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Phillips, J. (2005) *Class and industrial relations in Britain: the 'long' mid-century and the case of port transport, c. 1920-70*. *Twentieth Century British History*, 16 (1). pp. 52-73. ISSN 0955-2359

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/6663/>

Deposited on: 29 October 2009

**Class and Industrial Relations in Britain: the 'long' mid-century and the case of
port transport, c. 1920-1970**

Jim Phillips

Department of Economic and Social History

University of Glasgow

***Twentieth Century British History*, 16 (2005), 52-73**

In the early 1990s Sid Weighell, retired General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen, was interviewed by Anthony Howard for a BBC Radio 4 series on the post-1945 history of trade unions. Describing the apparent transformation of social and industrial relations overseen by the 1945 Labour government, Weighell recalled the words of a train driver, spoken to him as a young railway fireman, following the nationalization of the railways. 'Go careful with that shovel', the driver said. 'It's ours now.'¹ This allusion to the sense of ownership and purpose instilled in the workforce by nationalization, which encompassed a variety of industries and services, is consistent with Ross McKibbin's elegant analysis of the redistribution of 'social esteem' that took place in Britain in the 1940s. Class relations were, he argues, reconfigured so that the manual working class enjoyed enhanced social and political status as well as improved material well-being; this involved a sinking of inter-war class conflicts, including an erosion of the anti-working class prejudices and anxieties that characterized the inter-war middle class or classes.²

McKibbin's analysis can be related to long-running ideas about war and social change, and more recent debates about the post-war 'consensus'. Arthur Marwick, principal architect of the 'war and social change' thesis, in the 1960s and 1970s argued

that in Britain both world wars benefited under-privileged groups which occupied a valuable or enhanced economic, political and social role; these groups were rewarded through top-down social policy or secured positive change through bottom-up pressure.³ The war and social change model, which emphasised social and political convergence, duly influenced the debate about 'consensus', which stressed broad areas of economic, social and foreign policy agreement between the Labour and Conservative parties from the 1940s to the 1960s.⁴ These two meta discourses – war and social change, and consensus – contributed to the broad agreement which existed until fairly recently among non-Marxist labour and industrial relations historians about the essential discontinuities of the 1940s. Influential here were Alan Bullock's first two biographical monuments to Ernest Bevin, the labour movement's dominant twentieth century figure, published in 1960 and 1967. These books charted the unions' inter-war difficulties and then the extent to which their position was positively transformed by Bevin's wartime policies at the Ministry of Labour.⁵ Peter Weiler's more critical appraisal of Bevin, published in 1993, noted the relatively unreconstructed nature of capitalist social relations in the 1940s, but emphasized the opportunities that were taken – by Bevin and others – to rebalance industrial and social relations in the interests of labour and the working class.⁶ The primacy of '1945' – as the labour movement's crowning achievement – was consolidated in the 1980s and early 1990s through the impressive biographies of the Attlee governments written by Kenneth Morgan and Peter Hennessy.⁷

Readers of *Twentieth Century British History* will, however, be familiar with the literature emerging since the early 1990s that questions the extent and meaning of the political, economic and social changes that took place in the 1940s.⁸ This article contributes to the growing sense that the historical discontinuities of the 1940s and 1950s have been exaggerated. It does so by emphasizing the powerful legacy of the inter-war period, with industrial and social relations after 1945 clearly shaped by

arrangements, practices and prejudices inherited from the 1920s and 1930s. The main thesis is that the limited changes that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s were guided by developments in these earlier decades, and that the extent of the believed rebalancing of power between labour and capital – in labour’s favour – ought to be reconsidered. Class antagonism remained a powerful feature of British society and was in important respects sharpened by labour’s temporarily enhanced market position in the context of ‘full employment’. This is broadly consistent with Peregrine Worsthorne’s characterization in 1959 of the post-war ‘settlement’. Far from being a ‘consensus’, informed by the growth of social convergence, harmony or partnership, this was in reality a ‘stalemate’ between two more or less diametrically opposed social forces of roughly equivalent political strength, locked in a grudging truce.⁹

McKibbin himself has written that in the 1940s inter-war stereotypes of the working class ‘remained as powerful as ever; they were just believed by fewer people’.¹⁰ So social relations were, perhaps, subject more to quantitative than qualitative change. Such might be the interpretation of Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska’s examination of the resistance of the population, including the middle class population, to the governing emphasis in the 1940s and 1950s on the more equitable distribution of economic and social resources.¹¹ Discussion of limited discontinuities in the mid-century is also found in recent scholarship on trade unions and industrial relations. Important works here include Chris Wrigley’s survey of trade unions in Britain since 1933, which examines the growth and improving fortunes of organized labour in the years preceding 1940, and Alan Campbell and John McIlroy’s discussion of Scottish mineworkers, which interprets wartime militancy as extending a trend rising from the early 1930s. In similar vein Nina Fishman’s discussion of Order 1305, governing compulsory state arbitration of industrial disputes, introduced by Bevin in 1940 but abolished in 1951, highlights the temporary nature of change, with the pre-1940 emphasis on voluntarist industrial relations –

conducted chiefly with reference to short-term labour market conditions – reasserted by the early 1950s.¹²

