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Class struggle and the spatial politics of violence: The picket line in 1970s Britain

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The late 1960s to the mid-1980s in Britain was a period of intense industrial struggle, with strike levels at their highest since the 1920s. Concerns surrounding trade union power became central to broader anxieties about British "decline" and "crisis." These issues took a spatial form in conflicts around the nature of the picket line. This paper discusses the picket line in 1970s Britain in the context of recent debates on the geographies of violence, particularly in relation to questions of class and property, and the mutually constitutive temporalities of structural and direct violence. Rather than focusing on the diffuse processes of an abstract capitalism, I argue for greater attention to be paid to class conflict in shaping experiences and epistemologies of violence. This paper therefore places more emphasis on agency in the production of violence than has been prevalent in recent debates in geography. Drawing on extensive archival research, the paper focuses on three key disputes in this period. Building on work in labour geography, it explores how the assertive working-class presence of mass pickets were portrayed as violent through an account of the miners' strike in 1972. It then considers a similar process in relation to flying pickets during the 1972 builders' dispute, emphasising the threat of a politicised working-class mobility. Finally, the paper considers the coercive state response in the violent policing of the picket line during the 1976–8 Grunwick dispute. The radical right-wing project of neoliberalism emerged in part as a solution to the perceived threat of the labour movement; critical to its success and consolidation was challenging the "enemy within" of militant trade unionism. These violent class struggles around picketing in the 1970s, I argue, are crucial for understanding the long-term, structural violence of neoliberalism.

KEYWORDS
Britain, class, mobility, picket line, presence, violence

1 | INTRODUCTION

In September 1972, the Conservative government's Attorney General, Peter Rawlinson, delivered a speech on what he considered to be a deteriorating industrial relations situation. "During the last year or so," he claimed, "picketing has tended to become synonymous with violence. The freedom to picket that our law has long recognised has lately been too readily and

too widely construed as a licence to intimidate and destroy." The coercion and intimidation that had occurred during recent strikes, he insisted, could not be tolerated. "If we let go of that principle, then we are close to abandoning the rule of law and close to surrender[ing] to the rule of violence" (Rawlinson, 1972).

The late 1960s to the mid-1980s was a period of intense industrial struggle in Britain, with strike levels at their highest since the 1920s. Concerns surrounding trade union power became central to broader anxieties about British "decline" and "crisis" (Phillips, 2011). These issues took a spatial form in conflicts around the nature of the picket line. This paper discusses picketing in 1970s Britain in the context of debates on the geographies of violence, particularly in relation to questions of class and property, and the mutually constitutive temporalities of structural and direct violence. By bringing labour geography into conversation with these literatures, the paper emphasises the role played by discursive conflicts over the legitimacy of strike tactics in shaping working-class agency (Chun, 2009).

I draw on the analysis of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in understanding how articulations of violence helped produce a wider sense of crisis in 1970s Britain (Hall et al., 1978/2013). The CCCS authors argued that the dominant mode of the British state shifted from consent to coercion at the turn of the decade. This was evident in policing of the picket line. This paper explores how an "atmosphere of fear" (Pavoni & Tulumello, 2018) was produced around the picket line in the early 1970s that legitimated state violence against strikes. Rather than focusing on the diffuse processes of an abstract capitalism, I therefore argue for more attention to be paid to class conflict in shaping experiences and epistemologies of violence (Loyd, 2012). This places greater emphasis on agency in the production of violence than has been prevalent in recent debates.

The paper explores multiple understandings of the picket line in 1970s Britain through extensive archival research.[1] Accounts from employers, police, civil servants, politicians, journalists, and trade unionists demonstrate the conflicting ways that picketing was experienced and represented. I focus on three key disputes in this period. The paper first explores how the assertive working-class presence of mass pickets was portrayed as violent through an account of the miners' strike in 1972 (Crossan et al., 2016; Griffin, 2018). It then considers a similar process in relation to flying pickets during the 1972 builders' dispute, emphasising the threat of a politicised working-class mobility (Reid-Musson, 2014). In both instances, claims of violence were deeply entangled with concerns about the power of these tactics (Arendt, 1970; Kilby, 2013).

While some direct, interpersonal violence may have taken place, I argue that it was primarily the effectiveness of mobile and mass picketing that was perceived as threatening. Portraying effective forms of labour agency as violent could delegitimise powerful modes of organising and justify a coercive response. The final section considers this reaction through the violent policing of the picket line during the 1976–1978 Grunwick dispute. This increasingly aggressive state response to industrial action should be seen as one element of the radical right-wing project of neoliberalism, which emerged in part as a solution to the perceived threat of the labour movement in this period. These class struggles around picketing in the 1970s, I argue, are therefore crucial for understanding the long-term, structural violence of neoliberalism.

2 | THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF VIOLENCE AND CLASS

The issue of picketing was situated in a broader debate around political violence in the 1960s and 1970s. Among the influential work on the subject produced in this period, Galtung's (1969) sustained engagement with the direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence, in particular, continues to influence geographers (Loyd, 2012; Pain, 2019). It is the structural nature of violence that has sparked the greatest interest, an understanding that allows Laurie and Shaw (2018) to emphasise how the "violent conditions" of late capitalism stifles human potential. Such an analysis has developed alongside work on "slow violence" (Kern, 2016; O'Lear, 2016). As Pain (2019) has shown, for instance, the "chronic trauma" and slow violence of deindustrialisation continues to shape processes of economic dispossession. The violence done to working-class communities through deindustrialisation is crucial for understanding the outcomes of the class struggles of the 1970s and 1980s (Bennett et al., 2000).

