr told me on one of my visits to his home, where I often went to meet Jimmy Kerr his eldest son, who incidentally is mentioned elsewhere in this narrative:

Your dad was highly thought of by Doctor Young of West Calder in my young days. Not only was he the caddie, but the doctor had a son about the same age as your dad, who was going on to a residential school and old Young wanted your dad to go as well, the doctor would pay for his education. But he either couldn't or wouldn't go because his mother had a young family and James was the eldest and mainstay.

Though Old Kerr was getting on in age when he told me of those days, his memory was fresh and keen about the times when he was young. He would go on:

You know son, even a bloody upstart of a pit clerk could tyrannise us with their petty authority. I've seen me checking in late for the early shift and, even although I could make the cage in plenty of time, that bastard of a clerk wouldn't let me check in, with the result I lost a whole shift's wages.

And in the next breath he would start reciting:

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord is with them; blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of the womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen". Then, as the beads of his rosary passed through his fingers for a few moments, his memory would come back to his working life in the collieries of West Lothian, and his language drift back from the holy words of the 'Hail Mary' to the vernacular of the mining villages:

Yes, even the bloody upstart of a pit clerk, who was only a time-keeper mind you, could oppress us, let alone a coal owner.

Jimmy Kerr, his son said: "his mind begins to wonder a bit Hughie nowadays, old age catching up maybe some of his sins as well, hence the rosary beads". We heard many a tale about the West Calder days in "happy land". How typical of mining communities to nominate the most derelict of the mines "RAWS" as the "happy land", with that style of humour, which turns the meaning of something into the opposite. Jye's tales were often recited on a Sunday when we would have visitors down to our house which was a top flat at 24 Pipe Street Portobello.

Sometimes it would be Auntie Lottie, a younger sister of my mother and her husband uncle Duncan Wilson, who would arrive in the forenoon and Duncan would always have a couple of screwtops, that is beer bottles with a cork and rubber ring, usually McEwans, which would hold at least a pint. Jye Dee would always exclaim when Duncan produced the bottles "my Christ, what a Godsend". Then soon he would launch into his account of events and characters usually of West Calder. This is what Lottie and Duncan came to hear, like other Sunday visitors, and, no matter how many times they heard those stories, they were thoroughly amused and Jye could hold his audience for hours and hours on end until there was no more drink in those bottles, for the simple reason there was no more money left after Saturday night, except for bare necessities until next Friday or Saturday.

Jye would take his cue and the floor. I don't think he deliberately acted; the actions were natural, and, what's more, being that time of the day, he was unconsciously costumed for the part, dressed in his socks, and, with the braces of his trousers (galluses) trailing down his back, he would move about the living room, cum kitchen, cum bedroom Jye said:

Old Grumbly lived a few doors from us in the 'happy land'. He was an old Irishman and like his people they had flocked to the coal mines and shale mines of West Lothian, fleeing from poverty and starvation in Ireland to hard work and poverty in Scotland.

Grumbly worked in the retorts, where the shale was burned and turned into oil, like paraffin and grease for candles and other chemical by products. He was always an old man in my mind. He wore a great unkempt beard and I used to see him leave for his work in the morning, he was a tall man striding out, and his back as straight as a ramrod, but when he came home from his work he was bent double after a twelve hour shift at the retorts and when he spat the gobs were as yellow as a primrose.

His job at the retorts was to push the hutches forward to where they were unloaded into the furnace below and, as the shale fell, the most noxious fumes enveloped old Grumbly.

Duncan interjected:
It's no wonder his spit was yellow.

And Jye continued:
Yes and him and his clothes were yellow, like sulphur from his work. But he had another job as well, although an unpaid one, he was keeper of the keys of the chapel St Theresa's. And one Sunday morning the priest arrived for first mass and he nearly stepped on a huge turd lying in front of the chapel door, it was obviously a human product, and the priest disgusted and taken aback exclaimed sharply to Grumbly *'What's the meaning of this Peter?"* Grumbly replied, just as sharply, *Well Father, I may have the keys to the chapel door, but I don't have the keys to the arse of the congregation.*

As Duncan and Lottie's visit was a Sunday forenoon, had my dad attended chapel in the morning? No way, no chance. He was never a churchgoer and yet he often maintained in discussions with my elder brother and my mother, that there was a God and that he was a catholic. And certainly I remember distinctly when I was still at school and Jye Dee was working down the pit, before leaving for work, and this was late evening so that must have been backshift, dressed in pit clothes, he would draw up a chair and kneel on the chair with his back to the fire, take rosary beads in his hands and one could hear him muttering quietly through prayers before leaving for work. He used a bicycle at that time to travel to the pit and, because my dad was lame, he found it difficult to mount the bike and take off, so that some of us had to give him a push.

Another of his stories about old Pate Grumbly described the time when the old man had almost reached the end of his tether:
Old Grumbly was now very ill and his ailments were so far advanced that Father Gouldie had visited his old friend and delivered the Blessed Sacrament of Extreme Unction. Now any catholic will know that the sacrament, with it's anointing by consecrated oil is given only to those who are in danger of death from sickness or accident.

This had taken place and the priest had taken his departure. However, although old Pate had thus had his sins absolved, he was taking no chances, so he requested Bridget his grown up daughter to stand by his death bed and in the darkened room hold a lighted candle near him so that he was able to continue himself to read prayers for the dead and the dying. Bridget said "very well dad" and held the candle near the book. Old Grumbly's deep base voice rumbled on and on, over what the girl thought seemed prayers without end, so with the effort of holding candle aloft and the monotonous drone of her father's voice, she momentarily dozed off. The hot candle grease drifted on to the old man's beard, he jerked up with a roar, *Holy Jesus Bridget, will ye roast me alive even before I'm in Hell.*

But not all Sunday mornings were like that in our house. There were other times when Jye Dee had been on the randan the night before and in the morning my mother would say to him: "Well who the hell did you fall in with last night, you were certainly foul when you came up that stair cursing and swearing" and these remarks outlined another characteristic of my dad. Often when he got stoned, he would enter the tenement stair where we lived and, as he made his way up from landing to landing, his language must have been heard by all the neighbours, and his vocabulary in swear words was extensive to say the least, but what made it even worse were his defamations of orange-men and John Knox bast — s.

Was this the expression of bitterness, reflecting the poverty and meanness of workers lives and frustration arising from the impossibility of improving their conditions? Our neighbours in the stair or the street and the community were a mixed bag; you were either catholic or protestant in Scotland mainly, although a great many people were neither in actuality. Our neighbours were like that, they were not bigots, neither was Jye Dee, and the outbursts never led to much trouble in the stair. But in later years a great deal of strife was generated in Edinburgh by sectarian agitation organised by Protestant Action led by a man named John Cormack. The driving force of this movement was anti-catholic. Its effect divided people on sectarian grounds, but its result was harmful to the cause of Labour, and in the years preceding the second world war Protestant Action candidates were elected in as many as eight wards where the electors were mainly working class.

The Communist Party in my own experience during those years was the most active force in opposing and exposing the sectarian agitation of Protestant Action: Donald Renton of Portobello, Fred Douglas - well known orator especially at the Mound, Dave Chalmers of West Edinburgh, Tom Murray and Jack Kane of Craigmillar Ward, George Boath also of West Edinburgh. The last four were elected as Labour Councillors although they were members of the Communist Party. The Labour Party was certainly opposed as well to Protestant Action, but Labour was not a campaigning party. They confined their activity to election campaigns; even after the second world war they practically confined their activity to election periods, and in Portobello, where I was friendly with members of the Labour Party and had many discussions, their conversation was almost always about what took place at the internal Party meetings, constituency and ward functions.

The Communist Party was active in every issue of social importance affecting the lives of working people and their families. For example, they defended families against eviction from their homes, whether council or private landlord's tenants, they conducted campaigns against increased in rents, against cuts in social service benefits, they organised demonstrations at national and local level against the Means Test, and helped or even led Unemployment Hunger Marches. They were the foremost opponents to Franco's war in Spain and inspired hundreds of thousands of British people from all walks of life to participate in movements in support of the Republican government in Spain, beleaguered by the military forces of Fascism organised by Hitler in Germany, Mussolini in Italy, and Fascist supporters in Britain and elsewhere. Many of their members joined the International Brigade in Spain, including Donald Renton, and many paid the supreme penalty. Nowadays there are commemorative monuments, plaques, seats, honoured scrolls, dedicated all over Scotland in our cities, towns and other communities to the memory of those British patriots who fought against Fascism in Spain. As I've said elsewhere, the warning slogan "The bombs falling on Barcelona today will be followed by bombs falling on London tomorrow if Fascism is not halted" was well and truly heard in places like Portobello, delivered by communists like Donald Renton, Fred Douglas and their comrades.

When the bombs did start dropping on London, it was members of the Communist Party in the East End of London who led the demand and movement to allow the people of London to occupy the Underground Railway Stations as bomb shelters, so well described by Phil Piratin in the little book "Our flag stays Red". In pre-war years, Jye Dee was affected by such a movement, of course, and in a way was part of it. He was a collector of contributions for the National Unemployed Worker's Movement and his role was to stand outside the office where unemployment benefit was paid to its recipients in Portobello.

One day I heard him telling my mother:
Do you know I stood outside that office for two hours this morning in bitter cold collecting for the NUWM and that gormless bastard Danny —— passed me by – ignoring me. It's only two weeks since Dickson and Renton fought his case when his benefit was cut and they got his money restored.

"What do you expect from people like that?" my mother said. Jye replied:
What do I expect? Well I know he's got less brains in his head than works in a penny watch! But I thought at least he would be willing to pay his penny a week after they won his case.

James Dickson, mentioned above, was an unemployed miner and, in later years after the second world war started, miners were in desperate demand and James went back to the pits and was elected to the Executive of NUM Scottish area, where he specialised in compensation cases. He also lived in Pipe Street, Portobello. This place is beginning to sound like a hotbed of Reds and, although it was a well-known and well-used holiday resort, particularly by the people of Glasgow and Central Scotland, it was also an area with an industrial background as well. Here were a paper mill, bottle works, clay pits and brick works, potteries, sandpits, railway workshops and rail carriage cleaning depot, and surrounded by numerous collieries, which meant also a working population composed of workers from various European countries as well as Irish immigrant families. I think this had an influence in spreading socialist ideas, and this thought was confirmed many years later when I had become a member of the General Council to the Scottish TUC. One day I had occasion to call at the STUC office in Glasgow on business and, before I left, one of the girls on the staff gave me a message: "Mr D'Arcy, excuse me, but Mr Jack would like to see you before you go". I said 'okay' and went up to Jimmy's room at the top of the stairs.

Jimmy Jack was the general secretary at this time and when I met him he said "Hughie I believe you come from Portobello. Is that right?" "Yes I certainly do, what about it?" and Jimmy continued:
Well when I was still attending school I lived in Blantyre (a mining village in Lanarkshire). My dad was a miner, and every summer my mother took our family to the berry-picking in Blairgowrie where we met and worked beside many families just like us, and I'm trying to remember the names of families from your place. We lived in the same hut, so of course we heard the talk and the discussions going on, and my point is, I heard for the first time in my life, ideas about socialism and communism and, although I was just a youngster, they left a deep impression. Would you remember those families Hughie?

I said straight away: "certainly, do the names of Glancy or Renton ring a bell?" Jimmy rose from his desk excitedly: "that's them Hughie exactly! That's their names, it was the two mothers". It wasn't difficult for me to recall the names of the Glancy's or the Rentons and Jimmy Jack was not alone in hearing ideas about socialism from those families.

Jack then explained how the berry-picking was a necessity for his family to clothe the kids before going back to school after the summer holiday. Mrs Renton was the mother of Donald Renton, his sisters and brothers and was a widow all the time I knew her. Mrs Glancy was her sister, the mother of my lifelong friend George, his sister and young brother Billy. I had the opportunity to introduce Jimmy Jack to young Billy at one of the STUC congresses where the young man was a delegate from the TGWU in later years. The husband of Mrs Glancy was George Glancy, a bottle blower by trade, employed in the bottle works. He often told me about the glass

blowers and their union; they were well organised and earned good wages (I suppose this is always relative to other workers), but decline of status and earnings dropped dramatically after a strike which took place sometime after the first world war - and I don't mean the General Strike of 1926.

Following or rather during that bottle workers' strike, the company installed machines, one American, one German, which could turn out those green bottles faster than bottle blowers and so the demise of those highly skilled craftsman began. When I was still at school some of us boys would be allowed into the works by the workmen to watch the machines operating. I was fascinated by the movement of those mechanical monsters, which turned and turned endlessly as if they were fixed to a gigantic gramophone disc, while through the complexity of levers and wheels there flashed blobs of white hot molten glass that dropped into moulds which formed the finished bottles. The observer could not see the actual bottles at that stage but, when one moved to another part of the shed, here were the bottles like endless ranks of green soldiers marching forward on a conveyor belt, forever advancing without ever halting night or day. At the end of the conveyor were workers, grabbing the bottles from the belt as it turned underneath on a cylinder. The workers performed like Charlie Chaplin on the conveyor belt in his film Modern Times. How different from the previous mode of production where, again as boys, we used to watch the bottle blowers performing some of their work, when they picked out a white hot blob of glass on the end of a long metal tube and blew it into a finished bottle.

But the machines spelt the end of many skilled tradesmen in those works and some of them never gained useful employment again for the rest of their lives. As far as earnings went, I clearly remember some of my own mates worked in the bottle works before the second world war for the poorest wages I ever heard about and the longest hours; there were adults working there for less than £2.00 per week. George Glancy, the bottle blower, joined with many others the dole queue for a great may years but later was employed with the Water Department of Edinburgh Corporation. I think he was a member of the Labour Party, but I've heard as well from some of the old timers that Glancy profounded socialist ideas even before Donald Renton's family. He also became a member of the board of the Portobello Cooperative Society, where he joined with other socialist comrades whom I knew personally, such as my wife's Aunty, Meg Robertson, lifelong active member of the Communist Party whose husband was Hew Robertson,a founder member of the Communist Party i.e. CPGB. There was also Mrs Durkin, mother of a large family brought up in Portobello, most of whom became members of the Labour Party, some also joined the Communist Party.

David McAlpine was an old ILP activist, who was always deeply interested in what was going on in the Labour Movement. He came from the old school of socialists who supported the temperance movement, like William Gallacher, the Communist MP for West Fife. David never could agree with those members of the Portobello Board who supported the application for a licence to sell alcohol beverages in the Coop premises. He was inclined to the old slogan of the Temperance movement, "Drink is the curse of the working classes", whereas some of us were more inclined to the other belief that "Work is the curse of the drinking classes" (Oscar Wilde). But old McAlpine stuck to his guns, even though the licensed premises proved to be a most profitable and successful enterprise of Portobello Coop, and there is no doubt it could complete with the big Multishops and even beat them on drink prices.

I've mentioned only a very few of the active socialists and communists of Portobello in those days and the problem is, if I name some, then I'm bound to leave others unmentioned. This is always a fault. Still many others are in my memory and all of them contributed in one way or another to what we understand as the Labour Movement and

the driving force for the betterment of humanity in all its numerous variations is the total sum of almost countless individuals' efforts.

Before I leave Jye Dee, I should relate some other events and in this case I felt quite proud of my dad in the sense that he had a gift of expression which was not evident with the fathers of some of my boyhood pals. One Sunday afternoon a few of us schoolboys were playing football at the bottom of Pipe Street Portobello. There were no houses at this spot, only the blank wall of old Pottery works buildings on each side of the street. We used a huge double door, which was the entrance for lorries to an Inkworks, for our goal. We were not playing a proper game of football but only what we called 'shooting in', a common practice when there was not enough space or enough players for a real game. A policeman caught us, that is he caught one of us, the youngest, and he caught him by springing out of a small side door (an entrance to the Fun City). The copper was Baby Face, well hated by all the boys of that area, a disciplinarian notorious for catching people on petty charges. Well our young pal had to give all our names, there were only four of us in all, and we duly appeared at the Sheriff's Court in Edinburgh on summons. We were all accompanied by our fathers. The court proceedings were intimidating to say the least, although it was not my first appearance in a court.

The Sheriff was well and truly known in the city and beyond, Sheriff Jamieson. We boys were terrified; to us he was like the hanging judge, Braxfield, of Edinburgh disrepute. The fathers were terrified as well, excepting Jye Dee, so that, after the case against us was made by the prosecuting fiscal, the Sheriff asked each father if he had anything to say. And my three pals' dads declined, struck dumb with awe in the presence of the formidable Sheriff Jamieson. Jye's turn came. He spoke up and said: My Lord with your permission I would like to give an explanation in mitigation of the circumstances surrounding this case. The Sheriff said: Certainly you have my permission, proceed.

Jye continued:
These laddies were playing with a ball, which was a tanner rubber ball in this place, true enough! However they were playing there for the simple reason and, anyone familiar with Portobello beach at this place i.e. the foot of Pipe Street next to the Fun City will know that the tide comes right in to the promenade and the tide was in at this time so they could not play on the sands. Secondly, the boys were not playing football at all as the prosecution alleges; they were playing at "Neegors?"
The sheriff stopped him at this point and asked: "Let me stop you here, Mr D'Arcy what do you mean by Neegors? My dad explained: Neegors is a local expression, possibly of miners, it simply means headers, the laddies were playing at headers". And he gave a practical demonstration of heading a ball. The judge: "I see what you mean, so to Neegor a ball is to header a ball". And he then headed an imaginary ball from the bench back to Jye Dee. Sheriff Jamieson commented: "It's the first time I ever heard that expression, thank you Mr D'Arcy". He then bent his head towards the clerk of court and whispered something inaudible to us, straightened his back, adjusted his wig, which had become askew with heading that ball, and said: "I'm satisfied I've heard enough of this case, all four boys admonished".

Needless to be related, we were all highly delighted, and Jye Dee of course was the hero of the hour; the other dads took him for a drink and we recalcitrants made our own way home. Unfortunately, not all of my dad's experience with courts or lawman ended on such an optimistic plane and I recall an incident about that same period in time where tragedy struck our family a devastating blow. I suppose each of us will remember clearly their reaction when they heard the news of what happened. As for me, I was

on my way home from school and, as I climbed the tenement stair, I sensed something was wrong because people were hanging about on the landings, and suddenly I got the message. My sister Bessie had met with a serious accident in the laundry where she worked; her arm was caught and crushed in a calendar machine in that place. I didn't go into our flat, but turned away in shocked horror; I think I must have been afraid to hear confirmation of the truth. Eventually I went home and learned that Bessie was kept in the Royal Infirmary Edinburgh. She lost her arm, amputated above the elbow; she had been feeding linen sheets into the calendar, a calendar I understand is a huge steel roller or rollers which press these items like ironing.

She came home from hospital after some days. I can't remember her even crying, but everyone else was, mother and dad and most of all my great strong Uncle Tommy, Sergeant of the Royal Scots, Dandy Ninth and renowned athlete in wrestling, boxing, football, sobbing like a child. Bessie was only sixteen and I don't think I've ever passed that building, what was Holyrood Laundry, situated at Abbeyhill, without thinking of that criminal event. They say there was a guard on the machine (mechanical guard) and Bessie's fellow workers fainted in horror round about her. But one worker had the presence of mind to shut off the electric control switch and saved her life. Another sad story in the annals of working class families, but what was to follow was even worse, not worse in the sense of physical pain or mental anguish, but worse in the sense of adverse circumstances.

What happened after the accident were the legal proceedings for a settlement of compensation. My father engaged a lawyer on the advice of friends who recommended him as a good man, a Mr Connolly from Leith. The sum of money secured as compensation was £500, which in old money was not more than a total of three years wages for an unskilled worker. Seemingly at the time no blame was levelled at Connolly for accepting such an award. But does not such a paltry sum of money awarded for the loss of an arm, as well as such a disability for life suffered by a girl of such tender years, reflect the utterly callous contempt held by our so called courts of justice and their minions towards the well-being of working people. But that's not all! Connolly's business went bankrupt shortly afterwards and, as he still had jurisdiction over what money was left in Bessie's account (the bulk of it), she was left like other creditors with the princely sum of one shilling and sixpence in the pound.

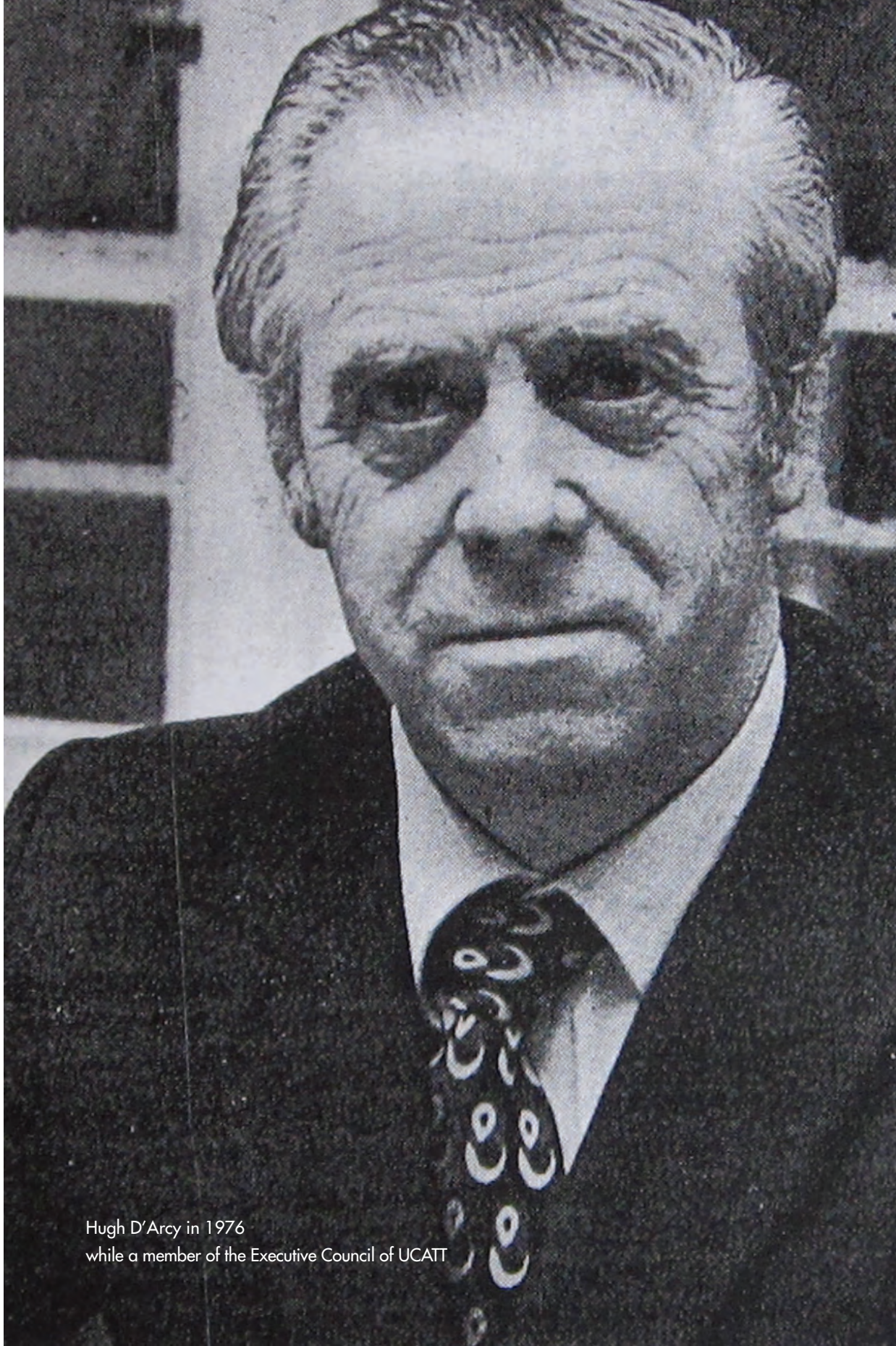
Then that other campaign began - the collection of silver paper by sympathisers to help towards the cost of an artificial arm. The smallest bedroom in our tenement flat in Pipe Street, Portobello, was packed out with sackfuls of silver paper and eventually Bessie got that contraption of straps and buckles, and a supposedly skin coloured casing with a mechanical hand which had a moveable thumb that was really a strong spring that could fasten on to a spoon or fork. Some people thought that hand was a wonderful invention, but then they didn't have to wear it. I mentioned earlier the 'callous contempt' of our law courts in their attitude towards compensation in accident cases, but someone will say "Ah yes, but you were writing about the early nineteen thirties, surely settlements are much more generous now". Are they? Well if they are, then it is thanks mainly to the Trade Unions and all the social pressure they have brought to bear through Parliamentary Lobbies and widespread agitation, public education etc. Still, despite all advances made, it leaves me dissatisfied yet, so to bring my comments bang up to date let me refer to the Trade Union Congress, Glasgow September 1991. A special TUC report which was presented to the delegates for the health and safety debate showed that the average fine for breaches of safety legislation was just £547 in 1989 (all industries). UCATT Executive Councillor George Brumwell told delegates about construction. It was an industry which killed one worker every three days and a member of the public every three weeks. Furthermore, here is an excerpt from UCATT's journal: "An average of 150 construction workers are killed each year. The average

fine on a company following a death is less than £6000." (Viewpoint October 1991).

Which brings to mind a discussion among building workers many years ago, at the time when Phil Piratin had been elected to Parliament representing the constituency of Mile End, Stepney. Phil was a member of the CPGB and he had the good fortune to present a private members' Bill to the House of Commons, at least the opportunity had been gained by his name coming out of the hat. So there we were, a group of typical workers heatedly discussing what his Bill was likely to be. Someone said: "he will bring out a Bill to abolish the Monarchy; he's bound to, being a communist". This idea of course was prevalent among the gutter press, but they were very far off the mark. The CPGB and its two MPs, William Gallacher and Phil Piratin, were far more practical and closer to the aspirations of working people than the gutter press imagined. When the terms of Piratin's private Bill became known, they were very clear indeed. I cannot recall the exact terms at this distance in time, but I remember the main point which was that the employer would be held responsible for all industrial accidents happening to a worker in his/her employment. The Bill would turn the burden of proof upside down. Instead of the worker having to prove liability for the accident against the employer, it would be the other way around.

The support for this Bill began to gather a great deal of sympathy among Labour MPs according to our information. However, there was no certainty of it being passed into legislation if it was opposed by the Attlee government. So, on assurances and promises given by leaders of the Parliamentary Labour Party at that time, that the idea in the Bill would be given supportive action in future legislative measures of the government, Piratin withdrew his Bill rather that see it defeated in the Commons. The principle in that Bill has never been exacted to this day; the liability for an accident at work which results in an injury to a worker still has to be proved against the employer by the worker concerned or his representatives. In this respect, I remember a case which was described by Sir Sydney Green at a Trade Union Congress a good few years after the Attlee government had passed into history. A railway worker was killed in a tunnel, the union involved being the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR). Sydney Green explained how it was impossible for the union on behalf of that worker's dependants to prove liability against the railway company (British Rail) as there were no witnesses involved; all that was known was that the worker had been employed in the tunnel, and lost his life there. The case against the employers could not be proven and the dependants got no compensation whatever. One case among how many? And I thought after I heard Sydney Green's speech on that occasion: how different it would have been if Phil Piratin's Bill had become an Act of Parliament?

The experience of tragic deaths and serious injuries suffered by building workers in the construction industry has now reached a stage where:
Police Officers in London are being instructed to undertake criminal investigation into deaths and injuries on building sites. UCATT chiefs strongly welcomed the announcement last month by the Metropolitan Police, and said they hoped this new move would lead to the prosecution of building firms suspected of gross negligence over health and safety. (UCATT)



Hugh D'Arcy in 1976
while a member of the Executive Council of UCATT

We fight for better pay, and homes for all

by HUGH D'ARCY

executive member of the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians, and member of the general council of the Scottish TUC, who writes in his personal capacity about the struggle for better pay and conditions for construction workers.

WHEN the building construction unions submitted their claim for £30 a week for 35 hours and increased holidays, to the National Joint Council for the Building Industry, they were offered a shabby 7 per cent.

The question of hours and holidays was rejected outright. To the credit of the unions concerned this initial offer was turned down as the latest one has been.

When the unions asked for an interim increase to compensate their members for the rise in living costs, the employers replied that it was "undesirable to diverge from a firm agreement."

What brazen impudence. The employers are guilty of continually breaking the National Agreement and they hope to continue doing so by their policy of screwing down national basic rates to the lowest possible level.

They then step outside the agreement and use devious methods to attract labour to their sites, such as "The Lump" (labour only), unofficial plus rates, and unlimited overtime.

These methods are used by many employers not only to attract labour but also to deliberately bring the unions into dis-

At the same time they stubbornly refuse to provide the opportunity of higher earnings to the majority of workers in the construction industry.

A lot of nonsense is talked about basic rates in the industry. The facts are that the average earnings for all workers in construction are £28 per week but wide sections are only earning £20 for craftsmen, £17 for labourers—before tax and insurance deductions.

House prices

Yet the employers state that our claim is totally unrealistic and if conceded would be harmful to the industry, resulting in cutbacks affecting employment opportunities. This, of course, is bunkum as a look at the three examples shows here in the Table below.