This article develops the thesis of limited change in social and industrial relations in the ‘narrow’ mid-century with a case study of port transport, a critical sector of Britain’s island and trading economy. ‘The most vital part of a country like ours is its coastline’, said Bevin in 1922, addressing the first meeting of the National Docks Trade Group of the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU), ‘and the workers in the dock areas, which were the mouths of the nation, held a correspondingly important place’.¹³ The ports are also worth examining because they ostensibly represent a strong case for the argument that social and industrial relations were transformed in the 1940s. High levels of employment and the institution of the National Dock Labour Scheme were concrete evidence to many in the 1940s that the workforce had secured major improvements. Yet these were limited adjustments, and in any case shaped by perspectives and policies formed in the 1910s and 1920s. It will be argued that the very strong continuities in industrial and social relations from the inter-war period were present in the wider economy and not just in the ports after 1945.

In class terms, of course, dock workers might be regarded as a distinctive group, characterized by peculiarities upon which broader conclusions about the position of manual workers cannot be drawn. Patrick Joyce and David Cannadine, among many others, have pointed to the structural fracturing of the manual working class across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which weakens ‘class’ as a useful tool of social analysis. Both concede, however, that class identity carried great force in strongly manual, labour intensive and industrial sectors,¹⁴ and dock workers, along with construction workers, coal miners and others, fit this typology neatly enough. Yet even this broader band of ‘traditional’ manual workers, chiefly associated with productive industries, was perhaps not so different from the swathe of ‘modern’ manual workers in

consumption industries. The authors of the multi-volume *Affluent Worker* sociological study of the 1960s argued that manual workers in car, ball bearing and chemical production were characterized by orientations to class, work and trade unionism that varied from those of 'traditional' workers. But these 'affluent' workers shared the attachment of other manual workers to collective action precisely because of their 'position and role as men who sell their labour power to an employer in return for wages'.¹⁵ Meanwhile the ability of most manual workers – 'affluent' or otherwise – to consume was very largely contingent on structures of industrial bargaining, shaped by market forces, with a footing in the 1920s and 1930s. Manual workers in many occupations and sectors sought to turn these structures to their advantage in the tightened labour market conditions operating from the 1940s to the 1960s. This occasionally involved industrial action that was sometimes successful in securing improved working class living standards. The broad reach of class antagonism across industry can duly be seen in the criticism that such industrial action drew from politicians, business leaders and newspaper editors in the 1960s and 1970s, whether the action was waged by 'affluent' or 'traditional' manual workers.

The chronological focus of the article is from the 1920s to the 1960s. This is to emphasize the core of the thesis: that in port transport the major points of discontinuity in the longer mid-century were in the 1920s and 1970s and not in the 1940s; and that the limited changes that took shape in the 1940s were essentially framed by practices and prejudices established in the 1920s. The thesis is developed through a discussion of first industrial and then class relations.

Industrial relations

The ports that processed the vast majority of the UK's imports and exports – petroleum aside – in the mid-1960s had been established in their importance by the 1910s: London, Hull, Leith, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Bristol and Southampton.¹⁶ Employment in these ports from the 1940s to the 1960s was shaped by Bevin's wartime dock labour reforms, consolidated by the National Dock Labour Scheme of 1947. Bevin was in 1922 the founding General Secretary of the TGWU, the main union representing dock labour, and Minister of Labour in Churchill's wartime coalition, and his policies and the Dock Labour Scheme can be presented as major historical discontinuities.¹⁷ The Scheme was administered jointly by representatives of employers and labour; it provided the workforce – largely casual and without a regular employer, employment and income – with guaranteed weekly income, irrespective of time worked, so long as daily attendance at the docks was established.¹⁸ These reforms are consistent with McKibbin's 'redistribution of esteem' argument and older ideas about war leading to significant social change. But the Dock Labour Scheme and industrial relations more generally in the ports in the 1950s and 1960s had decisive origins in a sequence of developments in the early 1920s. These included: the 1920 Shaw inquiry on dock labour; the formation of an employers' organization, the National Council of Port Labour Employers, in 1920; the consolidation of labour representation with the foundation of the TGWU in 1922; and the innovation of collective bargaining in 1920 with the establishment, recommended by Shaw, of the National Joint Council for Dock Labour, renamed the National Joint Council for the Port Transport Industry in 1944.¹⁹ At the Shaw inquiry Bevin argued for national wage bargaining, combined with industry-wide registration and financial maintenance of labour to replace the patchy existing arrangements for recruitment and remuneration.²⁰ The National Joint Council (NJC) provided industry-wide wage negotiations, but 'decasualization' did not follow and so remained, for Bevin and the TGWU, unfinished business in the 1940s.

