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To cite this article: Diarmaid Kelliher (2023) Disruption and Control: Contesting Mobilities through the Picket Line, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 113:9, 2252-2268, DOI: [10.1080/24694452.2023.2221725](https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2023.2221725)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2023.2221725>



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Published online: 20 Jul 2023.



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Disruption and Control: Contesting Mobilities through the Picket Line

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By exploring the relationship between picket lines and drivers in 1970s Britain, this article considers how mobility and the spatial practices of trade unions shape labor geographies. Focusing on issues raised by work on logistics and blockades, it argues that too much emphasis has been placed on tactics of interruption. Drawing on Toscano's writings, I suggest that paying attention to the complex entanglement of disruption and control enables a more sophisticated account of workers' agency. The article explores three key moments in the relationship between picketing and mobility: the 1972 miners' strike, debates over picketing legislation in the mid-1970s, and the road haulage dispute in 1979. In doing so, it makes a number of contributions to labor geography. First, it foregrounds the picket line as a key site for understanding the spatialities of working-class organization. Second, it highlights how struggles for control are shaped by competing conceptions of rights and moral economies. Third, it develops thinking on the relationship between mobility and agency by exploring how workers' power became entangled with the control of movement. *Key Words:* labor geography, logistics, mobility, picketing.

[T]he only way you could declare war was to attack the vulnerable points. They were the points of energy: the power stations, the coke depots, the coal depots We were only opposed to the distribution of coal to industry because we wished to paralyse the nation's economy ... we said that we would allow coal to go to old age-pensioners; we would allow coal to hospitals, schools, to other institutions and to the needy and infirm.

—Arthur Scargill (1975, 13–14), President of the National Union of Mineworkers, Yorkshire Area

In early 1972, Britain's coal miners undertook a successful pay strike lasting seven weeks. Notable for mobile picketing that targeted sites beyond the coalfields, the dispute was among the highest profile in the strike wave of the early 1970s. By preventing fuel from moving, miners emphasized the power of picket lines to disrupt the circulation of essential goods. Key to achieving this was picketing road haulers, a group of workers increasingly important to Britain's economy. In a period of heightened industrial conflict, encounters between drivers and pickets became central to how the picket line was experienced and understood (Hansard 1972; Mill 1974; "Women Try to Stop Lorry Drivers Strike" 1979).

Through an account of the relationship between picket lines and drivers in 1970s Britain, this article considers how mobility and the spatial practices of trade unionism shape labor geographies. It focuses on issues raised by the proliferation of research on logistics, which has foregrounded blockades and chokepoints as central to resistance (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness 2018; Chua et al. 2018). Often these tactics are understood primarily as weapons of disruption (Davis 2021). This risks painting a one-dimensional picture of workers' agency. Miners blockaded fuel depots but they also allowed some material to move, depending both on what was necessary to win the dispute and on a wider moral calculation. This article's central concern, therefore, is exploring the relationship between disruption and control in labor struggles (Toscano 2014).

The article employs archival material from workers, unions, employers, politicians, police, and others, to explore three key moments in the relationship between picketing and mobility. The first empirical section focuses on the 1972 coal dispute. Interactions between picketing miners and haulers produced moments of powerful solidarity but also violent conflict, spurring calls for legislation to regulate, and better control, encounters between drivers

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and pickets. The article focuses on debates around one legislative proposal, that drivers should be required to stop and listen to strikers. By doing so, it explores how conflicting visions of mobility rights were employed by the labor movement and its opponents.

Finally, the article considers the 1979 road haulage strike. Winning a significant wage increase, the dispute demonstrated the power that haulers themselves could mobilize through picket lines. At the same time, elements of both elite and popular opinion hostile to the strike converged on the need to constrain picketing, helping forge the basis for the Conservative government's antiunion legislation in the 1980s. These events are therefore important for understanding the emergence of neoliberalism in Britain, as contestation over the control and disruption of mobility in the 1970s formed a crucial context for subsequent attacks on the labor movement.

This historical geography of picketing and mobility makes a number of contributions to labor geography. First, it foregrounds the picket line as a key site for understanding the spatialities of working-class organization. Second, it highlights how struggles for control are shaped by competing conceptions of rights and moral economies. Third, it develops thinking on the relationship between mobility and agency by exploring how materially and symbolically workers' power became entangled with the control of movement. The next section contextualizes these debates within overlapping literatures on mobility, logistics, and the geography of rights.

Mobility, Class Power, and the Geography of Rights

A politicized engagement with mobility is crucial for understanding the relationship between picketing, disruption, and control. As Sheller (2018b) explained, mobilities research explores "the organization of power around systems of governing mobility and immobility" (19). The question of "how, when, and where people, goods, and capital move" is fundamentally political (Sheller 2018a, xii). These dynamics have long concerned geographers. For Massey (1991), "mobility and control over mobility both reflects and reinforces power." It is not "merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't," she insisted, "it is also about power in relation to the

flows and the movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility" (25–26).

Massey (1991, 24) cautioned against reducing this issue to a capital–labor conflict, with, for example, race and gender fundamentally shaping mobility. As we will see, picket line encounters in the 1970s could be highly gendered. It is also important, however, to appreciate the complexity of class relationships themselves. This article draws on approaches to labor geography rooted in historical methodologies (Hastings 2016). The granular narratives of workplace relations developed in such work allow for attention to conflict and alliances within and between classes over mobility issues, rather than generalizations about abstracted "capital" and "labor." Further, it encourages accounts of the shifting dynamics of mobility regimes over time.

Mobility has been understood to be shaped both by the fact of movement and stasis, and the meanings attached to these physical enactments (Kwan and Schwanen 2016). Historians of twentieth-century Britain have begun to show an interest in these questions: in the growth of car ownership, for instance, but also the "identification of mobility with freedom among many politicians and planners" (Gunn 2022, 13). This observation on the ideological marrying of movement and liberty is not uncommon (Blomley 1994b; Doughty and Murray 2016). Nevertheless, historical-geographical accounts are necessary to understand how specific manifestations of this ideology shape particular conjunctures. Moreover, through a labor geography lens, we can see how such meanings are produced "from below," in opposition to, and sometimes in sympathy with, elite versions.