Obviously the employers have a better bonus system than the lads on their sites, and we should not forget that the large em-

We all know the old story: —whenever the building unions submit a legitimate claim for

No section of the British working class is more aware of the continued existence of slums and inferior housing and actual homelessness which is deforming the lives of too many men, women and children.

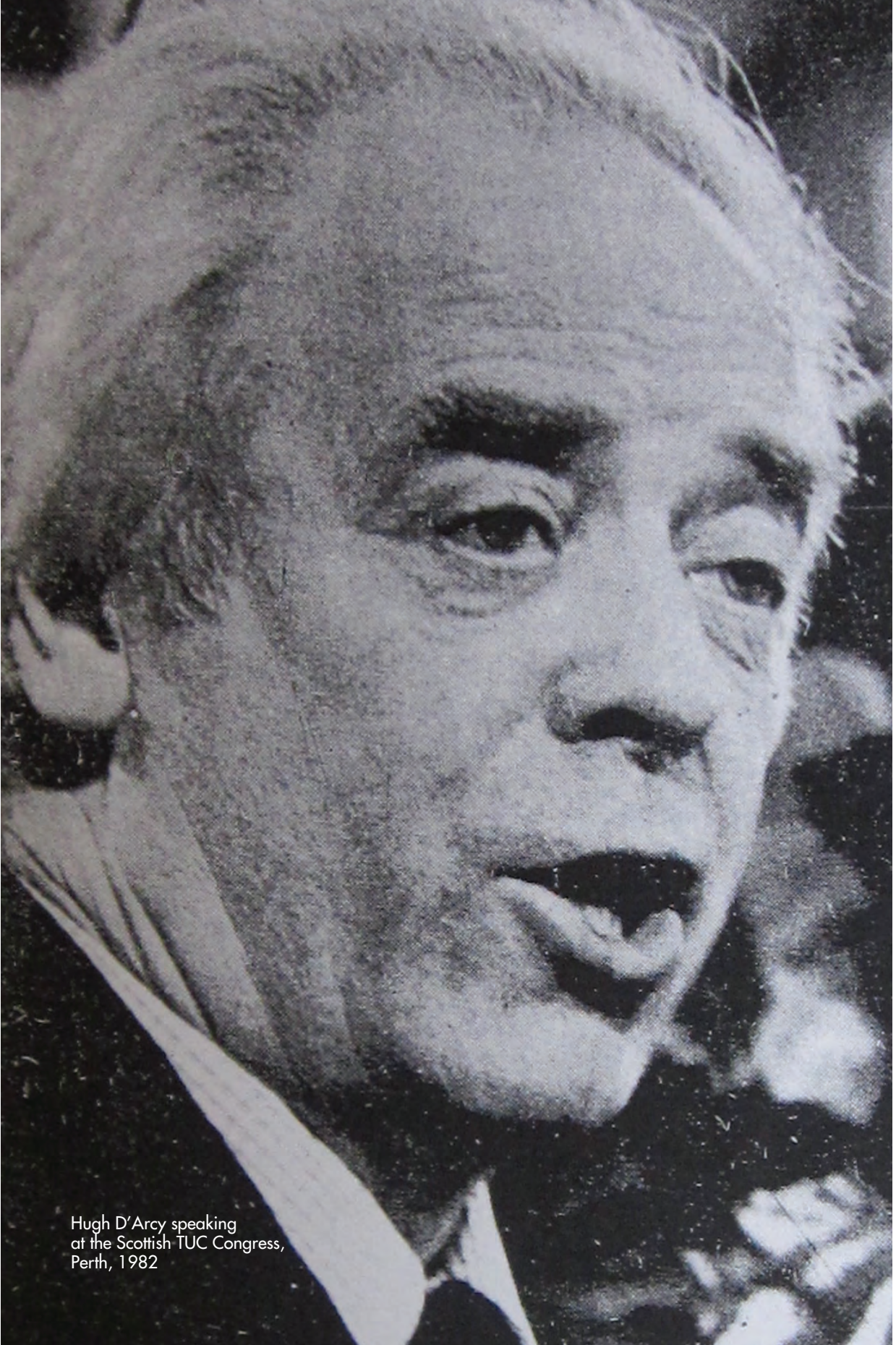
Yes, building workers are conscious of these conditions because they know that given the opportunity they have the ability to provide every family with a decent home in an enjoyable environment.

The construction unions are to the fore in agitating for an expanded construction programme which can provide for the needs of the community in new buildings for housing, education, industry, new towns, and other requirements.

The unions have also been prominent in condemning the policies of the present Tory Government who have deliberately created over one million unemployed, a large percentage of which are in the construction industry.

Slums

It is a scandal that this Government has reduced council housing programmes at a time when it has also reported one and a half million slum dwellings



Hugh D'Arcy speaking
at the Scottish TUC Congress,
Perth, 1982

Blacklisting and victimisation

Blacklisting and Victimisation – Examples of Experience
Blacklist Organisation e.g. Aims of Industry & The Economic League

There is nothing new about this weapon used by employers against workers, particularly those workers whose activities have become known to employers - activity to build the trade unions on the job, at the point of production, as we used to say. Certainly the latest forms and techniques of blacklisting have become perhaps more subtle and sophisticated, but the aims are just the same: to intimidate workers and their families with the fear of the sack and unemployment; and to frighten all workers away from trade unions and political action of any kind in support of the Left. Those of us who felt and still suffer from the cruel backlash of the Blacklist were always described as 'troublemakers' and 'agitators', but I will show from example of real life that more often we were 'trouble solvers' in struggles to win justice for working people.

In Post War Years

Blacklisting and victimisation of building operatives in my time in the Edinburgh area started after a strike on Southfield site in 1947. The employer was Scottish Orlit; the contract was for Council Housing for Edinburgh Corporation. The issue was the laying off of a number of bricklayers and labourers. The general foreman, Mick Currie, had only recently taken over this responsibility and, although there was still a great deal of work to be developed, nevertheless the management wanted a reduction in the labour force.

I was AUBTW steward and Jimmy Kerr was the Federation steward and we brought the full-time trade union officials into the argument, Charles Radcliffe, Scottish Secretary for the AUBTW and James Steward, Edinburgh District Organiser of the same union. The outcome was the union officials agreed with management and were prepared to recommend acceptance. I was against and, when a site meeting was called, I opposed the recommendation. I was soundly defeated on the vote; I got the support of the activists but that was all.

When the list of those to be paid off was handed to us on the Friday of that week, I think there were 12 of us; the most active lads on the job were included. However, because Jimmy Kerr and myself were on the list to be paid off, the union officials declared an official strike in support of the principle that properly accredited stewards should be among the last to go when sites were nearing closure. The contention was not a recognised part of the agreement, but generally AUBTW would try and enforce this procedure on sites.

So the strike was official but it did not last more than a week. James Stewart called a site meeting before the week was out and there was a return to work at his instigation. He barred me from attending that meeting and a new AUBTW steward was elected, Alfred Holligan, who soon disappeared from all union activities.

Jimmy Kerr and myself were given Dispute Benefit, an absolute pittance of 6 shillings per week and we signed on for the dole. There was plenty of building work all over Edinburgh and beyond but, because of the publicity of the strike in the press, our names were well and truly known; I covered dozens of jobs but there was no start for me.

I was young and married with one boy then and pretty desperate for a job and sought work to no avail. Jimmy Kerr was a bachelor and he waited on the Labour Exchange to find him a job, which they did after about 4 weeks. The job was at North Berwick with James Miller & Partners and Kerr got started. He immediately informed me and said there were vacancies for bricklayers, so I got a card from the Labour Exchange - at that time the Exchange issued cards for a start. Although the card was only introductory, it usually meant at least the firm wanted men.

I went down to the site at North Berwick and presented the card on the job, but no start for me; evidently the agent knew me better than I knew him. Kerr was working up on a two storey gable and he shouted down "Are you started?" I shouted back "No". He came down of the scaffold and we went back to the agent. He told us they didn't need any more bricklayers and he would be cancelling his application for brickies at the Exchange.

Jimmy Kerr packed his tools there and then. I tried to remonstrate with him to stay on but he wouldn't. The other bricklayers on that job were all trainees who had come to the trade through the Army Demobilisation. Jimmy and I had supported efforts in the branch to get them jobs and recognition, but they watched us walking off the job. They were very inexperienced trade union members. We bore them no grudge; they would learn in time.

So began a period in my life, which meant more often than not that I could only get a job when we could prove a vacancy for a bricklayer existed and when the men on the job were prepared to down tools to force the employer to start me.

Wimpey – Grangemouth Oil Refinery

Wimpey were building the Grangemouth Oil Refinery and construction workers of all trades were being taken on daily. We were a gang of brickies and labourers and we arrived at this site with our tools. There was a compound of office and other buildings outside the perimeter fences and a queue of men going through the office. We joined in and everyone was being started; my mates went before me, Charlie McManus, Peter Quinn, David Jackson, and Martin Walsh. The clerk took their Insurance Cards and Holiday Benefit Cards and he came to me, then halted and said: "Oh just a second". He went into a side room and came back and after a minute said: "Sorry not you"

Our gang went outside. We knew the reason for the refusal, THE WIMPEY BLACKLIST. There was a security guard at the main entrance to the site and in uniform as well, which was unusual in those days. I said to the lads "Look, get through that gate as quickly as you can make it" and we made a beeline for the gate but the clerk struck his head out of a cubby hole and shouted to the security man "Stop them" and the big guard banged the gates shut in our faces. However that didn't daunt us; we knew there were Edinburgh bricklayers on that site, so we went along the fence which was eight feet high and spikey. We could see workers building ducts and we shouted through the fence; some came over to us. We asked for the stewards and found out John Dickson was a steward whom we knew very well. John came over so we gave him a report of what happened at the office.

Dickson (Big Jock) didn't hesitate. He called a meeting of the bricklayers and their labourers straight away and it was unanimous: "Down Tools" immediately, by the bricklayer gangs. There was a Federation steward, from the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives, I can't remember his name, but he was a joiner and I met him that same forenoon along with Jock Dickson, after I was allowed onto the site but not yet started. I got the impression the Fed steward was a bit of a crawler; he showed a complete lack of enthusiasm over the down tools action but in no way was he going to be able to stop this strike spreading rapidly to the other trades. Wimpey management on the job saw the writing on the wall as well and very quickly beat a retreat over the refusal to give me a start. After a meeting with all the stewards that afternoon, agreement was reached and I started work next day with all my mates.

Immediate, resolute, industrial action got results and beat the blacklist quite effectively, as it would in my case and many others, time and time again. However, on the other hand, when no industrial was taken, and this happened time and time again, then the employers and their crawlers could get away with imposing a blacklist.

One of the foreman bricklayers was 'Beast' Davidson and we started on his section, which was building the brickwork on the Power Station for the Refinery. Beast was possibly about the fastest and cleanest bricklayer in Edinburgh, probably Scotland. He had been in business on his own account with his brother Allan and I got a job with his firm sometime before the Grangemouth incident with Wimpey. I lasted two days with the Beast's firm and was paid off with no reason given whatever, certainly never had a connection with my work performance. Well, here we are with Wimpey; Davidson's firm had gone bankrupt some time previous.

Anyway the 'Beast' was being quite friendly towards me at Grangemouth and one day I was working with Jock Dickson and the Beast came along the scaffold and started a conversation with me: "How have you been getting on Hughie; it's some time now since last I say you, and how's the family?" Jock Dickson retorted (and although it sounds brutal, it wasn't meant to be rude) "You hypocritical Bastard Beast, it was you sacked him when he was with your outfit at Bannockburn". Beast replied "It wasn't me Jock it was my partner". I bore no grudge against the Beast at all; it wasn't much of a job to lose anyway. Strangely enough, many years later, Beast Davidson befriended me and got me a job where he was a foreman, which proved to be a good job and lasted for a long period, a long period in the building industry could be a year.

This incident at the Grangemouth Oil Refinery had a most unusual repercussion, which revealed very clearly indeed that Wimpey had started using a documented Blacklist. We reported what happened to our trade union branch, Edinburgh No 1 AUBTW, and of course the full time officer for the district was present at the meeting, James Stewart. We learned only some weeks later, and the information was given to us by Charlie Brownlie who was the Scottish Secretary of NFBTO, that Jimmy Stewart, AUBTW official, was barred from entering the Refinery site by Wimpey. The reason for barring was that Jimmy Stewart after hearing our report about the above events had gone into that same office and without the management's permission entered the side room and actually found the Blacklist document and noted its contents, that is the list of names. However, the management caught Jimmy in the act and from then on and for a

very long period after he was not allowed to go on that site. Charlie Brownlie had to deputise for him in order to deal with AUBTW business; Wimpey accused Stewart of interfering in managerial rights.

The action of the clerk on that first day proved my name was on the list, but Jimmy Stewart never revealed the names on the list. However, we knew very well and for many years after that Wimpey operated a Blacklist. We believed they carried a blacklist document in the Edinburgh office, which the staff consulted when workers applied there for a job, so that it became completely futile for known union activists to go there for a start. On the Wimpey sites in the area the blacklisting was practised effectively by an ex bricklayer who became a general foreman and then sort of area supervisor. He had the advantage for Wimpey in that he knew many of us by sight and certainly by name.

We defeated Wimpey's blacklisting on another occasion, I think around 1949, when Wimpey had a contract for Council Housing at Moredun, Edinburgh. I was employed at that time by a small firm in Leith named W.D. Davidson, who had their builders' yard and office in Ferrier Street in Leith, near the foot of Easter Road, (now demolished). The firm carried on mostly maintenance work for Edinburgh Corporation, on schools, public baths, hospitals etc., and they also had other contracts with private companies, such as breweries, distillers and many other businesses.

I got a job with them thanks to the efforts of Sandy Fleming, who was Manager and I was grateful to Sandy for the reason that the offer to start came shortly after the period I've described elsewhere, when I was blackballed after being sacked by Scottish Orlit at Southfield. Sandy had been previously a member of the AUBTW Leith Branch. Certainly I was grateful for the start, being a young man with a young family and my nose to the grindstone, and, although the wages were the bare rate, no bonus earnings, I stuck it for a year. But I felt isolated and cut off from the big sites, and not only that; earnings of double the basic rate were being picked up on these sites by the bonus squads and I needed that money and was more than able to hold my own in any of those squads.

I decided to leave that firm, went up to Tolcross Labour Exchange and got a card for a job with McTaggart and Mickel who wanted bricklayers. Before going out to McTaggart's site, I visited a job near the foot of Leith Walk where a mate of mine, Charlie McManus, was employed and I knew he was sick of the job he was on, jobbing at the bare rate. He packed in straight away and got a card to start with McTaggart. However, when we went out to the site, even although we had cards from the Exchange and they needed brickies, we were refused. The man responsible for this we thought was the site agent, and the bricklayers on the site, some of them we knew and though they were union members, watched us being refused and did nothing about it.

That was that. However, Wimpey was taking on bricklayers at the Moredun site, so we got cards again and presented ourselves for work on that job on the Monday morning; this was before the days of the Wimpey blacklist. I can't remember the foreman's name, but someone told us he was a labourer who had been promoted. We approached him and presented our Exchange cards; Charlie's brother Abe had now joined us. The foreman said "Well are you really bricklayers? " He never knew us, but he wasn't refusing to start us; he was just being sarcastic. Charlie didn't like his remark and rejoined "Who the hell are you, a jumped up labourer asking us if we are bricklayers?". I intervened quickly, drew Charlie aside and said "For Christ's sake don't start a bloody argument before we are even on the job! We are started, so let's get down into a squad and start work". We got ourselves into a squad and it proved to be not too bad a site with quite a few months' work ahead.

It must have been late August and what I call the wasp season, for the obvious reason. Wasps are more numerous and more active at that time of year, particularly on building sites, because then and now the workers would take their meals in the cabins provided. Some of us preferred to sit outside the cabins in the good weather, where we made ourselves improvised seats or benches with whatever materials were lying handy. The wasps joined us for their meals as well, and they were well provided with a wide variety of snacks from what food our sandwiches were made with. But the wasps favourite cuisine was the melted sugar in the tea leaves, which would be discarded on the ground from the men who sat either in the cabins or outside. As the wasps became bolder, the scene usually became quite hectic, as some workers panicked and many an impromptu jig or Highland Fling was performed when they tried to escape the attention of these fearsome insects. As Shakespeare said "All the World is a stage" and any choreographer would have been proud of their work, if only they had thought up such dance arrangements as the wasps induced the workers to indulge in.

Charlie McManus was the most frightened and panic stricken of all the building workers I've ever seen in the presence of wasps. They drove him into a frenzy of uncontrolled terror. If you sat near him at these times, you suddenly heard a wild screech, and over would go your can of tea, and his and anyone else's sitting near, as he leaped up and began to flay his arms about like a propeller. He made the excuse that he had once been stung on his tongue by one of them. Certain it is that wasps at this period induce panic in many people but it's also true that the attempts to swat them or drive them away only make them more aggressive.

In any case this was the season of the year when we started with Wimpey on the Moredun site and I'm not sure whether McManus and I were there days or weeks, but on this particular morning we had all arrived as usual on site, ready to start work. And the practice was that most of us would go into the cabin and wait for the starting whistle. However, before the whistle blew, Albert Ross, a well-known bricklayer and activist in the union, told the AUBTW steward, Jock Mackay, that he wanted a meeting straight away as he considered an issue he had in mind was an emergency that brooked no delay.

Jock asked for the attention of all the men in the cabin and Albert started on his complaint. But I must introduce Albert, otherwise the sense of the story may not be too clear. Albert was a very diminutive person, and a born agitator. I mention this as a compliment, but at times he also had a bit of a short temper and it could be too bad for any person that his temper was vetted on. Perhaps it all sprang from Albert's background, which was not a happy one as a boy or a youth and some said he learned his trade in borstal. Be that as it may, he was a most able craftsman, very widely experienced in various fields of brickwork and militant in his beliefs, but not a member of the Communist Party. He was also a veteran of numerous disputes pre-war and war time. So Albert started his statement:

As I was coming to the job this morning, I happened to be travelling on the top deck of the bus, as usual. I'll mention no names at this stage, but I'm telling you, I overheard a conversation somewhere at my back, and my ears are pretty good, so I heard these words, 'there are too many dammed Communists coming on this job' and we all know who was meant by that remark.

Albert's opening words were delivered in a rather stilted and formal manner, such as one would hear in a branch meeting. But then the voice changed and he started to become more strident:

Well I for one am not going to stand for any f—g nonsense on this job. If a man has a card (Trade Union Card), he's entitled to get started no matter what his beliefs.

And now the pitch of his voice was really strident and piercing, not hysterical, and when the peroration came the small close cropped moustache started bristling. He raised himself to full height, five feet two inches, and sparks started flashing from his moustache: "and I don't give a damn for Wimpey or any other bastard Wimpey". I think he meant to say 'or any other firm', but his meaning was clear enough, and an awkward silence fell hushed on the crowd in the hut. Albert's barbs struck home straight and true and Jock McKay actually broke down. McKay had not made the remarks but he was on the bus sitting beside the man who made them, whom Albert strongly disliked and who was that kind of character who would have preferred to be a "Non" if he had been able to get away with it. Jock McKay's morale collapsed and he burst into tears; his health was not robust and he suffered badly from stomach ulcers at that time, but he was always a stalwart trade unionist, and so Jock resigned as shop steward there and then.

This result I don't think was Albert's design; nor do I think the next development was part of his plan either, for it meant we had to get another shop steward. Albert was promptly nominated; he could hardly decline after his request for a meeting and his statement. However, his burden of becoming the steward was lightened by Jimmy Gardiner agreeing to become deputy steward. Jimmy Gardiner was a most reliable character, a young married man with a family, a good record as a union member, level headed and well respected by his workmates. Although Gardiner accepted responsibility on this occasion, it puzzled me in later times that he dropped out of all union and political activity and then eventually went to Australia with his family. I met him again many years later when he came back to Scotland and lived in Portobello, but again he didn't stay long and went back to Australia.

But to get back to the Moredun job, things went along fairly smoothly, with no serious disputes and I recall another character employed on the site, well known among Edinburgh building workers, as we had met him many a time on various building sites, Martin McIntosh, just about the smallest hod-carrier I've ever seen, well not "just about" he was the smallest, and also just about the most able I've ever seen anywhere I have worked in the UK and that covers a lot of towns, cities and other places. The hod is the well-known toll of the bricklayer's labourer. Plasterers' labourers use them as well, although a different design, but the hod has practically gone out of use by brickie' labourers in Scotland these past number of years, and has been replaced by using barrows and mechanical hoists. Any building worker who has ever carried a hod in Scotland will remember it as an instrument of torture, like a treadmill, although sizes of bricks nowadays are more or less similar throughout the UK. This was not the case previously and bricks in Scotland were much larger, heavier and uglier than their counterpart in England. So of course were the hods, and, as far as laying the bricks or setting the bricks on the wall was concerned, well compared to laying bricks in Scotland, it was like playing dominoes. There are geological and historical reasons for this of course and we will come back to this later.

When Martin McIntosh worked at the Wimpey Moredun site, it was a delight to watch him going through his antics. He knew we were looking and he would often entertain us, although he was carrying through all his work responsibility and his supervisors never had a complaint. He used the English hod, which was his own tool, and he practised the style as in England, loaded it with bricks, ran up the ladder, along the scaffold, then seemed to do a somersault when he tilted the bricks on to the stack. Sometimes he used to go down on his knees to unload, spring back to the upright and, as he walked back along the scaffold, he would spin that hod aloft like a Pipe Major tossing his staff in a Pipe Band.

Another form of Martin's entertainment took place in the morning, in the cabin before starting time. He was always early doors, and, as you can imagine, the workers standing or sitting around in the cabin, not a great time of day for pleasant banter, especially on cold wet winter mornings. But McIntosh could break the dreariness; he would pick a tea can, we called them drums, place it gripped between his knees and rattle out with his fingers the most wonderful tattoos, accompanying himself with mouth music to marches such as Hieland Laddie, The White Cockade, The hens march to the Midden etc., which often reminded me of the lines written in the Doric dialect by Charles Murray in his beautifully expressed poem "The Wee Herd":

He played a march tae battler,
It came dirlin' through the mist,
Till the halflin squared his shoulders
And made his mind tae list

Such behaviour was Martin's in the morning, by way of cheering us up. We had many other gags in his repertoire, those of us who heard them before never tired of their repetition. But just because they were enacted in cabins on building sites, there were always new comers, always new faces in the audience to be taken in by Martin's kidology tales.

Another he would relate, but this time it would be during the mid-day break or when we were rained off and he would pick the very moment appropriate to his story. Anyone familiar with building workers will know about their keen interest in horse racing and most jobs would be contacted by bookie's runners collecting bets and these bets were usually placed at the lunch break. Now, as I said, Martin McIntosh was quite small and some worker was bound to ask him if he had ever been a jockey and of course this was his "entrance" his cue,

Yes, I most certainly have been a jockey (all lies). I served my apprenticeship at Newmarket and I had a mount in the 1936 Derby. Harry Wragg was on the favourite That was some race. Wragg led all the way, but in the last furlong I was lying second and gaining on him rapidly.

Martin now went through the action whipping his mount fiercely: Wragg turned round and just as I was about to pass him, spat a squirt of tobacco juice straight between my eyes, blinded me; he went on to win and I finished up in the bing.

Martin looked the part of a jockey, not taller than five feet, thin as a rake, his face was thin and sharp, weather-beaten and he had that quizzical look in his eyes with a spark of humour ever present. He was as active as a weasel, he wore his peaked cap close down over his eyes and, if ever one met him when he was dressed (not wearing working gear), he looked even more like a jockey, and very smart.

He had another favourite tale, and again it concerned a well-known figure of the racing track fraternity and again he would have an audience, most of whom had never heard it and so they swallowed it as authentic, until the punch line.
Martin started his dialogue:

I was working in a gang of navvies on a contract laying water mains along the Queensferry Road. We were on that part of the road which stretches between Cramond Brig and South Queensferry and passes by Lord Rosebery's estate.

Someone broke in "Who was doing the job?" Martin said
I think it was J.R.Watson of Iona Street, I'm not sure, I wasn't there long as I'll tell you. Anyway, we were having our dinner (mid-day break) and I was sitting near the fire at the edge of the canopy they use, when up came this toff, well dressed in knickerbockers (Martin called them another name in workers parlance) and a down the river hat with a feather in it. He stopped to warm his hands at the fire and said, "Quite a sharp day for you lads with that touch of frost!" I said certainly is sir, and then it dawned on me, it was Lord Rosebery, I recognised him from the racing papers. He got his eye on my tea can and he seemed fascinated by it, and I thought Jesus, he surely doesn't want a drink from that, but you know how I always keep my drum shining.

This was one of Martin's habits, his can was always kept as bright as a pin, whilst the others were soot black from the fires.
Rosebery said *That's a most remarkable vessel you've got there my man, may I ask how you came by it, I can't help but observe it is stamped, By Appointment to their Majesties*. Well I thought, he is deadly serious, probably never seen inside his kitchen let alone a Tate & Lyle syrup tin.

Of course, that is what the tea can was made from, like most of them, the rim was trimmed off by a can opener, any rough edges smoothed down, two holes pierced in each side with a nail and a length of copper or brass wire looped through the holes. Every building worker in Scotland used them, but Martin's can was sparkling bright and the insignia shone out as if it was the Scottish League Football Cup.
Lord Rosebery then said, *Could I ask you again how you came by that most unusual chalice, is it some sort of award?* As a matter of fact sir, it was given to me by her Majesty when she was in residence at Holyrood Palace and she was so impressed by the work of a mason building a pillar, I was the labourer, she presented us with these marvellous tea cans, hence the royal symbol. *Well done, my good man* said the Lord and then *I suppose it will have sentimental value for you, but could I ask if you would part with it for a consideration. I have a strong attraction for such curiosities.* I wouldn't mind, sir I said and I took the drum to the side of the hut and gave him it. He slipped a fiver into my hand and went on his way. I also went on my way in the opposite direction and never went back to that job.

"You lying bastard" someone shouted but Martin shot out of the cabin as they broke into laughter.

I can't recall exactly how long that Moredun job of Wimpey's lasted, certainly not over the winter, but it proceeded towards its finish almost without incident, except there was a row between Albert and a bricklayer who threatened him with physical violence. The man concerned was reported to the branch and fined a fiver, but he appealed against the decision and a higher appeal body reduced his fine to one pound. By the time the job actually reached its finish, the bricklayer force had been reduced to about twenty, including their labourers, but there now developed quite a drama which proved to be a most unique experience in the life of building workers.

The site described above was a section of the Moredun development and it was a contract on its own. However, the next phase of Moredun was also being carried out by Wimpey. This was for what we called the Blackburn type house, which gained its name from the Blackburn factory in Dumbarton. This factory produces metal roofs, prefabricated in the factory, transferred in sections by lorries to the site and lifted by crane onto the brickwork shell, all timber in that roof was eliminated by this method. This section was certainly another contract but by the same contractor and we were very well aware of the state of readiness for the brickwork to commence on this section.

We knew all the roads were in and on the first road the concrete foundations for houses were completed right down both sides of that road. And, what was even better, the very bricks were already stacked neatly in their places in quite a number of foundations, everything ready and in order for bricklayer squads to start operations. All this showed a very high standard of organisation on the part of the Wimpey who must be given credit for a high degree of efficiency. However, what was missing were the bricklayer squads and here we were, quite ready as well, and dead keen to get on with the job – only yards away.

But Wimpey didn't want us; or at least didn't want some of us, especially those among us who suffered from that dread disease of leprosy, otherwise known as virulent trade unionism. So Wimpey sacked us all on that section of the site which had been completed and did not offer anyone a transfer to the other section which I described above. But we had other ideas and the idea was, we would refuse to accept the sack of our cards, and demand a transfer to that new section. Along with this great idea, we then worked out our tactics. First, when it came to the mechanics of the actual pay-off on the Friday, we would take our pay packets but refuse our cards. "Hold on" shouted one of these awkward customers you'll always find among us, *"if we refuse to take our cards, they won't give us our wages"*. Sure enough, we all agreed, that's what would happen.

The great idea had run slap bang into its first obstacle; consternation twisted all our faces as we contemplated that not one of us could manage without that pay-packet that particular day, for the simple reason the days to follow were full of uncertainty and we lived from one pay day to the next. The great idea may not succeed and we could be out of work for some time. But such challenges force that initiative of which workers are so capable in times of stress. "I've got it" someone else cried, I can't remember who:
We'll take the books and the money, say nothing to anyone, then after we've all been paid up, we'll give our cards to Albert (the shop steward), he'll collect the lot and hand them back into the office.

That was it, a simple but quite brilliant solution, so our first tactic was certain to succeed. But that was only the first move in the drama. The second move had already started, which was that I had phoned round the Press officers and contacted some of the reporters and told them there was a good news story on that site, that afternoon, provided they came to get it.

There were more local and national daily papers published in those times and quite a few reporters came out. We were ready for them, having performed our first task, which was, we had all lifted our wages and cards, then having checked our money, each man handed his Insurance and Holiday Credit cards to Albert, who then went back to the cubby hole, tossed the whole bundle through to the pay-clerk and shouted through, "We'll take our wages, but we are not accepting the sack, you can have the cards back" and with that statement our earlier consternation passed on to the management staff in the office. We picked up our tool bags and plumb rules and walked up the road to the next development, which I have previously described. The reporters were already waiting for us and, after answering their queries, we gave them a Press Statement.