Yet the 1947 Scheme had a limited impact on the ports precisely because of the earlier establishment of national bargaining. This was hard won, and the TGWU and other port unions were required in the 1920s to concede ground, with employers responding to economic recession by successfully pressing for successive wage reductions. Shaw's award of a minimum daily 16s was incrementally reduced to 10s by June 1923.²¹ These pay disputes inter-sected with numerous localized labour traditions that the TGWU was unable to overcome fully, and which consequently strengthened the union's attachment in the 1950s and 1960s to the established institutions of national bargaining despite the introduction of the Scheme. In 1922 Bristol men felt they would fair better 'on their own', negotiating directly with local employers without national parameters; the 1923 agreement provoked a major unofficial stoppage in London that fractured the TGWU, with several thousand dockers establishing a dockers' section of the Stevedores' League, which had resisted the TGWU's overture in 1922; the reconstituted rival, the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers, would dog the TGWU in the 1940s and 1950s.²² In Scotland the TGWU established itself on the east coast in 1922 but struggled to incorporate the Glasgow men, who established the Scottish Transport & General Workers' Union (STGWU) in 1932.²³ The STGWU failed to organize beyond the Clyde, with at least one recruitment drive stymied at Grangemouth, but it periodically badgered the TGWU, focusing on the big union's modest successes in restoring wage cuts that were conceded in the 1920s and again in the early 1930s.²⁴

A sequence of unofficial strikes followed in the ports from the 1940s to the 1960s. This was part of a wider industrial phenomenon, shaped by the shift from unemployment or under-employment to full employment, and the less tangible but important erosion of social deference after 1945. At the Rootes car plant in Linwood a sequence of stoppages culminated in the dismissal of 270 men in May 1964. These workers were unconcerned, telling journalists that 'they felt they would get other goods jobs fairly

easily'.²⁵ The sack – or threat of the sack – was not the disciplinary instrument that it had been in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁶ Meanwhile, according to Geoffrey Goodman, unofficial forms of protest were encouraged by the loosening grip of the 'Establishment', in all branches of economic, social and political life, including the trade unions.²⁷ This was recognised by the Donovan Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Organisations, which reported in 1968 that 'full' employment had encouraged the development of informal bargaining, between shop stewards and workplace managers, alongside formal bargaining, between union officials and employers' representatives. In many sectors – including the docks – union officials consequently exercised a diminishing degree of control over industrial developments.²⁸

Yet the post-1945 strikes, in the docks and elsewhere, drew very powerfully upon the inter-war past. This inculcated a sense among workers as well as employers that they should seek or expect adjustments in cash wages more or less immediately in line with changing market conditions. In the ports the unofficial strikes, along with a large-scale stoppage by STGWU members in Glasgow in 1947, and a major inter-union dispute between the TGWU and the NASD in the mid-1950s,²⁹ further strengthened the TGWU's determination to defend the integrity of national bargaining, and the institution that encompassed this from the early 1920s, the NJC. The National Dock Labour Board (NDLB), responsible for administering the Scheme from 1947, was duly given little room to 'grow'. In 1965 Lord Devlin, a High Court judge who conducted several investigations into dock labour, noted Bevin's original conception that the NDLB should supersede the NJC, taking responsibility for working conditions and wages. Yet it suited the TGWU – and the employers, who disliked the Scheme because they resented sharing responsibility for managerial functions with labour – to retain the NJC and limit the NDLB to managing the size of the registered workforce and maintaining discipline.³⁰

The continued primacy in the ports of the NJC, which settled wages in the 1950s as in the 1920s chiefly in accordance with short-term market and trading conditions and with limited reference to longer-term social and industrial imperatives, reflected the survival of voluntarist industrial relations more generally in the post-1945 economy. There had been the potential for the transformation of industrial relations towards the end of the First World War, when reconstruction debates briefly realized the idea of Whitley Councils, to provide joint consultation not just on wages and conditions but the wider 'welfare' of the workforce. But these had assumed little material substance, marginalized especially by the difficult economic conditions of the 1920s that hardened the attitudes of employers and impelled union negotiators like Bevin to focus on the narrower fronts of wages and hours.³¹ For the next four or five decades these basic material concerns formed the core of industrial negotiations. As Alan Fox put it, employers generally accepted the involvement of unions in 'market relations', the 'terms and conditions on which labour is hired', while resisting their involvement in 'managerial relations', 'what management seeks to do with its labour having hired it'. In the tight labour markets of the 1950s and 1960s there was some informal labour control of 'managerial relations' in some sectors,³² including the ports. But union leaders, employers' representatives and policy makers paid no concerted attention to industrial democracy until the 1970s, when stimulated to do so by deindustrialization, company failures and shop floor 'work-ins'. The Labour government responded by encouraging a number of workers' co-operatives and in 1976 established an inquiry on industrial democracy, chaired by Alan Bullock.³³ Qualitative change duly arrived in industrial relations, although this was driven from the right rather than the left, with industrial pluralism and labour participation in management buried by the crude 'management's right to manage' unitarism of the 1980s and the softer but essentially unitarist Human Resource Management focus of the 1990s.³⁴

