

Solidarity that cuts across racial and gender lines: reflections upon the Grunwick strike

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Looking back at the Grunwick strike of 1976-78, [Wayne Medford](#) explains how ideas of solidarity and common good brought together a diverse group of people to support the rights of the striking workers, the majority of them immigrants. Forty years on and a time when intolerance is rising, the memories of Grunwick are vital.

I attended an anti-racism conference in London recently, where one session screened and discussed a film on one of Britain's longest running industrial disputes – at the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratory in London in the late 1970s. This dispute illustrated a form of solidarity based around workers and trade unions who were fighting for a common cause, going beyond the racial politics of the time. At the present time, when much worker-based solidarity has been weakened and marginalised, alongside a championing of an ethnicised, racialised, solidarity instead, reflection of Grunwick's history shows that such animosity and division is not inevitable.

Grunwick: origins and context

At [Grunwick](#), the mainly female workforce were largely new British Commonwealth immigrants from the Caribbean, as well as Asians expelled from east Africa. They claimed [oppressive treatment](#) by managers which touched on bullying, misogyny, and racism; they also demanded trade union recognition.

As often made by some contemporary voices, [claims were also made](#) during the 1960s and '70s for Britain accepting too many immigrants, depressing wages as a result. Those decades had seen [widespread workers' support](#) for Conservative politician Enoch Powell's denunciation of immigration from former British colonies, while in 1977, the anti-immigrant National Front marched in large numbers through south-east London. More widely, 1970s popular media often presented casual racism as entertainment – *Love Thy Neighbour*, the long-running *Black and White Minstrel Show*. East African Asians had recently arrived in the UK – to some open official discouragement – as was in the case of [Leicester City Council](#).

Before Grunwick, Asian workers had struck elsewhere – for example, at a [Leicester typewriter manufacturer](#) – but their action had not been supported by their trade representatives. However, at Grunwick, [huge support was offered](#) from individual trade unions from around Britain.



Solidarity

Solidarity is a useful way to think about the nature of support for the Grunwick strike, and of some of the current discourses around Brexit. One conception of solidarity is as a quality of individuals forming close-knit communities, based around shared values and geography. Another is as a shared ethos, forming one party to support another in need, to address a crisis or social injustice, through attentiveness and some self-sacrifice.

What is striking about Grunwick is that the cultural and political context of the 1970s was ignored by the diverse, overwhelmingly white, male workforce – ranging from local postal workers to miners and Clydeside shipbuilders – so many supporters came from all corners of the UK – who nonetheless identified with, and supported, this newly-arrived, largely female strikers.

Here, solidarity as an ethos towards others facing injustice came to the fore. Contextual differences of 'race', gender, and background were overlooked; here, they seemed collectively defined by their relationship to bosses, the police, and a struggling Labour government. A protest song was even written. The leader of the Grunwick strike, the late Jayaben Desai, [has since been recognised](#) by the trade union and media mainstreams. However, few legal avenues brought success; the dispute eventually petered out, and the Grunwick workers lost.

Recently, some new workers and workforces have demanded – and won – employment rights; for example, vulnerable workers in the '[gig economy](#)'. Some within the contemporary trade union movement have [sought to recognise](#) migrants as fellow workers; but problems exist in organising all workers in highly precarious employment spheres. Nevertheless, the rise of 'populist' politics in the UK, USA, also in Australia, has been frequently explained as arising from the anger and votes of the 'white working class'. Here, [solidarity means](#) a collective, homogenous social order, 'ours', which is 'under threat'. Too often marginalised from this debate is the loss of community-supporting and defining-industries, which also afforded intergenerational employment for families.

The current political economy erodes 'working' from 'working class', to attempt to replace it with (a nativist) 'white'. More widely, the (intellectual, middle-class) Left has been accused of abandoning this historic (white) working class constituency, and its 'legitimate concerns' regarding (competition over) low wages, depleted social services, and a threatened dominant culture. Some voices that assign the working class 'whiteness' [decry](#) its workers' ability to organise and [exercise their rights](#).

Back to the future?

Despite ethnic minorities and women obtaining more high-profile positions in professional and general public life, there are still wide inequalities and disparities in income, which tend towards discrimination against women and ethnic minorities. Women's average wages [still average less](#) than their male counterparts. Another female-dominated industrial dispute within London, centred upon female upholstery machinists working at the huge Ford car factory, the subject of the 2010 film *Made in Dagenham*, started in 1968, and despite political support and legal victory, was not resolved until 1984. Black workers' wages also lag behind their white counterparts.

In the late '70s, new forms of solidarity came to the fore, across racial and gender lines. Forty years on, a militant racism is visible on Britain's streets, and in everyday life. After the EU referendum, and while some trade unions [suggest](#) that extending workers' representation is necessary, Labour politicians [seem ambivalent](#) about difference within their movement's constituency, and the electoral consequences.

Note: More information about Grunwick 40 can be found [here](#).

About the Author

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