The building workers who have completed the latest phase of Council housing on the Moredun site to the satisfaction of the company, George Wimpey, Civil Engineers and Building Contractors, are now threatened with the sack. We are disputing this action and demand that our employment be continued for the reason that the next phase of housing development on this site is now ready for construction to proceed. The people on the Council waiting list are in desperate need of new housing and no delay should be tolerated by the housing authority. We seek the support of the public and the housing officials to press for continuity of progress on this site.

We then lined ourselves up in the foundations with our tools at the ready and some of the brickies stood with their plumb rules (spirit levels) on the corners, all set to start building. The camera men took the shots, and the local press Evening News and the Dispatch carried splendid photos next day.

The publicity was good and of course, the housing issue was very topical because of the desperate need for housing accommodation. Well the pressure was on Wimpey now, and we followed our action with a deputation to the housing officials at the City Chambers in the High Street. The chief official of the Housing Department at that time was a Mr Murchieson who was very well known to me and my mates because we had met him on frequent visits to the Housing Department to discuss business of construction programmes. Our experience of dealing with the man and his close associates gave us a great degree of confidence in him, for the simple reason he had very practical approach and an extensive knowledge of all construction problems connected with the City's programmes, as well as a positive attitude towards the problem of the building workers. We also met with many of the councillors and our case won a great deal of sympathy among them, particularly the Labour Party representatives.

The outcome of our struggle was that we were taken on for employment on the site I've already described. Work proceeded on that job right to its completion and I cannot recall any serious problems or disputes. Certainly there was at least one demonstration in support of a National Wage Claim, where we joined up with other sites such as the site at the Inch, but this was a half-day stoppage and not a serious impediment to production. The agent on that Wimpey site was a man named Bert Ramsay and I'm quite certain he was in no way connected with the original attempt to prevent us getting a start. I didn't know then that Bert had a certain sympathy with some of our ideas and actions but learned this in later years when I met him again and realised we had mutual friends such as Jim Hill, MP for Midlothian and Alec Moffat, President of the National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area.

I've written about incidents on building sites where we recorded some successful outcomes to skirmishes with the construction employers and there were many more, but there were also very many where we met defeat and setbacks and these were usually on jobs where trade union organisation was weak. I recall an incident where we were out of work and some brickies were waiting at Tollcross Labour Exchange in the hope that some vacancies would be notified. An application came in for three bricklayers wanted by Arnott McLeod Builders, and the site was near Corstorphine.

Mark Murray, a close friend of mine got a card for three, so he told me and another brickie, much younger than us, whose name was Tully. Mark then phoned up the job, but I said to Mark, "Don't mention my name over the phone or no one will be started". So Mark was asked on the phone what were the names of the three, he gave the names of himself and Tully and a fictitious name for me (a ruse which we often had to use). "Right came the reply, start tomorrow morning". The three of us went out next morning and as we got near the site, I said to Tully "You go well ahead of us and get yourself started just in case there's trouble". So the young lad done that and we gave him enough time.

Mark and I reported to the site office and handed in our cards, Unemployment, Insurance and Holiday cards, the site clerk took them and told us to go to a section to join a squad for work. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the bricklayer foreman going into the site office. I said to Mark "Hurry up, get up that road and let us get started before he spots me". However, he had spotted my cards and recognised the name, and out he came running and shouting for us to stop. He came up, he was known as "down the road". I had never worked on any job with him at any time, but he knew me or my name. He said to Mark, "You never gave his name on the phone". Mark said, "I know that, the other chap didn't come, so I told Hughie". The foreman said to me "I didn't start you".

"No, but you had an application in for three bricklayers" I told him.
"Well you're not starting" he said. I said to Mark "You might as well start, he's not refusing you. I'll now take this up with the Union."

But Mark refused to start without me and we walked back the site office to collect our cards and on our way we passed bricklayers working in a foundation. I recognised the assistant secretary of our union branch, Jimmy Hardy. I'm quite sure he didn't want to see me, but I went over and asked if they had a shop steward on the job and he told me where he was working, so I spoke to him. I knew that most of the brickies were regular McLeod men and were afraid to take any action, afraid for their jobs, but I wanted to complain in any case, that I'd be taking the matter up with the branch. Well they watched us going off the job and took no action.

I did complain at the branch, of course, but nothing came out of it. Managerial rights of the company to refuse anyone they chose, a so-called right which our full-time official often quoted to us and which he upheld and which always stuck in my gullet as in those of my mates. We always contended that if a firm required bricklayers then it should be first come, first served. 'Managerial rights', the right to hire and fire, was always a contentious issue with many of us at site level. Now we did not dispute that management had a job to carry out, the contract had to be efficiently completed and on time, and on many contracts there existed penalties which could be imposed by the client on the contractor if operations were not complete by specified dates. We were well aware of these conditions. Moreover it generally suited the operatives if production and progress ran smoothly on a job, if this happened then earnings benefited. Nevertheless if management were given the unbridled "right to hire and fire" workers, this could and did cause havoc with workers' lives and conditions. However, the Unions, over the years, have continued to make inroads into the employers "unbridled right to hire and fire" and in the Building Industry the restrictions on the managerial rights of employers to "hire and fire" are contained in the Working Rule Agreement of the National Joint Council for the Building Industry.

Some of the rules represent rights which have been gained by workers struggling on the job and in the unions and none of the gains were given "free gratis" by employers. It often makes me boke when I read of lectures so graciously handed out to other countries (especially the socialist countries of Eastern Europe) by people like Mrs Thatcher or Ronald Reagan about human rights, when I recall the long and bitter struggle of British and American workers to achieve some elementary human rights in our industrial lives. The building workers had to take strike action on numerous occasions to win even the right to a cup of tea in the morning. After generations of struggle, they can still be thrown on the scrapheap because of bad weather. Miners in the strike suffered vicious physical assault by government-organised police forces for exercising the right to strike and their union the NUM was bound up in a financial straightjacket by the courts in order to starve their families into submission.

Hard won human rights fought for and achieved by trade unions and the whole of the Labour Movement in a mighty struggle spanning the lives of generations of workers and progressive thinking intellectuals are now under attack and being assailed with every week that passes by the Thatcher-led Tory government. Mrs Thatcher had the audacity to go to Poland and lecture the Polish government about trade union freedom in that country. However, her visit coincided with the demonstration of Civil Service workers supported by wide sections of other workers protesting against the sacking and discrimination of workers at GHCQ Cheltenham for being trade union members. The hypocrisy of her attitude was well and truly noticed by thousands of Civil Service workers on this day. Some of us noticed the hypocrisy long ago and, in the President's address to the UCATT National Delegate Conference at Southport 1984, I said:

"I want to ask Thatcher, who is a fervent admirer of Solidarity in Poland, why it is that to be a member of Solidarity in Poland is a high mark of patriotism in that country, yet to be a member of trade union employed at Cheltenham is a mark of treachery to Britain?" But then words, like rights and freedom, mean entirely different concepts to different people especially people from different classes of society. I prefer Shelley's concept of freedom, "What is freedom? To a labourer thou art bread and a comely table spread". But freedom to Thatcher and the class represented by the Tory party means to asset strip publicly owned industries such as Electricity, Gas, Steel, Communications, even Water supply, Air Transport and hand them over to the Multi-National groups of capitalists, no matter which country those groups originate from.

The more successful a publicly owned industry has become after massive investment at the expense of all tax payers, and the even more important investment of workers' lives and labour, the sooner that industry is sold off to the vultures of high finance, in Britain, America, Japan and Europe. Freedom for the Murdochs and Maxwells of this world is to own and control the bulk of the press and influence the rest of the mass media. Freedom for the multi-national corporations is to suck out the natural wealth of Britain, like coal, gas, oil, agriculture and forestry, while wide sections of our people face chronic unemployment, whole industries are decimated and many young people suffer life without a job or future prospects with no hope of satisfactory employment. In all our great cities and other places as well, families and single persons experience homelessness while tens of thousands of skilled building workers are unemployed. What price freedom and human rights? This reminds me of that story I heard recently. It was reported that Mrs Thatcher had died and at the gates of heaven she confronted St Peter and the Devil. The Devil claimed her as his own and St Peter could not but agree and so she landed in Hell. After a week had passed the Devil came back to St Peter and begged for Mrs Thatcher to be taken off his hands. St Peter said "But why? You were keen enough to take her in the first place". The Devil answered "For God's sake, take her out, she's only been down there for a week and she has already closed down six furnaces".

But, to continue the tale of the struggle to survive the vicissitude of an active trade union member in the construction industry, I recall an occasion when a most unusual term was used at the conclusion of a dispute. The firm was MacTaggart & Mickel, well known builders of private houses in Edinburgh and Glasgow. The site was what we called then Old Saughton, near Broomhouse in Edinburgh and the contract was public housing for Edinburgh Corporation. I was working on a job at East Calder; it was another lousy job so I took a Saturday morning off to look for a better job with more money. I went on the MacTaggart & Mickel site above, spoke to Jim Frazer who was a squad foreman of a bricklayer squad and a man I had worked with before the war. They needed a bricklayer and so he told me to start the following Monday. I duly turned up for work on the Monday, but was told, no start. I knew it was not Jim Frazer's doing, but I suspected another person, I can't prove it so I won't mention the name. However, there was Union organisation on that job; Jackie Currie AUBTW No 1 Branch secretary was employed there, also Tiger Weir was shop steward for the brickies. So a meeting was called straight away and it was "Down Tools".

The local district organiser, Jimmy Stewart, was on holiday so an official from Glasgow deputised for him. I believe his name was McKinley and, when he heard the case, he let it be known to Mr Mickel that he would be seeking official union recognition for the dispute. The strike was into its third day and another meeting was held on the Wednesday. The bold Mr Mickel came into the meeting and Tiger Weir was going to throw him out as he had no right to be at the meeting. However tempers calmed down and Mickel said he only wanted to ask one question, so it was agreed to allow the question. Mickel turned to Jim Frazer and asked him, "Did you authorise Mr D'Arcy to start work on Monday?" And to Jim Frazer's credit, who was a regular with the firm, he replied "Yes I did and Mickel left the meeting".

The meeting continued and old Danny Rafferty, the most ragged dressed brickie I've ever seen, made some remarks. Danny was opposed to the stoppage and he said, "This lad D'Arcy, I've heard about him, there's always trouble. I wonder what he's up to or where he comes from. I'm going to keep my eye on him". I think Danny thought I was a Russian spy. However, Danny didn't keep his eye on me for long; he used to swallow some sort of white powder in handfuls for a stomach complaint and the bib of his ragged overalls was always covered with the stuff. He died some months later. After the meeting, Tiger (his name was James Weir) and myself went in to see Mickel and Tiger, whose habit was to speak very rapidly, like a machine gun, addressed himself to the boss. Tiger was more excited than usual so the words rattled out, not only with the speed of a Tommy gun's bullets but with even more aggression and the swear words were plentiful. " I'm f …… telling you Mickel, this dispute will not only be f …… official, I'm going to the Trades Council tonight after I make the f……. report the T and G (TGWU) drivers will not deliver one f……. brick or bag of cement on this job, so you can please your f…… self".

Well between Frazer's admission and Tiger's peroration and the loss of three days production, Mr Mickel was in a quandary. Tiger, of course, was bluffing. The Trades Council was not meeting that week at all and the likelihood of the TGWU responding in that way was unlikely, but Mickel wasn't sure if Tiger was bluffing. So Mr Mickel arrived at that strange term which settled the dispute. "Mr D'Arcy was re-instated", although I had never laid one brick on that job.

Many years later, when I had been elected to the Executive Council of UCATT, I became a member of the Conciliation Panel of the National Joint Council of the Building Industry. This was the machinery for the settlement of disputes in the industry. I often told the employers' representatives that a really good shop steward was never a troublemaker; he was more of a trouble solver. I mean by a good shop steward, one who represents the interests of the workers who elected him and one who normally solves more disputes than he ever starts. In other words, one who knows quite clearly that it is a dead loss to his members to lose their wages through stoppage of work and, therefore, the strike weapon is the very last resort. Nevertheless, strike action is also very necessary at times to defend his members and sometimes instant strike action in the only answer to a problem.

To give an example from real life I'll recount a case where the so called trouble-makers solved a dispute by convincing the workforce to keep on working. On Southouse site of James Miller & Partners in Edinburgh, there was a problem concerning bonus payments. I was in a squad of brickies along with Charlie McManus and we did not agree with the bonus measurement; we thought it was short measure. The question was resolved between the men and the firm, but it left bad blood in our relations with the agent on the job and we were forever at loggerheads. Eventually the agent wanted McManus and myself to transfer to another site (how often we heard that one). Charlie was adamant and wanted a site meeting straight away. I did not agree and proposed the two of us pay a visit to the other site, which was in Leith, that same day after we finished at 4.30pm and find the exact position on the Leith site, where we already suspected work was nearly complete for bricklayers.

So we went to Leith. We found Charlie's brother, Jimmy, and Arthur McQuade were the only two bricklayers on the job and they told us the job was practically complete, so we were no longer speculating about the Leith job. We could report the exact situation to the men at Southouse next morning and that is what we did. Of course, at the meeting it was all too obvious: the agent had tried to manoeuvre to get rid of us. So the reaction was "DOWN TOOLS". This was moved by big Tam Muirhead, who was a

brickie labourer in our squad. Tam had a gruff voice and a gruffer manner, so when he made the motion it was like the voice of doom. He made no speech – he just said very slowly "DOWN TOOLS", and of course there was no opposition – such an open and shut case. I said "Hold on, don't down tools, everyone carry on working. There is no need for you to lose your wages over this case. McManus and I will refuse to transfer; we will make ourselves available for work on this job (Southouse) each day and all day. We appreciate your support, but we think we are justified and we will be reinstated". Charlie and I had already agreed on this line, which was adopted by the meeting.

So we reported for work each morning and sat in the cabin all day, so you can bet the Morning Star was well read those days. Well after a week had passed, more senior staff from James Miller & Partners and our Eastern District organiser, Jimmy Stewart, came to the site and we were called in to meet them. The result was McManus and I were informed to resume work normally on that site, which we did and moreover we were paid our full wages.

One of Miller's senior staff was Bob Porteous, whom we had often met when problems arose on various Miller's sites in the Edinburgh and Fife areas. We had always found him to be a fair negotiator and the kind of person who would never allow a dispute to become very prolonged; he had an ability to arrive at a settlement. That does not imply that he was a soft touch in any way, but he knew the problems of the building workers; also the men came to trust him as a man of his word. There came a time later on and another dispute with Miller when I sorely missed Bob Porteous's presence but we will come back to that one.

I have referred to shop stewards and I would like to develop further the role of the shop steward. A shop steward's function and importance is becoming more clear to the public at large, particularly through the television nowadays as industrial disputes, lock-outs, work-ins through factory occupation, closure of whole industrial units, such as UCC Upper Clyde Shipyard, Caterpillar Tractors at Uddingston, decimation of the Scottish Steelworks by British Steel, closures of the pits in Scotland, including great complexes such as Monkton Hall near Edinburgh which still have a viable economic future before them. So we could go on listing the sabotage of Scotland's economy at the hands of the Tory government, unrepresentative and unwanted by the Scottish electorate.

To conclude my remarks on the Blacklist, I was gratified to read about the Daily Mirror's exposure of the Blacklist as operated by the Economic League and featured by the Mirror during the Labour Party Conference at Brighton 1991. The November issue of UCATT Viewpoint contained a whole page devoted to this subject, which was reproduced by permission of the Daily Mirror and Syndication International and, I quote:

Hundreds of names on the Big Brother blacklist exposed by the Daily Mirror are marked with the letter K..... a code branding them construction industry troublemakers. As a result they have been denied work, no matter how desperately they needed it. A team of Mirror investigators examined the so called K list, compiled by the shadowy right wing Economic League and used by employers to check workers of job applications. The 'Ks' are among 22,000 'subversives' on the list of which the Mirror has a copy. We know it is being used by the League, headed by director general Stan Hardy as recently as 1989 and building firms are among the organisation's main subscribers.

The Daily Mirror page then followed on with names of construction workers and their stories of Blacklisting, including names of companies involved and names of journalists and MPs. Three listed are dead, Alan Adams, Norman Buchan and Patrick Wall.

The same issue of Viewpoint contained a photo of Albert Williams, General Secretary, who has been a full-time officer of UCATT since 1971 but he is still on the Economic League's roll of dishonour. And I could name many who were well and truly victimised in the construction industry just because they had been involved in site disputes. Jack Henry, well known member of UCATT's Executive Council until recently, walked the streets of London for a very long period following the strikes at the Barbican and Horseferry Road sites and his wife endured hardship throughout this period. To the everlasting credit of Sir George Smith (General Secretary of UCATT at this time) his personal intervention with a firm, Roberts, building council housing at Wandsforth Road, got Jack a start. The workers on that job soon elected him as the Convenor and, to the credit of Jack Henry, he in turn acted to get a number of lads started on the job who had been victims of Blacklisting in London. Moreover, I was present on that job when an official of Lambeth Council Housing Department congratulated the company and the operatives for a splendid record of progress in house construction and that statement by the official was made on behalf of the Council. Nevertheless we are branded as troublemakers by such vermin as the Economic League.

I remember the aftermath of the 1972 Building Workers strike when some of our lads in Glasgow fell victim to the whip of the Blacklist; Eamon Monaghan is one of them. He played a prominent role in that strike, acting as chairman of the Building Workers Charter and chair of the Strike Committee in that area. He suffered the consequences and later was able to produce documentation on names of workers listed by companies such as Watlings and Lafferty.

Some names I have mentioned, of course, were political activists but they were also very capable skilled tradesmen and general operatives. Trade Unionism in the construction industry should place them on a roll of honour – activists like Bill Smart, Joe Roots, Tony Roots, Maxie Baer, Alan Tatham, Terry Heath, Dickie Miles, Albert Williams, Jack Henry, Dave Patchett, Harry Weaver, Charlie Kelly, Eamon Monaghan, Willie McFall, John Sheridan, Charlie Louther, Tommy McLeland, Tony Lowe, Bert Lowe, Jim Cousins, Ian Watson, Michael D'Arcy, James Kerr, Peter Forest, Charlie McManus, Willie Barclay, Sid Paris, David Thomson, Paddy Ryan, Jimmy Lynch and Mark Murray.

Of course, it wasn't only political activists who were enmeshed in the net of the Economic League. Jackie Goldwyre of Edinburgh, bricklayer, heard that Trentham, a construction company on a site in George Street, had vacancies for bricklayers. He applied for a job and was refused. I was an EC member of UCATT and I went back to the job and asked the agent why he was refused when bricklayers were required. He gave me no reason whatsoever. Now the point is Goldwyre was unknown to the agent or anyone else on the job, but Jackie was a member of the Union who had served as shop steward on several jobs. We suspected then that the national scheme of blacklisting was in operation.

Very shortly after this incident, Jackie applied for a job with Sir Robert McAlpine's site near Leith Street in Edinburgh, where there were again vacancies for bricklayers. The foreman knew he had been shop steward for UCATT at St James Centre - the Shopping, Hotel, Pubs and Government Offices complex in Edinburgh built by this company - and Goldwyre was refused a start at Leith. So he reported this to his Union branch, where I was in attendance. I wrote to Sir Kenneth McAlpine whom I had met during business meetings concerning the National Joint Council for the Building Industry and the CITB. I told him what happened, that this member, J Goldwyre, having heard McAlpine required bricklayers at the Leith site left his employment with another firm, applied to the McAlpine's job and was refused. Having packed in his previous employment, he was then denied unemployment benefit from the Labour Exchange. I also informed Messrs McAlpine that Jackie Goldwyre was not a political activist or a member of any political party, such as the Communist Party or the Labour Party, but he

had been a shop steward on McAlpine's site at the St James Centre. I received a letter in return asking me to tell Mr Goldwyre he could start on the site concerned and that the company would reimburse him for any loss of income resulting from the above events.

It therefore occurs to me that there are construction companies who will not stoop to such devious practices as a blacklist and also that there are trade union members who are in no way political activists but who can suffer from blacklisting. It will be of interest to all building workers and perhaps others to know that the present fairly extensive rules of the Working Rules, Scottish Regional Committee, National Joint Council for the Building Industry, originated and were developed in the section concerning 'Trade Union Recognition and Procedures' from a statement made by the Scottish Regional Joint Committee in the year 1948, referring to a case where I was the shop steward who had been sacked. I quote the statement:

Note. The following declaration was made by the Council in 1948 – Shop Stewards are Operatives and as such have the same privileges and no special place on account of their position. There should be no victimisation of them on account of that position.

I was in attendance at that meeting as the Shop Steward in question and the declaration was made following the particular case where I was personally involved. I've described the circumstances elsewhere in this narrative. To recount briefly, it was the dispute at the Southfield site, following the dismissal of a number of operatives who included myself (as Shop Steward 91948). The union at that time was the AUBTW and the Scottish Orbit. The AUBTW Organiser was Jimmy Steward and the result was recognition of Shop Stewards officially for the first time in Scottish Working Rules for the Building Industry.

I've no doubt this was an advance in growing recognition of the role of Shop Stewards but it didn't do me much good at the time, because it was the beginning of a period in my life when my name became quite notorious among employers and many fawning agents. However, I had better guard my thoughts against the debilitating disease of cynicism and, although that 1948 declaration squeezed out of the employers was a humble and limited step forward, nevertheless it was a first step and the longest journey has to begin with a first step. Yes we have made progress since those days and the present Working Rules on Trade Union Recognition and Procedures cover three full pages, I note only the headings here:-

Working Rule 25 Trade Union Recognition and Procedures

25.1 Membership of Affiliated Organisations
25.2 Full Time Trade Union Officials
25.3 Site Representatives, Union Officials (25.3.1; 25.3.2; 25.3.3)
25.4 Convenor Stewards (25.4.1; 25.4.2)
25.5 Employment of Stewards: General Conditions (25.5.1; 25.5.2; 25.5.3)
25.6 Training of Union Stewards
25.7 Site Stewards Committees (25.7.1; 25.7.2; 25.7.3)
25.8 Meetings of Operatives
25.9 Inspection of Cards
25.10 Site Procedure Agreements Supplementary to the Rule
25.11 Commencement of Site Works
25.12 Time Off Provision

Oh yes, quite a list, but many of these provisions are far from satisfactory and sorely in need of revision and amendment, and why? Because unfair discrimination and blacklisting against operatives are still rampant in this industry. We could compare the list I have just enumerated with the Working Rules on Safety, which extend over four pages, and yet more building workers are being killed and injured with every year that passes.

Shadow Employment Secretary, Tony Blair at the Brighton Labour Party Conference in 1991 pledged that Labour would outlaw organisations "like the Economic League who sentence men and women to a lifetime's unemployment on charges they never hear and evidence they never see". I sincerely hope and trust that a Labour Government will implement such pledges as Tony Blair's, but my advice to all workers is: keep your powder dry and be prepared to defend your fellow workers at all times, in all circumstances with industrial action and fully alert trade union organisation.

Because of the news value to the media, especially television and the competition to reach wider audiences between vested interests in television media, private and public (BBC), industrial issues are given wider coverage now compared with earlier years. When first I became a delegate to the Scottish TUC in 1965, scant attention was paid by the media to these important events and even less notice was paid in earlier years. The outstanding exception in the daily press was the Morning Star, which always gave first priority in its pages to such conferences, and its predecessor, the Daily Worker, also treated the TUC and the Scottish TUC as the most important events in a worker's calendar; these were and still are the Parliaments of the working class in Scotland and Britain.

Nowadays the reporters of the media, press and television are tripping over each other trying to get interviews with the personalities involved, although I'm of the opinion that still not enough coverage is given to what really are the most representative bodies of working class organisations in Britain. No doubt the highlight of the Trade Union year is the TUC when all the most important issues affecting the lives of working people are considered, debated and decided upon. In Scotland we have the Scottish Trade Union Congress, which is independent from the TUC in the sense that it is not affiliated in any constitutional form and holds its own annual congress which decides policy and elects its own General Council. In practice, however, the same national Trade Unions are affiliated to both bodies and those organisations will endeavour to have their own policies on all aspects affecting their members' lives adopted by the TUC and STUC.

I believe it can be said truthfully that the STUC has a higher profile and role in the lives of the people of Scotland than its partner in England. Some people would describe it as more left wing, but then that is to be expected. Any person with the slightest inkling of politics understands the Scottish nation is more forward and advanced than that of its larger neighbour as far as political consciousness is concerned. Or that Scots are well represented in the national leadership of Trade Unions and political parties in Britain, a composition which is weighted heavily in favour of the Scots when the population of the two countries are compared. This role of Scottish people is a by-product of the history of the Labour movement in Scotland and for that matter is a reflection of the struggles which have been waged by this nation over the centuries for control over its own destiny, often expressed in religious ideas and movements, such as the covenanters and later in movements and agitation around the Reform Act.

Merger of amalgamated society of woodworkers, and amalgamated society of painters and decorators, with the amalgamated union of building trade workers

Building workers 1972 strike

The merger of the main unions in the construction industry took place in July 1971 when the AUBTW formed the future UCATT in joining up with the woodworkers and the painters. Les Wood the general secretary of UCATT after the death of George Smith dealt with some of the problems of that merger in his book "A Union to Build, the Story of UCATT", published in 1979. Some of those problems still remained after the merger and were evident in the different attitude of the three sections reflected on the Executive Council towards the wages negotiations in 1972 with the NJCBI (National Joint Council for the Building Industry) and the strength that followed between the building workers and the employers.

Wage rates in the building industry had fallen far behind other industries in the Wage League Table by 1971, and basic rates for craftsmen and labourers had fallen even further behind average earnings in the industry. In Les Wood's book, cited above, Appendix1 page 196 reveals this situation:

Wage Rates in the Building Industry 7th June 1971
Craftsmen £20.00 per week (50p per hour)
Labourers £17.00 per week (42p per hour)

I was an Executive Council member of UCATT by this time and wrote an article which was published in the Morning Star on June 16th 1972. I wrote in a personal capacity about the struggle for better pay and conditions for construction workers and the fact that industrial action had already developed in support of the union's latest demands on the industry's employers. To quote as follows:

When the building construction unions submitted their claim for £30.00 a week for 35 hours and increased holidays to the National Joint Council for the Building Industry they were offered a shabby 7%. The question of hours and holidays was rejected outright.

To the credit of the unions concerned, this initial offer was turned down as the latest one has been. When the unions asked for an interim increase to compensate their members for the rise in living costs, the employers replied that it was "undesirable to diverge from a firm agreement". What brazen impudence! The employers are guilty of continually breaking the National Agreement and they hope to continue doing so by their policy of screwing down national basic rates to the lowest possible level. They then step outside the agreement and use devious methods to attract labour to their sites, such as the 'The Lump' (labour only), unofficial plus rates, and unlimited overtime. These methods are used by many employers not only to attract labour but also to deliberately bring the unions into disrepute, undermining their strength and membership. At the same time, they stubbornly refuse to provide the opportunity of higher earning to the majority of workers in the construction industry. A lot of nonsense is talked about basic rates in the industry. The facts are that the average earnings for all workers in construction are £28.00 per week, but wide sections are only earning £20.00 for craftsmen £17.00 for labourers, before tax and insurance deductions.

Then followed a table showing comparisons between profits and wages at that period:

Profits and wages

George Wimpey & Company

Profits (after tax) 1970	£3,436,000	
Managing Director's salary	£19,040.00	£360.00 per week
Workers employed 32,000	£1456.00	£28.00 per week

John Laing & Son

Profits (after tax) 1970	£1,179.00	
Chairman's salary	£17,125.00	£330.00 per week
Workers employed 17,000	£1560.00	£30.00 per week

Taylor Woodrow

Profits (after tax) 1970	£2,385.00	
Chairman's salary	£35,967.00	£690.00 per week
Workers employed 10,000	£1560.00	£30.00 per week

The article continues and deals with the political background to the unions claims: the existence of a Tory government in power in Parliament. At that time it was the government of which Ted Heath was Prime Minister and had reduced council housing programmes.

Tenants who are fighting against the Tory Bill and homeless families struggling for an expanded programme of council housing to rent will find natural allies among construction workers. No section of the British working class is more aware of the continued existence of slums and inferior housing and actual homelessness, which is deferring the lives of too many men, women, and children. Yes! Building workers are conscious of these conditions because they know that, given the opportunity, they have the ability to provide every family with a decent home in an enjoyable environment. The construction workers are to the fore in agitating for an expanded construction programme which can provide for the needs of the community in new buildings for housing, education, industry, new towns and other requirements. The unions have also been prominent in condemning the policies of the present Tory government, who have deliberately created over one million unemployed, a large percentage of which are from the construction industry.

Slums

It is a scandal that this government has reduced council housing programmes at a time when it has also reported one and a half million slum dwellings needing to be cleared in England and Wales with well over a quarter of a million for demolition in Scotland. In a situation like this, the Tory government stands condemned of criminal and social neglect for allowing unemployment to develop among workers whose skills and experiences are so urgently required to wipe out this blight of backward housing conditions created by private landlords and other parasites.

