Review: the Silvertown general strike

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The lost story of a strike that shook London and helped launch the modern labour movement

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John Tully tells well the story of courageous strikers at the Silvertown rubber and electrical factory in the east end of London in late 1889. The three-month strike ended in defeat, signifying a setback for the wave of New Union victories in Britain, writes Joy Macready

The foreword to historian John Tully's book Silvertown is written by John Callow, political education and research officer of the General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union (GMB). The GMB's history is linked to Will Thorne's National Union of Gasworkers & General Labourers (NUG&GL), which was instrumental in the development of New Unionism in Britain in the 1880s and 90s, and played a fundamental role in unionising the Silvertown workers.

Callow, referring to the origins of the GMB, writes: "The union, like the solidarity of its members who fought so valiantly on the streets of London's East End, was founded on a big idea. It sought to represent the underdog, the unskilled worker, and to unequivocally and unapologetically represent class as opposed to sectional interest.

"It was serious about redistributing power and wealth from the haves to the have-nots; appreciative of the risks it ran and the destruction of earlier general unions; and driven by a clearly articulated Marxist vision that found its expression in the guiding objective of the union's first rule book."

Its predecessor, the NUG&GL, was formed during the New Unionism movement that swept through factories across the country like wildfire in the late 1880s. Before this development, only skilled workers or labour aristocrats? were organised in old-style craft unions, and their members fought hard to keep out the unskilled or semi-skilled workers, such as dockers, gasworkers and general labourers.

During 1888 and 1889, previously unorganised workers formed unions, took militant strike action and won their demands. The strike wave began with the matchwomen's strike in July 1888, when 1,500 women walked out at the Bryant & May match factory. They organised pickets and raised strike funds, as well as forming their own union, the Union of Women Matchmakers.

This strike was followed in March, when gasworkers from the Beckton Gas Works in the East End of London joined a protest rally and won their demand for an eight-hour day. On the back of that, thousands got together to form the NUG&GL.
Then the dockers walked off the job in August that year. The Great Dock Strike involved more than 130,000 strikers and established strong trade unions amongst London dockers. It was even more impressive that these workers collectivised, as the bosses effectively encouraged them to fight each other every morning to get work for the day. The strike lasted just four weeks and the dockers won their demands, primarily an increase in pay to sixpence per hour, which became known as the dockers’ tanner.

The dockworkers also demanded an increase in the overtime rate, in addition to the abolition of the contract system and plus payments, which were a sort of bonus paid for work done quickly and calculated according to the amount of goods the dockers moved. Furthermore, the dockers insisted that men should be hired for at least four hours per day and that the call-on should occur only twice a day.

Just as the dockers’ strike finished, the workers at Silver’s rubber and electrical factory, again in the East End of London docklands, struck their primary demand was that workers should be entitled to overtime pay for weekly shifts exceeding 80 hours.

However, by this time, as Tully demonstrates, both the bosses and the state were better prepared. And there was an overriding political imperative: they had to stem the tide of New Unionism before workers across all industries took up the fight for decent wages and conditions.

Silver’s board of directors, with the full backing of the state apparatus, the police and law courts, dug in their heels and successfully set out to starve the strikers back to work.

As well as the role the bosses and the state played, Tully exposes the treacherous role the old craft unions, particularly the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), played in undermining the strikes, whether by dragging their feet in raising strike funds, or outright obstruction by refusing time and again to call out ASE members, an action which would have made it impossible for Silver’s factory to continue to operate and would have ensured the strikers’ victory.

The weakness of Tully’s analysis is that it does not advance a way that the strikers could overcome the ASE and London Trades Council (LTC) leaders’ sectional mentality by going directly to the members and creating cross-union committees to challenge their own leaders apathy and shut down Silver’s.

Conditions in Silvertown

Silvertown, named after Samuel Winkworth Silver’s rubber factory, was in the midst of the East End of London where, according to social reformer Charles Booth, 35 per cent of workers were destitute. Tully writes that Silvertown was a place apart, which had and in some respect still has an air of isolation, strangeness and remoteness.

The workers’ houses occupied a central strip, close to the factories and wedged between the dock on one side and the marsh and river. The rent in that area was much higher than in other parts of London, despite being markedly substandard housing. The rent was much too high for casual labourers, so overcrowding was widespread.