In the public sector established by the 1945 Labour government industrial relations were not appreciably 'better' or different from the private sector. On the railways the position generally was peaceful, although there was a national strike in 1955, a threatened national strike in 1958 and an expensive settlement of a national pay dispute for Harold Wilson's Labour government in 1966.³⁵ In the coalfields nationalization had an even more limited impact on industrial relations, despite the workforce's support for a measure that offered employment protection in a sector where demand was falling and surplus labour capacity seemed to be evident.³⁶ In the 1950s unofficial strikes occurred frequently in mining, generally arising from piece-rate disputes, and at the end of the 1960s, amid the pit closures that reduced employment in the industry from 517,000 in 1963-4 to 281,500 in 1971-2, there were two major unofficial stoppages that prefigured the national strikes of 1972 and 1973-4.³⁷ These disputes, and the further 'sequel', the 1984-5 strike, had roots in the 1921 and 1926 lock-outs, and were characterized by powerful regional labour identities and structures that the National Union of Mineworkers inherited in 1944 from its predecessor, the Mining Federation of Great Britain.³⁸

This long weight of history in industrial bargaining in the 1960s and 1970s was familiar to Hugh Clegg, Professor of Industrial Relations at Oxford, and Jack Scamp, a personnel manager at G. E. C with a public reputation for industrial 'trouble-shooting', especially in the motor industry,³⁹ who assisted the Devlin port inquiries. But both men were shaken by other continuities that they witnessed in the ports in February 1965. They were 'appalled' especially by the welfare amenities, lamenting the employers' refusal to provide adequate toilets, washrooms, drinking water or rest and shelter areas. Improvements in all main ports had been recommended by the NDLB in 1949 but were still to be implemented, despite recurrent complaints by the TGWU to employers on the NJC.⁴⁰ In 1966 the Management Consultants Association, surveying London amenities

for the NDLB, estimated that £2 million worth of work was required on shelter accommodation, canteens, toilets and washing facilities. The consultants emphasized the economic and managerial benefits involved. Dedicated shelters would eliminate the practice of seeking protection during rain breaks in goods sheds, and hence reduce 'pilferage'; a larger number of small, localized shelters, close to the work, would replace existing 'large, amorphous ones which are considered to encourage time-wasting practices' and so enhance 'managerial control of the labour force'.⁴¹

The physical environment of the docks in the 1960s was unchanged in other ways since the 1920s or 1930s. A major inquiry into port transport in 1962, appointed by Harold Macmillan's Conservative government and chaired by Lord Rochdale, the cotton magnate, recorded that technical innovations had been made since the 1940s, with fork lift trucks and slightly larger cranes and hoists. But there had been no generalized shift to mechanization, and work remained highly labour intensive.⁴² This partly suited the dockers, for the manual handling of multifarious cargoes and vessels involved substantial knowledge, even skill. This enhanced their position in the tight post-1945 labour market and provided them with considerable autonomy in their work.⁴³ But the work was consequently dangerous. While Rochdale reported a slight decrease in fatalities from 52 in 1950 to 38 in 1960, the number of non-fatal recorded accidents increased from 5,970 to 7,130.⁴⁴ In 1966 the Management Consultants' Association reported falling accident rates, attributed to improved packaging and ship design, together with incrementally enhanced mechanization. Yet 'safety consciousness' in the ports was still 'well below the level generally achieved in manufacturing industry'.⁴⁵

Dockers traded risks against rewards. Dennis Anderson, a Liverpool docker, told Fred Lindop that strikes took place when men – unequipped with special clothing until the late 1960s – refused to handle cargoes perceived as 'a hindrance to our health'.⁴⁶ Yet 'health and safety' strikes were rarely waged in absolutist terms: subject to bonus

payments 'dangerous' work was undertaken. The best-known strike of this kind, in June 1948, followed the suspension from work of eleven Londoners who refused to handle a cargo of zinc oxide that they regarded as hazardous. But for additional cash – 5s per ton instead of the 3s 4d agreed by their employer and union official – the men would have completed the job.⁴⁷ A negotiated approach to health and safety was apparent in other overwhelmingly masculine occupations, notably shipbuilding, coalmining and construction. This suggests to Arthur Mclvor and Ronnie Johnston a strong relationship between gender consciousness and health and safety: 'real' men complained about dangers with reluctance and the hazards of heavy, manual work enhanced the prestige of its practitioners.⁴⁸ So it was in the docks, where one of the most prominent labour activists, London's Jack Dash, habitually worked naked to the waist, earning the nickname 'Nature Boy', and made light of a potentially fatal 50 feet fall into a ship's hold in December 1960.⁴⁹

The most striking continuity of all in the ports, meanwhile, was the casual employment of registered men, with permanent engagement established only in September 1967.⁵⁰ In most ports by 1939 unions had secured arrangements where only registered labour could be utilized,⁵¹ but the short-term employment of these men before 1947 was characterized by numerous petty inconveniences and humiliations. Arrangements for demonstrating unemployment in the docks were rigidly applied, requiring that dockers report twice each day to the port office. In 1925 the TGWU proposed that less fruitless time be spent travelling to the docks by having men make the second daily report at their nearest employment exchange. Having met Bevin and other TGWU officers, the Minister of Labour, Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, rejected this, a measure, perhaps, of his Ministry's unimaginative approach to unemployment relief in the 1920s.⁵² For those anticipating work there were strict rules to be observed. TGWU members in 1936 at Dundee's Camperdown Dock reported before 7.45 am each