Galtung (1969, p. 170) distinguished between personal or direct violence, where an actor commits the violence, and structural or indirect violence, which lacks an actor. Similarly, Pain argues that "the 'abuser' in slow violence constitutes a diffuse set of processes rather than one individual" (2019, p. 393). This understanding importantly expands on conventional conceptions of violence, but it can have limitations. Pain emphasises that violence against picketing miners during their 1984–1985 strike was followed by the "diffusing slow violence of the closures that followed" (2019, p. 393). Yet, not only was each pit closure a specific event, the brutal decimation of coalfield communities was a political choice made by identifiable individuals: Margaret Thatcher, Ian McGregor, and others (Beynon, 1985). Of course, such people did not act alone

or in circumstances entirely of their own choosing; nevertheless, a de-personalised structuralism risks reiterating the very doctrine – there is no alternative – that was a key ideological construct of Thatcherism (Rowbotham et al., 2014).

Direct and structural violence should not be understood dichotomously (Tyner & Inwood, 2014). The "slow violence" of deindustrialisation cannot be separated from the beatings that working-class people took from the police on picket lines and elsewhere in the 1970s and 1980s. These are mutually constituted temporalities of violence. State violence against pickets, this paper argues, was constructed in broader arenas than the immediate encounter between strikers and police. It was produced by the instructions of Home Secretaries, judges' strict interpretation of picketing law, and lobbying by employers' organisations. Agency in this sense is complex, rarely attributable to a single individual, but nevertheless present.

As Cumbers et al. argue, we should understand "capital accumulation as an unfolding and open dynamic of class struggle, not a 'script' being played out according to some abstract law of capital" (2010, p. 55). Attending to the violence of such struggles is crucial. Central to the subdiscipline of labour geography since its emergence has been a critique of capital-centric analyses of the economy and an emphasis instead on the agency of working-class people (Peck, 2013). Yet, in the ongoing debates concerning how to conceptualise labour agency, the point here is not just that an abstract focus on "capital" erases the working class, but that it can miss out the capitalists, and class conflict, as well (Barton, 2018; Kiil & Knutsen, 2016).

The preponderance of violence in class relations tends to be, properly, attributed to employers and the state (Mitchell, 2011). Yet violence from and between workers, even narrowly defined, has undoubtedly been a feature of labour activism. This has taken complex and sometimes clearly reactionary, including racialised and gendered, forms (Featherstone, 2018; Jenkinson, 2008). Physical force has certainly been used around picket lines and industrial disputes. Ross's account of the 1890–1891 Chicago Carpenters' Strike, for instance, emphasises workers' use of "picketing, intimidation and assault," as part of "a well calculated geography of surveillance and violence" (2011, p. 1292) to deter strikebreaking. Violence here is understood as a spatial strategy aimed at controlling the scale of the labour market. Such accounts reinforce warnings within labour geography against romanticising workers' agency (Hastings, 2016).

In his study of 18th and 19th-century Britain trade unionism, Linehan has described how picket lines "not only established clear boundaries, that is, physical and moral lines it was forbidden to cross; they also accentuated the distinction between the inside and the outside, right and wrong, for and against" (2018, p. 108). Crossing the picket line fundamentally breached the moral geography of the labour movement. People who did so, Linehan (2018, p. 63) argues, were considered comparable to deserters in wartime and, therefore, potentially legitimate targets of violence. This is evidence of how workplace struggles can "create new cultures and new notions of justice" (Gough, 2010, p. 139).

Linehan argues that coercion featured more prominently in labour struggles prior to the effective decriminalisation of trade unions in 1871. Nevertheless, even in the earlier period, violence was often a "last resort," more likely to be employed when there were no arrangements for meaningful negotiation (Linehan, 2018, p. 215, 219). This is relevant here: many such mechanisms fractured as significant elements of the post-war social democratic settlement began to unravel in the 1970s and 1980s. A period of relative class conciliation hardened into one of class conflict.

A particularly influential analysis of the role of "violence" in the early 1970s was developed by the CCCS in *Policing the crisis* (Hall et al., 1978/2013), which argued that the dominant mode of the British state, domestically, shifted from consent to coercion. Through the lens of the racialised construction of a panic over "mugging," Hall and his colleagues analysed the production of a generalised sense of crisis in 1970s Britain. "Violence," they argued, "is *the* axis around which the public signification of the crisis turns in 1972" (Hall et al., 1978/2013, p. 293; original emphasis). *Policing the crisis* demonstrated how elite discourses on non-state violence provided the justification for an increasingly coercive state. This analysis resonates with work by Pavoni and Tulumello (2018) on the production of "atmospheres of fear," through which state violence, articulated in the language of security, is explained as a response to myriad forms of non-state violence. The creation of such an atmosphere of fear around the picket line was a key mechanism in this period through which working-class power was delegitimised and state coercion against striking trade unionists justified.