The article went on to argue the case that, while output in the industry had fallen because of cutbacks by both Labour and Tory governments, nevertheless productivity had risen, and quoted Mr E.O. Baillie F.I.O.B. Managing Director for Miller Construction Northern Ltd.:

This efficiency has been achieved in spite of ill-conceived deflationary legislation by successive Chancellors, the main target for which has always been the construction industry.

The article (see pages 44-45) continues with:

But argument alone will never impress employers, which is why building workers welcome the news that the unions will use their strength to compel recognition of their just demands – construction workers are aware that united action behind their claims won substantial gains for the miners, UCS workers and other sections of the working class. The measure of our gains will be determined by the strength of our fight.

The article was published as I said by the Morning Star on the 16th June 1972. But this date was Friday, the final day of the UCATT National Delegate Conference in 1972. However, even before its publication I ran into opposition because the Morning Star carried a notice earlier that week to the effect that this feature article was coming out in Friday's edition and practically every delegate bought copies of the Star every morning at the conference. The opposition did not come from the delegates; it happened like this.

I was walking from the dining room of the headquarters hotel with Danny Crawford, an EC member, and George Smith, the General Secretary, was sitting in this lounge. He said "Hughie can I have a word with you? I said certainly, what is it " and George drew up another chair. Danny said "Do you want me as well" George Smith replied in the rudest manner "No! you F….. off". Well I felt my face flushing at that disgraceful attitude towards Crawford but Danny walked away. I sat down beside Smith and he said "I believe you've got an article coming out on Friday in the Star on the wages issue". I replied "Yes that's right, so what?" George went on: "Well really, it's a practice we've never adopted in the ASW and it might be construed as electioneering. I would advise you to stop its publication while you still have time". I said: "What the hell are you talking about? Electioneering! I'm only just elected to the EC I don't face another election for at least four years". He replied "Oh well I'm just giving you fair warning, how some people on the EC might react to the article". I said "Look here George, I'll tell you this, that article stays in and the EC has its next meeting on Tuesday of next week and you or anyone else can challenge me at that meeting. As a matter of fact, I wrote the article at least two weeks ago. I'm sick of waiting for it to be published". His attitude changed immediately and his next words were: How do you reckon the wages campaign is progressing? and we discussed the problems of how our tactics should be developed.

George Smith's move was the first attempt at intimidation. Next day Bill Martin, EC member, had another go at the morning tea break in Conference: "Hughie could I have a word with you on the quiet?. I knew what was coming! I think you should withdraw that article from the Morning Star; it could harm your career, Bill went on. I told him, "George Smith gave me similar advice, and the article stays in". He said "Well I think you are a foolish young man for your own sake". The next attempt came from Jimmy Heapy, Chairman of the Conference, same approach. Before he could get started on the subject, I said "Jimmy don't bother about the article; you are the third one to approach me and it stays in"; he made no further attempt to pursue it.

All that pressure and yet they hadn't even read it, and all approaches from the ranks of the old ASW. It was a reflection of their outlook and conviction that they were the dominant section in the merger. They were in for many more rude awakeners. There was no challenge about the article at the next EC and George Smith had an interview published in the same paper on the wages claim a couple of weeks later.

Certainly the newly merged union was going through a severe testing time and the most severe test of all was the latest wage claim in the building industry, involving the new union organisation born less than a year ago.

The UCATT EC of course was allied with the other unions who composed the operatives side of the NJCBI, namely TGWU, GMWU, and EFTAT, but it was UCATT, the major union in construction, that carried the main burden of the claim and the main burden of industrial action arising from any confrontation with the employers in the industry, in other words, "all our eggs were in one basket". Consequently the EC developed its tactics and strategy for the struggle, which in the beginning was direct strike action but limited to a minority of key sites. Strike benefit was paid to those members involved and, although that benefit was only £6.00 per week, nevertheless it amounted to a financial drain which could make drastic inroads into the union's reserves. A national levy was imposed on all members who were not required to stop work; this levy amounted to £1.00 per member, but the number of members taking strike action was increasing every week.

The employers' first offer was a paltry £1.40 craft, £1.20 labourers per week, and yet, when the UCATT Executive considered this offer, some EC members voted in favour of acceptance; they were all painters' representatives. The builders section on the EC all voted against acceptance and two woodworkers voted with builders, so the offer was rejected, and the campaign continued.

The leadership of the strike action must also be credited to powerful rank and file participation. The "Builders Charter" was a campaigning publication, which had a long tradition of agitation on every issue affecting construction workers lives, particularly on the demand for better wages. The editorial board of the paper was composed of left wing activists from the building unions, and its role as a leading influence inspiring this tremendous movement among workers in this industry cannot be denied or underestimated.

The first offer was rejected by all the unions involved. The strike continued and escalated. A further offer was made by the employers. On this occasion, the UCATT EC had convened a special National Conference from all its regions. This Conference did not have the status of a "National Delegate Conference" with power to decide union policy, but was a consultative exercise, very well representative of the UCATT regions, with special emphasis on representation from the construction sites. We assembled at the TUC head office in Bloomsbury and the EC met that morning before the Conference started. The details of the further offer were outlined by the General Secretary, George Smith; it was a definite improvement on the previous offer. I spoke in favour of rejection and was supported by Albert Williams and Bill Lewis (all builders). When it was put to the vote of the EC, we were defeated, and we then went into the Conference.

The Chairman of the EC at this period was Frank Berry (painters) and he opened the Conference calling upon George Smith to make the report and outline the latest offer. The offer was received with overwhelming hostility in the discussion which followed and the very strong trend of opinion among delegates, both full time officers and lay members, was expressed very clearly indeed. This trend was for the EC to extend the strike and not allow the issue of strike pay to inhibit the development of wider strike action. In the words of more than one delegate it was expressed in this manner: "The EC should forget the problem of strike pay, and strike pay we have received is being deducted by Social Security officials in any case". That was the message of the Conference; there was to be no voting, as I explained, as this was a Conference for consultation.

The Chairman adjourned the meeting for a lunch break and, when we reconvened, his conduct of procedure was either the most stupid or the most arrogant I've ever seen, or perhaps it was both. He called the meeting to order, requested George Smith to reply to discussion, then immediately closed the Conference, so that the resumed meeting after lunch break lasted about ten minutes. Whether Smith had told him to do that, I'll never know, although the General Secretary looked as surprised as everyone else, when he was asked to reply. Quite a disastrous manner in which to close such a Conference. However, neither the Chairman's behaviour nor the EC vote previous to Conference could prevent the obvious, the inevitable surge of the developing strike action.

The determination of the workers to spread the strike had caught on. There were tens of thousands of workers, most of whom had never previously taken industrial action against employers, marching in great united demonstrations in our cities throughout the country. But, not only were there huge demonstrations, there was also the day to day activity of taking the message to thousands of building sites, some big sites, but mostly smaller scattered jobs. The method of the "Flying Pickets" had arrived among the construction workers; they had rapidly learnt from the miners' strike of 1972, when this phenomenon was used by the miners to conduct a most successful strike action to win substantial gains from the Coal Board and against the wishes of the Tory government of Ted Heath.

People will recall the dispute affecting the miners at that period, when the Coal Board thought their tremendous build-up of stocks of coal at key electricity generating plants and coal depots would beat the NUM into submission. But the flying pickets became the order of the day, and it was no longer a case of just stopping that pit where you were employed; the tactics were to blockade the power stations as well. The flying pickets did that job, but the miners were also joined by workers from other industries and the most memorable event was the mass picket at Saltley depot. Prior to the Saltley events, the Heath government had been in conflict with the Dockers in the first national dock strike since 1926. Troops were deployed during an electricity supply dispute, and also during a dispute with refuse collectors in the London borough of Tower Hamlets.

In their book 'Smear: Wilson and the Secret State' Stephen Dorril and Robin Ramsay wrote: "The climax of this conflict was the miners' strike of 1972 on 8 February 1972, with only a few weeks coal stocks left, when the Cabinet Emergencies Committee decided to declare the third state of emergency of the Heath administration. Two days later came the Saltley depot incident, when the 'flying pickets' of the National Union of Mineworkers, directed by the young Arthur Scargill, prevented the movement of coke from a depot near Birmingham". I recall the pickets at Longannet Power Station in Scotland, when Michael McGahey, President of the Scottish Miners, picketing with his members, suffered a severe kick on his leg and another union official was arrested by the police. The official who was arrested was a well-known character among the miners and in the Labour movement, Graham Steel; he was popularly called "Big Grahmey". He was incarcerated (not castrated) in Dunfermline jail and - the story goes – Mick McGahey visited Graham in jail and said "Grahmey, your being in jail is the very thing the strike requires at this juncture – a martyr". Mick was not kidding. Grahmey replied "You buggers get me out of this God's cursed place as quick as you can, I'm no ready to be a martyr yet."

The lesson and effectiveness of the flying pickets was not lost on the building workers and it was not only building sites where the pickets were active. They also visited factories pits, offices, miner social clubs, Labour clubs, postal depots, all the various branches of other unions to win financial support. Local Hardship Funds were organised throughout the regions and used to help the most severe cases of hardship. Those local funds were collected and distributed by the rank and file organisations and were a most important asset in the strike action. There was tentative agreement among the national leadership of the union side of the NJCBI that official strike pay should not be paid out, but this was not observed by the same sections of the national unions. This splitting tactic caused a great deal of distress and confusion among the ranks of workers who found it difficult to comprehend why some strikers received some strike pay and not others. I found in my experience during the strike and afterwards, when the explanation was made to UCATT members in a frank and clear manner, they accepted it. The explanation was simple; if UCATT paid out official Strike Benefit, even at £6.00 per week, to all our members involved, then the General Fund and all the assets of the Union would evaporate completely within two weeks.

By the middle of September 1972, many of the union members had been on strike for twelve weeks and a so-called final offer was made by the employers' side of the NJCBI. This was for an immediate increase to:

Craftsmen	£26.00 per week – (15p per hour) increase
Labourers	£22.00 per week – (13p per hour) increase

Thereafter the details were:

25th June 1973

	Standard Weekly Rate	Guaranteed Minimum Bonus	Cost of Living Supplement
Craftsmen	£27.00	£2.60	
Labourers	£23.00	£2.60	

10th June 1974

	Standard Weekly Rate	Guaranteed Minimum Bonus	Cost of Living Supplement
Craftsmen	£29.00	£3.00	£1.20
Labourers	£24.60	£2.60	£1.20

This offer was a substantial improvement on all previous offers and the immediate increase represented an advance in Basic Rates of 30 per cent.

I was not on the actual negotiating team but, as soon as I heard the offer that evening and also that the Union side would accept, I realised we had made significant gains as a result of the tremendous efforts in the strike movement and I was personally prepared to recommend acceptance of this offer. I travelled overnight to Edinburgh and I was aware there was a mass meeting to be held that morning. Although I was not booked to speak at the meeting, I had the up-to-date information on the offer, so I went straight from the Waverley station to the union office in Hillside Crescent, where preparations for a march and demonstration were already underway. I told the full time officials and chairman of the shop stewards committee I would speak at the meeting, gave them the gist of the offer and said I would be advocating support and a return to work. My opinion was not shared by all activists at that time, but many of them, perhaps even most of them, arrived at the same conclusion sometime later. I felt convinced we had taken the strike action as far as we could, we had achieved quite substantial gains, the positive aspects outweighed the negative aspects, and prolonged strike action at his juncture could only lead to a disorganised, scattered and demoralised return to work. Hindsight shows we were correct to conclude agreement on the offer and recommend an organised return to work, but then there was no hindsight at the time of that offer and a decision had to be made. I believe the Edinburgh demonstration on that day was the first in the whole country to hear the offer; the meeting took place in the Meadows after a march from Hillside Crescent, up Leith Walk along Princes St, up the Mound, via George IV Bridge to the Meadows.

The platform was a huge lorry and again it really was a mass meeting of construction workers. The chairman was Charlie McManus, who held that position for the stewards committee and was a veteran of many struggles among building workers. The first speaker was James Stocks, regional organiser UCATT. I followed on, gave a report on the previous day and evening negotiations at Cavendish Street, London, including the main details of the employers' latest offer, and then recommended support for acceptance with an organised return to work. McManus then prepared the meeting for a show of hands, "For or Against" the recommendation, and the voting took place. Before the chairman could announce anything, a shop steward on the platform, jumped forward and shouted, after the show of hands "The voting is indecisive, its indecisive". McManus then said "alright, to avoid any confusion, we'll take the vote in the following manner. All those in favour of the recommendation as moved by Bro D'Arcy walk over to that line of trees" and he pointed to the avenue of trees which forms Middle Meadow Walk. Well, they started walking until only very few were left beside the platform; it was an overwhelming and decisive vote to accept. The chairman then called on the steward who had objected to the first vote to announce the result of the meeting and he said "I have to concede it's an overwhelming majority to accept".

The main form of communication with the workers on strike, which had developed during the action, was the mass meeting as described above, and this was the pattern in nearly all major cities and towns. That very form had now been put to the test in the Edinburgh scene concerning the vote for acceptance of the latest offer and a return to work. This experience was repeated throughout the country, with more or less similar results. I wrote previously that the newly merged union, UCATT in its birth pangs, well-nigh had its Baptism of Fire during the greatest strike of construction workers in living memory in Britain; the union came through, not unscathed, but with its head held high.

At the start of the strike action the standard rate (basic rate) was:

Craftsmen £20 per week (50p per hour)
Labourers £17 per week (42_ per hour)

At the end of the strike the immediate increase was:

Craftsmen £26 per week (65p per hour)
Labourers £22.20 per week

A percentage increase of 30 per cent.
We made no advance on reduction of hours; we would have to fight another day on this issue.

The baptism of fire consolidated the ranks of UCATT and augured well for the newly merged union. The employers in the industry had been taught a severe lesson in allowing workers' wages to fall so low, but their resentment against the men and their unions was to show itself in what followed.

Shrewsbury Events and Trial

The resentment of the Building Trade employers was pursued with a vengeance and, months after the strike was settled, the Shrewsbury Crown Court sentenced a number of building workers to varying fines and terms of imprisonment for their part in incidents that were alleged to have taken place during the strike. The principal defendants in the Shrewsbury Trials were Des Warren and Eric Tomlinson, who were ultimately charged and found guilty of conspiracy under common law and sent to prison for three years and two years, respectively. I can recall one newspaper report at the time of the trial where the judge said it wasn't necessary for the prosecution to prove that conspiracy had taken place; all that was necessary was for the court to assume it had taken place.

The Conspiracy Act of 1875 was used against the defendants. Proof of evidence was an absentee as well, in a document compiled by the National Federation of Building Trade Employers and used to influence and pressurise the Home Secretary, who was Robert Carr at this period. Les Wood in his book quotes at length from the Employers' document, for example, "Certain broad conclusions may be reached on the basis of its contents" say the employers:

The first and most obvious relates to the geographical incidence of events – Yorkshire, the Midlands the North East, the North West and Scotland were the areas most acutely affected. — Another conclusion which may be formed is that there was a steady increase in violence from isolated, sporadic incidents in the earlier days of the strike to virtual mobster tactics towards the end ——.

This points to the final conclusion, that the violence was the work of a comparatively small, but coordinated group of people who were well organised, well directed and well financed.

Numerous conclusions arrived at, but no actual evidence offered.
The document goes on:
Questions might well be asked, for example about the source of funds to finance the transport. —— how the targets for intimidating action were selected, how the timing of the 'raids' were organised and how all the necessary intelligence work was done.

All these questions posed and how does the document answer them?
The NFBTE's dossier cannot answer these questions; but its compilers cannot avoid posing them.

Even when the alleged incidents were supposed to have taken place at Telford New Town, no pickets were arrested, although there was evidence that police officers were present at the time and place, and many months were to pass before the charges against the men were brought to court.

Les Wood in the same book describes how members of the UCATT EC met in a Teignmouth hotel, along with one of the union's solicitors, at the time when the charges were made against the pickets. And let me make it patently clear, not all the members of the EC were present at that meeting and I was certainly not present, nor made aware of this meeting. Les explains that, when they heard the charges, one EC member exclaimed "We daren't touch this with a barge pole". And that does not surprise me, for I learned later how hostile some of the EC members were against the men who were charged.

The solicitor involved advised the General Secretary and the Executive Council that the union's rules precluded legal assistance being provided to members charged with outright criminal offences. Be that as it may, sometimes solicitors will give the advice a general secretary wants. However, a great deal more could have been done by the leadership of the unions involved, mainly UCATT and to a lesser extent the TGWU. I remember the very morning the news broke about the sentences imposed on the men who were charged, the most severe sentence of three years imprisonment was inflicted on Des Warren, member of UCATT. The UCATT Executive met the same morning for its statutory meeting and normal business was on the agenda. However the news of the sentences could not be ignored and a hectic discussion ensued. Most of those in attendance were not in favour of any action being taken at all. However, some of us pressed for a line of action, particularly myself along with Albert Williams and Douglas Sanderson. We argued for a national protest campaign taking in the TUC and we urged a similar movement of pressure, such as had brought about the release of the Pentonville Dockers. We argued in vain that day, although most of the day was spent in the debate.

The general secretary eventually put forward the motion that the UCATT EC would protest to the government about "The harshness of the sentences". That is all we could get them to do that day, and the three of us mentioned realised it was futile to press any further against the hostility of our colleagues, on this occasion. The lack of a strong political lead by the UCATT EC initially, was the biggest political blunder of George Smith's whole career and this weakness led to confusion and hesitancy in the whole Trade Union movement. However, it did not prevent a movement of protest developing, particularly among UCATT members, which gathered so much support, that the EC of the union, despite the hostility of some members on it, had to identify itself with this protest movement. One of the EC members, Albert Williams, became a member of the committee which organised funds for the relief of hardship to the dependents of those who were sentenced. I well recall the aftermath of the UCATT meeting on the day the sentences were imposed. Some of us adjourned to a local pub, where the discussion continued and one EC member said: "I would have given them thirty years". So I said to him "You wouldn't dare to go before your members and say that to them" and he replied "No but I suppose you'll tell them I said it". I said to him: "Don't be so bloody stupid; if I told any of our members an EC member said such a thing, it would only demoralise them.

I'm writing of such arguments now, but time has passed and I mention this to show deep division among EC members. The hostility towards the Shrewsbury pickets did not prevent the protest movement growing in strength and the following report appeared in UCATT's journal "Viewpoint" in February 1975:

Over 80 Labour MPs have now signed a commons backbench motion demanding the immediate release of the two Shrewsbury pickets. It has support among the 100 Labour MPs who are members of the government and therefore prevented from signing backbench motions. The TUC General Council is to pursue the case of the imprisoned building workers, General Secretary Len Murray said recently *"We want to keep the momentum going".*

Meanwhile many trade union leaders, executives and MPs have called on the TUC to hold a one day stoppage for the immediate freeing of the Shrewsbury 2, Dennis Warren and Eric Tomlinson. Moves are also being made to get a debate in Parliament on the question of the Shrewsbury pickets. Both the TUC and MP.s are planning further approaches on their behalf to Roy Jenkins the Home Secretary. All these actions have come hard on the heels of the successful January 14th TUC lobby of Parliament, when well over 10,000 trade unionists marched and lobbied in pouring rain to tell their MPs "Free the Shrewsbury 2".

Many trade union activists, including from UCATT, were represented in full. Others, including the TUC and Labour Party, as well as regions, districts and branches, Trades Councils and Labour Movement organisations, sent delegations representing millions of workers. The marchers from all over the country assembled at Euston and Tower Hill, where a rally was held, and marched in a sea of banners and posters to Westminster where they joined those who had gone direct to the lobby. Everyone present, despite being soaked to the skin, felt satisfied at the response so far, but agreed that greater pressure must be exerted if the aims are to be achieved.

George Smith, General Secretary had a letter published in the Times on January 31st which I will quote in full:

Sir, - I have read with interest the letter from Mr Edward Lyons QC regarding the Shrewsbury pickets and cannot let his comments pass without a reply. The issue of the Shrewsbury pickets is one which transcends the personality of the two imprisoned men. Unfortunately the minimal coverage of this case in the press has been focused on Warren and Tomlinson as individuals, a situation which has permitted a side stepping of the matter of greatest concern to trade unionists: the use of conspiracy law in industrial disputes. In his letter (January 24th) Mr Lyons colours his arguments by firstly referring to violence taking place during the building strike. No one denies the probability that incidents occurred on September 6, 1972, but the fact remains that neither Warren nor Tomlinson were sentenced for committing specific acts of violence (and it is also curious that none of the policemen who accompanied the pickets made arrests that day). Of the three charges against these men – conspiracy to intimidate, unlawful assembly and affray – the latter charge was quashed by the Court of Appeals last February. As the sentences for these convictions were to run concurrently, Warren and Tomlinson were sentenced to three and two years respectively for conspiracy – certainly no one receives sentences of this magnitude merely for unlawful assemble.

Contrary to Mr Lyon's statements, the trade union movement does not want to create myths or martyrs from the Shrewsbury case. Dennis Warren and Eric Tomlinson are not heroes; they are building workers. They were taking part in a building strike, along with dozens of other men, when the alleged offences were committed. Any of the other workers out on that site that day back in September 1972 could have been arrested and charged like Warren and Tomlinson, but we know these men's names because they were the ones to stand trial and receive these disproportionate sentences.

The trade union movement is concerned with these men because their 'deterrent' sentences were admittedly passed to make them examples. In short, Warren and Tomlinson were denied justice based on their own alleged misbehaviour, but were punished for what someone might do in the future. That incidents of this kind have not reoccurred has failed to impress the Court of Appeal. The illogicality of this situation has convinced many reasonable men that deterrent sentences are a relic from an earlier age and belong to the era of public floggings.

However, in the case of the Shrewsbury pickets, their issue does not stop at merely questioning the moral validity of deterrent sentences. The right to picket is itself brought into question. Today pickets face a multitude of statutes and case precedents from which charges can be drawn and this applied equally to peaceful picketing and picketing where violence is involved. The state of the law is such that no one who goes on a picket line is sure what he can and cannot do within legal confines, a situation which is made worse by the introduction of criminal conspiracy charges against those who are accused of overstepping these bounds.

If Dennis Warren and Eric Tomlinson were guilty of crimes, why weren't they sentenced under the appropriate criminal statutes? Cleary it is because nothing that they did personally would have warranted sentences of such severity and they could not have been used as examples if sentenced for offences personally committed. These sentences have made even more dangerous the legal minefield through which a picket must find his way. Therefore, motivated by a strong sense of injustice, the trade union movement has taken up the case of the Shrewsbury pickets, not for what these men are, but for what they represent. Anything in these men's backgrounds is quite irrelevant, as Mr Lyons asserts, although it is unfortunate that he felt it relevant enough to comment on one of them.

From my vantage point, it is clear that, although in the interests of justice Warren and Tomlinson should be released, making heroes of these men will do nothing to protect any future UCATT pickets. The law regarding the right of pickets must be re-examined and the use of conspiracy charges in industrial disputes must be ended.

Yours faithfully

G.F. Smith
General Secretary, Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians, 9-11 Macaulay Road, Clapham, SW4 0QP

I have quoted George Smith's letter in full and I believe it is to his credit that his attitude had changed radically from what it was on the day the sentences were delivered; as I wrote previously, on the fateful day the most he was prepared to do was "protest against the harshness of the sentences". However, the Times letter reveals quite a remarkable change in attitude and demeanour. But activists in the Labour Movement will understand that is what the movement is all about; it changes people's attitude, thought and action, it represents "movement" as Mick McGahey often termed it: "the labour movement is a movement; it is not a monument".

But whilst the movement of protest did move people into action, it did not move the Tory government or the Labour government which followed it, and Roy Jenkins followed Robert Carr as Home Secretary. But we got no change from him either. Perhaps Jenkin's lack of sympathy with our case over Shrewsbury was an omen of things to come when he abandoned Labour's cause and defected as one of the gang of three, Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams and Dr Owen. But then the trail of the Labour Party is littered with such creatures and litter is a good word in this context.

The prelude to the kind of atmosphere surrounding the trial of the Shrewsbury men was created by the Tory government introducing the Industrial Relations Bill and when the Scottish TUC held its annual Congress in April 1971. The old AUBTW was still in existence and I was a delegate and member of the STUC General Council and had the opportunity to speak in the debate dealing with the Industrial Relations Bill. The implications of this Bill foreshadowed Shrewsbury and the role of High Court Judges. Here is an extract from that speech:

Although some people find it complicated, the essence and meaning of the Bill can be readily understood by any trade unionist, if he or she will only look at the last two pagers 138-139. The Parliamentary Acts of 1871, 1906, and 1965 are to be replaced in one fell blow. Those Acts were passed by Parliament in order to protect the trade union movement from the hatred of the High Court Judges, and, if these Acts were wiped out, it means the Judges come back on to the stage. The High Court Judges are the hand-picked servants of the British capitalist class, highly educated, highly trained, highly paid and highly prejudiced. Their motto is "God bless the laird and his relations, and keep the rest of us in our proper stations.

The following quotation is taken from Professor Wedderburn's book 'The Worker and the Law' and it is one of the Judges speaking about himself, namely Lord Justice Scrutton in 1923.

Labour says 'where are your impartial judges? They all move in the same circle as the employers, and they are all educated and nursed in the same ideas as the employers. How can a Labour man or a trade unionist get impartial justice?' It is very difficult sometimes to put yourself into a thoroughly impartial position between two disputants, one of your own class and one not of your class.

The early Acts we have mentioned were passed by Parliaments in which Labour representation was weak in numbers; therefore, the decisive struggle was waged outside Parliament. This is why we say now, unite the Parliamentary struggle with industrial struggle, and industrial struggle will be unavoidable for any trade union seeking to defend members interests.

Edinburgh Joint Building Workers, Shop Stewards Committee

Edinburgh Joint Building Workers Shop Stewards Committee decided to campaign on a number of issues, which were really becoming serious in the Edinburgh district, as unemployment in construction was increasing and had been for over a year. This was 1971; rents and prices of all goods were rising more than ever. Although we were not recognised as an official body - the various unions had their own machinery, we decided to set up the above committee to coordinate our efforts on all the problems facing the people of this area. The small group of activists from the building workers decided to hold our first meeting on 6th October 1971 and our first action in the campaign was to send a deputation to the Edinburgh City Council to protest against the cut-back in housing programmes and the effects these cuts would have in further increasing unemployment among construction workers. We further decided we would distribute 5000 leaflets issued by Edinburgh District Trades Council dealing with these cuts and other matters and we would meet as a committee every week.

During the following weeks, we organised meetings on various building sites with speakers from a number of unions. We invited representation from Community Associations, particularly women, to join us on the question of rent increases. We needed finance to conduct our struggle, for up till then we paid rent for Trades Council rooms out of our own pockets, so we appealed to all the branches of the unions as well as seeking support from workers on the sites. We conducted our business at the committee along similar lines as the official union committees and were guided by well experienced trade unionists and we always had full time officials to our committee, as well as having the officials speaking on sites in the canteens or outside the gates. The employers' attitude was cooperative when we were agitating against cuts in the building programme and we had an employers' representative with us on the first deputation to the City Council along with the full time union officers.

Although our committee still wasn't officially recognised, all the unions and others displayed encouragement. By now we started to hold socials in the Trades Council rooms to help raise funds. The money enabled us to print leaflets explaining our case against unemployment for improved working conditions on sites and a radical improvement in wages. Construction workers' wages and earnings had fallen to amongst the ranks of the lowest paid workers in the industry. The Executives of all the building unions were now demanding an increase in wage rates of £30.00 for craftsman and a 35 hour week with similar changes for labourers. Basic rates were craft £20.00, labourers £17.00 per week. Whilst we advocated the changes for building workers, at the same time we continued publishing leaflets explaining the needs of the community for more schools, housing (new and refurbished), hospitals, roads, new sewers etc.; in this way we were building up public support for the building workers' demands. We wrote and sent resolutions to the regional organisations of the unions calling for more active support for Shop Steward Committees and for the regions to put pressure on the employers and government to concede our claims.

It was becoming more obvious as the wage negotiations proceeded that the employers were digging their heels in against the claim and even more obvious that there might be a strike. We were now into June 1972 and the regional organisations of unions were more anxious that their Shop Stewards should be brought into more active support behind the official campaign. New action committees were being set up by the regions and we activists were drawn more into the action of our respective unions.

The work of the Joint Shop Stewards Committee in Edinburgh over the past nine months was to prove invaluable in the coming months. The miners' struggle at that period had taken most of the public attention and we experienced the advent of "Flying Pickets" in the miners' strike. Our Shop Stewards Committee had given strong support to the miners in their struggle and all the other activity we had engaged in was to enhance our own campaign in the hard and difficult months ahead.

The greatest national building workers' strike ever in British history was unfolding. The employers' first offer of £1.20 per week was an insult to the workers and all the union executives in the NJCBI (National Joint Council for the Building Industry) rejected the offer. The industrial action started. There was a ban on overtime, but we learned that the ban was effective in the city only, and reports from outlying areas revealed that it was not being observed. Calling for a ban on overtime and putting it into practice by workers under pressure from ambitious management was very hard to sustain. Nevertheless, it was affecting production in some firms. It also brought to light the dependency most of our members had on overtime earnings to make ends meet at home. Where the overtime ban was effective, the men on these sites started calling for an all-out strike, rather than have the dispute drag on with such low earnings for a 40 hour week. They also pointed out that men working bonus could still earn more than the basic rate. Another tactic by workers was to stop bonus working and apply "Work to Rule". Employers undermined this tactic by encouraging men to continue normal bonus production and the accumulated bonus money would be paid out after agreement had been reached in the dispute. Another strategy was "selective strike action" at a national level, whereby important sites were struck with official approval, and this would spread in the event of employers holding out against the claim.