Many of Silvertown’s residents were casual labourers, who picked up work on a daily basis at the dock or factory gate. The lives of Silvertown labourers were blighted by chronic destitution and systemic violence. There were many deaths from infectious diseases, many due directly to polluted water supplies, exacerbated by overcrowding, overwork and malnutrition.

Workers at Silver’s also faced dangerous conditions, including chemicals such as molten sulphur, sulphur dioxide and hydrogen sulphide. They were exposed to carcinogens, such as naphtha, benzene and carbon
disulphide, and worked in incredibly high temperatures.

As a result, the average lifespan of a Silvertown worker was 35 years, compared to an average of almost 42 years across Britain.

The great strike

The strike at the India-Rubber, Gutta-Percha & Telegraph Works (Silver?s) started on 11 September, 1889. Gutta percha was made from the latex of a tree- harvested in Malaya; which had excellent insulation properties for electric cables, especially in underwater conditions. The firm?s ships were girdling the ocean beds with a network of telegraph cables. Thus the factory was working flat out for a booming industry responding to a growing demand for and all sorts of electrical equipment and rubber goods.

The submarine cables were of immense geopolitical significance, in particular for the administration of the European colonial empires, according to Tully. As a result, in the 1880s Silver?s had developed into one of the world?s premier rubber, electrical and telegraph firms.

Silver?s employed 3,000 labourers and artisans, with casual workers taken on during peak periods. Most workers put in a 12-hour day, from 6am to 6pm, but many had to put in overtime, working 70-80 hours per week.

At the time the strike started, the dockers were still out on strike. The police had kept a low profile on the docks until early September, in response to frantic lobbying of Scotland Yard by the dock companies. This response was to foreshadow their heavy presence during the Silvertown strike.

On Wednesday 11 September, 280 yardsmen submitted to management a written petition for a pay rise and an undercover lunchroom, as they were forced to eat outside in all seasons. Yardsmen were unskilled and semiskilled men, labourers employed to carry machine parts, cables, rubber, copper and other raw materials around the yard and wharves outside the factor buildings; they also shovelled coal, swept up rubbish, manoeuvred heavy loads; and filled and emptied carts and railway wagons.

Initially, Silver?s managing director, Matthew Gray, granted the three farthings increase for the yardsmen. This news spread like wildfire over the weekend, resulting in many of the non-unionised, non-craft workforce, including electrical shop workers, signing a round robin asking for the same increase. From this time on, Gray was intransigent; he would neither negotiate directly with the strikers nor accept outside offers of arbitration, e.g. from the NUG&GL.

On Monday 16 September, a notice appeared on the factory gates stating the company was withdrawing its offer to the yardsmen and flatly rejecting the electrical shop workers? demands.

The 280 yardsmen walked out, followed by 700 or 800 workers from other sections of factory soon after. Trying to instil fear into the rest of the workforce, Gray summoned the employees to tell them there would be no increase. By Thursday afternoon, the works were altogether closed with 2,000 men thrown out of work. The strikers, no doubt, took heart from the dock victory that ended at the end of that week.

Impressively, many women workers also came out on strike. The company employed 350 women and girls, which was about 11 per cent of the workforce. They had the worst pay rates, even for identical work. In addition, they were not paid if there was no work, but had to remain on the job without pay and sacked if they went home.

As Tully says: "From the capitalist?s view of view, patriarchy was a great boon: employing women on
substandard rates helped depress wages and boost profits.\textsuperscript{4}

Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl, was heavily involved in the Silvertown strike, particularly amongst women workers. Tully wrongly attributes her success as making ?feminist\textsuperscript{5} history, when in fact she was making socialist history \textsuperscript{?}, organising women along class lines. At a time when women were banned from voting, university education and joining the old craft unions, Eleanor (as she was commonly known) organised the first women\textquotesingle s branch of the NUG\&GL and became the founding secretary.

Eleanor appealed strongly to the women. She argued that they \textquotesingle must form unions and work in harmony with the men\textquotesingle s trade unions. As the dock strike had taught them the lesson that skilled and unskilled labour should work together, so the present strike should teach them a further great lesson. That they could only win by men and women working in combination. The capitalist was only using women to underwork men and that would be the case until women refused to undersell their brothers and husbands,\textsuperscript{6} according to a report in the Stratford Express quoted by Tully.