Hall and his colleagues emphasised that the category of violence drew into its orbit a range of disparate phenomena: violence "becomes the lowest common denominator, which converts all threats into '*the threat*'" (Hall et al., 1978/2013, p. 294; original emphasis). This was exemplified in Home Secretary Robert Carr's 1972 Conservative party conference speech, which invoked "a wave of violence" including football hooliganism, airplane hijackings, "mugging," protests, and "violent picketing" (Carr, 1972b). Tyner and Inwood have argued that violence has become "an overburdened concept, one that risks being crushed by its own inclusivity and unspecificity" (2014, p. 772). Mirroring capacious definitions of violence advanced by critical writers, Carr's rhetoric emphasises how elites can employ a broad understanding of violence to delegitimise perceived threats. For instance, damage to property is regularly considered in the same category as interpersonal violence (Askins & Mason, 2015). This may not imply the need for a narrow definition of violence, but requires recognising

that the meaning of violence can become a site of struggle in particular conjunctures. It is more useful, therefore, to understand violence as a contested concept than a "slippery" one (Kilby, 2013, p. 261). This contestation takes place on uneven terrain. As Loyd argues, "epistemologies of violence … hinge on relations of power" (2012, p. 479).

The relationship between property and violence is central to understanding the role of strikes and, therefore, the picket line. Clover (2016, p. 12) suggests that, as a threat to property rights, strikes are frequently portrayed as inherently violent, regardless of the tactics employed. It is unsurprising, then, that the violence of working-class struggle becomes spatialised in the picket line; a particular class expression of how "violence sits in place" (Springer, 2011). This is especially true in periods of significant industrial unrest and economic uncertainty, as in 1970s Britain. Such contexts help shape "which violences receive attention" (Pain & Staeheli, 2014, p. 345).

Capitalist private property, Blomley (2003) argues, is produced both through moments of direct subjective violence, and by the ever-present threat of state violence. While "the possibility of violence makes its realization often unnecessary," the violence that maintains property is periodically made visible. The example he offers is, again, the 1984–1985 miners' strike: one extreme case, "representing a rupture in the economy of legal violence" (Blomley, 2003, p. 132). It is in such periods of intensified conflict that the apparently objective, de-personalised violence of capitalism emerges as a matter of subjective relations. A historical geographical account is crucial, therefore, in mapping these shifts from submerged to open contestation. As Lukács put it, "in the class struggle we witness the emergence of all the hidden forces that usually lie concealed behind the façade of economic life, at which the capitalists and their apologists gaze as though transfixed" (1923/1971, p. 65). The remainder of this paper explores how the violence of class struggle was attached to the picket line in 1970s Britain.

3 | THE VIOLENCE OF A WORKING-CLASS PRESENCE

Almost immediately after being elected in 1970, the Conservative government began gathering evidence of violence in recent strikes (Smith, 1970). One civil servant noted the prevalence of "aggressive" tactics, which supported the "widely recognised fact that picketing is now no longer a means of conveying information, but rather of bringing pressures, often of a highly objectionable kind, on employees who would otherwise be reluctant to take part" (Heron, 1970). One focus for complaints was the increasing use of "mass pickets," an ill-defined term employed to describe any large gathering at a picket line. This section considers the place of the mass picket in debates about violence, particularly during the 1972 miners' strike. It argues that mass pickets were the focus for concerns about unruliness, or a lack of discipline, which could be understood as inherently threatening.

Central to anxieties surrounding mass pickets were questions of presence and power. Drawing on EP Thompson (1963), labour geographers have been interested in the production of a working-class presence through diverse forms of labour organising (Crossan et al., 2016; Griffin, 2018; Percy, 2014). The mass picket was a particularly assertive expression of this presence. Explaining the tactic, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) argued that "a large body of pickets brings home to non-strikers the depth of feeling that exists among the strikers and also constitutes an affective appeal for solidarity" (TUC, 1972, p. 5). The highly visible presence of the mass picket was a strategy of claiming territory, if only temporarily, in a spatial politics of solidarity (Arampatzi, 2017). For critics, however, the presence of the mass picket constituted violence.

The concern over picket-line disorder was significantly heightened in 1972 with a number of high-profile strikes involving dockers, miners, builders, and others: a "glorious summer" of class struggle (Darlington & Lyddon, 2001). This was a crucial year – as discussed above – for the wider framing of crisis and violence (Hall et al., 1978/2013). Throughout 1972, internal discussion and public pronouncements from the Conservative government insisted on the inherent illegality of mass pickets. Rawlinson (1972) and Carr, in particular, emphasised that "sheer numbers attending [a picket] can of itself constitute intimidation" (1972b). This view was ultimately embedded in the 1980 picketing code by the next Conservative government, which claimed that "the main cause of violence and disorder on the picket line is excessive numbers" and recommended a maximum of six people at any picket (Department of Employment, 1980). The spatial imaginaries of violence constructed by the labour movement's opponents, therefore, emphasised the mere presence of large numbers of working-class people on picket lines (Loyd, 2012).

The 1972 miners' strike was central to the wave of industrial struggle in the early part of the decade. Its ultimate success in achieving a major pay increase significantly damaged the Heath government's attempt to restrain wage growth (Phillips, 2006). The miners' victory was partially based on widespread and occasionally large pickets, most notably at power stations, which were crucial in shaping the discourse of industrial violence. Yet, in the immediate aftermath of the dispute, Carr – then Secretary of State for Employment – told the cabinet that "most of the picketing was peaceful and much of it was on a small scale," although there were "some cases of violence and intimidation" (1972a, p. 1). Police reports from the

dispute frequently note the mundane reality of picketing, while occasionally taking offence at their defiant presence. One such account noted that "incidents of actual violence have been few but pickets have maintained an attitude of truculence and determination" (Chief Constable, Derby Constabulary, 1972).