After two or three weeks things were beginning to change. Some firms were signing agreements to pay the claim and the strike was starting to take effect. The lads on strike were picketing their jobs and receiving moral support from other workers. Profit not morality kept the employers fighting and now seven weeks had gone by and the lads who had been on strike from the start in the selected actions were really feeling the pinch. Employers tried another miserly offer and this was answered from the grass roots by the call "Everybody out".

Edinburgh Building Workers Strike Committee had to be seen to be believed. It consisted of all section of the industry outside of the employers, including many workers who did not work under the main agreement of NJCBI, many from the Local Authorities and Health Services, some were self-employed. We now called all shop stewards to a meeting every morning at the Trade Council rooms; if any stranger had looked into the basement, they couldn't have been blamed if they had thought they had come across a very busy bookmaker's office. A huge blackboard covered one wall; this gave all information as to what sites were to be picketed. Picket forms were given to each picket, vans and cars were provided to take the pickets to outlying jobs.

It should be mentioned we had been informed that union funds had been sorely depleted after seven weeks' action. Still it was amazing how successful collections on the sites were before the "all out" decision had been made. This money was now being put to good use for petrol for cars and the hire of a van for our official "Flying Picket". The voluntary work by these lads who had never been on strike in their lives was unbelievable, although many of them had experienced skirmishes on different jobs. Mass meetings were held every week, attended by thousands, in the open-air, in venues such as Calton Hill, the Meadows, Leith Links. The public joined in as well, and they were getting the message on the justice of our claims so that they supported the collections we called for at all these meetings.

We started to organise local action committees in every town, from Bathgate in the west down to Galasheils in the Borders. We had national speakers at all the mass meetings and these events were preceded by marches with pipe bands. We held socials at the Trades Council. We even had the 784 Theatre Company put on a play to help our funds. And throughout the period we had a soup kitchen and sandwiches organised at Trades Council in the basement, where the blackboard could be examined for the latest information, where it was always manned by a delegate, to monitor the latest reports.

Naturally there were cases of poverty; after the tenth week, we set up a sub-committee to work with the DHSS on benefits. We gave money in some cases to men just to provide them with a bed for the night and the very worst hardship cases, but most of them had to rely on family or friends. There were many who had to bear sacrifices and many who got out of the industry. The outcome was that after three months' struggle we won a substantial increase in wages. The action brought out many weaknesses, but showed the tremendous character of the workers if organised. As a committee we brought into this struggle MPs, union full time officials, city councillors, tenants associations, shop stewards from many unions outside construction, actors, musicians, pipe bands, social clubs, entertainers, all the workers in the industry with their wives and children. We were proud of our banner which was a single 6 feet by 4 feet, red with white letters **Edinburgh Building Workers Joint Shop Steward Committee**. It was seen in many demonstrations all over the country and the building workers take an important place in Edinburgh's history. They will be remembered for well-disciplined mass meetings and marches all over Edinburgh in that building workers strike 1972.

TO BUILD A HOUSE

I retired from full time office in UCATT (Union of Construction Allied Trades and Technicians) in September 1984 and at that time Janet and I were living in Gatehouse of Fleet, Dumfries and Galloway, having moved there from Portobello, Edinburgh, with the notion that we would live there after my retirement. In preparation for that time we had taken out a bank loan and bought an old dilapidated cottage in a row of cottages which had been built originally to house workers' families who were employed in a cotton mill by a manufacturer named Birtwhistle. That street of cottages (terraced) was named after him and the locals called it "Birdwhistle Row". It contained some of the very oldest working class housing in Scotland in existence and the cotton mill was built about the 1780s. I feel sure that this is the same Birtwhistle mentioned in Robert Burns "Ballad Second" The Election "An' there'll be roaring Birtwhistle – yet luckily roars in the right!"

The old water mill ruins, known locally as the "Bobbin Mill", have recently been preserved. In any case, that is the street where we bought the dwelling and I extended and renovated the old property, thereby fulfilling a long lasting urge to build or at least to modernise a decent home for Janet and myself. This urge to build a home for ourselves possibly arose from our bitter experience of not having a home of our own for many years of our early married life, following the war years. And certainly we were not the only family to suffer this condition, but we did have particular setbacks. We lived with Janet's mother for nearly six years in Rossie Place, Edinburgh. She was a war widow with two children of school age, and her flat consisted of a living room, bedroom, boxroom and bathroom. Our first son Ian was born there, so we were pushed for living space to say the least. It says a great deal for Janet's mother that she put up with these conditions. I went away to work in Newcastle on Tyne, where my brother was living, hoping to find a place there, which I did.

What a dump! Franklin Street (now demolished) had one room, which acted as living room and kitchen with a bed settee, and another tiny room, which could hold a single bed for Ian. The water supply was a tap in the yard and the toilet was outside; the toilet shed was falling apart, with a leaking roof and occupied at night by a gang of cats. It was shared with our neighbour, who lived above us, but they never used it and neither did Janet (except for drainage). That place was in one hell of a state, but I got busy;

my brother Jimmy helped. Dry rot was in part of the flooring; the tiny room floor just collapsed in dry dust, like sulphur (an advanced stage of dry rot). I made it habitable and we bought our first furniture. We had been there for six months when word came that we had been allocated a flat in Edinburgh from the council. Janet travelled back, received the keys and visited the flat, while I made arrangements to move our worldly goods.

We visited the housing official at the City Chambers in Edinburgh and in those years we still had identity cards which we had to show to the official. The cards showed the address in Franklin Street, Newcastle on Tyne, and the official took the key of our house back and wiped us off the waiting list in one fell blow. What an absolutely callous and cruel action after six years waiting on the list! What's more I spent most of these years building council houses on Edinburgh sites. I tried to explain to him the condition which compelled us to move to Newcastle and the state of that slum dwelling (which was rented). But he never listened to a word and contemptuously dismissed our pleas.

That was a terrible blow for Janet to suffer, especially after having the keys in her possession. There was no going back to Newcastle; our furniture had to be put in storage there and so we were back staying with Janet's mother, then my mother and dad, then my sister. No wonder I had that feeling and desire for a place of our own. I used to think it was quite ironic when Michael McGahey used to have a saying when he introduced me to anyone "This is Hughie D'Arcy, he's a bricklayer and he's never built a house". The saying never annoyed me, but in a way it was true. I never had built a house – for myself! And yet I had helped to build them all over Britain.

I often used to say to Janet as we walked past some old tumble-down buildings – it could be anywhere, Edinburgh or some country village – "Look at that old place, what I could do with that". Janet would just give it a blank stare and walk on. Sure enough, we would pass that way again, perhaps in a year or two. I would say "look at that building, what did I tell you? I knew it could be renovated into a decent house. Janet would just say, "What's the use of talking like that - it makes no difference if we haven't got the money to do it". Anyway, there came a time when we could get that bank loan. £7,000 between us doesn't sound much, and it wasn't even in 1980, but it was enough to allow us to purchase that old place and transform it into a decent home. I thought I could retire there, but I was wrong. Janet knew better than me. We were, I'm afraid, born and bred townies. The place was fine, the people were as nice and friendly as one could ever meet and we had good neighbours, but we were too far away from our own family and we could not easily adjust to a country place and life. However, we had not burnt our boats altogether and so we were able to move back to near enough Edinburgh.

Janet said "but have you now regrets giving that house up in Gatehouse after all the work and the bother?" By the way, it took me about 3 years to finish it. I said, "No, I've no regrets. After all, past labour is past and done with and in any case I've spent many years working for private employers and have absolutely nothing to show for it. At least for the labour I put into that old house, we can now buy another one; perhaps this one is not so good, but it is not too bad".

Some school days

When I think back, my mates at the protestant school, Towerbank, Portobello fared even worse, because when it came to the 'Quolly', I don't think even one of them passed and here I mean those boys in our crowd of my age, most of who came from Pipe Street, Portobello. At Towerbrook School they even had a special class for those who did not pass, they called it the 'Non Passers class' (NPs), almost non persons. I've wondered many a time since, was our catholic school background any disadvantage in comparison to the protestant schools at the elementary level? I don't really think it was, for example proportionally speaking, far greater numbers of people young and old found their way into the Communist Party from a catholic background, whether that was because of the catholic influence or in spite of it I'm not sure. Or perhaps the reason was the Irish syndrome in some of our parents and grandparents. Certainly the historical persecution of Catholics in the UK, including Ireland north and south, could not be ignored by most catholic teachers and certainly not by parents either, but I cannot recall any particular bias being shown by teachers against the British Establishment, including the Royals' set up. On the other hand, I remember very clearly the antagonism of some teachers towards the Soviet Union, who told us repeatedly, they burned down churches and murdered priests and nuns in Russia. Well I left school in 1933, so you will understand the prejudices and the period I am writing about.

Nor did we hear anything about the struggle of the Covenanters for the Solemn League and Covenant, although I learned much later in life - on a visit to Greyfriar's Churchyard at the top of Candlemakers Row in Edinburgh – that, according to carved wording on the Memorial to the Covenanters, eighteen thousand people in Scotland had lost their lives in that cause. Neither did we hear or learn much about Robert Burns at St John's, except perhaps that he was a freemason and a person of scant repute and dubious morality although he was Scotland's greatest poet. All these gaps in our grossly rudimentary education had to be filled in much later.

I'm only sketching briefly a background on education, or lack of it, at this juncture to show that it is not an easy task for anyone so afflicted to write a worthwhile account of the lives of building workers in particular. Still I'll have to begin, but where to begin? At the beginning! But where is that? Perhaps at the start of what we in the Labour Movement call class consciousness does that sound like jargon? Well it only means when a person begins to understand they come from a class of people who are identified by their common interests, which are not based on religion or colour but by the way they or their families get their living. That understanding was not too difficult for me, although certain prejudices had to be shed and the prejudice did not come from my home; they came from school teachers and not just catholic teachers. There was a Mr Carrigan who taught the science class, from Towerbank and St John's pupils, but one day in an extra mural little session he gave us his opinions about Donald Renton. Donald was a very well-known Communist activist in those and later days in Portobello where his family lived. Mr Carrigan said he was surprised that Donald, who had been a pupil of his and showed good promise in school at Towerbank, had become a troublesome agitator and a person we should not get involved with.

Well of course many of us were influenced against Renton and his comrades by remarks like that so that one day at Wood's Park football ground some of the boys from Pipe Street met other boys from Mitchell's Buildings and we were hostile to each other in any case, like different gangs. This day our mutual antagonisms only expressed themselves in argument, and I said to Charlie Renton, one of Donald's younger brothers: Your brother's a bloody agitating upstart. *"Is that so?"* said Charlie *"Well who the hell do you think got you lot your school dinners?"*

Well that stopped me in my stride, but I didn't really know anything about who got us school dinners. However, I found out through my parents, that what Charlie said was true. Not just Donald, of course, but the local Communists and Labour activists who had campaigned and agitated for the Local Authority to provide school dinners to the families of the unemployed. That issue of school dinner provision was possibly my introduction to an understanding of what we came to know as the Labour Movement. So Donald Renton was an agitating troublemaker to the authorities, the Establishment, those members of our society and our community who held power and influence over the fortunes and well-being or the lack of it, endured by working class families in Edinburgh but particularly in Portobello, his main centre of activity in those days. So what trouble did he and his comrades create? Well, at that time the poorest section of the unemployed applied for relief to the Parish and the person in charge of determining the amount of relief was a Mr Noble (what a misnomer -Noble in name, but not in nature). The men and women who were on the Parish had to queue outside the Public Library where Noble had his offices (held court). Come rain, hail, snow or frost, they had to suffer the indignity of waiting in that line sometimes for hours long.

So Renton made trouble over this humiliation of human indignity. With his comrades they set up one of those folding platforms that were used for addressing street meetings and they held meetings right next to the bread line and agitated and pressurised the authorities persistently, over a long period of time until they succeeded in forcing the Parish Council to allow the relief applicants to wait inside the public building, sheltered from the worst elements of the weather. They made trouble for the National Government led by the despicable traitor to the Labour Movement, Mr Ramsay MacDonald, when that government tried to introduce cuts in the already starvation levels of unemployment benefits. And, in unity with the Communist Party and National Unemployed Workers Movement all over Britain, they started the campaign which led to the hunger marches converging on London.

Famous historical events like the Jarrow March and the marches from Scotland starting from Glasgow through to Edinburgh where the marchers slept overnight on the pavement of that world famous shopping precinct of Princes Street and where our City Fathers, the hard-faced Tory majority, refused them accommodation in Council property. But the hunger marchers undaunted hung their shaving mirrors on the railings of Princes Street Gardens in the morning, shaved and carried on with their march to London. Donald Renton's name became known nationally like his compatriots, Wal Hannington, Peter Kerrigan, Harry McShane, Willie Gallacher, Bob Cooney, Bob Stewart, Fred Douglas, Harry Pollitt and many other leaders of the agitation against unemployment.

Characters in construction

Edinburgh No1 AUBTW had among its membership some of the most unique characters you could ever wish to meet throughout the whole building industry of Britain, and the industry breeds some really remarkable people. I recall George Sinfield, one time industrial reporter for the Daily Worker, who was a reporter of such integrity that all the members of the General Council of the TUC in those days trusted him completely and he could easily get interviews with any of them including right wingers like George Lothian, Victor Feather etc. They knew he would never betray a confidence. Albert Williams and myself visited his home at Paignton during an AUBTW National Delegate Conference and George Sinfield told us, of all the workers he had ever met, he loved the building workers most of all and I can understand this. There is something about their attitude towards a job or towards employers that is peculiar to themselves; many of them don't feel tied to a job or an employer and on the spur of the moment they will 'pack it in' if

something doesn't suit them, even in bad times. There is an air of independence about them, a trait in their character that is perhaps a by-product of a casual industry which possibly could produce a reaction such as: "well the boss doesn't care a damn for me so I don't give a monkey's funky for any boss". For example, when I was an apprentice I worked beside some remarkable men. I recall one of them whose name was Skin Imrie, a young brickie, and what impressed me about him was the fact he came to work in a brand new suit, a bright green suit at that, dressed just as if he was going to a dance hall, spotless in the morning and spotless after a day's work and yet he worked normally and he was a good tradesman. Some of his workmates were dressed in rags, but there were no traces of servility among them and how I loved just to get working beside them, to try and learn that wonderful mastery of that trade and perhaps be like Skin and come to work in a beautiful suit.

I next met Skin many years later when I was a married man with a family to support and he was the same, a few years older than me. I was living in Victoria Street, top of the Bow in Edinburgh at that time and Skin came to my flat. Of course I knew him straight away, even although he was now sporting an RAF moustache, Jimmy Edwards style. He said "I hear some of you were starting with Laidlaws at Polkemmet on Monday. Is there any chance of me getting a start?" I told him "Well Skin yes we are, we heard they would be starting a squad of brickies, but I can tell you there are quite a few going out, but if you want to chance it, by all means come out. The bus leaves St Andrew's Square 7am, that is the service bus, there's no transport laid on by the firm". I knew there were bricklayers going out there, and it shows that work was tight in the town, otherwise they would never go away out to such a bleak place as Polkemmet Colliery for a job. But then Skin was desperate for a job as well, so I didn't like to put him off; he was a union member and just as entitled as any of us to get a start.

Come Monday morning and there we were. I think there were seven brickies and three labourers at the bus station. When we found the job, we learned the firm of Laidlaws from Glasgow were building store sheds for the National Coal Board, and what a desolate godforsaken site, on a cold bitter winter morning of November. We were all started by the agent, a man called Alexander and as we found out not much later, a real tyrant. The foreman bricklayer was known as Old Tom and he took us to the first task which was a brick structure and we stood about on the first left scaffold. There was no mortar or bricks loaded onto the scaffold, because the labourers had only started and were only preparing the materials. So of course we brickies stood on the scaffold idle; we would rather have been working and active on such a cold exposed place.

Old Tom came up to us and said "for goodness sake try and look active; he (Alexander) can see you all from his office". Skin said to Tom: "Go and tell him to have a good chew at my balls". So the blithe spirit of the green suit had not been crushed by the cruelties of many years spent in the building industry. What is more, not only was Skin desperate for that start, he was going through a most traumatic experience in his domestic life, because he had only recently moved his home back to Edinburgh from a town in the Scottish Borders, Greenlaw, where he had been working and living with his family. Skin's son had suffered a terrible accident in that town when he was struck by a bus and was so crippled that his dad had to carry him bodily about the house, from bed to toilet and the boy was quite heavy, being about twelve years old. Moreover Skin had a lawyer on the case, no legal aid in those times, so the financial worry was there, with no certainty that the boy would win against the bus company. However, none of all that could quench that indomitable spark of independent manhood which burned in Skin Imrie as in many other building workers.

By the way, Skin's rejoinder about an invitation for Alexander to chew over a certain delicacy was in no way directed at Old Tom. Our attitude towards the old foreman bricklayer was one of sorrow and sympathy, that he had to work with such a brute as that agent. That Polkemmet job was one lousy job: the foundations were flooded before a brick was laid; no amount of sweeping or bailing out could get rid of that water; and the first three or four courses of brickwork had to be laid under water. The site itself was next to the colliery and anyone who knows that area, especially the miners who worked there, are familiar with the fact that Polkemmet lies fairly high up near Whitburn and is well exposed to all the ill winds that blow between Glasgow and Edinburgh, particularly in mid winter. Our wages were poor, even although we earned bonus, but site conditions did not lend themselves to high productivity and, as I mentioned previously, we were travelling quite some distance from Edinburgh. Nevertheless we stuck it and worked on and then, after suffering these conditions for a few weeks, Old Tom came on the scaffold to tell us we were to be paid off on the Friday, just about two weeks before the New Year.

The job was not finished and would not be complete until well after the New Year break and we knew that, if we finished up that week, there was not a hope in hell's chance of us getting another job until well into the New Year. So we made our minds up not to accept the sack and Skin along with myself told Alexander he was not on. Then I contacted the District Organiser, Jimmy Stewart, that evening and he came out to the job. There was not a great deal he could do except use his official position, and we all knew it was futile to down tools under those circumstances, but our resistance had an effect and we got a few more weeks which at least took us past the New Year holiday. The bitter weather continued and there was at least one advantage about that site and that was the fact that we were able to get a good hot meal and cheap at the miners' canteen.

Old Tom collapsed as a result of the cold weather one morning when he was working on a high gable. He actually fainted on the scaffold and some of us had a most difficult job to get him down the ladders to ground level. We reckoned he had been used to working in a local brickworks for some years and was not fit for working outside, especially up a height on a site like that one in the dead of winter.

Although I've described Skin Imrie to a certain extent, he was never an activist in the union in that sense that he never attended branch meetings, either pre-war or post war days. But the job where I first saw him was at Marianville Edinburgh in the pre-war days where a firm Ford and Torrie were building private houses for sale. I was an apprentice bricklayer and that job was where I first heard any talk about unions and I heard this, *anyone going up to the lodge tonight*, and Jimmy Kerr a brickie said "Yes I'm going and I'll take anybody's money up." There was no formality of shop steward and, although I think most of the bricklayers and masons were members, there were some who were not. I learned that, when the old "walking delegate" came on the job (Neillie Dick) and some of the young brickies like the Swan brothers from Leith and Wullie Kay from Portobello were trying to hide from him, John Swan and Kay picked up labourers' hods and pretended to be hod carriers, but old Neillie was too fly for them and caught them. They were ordered to attend the next meeting of Edinburgh No1 AUBTW where they would have to start paying up an entrance fee. There was no real hostility to the union on that site and I met men there who were life-long members of the union.

One of my responsibilities as an apprentice was to make tea for the bricklayers, masons and labourers - that was common practice for apprentices. There were other apprentice brickies, but the youngest usually had that job which meant I had to organise a fire for about forty tea cans; tea urns were unheard of then. It meant one had to collect firewood, but there was plenty of that from all the scrap wood left by the joiners and you made a brick surround, over which you placed a sheet of corrugated iron,

which you riddled with holes using either a pick of a brick hammer. Each man carried his own tea and sugar either in discarded mustard boxes, paper bags or even proper tea and sugar boxes. Well you had to know each person's tea can, which was usually an empty syrup tin pierced with a hole at each side through which was inserted a loop of wire which acted as a handle to enable the can to be lifted off the fire. Some of the men had discs or other tokens to identify their own can.

I didn't mind that job of boiling the can, although I grudged the time it took me away from building bricks, because I was bursting to learn all about brickwork and, moreover, it was good to work in the company of those men, with their marvellous talk of other jobs, towns and places, and even other countries. Especially was it fascinating to hear about the feats of famous bricklayers who could lay a thousand bricks in a day and others who could produce such works of art in face bricks that even Leonardo Da Vinci would be green with envy.

I just wanted to be like those great tradesmen. However, one day I was working with old Goldtooth Murray, he seemed very old to me though I now wonder what age he really was, but he had already worked in various parts of the world like Canada and South Africa as a bricklayer. Goldtooth said to me:

Look here son, never mind all that big talk about a thousand bricks a day. You should learn how to lay one brick properly first of all. If you master that, speed will come naturally. Now watch as I lay this brick on its bed, you lay the brick aris to aris (I had never heard of an aris). Your eye follows the aris of the brick and the top edge of the course underneath; don't look at the line at this stage, but lay aris to aris, then adjust the brick to the line.

I never forgot that simple but fundamental lesson by that gentle and kindly old man and it was to stand me in good stead throughout life.

Boiling the drums had distinct advantages in more than one way, particularly on that site. For instance, the official meal break was only half an hour, 12.30 to 1.00, but there was also an unofficial tea break in the morning. However, only the very boldest spirits indulged in this practice, as Gilbert and Sullivan put it "none but the brave deserve the fair" and I knew the bravest on that job, so I made only about six drums of tea at about ten o'clock. One of them was for the foreman bricklayer Harry Ballantine and, even although he was foreman, he would have been sacked as quickly as anyone else, if caught by the bosses. The others were Jimmy Kerr, Skin Imrie, Willie Hay, Willie Laing, the Swan brothers and Johnny Brown. It suited me to make their tea because they were the best tippers. Most of the men gave me a tip, threepence on pay day, but the bold spirits gave me more. As well as making tea, I ran some messages, mostly to the nearest street bookie with bets for horse-racing and nearly every day I ran a message for George Yates, a quarter pound of boiled ham and a bottle of beer. Yates was one of the characters and for a laugh he used to put his plumb rule over his shoulder in imitation of a rifle and march up and down a foundation with all the brickies looking on. He was getting on in years and wasn't very fit by then, but Harry Ballantyne looked after him well, and never gave old Geordie any task beyond his strength. Jimmy Kerr told us that Geordie went on the batter on Saturdays but, before he got too drunk, he posted in an envelope a ten shilling note to himself so as he would have some money on Monday following.

I was to meet some of those men in later years after the war, but most of all Jimmy Kerr who was also known as Porky. Jimmy was to become chairman of Edinburgh No1 AUBTW and also a delegate to the local branch of the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives as well as Edinburgh Trades Council and many other responsibilities. As a chairman he was known to be very abrupt and even rude, and any member who was not familiar with procedure was given short shrift indeed. And Kerr didn't bother to

explain procedure to anyone who didn't know; if they stood up to speak in the branch wearing a hat, for instance, Kerr bawled out "Take off your hat, or, if they attempted to speak out of turn unknowingly, Sit down." But if it's any consolation to anyone concerned, Kerr was just as rude to the highest dignitaries in the union - even more so. And, when he became the chairman of NFBTO Edinburgh District, on the occasions of the mass meeting which were most often held in the Central Halls, Tollcross, Edinburgh, Jimmy acted just the same as he did in the branch. He seemed to imagine it was the height of democratic behaviour to show no favour or even ordinary manners to visiting speakers and the higher their position in the unions the more brusque was Kerr's introduction - and especially if it was a packed out meeting.

These meetings were a fairly regular method of reporting on progress or lack of it on the issues of the day, usually a wage demand. Members of all building trade union branches were notified and we activists used to work for the biggest attendance possible. We viewed meetings as a means of mobilising support behind whatever claims were being made, and they were a most important forum for the expression of opinion from the rank and file as well as the leadership. Certainly Kerr's chairmanship did not inhibit that process but many a trade union leader must have been nonplussed at his manner. Kerr would call the meeting to order and his opening remarks went along these lines:

Well then fellow members, no need for me to tell you what this meeting in about. You know as well as me it's about our latest wage claim, and here are some of our so called leaders to tell you what's happening in London. You know them all as well as me, so without further ado, Lowthian you are first, it's up to you.

That was George Lowthian, General Secretary of the AUBTW, introduced to be the first speaker, and the others who followed fared no better as far as introductions went; there would be no patronising attitudes by the leadership tolerated if Kerr was in the chair.

I'll never know if Jimmy Kerr was trying to play the role of Wallace Beary (the famous film actor who often played the part of the rough tough villain of the peace) or whether Wallace Beary was portraying the character of Jimmy Kerr. In all the years I knew Kerr, he never changed much and on the last occasion, when he was a delegate to UCATT National Delegate Conference, he was at the centre of a dramatic scene in the conference hall. If I remember correctly, the subject on the agenda was the Common Market and Kerr tried to get into the discussion to oppose it, but the Chairman was trying to close the debate at that juncture. However, Kerr was not going to be debarred; he still went to the rostrum and started to speak, but George Smith, General Secretary then, switched off the loudspeaker system and went down to the rostrum to try and pacify Kerr who then started to argue with Smith. George Smith told me later:

That pal of yours from Edinburgh was a real stubborn bugger. Do you know what he said to me when I tried to get him to go back to his seat that day?" *"Where the hell were you Smith when we were all out on strike at Leuchars Aerodrome? I know where you were; you were hiding in the shipyard at Dundee."* You know, I got the surprise of my life. Imagine him going back all those years and bringing that into the argument!

The Leuchars Aerodrome strike was in pre-war years about 1938 and Kerr maintained it was a sell out by the leadership then and still held George Smith partly responsible.

Still, underneath that rude, brash, possibly protective shell there was a kindly gentle heart beating all the same, a sympathy for the underdog or people who had fallen on hard times. For example, when I became Branch Secretary of Edinburgh No1 AUBTW, it was my habit to be at the meeting early, and there outside the premises in Melbourne Place I often met Tommy Docherty hanging around, and learned he

was waiting for Jimmy Kerr who would give him a drop (handout). Tommy was a bricklayer, who was down on his luck, more accurately he was down because of his mental health which had broken under the stress of our so called caring society. Some people, who knew Docherty as 'Tony', would say he was a 'headcase' long before this. But I knew different; he was certainly eccentric, but nevertheless he was perfectly capable of performing a bricklayer's work, to a very high degree of qualification. I think the last time he held a job was on the Southfield site of Scottish Orlit, 1947, and he lasted there for about two years, which was and is a fairly long spell of work for a building operative. Of course 'Tony' was paid off at least half a dozen times during that period, but Kerr and myself were the stewards so we got him reinstated just as often. The trouble was that some of the brickies were a bit nervous about working with Tony, having heard of some of his exploits, tales such as this one ——

At the time of the Glasgow Fair weeks holiday each summer, Tony Docherty would stand at the foot of Bath Street, Portobello (a favourite resort of the Glasgow people before the 1940-45 war) and there between the two pubs (which are still there at the time of writing) he would challenge anyone to a fight. Needless to say he was never short of opponents, and the outcome would be his landing in the jail where the cops tranquilised him with the help of their batons, which didn't do much for his stability of character of mental health. So, hearing stories like that and many others perhaps, it was understandable that some of his workmates would be wary about working beside him. It never worried me; I knew him as a workmate and also as a fellow lodger in digs near Peterhead and I knew Tony's behaviour was perfectly serene and normal, providing he was left in peace. The trouble always started when people treated him abnormally and as a different animal from themselves, especially at work. Sometimes they found him saying the most unusual things. Tony was only being humorous, but they didn't always appreciate his brand of humour. He would say "you know these bricks are a bit rough on the hand. I wonder why the brick manufactures don't produce rubber bricks; they would be easier to handle, waterproof as well."

Statements like that would make his workmates pay close attention to him, to say the least, and this actually happened to him when I was working as his mate on a site near Peterhead, north of Aberdeen in 1944. I was discharged from the army at that time and Direction of Labour was still the order of the day. So, when I became a civvie, I registered for work at Portobello Labour Exchange and was immediately directed along with Tommy Docherty to a site at Crimond aerodrome near Peterhead; we landed in the same digs on a farm near the job. We started work and, on the very first day, Tommy made that remark I quoted about 'rubber bricks'. Next he took his trowel, and he was an expert at spinning his trowel, that is a game brickies would often play, to spin a trowel through the air and land it so that it stuck handle end quivering in the scaffold batten, almost like the daggers thrown by the circus knife throwers. As I said, Docherty was good at this, but on this occasion he was throwing his trowel to stick between stacks of bricks, well that was enough for the brickies near him on the scaffold and they scattered, and a few minutes later the foreman bricklayer called up for me to come down and see him, which I did. The foreman said to me "the bricklayers are complaining about that mate of yours and they will not work beside him; there's something strange about him. I said, there is nothing wrong with him. Perhaps he is a little eccentric, but he is probably the best bricklayer on that scaffold; you'll find no complaints with his work." The foreman said "I'm sorry but he'll have to go. Even the steward made a complaint."