She also served on the national committee of the NUG\&GL. In addition, she volunteered her services to the movement, for example teaching leader Will Thorne to read and write.

As well as the small three farthing wage increase, the demands of the strikers included: proportionate increases for piecework, and for women, girls and boys in all departments; overtime pay for work after 5pm at time and a quarter, and work on Sundays and holidays to be paid double time.

The workers further demanded the abolition of the hated rule refusing payment for time worked to anyone omitting to put in a ticket at the start of the day. Lastly, they stipulated that they would only return to work on the basis of no victimisation of strike activists.

From the outset, the workers set up a 30-strong strike committee, set up daily picket lines to stop scabs from going in, organised mass meetings and demonstrations, fundraised, made flags and banners, and called on their working class brothers and sisters for assistance.

By the time the New Unionist Will Thorne and others arrived, Frederick Ling, a stoker at Silvertown, and his comrades had already had the strike well organised, educated by the dock strike. However, the bosses had also learned lessons from the preceding victorious struggles.

The bosses\textquotesingle offensive

There was no question whether the company could afford to give the workers a pay raise. Silver\textquotesingle s factory was making huge profits for the company\textquotesingle s shareholders at the employees\textquotesingle expense. The counteroffensive by the bosses was about something much bigger.

As Tully writes: \textit{A workers\textquotesingle victory at Silvertown would set an example for the working class as a whole and would increase the power of the New Unions; in this respect, both the strikers and Silver\textquotesingle s were proxies for a broader class struggle. There can be little doubt that Silver\textquotesingle s could have well afforded to grant the modest demands of the strikers. The ruling class had demanded a line in the sand and Gray\textquotesingle s hand wielded the stick that drew it.}\textsuperscript{7}

Political heavyweights, like Tory Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, had a direct conduit with members of the board of directors at Silver\textquotesingle s. For example, one board member Henry Marcham\textquotesingle s brother was the government whip in the House of Lords. Salisbury associated with figures such as William Collison, who headed up the strikebreaking National Free Labour Association, and even the Kelly-Peters Gang and the \textit{Eyeball Busters\textsuperscript{?}}, East End criminal elements who specialised in roughing up trade unionists.
There were even priests among the shareholders of Silver?s who completely ignored the strikers during the dispute.

And Silver?s held the line against New Unionism. By this point, employers were ready to launch a counteroffensive against New Unions using the methods pioneered at Silver?s.

Tully links the strikebreaking methods employed at Silvertown to those used in the US during the 1930s. At that time, many employers adopted a "scientific" strikebreaking package, which became known as the "Mohawk Valley Formula?. The formula was based on the methods adopted by the Remington Rand Corporation to crush a big strike at Ilion, New York plant.

Tully argues that this was the earlier version ? "the Silvertown Formula?. He writes: "The individual elements of both formulae were not original, but in both cases they were combined into a formidable strikebreaking package. The central elements of the Silvertown formula included the refusal of all offers of arbitration or negotiation, and the transfer of work overseas or its "outsourcing" to other local factories."

"The firm also attempted to mobilise middle-class opinion against the strikers via the press, in particular by blaming the dispute on the outside agitators."

"Silver?s was also able to rely on the cooperation of the police, who used heavy-handed methods against the strikers. The police were also used to escort large numbers of scabs, who had been recruited in rural districts, through picket lines."

"Another innovation was the housing and feeding of the blacklegs inside the factory. Finally, the company had the full use of the Metropolitan Police and Home Office solicitors to prosecute strikers."8

Gray forged this strikebreaking methodology. He dug in, refused to negotiate and had the machinery dismantled and shipped to the company?s smaller factory, Persan Works, near Paris. Silver?s also outsourced work to other London engineering and electrical firms. Gray took the opportunity to remove old machinery and install new equipment, effectively upgrading the factory during the strike.

Silver?s also actively recruited blacklegs, then called "scab herding?, from outside the East End. They put an advertisement in a local paper for 60 labourers near Colchester and with high unemployment in the rural area, 250 turned up in response. However, many turned down the work when they realised they would be scabbing.