morning and 12.45 pm each afternoon, although they were not paid until work started at 8 am and 1 pm. Moreover, 'Members seeking employment must stand at a reasonable distance from foremen while booking on. No hustling allowed, and members when employed to separate from those looking for work.'⁵³ The Scheme did not disturb these inconveniences substantially. Men still mustered at the call stands each morning and afternoon, even when no work was anticipated. Most dockers laboured without a regular employer and were hired for single jobs that could run for a single morning or afternoon only. Piece-rates, the norm in all main ports other than Liverpool, reflected the cargo's market value as well as the effort involved in shifting it, giving a competitive and sometimes corrupt edge – with foremen inviting bribes – to the twice-daily 'call-ons' at the dock gates.⁵⁴ Those not engaged enjoyed the Scheme's basic protection, but there were intermittent echoes of inter-war joblessness and insecurity. In 1961-2 the NDLB reported that the recession had inflated unemployment among dockers to 11.35 per cent.⁵⁵ More men were duly passing idle mornings near the poorly appointed docks, spending rather than earning, and – perhaps – nursing their various grievances. A reporter for *The Times* noted that those 'kicking their heels in dockside cafés' were 'saying what they like about the Chancellor, the employers, the Transport and General Workers' Union and the Dock Labour Scheme'. Travel and subsistence alone absorbed such a proportion of the basic weekly guarantee (£7-8s) that significant financial hardship – which the Scheme was designed to uproot – was returning to the docks.⁵⁶

These intersecting problems – casual recruitment, under-employment, the expenses of idle time – were aggravated in larger urban centres, where post-1945 re-housing programmes dispersed men further from the ports, adding to travel costs and the frustration of attendance without employment. The Management Consultants' Association calculated that in December 1965 some 73.3 per cent of the London men travelled less than 5 miles to work; 18 per cent travelled between 5 and 10 miles and a

significant minority, 8.7 per cent, more than 10 miles.⁵⁷ One of these longer-distance commuters was Reuben Harley, who journeyed from Hawkwell in Essex to the West India Dock in Poplar, a round trip of 50 miles. Harley wrote to Lord Devlin in April 1966, outlining the position for those reliant on the basic weekly wage, now £11-1s-8d. Having covered rent and rates (£3-19s), rail and bus fares (£3) and dinners and other consumables (£1), Harley had just £3-2s-8d to meet insurance, food, clothes, holidays and union subscriptions. He observed with some pungency that while his basic earnings had risen by 233 per cent since 1939, the cost of living – measured in the cash values of his weekly expenses – had risen by 600 per cent.⁵⁸

Social Relations

These various continuities – adversarial bargaining, labour intensity, casual recruitment and poor amenities – undoubtedly reinforced the strength of class feeling in the ports where, according to Ted Johns, a retired London docker, ‘all employers are bastards’.⁵⁹ The high profile of unofficial and strongly class-conscious workplace representatives like Jack Dash indicates a very thick wedge of militant opinion in the docks. But social relations in the ports, as in other economic sectors, were not homogeneous, and London members of the TGWU Docks Group National Committee articulated a competing strand of opinion when they complained in 1961 and 1967 that unofficial strikes ‘black-legged’ the union and ‘received such adverse publicity that the whole country was becoming heartily sick of the word "dockers"’.⁶⁰ The London officials were, of course, keen to protect the integrity of joint industrial bargaining, which was itself an ambiguous measure of social relations in the ports as elsewhere in the economy. This system arguably institutionalized the competing social interests of capital and labour, by highlighting the

existence of ‘two sides’ in industry. This, according to Alan Fox, worried business leaders, including the CBI President in 1966, Sir Maurice Laing, who talked instead of ‘partners’ engaged in joint enterprise. Yet through negotiation and compromise, joint industrial bargaining, as Fox also noted, with its ‘pluralist’ overtones, provided the means of at least mitigating class differences.⁶¹

Heterogeneous class relationships in the ports might also be inferred from the activities of the various sports and welfare clubs that were overseen by the NDLB. By 1960 there were 24 dockers’ clubs around the ports, sometimes established in fairly handsome premises with NDLB loans and maintained through weekly members’ subscriptions. The Dundee club, for instance, was housed in an imposing Victorian mansion overlooking the port area, one mile away, from a vertical height of 100 metres. The NDLB disbursed additional funds, from employers’ levies, through its National Sports Committee, to which numerous local clubs were affiliated. In the largest ports of Liverpool and London some 30-40 per cent of registered workers belonged to sports clubs in the 1950s and 1960s. The social politics of these clubs were intriguing. The Liverpool men’s sports ground was opened in 1953 by the Duke of Edinburgh, who the workers presented with a silver-plated hook (the tool used by dockers to gain purchase on sacking and other forms of packaging).⁶² The London Port Workers’ Sports Federation was established in 1955, and at the end of 1965 had just under 10,000 affiliates in eleven separate clubs, as indicated in Table 1. This represented a fair slice of the 25,484 registered dockers in the port in 1965.⁶³