There were, however, some notable examples of large-scale picketing. When 2000 people picketed Longannet power station in Fife, 13 were arrested on charges of "mobbing and riot" (Phillips, 2006). The Scottish Council for Civil Liberties noted that this charge "is sufficiently vague and sweeping to cover any disorder or 'intimidation by numbers' which might arise from a mass picket" (1977, p. 3). The concept of "intimidation by numbers" was central to how the mass picket was represented. Similarly, a picket of Nechells coke depot in Birmingham swelled in size when miners were joined by thousands of workers from local factories. As a result of the sheer numbers of pickets, the police were required to close the depot. The mass picket was again accused of intimidation (Dangers of mass picketing, 1972).

The Nechells picket, mythologised as "the battle of Saltley Gates," haunted the right for the next decade. It continued to be referenced in relation to picket line disorder until at least the 1984–1985 miners' strike (Baird, 1984). The "Saltley-coke works mob" was notably invoked in the late 1970s when the Conservatives, in opposition, discussed how to defeat unions that would resist their privatisation plans (Nationalised Industries Policy Group, 1977). This language of the "mob" reflected long-standing tropes directed at the working-class presence, and the presumed irrationality and violence of crowds in general (Blomley, 2003; Davis, 1973).

Disorder during the miners' strike was partly blamed on a disjuncture between pickets and union leadership. The chair of the National Coal Board (NCB) complained that picketing instructions issued by the national executive of the miners' union were ignored by local representatives (Ezra, 1972). The union leadership was expected to play a disciplinary role towards their more enthusiastic members. *The Economist* argued two years later that giving union leaders' greater control over picketing might reduce violence ("The new model army", 1974). Again, this perception shaped the 1980 picketing code, which insisted that "an experienced person, preferably a trade union official who represents those picketing, should always be in charge of the picket line" (Department of Employment, 1980, p. 12).

Allegations of a lack of discipline on picket lines reflected a concern about the re-scaling of influence within trade unions towards shop stewards and other workplace-level representatives (Saunders, 2019). This was notable in the 1972 miners' strike, when picketing tactics built on extensive grassroots organising during unofficial strikes in the 1960s (Scargill, 1975). More broadly, it could be understood as a particularly threatening expression of a perceived decline of deference in British society, where traditional sources of authority – including trade union leadership – were weakened (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2018). Rather than suggesting a growth in individualism as such forms of authority were undermined, however, the assertive picket line was an example of what Therborn has characterised as the rise of "rebellious collectivism" (2010, p. 20; see also Robinson et al., 2017). This breakdown of established order threatened violence (Hall et al., 1978/2013, pp. 142–143).

The working-class presence of the mass picket should be understood intersectionally (McDowell, 2008a, 2008b). Representations in this period of the violence of pickets, hooliganism, street crime, and so on, generally emphasised aggressively masculine, primarily young, working-class protagonists. Although, notably, picket lines and "mugging," for instance, could be racialised very differently. The victims of such violence were often groups considered weak or vulnerable (Hall et al., 1978/2013). Both supporters and critics of the miners' strike drew on gendered tropes. Labour MP Neil Kinnock, at least implicitly defending picket-line violence, suggested that it was the natural reaction of any "red-blooded man" on seeing his ability to provide for his family undermined by "some cowboy" crossing the picket line (Hansard, 1972).

Coal mining was a predominantly male industry. However, along with workers such as canteen staff, there were a significant number of women in clerical roles. Distinctions of gender therefore partially mapped onto stratifications between manual and administrative roles, frequently separated into different physical workplaces. In turn, these differences were often reproduced in divisions between strikers and non-strikers. The alleged viciousness of the picket line was encapsulated by miners' mass picketing of coal board offices. The NCB reported on a 500-strong picket at its Doncaster offices, noting that staff only got across the picket line "after abuse, intimidation, spitting etc. – many girls treated for shock" (NCB, 1972, p. 2).

An "eyewitness account" described how, once inside the offices, "almost every female of the staff collapsed in tears, were hysterical or otherwise physically distressed …. An hour later many were still in tears. One member of staff said that he had never seen so many women in such distress, though he had experienced the London blitz" ("Picketing at NCB", 1972). Crossing such a picket line was, undoubtedly, extremely stressful. Yet the perceived violence of the picket was enhanced by the vulnerability and weakness of the "girls." Despite the prevalence of intimate gendered violence, such scenes of aggression by working-class men towards women on the picket line were taboo (Warrington, 2001).

Towards the end of 1972, the TUC noted that "picketing has been in the news not because workers on strike have been more violent but because picketing has become more effective and widespread" (1972, p. 2). Power and violence are often deeply entangled (Frazer & Hutchings, 2008; Kilby, 2013). Strikes, as suggested in the previous section, can be considered inherently violent when they threaten existing property relations, and this violence can be spatially manifested in the picket line. The 1972 miners' strike was overwhelmingly successful, securing significant wage increases (Phillips, 2006). The miners' power depended on solidarity from other workers and the importance of coal in the economy; it was both structural and associational.[2] The strike impacted workplaces and homes across the country. The mass pickets therefore had significant presence but also spatial reach (Allen, 2011; Axelsson & Hedberg, 2018). This reach was enhanced by another tactic employed by miners and others in 1972, and frequently blamed for violence: the flying picket.