Attending to this interplay between ideology and the material, Sheller argued for a positive account of "mobility justice." She noted that "freedom of movement may be considered a universal human right, yet in practice it exists in relation to class, race, gender, and ability exclusions from public space" (Sheller 2018a, 20). Sheller (2018a, 49) highlighted the abuses of liberal conceptions of mobility rights, emphasizing that freedom of movement for some can constitute domination of others. However, a concern to protect individuals from coercion can tend toward a general aversion to power (Sheller 2018a, 173). The "right to move" has often been employed strategically during labor disputes to promote crossing

picket lines. The historical geography of picketing emphasizes that, from a labor organization perspective, the ability to assert control over movement can be crucial.

As Blomley (1994b, 413, 419) argued, mobility rights have “a hallowed place within the liberal pantheon,” relying on the limited, negative freedom of absence from constraints. Discussions of mobility reflect broader critiques of “rights”: the limitations of abstract universalisms, the emphasis on individuals rather than collectives, and the enforcement of rights by courts that are frequently hostile to working-class power (Blomley 1994b; Cresswell 2006). Trade unionists in 1970s Britain themselves, however, repeatedly employed rights-based rhetoric in relation to picketing. Despite their limitations, asserting rights can mobilize progressive movements, establishing ideals against which the actions of elites are judged (Blomley 1994b, 413; Mitchell 2003, 25).

The labor movement’s version of mobility rights was tied to broader moral economies; that is, deeply embedded conceptions of economic justice that often conflict with free-market logics (Hastings 2016). The centering of justice is an important element in the labor movement’s “symbolic power,” where leverage is sought “in the contested arena of culture and public debates about values” (Chun 2009, xiii). The picket line is important here, as a space to which powerful moral sentiments are attached, and one that enables the claiming of rights (Linehan 2018; Nield 2021). Mitchell (2003, 73, 220) emphasized that the picket line “demands notice”; it is a site where the marginalized can assert their understanding of rights. Beyond articulating rights, however, forms of control produced by picketing can themselves be shaped by moral concerns, as is discussed later.

To be effective, rights-based claims need to be backed by power (Mitchell 2003, 22). As well as symbolic power, this article employs the concepts of structural and associational power in understanding labor agency. Spatializing Wright’s (2000) original formulation, Cumbers et al. (2016, 96) described structural power as workers’ ability to disrupt capital flows based on their location in production, distribution, and transport networks, whereas associational power is developed through mobilizing relationships of solidarity. The degree of labor movement power in 1970s Britain has been subject to important debate, not least because opponents of trade unions

often exaggerated their influence (Phillips 2011). Nevertheless, relatively low unemployment, high and growing trade union membership, and ingrained cultures of labor organization meant that—at least in certain sectors—workers had significant influence. This did not go uncontested. As we will see, the labor movement’s attempts to enforce their vision of rights about and through picketing across these different forms of power faced concerted opposition.

Labor geographers have paid increasing attention to the entanglement of mobility and worker agency, particularly in relation to migration (Reid-Musson 2014; Lawreniuk and Parsons 2018). Recent research emphasizes how, ideologically and materially, differentiated forms of labor mobility contribute to inequitable workforce stratification (Mills 2019; Mazer 2022). This article, however, emphasizes the contested mobilities of labor disputes. In doing so, it builds on Blomley’s (1994a) work on the 1984–1985 British miners’ strike, during which “movement through space became an essential tactical concern for both union and antistrike forces” (152). Blomley (1994a) argued that the ideology of “the right to work and the right to free movement” (183), and its enforcement against pickets by an overwhelming deployment of police, was central to the strike’s defeat. That dispute can be seen as the culmination of conflicts around picketing and mobility that had intensified since the late 1960s. By focusing on the 1970s, this article situates the iconic labor disputes of the Thatcher years in a longer historical narrative.

Questions of workers’ power and mobility have been central to the proliferating interest in logistics, an area of research overlapping with, but distinct from, labor geography as such (Cowen 2014; Chua et al. 2018). Much of this work is rooted in a historical argument about the emergence of logistics as a specialist field since the 1960s. By allowing goods to move rapidly across vast distances and therefore unmooring production, and with the growth and consolidation of labor-saving processes such as containerization, a developed logistics industry is understood as enabling an attack on organized workers through the 1970s and 1980s. This was particularly evident in wealthier countries (Cowen 2014, 40–45; Toscano 2014). In this sense, the “logistics revolution” was a spatial fix in response to the economic crises of the period (Danyluk 2018).

Yet, somewhat paradoxically, logistics' centrality to contemporary capitalism has also been identified as enhancing workers' structural power in certain ways. Workers in these sectors are located in "the world's choke points—critical nodes in the global capitalist supply chain," enabling them to challenge capital's "smooth circulation" (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness 2018, 2). Furthermore, by interrupting global commodity chains, worker action can have significant spatial reach (Sowers, Ciccantell, and Smith 2018). Some literature suggests greater caution, emphasizing the limited associational and marketplace bargaining power of many workers in this sector, as well as the violence used effectively by states and others to defend elite interests (Silver 2003, 100–01; Cowen 2014; Coe 2020).

Parallel to debates over the degree of worker power enabled by the logistics revolution is one that focuses on form, with a notable emphasis on the blockade (Toscano 2014; Chua et al. 2018). Clover (2016, 31) described blockades as a type of circulation struggle, distinct from conflicts over production, of which strikes are the predominant example (Clover 2016, 16). There is a crucial difference here, Clover (2016, 138–39) suggested: Because value is regulated by socially necessary labor time, strikes are fundamentally temporal conflicts. In contrast, as attempts to control movement, circulation struggles are spatial.