Table 1: London Portworkers’ Sports’ Federation, Membership, 1964-5

<i>Affiliated Club</i>	<i>Allocated</i>	<i>Weekly or Staff</i>	<i>Total</i>
India & Millwall Docks Social Welfare Association	886	88	974
London Doclab Staff Club		138	138
National Dock Labour Club		71	71

Poplar, Blackwell & District Rowing Club	70	15	85
River Thames Social & Sports Club	1,964	699	2,663
Royal Docks Sports Association	876	230	1,106
Sec. 6 London Dockers Athletics & Social Club	847	116	963
Surrey Docks Social Welfare Association	1,617	434	2,051
Tilbury Dockers Social & Sports Club	997	12	1,099
Two-Seven-Nine Welfare Association	557	125	682
TOTAL			9,742

Source: PRO, BK 18/8, Annual Report of the Council of Management, London Portworkers' Sports Federation, 1964-5.

Employers supported the Federation's activities. G. E. 'Bill' Tonge and J. K. Badcock, chairman and secretary of the Port Employers in London, attended monthly meetings of the Federation's Council of Management; G. E. Tonge trophies were contested within the Federation in both cricket and 6-a-side football competitions.⁶⁴ An annual golf match between the Federation and Port Employers in London was initiated in 1961 at Mid Kent Golf Club. This was drawn, 5 games each, the Federation recording its 'appreciation that the Employers had defrayed cost of Green Fees and entertained all participants to lunch and tea'. Special thanks were paid to R. H. Hampson, of Scruttons, London's largest private employer with roughly 3,000 men in 1960, and sponsor of a separate annual golf competition since 1957, where Federation members played for the Philip Scrutton Golf Trophy over 27 holes at Mid Kent. At the 1961 Federation-Employers match Hampson provided and presented prizes to participants; in subsequent years a 'very handsome silver Challenge Cup' was contested, gifted by Tonge on behalf of London employers.⁶⁵ The Federation won this in 1962, 7 games to 3, after which 'both sides presented prizes and gifts and spend a most convivial hour together in the Bar Lounge' at Mid Kent.⁶⁶ The Federation enjoyed further victories before the 'justifiably jubilant' Employers team prevailed in a close finish in October 1966, winning the last three 2-balls to secure a margin of 7½ to 5½. One of these winners was J. Grigg of Scruttons.⁶⁷

This harmonious social inter-action in sporting contexts co-existed with ongoing tension in the workplace. The Port Employers in London, along with the National Association of Port Employers, which Tonge served in the 1950s and 1960s, strongly opposed the NDLB's joint industrial management of discipline and the scale of the workforce. Jack Jones, TGWU General Secretary from 1969 to 1978, noted that Tonge's genial style 'concealed an iron fist', and his opposition to labour in disputes on the NJC was unambiguously determined.⁶⁸ As a corporate body employers had attempted to resist joint management in 1947, and recurrently sought the withdrawal of union representatives from responsibility for these matters in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁹ The friendly golf matches and cricket or football trophies might appear at odds with this continuing struggle between labour and capital, but can actually be understood as a by-product of industrial tension, which employers perhaps attempted to mediate – more or less consciously – through the sporting encounters. Tonge and Scrutton could deflect some criticism of the employers' corporate reluctance to move beyond casual employment relations, and the miserable condition of workplace amenities, by pointing to the modest sums expended on sports and welfare clubs.

The employers' broad disinclination to invest in capital equipment and welfare amenities was identified as a central characteristic of port transport in Lord Rochdale's 1962 report on the sector's 'inefficiencies'. This investigation stemmed from complaints by port users about delays, believed by Macmillan's Chancellor, Selwyn Lloyd, and his Ministers of Transport and Labour, Ernest Marples and John Hare, to result mainly from strikes and 'restrictive' labour practices.⁷⁰ Rochdale viewed matters differently, observing that 'labour difficulties' were merely a symptom of port transport's problems, pointing to the wider context of casual employment, poor amenities and under-investment in capital equipment.⁷¹ But the inquiry enabled business users to bring complaints about labour into the public domain. The National Union of Manufacturers, the Federation of British

Industry, the National Association of British Manufacturers, the London Chamber of Commerce, which represented hundreds of port users, and the Road Haulage Association all offered explanations of alleged congestion and operational inefficiencies chiefly in terms of the behaviour of the workforce, the organization of the TGWU, or the joint-industrial structure of the Dock Labour Scheme. These business representatives ventured no direct criticism of port employers.⁷²