4 | THE VIOLENCE OF WORKING-CLASS MOBILITY

The journal *New Society* commented that "it is the arrival of the flying pickets – used by the miners in 1972 and 1974 – that has turned picketing into being an offensive action …. Flying pickets are now a powerful tactic in many strikes" (Taylor, 1974, p. 482). The flying picket travelled between workplaces, encouraging them to join the strike, transforming the picket from a protest contained at the entrance of a single site into something more unpredictable. It became closely associated with "secondary picketing" of workplaces not immediately involved in the dispute. Mobile forms of picketing have a long history but the specific language of the "flying pickets" gained prominence in the early 1970s alongside the wider association of picketing with violence.[3] As Blomley (1994) argued in relation to the 1984–1985 miners' strike, such mobility made "movement through space" a key area of conflict between trade unionists and their opponents.

Nowak (2016) has emphasised the dynamics of a strike wave, during which disputes proliferate and influence each other. Perhaps inspired by the miners' success, building workers employed flying pickets in a 12-week strike in the summer of 1972. The dispute escalated from a series of localised walk-outs into an all-out national strike involving 270,000 workers (Darlington & Lyddon, 2001, pp. 179–207). Construction was considerably more casualised than coal mining, with weaker trade union organisation (McGuire et al., 2013). As a result, flying pickets focused more on non-unionised construction sites than on related industries (Arnison, 1974). The picketing again had significant successes and the resulting deal between unions and employers saw a major pay increase (Darlington & Lyddon, 2001, p. 202).

The employers' organisation, the National Federation of Building Trades Employers (NFBTE), emphasised the insidious role of mobile pickets in spreading the dispute. The strike, the Federation's president declared, was "decidedly unpopular with the men" but "militant picketing by outsiders" had stopped some sites (Westacott, 1972). The location of picketing was expanded in unpredictable and threatening ways by flying pickets. "Groups of men," the NFBTE reported, "went from site to site, often using intimidation and threats to get work stopped. This was particularly marked in Yorkshire, where pickets approached operatives even at bus stations and company's [sic] pick-up points and warned them not to go to work" (1972b, p. 3). Nevertheless, the Federation also acknowledged that "travelling militant pickets … do not always attempt or need to use intimidation. Their well drilled presence, with perhaps a little fifth-column work within the site, can be enough to achieve their aims within the law" (NFBTE, 1972c, p. 1). The potential power, and threat, of the working-class presence was evident again.

Commenting on Yorkshire miners' flying pickets in the 1960s, *The Guardian* attributed this apparently new tactic to working-class affluence and the increasing prevalence of cars ("'Flying picket' spreads strike", 1961). The NFBTE implied something more sinister: "the violence was the work of comparatively small, but co-ordinated groups of people who were well organised, well directed and well financed. Questions might well be asked, for example, about the source of funds to finance the transport arrangements" (NFBTE, 1972a, p. 2).[4] The small, threatening group here diverged from "the mob" language associated with mass pickets. The employers' federation elsewhere described flying pickets as "gangs of militants" (NFBTE, 1972c, p. 1).

The question of mobile pickets was therefore linked directly to militant outsiders with a propensity for violence. Such accusations – with the outsiders either explicitly named as members of extra-parliamentary organisations or more vaguely as "militants" or "extremists" – were common in numerous disputes in this period (Dickaty, 1971; Heron, 1970; Robens, 1971). Reid-Musson (2014) suggests that the spatial agency of mobile workers can be considered threatening, with the outsider associated with criminality. While Reid-Musson focuses on migration, the flying picket was an explicitly politicised form of working-class mobility (see also Lawreniuk & Parsons, 2018; Zampoukos et al., 2018). As a result, it became linked more directly to Cold War scaremongering.[5] This coalescence of violence and political extremism in mobile pickets helped produce a broader sense of societal crisis (Hall et al., 1978/2013).

Throughout the dispute, the NFBTE requested its members provide evidence for an "intimidation document" that would be delivered to the Home Secretary to encourage stricter picketing laws (Harnett, 1972). The resulting dossier "of personal violence, injury, arson and damage" emphasised that "'flying pickets' are a serious menace to the health of industrial democracy in this country" (NFBTE, 1972a, pp. 2–3). The violence of flying pickets was therefore connected to a notion gaining traction that trade unions threatened parliamentary democracy (Brittan, 1975). Robert Carr's speech to the 1972 Conservative Party conference appeared to reference the dossier when he described the "disturbing evidence of intimidation" during the strike. As a result, Carr (1972b) pledged, he would "draw the attention of the chief constables to the provision of the law." Soon afterwards, builders who had travelled from North Wales to picket in the Shrewsbury area were arrested.