However, the movement of goods has always been key to the realization of value for capital. The logistics revolution signaled a greater attention to transport as a "vital element of production" rather than a "separate domain" of distribution (Cowen 2014, 40). In turn, strictly dividing production and circulation struggles can be misleading. Focusing on the picket line, a border across which movement is to be prevented, emphasizes the spatialities of strikes. Mass pickets, in particular, are often functionally indistinguishable from blockades (Kelliher 2021). Tracing the trajectories of picketing and road haulage in the 1970s therefore offers important insights into debates on circulation struggles.

Toscano (2014) argued that an emphasis on blockades has foregrounded a "theory and practice of *interruption*." He suggested that in these debates, "disruption is not sufficiently linked to *control*." The historical geographies of picketing, automobility, and circulation in 1970s Britain allow us to explore the dynamic relationship between disruption and

control. The economic disruption of strikes and particularly mass picketing often received significant attention. More complex attempts were made, however, by trade unionists to assert control over circulation through picketing—systems of dispensation for essential materials, for instance—that went beyond interruption.

This article builds on Toscano's argument. By moving beyond the disruption of industrial action, it foregrounds alternative forms of regulation, highlighting more sophisticated forms of worker agency. Although picketing was often denounced for interfering with individual mobility freedom, in practice the central antagonism was frequently who could control movement and for what purpose. Of course, these factors were not entirely distinct: Control was often enforced by disruptive acts. In turn, picket lines were shaped by multiple conflicts over control involving unions, workers, employers, and the state. These dynamics were evident in the interactions between miners' pickets and haulers during the 1972 coal dispute, to which this article now turns.

Picket Line Encounters

In the early 1970s, picket lines were established at workplaces across Britain as strikes surged to their highest levels since the 1920s. That pickets frequently engaged truck drivers reflected the increasing economic importance of road haulage. Second to rail as late as 1954, by 1970 road transport was moving over 60 percent of domestic goods (Department for Transport 2020). P. Smith (2001) noted that, due to their strategic position, haulers were frequently asked to respect picket lines, and their support was often "instrumental in achieving victory" (134).

Although their location in circulation networks gave haulers power, other aspects of the industry mitigated against it. Road transport was notably fragmented, with drivers spread across tens of thousands of "Hire and Reward" companies, large numbers of self-employed "owner operators," and many others integrated directly into firms (Price Commission 1978, 18–21; P. Smith 2001, 145). This complexity meant unionization was uneven, and self-employed drivers especially had a reputation for individualistic attitudes (Gregson 2017, 347; Gregson 2018, 302). Subsequently, not only was there conflict between

striking workers and haulers, but the labor movement's opponents viewed road transport as a potentially important strike-breaking weapon (Nationalised Industries Policy Group 1977; Dorey 2013). Still, trade unionism in the industry—predominantly within the huge Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU)—had become significantly stronger and more assertive since the 1960s. By the early 1970s, membership of the TGWU's Road Transport Commercial Group reached 200,000, continuing to grow until peaking in 1978 at 226,290 (P. Smith 1999, 29; 2001, 205).

Encounters between pickets and drivers during the 1972 coal miners' strike reflected this complex picture. Miners' pickets "were placed at strategic rail and road access points to prevent the movement of coal and alternative fuels. Unions organising rail and road transport workers instructed their members not to cross picket lines" (Trades Union Congress [TUC] 1972, 6). The extent of control enforced by the miners required a notably mobile approach to picketing. This was the dispute in which "flying pickets"—striking workers traveling rapidly across multiple sites—gained prominence (Kelliher 2021, 20–21).

During a recent interview, trade unionist Ken Muller described visiting a National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) picket line at Bankside Power station in London consisting of two miners. When an oil tanker arrived, one of the miners

flagged the guy down, and said, "official picket line." And the driver said, "no problem, mate," and turned the truck round and drove away. And while I was sitting there chatting to them, two or three lorries came up and there were no threats, no arguments, there was just no question that these lorry drivers were going to cross their picket line. (Interview with author, 11 May 2021)

Contemporary sources give a similar impression. The South of Scotland Electricity Board (1972) reported that "in most cases the pickets had only to ask the driver if he was a member of the T.&G.W.U. and on being reminded of the understanding between the Unions he turned back to his depot without further ado." Picketing in such encounters, relying on a few workers and the words "official picket line," had a distinctly symbolic power. For committed trade unionists, the reason for the strike was largely irrelevant, that it was a picket line sufficed. The declaration of the "official" picket line described by Muller, and the orderliness of the agreement between the

unions, suggests a more disciplined form of power than the anarchic conflict condemned by the miners' critics (Kelliher 2021).

There were much darker elements to the relationship between drivers and pickets, though. Nearly a month into the dispute, Hatfield miner Frederick Matthews was struck and killed while picketing by a truck as it left Keadby Power Station in Lincolnshire (Chief Constable and Lincolnshire Police 1972). Although such tragedies were rare, Matthews's death was not an aberration but the extreme end of conflicts between pickets and drivers that marked multiple industrial disputes in this period (Pugh 1971; Litterick 1975; Hartley, Kelly, and Nicholson 1983, 62). Police reports from 1972 describe miners threatening to overturn vehicles, smashing truck headlights, and throwing bricks through windshields. In turn, such actions were often a response to trucks being driven dangerously and aggressively around picket lines (C.C. Dyfed Powys Constabulary 1972; Chief Constable and Derby Constabulary 1972; Chief Constable and Suffolk Constabulary 1972).