In this respect the process – rather than the report – of the Rochdale investigation inter-sected with ideas about Britain's economic decline, and contributed significantly to the 'scapegoating' of labour as a chief explanation for this decline in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There is fairly broad agreement nowadays among academic historians that the extent of British 'decline' has been exaggerated. Alan Booth has indicated that manufacturing industry actually performed reasonably well in the post-1945 period; Jim Tomlinson has argued that 'decline' was more of an ideological construct than an economic or industrial phenomenon; reviewing the economic and business history literature David Edgerton has noted the inclination of scholars to accept the 'decline of declinism'.⁷³ Edgerton and Tomlinson have also scrutinized the methodological and analytical weaknesses of Correlli Barnett, the arch-declinist, whose many books are plainly compromised by their inadequate grounding in historical context and literature, and tendency to present primary evidence inaccurately.⁷⁴ Straw man though he may be, however, Barnett produces books that continue to enjoy wide circulation. The most recent volume of his post-1945 history emphasizes the importance of dock strikes, 'spectacular mutinies' that damaged manufacturing exports, held up imports, and occupied the precious time of ministers and civil servants. In less colourful prose Derek Aldcroft and Michael Oliver directly link collective bargaining, strikes and 'restrictive practices' with 'sub-optimal economic performance', and position port transport – along with car production, coal, steel, shipbuilding and printing – as one of

the sectors where strikes were 'endemic', resulting in 'more than a marginal influence in terms of lost production and progress'.⁷⁵

Table 2 offers some perspective on the linkage between industrial relations and economic performance in the ports. It will be seen that in most years only a very modest volume of working time was lost to industrial disputes. The data undermines the basis for the position applied by Aldcroft and Oliver to the docks, with no strong correlation between increased levels of strike action and diminished productivity. From 1967 to 1970 the trends in strikes and productivity were both rising, the consequence of 'decasualization', driven by Harold Wilson's Labour government and continued by Edward Heath's Conservative government, with casual recruitment finally replaced by more permanent employment relationships. Designed to improve industrial relations, this necessitated a reduction in the volume of registered workers – and employers – and was supported by redundancy payments funded chiefly by central government.⁷⁶

Table 2: Dry Traffic, Employment and Days Lost to Industrial Disputes in British ports operating under the National Dock Labour Scheme, 1960-1970

<i>Year</i>	<i>Dry Traffic (exports and imports; tonnage in millions)</i>	<i>Registered Dock Workers (average of monthly figures)</i>	<i>Tonnage per worker per annum</i>	<i>Days Lost to Industrial Disputes</i>	<i>Days Lost to Industrial Disputes per Registered Worker</i>
1960	91.3	72,550	1,258	421,000	5.8
1961	86.2	71,679	1,202	159,000	2.2
1962	85.7	66,811	1,283	147,000	2.2
1963	91.7	64,957	1,419	46,000	0.7
1964	97.8	64,083	1,526	129,000	2
1965	95.7	65,128	1,469	105,000	1.6
1966	85	62,522	1,360	134,000	2.1
1967	87.3	60,144	1,452	606,000	10
1968	92.7	56,563	1,638	110,000	2
1969	93.7	52,732	1,777	424,000	8
1970	97.7	46,912	2,083	718,000	15.3

Sources: National Ports Council, *Digest of Port Statistics*, 1966, pp. 21, 30, and 1971, pp. 11, 25; *Ministry of Labour Gazette*, January 1962, p. 4, January 1963, p. 6, January 1965, p. 20, January 1967, p. 11; *Employment and Productivity Gazette*, January 1969, p. 44; *Department of Employment Gazette*, January 1971, p. 63. Note that there were 60,144 registered workers for the first 37 weeks only of 1967; for the remainder of 1967 there were 57,505.

The increase in productivity from 1967 might suggest that the ports were carrying excess labour beforehand. Yet employers themselves accepted, if sometimes reluctantly, that spare capacity was needed to meet upward traffic flows, and a reasonable alternative interpretation might be that the workforce performed creditably enough, given the limited investment in capital facilities. Bob Mellish, one-time London docker and the Labour Party's Transport spokesman, expressed this view in a Parliamentary debate on Rochdale. 'We make a great mistake', he said, 'if we let it go out from the House today that somehow the British docks industry is now badly run, that it is an industry almost dying of decay, that the whole industry is riddled with restrictive practices and that hardly anybody is doing any work.' Mellish claimed a 12 per cent increase in productivity in the ports from 1951 to 1961, achieved on the basis of the workers' efforts and their willingness to cooperate with a substantial degree of mechanisation.⁷⁷

Mellish was defending his 'own' people, but his partiality should not obscure the probability – projected in Table 2 – that industrial disputes had little bearing on economic performance in the ports. It would seem plausible to extend Tomlinson's model of decline as a constructed process to encompass the ideological 'scapegoating' of labour: anti-labour forces mustered 'declinist' arguments, rooted in criticisms of organized workers, as strategic elements in the conduct of industrial politics. This was evident in other sectors, as Tim Claydon demonstrates in his analysis of press coverage of disputes in car manufacturing, with much editorial coverage of their alleged impact on production and sales and little on their under-lying industrial and social causes.⁷⁸ In this connection it seems fitting that car manufacturers were among the sternest business

critics of port labour. In December 1964 the Society of Motor Manufacturers & Traders Ltd complained to Devlin that unofficial dock strikes were the main obstacle to the delivery for export of cars.⁷⁹ This ignored deficiencies in car design, production and marketing. It also represented – like the evidence of port users to Rochdale – an exhibition of class solidarity among business leaders, endorsing the port employers' position that 'failure' in the docks was chiefly the result of labour organization, practices and behaviour. In this respect Rochdale marked a *quantitative* rather than *qualitative* shift in the character of criticism of dockers. The Dock Labour Scheme's introduction in 1947 was accompanied by thoroughly ideological arguments – in the daily and business press – about the irredeemably idle and opportunistic nature of many dockers.⁸⁰