For many trade unionists, this coincidence of the employers' dossier, Carr's speech and communication with chief constables, police action, and ultimately severe court sentences, was evidence of the entangled class forces invoking the spectre of picket line violence to push back against successful industrial action (Goodman, 1974; TUC, 1974a, 1974b). The Shrewsbury trials, in which the prosecution accused flying pickets of "a terrifying display of force and violence" ("R. v Jones", 1974), are the dispute's most famous legacy. Three pickets – Des Warren, Eric Tomlinson, and John McKinsie Jones – were convicted of conspiracy and received custodial sentences. It was these cases that were particularly controversial within the labour movement.[6] While even Tomlinson admitted that "some pickets did misbehave themselves" (1975, n.p.), the conspiracy charges served to severely punish picket organisers. This threatened to have significantly wider implications: "the very nature of trade union organisation and the act of combining for industrial action," the TUC noted, "causes unsympathetic people to regard it as a sort of conspiracy" (1975, p. 4).

These trials, and their extensive press coverage, helped produce an atmosphere of fear around picketing in general, and mobile pickets in particular (Pavoni & Tulumello, 2018). The mutually reinforcing role of formal state forces and the "ideological state apparatus" (Althusser, 1971/2014) was evident in the 1973 ITV documentary *Red under the bed*, which broadcast at a key moment during the trials. With footage of violent picketing, including during the builders' dispute, the show aimed to demonstrate the communist influence in British trade unions. The documentary was actively supported by the Foreign Office's anti-communist Information Research Department, and at least passively by the Heath government.[7]

The atmosphere created around picketing had multiple effects. Judges emphasised that the Shrewsbury trials' sentences were intended as a deterrent (North Wales 24 Charter Defence Committee, n.d.). The use of conspiracy charges, therefore, sought to dissuade trade unionists from repeating successful picketing tactics. This atmosphere also helped exacerbate divisions within the labour movement. The General Secretary of the Laminated and Coil Spring Workers' Union, for instance, criticised the TUC's defence of the imprisoned building workers: "These men are punished for violence, intimidation and damage to property, NOT for picketing, they deserve all they got" (Hynes, 1974). Even the perception of violence can weaken solidarity (Scholz, 2007). Trade unionists themselves began blaming outside militants for introducing violence to the picket line, in contrast to the "responsible" mainstream of trade unionism (Murray, 1977). The divisions were relatively minor at this point but would intensify, becoming notably severe during the 1984–1985 miners' strike (Kelliher, 2017b, pp. 110–119).

Perhaps most effectively, the demonisation of the Shrewsbury pickets helped create the foundations for broader action. Secondary picketing, in part a more formal proxy for discussing flying pickets, was understood to pose "a serious threat to law and order" (Cabinet Office, 1979). As with the mass picket, it was the Thatcher government's legislation in the subsequent decade – notably the 1980 Employment Act – that sought to end these mobile tactics by restricting pickets to a strikers' own workplace. By the 1987 election campaign, Conservative Party adverts boasted that "we have outlawed secondary picketing and the violence that goes with it" (1987, n.p.). There were, however, more immediate ways the state could tackle the threat of pickets. As Pavoni and Tulumello argue, "violence and the fear of violence" enables the state to justify coercive actions (2018, p. 13). The next section considers the role of police violence against the picket line.

5 | VIOLENCE AGAINST THE PICKET LINE

The picket line undoubtedly could be an antagonistic space, which sometimes spilled over into interpersonal violence. This did not necessarily all come from one direction. During the builders' strike, there were reports of pickets being attacked and injured by anti-strike groups, and in one instance being threatened with a shotgun (Arnison, 1974, pp. 34–35; NFBTE, 1972a, p. 7; Tomlinson, 1975). Perhaps most common was the violence of people driving vehicles aggressively across picket lines (Litterick, 1975; Mowat, 1980; Pugh, 1971). Tragically, Freddie Matthews died after being struck by a lorry outside a power station during the 1972 miners' strike (Phillips, 1974). Regardless of the source, such conflict could simply reinforce the atmosphere of violence surrounding picket lines.

Unlike in other geographical and historical contexts, organised violence against picketing workers by private individuals was relatively rare in 1970s Britain (Norwood, 2002). This role was largely monopolised by the state. Discussing the 1972 miners' strike, Beckett has suggested that "on picket lines [if not in police stations] members of powerful trade unions were often protected by the invisible shield of their social standing and connections" from the police violence experienced by racialised minorities, Irish republicans, and other "lower status groups" (2009, pp. 77–78). The quiescence of the police in the early 1970s can be exaggerated. Interviews with miners and supporters who were at Saltley in 1972, for instance, repeatedly describe police violence against pickets (Banner Theatre Productions, 1974; Cockerill, 1991; Scargill, 1975).

There were, nevertheless, prominent voices arguing that the police were not tough enough. Derek Ezra, chair of the NCB, complained to Minister for Industry John Eden that events in the miners' strike "have gone beyond what should be tolerated. Can a mob of 500 people be allowed to insult, injure or humiliate people who are trying to do their job while the police stand by because they do not think they have the power to prevent it?" (1972, n.p.). When the Attorney General Peter Rawlinson, in the aftermath of the dispute, insisted that "it is the duty of the police to enforce the law" (1972, n.p.) in relation to picketing, the implication was that they had not been doing so. Discussion within government about the need for stricter policing, however, was tempered by concerns that it was "questionable whether public opinion generally would support the much tougher measures which would be needed to ensure effective enforcement in all circumstances" (Carr, 1972a, p. 2). The prominent trials of the Shrewsbury pickets, media coverage like *Red under the bed*, and public pronouncements by senior government ministers situating picketing in a wider "wave of violence" (Carr, 1972b), helped produce an atmosphere in which harsher policing could be justified.

