

HISTORY WORKSHOP PAMPHLETS

Number Nine

**CHILDREN'S
STRIKES
in 1911**

**BY
Dave Marson**

Price 30p

HISTORY WORKSHOP PAMPHLETS

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PREFACE: SEPTEMBER 1911

I came upon the children's strikes of 1911 by accident. I was researching into the Hull Dock Strike of 1911, and reading through the Hull newspapers of that year, when I noticed a small paragraph relating to a strike of Hull school children which took place in September 1911. It seemed no more than a curiosity, an illustration of the extent of the industrial unrest taking place at that time. What struck me first was the story about a policeman having to mount his bicycle and charging at the youthful strikers who had formed a picket line outside their school. The mere sight of a blue uniform was enough to frighten me and my school friends.

What set me looking further into things was one line in the report which said that the Hull boys were following the example of children in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Then looking through another Hull newspaper I discovered a front page splash, with photographs and a story about the strike. The newspaper listed all the different classes of workers who had been out on strike in Hull during that hot summer - cement workers, factory girls, seamen and dockers, and connected the children's strike to them. It was a photograph that really affected me - it was a picture of the children picketing the gates of Courtney Street Primary School, the same school I had been to myself. I identified myself with those strikers - some of them might have been the parents of the children I went to school with.

When I looked at the *Times* I found that children's strikes were taking place not only in Yorkshire but all over the country. At first I couldn't believe it - how could it have taken place so quickly and all over the country - I'd always believed that strikes were something which had to be organised. I felt that these children were trying to say something. I did not realise how many places were affected until I started reading through the local newspapers at Colindale. These showed that there were many more than the *Times* had reported.

At Colindale I came up against my first real difficulty. Many of the local newspapers for 1911 were destroyed during the Blitz. When I looked up the catalogue I kept coming upon complete runs of different local newspapers with a note

saying 'Missing 1911'. 1911 seems to be the only year to have suffered so badly. But even from the newspapers that were left it was possible to piece together the geography of the strikes because they contained not only reports of local strikes, but also referred to ones taking place elsewhere. For example, a Newcastle-under-Lyne paper would tell me that strikes had taken place in other parts of the country.

In the end I was able to draw up a list of sixty-two towns at which there were children's strikes in September 1911. Here is the list:

Ancoats	Dunbar	Miles Platting
Ardwick	Folkestone	Montrose
Aston-under-Lyne	Galashiels	Manchester
Aberdeen	Glasgow	Nottingham
Airdrie	Grimsby	Northampton
Bradford	Greenock	Newcastle
Birkenhead	Gateshead	Oldham
Barrow	Goole	Paisley
Birmingham	Grantham	Portsmouth
Barnsley	Halifax	Peterborough
Blackburn	Hartlepool	Runcorn
Bristol	Hull	Sheffield
Burton-on-Trent	Hyde	Stockport
Blyth	Kircaldy	Stockton
Choetham	London	Sunderland
Coventry	Llanelly	Southampton
Colchester	Liverpool	Stoke-on-Trent
Clyde Bank	Leith	West Hartlepool
Dublin	Leicester	York
Derby	Leeds	
Darlington	Middlesbrough	
Dumbarton		

Some of the reports speak of hundreds of children parading through the streets and at Dundee and Hull thousands of pupils defied the school authorities, but it is not possible to give the actual numbers of children who left their classrooms. The list of places is also not complete; only by visiting every town in the country and seeing if a 1911 newspaper survives in the local newspaper office or library could I have got a complete list. But even without a complete list it is still possible to draw certain conclusions.

CHILDREN'S STRIKES IN 1911

Dave Marson

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Editorial note. The children's strikes of 1911, as Dave Marson shows in this pamphlet, were part of the huge upheaval of labour in the long, hot summer of 1911. The industrial unrest has often been written about: the school strikes are Dave Marson's own discovery. He came upon them by accident when researching into the history of his own people, the Hull dockers. He has followed the strike movement all over the country, and has set them in both a school and a community context. The school situation which he describes has by no means disappeared: nor have the difficulties of organising resistance. The writer is a working docker, who was a student at Ruskin in 1970-2.

Routledge & Kegan Paul

HALF MOON THEATRE,
Alie Street, Whitechapel E.1
'Fall in and Follow Me',
A play about the children's
strikes of 1911.
Starting July 7, 1973.

GRAPHICS IN LAMBETH
An exhibition of posters
and graphics by
Adrian Hodgkins
London College of Printing
Back Hill, Clerkenwell, E.C.1.
May 10-25, 1973.





On Tuesday large numbers of schoolboys at various schools in Hull refused to return to their lessons, stating that they were "out on strike for shorter hours and no stick." The picture shows a large crowd of the children in Courtney street.—("News" photograph.)

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These two volumes will be published in 1974 and will be followed by volumes on POPULAR CULTURE; CLASS STRUGGLE; THE WOMAN QUESTION