One of the strike's most famous moments sheds light on these tensions. On 10 February, a picket of miners and thousands of supportive local workers shut down a fuel depot in Birmingham. Mythologized as "the Battle of Saltley Gates," the event was celebrated by the labor movement for demonstrating the power of solidarity and mass picketing, and demonized by its opponents as a symbol of mob rule (Scargill 1975; Nationalised Industries Policy Group 1977). Before that day, however, there had been smaller, unsuccessful pickets at the site. One miner described arriving to picket: "My feet sore with walking from one street to another and all I could see was lorries" (Banner Theatre Production 1974b). Some drivers told the miners they could not support them because "I've bought a new truck, I've a family to keep the same as you" (Banner Theatre Production 1974b). The drivers' views appear here second-hand, from a largely unsympathetic source. Still, the appeal to financial pressure is plausible, emphasizing the barriers to class solidarity, but also challenging simplistic accounts of mobility focused on individual liberty. Economic imperatives asserted their own control, elided when politicians insisted on "the right of ordinary citizens to work or not to work and to come and to go in accordance with their own judgement" in the face of picketing (Rawlinson 1974).

Pickets attempted to convince haulers of their cause, but also employed more coercive methods. The same miner told drivers that “we’ve got the number of your truck, you’ll never get into Keresley Colliery again.” After the strike, he checked trucks at the pit entrance, and “turned quite a few of them,” noting that he was “authorised to do it by the branch secretary” (Banner Theatre Production 1974b). The tactic was not national union policy, but this was also not an isolated example (NCB Industrial Relations Department 1972). The threat to boycott drivers who crossed picket lines was used by other workers in this period, including—as discussed later—haulers themselves (Hartley, Kelly, and Nicholson 1983, 54; Thackham n.d.). The power of the picket line was therefore dependent on relationships that stretched beyond the immediate encounter.

This was not, however, why Saltley became famous. If persuasion, interunion agreements, appeals for solidarity, and threats of boycotts failed, Saltley demonstrated that mass pickets could physically obstruct vehicles. This was where the picket line became most like a blockade. When thousands of local workers abandoned their factories to join the miners on 10 February, the scale of the picket compelled the police to shut the depot gates. One trade unionist described how their

whole factory came out to a man, I should say around four thousand people, and we marched on Saltley, and on the way we picked people up from Morris Commercial, the girls from SU Carburettor, and so forth. ... The slogan we took up as we come over the hill, “Close the gates, close the gates,” and I saw miners crying, and cheering—it was fantastic. (Banner Theatre Productions 1974a)

This dramatic expression of solidarity emphasized the importance of broader networks within the labor movement, of associational power, in enforcing picket lines. Yet, although the blockade was crucial, notably the depot reopened the next day on the basis that it would only deliver fuel to priority customers (Chief Constable and Birmingham City Police 1972). Throughout the dispute, rather than immobilize all fuel, the miners largely allowed essential supplies to keep moving. Drivers would receive a certificate confirming deliveries were exempted—such as those for hospitals, pensioners, or schools—which pickets would check before allowing them through. Sometimes miners traveled with the driver to ensure it was an authentic case (Daly 1972). The

form of control produced by pickets was therefore shaped by moral concerns and was significantly more complex than simple disruption.

Encounters between picketing miners and drivers were diverse: moments of solidarity, sometimes coordinated by interunion agreement; conflict that could be violent, and that spilled out beyond the immediate dispute through boycotts; mass pickets that functioned effectively as blockades; and systems of permissions to allow certain vehicles to pass, contradicting the absolutist imperative that is often associated with picket lines. Picketing during the 1972 miners’ strike emphasized how disruption and control could coexist, if uneasily (Toscano 2014). For many within the labor movement, though, there was a desire to prevent conflict with drivers without reducing the picket line’s power. This reinforced an impulse to find legislative solutions to their perceived problems.

Picket Lines and Spatial Rights

The industrial conflict of the early 1970s sparked intense debate about the nature of picketing. Calls for changes to the law and policing, and for codes of conduct to regulate picket lines, came from multiple sources. Following Labour’s election victory in 1974, discussion often focused on a specific legislative proposal: that vehicles should be required to temporarily stop at picket lines to allow striking workers to talk to drivers. This measure centrally concerned “mobility and control over mobility” (Massey 1991, 26), and contrasting views clustered around conflicting articulations of “rights.” One Conservative parliamentarian challenged the idea as contrary to “the right of the individual to freedom of movement upon the Queen’s highway” (“Parliamentary Question No. 564/1974, Draft Reply” 1974). For many trade unionists, such freedoms had to be balanced by picketers’ right to communicate. How spatial rights were articulated, practiced, and legislated for, were therefore fundamentally shaped by—and productive of—class relations.

Attempts to legislate for a right to stop vehicles were partly a response to court interventions (Cresswell 2006). Particularly important was the case of union organizer John Broome, arising from the 1972 national builders’ strike. According to court documents, Broome stood in front of a truck for around ten minutes while picketing a Stockport

building site, with the intention of persuading the driver to turn around. He was arrested and charged with obstructing the highway (Justices for the Peace, Stockport 1972). On reaching the High Court in 1973, judges ruled that pickets had no right to block vehicles. This seemingly mundane case concerned a fundamental principle. The judges insisted that the law merely granted immunity from prosecution if workers sought to “peacefully persuade” others from crossing picket lines, it did not grant them a positive right to speak to anyone (“*Hunt v. Broome*, High Court Judgement” 1973).

This contradicted what many trade unionists believed was the law and, just as important, what they felt to be fair (“*Law Gives Strike Pickets*” 1974; Tuchfeld 1975). Appeals to “rights” in the labor movement frequently mixed the two: Assumptions about the law reflected a broader sense of justice. Sally Groves, a striking worker at the Trico factory in 1976, recalled vehicles crossing their picket line, accompanied by police:

What we obviously had the right to do, we understood, was to speak to the drivers. You couldn’t when they used to keep you back and let them sweep in at huge speed. (Groves 2013; see also Groves and Merritt 2018)

There are many similar examples from this period of trade unionists asserting their right to talk to drivers that mingled legal claims with broader beliefs about norms of industrial relations (NCB 1972; Tarr 1972).