Dockers were in some respects an unusual group. In their labour process, traditions and organization they resembled, it is true, 'traditional' manufacturing workers, but they were also service workers. This second aspect of their identity explains the public criticism of their behaviour from the 1940s to the 1960s: a major dock strike was experienced directly by consumers as well as port users or policy makers and perceived to be a crisis in a way that a major strike in private sector manufacturing – cars included – was not. States of Emergency were declared and troops despatched to clear food imports by Attlee's Labour government in 1948 and 1949; in May 1962, when a national dock strike was averted by eleventh hour talks at the Ministry of Labour, Macmillan had been prepared to do likewise to keep the ports open.⁸¹ Middle class, business and consumer complaints about dockers from the 1940s to the 1960s in this respect anticipated criticism of organized workers more broadly in the public sector in the 1970s, including those in transport, the medical services and the dustmen and gravediggers of the 1978-9 'Winter of Discontent'.⁸² Here there were clear echoes of McKibbin's inter-war class stereotypes, which amounted to the construction of an enlarged non-unionized 'public' that was mobilized against the organized working class.⁸³

So the 'public' criticism of the dockers from the 1940s to the 1960s arguably represents a bridge between the anti-labour sentiments of the 1920s and the 1970s, indicating the strength of continuities in social as well as industrial relations in Britain's longer mid-twentieth century. Social relations in the 1940s and 1950s were certainly different from the 1920s and 1930s. How, otherwise, could a Labour government have been formed in 1945 with substantial middle class support, and how else could this government have redistributed economic and social resources in favour of the manual working class, symbolized by the establishment of the National Health Service? But the shifts in social relations should not be exaggerated. Historical accounts of the 1940s now increasingly emphasize the degree of middle class social and cultural opposition to the Labour government, partly driven by affluent consumerist objections to rationing and 'fair shares'.⁸⁴ In similar vein David Howell's recent essay on the 1946 Laski libel trial is extremely instructive, showing that numerous English middle class prejudices and mechanisms were invoked, including a special jury of persons with rateable property of £100 rather than the normal £30, to defeat the contention by Harold Laski, Chairman of Labour's National Executive Committee, that he was libelled during the 1945 General Election by, among others, Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express*. There is a sense, in other words, that middle class antagonism towards manual workers and their organizations – trade unions and the Labour Party – was tempered or constrained, but certainly not uprooted, in the 1940s.⁸⁵

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this article has highlighted important continuities in Britain's 'longer' mid-twentieth century history, chiefly in industrial relations and social class

divisions, which outweigh the discontinuities of the 1940s and 1950s that were emphasized in literature from the 1960s until perhaps the mid-1990s. It reinforces the emerging view that social change was limited in the 'narrow' mid-century, and suggests that those changes that took effect were rooted essentially in institutional arrangements established in the 1920s. The post-1950 'golden age' advances by manual workers in many branches of industry – including many 'affluent' workers in capital-intensive consumption industries as well as 'traditional' workers in labour-intensive productive industries – were located in what can now be seen as short-term changes in labour market conditions. Workers benefited from these conditions because of the industrial relations structures that were established before the Second World War. But the extent of these manual working class advances was constrained by the class relations inherited from the 1920s and 1930s. In the ports work was dominated by significant continuities: casual recruitment, adversarial industrial relations, poor amenities. These were more important than the central innovation of the period, the Dock Labour Scheme, which employers, in a clear illustration of the unchanging nature of social relations, opposed in the 1940s and sought to undermine in the 1950s and 1960s. Dockers – like other manual workers – encountered media, business and consumer hostility, especially during strikes. This criticism was disproportionately excessive, given the extremely modest impact of industrial action on economic performance, and qualifies Ross McKibbin's suggestion that the 1940s and 1950s witnessed a quantitative redistribution of 'social esteem' as well as material resources in favour of manual workers.⁸⁶

This perspective, that material conditions in the ports were relatively unchanged in the 1940s and 1950s, adds to the growing body of historical literature that questions the existence of a broad-ranging consensus in Britain after the Second World War. Peregrine Worsthorne's characterization of political, economic and social conditions as amounting not to a 'consensus' but to a 'stalemate' between working and middle classes

is certainly apt, at least so far as the ports are concerned. This stalemate was unlocked in the docks only by a conjunction of exogenous shocks in the early 1970s: the increased adoption of the technology of containerization of cargoes; the related shift from traditional ports to newer centres, notably Dover, Felixstowe and Harwich; and the impact on employment and industrial relations more generally of the 1973 oil crisis. These developments shifted the balance of forces in the ports very quickly away from the workers and in favour of the employers, underlining further the temporary nature of manual working class advances in the 'narrow' mid-twentieth century.

Dr Jim Phillips

Department of Economic and Social History

University of Glasgow

4 University Gardens

Glasgow G12 8QQ

Email: J.Phillips@socsci.gla.ac.uk

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