In 1976, workers at the Grunwick photo-processing factory in London walked out in protest at harassment and in support of union recognition. The dispute, led predominantly by women of South Asian heritage, lasted two years and has often been remembered for the broad solidarity it received (Anitha & Pearson, 2018; McDowell et al., 2012). It was ultimately unsuccessful. The "thugs and bullies at Grunwick" – as Thatcher (1984) subsequently described them – became an enduring reference point for the disorder of mass pickets. A letter to the *Times* decrying "siege conditions" at Grunwick was one minor example of the tendency to employ militaristic language to describe strikes, which helped legitimate violence against pickets (Gouriet, 1977; see also Hart, 2017).

Supporters joined the small group of strikers outside the factory gates throughout the dispute, and in notably large numbers when mass pickets were called. For those who took to the picket lines, there were often positive experiences of diverse forms of solidarity (Kelliher, 2017a). There was also terrible, direct, physical state violence. Helena Kennedy, a lawyer who both joined the pickets and represented many who were arrested, recalled the policing as "so ugly and so terrible […] It was so terrifying" (2016).

One strike supporter sent a report from the picket line to the National Council of Civil Liberties. When the bus carrying strike-breakers arrived, he explained, the police started shoving and pickets at the back of the crowd responded: "As I struggled to free my arms and regain my balance I became aware of agonised screams from a point less than an arm's length away. A young girl, her face hideously distorted, was being subjected to enormous force by a young police officer who was quite deliberately and determinedly attempting to pulverise her face." He started being hit in the head. "Turning, I observed just in front of me a young man lying on the ground. He was being viciously kicked and stamped upon by several police officers." After receiving more blows to the head and face, his glasses were taken from his face and stamped on, before he was "hurled forceably [sic] across the road." He described being "sickened and disgusted" by the "brutal, savage force" that was used (Shopland, 1977; see also Mann, 1977). The shock evident in such accounts emphasises the unexpectedness, and arguably the novelty, of this treatment.

The journalist, and later Labour MP, Denis MacShane (1977) wrote about being arrested at Grunwick. He claimed that police kept saying "fucking rabble. That's all you are." After it was explained that "having this on your record will ruin you, you little cunt," McShane was led into the police station: "You're fucking lucky there aren't any stairs to fall down, aren't you?" "Rabble," like "mob," reflected a hostile attitude towards a working-class presence, and the aggressive language suggested pickets enjoyed little "social standing" (Beckett, 2009, pp. 77–78). Beckett's argument that state violence marked groups as of "lower status" is important here. Police violence against pickets helped undermine trade unions' postwar role as respectable corporatist partners of the state and employers, transforming at least their more assertive elements into the "enemy within."[8] In this sense, the symbolic power of the labour movement – its "recognition in the public arena as a legitimate political actor" (Chun, 2009, p. 14) – was significantly damaged.

Much of this police violence took place when buses of strikebreaking workers arrived at the factory. During the Saltley picket in 1972, police decided their overriding concern was to minimise disorder and so closed the coke depot. At Grunwick, the goal was to ensure workers could cross the picket line, even if this required – in Carr's words – "much tougher measures" (1972a, p. 2). One Grunwick supporter explained that she felt "really bad shouting at the scabs. It's awful, you

get no chance to talk to them. The police just don't give you a chance, and that's what polarises the whole thing" (Campbell & Charlton, 1977, p. 46). The essential antagonism, and potential for violence, of such picket-line encounters were arguably exacerbated by policing tactics.

To an extent, the police were acting on court decisions from the early 1970s. Judges had made clear that pickets were not allowed to stop vehicles and, crucially, that they had no positive right to attempt to peacefully persuade people not to cross their picket line ("Law gives strike", 1974). Such decisions undermined the discretionary power of police – who in certain disputes had agreed to stop vehicles to allow pickets to speak to the drivers – in ways detrimental to trade unionists, and more likely to exacerbate conflict (TUC, 1974a). In reaction to such rulings, the Labour Research Department suggested that the police tended to "show more tolerance and practical common sense than do Her Majesty's judges" (1976, p. 7).

State violence at Grunwick was directed at individuals but also the symbols of the labour movement. The police explicitly attacked trade union banners, a notably direct way of seeking to erase an assertive working-class presence (Crossan et al., 2016). One shop stewards' convenor from Bristol Rolls Royce described how their members were "subjected to brutal and unprovoked police charges, our banner (which was on display) was deliberately smashed up and the members witnessed wholesale arrests and physical violence conducted by the police" (Higgs, 1977, n.p.; see also Coventry Trades Council, 1977). Car workers from Coventry suggested that they could not continue to send representatives to Grunwick because of the risk of injury from the police (Wilson, 1977). The support of car workers had been crucial at the miners' Saltley picket in 1972; at Grunwick, police violence beat the solidarity from them. This was a brutally direct example of how state violence could eliminate the picket line's potential as a diverse space of solidarity, encounter, and togetherness (Shaw, 2019).

In Jonathan Coe's novel *The Rotters' Club*, set in 1970s Birmingham, a shop steward from the Longbridge car factory receives a police truncheon to his head at Grunwick. His son describes the long-term physical damage caused by the violence but believed "there is something worse than that … his father has lost what he calls the will to fight" (Coe, 2001/2019, p. 389). The process of demonising the picket line as a violent space was intensified under the subsequent Conservative government elected in 1979, and policing of industrial disputes became arguably even more aggressive. The labour movement did continue to fight in the 1980s but the experience of pickets at Grunwick was replicated across several disputes, contributing to a broader demoralisation among trade unionists.