Illustrated Chronicle

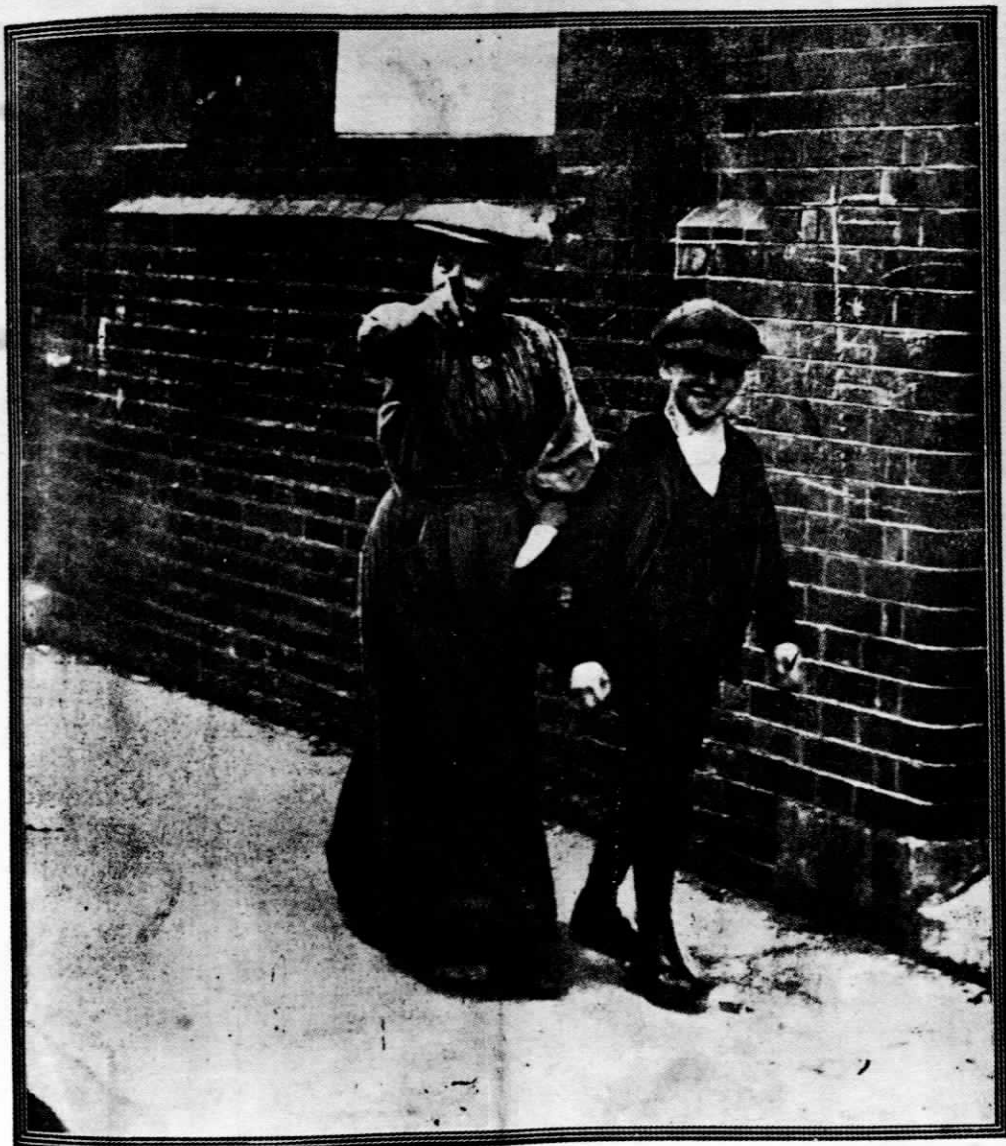
A DAILY PAPER WITH ALL THE NEWS AND PICTURES.

No. 441 (Continued on p. 4)

Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Wednesday, September 13, 1911.

Price One Halfpenny.

A STRIKER ARRESTED BY HIS MOTHER.



The worst strike in the strike of 1911 is the late "house hold" in London for less pay, more day, more holiday, and maintenance of strikers without payment. Many business situations were witnessed. Our picture shows one strike being arrested by its mother. It is worse to enjoy strike.



"Mail" Photos.

Schoolboys' Strike in Hull.

The photographs above show some of the West Hull schoolboy strikers, who visited the riverside to bathe in the Humber. The lads are seen on the riverside getting ready for a dip

I: DIVIDE AND RULE

My own recollection of life in the classroom is that children did not support each other when they saw a classmate victimised by the teacher. A schoolboy would stand there defenceless in front of the teacher and accept his punishment without question or protest and nobody would come to his aid. Whereas in the case of the dockers, you only have to hear of someone being victimised and you would give your support to any action taken on his behalf. When a situation demands strike action the dockers working a ship simply leave everything and walk off. The men then walk around the docks bringing out dockers from other vessels. The formula is: we've never got anything except by sticking together; let's keep it that way. On the docks most men know each other personally because they have lived out of each other's pantry. The term 'Brother' is a union term, but on the docks it really means something; it could be your brother. In the docks it is like a family born out of experience of hardship and trials knowing that the other man is in exactly the same position as you are; if it happens to him, then sure enough it is going to happen to you. Apart from that it's just a feeling. Even the old dockers could not explain it; people would stand up at the strike meetings and speak, opening their hearts to the men, and others would follow them, because they knew they were speaking the truth.

When somebody shouted down the hatchway, "We're all out," you would stop work immediately. It was a duty rather than a matter of pride or anything. The financial needs of your family came second when you voted to strike. Dockers are used to taking risks.

In my school when a teacher was disciplining a boy in the class, he would first of all make the boy a laughing stock, make him appear stupid. The teacher got you on your own. He picked on one child and not the group. An example I remember went like this; a boy had been fiddling about under his desk for most of the lesson when the teacher became very annoyed and finally ordered him out to the front and made him bend over; as he reached for his cane, the boy bent over and the split in his trousers (which he had been trying to hide from the class) opened out and we all saw what he got for his

birthday. The class fell about laughing. The teacher made him sit down and said that he had been punished enough.

Whenever there was punishment, we accepted it. Perhaps the teacher would pull the boy out in front of the class and try to make him explain his misbehaviour. You were made a public exhibition; probably your friends would laugh at you for being caught out. The teachers were able to make use of these situations; they always made sure the class was laughing at the individual who was being punished.

We went out of our way to test the teacher's strength. If he was a new teacher we would get cane off him, because we would try and assess his authority. We tried to make him lose his temper. Student teachers were our favourites. The boys in the class acted dumb or stupid: whenever they were asked a question our answer was 'Huh'. I think we knew that a teacher could lay the stick on us or even thump us, but he could not thump any harder than our parents. If your Dad happened to be a docker for instance, he could bloody well throw a punch and make it hurt. A 'Pappy' teacher with nice soft hands was not in the same league.

The type of home life we led, in some ways we were better off in the school. Simply because we got some kind of attention. It was attention other people would see as discipline. But at least someone cared enough about us to say; 'Come to school with your faces washed!' or, 'Why don't you get your boots cleaned?'