Well that was that. There was no support for Tommy and we were complete strangers on the job. I had the task to tell him and of course he saw the foreman speaking to me. Tommy asked me "what's wrong; has my scaffold language been too bad?" I told him he was being paid off and he would get a week's pay, dig money, and a rail warrant

home. He took it not too badly and the foreman asked me if I would take him back to the digs. I went with Tommy to the site office to collect his books, and there was a clerk at a table in an outer office. The clerk said he would get Tommy a chitty, showing his wages, rail warrant etc., but the wages would have to be posted on. This upset Docherty, and he shouted "I need some money now. How the hell do I get home with no money?". The clerk made one of the biggest mistakes of his life. He said: "if that's your attitude, I'll send for a policeman." Well that remark sparked off the adrenalin in my partner's mind and possibly revived those happy memories of police cells, and Tony sprang into action. He said "You'll send for a polis will ye? Send for half a dozen. I like them". And he sprang for the outside door and snubbed it from inside, then turned towards the clerk. But the clerk moved just as sprightly and shot through another door into the main office and locked it from the other side.

Well I got my erstwhile workmate pacified outside the office, but he was pretty upset by now. There was a tossing school a few yards away having a game during the mid-day break. Tony wanted to take them on as well. However, I got him quietened down and just then a van came to pick us up (ordered by the firm) to take us back to the digs. He got his bags and tools packed; I chummed him to the bus and gave him some money - and I didn't have much. Within days I received a letter from him with the money back and he expressed thanks and said in the letter the experience on the Crimond site was not entirely new to him. A few years would pass before I met him again at Southfield site in Edinburgh. So that was my introduction to the site at Crimond and the main contractor was Higgs and Hill, a national building and civil engineering company.

I was already a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. I joined as soon as I left the forces; I would have joined sooner but member of the Armed Forces were not allowed to be members of any political party, and it may come to the surprise of many that the Communist Party observed this condition. I was not on the job many weeks before I moved into digs in Peterhead where I made contact with members of the Party and the Labour Party. I was elected a shop steward, Peterhead 1944, for the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers (AUBTW). I made an order for a few dozen Daily Workers through a local newsagent and sold them on the site; sometimes they were more than a day late (wartime difficulties). I ordered as well copies of the New Builders Leader, which was a monthly magazine published by rank and file building workers in London - I can't remember how many I ordered but it was a goodly number. I also ordered and sold the Irish Democrat, 120 copies each month, and we had a good sale for them because there were hundreds of Irish workers on that site and most of them stayed in a camp near the site, where we visited and sold them. When I say 'we' I mean the Federation steward Simpson, a Party member from Aberdeen, a tremendous stalwart and conscientious worker for the Party and the unions who had an inspiring influence on me. Simpson later worked with British Rail and became an active member of NUR. In those days I used to travel to Party meetings which were held in Inverness periodically. It was quite difficult for me to get to those meetings because of travel problems. I would check out at mid-day on a Saturday and walk some miles over fields and country roads until I boarded a bus which took me as far as Banff, the town where the hands of the town clock had never moved since the day when they hung Macpherson "Macpherson's Farewell" (R. Burns). From Banff to Elgin by bus, and that was as far as I could that night, stayed there overnight in a small hotel, and then on to Inverness in the morning.

There would never be more than six comrades at the meeting, which was a committee, building the Party in that part of Scotland. I remember meeting Mr and Mrs Skinner on some of those visits, both of who were Party members and who became highly respected and widely known, not only by Inverness people but also by many

active workers in the Scottish Trades Union Congress and its officials like Jimmy Jack, Jimmy Milne, John Henry. Tom Baxter of Aberdeen was the Communist Party organiser who convened these meetings in Inverness and attended them, so I got to know Tom and his wife. Tom even then was suffering from tuberculosis and yet maintained his activity until overcome and stricken by this virulent disease. I'll always remember him as an orator as well in the Market Stance which was Aberdeen's Public Forum, like the Mound in Edinburgh, or Glasgow Green or Dundee's City Square. He often brought historical lessons into his public speeches, for example:

Communism is not just an invention of the Bolsheviks in Russia; Communist ideas were propounded in England in Cromwell's time, in the ranks of the first democratic army in the world, Cromwell's New Model Army, where the rank and file of that army known as the levellers elected delegates as officers, who were known as Agitators, that was their official designation. These were the forces who challenged the old conception of "The Divine Right of Kings". A great many people in those times believed the King was appointed by God and, if ever the King was deposed, the whole world would come to an end. Nevertheless the King was deposed. King Charles the first lost his head. It wasn't the first time he lost his head – but it was the very last time and the world did not come to an end but the struggle for democracy moved on.

I was a shop steward for the AUBTW in those Peterhead and Inverness days. The full time official for that union was Charlie Radcliffe, a most able and efficient organiser, so much so he was elected to the post of Divisional Secretary for Scotland for the AUBTW a few years later, and many of us thought then he would eventually be the General Secretary of the union. Charlie also became a town councillor in Aberdeen. When he took office as the Divisional Secretary, he had to move to Glasgow and he later lost that position; I believe pressure of work had a lot to do with that. I met him many years later in Aberdeen when he was presented with his 50 year membership badge. After he left full time office for the union, he went back to the granite dressing workshops in Aberdeen and followed his trade as a stone mason.

When he addressed the assembled company at the 50 year presentation from the Aberdeen UCATT branches composed of members and wives, I found Charlie was completely in touch with Trade Union and political issues of the day. I would say that side of his personality was characteristic of the folk of that city involved in the Labour Movement. During my early years in Aberdeen, while still in the forces, I met Jimmy Milne who later became the General Secretary of the Scottish Trade Union Congress, following the retrial of Jimmy Jack. Jimmy Milne was a member of the Communist Party when I first met him and he remained a member for the rest of his life; his wife Alice was also a member. Our paths were to merge again many years later when I was elected to the General Council of the STUC and then, during his period of office as the General Secretary, I was elected as Vice President then President of the STUC in the years 1975-1977.

To many people Jimmy Milne seemed a shy and modest person, but, when it came to propounding the case for the policies of Congress, believe me there was no shyness or modesty in his character. He had the firmest and most knowledgeable grasp and the widest understanding of Scottish political and economic problems I have ever known and he used these qualities with energy and drive on behalf of the unions in the STUC as well as the people of Scotland. It is not for nothing that the STUC had and still retains the reputation of the most effective lobby in Scotland on all political, economic and social questions affecting the lives of Scottish people. I remember an occasion when Jimmy and I had addressed an unemployment protest meeting in Dundee and, when we were coming out of the hall, Syd Paris, that well-known stalwart of the Dundee Labour Movement, spoke to us about the problem of a young boy. The young chap, only about sixteen, told us he had lost his job in a hotel, so when he heard about the protest

meeting against unemployment he thought "Right! That's the place for me to go", and someone told him to approach Syd, who of course was not the kind of person, who would ignore a young lad's worry. Jimmy Milne in typical manner listened closely and before he left the hall got the local full time officer of the General & Municipal Workers to take the boy's problem in hand, not a case of redundancy, but a case of finding him a job.

Another character I worked beside at the start of the Second World War, when we were building air raid shelters at the back of tenements in the Marionville area in Edinburgh, and who left a lasting impression on me was a bricklayer named Jimmy Simpson, known as Red Simpson by his workmates. The season of the year was wintry; the snow lay on the ground, but it wasn't cold enough to stop building operations. However, it was sheer misery with underfoot conditions turning the site into a quagmire and old Jimmy (he seemed old to me, but then I was nineteen years old) felt the cold penetrating his old frame. What made the conditions worse was the nature of the work; the brickwork called for the construction of a type of bonding which was something like what was termed "rat trap bond" and its purpose was to be infilled with concrete and steel reinforcing rods, which in turn was to strengthen the walls to withstand bombing attacks. Sounds complicated! It was! And old Jimmy kept bumping his head on these steel rods, which caused nasty abrasions that did nothing for that person's tranquillity of mood on such mornings.

However, relief was at hand and the old foreman on the site, Andrew Porter, came regularly to Jimmy's aid, just like a St Bernard's dog; he brought a dram of whisky from the licensed grocer. The dram improved Jimmy's morale; he ceased swearing at the rods and started philosophising. I learned he had worked in many different countries of the world as a bricklayer, including America and the Middle East he said:

Wherever I go I preach the Bible, the Bible of Discontent. Just think of all the wealth in the world, who produces that wealth? The workers, of course, but who owns the great bulk of it? Certainly not the workers. Just look at all those cities some like New York, Chicago, Johannesburg, our own Edinburgh, although very little of it our own, building workers built all these great cities and yet even at the end of their lives they own nothing except a few bits of sticks of furniture, which by then are probably worthless but all the wealth their labour has created is owned by a class in society who never laboured in their lives.

That was old Jimmy's message. Was that the reason they called him Red Simpson? And how true his remarks were about his own life, for I remembered, when he died a few years later, the union branch paid the expenses for the burial, to keep him out of a pauper's grave. He died in a lodging house, penniless, and part of branch funds, which was termed the Benevolent Fund, was designed exactly for such emergencies and that Fund was contributed by our members over and above the normal contributions which were sent to the General Office. The Bible of Discontent was really a by-product of the employers' treatment of and attitude towards the workers. Any building worker could tell of the conditions of those days and later days, even present days in some cases, of welfare on sites, where their mid–day meal was eaten in filthy cabins, often seating was just a roll of felt, or cement bags, toilet provision generally was primitive to put it mildly. It is no surprise that building operatives suffered badly from haemorrhoids (piles) because many of them would not use those toilets at all and waited until they got home from work. I remember I had the opportunity to describe such conditions from the rostrum at a Scottish Trade Union Congress. I reported along these lines:

I was working on a site one day and the call of nature forced me to use the site toilets which were primitive to say the least. When I went into their shack, it was in complete darkness, so that I took someone else's trousers down by mistake.

A delegate shouted, "were the trouser's Dennis Healey's?" - I had had a difference with Dennis Healey's budget proposals earlier that week. The sense of that old bricklayer's words on wealth and property gained greater depth later on when I read Marx's comment:

Capitalist property is built upon the dispossession of the many in the interests of the privileged few and also when recently I came upon this passage in Maxim Garlne's novel, The Magnet, describing the words of one of the characters:

"the old man spoke of ordinary people, as small as himself, but talked of them in such a way that they acquired a certain importance, sometimes even beauty – 'and so today, commenced by the great labours of people of whom even the dust has not been preserved there has grown up a considerable city, that cannot be denied beauty."

Peter Forest was a stalwart of Edinburgh No1. I first met him immediately after the Second World War, one of the most dedicated and sincere communists I was privileged to meet. Peter never lost an opportunity to convince people about the cause, even on his way to work on building jobs. He handed out on the tram whatever was the topical leaflet on the political and trade union scene. He was an active member as well of the Esperanto movement and well versed in the knowledge and practice of that organisation to develop an international language. Peter once met would never be forgotten and I must admit many of his compatriots thought Peter was slightly eccentric but many more were influenced by his advocacy for socialism and the case for trade unionism; I'm sure he was strongly influenced himself like some others in that branch by the Wobblies. He became a legend in his time and one of the stories about Peter concerned his behaviour in the early 1930s. He was employed on a site where the boss was a well-known building employer by the name of Cousins. So one morning Peter, as was his habit, prepared to take his 'piece' about 10.00am which was absolutely not recognised by any firm in Scotland as far as the building trade was concerned. He made a small table with bricks and likewise a seat with bricks and a short length of flooring timber, spread a linen napkin out and laid on it some carrots and an apple (Peter being a vegetarian). Old Cousins the boss came on the job, stepped out of his car, spotted Peter enjoying his repast and took an apoplectic fit. He quickly recovered and shouted out at Peter "What the hell do you think you're doing Forest. Forest looked up quite slowly and calmly replied "I'm having my morning break; haven't you had yours?".

So our Peter was a pioneer of the morning tea break which would not be recognised by the Scottish employers until very many years later. In the time when I first knew him, the immediate post war years, his health had broken. I would not hold vegetarianism responsible, but would blame malnutrition, arising out of years of unemployment. He never missed a branch meeting, where he acted as doorman; nor did he miss the opportunity again to improvise a makeshift table and spread out, on this occasion, books, pamphlets, leaflets, notice of Labour Movement meetings. He also distributed the union newspaper, The Builders Standard and the New Builders Leader. For all such activity he had the official permission of the branch. Peter had a habit when the minutes of the previous meeting were read out to "Move the Minute Mr Chairman." When this was duly seconded, he would say "read them out seriatim, Chairman." And this would be for many of our members the first lesson in Latin they ever heard, when they learned later on it meant, go over the minutes one after the other.

Another word Peter often used was status quo "I move the status quo Chairman", another lesson in Latin, the connotation of which was transformed into the vernacular during a strike later on at Oxgang, when the firm concerned was Scotcan (Scottish Orlit previously). What happened was the steward on the site was Abe Moffat, the son of Abel Moffat, well known and respected President of the NUM (Scottish Area). I was idle at this time and young Abe told me there was a vacancy for a bricklayer

on that job and so I presented myself for a start. The agent on the job was Mick Currie (mentioned elsewhere in this narrative). He refused me a start which caused the strike; the site was organised already as a union job, mainly because a group of activists were on the job including Jack Currie, the brother of Mick the agent, branch secretary. The district organiser was sent for, Jimmy Stewart, and a further meeting was held. Someone moved "Tattie Scone", a perfectly understood translation of status quo, "we remain on strike", which was unanimous. The strike had lasted three days and Stewart called a further meeting, and reported the firm had made a proposal, which was that I would be given the chance of 'first refusal' in the event of the first vacancy for a bricklayer on that site. The proposal was accepted by the meeting that "The Tattie Scone be lifted" and work resumed immediately. I should have explained that Jimmy Stewart had also given the meeting the assurance that he had a job for me with James Miller & Partners, which made it extremely awkward for anyone to propose a continuation of the tattie scone which would have meant the punters on that site losing their wages while I had a chance of a job with Miller & Partners.

I took the job offered which was a hopeless position for earnings but I didn't have to suffer it for long as I got another job with a gang of bricklayers earning good wages, right next the Oxgang site of Scotcan. The irony that followed was that a vacancy did occur with Scotcan and I was duty bound to apply on principle, which I did (although in my heart I resented it) because I was then earning much higher wages, that is bonus, on the job I was leaving. I would have preferred the tattie scone, rather than the transfer to Scotcan. It has just occurred to me that had I been a member of a masons' branch in Edinburgh, where there were two in those days, their members would be quite familiar with Latin words, especially the monumental masons who carved the letters on all graveyard memorials and all other stones. Perhaps Peter Forest's use of such terms sprung from the historical fact that the bricklayers union the AUBTW (Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers) and the OSS (Operative Stonemasons' Society) had amalgamated in 1921, thereafter both those trades were far more closely associated in their organisation on sites and in branches. Peter Forest never lost a chance to convert allies to the policies of the Communist Party or even influence further Party members to the ideas of Marx and Lenin and one of his practices was to chum home the branch secretary at the end of the meetings to help protection in case of attempted mugging and robbing of the evenings takings in financial contributions. Jack Currie was branch secretary of Edinburgh No1 before me; he lived in Chapel Street, Southside, which was on Peter's way home, so Jack was well and truly lectured on these occasions.

Then came my turn. I also lived on the route to Peter's home, but I got the impression that another member was Peter's target in his untiring zeal of educating us. His name was Peter Quinn, and, every time I see Quinn, he always speaks about Forest in those days, and how time or the lateness of the hour was oblivious to Forest who had no work to bother him in the morning, or wife and children to think about as he was a bachelor. If we happened to go for a drink on our way home, Forest would come into the pub as well, although he was a teetotaller. Peter's father was a skilled print worker who suffered victimisation for his trade union activity and then spent the rest of his life in poverty along with his wife, both lifelong members of the Communist Party. Old Mrs Forest was always to be seen in any march of the Labour Movement in Edinburgh and the last time I saw her was on such a march in Princes Street, old and infirm, but she could not be stopped.

Jimmy Kerr was a frequent visitor to the Forest's home, a top flat in St Leonard's Street, and he told me that Peter's old mother liked a wee bet on the horses. The stake would never be more than a tanner (sixpence) and she faithfully followed Cayton of the Daily Worker, but she tried to keep her sinful gambling vice a secret from Peter, who frowned on such futile pastimes. With the passing of the parents, he neglected his health even more and in his latter days he used to look after the Party rooms in Buccleuch St, unpaid

of course. To me Peter Forest was an example of the high integrity and dedication to be found in members of the Communist Party; no other Party in Britain had such a devoted following. My first impression when I met members of this Party was their honesty, preparedness to work hard and spend a lot of their spare time, and a lot of their money in the cause of building a movement that could eliminate the exploitation of capitalism and build socialism. That first impression has never left me, and by now I've met such comrades through the construction industry, and in every section of the Labour and Trade Union Movement as well as in many countries of the world. When I hear such rubbish nowadays expounded by so called world statesmen like John Major or President Bush that 'Communism is dead', the depth of their ignorance about politics astonishes me. Their very names will hardly be remembered in a few year' time and yet Karl Marx died in 1883 and his works and theories are still subjects for intense controversy in most universities, his ideas on the development of capitalism as well as Engel's and Lenin's are the guidelines for millions of workers who will be the 'gravediggers of capitalism' and the builders of socialism.

I have mentioned names of persons I've been associated with in many of the movements I've been involved in and I trust I haven't used their names to make me sound more important. I'll probably mention many more. Some of them I feel honoured and privileged to have met, but there were others whose acquaintance I regard with disdain. I remember reading Charlie Chaplin's life story, written by himself, and the remarkable number of well-known personalities he had met in his long career. But I got the strong impression Chaplin was not indulging in 'name dropping' and that most of them were elevated just because Chaplin mentioned them and certainly not vice-versa.

During the years I served on the General Council of the STUC, which covered the period from 1969 to 1984 when I retired from full time office in UCATT, the General Secretaries were Jimmy Jack and Jimmy Milne and John Henry, outstanding Assistant General Secretary. And my colleagues on the General Council during this period were tried and trusted stalwarts of their respective unions, some of whom became more well-known in the public mind than others and many of them became Presidents of Congress. I think it would be unfair to name some and not others, so up the year when I became President and from 1969 the following served the General Council at various periods.

W. Aitken, AEEW
W. Blainford, EEPTU
J. Dollan, NUJ
C. Drury, NALGO
J. Jarvie, ABFSWS
G. Laird, AUEW
E. McIntyre, NUH&KW
J. Mathieson, NUR
J. O'Reilly, COHSE
W. Shields, AUEW (TASS)
G. Bolton, NUM
J. Henry, Edinburgh Trade Council
A. Barr, NUR
R. Curran, NUPE
A. Dannet, GMWU
E. Humphries, FBU
J. Kirkwood, POEW
J. Langan, ABTMS
J. McElvie, NUR
J. Morrel, GMWU
H. Penman, NUBE
T. Taylor, NUUB
B. McIntyre, Clothing Workers
H. Wyper, Glasgow Trades Council
A. Bell, ISTC
A. Day, ASTNS
T. Dougan, AUEW
W. Hutchison, AUE.W
A. Kitson, SH & MA
R. McDonald, TGWU
W. McLean, NUM
W. Niven, AUEW (TASS)
J. Pollock, EIS
W. Tweedie ASBSBSW

Only a very small minority of the foregoing representatives from the affiliated unions were actually members of CPGB. (Communist Party); I mention this because its significance will become clear in my later observations. For example, and I quote from Angela Tucket – The Scottish TUC –

With the early prospect of the Heath government being thrown out, there was considerable anxiety in Scotland following the experience of the miners, shipyard workers, steel and rail workers about how far and how fast a new Labour government would be ready to go; they had not forgotten the earlier 'In place of Strife'. This had been vehemently expressed at Dunoon on 1972. First Michael McGahey won unanimous support for a resolution totally rejecting "the propaganda of 'Incomes Policy'" and calling upon – the next Labour government to drastically redistribute the nations' wealth in favour of the wage earners, pensioners and the underprivileged –

This was immediately followed by a motion on 'Relations with the Labour Party' – it was agreed to remit the motion with an even more sharply worded amendment to the GC (General Council) who decided to discuss it on the Joint Committee with the Labour Party. However the Scottish Council of the Labour Party, which had reservations about the GC having taken the initiative in calling the comprehensive Scottish Assembly on unemployment, replied in August 1972, that they were unwilling to meet unless all the representations from the GC *"were eligible for membership of the Labour Party".* This restriction the GC felt unable to accept and much correspondence followed.

The significance of this restriction is noted by Angela Tucket in her references to Chapter 25, and I quote:

At that time the GC included W. McLean, General Secretary of the miners, H. D'Arcy of the builders, Enoch Humphries, Fire Brigade union, Alex Day and W. Niven of the Technical & Supervisory Staffs with the Assistant Secretary James Milne always on hand to deputise for James Jack.

Some of the group named were obviously not eligible for membership of the Labour Party because we were members of the Communist Party, so we bore the Mark of Cain on our forehead according to the Scottish Council of the Labour Party at that time. However, remarkably enough, such reservations didn't seem to bother Prime Ministers and their Ministers, Cabinet colleagues, or all sorts of denominations of MPs, especially Labour MPs, because many of them were quite keen to meet with the GC of the STUC and all of its working committees to consider all the most important issues affecting the lives of the people of Scotland.

Harold Wilson's Visit to STUC

After the downfall of the Heath government which was brought about after provoking such immense resistance, culminating in the miners' strike and then the introduction by that government of the four day week crisis, which led to a General Election and the return of a Labour government led by Harold Wilson, the General Council STUC received important new recognition during the last year of office of James Jack, the General Secretary. Prime Minister Harold Wilson and seven Cabinet Ministers came to Glasgow on March 17th and 18th 1975 and met with the General Council to consult them on all the vital economic issues facing Scotland. As well as the state of the Scottish economy as a whole, these included the social services and Scottish Devolution. The General Council were given the promise of a Scottish Assembly with legislative powers.

We met in hotel next to Glasgow Airport and, when Mr Wilson and his Cabinet colleagues arrived, I remember there was a demonstration of steel workers outside expressing their opposition to steelwork closures. All the members of the General Council were present in the hotel lounge area. I was standing with Jimmy Morrel, GMWU, and the Prime Minister came right over and shook hands. I asked him if he would like a drink and he chose a pint of beer. I got the drinks and said "Perhaps the pint is not as good as the one in the Members' bar in the Commons which is Federation ale." He replied "Yes I know that Federation Ale, and I can claim to be partly responsible for getting it into the Members' bar." While we stood talking, I noticed the barmaids, I think there were four, had gathered at that end where we were standing at one of those pillars which had a shelf surrounding it. I said to Mr Wilson, those girls are bursting to see the great man. He looked over to them and walked over, chatted to them for quite a while before he re-joined Jimmy and myself. I told that story to a Labour MP many years later and he said "Wilson was always a publicity merchant, with his pipe and pint etc."

I didn't accept that then and I don't now because I was sure he was just being friendly with the bar workers; he had no need for publicity or public showing off in that place.

The General Council and the Cabinet members got down to business straight away and continued in session all the rest of the day and evening; then followed our business to the next day. As far as I noticed, Harold Wilson went around the various separate discussion groups, but let them get on with their business, listening closely but not interfering. Of all the Prime Ministers and their Ministers I have ever met as a General Council member - and we had met many of them since 1969-1984 - Harold Wilson's Cabinet kept their ears closer to the ground than any other. Maybe I had a soft spot for Harold Wilson; I certainly had a respect for his ability which may have stemmed from an occasion of the immediate post war years when Wilson was active among the left in the Labour Party.

The particular incident was a weekend school held near Edinburgh and I was a delegate from my trade union branch. I asked him a question about east–west trade and found him to be very knowledgeable, also to be strongly in favour, particularly in exchanging Soviet grain for British exports. And I believe he still expounded this later when he became the President of the Board of Trade in the Atlee government. I read his memoirs recently and my respect for him has not diminished, although I will admit I was surprised by some of his comments. For instance, there was a widely held opinion in the Labour Movement and far beyond that Harold Wilson was an extremely capable economist, and his years of work as Beveridge's stable mate in all that research study, that went into the preparation for the recommendations that were later to become the proposals for the "Welfare State", certainly lent weight to peoples' opinion of him as an able economist. Suddenly in his memoirs he admits he had never read Karl Marx. Imagine a student of economics making this admission! Well to me that's just like a naturalist confessing he had never read Charles Darwin or even a Christian minister admitting he had never heard of the Sermon on the Mount. In another quite frank observation, he said he learned some quotations of Marx's well-known sayings off by heart, in order to impress his Soviet associates on visits to the Soviet Union. Now is that the characteristic of a chancer, or merely the subtlety of a very astute diplomat?

Nevertheless Harold Wilson's memoirs contain paramount lessons for the Labour Movement of Britain. It's only a pity that he waited until the publication of the memoirs before he made some of his observations public, but that is a problem with many other memoirs. A reading of Dennis Healey's memoirs led me to the conclusion that he was far more at home or at ease with bankers and all sorts of financiers than he was with workers. For example, he regarded the General Council of the STUC as a bunch of Communists. Certainly in my time there were a few, but very few indeed.

In New Time, Number 67, Nina Fishman's excellent article provides much food for thought and action on the role of Christian Socialism, Marxist Socialism and Ethical Socialism. She writes regarding previous Labour governments: "It is very hard to believe that all the damage was done between 1979 and 1983." Agreed, and I'll go back much further and show where the rot really started. Harold Wilson, who was a member in the Atlee Cabinet or the 1945 Labour government, saw very clearly where the rot began and wrote in his memoirs regarding the Korean War crisis (Page 115):

Atlee succeeded in defusing the crisis in Washington, but at a heavy price as far as Britain's strained economy was concerned. In the communiqué issued at the end of the talks with President Truman, the key clause committed both countries 'to increase their military capabilities as rapidly as possible'. Under American pressure Britain's already crippling arms burden was to go up from £3,400 million to £4,700 million. This squandering of our resources is what brought me out fighting at Bevan's side.

Wilson then went on to describe how the increased arms burden led directly to increased charges for prescriptions in the National Health Service and he relates a discussion in the Cabinet at that time (page 116):

Atlee was in hospital, Morrison was in charge. Bevan asked why the £23 million involved in the cost of prescriptions could not be taken off the arms programme and warned that he would resign if he were not supported. Gaitskell made it clear for his part he would have to resign if he were not supported.

Gaitskell was in favour of the health service charges being imposed. That, in my opinion, is where the rot started in the Atlee government programme and led eventually to its defeat.

The most important development that came from the Wilson's visit to the STUC was the firm commitment to a Scottish Parliament by Labour and this time by the leadership of a Labour government. This was a significant advance for Labour because, although the STUC had been convinced for many years before this on the absolute need for a Scottish Parliament, full credit for this must be given to the Scottish Miners whose record on this struggle can easily be checked by their sponsorship of the many resolutions adopted by the Congress. This consistent line of support for a Scottish Parliament was even greater on the part of the Communist Party (CPGB) who made it a firm flank of their policy during their whole existence, as exemplified in the speeches and actions of William Gallacher MP in and out of the House of Commons. This cannot be said for the Scottish Council of the Labour Party or the Parliamentary Labour Party, many of whom seemed to have forgotten the outstanding role of advocacy pioneered by that other Labour MP, Keir Hardie, who fought so bravely for the idea of a Scottish Parliament all those years ago at the time of foundation of the Labour Party. Sad to say too many or our Labour leaders even in Scotland became converted to the case for a Scottish Parliament only because of the advance of the SNP into the Labour vote in local elections areas and Parliamentary constituencies.

The economics of construction

The construction industry is notorious for its casualisation of the labour force; continuity of a contract is often interrupted, even before a development is complete. It was only a few weeks ago in 1993 that one of our members, a joiner, reported at the branch meeting that the labour force was being run down on a large contract called Hospitality Inn, situated in Leith Street Edinburgh, next to the Playhouse Theatre, and the gigantic tower cranes were being dismantled though the progress in construction had not advanced much above the foundations. This is not an uncommon experience in the construction industry. Suddenly the financial investment dries up, the site closes down, the workers are scattered to the four winds, some may find other jobs, others will walk the streets of unemployment, the site may open up again if shareholders somewhere, be they in Britain, USA, Hong Kong, Japan or Germany, can smell a profit in its development. Perhaps it is ironic that the Hospitality Inn job lies exactly at the foot of Calton Hill, whose top is dominated by that other unfinished building, the National Monument, often called the national disgrace because it was never finished. I'm not a betting man but I'd lay odds the Hospitality Inn will be completed before the National Monument, even though another hotel is about the last priority of all the building Scotland requires. It all depends where the most profit lies in this society we live in at present.