Arguments about picketing legislation were shaped by accounts of technological advancements and the attendant transformation of mobility (Nield 2021, 90). The main union confederation, the TUC, complained that existing laws were a hundred years old, from a time when “a picket could stand at a factory gate and talk quietly to a driver sitting in his open cart while his mate kept the horse steady. Now a driver is sealed off behind a noisy engine in the cabin of a powerful lorry—or a coach loaded with strike-breakers” (TUC 1974b). A mirror of these claims existed in Conservative ranks, where it was argued that developments in communication and transport enabled the employment of mobile “flying pickets” and “secondary picketing”; that is, picketing of workplaces not directly party to the dispute (Conservative Research Department 1979).

These debates were a response to the events of the early 1970s. Cases such as *Broome*, the use of conspiracy charges against builders’ pickets in the same dispute, and the temporary imprisonment of five striking dock workers in 1972, convinced trade unionists that picketing rights were threatened. During the second general election of 1974, the Labour Party (1974) promised “new safeguards for peaceful picketing.” In this context, trade unions lobbied the Labour government to introduce a legal right for pickets to stop vehicles (TUC 1974a).

Employers’ organizations and right-wing groups like Aims of Industry were vitriolic about the proposal (Broadway 1974; Elliot 1974). The West Midlands Engineering Employers Forum declared it “totally repugnant, [and] against all standards of natural justice.” They insisted on the “rights of an employee to cross the picket line” and urged resistance to any extension of pickets’ “rights or privileges ... in order to protect public order and individual freedom” (Willis 1979b). These arguments reflected the wider prevalence of political discourses connecting automobility and liberty (Gunn 2022, 13). Unions were not entirely isolated, however. The backing for pickets’ right to stop vehicles by the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) was evidence that “freedom” and “liberty” could be conceived of in radically different ways. The NCCL tied the demand to a broader campaign to limit the use of obstruction laws against demonstrators, challenging the prioritization of individual, private mobility rights over the right to protest (NCCL 1975; Kitchen 1979; see Sheller 2018a, 16).

Despite the sympathy of Michael Foot, Secretary of State for Employment, and significant support from Labour backbenchers, the government quickly dropped the idea (Foot 1975; Janner 1978). The measure was strongly opposed by other senior party figures, partly because of police lobbying (Castle 1974; Jenkins 1975). The debate gained renewed intensity during the 1976 to 1978 Grunwick strike, however. This ultimately unsuccessful dispute in a London photo-processing plant, led largely by women from East Africa of Gujarati heritage, concerned workplace conditions and union recognition (Anitha and Pearson 2018). It gained widespread media coverage partly because of the large picket lines and clashes with the police, particularly in 1977, when the strikers were bolstered by thousands of supporters from across Britain (Grunwick Strike

Committee 1977). The main targets for pickets, and the flashpoint for conflict, were the coaches that took workers into the factory (J. Smith 1977; “The Right to Stop Vehicles” 1978). Again, despite cases such as Broome, strike supporters protested “the absolute disregard of the pickets’ right peacefully to communicate information” (J. Smith 1977).

The General Secretary of the strikers’ union APEX, Roy Grantham, suggested that requiring vehicles to stop “would take a great deal of heat out of the kind of situation we had at Grunwick” (“The Right to Stop Vehicles” 1978, 10). This argument still reflected a belief that pickets had the right to speak to nonstriking workers, but it also tapped into concerns about violence surrounding the picket line (Kelliher 2021). Grantham suggested pickets could be made more orderly, while maintaining their effectiveness. There were some grounds for this belief. During the 1972 miners’ strike, certain police forces operated a *de facto* version of this system, systematically stopping vehicles and allowing a limited number of pickets to speak to the drivers (Chief Constable and Suffolk Constabulary 1972; Harvey 1972; TUC 1974a). This suggested that such an approach was practicable, and it seemed to reduce conflict.

Mitchell (2003) argued that picketing is effective because it “demands notice in a way that dispassionate discourse simply cannot. Orderliness can thus quite easily serve power” (73). Yet, order and power can be configured in multiple ways. Disorderly pickets sometimes reflected strikers’ weakness, not their strength, represented starkly in the coaches of strike breakers entering the Grunwick factory (Phillips 2011). Requiring vehicles to stop and their occupants to speak to pickets would at least have obliged them to hear the strikers’ case, and perhaps justify their own actions. Symbolically, by legally enshrining the rights that many trade unionists felt morally they had already, it would have also given extra legitimacy to picketing.

The notion that individual liberty demanded unfettered automobility ignored that these rights were already limited. One civil servant noted that lawfully obstructing the highway was not unusual, as many utilities workers did so, although only the police were entitled to halt vehicles (Calvert 1974). Even this was questionable. Drivers having to stop and identify themselves on entering workplaces was hardly unimaginable. The concern was about who

was doing the stopping and why. During the 1972 miners’ strike, for instance, the head of the National Coal Board complained that one local strike committee “seem to assert the right to decide who shall enter the pit” (Ezra 1972). As we will see, similar claims were made during the 1979 road haulage dispute, that striking workers had usurped the employers’ power to control movement in and out of workplaces. This was an assertion of property rights and class power, not personal liberty.

As Sheller (2018a) emphasized, we need to pay attention to “which mobilities are promoted and which are impaired” (47). Concern with free movement did not extend to pickets themselves. While requiring vehicles to stop at a picket line was unacceptable, the labor movement’s opponents simultaneously sought to—and in the 1980s ultimately did—constrain picketing to a striker’s own workplace (Blomley 1994a, 183). Similarly, employers and politicians were concerned about the right to cross picket lines without coercion but not the obverse. Whether employer pressure, organized victimization of trade union activists, or the economic imperatives discussed earlier, decisions to cross picket lines were shaped by relations of class power (Mustchin 2019). In response, some unions attempted to negotiate contractual clauses enshrining a right to respect picket lines (Rawlinson 1972). The 1974 General and Municipal Workers’ Union conference insisted that “a worker should have the right to refuse to cross a picket line without fear of being penalised or disciplined by his employer” (Department of Employment 1974).