That was a kind of caring. I can remember lads dozing off in class. They just did not want to study. They were not tired, they simply did not want to do anything. Some teachers let these lads sleep on thinking the boy needed the rest. Children in a classroom are looking for something. In a class of 40 you feel you have to draw attention to yourself; you want the teacher to take an interest in you. The teacher is part of the child's life, he is there in front of the child. On the docks it is different. The employer appears now and again; most of the time a workman is on his own. You are not interested in what he thinks about you personally, he may never have seen you.

When children act against the teacher they do not make a stand together. When one of them is caught out they do not back him up. During my school days we never walked out as a

body. Individuals ran out and brought their parents back, usually Mam; some would threaten the teacher by saying "I'll fetch me Dad." The class would then sit back and await the ensuing slanging match, usually making derogatory remarks about the teacher's lack of manhood. I think we looked upon these situations as entertainment.

II: FALL IN AND FOLLOW ME

In the September of 1911, school children at Council Schools throughout the country came out on strike, pupils leaving their desks and parading the streets, or picketting their schools. The first children's strike I came upon took place in Hull on the 13th September and what happened on that day was reported in the *Hull Daily News*:

Hull escapes little in the way of trouble, and so it came to pass yesterday that hundreds of school-boys came out on strike. Hull has thus been involved in practically every phase of unrest which has troubled the country during the past few months. For weeks there has been a feeling of anxiety as to what might happen next. First, the sailors and dockers; then the millers, cement workers, timber workers, railway men, news-boys, factory girls and now the school-boys.¹

The strike started at the St. Mary's Roman Catholic School, when twelve of the older boys led the younger boys out of the playground during the morning break. Once it was known they were on strike, the news quickly spread around the school, and by the time the afternoon lessons should have started the strike news had reached several other schools in the East End of Hull. Soon there were crowds of boys standing outside their respective school gates; howling and shouting 'come out!' and 'blacklegs' at the pupils who were returning to their classrooms:

Lively scenes were witnessed outside St. Charles Roman Catholic School in Pryme Street, about half-past one. Some of the older boys held meetings, and the manner in which they aped the leaders in

1. *Hull Daily News*, 13 Sept. 1911.

the recent strikes was significant. 'There is too much work,' said one lad, and immediately there was a shout of approval. 'And too much cane,' said another, whereat there was a louder shout. Hats were waved, and then a policeman came on the scene, and some of the younger boys wisely ran into school. But not so the older boys. They ran off in various directions.

The boys then decided to visit other schools in the area and soon their procession grew longer and more boisterous as strikers from other schools joined in. By the time they reached Holderness Road - which is the main road that runs through the East Hull area - hundreds of school children were carrying banners and milk bottles; one banner said, 'We're on strike, who will join us!' As the day went on more reports of violence were reported to the police. The lads were on strike and they wanted all the support possible from other schoolboys.

News of the Hull children's strike took over the front page of the *Hull Daily News*, there were even some photographs, which were for me very significant: because of the way the children were dressed, with collars and ties but no boots or socks; one is able to ascertain from the children's faces the sheer joy of the occasion, and yet their sunken eyes and shaven heads tell of deeper problems they had to endure. The report went on:

A crowd of lads made themselves very objectionable outside St. Mark's School. The vicar (The Rev. Butler Cholmeley), whose house is near the school, tried to calm the excitement of the boys, but stones were thrown and he was hit on the forehead. An endeavour was made to raid the school, but it did not meet with success. A large number of parents had gathered, and the boys made a hasty retreat. Before going, however, they let it be known that they demanded the abolition of the cane. At some of the schools, windows were broken.²

The lads visited more schools, Buckingham street, Escourt street, Craven street, Mersey street and soon they were joined

1. *Hull Daily News*, 12 Sept. 1911.

2. *Ibid.*, 13 Sept. 1911.

by children from Lincoln street, and Courtney street. Outside the Charter House school, a policeman mounted on his bicycle made several charges at the boys before they ran away. Thousands of people lined the main road to watch the progress of the strikers:

Tradesmen were out at their doors, laughing at the unusual scenes, although many were making anxious inquiries as to the whereabouts of their errand boys.¹

The procession of strikers made its way to 'Corporation Field', a large concreted area in the West End of Hull where mass meetings of the dockers were usually held. After their meeting the boys went off to the banks of the river Humber for a swim.

The newspaper reported on all this in a very sarcastic manner, an attitude repeated by papers throughout the country; not in one single report or editorial does the children's unrest motivate a serious inquiry.

The strike movement had originated at Llanelly on 5th September 1911. It began (according to a newspaper report) when a deputy head master punished a boy for passing a piece of paper around his class, urging his colleagues to strike:²

The strike epidemic now prevalent has infected the rising generation at Llanelly, and, in order to be in the 'fashion', the schoolboys decided upon a 'down tool' policy. The origin took place at Bigyn School on Tuesday, when the scholars, in sympathy with one of their colleagues who was punished for an offence, deserted their classrooms, and paraded the streets, to the accompaniment of singing and booing. Later in the day, however, the scholars returned.³

How did the local education authorities at Llanelly propose to deal with the problem? Mr. Joseph Roberts, an ex-chairman of the Education Committee, in an interview stated, 'That the absence from school of the children would greatly affect the

1. *Hull Daily News*, 12 Sept. 1911.
2. *Western Weekly Mercury*, 9 Sept. 1911.
3. *Llanelly Mercury*, 7 Sept. 1911.

Government grants. The absence of each child would mean a loss of between a penny and three half-pence per half day, and he warned the parents to see that their children attended regularly. The more grants received, the less would be the education rate. Decreased grants would indirectly hit the workingmen, who would have to pay increased rents'.¹

Now began the gradual spreading of the strike-fever among school children. The very next day a strike broke out in the Edgehill district of Liverpool. It was here the children began to show their initiative and remembering how their fathers had been organised they elected a strike committee which presented demands to the school teachers; that there should be abolition of the cane, and an extra half-day holiday per week. 'Having demanded sufficient on the destructive side they turned to the constructive policy. Monitors were called upon to perform certain work. Why should they not be paid?'² The strikers marched around the Edgehill schools, calling on other boys to come out and support them in their demands. Several of the loyal pupils said they were attacked and beaten with sticks when they refused to join the strikers. 'Indeed such was the outlook at one time that the calling out of a company of Boy Scouts was suggested.'³

The strike now spread to the Manchester area ; here again the boys came out because a boy had been punished for a minor offence.