The state violence during the 1984–1985 miners' strike, the pivotal dispute of the period, is both well established and a matter of ongoing contention (Conn, 2016; Green, 1990). National Union of Mineworkers' President Arthur Scargill – in response to accusations against miners' pickets – told the TUC annual conference that "I have heard reference to violence. Is it not an act of violence to threaten to destroy a man's job or that of his son or daughter?" (TUC, 1984, p. 400). Scargill recognised the destruction to come. The atmosphere of violence attached to the picket line in the early 1970s justified the state coercion against trade unionists later in the decade and into the 1980s. This played an important role in undermining the power of the labour movement, which in turn was crucial to the consolidation of Thatcherism. The result was the long-term violence of neoliberalism (Laurie & Shaw, 2018; Pain, 2019).

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Writing for *Spare Rib* in 1974, Angela Phillips observed that "in times of high employment and reasonable affluence the law is interpreted fairly liberally, but as money gets tighter and the class struggle intensifies the police and judges clamp down on picketing" (1974, p. 32). This paper has argued centrally that in the heightened class conflict of 1970s Britain, the question of violence became spatialised in experiences and rhetoric surrounding the picket line. Particular types of picketing were considered especially dangerous. In part, this relied on much broader and longstanding tropes, such as the language of the "mob" rooted in assumptions about the irrationality of working-class crowds. Yet the assertive presence of the mass picket, and the politicised mobility of the flying picket, were threatening primarily because these tactics appeared to have some successes in the early 1970s.

The power of the picket line, and its representation as a violent space, were deeply connected (Clover, 2016; Kilby, 2013).Trade union victories, notably in the "glorious summer" of 1972, were a glimpse of the potential power of the labour movement, even if the threat was sometimes exaggerated (Darlington & Lyddon, 2001; Phillips, 2011). Employers' organisations, the state, and sections of the media helped produce an atmosphere hostile to the picket line, which in turn justified the violent measures used against it (Hall et al., 1978/2013; Pavoni & Tulumello, 2018). As well as the obvious function of enabling strikebreaking, police violence against pickets helped demoralise the labour movement and mark trade unionists as a "lower status group" (Beckett, 2009).

Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) emphasise the importance of temporality in conceptualising labour agency, including paying attention to the permanence or transience of particular gains. The victories during the strike wave of the early 1970s in Britain proved temporary. The demonisation of picketing outlined in this paper helped create the conditions in which an assault on trade unions was intensified in the 1980s. The Conservative government introduced a series of legislative measures, starting with the 1980 Employment Act, that severely restricted trade union power, and the increasingly forceful policing of industrial disputes contributed to the defeat of a number of high-profile strikes in the decade. At the same time, a sudden acceleration of the long-term process of deindustrialisation undercut the basis of significant swathes of the labour movement. Trade union membership, density, and influence declined dramatically (Martin et al., 1993).

The outcome of the events explored here has been an intensification of exploitation and inequality, the "chronic trauma" (Pain, 2019) and "violent conditions" (Laurie & Shaw, 2018) of deindustrialisation and neoliberalism. Yet, working-class people should not be seen merely as the passive victims of structural violence. It was the spatial expression of working-class power, presence, and solidarity in the picket line that made it so contentious. This paper has argued against understanding the violent geographies of neoliberalism in an overly de-personalised, abstracted manner. Through a study of the picket line, it has emphasised the historically and geographically specific, and contested, meaning of violence (Tyner & Inwood, 2014). If the gains of the early 1970s were not permanent, the defeats of the 1980s may not be either. In another moment of crisis, in a different period of struggle, other outcomes will be possible.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data underpinning the results reported in this paper are openly available from Birmingham Archives and Collections; British Library, London; Hull History Centre; Kent History and Library Centre; Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick; The National Archives, London; National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Archives used (abbreviations used in the References are in brackets): Birmingham Archives and Collections; British Library; Hull History Centre (HHC); Kent History and Library Centre; Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (MRC); The National Archives (TNA); National Records of Scotland (NRS).

[2] Wright (2000) defines associational power as relating to collective class organisation, and structural power as resulting from workers' location in the economy.

[3] One *Guardian* (1961) article claimed the flying picket was a novelty of an unofficial Yorkshire miners' strike in 1961. Linehan (2018), however, provides examples of some 19th-century equivalents.

[4] Strike supporters insist the money came from a levy of union members (Regam, 1975).

[5] This is not, however, to deny the significant role Communist Party members played in the dispute (Darlington & Lyddon, 2001, pp. 179–207).

[6] "Picketing: Letters from other organisations, 1973–1974," MRC/MSS.292D/46.51M/1.

[7] "Woodrow Wyatt's TV programme, 'Red under the Bed'", National Archives, PREM/2011. This file became publicly available following a Freedom of Information request by the Shrewsbury 24 Campaign in 2013 and received publicity in the British press and parliament (Boffey, 2015; Hansard, 2014).

[8] Thatcher's infamous labelling of the miners as "the enemy within" during the 1984–1985 strike seems to have been a staple Conservative designation of trade unionists since at least 1980 (Hoskyns, 1980).

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