The police played a critical role in breaking the strike. Not only did they accompany the scabs from Colchester via train and in first class, no less? to keep them away from the strikers, but also escorted them right to the factory gates via steam launch. The blacklegs were billeted aboard the company cable ship, tied up at the Thames Wharf inside the factory grounds.

The pickets hooting and jeering had deterred many would-be blacklegs; some repented and had train fares home paid by strike committee. However, on the 50th day of strike, 5 November, strikers turned out in force for their picket to be confronted by a thick line of Metropolitan police escorting blacklegs into the factory. From then on, the police had a constant presence on the streets of Silvertown.

Gray and his political allies also used the law courts to punish strikers and criminalise picketing, even though it was legal. On 8 November, the West Ham magistrates? court found a number of strikers guilty of intimidation and fined them hefty amounts, while other strikers were bound over to keep the peace.

The violence meted out by the police quickly escalated. On 19 November, the police harassed a
demonstration and picketers started throwing stones. The police retaliated with a baton charge, resulting in serious injuries and with many strikers being taken to hospital. The next day, mounted police charged another demonstration.

Lastly, at the beginning of November, Silver?s threatened to evict strikers from their homes ? which were owned by the company. Faced with losing their homes as well as being starved forced many workers to abandon the strike and return to work.

Working class solidarity

During the 12 week strike, the Silvertown workers received much support from their local community, socialist organisations such as the Social Democratic Federation, and other unions and charitable organisations. They went door-to-door in working class neighbourhoods collecting strike funds ? some strikers actually wore out their shoes because they pounded the pavement so often.

Local traders reportedly denounced the 70 Colchester men who were billeted aboard the cable ship and refused to supply them with meat and foodstuffs. The company was forced to drive some bullocks and sheep into the works to provide for the scabs.

Amongst the strikers, there was real-world working class solidarity. Some report that half-starved single girls gave their strike pay to married workmates so their children might be fed. However, the mass support and large financial contributions that had flooded in for the Great Dockers? Strike didn?t materialise for the Silvertown strikers. For example, the dockers had received £30,000 from the Australian dockers alone, which had helped the strike continue to victory.

This was partly due to the media war being waged against the strikers by the bourgeois press. To counter this propaganda, Eleanor Marx called on the workers? movement to unite to launch a labour press.

However, the bigger cause was a lack of solidarity from within the factory itself.

The main aim of the strike was to close the coal shop, essential for raising steam for the boilers and machinery. Turners and smiths, members of Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), struck with the labourers. However, the fitters, carpenters and instrument makers, also members of the ASE, remained on the job.

Thereby the Silvertown strike was undermined from the outset by a lack of unity between skilled tradesmen and so-called unskilled labourers. The leaders of the ASE, an ?old? or craft union, refused to call out its Silvertown members in solidarity with the New Union, the NUG&GL.

Addressing a strike committee meeting, ASE member Tom Mann said that the strike had exposed the huge problem of the lack of working class unity. Encouraged by their own union leaders, the engineers and tradesmen at Silver?s had refused to join the stoppage, and money for the strike fund was not coming in quickly enough. What was necessary, Mann argued, was to ?hasten on a Federation of the Trades? capable of tackling the employers as a solid front.

Tragically, the ASE, protecting its own sectional interests, hid behind a technicality ? that its members were only ?doing their jobs?, and would on principal refuse to do a labourer?s job. However, the NUG&GL claimed that fitters were helping to dismantle machinery sent to Persan factory. The ASE denied this, saying that its members were only working on light machinery that could be removed and installed without labourer assistance.

However, to the Silvertown strikers, the craftsmen that remained on the job were no better than blacklegs
who were prolonging the dispute.

The strikers believed ? and rightly ? that if the ASE men were to strike, it would force Silver?s to negotiate to end the stoppage; while the ASE said withdrawal would have little impact and jeopardise their own jobs, which could be taken by non-unionists.

As Mann argued: ?It was undoubtedly true that, by enabling the firm to run machinery, they were prolonging the strike.?9 Had machinery broken down and not been repaired, it would have been difficult for the scab machine minders to maintain production.