The young disputants desiring to extend the fight against the powers at once appointed pickets who, labelled with papers pinned to their caps bearing the word 'picket', marched in a body to the Holland street Municipal School which is close by, the object being to induce the scholars there to declare a sympathetic strike. These endeavours, however, were futile, and the presence of the teachers at the gates prevented the pickets from entering the school grounds to carry out their programme of 'peaceful' persuasion. The strikers next proceeded to the school of Corpus Christi, in Varley-street. By this time they had assumed quite a militant attitude, having on the way secured sticks which they

1. *Llanelly Mercury*, 7 Sept. 1911.
2. *Northern Daily Mail*, 9 Sept. 1911.
3. *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 9 Sept. 1911.

brandished fiercely, but an even more terrifying display was made by others who were the possessors of toy pistols.¹

The boy strikers had by now earned themselves a reputation of copying their fathers. As one boy stated, 'Our fathers starved to get what they wanted; what our fathers have done we can do.' Headmasters and Educational Authorities who were interviewed by reporters suggested more cane and not less was needed in the elementary schools. As the strike began to spread all over the country these same authorities began to blame the popular half penny press for giving the schoolboys ideas. The 'Truant Class' children were also blamed: as one newspaper put it, the elementary schools in the slum districts are responsible for the lack of discipline among school children. The *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 14th September, reporting on the Manchester schoolboy strikers, saw it this way:

Formerly boys drew their inspiration from tales of adventure or the more romantic episodes related in their history books. The advent of the picture press and the cinematograph has brought them into closer contact with current events. Their conduct of the strike reveals a close intimacy with the methods employed in the railway and dockers' strikes.²

By the middle of September, the schoolboys' strikes had reached as far south as Portsmouth and Southampton, while in the North and Scotland schools in Glasgow and Leith were affected. Throughout the country schoolboys had taken to demonstrating in the streets. No one would listen to their demands, they were laughed at and ridiculed by grown-up onlookers. These same children had just returned from the school holidays and although their strike action failed to shut down any one school completely they were able to create disturbances serious enough for the police to be stationed at school gates. Their efforts were sufficiently newsworthy for their endeavours to be recorded for posterity in those newspapers that normally only gave them space in poetry and puzzle 'corners'.

Throughout the country, 'Rolling Columns' and 'Flying Pickets' of children, seemingly without any organisation, managed to

1. *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 9 Sept. 1911.

2. *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 14 Sept. 1911.

create disturbances serious enough to warrant police and in some cases plainclothes men being called out to restrain them. At Manchester, for instance:

A contingent of youthful rebels from Ancoats and other parts of Manchester invaded Reddish yesterday and endeavoured to persuade the scholars at the schools to come out and join them. They approached the district by way of Gorton, and on reaching Reddish they visited all the schools. Though failing in their object at the North Reddish Council School, they were successful at the Houldsworth School and St. Joseph's Roman Catholic School, where most of the boys accepted the invitation and left the playground.¹

Even the very little ones were affected by the strike epidemic. There is a report that strikers at Risinghill School, Islington, included children as young as three. And at Tower Bridge Police court, 'two tiny tots aged six and eight' were brought before the magistrate on September 15th. They were both named Tillyer and were from Bermondsey. They were charged with wandering abroad without proper guardianship:

Mr. Westcott, industrial school officer, said that on Wednesday afternoon he saw the boys in Great Dover street. There was heavy rain at the time, and the boys, who were badly clothed, were in a deplorable state. When he spoke to them they said, 'We are on strike'. Upon his telling them that he must take them to see their mother they resisted and screamed, and as a crowd collected a constable had to be called. The Magistrate (smiling): 'Only a constable, I thought it was a strike!' Witness added it was considered desirable, in view of the boys' condition, that they should be sent to the remand home. Their record of school attendance was unsatisfactory. The father urged that since the cab strike he had been unable to do more than provide food for the children, and their clothing had been neglected. It was stated by the mother that her boys met other lads who were on strike, and the tiny couple joined them. The magistrate discharged

1. *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 13 Sept. 1911.

them.¹

The main action of many of the strikers was to turn out neighbouring schools. At Swansea:

On Monday morning about 300 boys left the school yard, determined to go to the St. Thomas' School to endeavour to induce the boys there to strike. Some of the lads obtained straps and fastened the outer gates together.²

At Liverpool:

. . . when the school children in the Edgehill district of Liverpool were released for playtime they went on 'strike', parading the district and calling upon other schools asking the scholars to come out in sympathy. Window panes and street lamps along the line of march were smashed,³ and the 'loyal scholars' were beaten with sticks.

The boys carried banners, shouted slogans, and chalked their demands throughout the country. What were they demanding? 'Less hours and no cane' was the most popular. Where the boys organised themselves into strike committees their statements to the press included demands for payments to be made to boys carrying out monitors' duties. In Montrose, the boys drew up a list which included:

Steam heating apparatus;
Age limit fixed at fourteen;
Shorter hours;
Potato-lifting holidays;
No home lessons;
Abolition of the strap;
Free pencils and rubbers.⁴

At Darlington schoolboys demanded 'one hour schooling in the morning and one in the afternoon, and one shilling per week for attendance'⁵. Boys attending the Low Felling Council

1. *Hull Daily News*, 16 Sept. 1911.
2. *South Wales Daily Post*, 12 Sept. 1911.
3. *School Government Chronicle*, 16 Sept. 1911.
4. *The Greenock Telegraph*, 19 Sept. 1911.
5. *Northern Daily Mail*, 15 Sept. 1911.

