

Toynbee Hall & Trade Unions

Despite being ostensibly apolitical, Toynbee Hall's residents played crucial roles in two pioneering strikes

In June 1888 social reformer Annie Besant published an exposé on the appalling conditions at the East End Bryant & May matchstick factory.¹ The factory's owners refuted the claims, threatened to sue Besant, and fired the suspected informants. This prompted the entire work force to go out on strike.

The 'Matchstick Girls' were young women of Irish descent employed in hazard-ridden matchstick factories, described by Dickens as 'the worst of the ill-paid workers of the East End'.² Unskilled, female, and foreign workers had previously been deemed unsuitable for union membership. It is remarkable that they achieved a watershed victory for British unionism.

'Co-operation and trade-unionism are the two forces which will make the twentieth century. The twentieth century will be the working men's century and they must take their place in it'.³

Three Toynbee Hall residents, A.P. Laurie, Arthur Rogers, and Hubert Llewelyn Smith, investigated the controversy, presenting their findings in three letters to *The Times*. After presenting both sides' claims, they concluded Bryant & May's directors could not prove that 'eleven shillings and two pence' was the average wage paid. In keeping with Toynbee Hall's cooperative outlook, they also lamented the 'deplorable' relationship between employers and employees within the factory.⁴ Their letters forced Bryant & May to admit many of the striker's claims were true and give in to their demands. Toynbee Hall had come to the striker's aid at a time when stereotypes denied them allies.



Dockers, students, and the Barnetts at Oxford, 1890. ©Toynbee Hall archives, London Metropolitan Archives, City of London.

The Dockers' Strike followed a year later. Dockers were 'casual' dock labourers who had no guaranteed income. One dramatic report described 'coats, flesh, even ears being torn off, men crushed to death' as Dockers fought for work. Rather flippantly, *The Times* reported this daily struggle as 'a matter of luck'.⁵ Regardless, without regular work thousands of Dockers faced poverty and insecurity. Thus, bonus pay or 'plus money' was a lifeline for many Dockers. When the East & West India Docks Company's attempted to reduce it, 10,000 dockers went to strike. Although disparate dockers' Unions emerged, the strike was a highly organised success. As with the Matchstick Girls' strike, Toynbee Hall was intrinsic to its success.

The jubilant Central Strike Committee was entertained at Toynbee Hall and its leaders praised Toynbee Hall's residents. Firstly, unionist Ben Tillet recalled a pre-strike lecture at Toynbee Hall regarding Napoleonic battle tactics which 'crystallised in my mind many vague ideas, gave outline and form to the organisation I was endeavouring to establish'. This is interesting, as he was an established unionist drawn to Toynbee Hall prior to the strikes. Tillet also praised 'no high-brow condescension' from Toynbee Hall's residents, who offered fraternity to all.⁶

¹ A. Besant, 'Slavery in London', *The Link* [London, 23rd June 1888]

² A. Briggs & A. MaCartney, *Toynbee Hall; the First 100 Years* [London: Routledge & Paul, 1984], 46

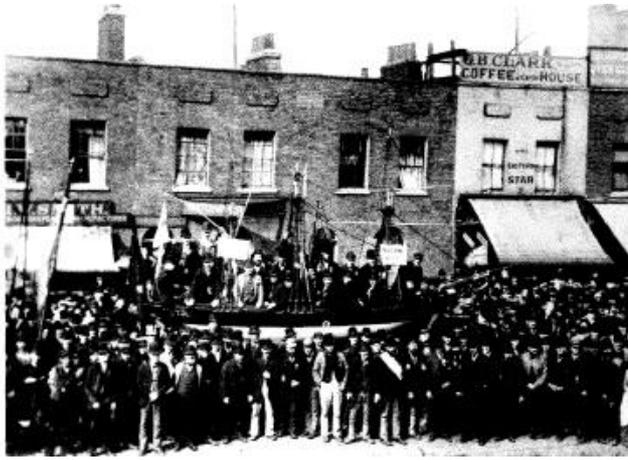
³ H. Barnett, *Cannon Barnett; His Life, Work, and Friends*, vol. 2 [London: John Murray, 1918], 219