Such an experience as suspending operations on construction sites and the scattering of the workforce are commonplace in this industry and even the completion of construction projects results in the sacking of the workers concerned. The most recent slump in the industry is the worst we have lived through since the early 1930s under this so called 'caring Tory government', with figures quoted by various sources of probably half a million building workers unemployed. I have often heard the industry being described as a 'Jungle', but really, a jungle is a haven of serene tranquillity in comparison. I heard one story of a building job:

- the bricklayers were going hell for leather high up on a scaffold, as the saying goes 'heads down arses up', and the foreman brickie shouted down to the general foreman on the ground, '*get me some more labourers, they're falling off the scaffold like flies'*. The general went to the site gate where there was a queue of hopefuls, called some of them in, went back and shouted up to his brickie foreman: '*Hey here's another six, will they keep you going till dinner time'*. Construction is one of Britain's most dangerous industries killing three people a week –

This statement was made in a report of a public meeting, which took place in Glasgow at the end of 1993 and was representative of all sides of the industry, unions, employers, education, training organisations, safety reps, CITB. The meeting discussed the government's review of 400 sets of health and safety regulations, a review that has the encouragement of Prime Minister John Major to reduce the so called 'burden on business'. UCATT activist Davy Ayrs from Washington, Co Durham, said he was suspicious of the review because of its criteria. David told the meeting:

The real burden in fact falls on the workers and their families. Up to three workers are killed every week in the U.K. You cannot measure the grief of families who have lost their loved ones in accident in monetary terms.

A report 'The Perfect Crime' by the West Midlands Health and Safety Advice Centre (HASAC) states:

– Statutory authorities are failing to prosecute cases of workplace manslaughter and incomplete investigations by statutory safety authorities and a lack of will on the part of the Crown Prosecution Service are allowing reckless Company Directors to escape prison. HASAC researchers managed to track down and reinvestigate 30 out of 50 workplace deaths in the West Midlands between 1987 and 1992. "Our dossier shows there were four workplace deaths where a manslaughter prosecution should have been brought and a further seven where there was prima facie evidence of manslaughter, according to researcher John Whitefoot." "In many cases our investigations seem to have been far more thorough than those undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive or the local environmental health department after a workplace death.

Only one of these deaths actually resulted in a Company Director being prosecuted, for breaches of Health and Safety at Work Act. He received a £1500 fine:

'We want to see every workplace death thoroughly investigated and, if recklessness is proven, manslaughter charges brought against the Company Directors responsible', says Whitefoot: 'The police investigate every road traffic accident this way, so workplace deaths should be treated with equal seriousness'.

In this regard UCATT's journal of December 1993 contained this observation headed: - Jury's verdict on demolition deaths brushed aside:

UCATT officials are angrily denouncing reports that the Crown Prosecution Service will not bring charges in a case involving two workers killed when demolishing a railway bridge in South London last year. This is despite a verdict from a jury that the men had been unlawfully killed. The CPS is insisting that there is insufficient evidence for criminal charges against British Rail and the demolition contractor involved in the incident. UCATT General Secretary George Brumwell said the CPS decision was lamentable but predictable: *'It shows once again how easy it would be to get away with murder at the workplace. Different standards of behaviour seem to apply at work and in society at large'.*

I remember many a discussion on the EC of the old AUBTW particularly on wages and there was always division between the left and right. The General Secretary then was George Lowthian, and he often plugged a theme against us using industrial actions. His argument went along these lines, for example:

– it is all right for such sections of workers taking action like miners, or power industry workers or rail workers, because when they stopped work they could close down an industry and the government had to take notice. But what happened if building workers struck work; people just had to wait longer for houses or other buildings, so the authorities didn't worry too much –

However there was a great flaw in Lowthian's reasoning, which glossed over a glaring contradiction in relations between employers and workers, and to me this was and is a fundamental lesson for all workers, a basic truth. As soon as a worker stops work, strikes or downs tools if you like, the bosses' profit stops at that point and this is the power and pressure which all workers have and can apply, the withdrawal of their labour power. It is passing strange that, in a society such as we live, in the importance of a worker's contribution to the well-being of society's life is hardly ever recognised or appreciated until that worker stops working. Moreover, George Lowthian's argument implied that only certain sections of workers had industrial muscle which could make an impact on wage negotiations, but his argument is erroneous as well, and we know of

many examples which contradict his assertion. I remember a dispute whereby so called workers of lesser importance won substantial wage increases beyond what many key workers had achieved at that time. It concerned the cleansing workers in London, the dustmen's dispute.

Some people may remember these events by the black plastic bags, which came on the scent in those days, and how they piled up enormous heaps on the streets of London. Well here was a problem for the local authorities who were the employers, and an even greater nuisance for the general public, many of whom never even noticed how essential for the well-being of society was the contribution of the dustman's daily work. The settlement in this dispute resulted in a substantial wage increase, far in advance of what skilled workers had won in what were termed key industries at that time. I recall another dustman's dispute, on this occasion in Glasgow, and it was a strike by the drivers. Once again the plastic bags started piling up in the streets and in the backyards. I attended a demonstration march, which gathered in Maryhill and proceeded all the way to near Queen Street Railway Station where a public meeting was held. It was a really bitterly cold morning with an easterly wind whipping up the banners, the kind of biting cold wind which Glaswegians say only blows in Edinburgh. I was the official representative of the STUC General Council on that demonstration and, even although the strike at that point was unofficial, nevertheless I was there. In any case, I was in good company because my companion on the march was Dan Duffy, an officer of the TGWU, the union concerned, and member of the union's Executive Council.

I remember the role of the media, television and press in that dispute, when troops were brought in to clear some of the rubbish. And I expressed it at the public meeting in the street beside Queen Street Railway Station in Glasgow and later at the following Congress of the STUC along the lines –

How is it soldiers after a few days find some rats among the garbage and are suddenly on television and press portrayed as public heroes, but dustmen who have carried out the same work for donkeys' years are portrayed as public enemies when they stand up for their rights-

That is what I mean when I say, this society that we live in never appreciates the value of a worker's worth until that worker stops working. George Herwegh born in Stuttgart 1817, died in 1875, put it another way in one of his poems:

Ye sons of labour, up! Awake! Arise!
Learn all the virtue in your strength that lies.
The world's great wheels and works refuse to go,
Unless your stalwart arms the force bestow.

Ragged trouseres philosphers

Robert Noonan, who wrote his famous book "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists" under the name of Robert Tressel educated more than one generation of British socialists after it was first published in 1914, even although that first edition was an emaciated and crippled version of the original manuscript. I first read it near the end of my time as a wartime soldier and like many other it had a profound influence on me. I've had the good fortune as well to have read Mr F.C. Ball's book "One of the Dammed", which describes more facts about Robert Noonan and details circumstances of the recovery of the full manuscript. I have in my possession a copy of the latest edition of The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists published by Lawrence and Wishart, London, edited by F.C. Ball, and presented to me on my retirement from the EC of UCATT by the

North West Regional Council of UCATT in 1984. I'm sure this edition will also educate further generations of British socialist as well as many other outwith the British nations. However, while Noonan termed his building workers 'ragged philanthropists', to my mind many of the workers I knew in that industry were more like 'ragged philosophers', particularly in the endless discussions, debates, arguments, songs. I've mentioned some of them by name already in this narrative, Charlie McManus for one, philosopher yes! Without a doubt! But philosophy expressed in his own inimitable manner, Communist Party member all his adult days, YCL as well. Mr McManus had a deep hatred of Royalty and all it stood for and how he could raise laughter among all within hearing! He should have been on the professional stage, but his stage was the cabin of a building job and the audience was his workmates, usually bricklayers and labourers during periods of rained off or frosted off time; other times would be at the dinner break half hour and the audience would be wider, including joiners, painters machine men and more labourers.

If Royalty was his subject, the event would be a Royal visit to Edinburgh, so he would open up:
Well then did you see them, did you see the photo in the News? Your betters! Taking the salute at the castle esplanade, you lot sitting there, you couldn't do that, stand perfectly still for over an hour with your arm held up in a salute, what did the papers say? That takes stamina! It shows George respects us. But you didn't notice the harness strapped up his back. He wears a harness to hold him up straight; it's out of sight of course. It's the same when he stands on the balcony at Buckingham Palace waving to the crowd - they've got a scaffold at his back supporting him. The poor rotten body couldn't do those things on its own, the poor souls riddled with all kinds of disease, it runs in the Royal Family, they're stricken with all kinds of disease.

And so Charlie's muse would inspire him into that flow of the vernacular and into that style of exaggerated chaos which I often think is a trait in Irish humour. But then he would welcome an interruption from the gallery, *'What did you say Allan, the Prince of Wales was not a bad lad, is that what you said?'*
Oh aye that's right, that's what the papers said when he visited the unemployed in Wales, and he even went into a worker's house, by Christ that was a brave action! And then he made that revolutionary statement "Something must be done!" But what the hell did he ever do, he got involved with that American cow Mrs Simpson and forgot all about the unemployed of Wales.

Allan interrupted again "But surely he made a sacrifice when he gave up the throne". McManus came back:
Sacrifice! What sacrifice? You said the other day Allan, the throne was a burden, the crown was a cross to bear, so where was the sacrifice? We know now, when he was made the Duke of Windsor, but along with being made a Dukie, he was given a backhander of a cool million pounds and that was some money at that time. Baldwin got shot of him and later on when the war started he was exported away to the Bahamas, well away from the war zone and why? Because he was a Nazi sympathiser and an embarrassment to the new Churchill wartime government. He was not on his own of course, because quite a few of leading Tory Ministers, including Lord Halifax and Sir Samuel Hoare were sympathetic to Nazi Germany.

Recently the occasion of Charlie's discourse was the branch meeting and the Royals by this time were going through a period when their moon was on the wane and more of the British public were beginning to adopt an attitude of contempt similar to the dissension of McManus, especially following all the media disclosures of marital relations among the Royals. McManus again:
Did you watch them on Buckingham balcony? How many more are they gonna get on that balcony? And of course us mugs are paying! Holy Christ the balcony's near collapsing, even although it was reinforced lately. Did you see Margaret, Diana, Fergie, Ann, Charlie, Dukie, Andrew etc. and all the bairns coming along, dipping into the public purse; we'll need more reinforcement, even an extension to hold them all.

Such were the McManus lectures on the Royals, and often the scene was on the job in the hut. Very frequently another philosopher would be present, Joe Kerr, and Joe would interrupt McManus: "For Christ sake, give it a rest Charlie, we know all about them". McManus looked round to see where Joe was sitting. "Oh it's you Joe, have I disturbed your study of the nags, I'm very sorry Joe" and now McManus addresses all those within hearing, sitting around the tables, sarcastically,
Here's Joe, just a big harmless innocent laddie, all he asks for is to be left in peace to study the horses, day and night, night and day, horses during the day, greyhounds at night nothing wrong with that! But what puzzles me about Joe, what happened to that good Catholic education he got at St John's Portobello, all those years of dedicated effort by those poor nuns. I feel sorry for them. Can you imagine their frustration trying to penetrate that great thick skull with some sense of even arithmetic that is now wasted on horses.

Joe sprang into action – now Joe's physique was massive compared to Charlie, nearly six feet in height compared to five feet three inches, and fifteen stone compared to ten stone – and he grabbed Charlie by the hair "You wizened bloody poisoned dwarf" and he threatened to lift Charlie off his feet by the hair. McManus screamed "Mercy Joe, Mercy Joe", but laughing with it. He knew Joe would do him no hurt at all, he know Joe was a great gentle giant, and the violence would be in words only. This scene had been enacted many a time, on many a job where they had come together.

Joe Kerr was the younger brother of Jimmy Kerr, again mentioned earlier in these memoirs, and about three years younger than McManus who would be about fifty three years old at the time of the scene above. Joe was notorious for being late in timekeeping; only he could have been the character in the story about the bricklayer who was always late for his work. The tale went the squad foreman of the bricklayer gang was absolutely sick of the brickie in his gang who was always late for work and so he challenged the culprit one morning, "look here I've had enough of this, do you know what time we start in the morning?" The defaulter replied. "No, as a matter of fact I don't! You'se are always working when I get here". Joe Kerr had a consistent method of argument in discussions on and off the scaffold, no matter what point of view anyone put forward he would be the opposite. But yet he did propound a theory in which he was fairly consistent and he would develop his argument in discussions about how the building industry should be organised. Public Ownership and Nationalisation of the industry was on the agenda of every National Delegate Conference of every union in the construction industry in those years and such policies were widely adopted by all the unions concerned. And of course such a subject cropped up repeatedly on the sites and in the union branches, but Joe would advocate his solution:
– The union should organise all its members into a company – tender for all the big contracts, control the wage rates and use the profits for the benefit of the members –

Some of us would show that such schemes had been tried in the past, for example, Doctor Begg's Buildings had been built in this way (This was a massive tenement development in Edinburgh near Holyrood Palace which had deteriorated into grossly overcrowded slum dwellings and later demolished.) We would also argue that Robert Owen, the great pioneer of Cooperative socialist experiments and ideas, had practised such schemes in places such as New Lanark, now a museum. And, even although his ideas, writings and works were and still are an invaluable contribution to human society's emancipation, his practical experiments were doomed to failure in the environment of more powerful capitalist economic forces and a political system and state structure dominated by a hostile government controlled by an establishment serving the vested interests of the landowner and capitalist class. In other words, we were saying to Joe, his pet scheme could never come to fruition either in similar hostile surroundings. I suppose Joe's idea of more Cooperative forms of working practice was an embryo of a rather rudimentary challenge to existing methods of competition among workers themselves, but the idea was also a romantic illusion which could not fit into the conditions of the construction industry at that period.

It was difficult enough even to get some workers to take the elementary step of joining a union, or even after getting them to join, to keep them in continuous membership. Syd Paris is a well-known character in the Scottish Labour and trade union movement, a painter and decorator by trade, member of the old Scottish Painters Society and later of UCATT and for many years, secretary of the Dundee painters branch of that union. Syd's wife Margaret was a full time official of the General & Municipal Workers, both of them were active members of the Communist Party (CPGB) until that organisation went out of existence - and a more kind and considerate couple I've yet to meet. I think I've already mentioned Syd in connection with him trying to find a young lad a job in Dundee.

On another occasion I visited Dundee for the purpose of making the presentation to Syd of his 50 year membership card and in the union. I stayed with Margaret and Syd that night and in the morning I accompanied him on a walk with his poor old dog. I asked: "I didn't know you had a dog Syd". He said "Well we haven't had it very long, it was Margaret who took it in and we haven't the heart to get him put down". The story was that in a pub where Syd was a frequent customer, this dog was outside the door and, when Margaret came to meet Syd, she noticed the dog and told Syd about it, asking who was the owner of the animal?; nobody knew, although they noticed it had been there for hours. So our couple took it home and no person ever claimed it. The poor abandoned animal was not in a good state of health; they took it to a vet and paid a bill for £100.00 for treatment, but when I say it that morning I thought it wouldn't enjoy many more walks. The last time the Scottish TUC had its annual Congress in Dundee was the year and of course in the Laird Hall, City Square. I've attended public meetings and at times have spoken in that famous square, but I hadn't been inside the actual hall since the building workers strike of 1972 and that was a tremendous meeting then, organised by Dundee construction workers local strike committee who as to be expected mounted a powerful campaign in support of that wage claim. I remember some of the lads who played a leading role in that action, such as Willie Barclay, Syd Paris, David Thomson, John Gordon, Jackie Johnstone.

The workers of Dundee are well known for their history of struggle in the continuous effort to improve the lives of the people of that town and for their solidarity and support for worthwhile causes in this country and worldwide. And so it was with keen interest I witnessed the exhibition in that great hall during the above Congress of Trade Unions, banners and photographic plates of demonstrations and meetings covering such issues as the Scottish painters' apprentice strike of 1912 and a 1931 demonstration against the means test when the placards read "Put our Landlords On The Means Test" and "We Demand a 25% Reduction In Our Rents". The great Dundee poet Mary Brooksbank

was in the front row of this photo. Mary will be remembered for many of her poems and songs; the song of the Dundee Jute and Flax Workers I liked best, was familiar to me long before I discovered the author was Mary. And Charlie Kelly of the UCATT Executive often sang this song in the social evenings that invariably lighten the more serious business of Trade Union Conferences. The first lines of OH DEAR ME went:

Oh dear me, the mill's gaen fest,
The puir we shifters can get a rest,
Shiftin' bobbins course and fine
They fairly mak' ye work for your ten and nine.

I was fortunate enough to acquire a copy of her SIDLAW BREEZES kindly sent to me by Bernard Panter of the Industrial Society.

Syd asked me if I could pick him out in the apprentice painters' strike photo. I couldn't recognise him without his famous whiskers, but then he was eighteen in the photo. However, Syd and his whiskers were featured I reckon in all those photos of demonstrations and almost always in the front ranks. The whiskers were something like the old Royal Air Force, Jimmy Edwards style, they followed a downward curve from the upper lip, then swept majestically upwards to meet his side laps coming down past his ears. As Syd grew older in years the moustaches grew more exuberant, so did his reputation as a worthy in the Labour Movement in Scotland.

I recall a happy experience during a holiday in the Soviet Union; this event was organised by the Scottish TUC. Syd, Margaret, Janet and myself were in the group and we visited a children's holiday camp in Kazakhstan. As we were shown around the place, groups of the young people clustered round Syd and followed him wherever he went, as if he was the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Of course the attraction was the whiskers; they had obviously never seen such a luxuriant exhibition and Syd Paris was quite proud of all the attention.

London 1936 – 1937 Anti fascist movement

When I was seventeen I left home and travelled to London, the great Mecca for all kinds of people trying to improve their lot in life. I was encouraged to go there by my elder brother Jimmy who was a bricklayer. My mother saw me off at Waverley Edinburgh and that was an unusual journey for a youth of my age, in those times. That journey sticks in my mind and was the first to London, only to be repeated many times over many years in later life. Jimmy met me at the barrier at Kings Cross; he was wearing a light coloured suit in summer fashion and not many weeks would pass before I was measured properly for a very good suit by a Jewish tailor in Willesdon NW London. That was my first 'made to measure' suit. I paid for it myself out of my earnings. I was the first among my pals to have such a suit and even later, when they had their first suits, they were all paid for by their parents. So London was good for me, I was earning more. Certainly it was far better to be a bricklayer, even an apprentice in London, than it was in Scotland. No doubt it still is; then it was 1936.

My first job was with Bovis at Preston Rd Station, Wembley, where my brother and his two bricklayer mates were employed, Alec MacDonald and Albert Sproat, all from Portobello. As the site came near completion, they prepared to leave for another job. I wanted to go with them, against the wishes of my brother who reckoned I was getting on quite well on that site. And what surprised me was the attitude of the foreman bricklayer when he heard I wanted to leave. He said to me that I should stay with Bovis and they would "always have a home for me", which meant in London parlance, they

would always have a job for me. Now that attitude of a foreman towards a boy was to say the least most unusual in my experience. In Scotland they couldn't care less, they wouldn't even notice whether a worker left or stayed. Yet, this was not the only time it happened to me in London. Now I have no illusions that building employers were a different species in London from their ilk in Scotland, only that building operatives must have been in more plentiful supply in Scotland. However, I didn't heed what was probably good advice so I moved on.

At that time Mosley and the British Union of Fascists were active on the London scene. My brother and his mates had attended the huge demonstrations against the Fascists in Cable Street in the East End and had met Donald Renton from Portobello on that occasion in 1936. Donald was living in the East End and active with the Communist Party and the National Unemployed Workers Movement. I was very interested in the anti-fascist movement and very well aware that the Communist Party was by far and away the leading force in this movement, not only in London but throughout the whole of Britain. I attended the meetings at Hyde Park Corner on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons and listened to various speakers, but the Communists spoke the most sense, and not only spoke against Fascism. Their actions followed their words; they organised the people against it, many of them fought in Spain against Franco, Hitler and Mussolini and I quote Bill Alexander, Honorary Secretary, International Brigade Association:

Oswald Mosley and his black shirt followers tried to establish fascism in Britain, aping the aims and methods of the dictators. He had the connivance and support of the Conservative ruling class and their police and state. These would be dictators were resisted and fought by progressive and working class people —– From all over the world men and women went to join the heroic armed resistance of the Spanish people, about 2,400 came from the British Isles, 524 giving their lives in the war.

Bob Looney, well-known Aberdeen Communist and International Brigadier said in his poem 'HASTA LA VISTA' (until we see Madrid again):

We went to Spain
Because of that great yesterday
We are part of that great tomorrow
Hasta La Vista Madrid

In a note on the poem at a reunion in London of the British Battalion of International Brigade, he said "We will never forget one other thing that stemmed the fascist flood and killed the legend of fascist superiority – The defeat of Hitler started in Spain"

The Tory government at this period prattled on about neutralism and supported non-intervention, while Labour Party leaders like Herbert Morrison advocated a line against Mosley "ignore them, don't give them publicity and they'll die out". On the other hand, the Communist Party line was very clear with the warning, "The bombs dropping on Barcelona today will be followed by bombs dropping on London tomorrow" and the slogan of Spain's anti-fascists "No passeron" (they shall not pass) was advocated to stop Mosley in London. Seeing is believing and, as Michael Gorbachov once put it, seeing something once is better than a hundred lectures. So I was one of the demonstrators at the age of eighteen among many thousands who opposed Mosley's attempt to march through the East End of London.

My brother and his mates were more aware than me about the arrangements for the action against the fascists and where that action was to take place. We went to Petticoat Lane on that Sunday forenoon, then made our way to the area of protest demonstration, which I think was in Bermondsey. A barricade was erected across the street where it was thought Mosley would pass and already the streets were becoming crowded. The police arrived in bus loads where we were and started dismantling the barricade, but no sooner did they start stripping it when another barricade was erected further along the street. There was no violence or trouble of any kind at this time; however that was not to last.

The police organised a charge into the crowd, mostly police on foot and the people ran back. We jumped up on to a garden wall and could see clearly what was happening. Some of the crowd ran into a narrow lane to escape the police charge, but when they discovered it was a cul-de-sac they ran back out and the police battered many of them with their truncheons; one very old man staggered past us bleeding profusely from a head wound inflicted by the cops. We heard the news that the Fascists were forced to change their route and some lads were shouting to the crowds "rally to…", I can't remember the place name - somewhere in Bermondsey. I take it they would be steward of the anti-fascists. Anyway, we followed the crowds who met up with the Mosley's supporters, they were marching on the road, I heard there were about 400 of them, but I read later from the papers there were 4000 police protecting them. They certainly were protecting them; there were solid ranks of police on each side of the Fascists. I'm quite certain if it had not been for police guarding them, that day would have spelt the end of any further public activities of the Mosleyites.

As it was, they were prevented from marching along the route they planned by the demonstrators. We walked with the crowds following the Fascists, and those crowds vastly outnumbered police and Mosley supporters. There came a halt as mounted police blocked the road, but allowed the Fascists and their solid police escorts to proceed. The anti-fascist demonstrators were diverted up a side street at that point and this sort of diversion we learned later was taking place in other areas. The crowd still tried to move to where it was thought Mosley would try and address his supporters, but from where we were we couldn't get near it. My brother Jimmy helped me to climb on top of a pillar post box; from here I could see further up the street and, as the crowd tried to advance, I could see the mounted police preparing to charge and I shouted "Get back, they're coming" and we retreated up side streets again. This manoeuvre happened repeatedly and eventually we all dispersed. It was getting late and we had to avoid missing the last tube trains back to Willesden. We read in the papers next day that 400 arrests had been made by the police, but Mosley had been stopped from marching through that part of London which was the East End and prevented from holding his planned rally.

The credit for the leadership of the anti-fascist movement on this occasion goes to the Communist Party and I was there to see for myself. But his conclusion applies to all the years leading up to the second world war, in Britain and elsewhere. It often saddens me now to think that it took the actual advent of that war and then experience of war to awake millions of people all over the world to the danger and menace of Fascism, Nazism at it is now termed. The Communist Party in Britain saw it so clearly even in those early years. Everyone knows nowadays of Chamberlain's betrayal of Britain's interests at the time of Munich and his arrival in Britain from that iniquitous deal with Hitler, waving that piece of paper and declaring "Peace in our time". That action bluffed millions of our people but it did not convince the Communist Party who described the action as a betrayal, and it was William Gallacher, the Communist MP, who declared in the House of Commons that Chamberlain's deal was a betrayal of Britain.

It was the Communist Party also which authored the slogan "Chamberlain must go", long, long before it dawned on Churchill and others that Chamberlain had to be removed as Prime Minister because his policies had become an obstacle to the real defence of British interests. This was the period of the 'phoney war', a most apt description for that period before Dunkirk when Chamberlain was still in power and the British Expeditionary Force was in France. The British troops were ill equipped for their task and so our present day advocates of the 'nuclear deterrent' keep on about "don't let us reduce our weapons; look what happened the last time" meaning pre 1939 years. But these Tory supporters are wrong now and they were wrong then. The main reason for our troops being ill equipped to face the German forces was Tory government defence strategy, which was based on the hope that Nazi Germany would attack the Soviet Union first. Unfortunately for us all, that strategy proved wrong, for Hitler turned the German forces against Belgium and France, and Britain became embroiled in the war. But, even at this late stage, there were people in government so blinded by hatred of the Soviet Union that they started equipping British troops in France to go to Finland to fight against the Soviet Union. This information was given me by a soldier involved, Alec McDonald, a bricklayer friend and soldier at this time). Chamberlain and Tory government policy proved bankrupt in the face of Nazi aggression and Chamberlain had to go. The Churchill government took over, and the wartime coalition was formed with Labour. Chamberlain's policy of appeasing Hitler in the hope that the Nazis would attack the Soviet Union was mistimed, wrong in timing but not wrong in conception because the Nazis did attack the Soviet Union.

However the Western European countries were the first to feel the nailed fist of Nazi Germany's war machinery which had been built with the support of German capital and international capital, chiefly American. Nazism could never have come to power in Germany and grown so strong but that its war preparations were approved and directly supported by the ruling circles of the United States, Great Britain and France. They did all in their power to channel German aggression eastwards, against the Soviet Union, hoping in this way to resolve their inter-imperialist contradictions with Germany. Unfortunately for the peoples of West Europe, the Frankenstein monster of German Nazism got out of the control of those governments who nurtured it and attacked them first so that record reads:

1936 German armed intervention in Spain on the side of Franco's Fascists
1938 Germany seizes Austria and part of Czechoslovakia
1939 Germany seizes all of Czechoslovakia and in September of that year attacks Poland. This triggers off the Second World War.
1940 Germany occupies Denmark and Norway, invades Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and France. France surrenders, and Britain is embroiled in the war.

One cannot help but wonder what would have happened if history had taken the other course, what would have been the fate of the British people if the German armies under the leadership of the German General Von Paulus, who commanded their 6th army poised ready on the French side of the Channel, had invaded Britain at that time?

I have no doubt the Nazis would have found no shortage of Lavals, Petains, Quixlings and other traitors ready to collaborate in the occupation of this country. Those among us who later read Ivor Montague's book "The Traitor Class" will recall his courageous and damming indictment of those Tory ruling circles in pre-war governments responsible for the "Anglo German Naval Agreement" for example. This pact gave Hitler the opportunity to sidestep the limitations on naval armaments imposed by the Versailles Treaty and brought into being the u-boats and packet battleships, such as the Bismark, the use of which almost brought Britain to its knees during one period of the war that followed, with the dreadful loss of lives inflicted on the crews of the Royal Navy and Merchant Navy.

Hitler didn't even bother to sidestep the other restrictions of Versailles. The Versailles Treaty, drawn up by Great Britain, USA, France and other allied powers who defeated Germany in the First World War, forbad Germany to maintain a large army and navy. Hitler ignored the bans. In 1935 he said, in a moment of frankness: "I'll have to play ball with capitalism and hold back the Versailles powers by using the spectre of Bolshevism, by making them believe that Germany is the last bulwark against the red flood, get rid of the Versailles Treaty and rearm ourselves". The bogey of the "red danger" proved effective. Although many of the observations concerning the period before the outbreak of the Second World War are made from hindsight, some of those developments were well known to many people on the left of the Labour Movement at that time.

At this period in which I write these comments, it is perhaps not popular to quote Stalin but then I'm not seeking popularity. So, if I recall some of Stalin's very clear warnings of the dangers facing Britain, France and the United States, arising from their policy of non-intervention and a refusal to accept collective security with the Soviet Union against the fascist aggression, my purpose is to show that a more positive attitude by the western powers toward the Soviets at that period could have prevented much of the terrible calamity and suffering Nazi Germany, Italy and Japan inflicted on the people of the world.

In March 1939 Stalin's speech to the 18th Congress of the CPSU (B) contained these remarks "the fascist rulers decided, before plunging into war, to mould public opinion to suit their ends, that is, to mislead it, to deceive it". And now he mimics the fascist leaders:

A military bloc of Germany and Italy against the interests of Britain and France in Europe? Bless us, do you call that a bloc? "We" have no military bloc. All "we" have is an innocuous "Berlin-Rome axis" that is, just a geometrical equation for an axis.A military bloc of Germany, Italy and Japan against the interests of the United States, Britain and France in the Far East? Nothing of the kind! "We" have no military block. All "we" have is an innocuous "Berlin-Rome-Tokyo triangle" that is, a slight pendant for geometry. A war against the interests of Britain, France, the United States? Nonsense! "We" are waging war on the Comintern, not on these states. If you don't believe it, read the "anti Comintern pact" concluded between Italy, Germany and Japan.