Schools, Co. Durham 'ask to start school at 9.30 in the morning until 12 noon, begin again at 2 pm until 4 pm, and unless these conditions are forthcoming, they say Alderman Costelloe need not hope to be Gateshead's Mayor next year.'¹ Hull strikers demanded 'an extra half day holiday, weekly monitors to be paid, a penny a week, and all to leave school at the age of 13.'² Nottingham boys demanded the school leaving age should be 13.³ At Bradford,⁵⁰ boys attending Bolton Woods Council School came out, demanding the abolition of the attendance officer, and one day's holiday a week exclusive of Saturdays.⁴ At Coventry, where Holy Trinity Non-Provided School and Red Lane Council School were the schools principally affected, though scholars at other schools also remained away, there was a meeting held in Pool Meadow addressed by one of the leaders. 'It is understood that the modest demands of the strikers are - No home lessons; No cane; Half-holiday on Wednesdays; No attendance officers; Penny a week for monitors.'⁵

At Leicester, the boy demonstrators carried banners bearing the words 'We want 30s a week and less hours per day.'⁶ And at Newcastle 'a number of boys met and in addition to asking for the abolition of the cane and the establishment of a weekly half-holiday, requested that a penny should be given, out of the rates, to each boy every Friday. Socialists have apparently been at work among these young jokers.'⁷

'Flying pickets' helped to spread the strike. At Manchester, where juvenile strikers were very numerous, 'organisation was one of their strong points. Pickets were appointed and provided with rough tickets to wear on their coats as they went round to various schools to endeavour to get the boys to strike in sympathy, carrying out their operations with great seriousness.'⁸ At Ashton-under-Lyne, 'Pickets, some of whom had pinned on their coats pieces of cardboard on which the word 'Picket' was written, went to various schools and induced the lads to come out.'⁹ At Paisley also, the flying picket was well pre-

1. *The Illustrated Chronicle*, 15 Sept. 1911.
2. *The Times*, 13 Sept. 1911.
3. *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 15 Sept. 1911.
4. *The Star*, London, 12 Sept. 1911.
5. *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 13 Sept. 1911.
6. *The Weekly Express*, 15 Sept. 1911.
7. *Northern Daily Mail*, 15 Sept. 1911.
8. *Ibid.*, 12 Sept. 1911.
9. *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 13 Sept. 1911.

pared:

Yesterday afternoon a party of boys who had previously put their heads together resolved to have a general turn-out from all the schools, and at the meal-hour they formed a flying column which touched at several schools in different parts of the burgh. The nucleus grew with snowball rapidity and, latterly, the proportions of the band had so increased that fully two hundred boys were on the march.¹

In other places the picket was more impulsive. The trouble started in Hull when twelve of the scholars left the school-yard at St. Mary's Catholic School at playtime. 'Acting as pickets, they rushed off to other schools to proclaim the fact that they were on strike.'² In one school in Aberdeen the arrival of the flying picket had an electric effect:

The boys, being apprised of the presence of a large number of 'strikers' outside, revolted. They banged the desks, and in a wild rush to get outside to join the other strikers they smashed the fittings. For a time the scene was one of great disorder, and the teaching staff were powerless in their endeavour to quieten the children.³

It could be that some boys preferred to picket outside schools other than their own because they did not want to be recognised as strikers by their teachers; equally, conflicts existed between boys at different schools and they may have seized the opportunity to continue old or recent conflicts, which would account for some of the reported fighting between groups of boys.

In some places the strikers found it very difficult to gain the support of their friends and this meant that the teachers were able to isolate and identify the ring leaders:

A strike of schoolboys occurred at Blackburn to-day. About a score of scholars attending St. Luke's Church of England School refused to go in with the other

1. *Paisley Daily Express*, 15 Sept. 1911.
2. *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 13 Sept. 1911
3. *The Greenock Telegraph*, 16 Sept. 1911.

children this afternoon. When, however, they found that the rest would not strike in sympathy with them they presented themselves, and would have returned to their classes had they been allowed. The headmaster, Mr. Cornall, however, refused to allow them to do so, and said he would write to their parents and afterwards deal with them. The boys were therefore left in the street to meditate on what their punishment will be.¹

This situation obviously put the children in a very serious position. To come out on strike was a very big step, but, to be ignored by your school-mates when you desperately needed a massive demonstration, and to find yourself in a tiny minority, must have been unnerving. At London a bright little boy of ten said: 'We had to go back, as there were very few of us out for the principle of the thing, and it is no use only a few of us declaring that we would not attend school.'²

At Maryport the teachers were able to mobilise loyal pupils to fight their battle for them. When a strong picket of boys from the Grasslot School visited Maryport Council School to induce the boys there to strike, 'The upper standard boys of the Maryport School were sent out to capture the picket leaders, and a battle followed in the Market-place. Stones and fists were used. Some of the Grasslot boys were seized, but they fought hard and, being big and strong, escaped.'³

The majority of the newspaper reports mention numbers of around 50 to 80 boys from each school who took an active interest in the way the strikes were organised, the rest were there at their whim or did not want to find themselves left in a minority group. Those few children, bolder than the rest, who manned the picket lines outside the school-gates shouting their demands and calling other pupils to join them, did so, not realising that they risked a caning. This is what happened to strikers at Bigyn Boys School, Llanelly, where the headmaster, Mr. Gwilym Harris, caned every one of them:

While the children were at play on Tuesday it appears that 30 of the 827 boys present left the school. From inquiries I have made, it seems to me that it is not right to call this a strike at

1. *Lancashire Daily Post*, 14 Sept. 1911.
2. *Northern Daily Mail*, 14 Sept. 1911.
3. *Ibid.*, 16 Sept. 1911.

all, when it is simply insubordination on the part of some of the boys . . . When I returned to school on Tuesday afternoon, I caned everyone of the boys who had absented themselves . . .¹

There were other punishments for these children, because black marks would go on their character references, which were needed when applying for a job: for some it meant giving up their chance to win an attendance medal for which many respectable working class parents coveted - so much so that some children were forced to go to school even when they were ill. It took four years of perfect school attendances to win a bronze medal, six years for a silver, and ten years to achieve a gold.