The picket debate should be understood as part of a broader struggle over workplace power. Picketing practices can be placed on a continuum of attempts by the British labor movement and left to assert greater workers’ control in the 1970s, from the Labour government’s enquiry into industrial democracy to the famous Lucas Aerospace shop stewards’ plan for alternative production (Gold 2004). Just as the temporary control asserted by pickets faced strong opposition, so did more systematic attempts to embed workers’ influence. Phillips (2011) outlined, for instance, how employers successfully resisted the Labour government’s plans for workers on boards of large companies as an “unacceptable challenge to managerial prerogative and shareholder rights” (2).

The rhetoric of personal liberty in relation to picketing obscured attempts to enforce a mobility regime that worked in employers’ interests and

against organized labor. The contentious discussions around picketing rights and laws during the 1970s foregrounded these questions. It demonstrated the importance of conflicting conceptions of spatial rights, with relations of class power embedded in opposing approaches to mobility. The picket line was a key space in which these rights were produced and regulated. These issues intensified in 1979 as road haulage drivers went on strike themselves.

“The Blockade of Britain”

The January 1979 road haulage dispute was a crucial moment in a strike wave that became known as the Winter of Discontent. Picketing was intensive, widespread, and often highly effective. The dispute was primarily about pay, as many of the strikes that winter were, reflecting frustration with the erosion of incomes by inflation and the government’s Social Contract (López 2014). Other specific pressures reinforced haulers’ dissatisfaction. Hire and Reward wages were slipping behind other sections of the industry, and European regulations limiting drivers’ working hours threatened overtime earnings (TGWU 1977; P. Smith 2001, 144–45). The European Economic Community also sought to mandate tachographs in heavy trucks to monitor driving. Trade union resistance—partly because of its potential to be used as a disciplinary tool—meant that the measure was not immediately implemented in Britain (Price Commission 1978, 66). Nevertheless, this conflict over technology reflected ongoing struggles over workplace control that also manifested in the picket lines.

Two weeks into the strike, the president of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) wrote to Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan to communicate their distress at the “virtual blockade of the UK.” The problem was largely attributed to “secondary picketing.” This was a manifestation, however, of a wider concern about “the imbalance of power that has been progressively tipped to the total advantage of organised labour” (Greenborough 1979). After the dispute, a CBI official noted that the law is “very much weighted in favour of those who take industrial action” (Hanley 1979). In particular, the CBI argued that recent legislation had given license to secondary picketing in a way that enabled “pickets to ‘black’ or ‘blockade’” (CBI 1979b).

The dispute drew attention to key features of picketing in this period. The notable mobility of the drivers’ pickets enabled them to assert significant control over the circulation of goods. The CBI’s claim that there was an “imbalance of power” entirely favoring the labor movement was overblown. Nevertheless, it reflected a widespread concern among prominent employers and politicians (Willis 1979a). As a result, the strike spurred calls for stringent controls over picketing. Yet, the class dynamics of this were complex: Some workers, including trade unionists, were hostile to the strike. Intra-class conflict shaped popular support for the right to cross picket lines, and by extension for politicians who proposed to constrain picketing.

The term *blockade* was widely used to describe the drivers’ strike (“The Blockade of Britain” 1979; Conservative Central Office 1979; J.C.C. 1979). Beckett (2009) wrote that TGWU officials in Hull “organized a blockade of the city so complete and unyielding that Hull became known as ‘Stalingrad’ and ‘siege city’ in the press” (485). This dispute highlights the limitations of strictly delineating between blockades and strikes, between production and circulation struggles. Key to the drivers’ ability to interrupt the economy’s normal functioning was the targeting of “choke-points.” Notably, pickets prevented drivers from moving loads through docks in Hull, Glasgow, Liverpool, Tilbury, and Southampton (P. Smith 2001, 148). Solidarity intervened “in the material relations between places” (Featherstone 2012, 18), extending pickets’ impact so that they disrupted international, as well as domestic, flows of goods.

The relationship between different logistics workers was not always harmonious, as shifts in the sector transformed the power dynamics between various occupations (P. Smith 2001, 100; Thackham n.d.). Conflicts over containerization earlier in the 1970s had seen pickets and counterpickets involving dockers, container base workers, and haulers (Lindop 1998; P. Smith 2001, 95–101). There were, nevertheless, also significant moments of solidarity, including during the 1979 strike. One company director complained that any goods they attempted to get through Hull “would be ‘Blacked’ by the lorry drivers’ ‘brothers,’ the Dockers” (Toffolo 1979). Hull dockers had a reputation for enforcing boycotts of haulers who undermined strikes (Crossan et al. 2016, 363).

As with the miners in 1972, picket lines reinforced industrial action in complex ways. There were physical blockades but also genuine attempts at persuasion (Hiles 1979). At other times, as in the Hull docks, the risk of consequences for crossing picket lines enhanced its power (Rodgers 1979). One haulage company alleged that “threats of blacking and withdrawal of union cards are common place” (Knowles and Knowles n.d.; see also Charlton 1979; Timber Trade Federation 1979). The ability to enforce such threats varied. Nevertheless, the possibility of being expelled from a union for crossing picket lines carried weight, particularly in workplaces where union membership was mandatory (Department of Employment 1979).

There were further echoes of the miners’ strike. The TGWU issued a picketing code of practice, which instructed that vehicles carrying “priority” supplies—for hospitals, for instance—should be allowed through (TGWU 1979). Beckett (2009, 489–91) described employers queuing outside the Hull TGWU offices, waiting to apply for priority status to a committee of local shop stewards. This turning of the world upside down exemplified the “imbalance of power” that concerned the CBI. Again, it was not simply a question of whether material moved, but who controlled this circulation. Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher lamented that “the place is being practically run by strikers’ committees and ... they are using such language as ‘allowing’ access to food, ‘allowing’ certain lorries to go through. They have no right to prevent them from going through” (Hansard 1979a). That the Labour government discussed dispensations with the TGWU enraged their opponents. Leon Brittan, Conservative employment spokesperson, insisted on the “absolute right” to cross picket lines, and complained that “the Government is implicitly recognising the right of those controlling the strike to stop goods getting through” (Conservative Central Office 1979).