That is how Messieurs the aggressors thought to mould public opinion, although it was not hard to see how preposterous this clumsy game of camouflage was, for it is ridiculous to look for Comintern "hot beds" in the deserts of Mongolia, in the mountains of Abyssinia or the wilds of Spanish Morocco.

The speech then describes the seizure of Chinese territory by Japan, Italy of Abyssinia, Austria and the Sudeten region by Germany, then continues and I quote:

Thus we are witnessing an open re-division of the world and sphere of influence at the expense of non-aggressive states, without the least attempt at resistance, and even with a certain connivance on their part. Incredible but true. To what then are we to attribute the systematic concessions made by these states to the aggressors? The chief reason is that the majority of the non-aggressive countries, particularly Britain and France, have rejected the policy of collective security, the policy of collective resistance to aggressors, and have taken up a position of non-intervention, a position of 'neutrality'.

That speech was not hindsight but the clear warning of the disastrous policy that was ignored by the western governments until too late.

It is pitiful nowadays to hear and read idiots from Maxwell's and Murdoch's crawling media, prattle on about the Soviet Union signing a non-aggression pact with Hitler at that period. Surely it must be evident to the most simple student of history, that the Soviet government knew perfectly well that Nazi Germany would launch a war against the Soviets and, in the absence of a collective security alliance between the UK, France and the USA, they were compelled to try and buy time against the inevitable holocaust which was bound to come.

However if any student or for that matter anyone else interested in the events of those years - often depicted as "the years of appeasement of Fascism" - find it difficult to accept statements attributed to Stalin, then let me refer them to the work of Angela Tucket in her excellent study "The Scottish Trades Union Congress" 1897-1977 where she describes and quotes as well the discussion of delegates and resolutions adopted by the STUC during those years. Neville Chamberlain in May 1937 replaced Baldwin as Premier and a year later the STUC Presidential address declared British policy had given 'the necessary impetuous to Germany to occupy Austria'. Herbert Ellison JP, the first National Union of Railwaymen delegate to preside at Congress, stressed that:

Had the government given the Fascist countries to understand at the outset that they would not tolerate certain of the events that have taken place, I believe we should not now have been compelled to prepare so speedily for something that the workers trust may never occur.

At that same Congress Thomas Scollan, MP, speaking for Glasgow Trades Council, moved a composite resolution which declared that the 'National' government had undermined the League of Nations over Abyssinia over its 'betrayal of the Spanish government by the Non-Intervention Pact, over Austria over 'the ravishing of China by Japan'. In this he went on to characterise Premier Chamberlain and divisions among the Tories and continued

– Fascist intrigue within Conservative circles had removed Baldwin to the cold store of the House of Lords and brought forward in his place a champion of Fascism.

He then said Chamberlain had acted behind Eden's back at the Foreign Office and had sent an ambassador to France offering £90,000,000 if it would break the Franco-Soviet Pact. Scollan added that it was

– not a pact for ourselves that the government was after, but an anti-Comintern pact such as existed between Germany, Italy and Japan. We concluded that the 'government was driving Britain on to war in cooperation with international Fascism against Soviet Russia, and even many Conservatives were alarmed at the road Chamberlain was taking'.

Once again, it was passed by 'an overwhelming majority'.

Those statements, so painstakingly researched from the reports of the STUC by Angela Tucket for her book, were never of course publicised by the media at the time except for the Daily Worker. But they do reveal that the Labour Movement in Britain and the STUC in particular were very well aware of the dangerous road the Chamberlain government was going down. It was the Communist Party who came out with the slogan 'Chamberlain must go'. Then, with the collapse of France, Chamberlain's fellow arch appeasers, Marshal Pétain and Pierre Laval, headed the French government and took over from the Nazi occupiers the repression of the underground resistance movement initiated by the French Communist Party, which had been declared illegal immediately on the declaration of war in 1939. When the war ended in 1945, both were tried and found guilty of treason. Laval was executed in October and Pétain sentenced to life imprisonment. With France occupied by the Nazis, at long last came the overdue change of government in Britain. Chamberlain did go, kicked out along with some of his pals by Winston Churchill, who rapidly brought in Labour Ministers. 1940 saw total retreat by the British Forces and the evacuation of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain began.

Self employment/714S/CIS Certificate

I now come to my final chapter on building workers, although there never will be a final chapter for building or any other workers. The struggle never ends but will continue, albeit in many different forms, so let me say rather, I now come to my latest essay on this subject. I started off by calling this narrative "A Bible of Discontent". I'll finish it by stating how correct old Jimmy Simpson (Red Simpson) was when I was a callow youth, and he told me, on that lousy cold winter morning in 1939: "Wherever I go I preach the Bible of Discontent".

Nowadays, I attend the 50 Year Free Card Presentations to our retired members who have maintained 50 years unbroken membership of the union, and I have attended those functions all over this country - including the presentation which I made in honour of George Lowthian the last General Secretary of the AUBTW in London. The 50 Year Free Card and Badge Presentation is still a very important tradition in UCATT where the branch honours its old members. There are no great financial awards given, and the Free Card means, the member pays no more contribution, and the only benefit her or his next of kin will receive, will be Funeral Benefit which is very small fry indeed - £90.00, when you consider funeral costs these days. However, our members are very proud when they achieve this award and the branch will try and make this occasion a highlight in its functions. I always compare it with the Victoria Cross and almost inevitably on these social occasions, we will discuss the changes in the building industry over those 50 years. The advances in conditions which we have achieved is always a theme, and yet to me, I remain as discontented now as I was when I was first elected as a shop steward for the bricklayer away back in my Peterhead days of 1944. Someone reading this will say: "My god there's no satisfying some people". Well, we've a lot to be dissatisfied about, when I think about the ceaseless struggle generations of building workers have waged to improve their working conditions, even for the very minimum of simple welfare provisions, such as a half decent toilet, or a cabin to eat their sandwiches. We've had to conduct numerous strikes for an elementary tea-break, simple fare concessions, which workers in other industries have taken for granted donkeys' years ago, and now and for recent years every advance has been put in jeopardy by the Lump. And not only put in jeopardy, but completely wiped out, by the practice of the use of 714 tax certificates and SE60s which are systems of labour exploitation used by the largest to the smallest building contractor. The Lump has been used to weaken and undermine the influence of the unions in construction, particularly UCATT, the main construction union.

There's nothing new about this system of wage payment. It was used in my time before the war years; in Scotland we called it the 'Grip', in England they termed it the 'The Lump'. Instead of paying wages by the hour and other monetary entitlements, such as travelling time and fares, unemployment insurance, overtime rates etc., the job was done for a price i.e. a lump of work for an agreed price, or a price per 1000 bricks laid, and that price covered everything. The unions challenged this method of paying wages. The bricklayers and their labourers were affected more than other trades, but it spread rapidly to other trades from the 1960s onwards. The AUBTW Executive challenged this system through the lay courts in the case of AUBTW vs Emerald Construction at Fiddlers Ferry (significant name) site. The union lost the case. I was a member of the EC of AUBTW. at that period. We had a strong minority of Communist Party members: Bill Smart, Dave Patchett, Albert Williams, Paddy Ryan, Hugh D'Arcy. I'm not sure if Dick Miles was in the party then. The National Officers were George Lowthian, General Secretary, John Leonard, President, Bill Lewis, Assistant General Secretary. Yes we lost our case, but continued our campaign against Labour Only in hundreds of disputes, official and unofficial.

I believe Albert Williams was the first among the left to recognise we were fighting a losing battle, but not even the right wing could afford to admit it was a losing battle – for the simple reason, Labour Only was decimating the membership of the union. 1972 was the beginning of the merger of the main construction unions into UCATT, which I described earlier in its baptism of fire during the 1972 strike. The merger did not halt the decline in members in the long run as Labour Only grew apace.

Bert Lowe describes it clearly in his excellent work 'Anchorman' (page 123):

One of the major topics under discussion at conference was the problem of self-employment. This menace was now turning into a tidal wave that was threatening to engulf us all: 137,000 in 1979, rising to 205,000 in 1983, plus 200,000 on 30% reductions. Many if not most of these operatives were UCATT members or lapsed members, driven to this form of employment because no other form existed. It was clear in my mind that we had to do some radical rethinking in relation to this problem. Some of our comrades on the left were still talking in the terms of some form of industrial action.

Indeed, to quote one of our left wing colleagues from Liverpool: "We will mobilise the membership in a similar manner to that of 1972 and fight with the same resolve against self-employment like the miners have against pit closures". What he had failed to say was that at this moment of time we did not have an organised army to mobilise to carry out such a campaign. Our consultative conferences revealed that no basis for these actions existed; certainly passing such resolutions such as this would not bring about the removal of this menace from our industry.

We had to recognise that changes had taken place in our industry over the last decade. The industry had undergone a complete transformation from the old method of direct employment to one of self-employment. This was now spreading to industries other than building. Accepting that this was now a part of life did not mean that we had embraced it, rather the reverse. The way that I saw it was that the self-employed, the lumpers – call them what you wish, were soon to become the most exploited section of the workforce. Not for them the hard earned gains of the trade union struggle: no independent weather payments, no guaranteed, no sick pay, no holiday pay, no overtime payments, no 40 hour week and above all no trade union protection from unscrupulous sub-contractors who work them up to ten hours a day, seven days a week and often default with the payment of wages.

Bert Lowe first started working in Stevenage New Town in 1950 and, like many of his workmates, was eventually allocated a house in the New Town. From those early years the AUBTW branch had conducted a continuous unremitting struggle against self-employment, known as Labour Only "The Lump". I would reckon Bert and his comrades fought a more intensive struggle against the use of Labour Only than any other group of building workers in the whole of Britain. And yet! And yet! Prior to the 1984 Delegate Conference of UCATT at Southport, after all those struggles since the early 1950s, Labour Only was rampant in the Stevenage New Town area as well as over the rest of the country. Bert in his book made a quotation from my Presidential Address at the 1984 Southport National Delegate Conference, although in his book the year is incorrectly stated as 1988 - I had retired from full time office on the Executive Council in September 1984. However the quotation was accurate and Bert wrote:

Many of our full time officers were now recruiting self-employed into our organisation. Some of our comrades did however understand the politics of the situation. Hugh D'Arcy, addressing the 1984 National Delegate Conference, quoted from Lenin in his book 'Left Wing Communism an infantile disorder': We must bring into the organisation the most backward elements among the working masses.

This was a growing recognition among EC members that we must organise the self-employed into the union. It was not yet approved by the majority of our membership, nor yet a majority of the EC. Some EC members were convinced, such as Albert Williams and Jack Henry, but, as Bert made clear in his book, many on the left were still fighting a losing battle to eliminate Labour Only from the industry. By the time of that 1984 NDC, Labour Only was swamping the industry and again some of the leadership and also the so called Left were acting like King Canute and ordering the tide to go back when the tide was on the flow. Many on the Left had developed an attitude towards Labour Only workers, an attitude which was similar to old Right Wing to Incentive Bonus in the 1940s, which I described earlier in this narrative.

It was this problem that convinced me to make this the most important plank in the President's Address to the 1984 NDC at Southport and I quote:

We are gravely concerned about the problems which Labour Only contracting and the operation of 714s have created in this industry and we say to the employers in the Building Employers' Confederation, some of you are now concerned about the 'unfair practices and competition presented by self-employment' (Employers words) and I say "a plague on your own heads, you are the people who created this monster, nurtured it and developed it as a shortcut to defeat the union in construction. Now the monster, like Frankenstein's monster is turning on its own master and so some employers are getting worried about this unfair competition". Let me remind this Conference of the Phelps Brown report of 1968 on the question of Labour Only. Phelps Brown said that: "there are over 250,000 self-employed workers in construction and they are used mainly by the main contractor". There are today over 35,000 holders of 714s as well as an unknown number of individuals working on the basis of 30% deductions of tax – These figures are expected to increase in the near future and so the problem has not gone away.

We, the members of UCATT, are not responsible for what is happening to workers in the industry. We are not responsible for the Black Economy; nor are we responsible for throwing millions of workers on to the streets of unemployment and forcing hundreds of thousands of building workers into the Black Economy with all its one hundred and one malpractices. All this is a result of capitalism in Britain, and in particular capitalism under a Thatcher government. But we claim UCATT is a result of effective union organisations in the construction industry, and I believe that, so let me quote Lenin on problems of organisation in his pamphlet "Left Wing Communism, an infantile disorder". "We must bring into organisation the most backward elements among the working masses". If we apply this formula to the present day conditions of the construction industry in Britain, then it should be our role and purpose to defend and advance the conditions of all the workers in this industry. In other words, we are against all forms of exploitation of workers and it is not only directly employed workers who suffer exploitation by the employers. It is all workers, many of them forced by the circumstances of capitalist exploitation into forms of work not to our liking – 714s, 30 percenters, self-employment, moonlighting, and we should bring them into the organisation. The alternative is to retreat from the jungle of the building industry and confine ourselves to local authorities, health service and other parts of the public sector.

That was 1984 and Bert Lowe wrote in his book:
The debate raged on until the 1988 National Delegate Conference when the union voted by 62 votes to 49 to abandon its position on the self-employed but it was too late. The floodgates had opened; we now had a whole new generation of building workers who had never had the opportunity of working on a trade union organised contract – Those who were fortunate to be at work, were now denied their basic employment rights, long hours, no holiday pay, no wet time payments, or redundancy payments. George Brumwell, our new General Secretary, is now calling for secure employment rights for all building workers directly or self-employed.

I'm reading the July 1997 issue of Viewpoint and the front page article reads:
UCATT is declaring war on contractors who deny employees their employment rights or unlawfully cut their pay as a result of the clampdown by the Inland Revenue and the Contribution Agency on bogus self-employment in construction.

I think UCATT is to be congratulated in its efforts to compel contractors to observe and practice the Working Rule Agreement in Construction, as well as recognise employees' statutory rights. But I sincerely hope no-one will be taken in by a clampdown by the Inland Revenue as a solution to the problems of building workers; we've been down that road before. Read this from Les Wood's The Story of UCATT (page 160):
It becomes clear that the Finance Act 1975 has the effect of making 'Labour Only' self-employment still less attractive … The changes brought about by the 1975 Finance Act were timely. Had the changes not been introduced, it is conceivable that malpractices would have continued to grow, not only among small groups of 'Labour Only' workers, but among larger firms who had the necessary expertise to accomplish tax fraud on a grand scale.

We know now from experience that these Finance Act measures were futile in trying to stop the growth of Labour Only and, with the advent of a Thatcher government, as Bert Lowe put it "the floodgates had opened".

But surely it is past the time for building workers to look for some Messiah, such as Inland Revenue or even Labour governments, to liberate us from the bondage of Labour Only. Some older lads will recall the effort of Eric Heffer MP, one time joiner, to push through a Parliamentary Bill to outlaw Labour Only in construction. It never saw the light of day; it never even gained the necessary support from Labour MPs. No! There's no Messiah's for us, there is only ourselves. Only building workers can solve this problem, and that is by their own action. The way ahead is perfectly clear to me and my intelligence, my mallum, is no better than any other punter from the building sites.

I quote again from UCATT's July '97 Viewpoint:
The London based rank and file Joint Sites Committee has put out a leaflet with a list of some of the contractors' dodges to avoid the tax and employment changes. Among the favourites are:
1. You can all pretend you're jobbing builders by putting an advert in the local paper once a year
2. If you use your own car for work, you can claim that as plant, so you'll still be classed as self-employed
3. I'll employ blokes who are limited companies. You can buy one off the shelf for £50.
4. I'll write it into everyone's contract that they are only 'temporary' workers"

How generous of those robber barons to give all this free advice to workers to enable them to gain the privilege of remaining self-employed. However the gem of all the offers is contained in a letter from Chase Norton Construction Ltd to its employees and I quote "the increased cost to the Company to take yourself on to the direct payroll is £1.69 per hour". So there you have it, straight from the horse's mouth (or is it the shark's mouth?), the Labour Only worker with this outfit - and probably generally with all such outfits - is losing £1.69 per hour, and that is more than £60 per week and in a year's work that is more than £3000.

The answer to such gross exploitation is not new; take the advice of the London Joint Sites Committee, get organised! Get unionised! Get cracking! Contact the London Joint Sites Committee or UCATT, set up such Joint Site Committees in all regions of Britain and demand all your rights, whether you are classed self-employed or not: Statutory Rights, all entitlements under the Working Rule Agreement for the Construction Industry and Civil Engineering Industry e.g. Holiday Pay, Sick Pay, Inclement weather payment, guaranteed week payment entitlement, lump sum payment or retirement, travelling time and fares to work payment, enhanced overtime rates, dirty money.

Internal union conflict

When I retired from full time union office in 1984, I felt a certain feeling of satisfaction, a sort of a sense of achievement that I had helped to leave behind a leadership in the Executive Council, a group of people whose integrity had been tried and tested in the struggle to defend and improve the interests of UCATT members and the working conditions for all construction workers. In this group were Albert Williams, Jack Henry and Charlie Kelly and in all the tribulation and problems which have beset UCATT since then, in my opinion their integrity has continued undaunted. However, another trio appeared on the national scene and began to challenge for the national leadership in the union, Peter Lenahan, John Flavin and Ron Doel. Their campaign to win seats on the Executive Council of UCATT launched one of the most painful episodes in the records of the union. The branches were circulated repeatedly with unofficial material, unsigned, origins of publication undisclosed, defamation of members character indulged in shamelessly, character assassination of people like Albert Williams and Jack Henry. This scurrilous campaign led to Jack Henry losing his seat on the Executive Council, which to me represented a severe setback for the best interests of the union membership. Many people on the left were duped by this campaign in UCATT. The issue became an argument in the letter columns of 'Times Change', the paper of the democratic left, and I replied in that paper to statements which had appeared in Issue 17.
Here is an excerpt from my letter:

As for Nina Temple's opinion in the same issue, that it was Lenahan who won the struggle to hold honest elections in the union, let us inform readers that election was far from being 'honest'. It was marked by outside interference because branches of the union were flooded by material blackening the leadership and lauding the Lenahan trio who gained a narrow majority. Lenahan's resort to the courts of English legislation to seek justice in the union is a travesty of principles held by previous advisory committees of the Communist Party of Great Britain. We pursued complaints of malpractices in voting procedures through the courts of the union, under the union's own rules, and accepted the ruling of these courts, win or lose. Not so Lenahan; he appeals to a legal system, whose reputation stinks to high heaven, especially after the original corrupt verdicts of the Guildford and Birmingham bombing, courts which have done their damdest to ruin unions such as the TGWU, AUEW, miners and now UCATT.

The actions of this triumvirate in the UCATT Executive Council reverberated on their own heads and they were removed from office after a ballot vote of the membership was held in December. The ballot was held on the question of whether to retain a full time executive or to change to a lay executive. The result of the ballot, in which 93,608 ballot papers were sent out by the Electoral Reform Society, was:

1. To retain a full time executive: 2,198 votes (13 per cent of total votes cast)
2. For a lay executive: 14, 726 votes (87 per cent)

The result endorsed the decision of UCATT Rules Revision Committee the previous year in favour of a lay executive, which under the union rules had to be ratified by a membership ballot. I was sorry to see Charlie Kelly lose his seat in this way, because I never did classify him along with the trio; unfortunately it seemed as if the membership had in their minds done just this. I recall Charlie as one of the most able organisers I ever met, a foremost negotiator on the National Joint Council for the Building Industry, where he played a leading role in apprenticeship training, and a man who conducted all his responsibilities for the union with the utmost integrity. And, still my words about the tried and tested integrity of trade unionists such as Williams, Henry and Kelly, whose names were dragged in the dust, perhaps I should speak about their simple humanism.

I remember a boarding house in Blackpool near Ginn Square where I shared accommodation with Albert Williams and Bill Lewis as delegates to the TUC and, like most delegates, no luxury hotel but a plain boarding house was all our expenses could afford, along with working class families, most of them from Manchester. There was one family there, who had a spastic boy about 12 years old; it was Albert who noticed the boy's handicap and Albert played a game of indoor pool on a little pool table with the boy every day we were there.

I first met Jack Henry when he lived in dire poverty, having walked the streets of London for following a strike and picket responsibility on a site. Yet Jack was a highly skilled finishing joiner. I was made aware of this one morning in his house, while admiring a dresser and bookcase of oak. Dolly, his wife, told me Jack had made them himself. I must have shown surprise, for he said to me: "What are you staring at D'Arcy". I said, "You made that furniture? I thought you were just a shuttering joiner". Now I had better explain the term 'shuttering joiner'. A shuttering joiner on some sites didn't need many tools. If the shuttering was metal, about all he required was a spudjel, which is usually the tool of the scaffolder, although metal shuttering required varied skills but certainly not woodwork skills. However, with all Henry's skills he suffered the whip of unemployment through victimisation when I first met him. One morning in the union's head office at Clapham, when I was preparing my papers for the executive, Jack called me over to look out of a window to see a bus queue. He said: "You think you've got problems D'Arcy, look at that poor mother in the queue". I looked and saw among the crowd at the bus stop a woman, not young, perhaps about 60 years with her arm around the shoulder of her Down's Syndrome daughter (maybe). Henry would notice scenes like that. Charlie Kelly was a very talented lad; he was a joyful entertainer with his songs, of which he had a very wide repertoire, an asset to any party. If I was present, I would ask him to sing the Dundee song "Oh dear me", which to me was and is a very moving song and sent shivers down my spine. The chorus went:

Oh dear me, the mill's gaen fest,
The puir wee shifters canna get a rest,
Shiftin' bobbins, coarse and fine,
They fairly mak' ye work for your ten and nine.

Possibly the song reminded me of what my mother told me about her experience when she went to her first job after leaving school at 14 years of age. She was employed in the cotton mill, beside the River Esk at Musselburgh, at less than half the wage quoted in the song.

I have painted very briefly two traits in the personalities of three men, Albert Williams, Jack Henry and Charlie Kelly, integrity and humanity, which brings to mind the words of the Bard in the song 'Sylvia'.

Is she kind as she is fair,
For beauty lives with kindness.

In a similar way, integrity is the inseparable companion of humanity and these three men had these qualities in abundance.

The unity of opposites

Now, as I try to bring to conclusion my experience of struggles of construction workers to improve their living standards, I think again of Red Simpson's Bible of Discontent. I don't know if he was Christian or a Communist, although his obsession regarding the existence of all those great cities having been built by building workers, who nevertheless own nothing of them at the end of their lives, smacks of Marxism. I think it was in Marx somewhere I read about a formulation which claimed that the source of all wealth is labour (by hand and brain), apart from the fruits of the earth itself in its natural resources coal, oil, flora, fauna, the waters etc. Is it strange for that old bricklayer to use a bible to expound the exploitation of labour which leaves the building worker (for example) penniless after all that effort? And I know very well, we don't just mean, all the great cities and the tremendous wealth they represent were the creation of construction workers alone, but they are the accumulation of labour of millions of workers (by hand and brain). No, it is not strange at all, because I've read in various historical works that building workers were among the first unions to affiliate to the International Working Men's Association, whose secretary was Karl Marx who coined the famous phrase which inspired socialist activists of many generations all over the world:

Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains, you have a whole world to win!

And just as those burning words impressed building workers' unions then to affiliate to an international organisation of unions, so they continue to recognise the importance of international topics today, as witnessed at the June 1998 National Delegate Conference of UCATT when four motions on the topic were carried unanimously by the delegates:

1. Supporting human rights groups campaigning for the end of bonded labour as practised in some Asian and South American countries
2. Condemning the United States blockade of Cuba and noting the advances made in Cuba, such as free universal healthcare and education.
3. Deploring the failure of the authorities in Lesotho to protect striking workers from being brutally attacked
4. Calling on the government to press for workers' rights internationally, for example by including social clauses in all trade agreements.

That June conference was addressed by Roel De Vries, president of the International Federation of Building and Woodworkers, to which UCATT is affiliated. As an example of international cross border action, he described how the IFBWW had coordinated successful international pressure on the Swedish furniture company IKEA to sign a cooperation agreement covering minimum employment standards, health and safety and the right to organise. For example, IKEA would now demand from its suppliers that no child labour should be used, that workers would also have unrestricted rights to join unions with negotiating rights, and that there would be no discrimination on grounds of race or gender. If old Jimmy Simpson's ghost or his soul sits in at his old union branch meetings of present days, I'm sure it would be pleased to hear about the union's concern about exploitation of workers all over the world and in particular our own country.

I'm also certain, however, that the element of discontent has not been eliminated, any more than that many problems remain to be solved. In these days of New Labour, with modernisation and reformism as the order of the day, the protagonists have wished away what they think of and term as old fashioned socialist, stick in the mud, even Luddite and Wobblie ideas. The New Labour intelligentsia believe that the left wing history of the Labour Movement is an albatross round their neck and an obstacle preventing them from winning parliamentary majority. But we've been down that road in the record of Labour numerous times, perhaps the classical example being that of Ramsay MacDonald and the second Labour government, when, in the midst of yet another crisis of capitalism in the world, he betrayed Labour with some of his colleagues and joined the Tories to form a so called National Government. I remember the remarks of an old Labour stalwart to whom I was delivering the Daily Worker in Milton Street in Edinburgh about 1947. He told me he attended Labour Party meetings when Ramsay McDonald was at the peak of his popularity. He said "it was perfectly true MacDonald could charm the birds out of the trees and the meetings were bursting with enthusiasm for MacDonald's brand of Labour" but the old stalwart recognised with bitterness the betrayal that followed. I thought then it was a pity he didn't see the clay feet of McDonald earlier, like William Gallacher and the CPGB did when that party was thrown out of the Labour Party in 1926 at its Edinburgh Conference through disaffiliation. MacDonald was the prime mover of this.

Now we hear again echoes of those events in New Labour's rejection of candidates such as Dennis Canavan and others for the forthcoming Scottish Parliament. It is now much more than the clay feet of New Labour leaders that is evident as the recent reshuffle of the Cabinet shows. It is clay men and women that are being brought in while the gold is thrown out, resulting from this lurch (not swing) to the right. The Morning Star of February 24, 1998 featured an article by Tish Newlands, commemorating the 150th anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, which reminded me of my early days in the Labour Movement when I first read that pamphlet, and those words "A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of Communism". And, in the feature article about the Manifesto, Newlands describes how the revolutionary movement waned after the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, but rose again in the Paris commune of 1871. Since those days, there followed the greatest revolution of all, 1917, which led to the formation of the Soviet government. But now the bagmen of reformism and the market economy, which we used to call capitalism, are celebrating what they term the collapse of Communism. So the spectre of Communism has been exorcised and laid to rest. Ah! But hold on bagmen; hunger, poverty, unemployment, homelessness, drug addiction, prostitution of women and children, famine afflicting millions of people are more rampant and widespread all over the world than ever before.

Fidel Castro's speech of welcome on the visit of John Paul II to Cuba contained a summary of the current state of global injustice concluding that an "alienating consumerism [is] imposed on peoples as an ideal model". They were significant words for a significant meeting. Here we have a leading exponent of Communist ideology meeting with a leading exponent of Christian practice and belief, who find something in common. I wonder if this is what some philosophers meant by the theory that two physically opposite forces can create something new: a new factor of tremendous strength. Perhaps because I was a bricklayer I could understand more easily the way in which Leonardo Di Vinci explained it in describing the physical character of an arch. Just imagine an arch of brickwork or stone as the two sides, that point of balance where gravity would make them collapse at their greatest point of weakness; instead they are joined together, and the two weakest points become united and create a tremendous strength of support, the unity of opposites.

This book was officially launched on 7 December 2013 at Danderhall Miners Welfare Club in Edinburgh.
Author Hugh D'Arcy was at the launch (see left), speaking on the platform, signing copies and listening to the many tributes to him. Those paying tribute included Harry Frew, President of the Scottish Trade Union Congress and Secretary of UCATT Scottish region; Tam Lannon of the Westminster Branch of UCATT; David Hamilton, MP for Midlothian; Gavin Strang, retired MP and friend; Hugh's son Ian, representing the family; and the chair, Rab Paterson, Secretary of Midlothian Trades Union Council. Many members of Hugh's large family were also present, along with friends, colleagues and comrades. A month later, on 8 January 2014, at the age of 94, Hugh died, leaving us with his unique insight into British trade unionism in the twentieth century.

This book is the remarkable memoir, stretching from the 1930s to the 1990s, of Hugh D'Arcy, born in Edinburgh on 29th September 1919 and still alive today (2013). Hugh left school at 14 and became an apprentice bricklayer, working in the building industry, first as a bricklayer and finally, until his retirement in 1984, as a full-time trade union official for UCATT – the Union of Construction Allied Trades and Technicians. Hugh has written, at different times in the 1980s and 1990s, a first-hand account of his experiences in the construction industry, of the political battles and industrial disputes in which he was involved - from Cable Street in 1935 to the 1972 strike, of the many interesting characters he worked with, and of the employment and working conditions that building workers endured then – and often still do. We publish it now in the hope that it will provide an inspiration to all building workers and to all those with an interest in oral and labour history and that it will act as a spur to transforming the construction industry to the benefit of those who work in it.

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