In many cases the children stayed out long enough only to register a token protest, and the appearance of a teacher (especially if he were a headmaster) was enough to send them back to their desks: the strike at Latchmere Road School, Battersea for instance, lasted for less than an hour. The children 'came out' during the dinner hour and paraded up and down Battersea Park Road, singing 'fall in and follow me' and shouting 'We are out on strike'. About ten minutes to two, however, the headmaster came along on his bicycle 'whereupon most of the boys rushed into the playground.'² At Birmingham, 'A few of the lads at St. Mark's School stood together in the street a few minutes instead of walking into the building as they arrived, but when one of the masters came along and told them to go into their class rooms they promptly obeyed, and school work was commenced at the usual time.'³

At Llanelly, where the strike originated, 'the appearance of the master with a stout cane' stopped the strikers in their tracks. as their procession made its way from school to school 'and they made a hasty retreat.'⁴ The Headmaster of Huntingdon School, at Nottingham heard rumours of a strike, 'and after prayers he informed the boys that he could also strike, and strike hard, if necessary.'⁵ At the Carlton Road Schools, Kentish Town 'about 300 boys and girls marched out at the luncheon hour, and when the schoolbell rang at 2 o'clock assembled in the roadway and declared to the world and to

1. *South Wales Daily Post*, 7 Sept. 1911.
2. Reference mislaid.
3. *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 14 Sept. 1911.
4. *Grimsby and County Times*, 8 Sept. 1911.
5. *Northern Daily Mail*, 14 Sept. 1911.

each other, with shrill enthusiasm, "We're on strike!" But suddenly there was silence, until one voice spoke words of terror, "Golly, there's a bobby!" . . . The head mistress dealt with the girls. Her appearance at the gates overawed the girls and infants. When she clapped her hands they obeyed the signal with downcast looks.¹ Some fifty boys at a Bradford School of from 10 to 14 years of age refused to go back to their tasks yesterday after dinner, and excitedly discussed 'rights'. When faced by their headmaster, however, 'they abandoned their agitation and returned to work.'²

At the other end of the scale there were the places where the strikers, far from being afraid of the teachers attacked them.

Schoolboys at Coventry rescued two of their number from the school official who was escorting them to the education offices. The boys set about him so aggressively that he had to release them.³ At Salmon Pastures School, in the East End of Sheffield, 'stones were thrown at a lady teacher as she was getting on a tramcar, and the 'strikers' also attacked the boys attending the school, all of whom remained loyal.'⁴

School buildings were attacked in many places. At Glasgow:

A serious aspect was lent to the situation yesterday by the reports of wholesale window smashing made at the headquarters of the School Board. At Crookston Street school eight large plate glass windows were broken, at Barrowfield School and at Dalmarnock School eighteen windows were broken. Inquiries are being made by the police.⁵

Again, at Bradford, 'The boys at half a dozen . . . schools struck yesterday, and held a strike meeting in approved style. The schoolboy strikers smashed windows at the Northwood Grove and Central Schools, Hanley, and in Cobridge policemen had to be stationed at the schools in the borough.'⁶

A report on the Islington strikers from the Risinghill school states: 'their ages ranged from 13 to 5, while some

1. *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 13 Sept. 1911.
2. *The Lancashire Daily Post*, 13 Sept. 1911.
3. *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 13 Sept. 1911.
4. *The Times*, 14 Sept. 1911.
5. *The Greenock Telegraph*, 15 Sept. 1911.
6. *Ibid.*

carried stones, pieces of iron, and sticks. One small boy had no less than three half-bricks tucked under one arm as he marched through the street.¹

At Leicester 'peaceful picketing is far from their thoughts and the lads with pockets full of stones early showed that they meant business. One venturesome lad set the ball rolling by shattering a window with a good sized stone, and the others, following his lead, speedily smashed a number of other window-panes. This was not all the damage, however. Variety was imparted into the proceedings by the boys damaging large notice-boards, etc.'² Two or three hundred lads came out at Ashton-under-Lyne:

The strike was brought to the doors of Ashton people on Tuesday, and there was much excitement in the town in consequence. Two or three hundred lads 'came out', most of the elementary schools in the borough being affected, and so serious did the situation become that policemen were stationed in the vicinity of some of the schools, and officers in plain clothes were on special duty.³

At Payne Street Schools, Islington, a flying picket from Shore-ditch attacked the school buildings:

Just as the scholars were going into school about ten strikers appeared on the scene, armed with sticks, stones, bits of iron, and similar weapons. They threw stones at the school windows, and the policeman on guard at the schools had a difficult task in quelling the disturbance.⁴

Pickets at Sheffield tried even tougher methods, 'a crowd of "strikers" chased the boys going to school into the yard and dragged some of them out.'⁵ In the Potteries, 'schoolboys armed with sticks and stones attacked the Northwood and Grove Schools at Hanley, and a dozen panes of glass were smashed at each school, while windows at other schools were also broken.'⁶

1. *The Observer*, 15 Sept. 1911.
2. *The Leicester Mail*, 14 Sept. 1911.
3. *The Evening Reporter*, 13 Sept. 1911.
4. *The Herald*, 13 Sept. 1911.
5. *The Times*, 14 Sept. 1911.
6. *The Lancashire Daily Post*, 15 Sept. 1911.

The strikers were particularly formidable in Shoreditch, East London, making heavy raids 'armed with sticks, stones, iron bars and belts'. They 'breathed sufficient fire and slaughter to cause a dozen police to be specially called out,'¹ Police were also out in force in Liverpool.