There was a significantly uneven geography to these processes of control, however. Some local strike committees defied instructions from union officials on dispensations and the picketing code (Charlton 1979; Johnson 1979, 2; Wood 1979; P. Smith 2001, 150). Agreements made in one area of the country were not always respected by pickets in another (“Cases for Liaison Group” 1979; “Food Sector Picketing Difficulties” 1979; Tunstall 1979). In some instances, pickets seemingly required drivers

to carry a union card even to transport priority goods, or insisted on donations to charity or the union’s hardship fund before allowing them through (“Cases for TGWU” 1979; Charlton 1979; Food Manufacturers’ Federation 1979; “Reports from Regions of Picketing ‘Own Account’ and Essential Supplies” 1979; Stuart 1979). These practices added to the strike’s disruptive power, but they did not give the impression of disciplined control. In a horrendous reminder of the dangers of picketing, the dispensation scheme was also suspended in Scotland following the death of striker Robert Watson, killed by a truck leaving Shell’s oil depot in Aberdeen (“Drivers Protest at Picket’s Death” 1979; Langdon 1979).

Geographical variations in practices partially reflected different levels of organization. Where the local union was strong, shop stewards often asserted their autonomy on matters including dispensations. Attempts to dictate the scale at which decisions were made reflected a struggle for advantage with the employers, but it was also about power within the union (Savage 2006). The structure of the dispute encouraged fragmentation. The strike began as a series of local stoppages, without the national union’s endorsement, before spreading across Britain (P. Smith 2001, 147). The TGWU justified the decision to make the strike official partly because they believed it would allow the national union to control picketing. This proved to be largely wishful thinking (Evans 1979; Harper and Aitken 1979; “Note of a Meeting at 10 Downing Street” 1979). The road haulage dispute reinforced the view held by some critics of the labor movement that, rather than unions being too powerful as such, the problem was primarily union officials’ weak influence over local stewards and members (Kelliher 2021, 19).

Whether coordinated control or unpredictable disruption, the haulers’ strike galvanized opponents of the unions. Employers’ organizations that had previously been agnostic about reform to picketing legislation appeared radicalized (Brewers’ Society Employment Committee 1979; CBI Social Affairs Directorate 1979; Lambert 1979). The CBI’s Director of Social Affairs insisted that the “present chaos” necessitated new solutions and “a greater amount of employer solidarity than has been seen in recent years” (Norton 1979). The strike therefore helped consolidate business opinion around the need to aggressively constrain union power, a view that became the neoliberal common sense of the 1980s (Hall and O’Shea 2013; Mustchin 2019).

It was not only employers who were concerned, though. The significant economic disruption caused by the haulers' strike threatened the livelihoods of other workers, including fellow TGWU members (Courtaulds TGWU Members 1979; Cronin 1979; Lambie 1979). This led to instances of intraclass conflict that manifested on picket lines. One example was filmed by a news reporter at the entrance to the Cadbury's factory outside Birmingham ("Women Try to Stop Lorry Drivers Strike" 1979). A picket of male drivers was met by a counterprotest of women who worked in the factory. They opposed the strike in explicitly gendered terms, emphasizing the suffering of women and children caused by the dispute. The women explained that, despite also being TGWU members, they believed they would not receive support from the drivers if the situation was reversed. Class solidarity could therefore be understood as distinctly masculine (Cowen 2014, 115).

One driver provided evidence to support the women's claims: "these ladies ... [are] probably out at work for pin money, they've got their husbands out at work. A lot of these guys are the only breadwinners in the house and so they're suffering a lot more than these people are" ("Women Try to Stop Lorry Drivers Strike" 1979). The derogatory language of "pin money" had long played a role in diminishing women's work (McDowell 2014, 159). Male breadwinner ideology could simultaneously drive wage militancy and produce exclusionary versions of trade unionism (Barrett and McIntosh 1980). It is notable how gendered divisions of employment structured picket line conflict: That haulers were overwhelmingly male, and women were concentrated in particular factories, shaped such antagonisms. This was evident in other disputes, including the well-publicized hostile relations between picketing male miners and predominantly female office workers in the coal industry during the 1972 strike (Kelliher 2021). The relationship could be reversed, of course, such as during the 1976 Trico equal pay dispute when many of the men in the factory crossed the mostly female picket lines (Groves and Merritt 2018).

Opposition to the drivers' strike was also expressed in the large volume of letters sent to their union. One was particularly notable. Four London TGWU branch chairs wrote to the union's General Secretary, outlining their concern "at the anarchy" caused by "unofficial pickets" targeting places not

involved in the dispute. By putting people out of work, these actions were "creating a great deal of animosity between [union] members." They argued that such action contradicted "the constitution of this Union and the spirit and intention of the working class movement." The letter warned about "the possibility of a Right Wing backlash and anti-union legislation that may not be resisted by those of our members who have been unfortunately forced to suffer by this action" (Spitalfields, Borough, Stratford and Western International TGWU Branch Chairs 1979).

Such tensions signaled the potential for popular support for an antiunion offensive. The CBI (1979a) discussed the need to "catch the present tide of public opinion in order to outlaw the unacceptable forms of picketing which the country has recently witnessed." Thatcher sought to do exactly this. In a parliamentary debate on 16 January, the opposition leader insisted that "the real problem is that we have lived through a long period of increasing trade union power." She continued on the "vexed issue of picketing" in rhetoric suffused with the language of mobility rights: "every person in this country has a right to go about his daily work or pleasure free from interference by anyone else. That right is not being exerted or exercised at the moment" (Hansard 1979a).