⁴ A. P. Laurie et al, 'The Match Girls' Strike', *The Times* [London, 12th July 1888], 12; [14th July 1888], 9; [17th July 1888], 10

⁵ T. McCarthy, *The Great Dock Strike 1889* [London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988], 31-32, 39

⁶ B. Tillet, *Memoirs and Reflections*, [London: John Long, 1931], 112





Striking East End Dockers, 1899

During the strike itself, Toynbee Hall residents initially organised supplies for dockers. However, the Settlement quickly became a unionist hub; 'A room was taken, an early meeting held outside the dock gates, representatives of the different departments of the London and St. Katherine's Docks elected by the men and those who had moved in the matter found themselves deliberating ways and means with a committee of some twenty-five representative "dockers"'.⁷

'Toynbee Hall rendered considerable help during the strike... in several instances the Toynbee men themselves became branch members, accepted positions of officers and did much useful work'.⁸

The strike established a bond between the Dockers and the Settlement: resident Ernst Alves became the President of the Dockers' Trafalgar Branch and numerous Dockers unions met at Toynbee Hall. Simultaneously, the Settlement connected the Dockers to Oxford University. In 1890, the Oxford Committee of Toynbee Hall hosted a debate on trade unionism with speakers including unionists, politicians, and industrialists. Through such events, Toynbee Hall legitimised unionism by bringing its advocates into contact with future elites. It also did so informally through a 'tradition of good fellowship' which continued into the twentieth century; Oxford undergraduates and dockers shared a 'rollicking evening' organised by Toynbee Hall in 1926.⁹

⁷ *Toynbee Record* [October 1889, Toynbee Hall archives, London Metropolitan Archives, City of London], 10

⁸ T. Mann, *Memoirs* [London: Labour Publishing Company, 1923], 105

⁹ *Annual Report 1927-1928* [Toynbee Hall archives], 9

Despite the success of the Dockers strike, the *Toynbee Record* struck a cautious tone in its aftermath; '[union] organisation always means the exclusion of the more inefficient'; the disabled, elderly, and unemployed.¹⁰ Barnett subsequently established the 'Toynbee Commission' to research this problem.

Again they wrote to the *The Times* - a letter signed by 'seventeen of the most prominent friends of the poor', including East End MPs and esteemed social reformers Sidney and Beatrice Webb. In response, the Mayor of London called a conference to discuss East End unemployment. Its outcome was ingenious; London City Council established a forty-acre plot where unemployed dockers worked temporarily 'under supervision' to exhibit their work ethic and skills, thereby earning a reference to help them find permanent work. Two-hundred men used it in the first three weeks alone.¹¹ This scheme indicates Toynbee Hall's desire to make a lasting impact, learn from the strikes, and reduce the chances of future belligerence.

Despite Barnett's attempts to be apolitical, by 1900 Toynbee Hall was a unionist hub, and would be a fulcrum for the 1926 General Strike.¹² As *The Spectator* concluded in 1935, Toynbee Hall 'filled the gaps' in early unionism by providing physical resources, spiritual fraternity and political credibility for workers. Simultaneously, Toynbee Hall recognised that problems of the East End went beyond specific strikes. Once the furore over strikes subsided, Barnett and his men continued their work and research to improve the East End as it does to this day.

Further Reading

- T. McCarthy, *The Great Dock Strike 1889* [London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988]

- L. Raw, *Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and Their Place in History*, [London: Bloomsbury, 2009]

- B. Tillet, *Memoirs and Reflections*, [London: John Long, 1931]

¹⁰ *Toynbee Record* [October 1889, Toynbee Hall archives], 7

¹¹ Barnett, *Canon Barnett*, vol. 2, 238-240

¹² *Annual Report 1926* [Toynbee Hall archives], 8