So boisterous did the boys behave that the police had to be requisitioned, and for some hours constables kept the 'strikers' from gaining entrance to the schools, although in one case the boys effected an entrance into a playground and smashed several windows. Late in the afternoon the boys held a miniature mass meeting, and they dispersed amid cheers to resume their demonstration to-day.²

Another place where the disturbance went deep was at Birkenhead. 'A grave lack of discipline' had been observed before the strike began and when it broke out police protection was invoked for the teachers:

The schoolboy 'strike' movement has spread to Birkenhead and a grave lack of discipline has been observed in several of the schools in the lower parts of the town. Yesterday morning the trouble broke out afresh in St. Anne's School, and the teachers experienced difficulty when passing along the streets near to the school. Several of the more riotous spirits hooted and shouted abusive epithets at the masters, and when one of the latter seized an assailant he was treated to a volley of stones, showing how well the lessons of the late labour troubles have been imparted to the younger generation. The youngsters in their mad conduct have the open connivance at least of their parents. The facts suggesting this are that truants are parading the streets, declaring their intention not to return to school, and that school board officers going about the district have been stoned and compelled to abandon their work. Police protection has been invoked for the teachers, and measures to eradicate the trouble are being taken both by the police and education authorities. The lads have various fancied 'grievances' which they air in boyish fashion. They apparently fail to realise that

1. *The Star*, 12 Sept. 1911

2. *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 12 Sept. 1911.

the trouble will have only one ending, an unpleasant interview with parent, teacher, or the police flagellator, Sergeant White with his terrible birch.¹

At West Hartlepool about 100 boys at a council school came out. 'A storage room at the back of an hotel was looted, and some bottles of stout and whisky and boxes of cigars were removed by the "strikers", some of whom were arrested and will be charged this morning (three boys were put on probation and a fourth was discharged). While marching through the streets the boys stopped an errand boy who was taking some apples to a house and helped themselves freely to the fruit. The boys are also stated to have thrown stones at the windows of houses occupied by the teachers.'²

News of pickets arriving at schools brought teachers and parents alike to the gates to protect their children. In Hull, troubled parents were rushing to the schools to see if their boys - the strike was confined to boys - had turned up for lessons.

In the majority of cases the bewildered teachers shook their heads, and the parents rushed after the ever increasing procession of lads, who, armed with broomsticks and bottles, went from school to school trying to induce others to join the movement.³

At Llanelly the headmasters 'got wind of the mischief that was brewing' and when the flying pickets, who came from the Copper Works and Old-road schools, arrived, they were 'ignominiously driven away', says a report in the *Western Weekly Mercury*.⁴ At Grimsby some boys from the Weelsby-street School paraded the town with poles bearing streamers and the words 'Schoolboys on Strike'. The strikers marched to two other schools 'but the teachers having been warned . . . kept their boys in school. The ringleader decamped upon the appearance of a teacher, and another lad mounted on a pony then assumed command.'⁵

The most active strike-breakers, in many places, seem to have been the mothers. Not only did they exert pressure on the chil-

1. *The Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*, 14 Sept. 1911.

2. *The Times*, 15 Sept. 1911.

3. *Hull Daily News*, 12 Sept. 1911.

4. *Western Weekly Mercury*, 9 Sept. 1911.

5. *The Illustrated Western Weekly News*, 16 Sept. 1911

dren when they returned home, at the end of the first day's strike, but in some cases they intervened more actively, dragging the children back to school on the following day, and in a few cases mounting a counter-picket at the school gates. For instance an attempted strike at East Wall National School, Dublin, was suppressed summarily by the mothers, who gathered in force, armed with all sorts of weapons, and cleared the malcontents off. 'When the school broke up at 3 o'clock yesterday afternoon a few policemen and many mothers were there to protect the good boys who had resisted all temptation to stray from the paths of learning. Under female convoy these boys reached their homes in safety...'¹

The boys may have had some sympathy from their fathers who understood their feelings but they never interfered when it came to school matters. It was the mothers again in London who acted as strike breakers

In all directions could be seen processions of women in no amiable mood leading their young hopefuls unwillingly to school, and it became apparent that the great strike had collapsed.²

Reports from newspapers all over the country told how mothers faced the childrens' picket lines and in some places were the only authority the children surrendered to. 'An army of mothers' filed into the Bath-street School, St. Luke's, London 'dragging their unwilling offspring to the headmaster,'³ and at the Radnor-street School, in another part of the same district:

One irate mother was met on the staircase, bringing with her her reluctant son. 'I'll give you strike!' she said, as she dragged the struggling boy to the headmaster . . . From one o'clock onwards an army of mothers, thinking it the safer course, filed up to the school, taking their boys with them, and handed them over to the charge of the head master.⁴

The children were in some places frightened of the burly

1. *The Irish Times*, 15 Sept. 1911.
2. *The Illustrated Chronicle*, 13 Sept. 1911.
3. *The Independent*, 15 Sept. 1911.
4. *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 13 Sept. 1911.

policeman who stood on guard outside the school gates protecting the loyal scholars. But they would not, however, return to school unless they were forced to by their mothers. In Hull:

What a change this morning! Parents brought their children to school, and others held up the warning finger to their precocious offspring, in token of what they could expect if they persisted in absenting themselves from school.¹

Children in the Southampton districts were also brought back to school by their mothers.

On Friday morning practically all the scholars attended school as usual. Many of those who participated in the previous day's demonstration were accompanied by their mothers, although the ringleader, a sturdy-looking boy, was brought by his father, and reached the school followed by an admiring group of sympathisers.²

Girls, because they were more closely controlled by their mothers than boys, played a very small part in the strikes. Only two reports mention them. At Portsmouth 'about 150 boys and girls from two council schools paraded the streets and went round to other schools seeking for recruits.'³ And in Scotland the school girls in Kirkcaldy and Cambuslang showed themselves to be far more militant than the girls attending schools in England and Wales. It could be argued that the Scottish educational system was far more equal in that it encouraged the girls as well as the boys in obtaining educational standards. This may account for the girls taking an active part in every form of school activity including the strikes:

One hundred boys and 100 girls struck at Sunderland School yesterday. The school attendance officers at once took action and called on the boys to 'Fall in' . . . The girls, however, were defiant, and paraded streets in the neighbourhood singing 'Fall in and follow me'.⁴

During the course of the strike various suggestions were made

1. *Hull Daily News*, 13 Sept. 1911.
2. *The Hampshire Advertiser*, 16 Sept. 1911.
3. *The Times*, 15 Sept. 1911.
4. *The Greenock Telegraph*, 16 Sept. 1911.