The following day, Thatcher reinforced this argument in a television broadcast, condemning "picketing that threatens to bring the country to its knees—emptying our shops, endangering our farms, closing our factories, taking our jobs." The restriction of trade union power was essential, Thatcher argued, to avoid "anarchy." She called for cross-party agreement to produce a picketing code of practice; outlaw secondary picketing; amend the laws on "closed shops"; for secret ballots in the unions; and to negotiate no-strike agreements in essential services (Thatcher 1979). Most of these measures would be enacted by the Conservatives once they returned to power.

Thatcher's proposals were unsurprisingly rejected by Labour but the party's leadership largely accepted the parameters of the debate. Prime Minister James Callaghan acknowledged the "nuisance" of secondary and flying pickets (Hansard 1979a). A week later, he insisted that "everyone has the right to work and everyone has the right to cross a picket line. It is not a sacred object" (Hansard 1979b). Callaghan

articulated mobility rights in narrowly legal terms: “If, when people are stopped—if they choose to stop—they desire to go on, there is nothing in the criminal law or the civil law to stop them from carrying out their duties” (Hansard 1979b). Although accepting that there was a problem, Callaghan drew attention to the government’s impotence, complaining that “it is much easier to analyse than it is to find a proper solution” (Hansard 1979a). One letter to the TGWU emphasized how this undermined Labour: “The Prime Minister says everyone has the right to cross picket lines on lawful business, but this weak Government allow pickets to blockade any place they choose” (F.N.P. 1979).

The road haulage dispute ended in success on its own terms, with a 22 percent pay increase (Beckett 2009, 494). Through a mixture of control and disruption of circulation, the haulers demonstrated the power they could wield by striking and picketing. P. Smith (2001, 161) argued that the workers viewed it purely as a wage dispute, paying little attention to broader political implications. This might be an exaggeration. The dispensation scheme for priority supplies, as well as charitable donations made by drivers after the strike, suggests at least some concern for public opinion (Nethercott 1979). But their opponents more effectively mobilized arguments rooted in ideas about freedom and mobility to demonize the haulers. In the short term, this did nothing to defeat the strike. Nevertheless, by hardening the mood among employers, stoking popular antipathy toward unions, and revealing Labour’s weakness, the dispute helped coalesce the forces that would be mobilized against the labor movement by the next Conservative government, which was elected just four months later.

Conclusion

The relationship between drivers and pickets in 1970s Britain was fundamentally shaped by mobility politics, that is, “an ongoing struggle to control or disrupt the mobility regimes that shape power relations” (Sheller 2018b, 21). Striking workers’ capacity to intervene in the movement of vehicles was crucial to organized labor’s ability to pursue its demands. Despite rhetorical appeals to mobility freedom, many opponents of the unions were more concerned with employers’ prerogative to dictate the circulation of goods than personal liberty. By

interrupting normal hierarchies of control—if only briefly—trade unionists challenged key elements of the dominant mobility regime. Thinking through these relationships of class power emphasizes the importance of integrating mobility in its multiple forms into accounts of industrial conflict, providing a more sophisticated understanding of labor agency (Strauss 2020).

The centrality of road transport to labor disputes in the 1970s demonstrates that circulation and production struggles should not be strictly delineated. In turn, a focus on picketing as a distinctly spatial practice emphasizes how debates around strikes and blockades can inform each other. The historical geography of Britain’s picket lines in the 1970s helps us understand the complex entanglement of disruption and control in shaping circulation struggles (Toscano 2014). Strikes and picket lines in this period were often portrayed as weapons of interruption. But the striking miners and haulers also attempted to exert more disciplined control, notably through dispensation schemes for essential goods. Moreover, struggles to gain control around picketing extended beyond the immediate encounter, manifesting in conflicts between union officials and shop stewards, picketers and courts, and employers and political parties.

Ideologies of mobility were crucial, notably their manifestation in competing articulations of rights. The right to cross picket lines was frequently explained in terms of a fundamental individual freedom of movement. In contrast, trade unionists insisted on a right to picket that meant drivers should be required to stop and listen. As Saunders’s (2019) study of Britain’s postwar car industry shows, comparatively militant forms of labor activism could be normalized within particular workplaces, becoming common sense to those involved, while eliciting hostility from outside. This is suggestive for understanding the haulers’ successes in 1979, but also the antipathy they faced from both elite and popular sources. By targeting “choke-points” and organizing solidarity across occupations, both miners and truck drivers demonstrated significant structural and associational power. The debate over rights, however, highlighted the union movement’s increasingly weak symbolic power, its comparative failure to make the values and assumptions that it successfully inculcated in well-organized workplaces hegemonic in broader society (Chun 2009).

A dominant ideology of mobility tied to individual freedom was accepted across the mainstream political spectrum. Emboldened by the greater employer “solidarity” instigated by the 1979 road haulage dispute and other strikes, Thatcher connected this ideological framework to a set of legislative proposals that fundamentally constrained the mobility of picketing, alongside myriad other restrictions on trade union practices. These laws were backed by state power in the form of aggressive policing and punitive court action across several disputes in the 1980s, notably the 1984–1985 miners’ strike. Furthermore, through economic policies that sparked a sudden acceleration of deindustrialization, alongside programs of privatization, the Conservative government helped undercut the basis for much of the labor movement’s strength (Massey and Painter 1989). The defeats of the 1980s emphasized that the power of picketing was rooted in historically and geographically specific conditions. The challenge of 1970s trade unionism was met with a reassertion and reinvigoration of a mobility regime that prioritized the unhindered circulation of capital. The employers who had found themselves queuing outside a TGWU office in Hull requesting permission from workers to move goods were back in control.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to David Featherstone and Jim Phillips for comments on versions of this article, and to the reviewers for their helpful comments.

Funding

This research was supported by a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship (F19\1000750).

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