But the ASE went even further and started to witch-hunt its own members. Police arrested Hugh Walsh, an ASE member from Canning Town, plus another when they went to Silvertown ? and the chief witnesses were two other ASE members!

The London Trades Council, a sluggish body of respectable craft unionists headed by George Shipton, from the Painters? Union, was equally uncooperative, for similar sectional and economistic reasons as the ASE. Afraid of the New Unions and their explosive growth, Shipton dismissed them as ?mushroom societies likely to die an early death?.

The LTC offered to mediate in the strike, but took no action when Gray out rightly rebuffed the proposal.

Under Shipton, the LTC had even fobbed off the dockers when they asked for help. Although Ben Tillett, the leader of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers? Union, had written the council for assistance, Shipton asserted that it was ?impossible to interfere in the dock strike without the consent of the strike leaders?. He was equally impenetrable to the Silvertown strikers.

The strikers also launched international appeals, particularly to the Persan factory workers in France. In the fourth week of the strike, with funds low, the strike committee sent Edward Aveling, common law husband of Eleanor Marx?s, to act as emissary.

However, on 16 October Edward returned with bad news: the workers at Silvers French plant had refused his appeal for working class solidarity. This drives home the importance of organising across borders to develop international solidarity.

Crushing defeat

On 9 December, after a number of workers were forced back to work through either the threat of losing their homes or by sheer starvation, a general meeting of the strikers recognised the inevitable and declared strike officially over. Out of 3,000, only 450 were still on strike.

The Great Silvertown Strike had been crushed and the New Union upsurge temporarily halted.

As Tully writes: ?Using the methods tested at Silvertown, the employers were to launch a decade-long offensive against the unions that fully merits the description of class war waged under the banner of ?freedom of contract?. ?10

Much of what came later was a refinement of the ?Silvertown Formula?, including no negotiation, no union recognition, no outside arbitration, mass enrolment of scabs from rural areas, billeting scabs inside factory or other worksite, and mobilising large number of police ? and later soldiers and gunboats ? to protect them.

Employers continued to use the courts to punish strikers and criminalise picketing, and in 1901 a law was brought in, called the Taff Vale judgement, where employers could sue trade unions for damages resulting from strike action.
This impelled many trade unionists to look beyond trade unionism toward independent working class political action. As Will Thorne, who was also a member of the SDF, said in 1893: “During a strike there are no Tories and Liberals among the strikers, they are all workers. At election times there are no workers, only Tories and Liberals. During an election there are no Tory and Liberal capitalists, and all of them are friends of the workers. During a strike there are no Tories and no Liberals among the employers. They are all capitalists and enemies of the workers.”

It was clear that workers needed an independent voice in parliament in order to override such decisions Taff Vale and implement reforms that syndicalism alone could not win. In 1900, the labour and socialist movements came together to form the Labour Representation Committee (LRC).

Lessons learned

The biggest strategic problem facing the Silvertown workers was to break the stronghold of the old craft unions’ leaders.

Although Tully reports the many times the strike committee sent representatives to the LTC meetings and appealed to the Executive Committee of the ASE to call out its members, he doesn’t discuss how the strikers reached out to other union members, particularly those on site. This sectionalist mentality is still very much prevalent in today’s trade union movement. There is a tacit agreement of “non-interference” in another union’s business, something that has ensured that a number of great strikes have ended in defeat.

The Silvertown strikers should have gone immediately to the ASE members and have them represented on a cross-union strike committee. They should have had a unionisation drive and pulled in the 50 per cent of workers, mainly electricians, that the ASE would not allow in as members. They should have sent delegations to all the local union meetings to demand assistance and build support groups.

These cross-union bodies could have helped break down the undemocratic nature of the craft unions and opened up new layers of workers to New Unionism. They could also have developed into councils of action across the whole country, challenging the bosses’ rule and ousting the bourgeois political parties.

For what these workers didn’t lack was determination and courage. As Tully writes, “The men and women at the rubber and telegraph works had played a tremendous role?For 12 long weeks, 3,000 previously unorganised Silvertown workers and their families picketed, marched, sang, laughed and suffered terribly through a protracted dispute.” However, what they needed was a revolutionary socialist strategy for transforming the old unions and a party fighting for political power.

REFERENCES

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