about the part played by older boys and grown-ups in encouraging the children to act (headmasters were particularly prone to put the blame on 'outsiders'). At Attercliffe school, Sheffield, the boys were said to have been egged on 'by some foolish women.' As soon as a teacher came along (according to a newspaper report) 'they scuttled off.'¹ In one of the Leeds demonstrations an engineer's apprentice, armed with a cudgel, was captured by one of the masters and taken into the school. It was stated that this particular group of strikers had been encouraged by their parents 'who hung about the school gates and unsettled the non-strikers at their desks.'² In Dublin:

One of the teachers laid the blame for the 'strike' at the door of a few boys who have recently left school and gone to work. Rejoicing in their own newly-won freedom from the irksome discipline of school, it is believed that these young toilers were filled with the glorious hope of making less hard the lot of their former schoolmates, who were still bound to dull drudgery at the desk.³

At Shirebrook, Notts, it was stated that the boys were influenced 'by a number of pit youths who incited them after reading newspaper placards.'⁴ And in Southampton it was reported:

A crowd of boys, numbering about 70, assembled in Bond-street, their ringleaders being young ruffians, who, it is stated, had nothing to do with the school. In fact only about 30 belonged to Northam school...⁵

'Rowdies' seem to have played some part in the very big night-time demonstration and riot which took place in Dundee, and it is possible that the exceptional strength of the strike here - 'several thousand' boys were said to have mutinied - had something to do with the close link of children and the factories under the half-time system. The Dundee strike was the biggest in the country. It broke out on Thursday 14th September and was reported in one of the Scottish papers as follows:

1. *The Times*, 14 Sept. 1911.
2. *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 14 Sept. 1911.
3. *The Irish Times*, 15 Sept. 1911.
4. *The Weekly Express*, 15 Sept. 1911.
5. *The Hampshire Advertiser*, 16 Sept. 1911.

THE SCHOOL "STRIKES."

EIGHT SCHOOLS INVOLVED IN DUNDEE.
A HUNDRED SCHOOL WINDOWS SMASHED.

Rowdy scenes occurred in Dundee yesterday in connection with a strike of schoolboys. No fewer than eight schools were involved, and it was calculated that by the afternoon several thousand boys had mutinied. The trouble arose originally in Cowgate School, where there was a breakaway in the morning, and the leaders of the movement were observed to threaten others if they did not join. The masters, interviewed, stated that they were unaware of any grievance, while the boys declared that they wanted to be given fewer home lessons, more holidays, and less of the strap. At eleven o'clock the trouble seemed to be disappearing, a large section of the lads returning, and one of the leaders, who was subjected to corporal punishment, refused to advise a continuance. But the news of the strike had got abroad in the town, and at the dinner hour there were defections from Wallacetown, Victoria Road, Blackness, Balfour Street, Hill Street, and Ann Street schools, and the boys paraded through the town and adopted various tactics to secure accessions to their ranks. A company of them paid a visit to the High School, and, armed with sticks and missiles, they created a demonstration. They did not, however, succeed in getting any recruits at this institution. In many instances the parents of the boys interfered with a view to putting an end to the dispute, and one boy was driven back to school by his grandmother, who boxed his ears from time to time. No girls took part in the demonstrations.

The strike took a serious development in the evening, when a band of 1500 boys, accompanied by a number of rowdies, paraded the town. They were armed with sticks, and many of them supplied with stones. Various schools were visited, and the more daring youths climbed the railings and broke the windows with their weapons, while volleys of stones were thrown. The damage is not fully known, but eight or nine school buildings were in this manner handled and it is believed that at least one hundred windows are more or less wrecked. The youths recognised a teacher coming from

an evening school, and he was attacked and struck with a stone.¹

In textile towns like Dundee, school and factory-floor were not so far apart because of the system of 'Half Timers'. Bob Stewart in his autobiography, *Breaking the Fetters*, tells of the infamous social and industrial character of Dundee. The jute mill-owners were the biggest single employers of children between the ages of 10 and 14 years and, as they were required by law to educate the children, some classrooms were actually built in to the mills. Schools and homes were built among the warehouses and jute mills, for immigrant workers; the majority coming from Ireland who were considered to be the lowest form of life by the rest of the community. Jute in its raw state is obnoxious and dangerous to health, particularly where workers breathed and swallowed 'stour' (flakes of jute) into their lungs and stomachs, giving them a permanent thirst, which is perhaps why Dundee was considered to be a town of drunkards.

'Half Timers' worked for three days a week in the jute mill then spent two days at school. The next week vice versa. On Saturdays they worked till 2 p.m. Pay for a short week's work was 2s.9d and a long week's 3s.4d.

In the spinning flat where Bob Stewart worked they sang:

Oh dear me, the mull's work gaein' fest
Puir wee shifters canna get a rest,
Shifting bobbins coarse and fine,
Who wad work for twa and nine.

'And work we certainly did', says Bob Stewart, 'from six in the morning till six at night with two breaks for breakfast and dinner'.² Bob Stewart had another job as 'chapper' or knocker up, 'on the side'.³

Children were an accepted part of the work force and treated as equals by the grown-ups. Social workers frowned on this practice and argued that the factory was more often than not permeated with evil influences: 'loose, filthy talk in these places is so common now-a-days as to be hardly worthy of notice. The gambling craze is rampant and the drinking saloon is to the tired worker a place of refuge'.⁴

1. *Paisley Daily Express*, 15 Sept. 1911.

2. Bob Stewart, *Breaking the Fetters*, London, 1967, p.13.

3. *Ibid*, p.14.

4. L.K. Phillips, *The Ragged Edge*, p.70.

It was during the meal breaks that the children became involved with the grown-ups' world, the noisy machinery stopped, while its operators gathered in small groups; conversation would be at a minimum until they had finished their sparse meal (no doubt the luckier ones shared their food with the children); then the children would contribute by reading from newspapers and journals. Perhaps, while passing on the latest news to older workers, they discovered how other children throughout the country were struggling to make their plight known.

III: THE TRUANT CLASS

The children who came out on strike in 1911 were almost all from Council Schools, mostly in the industrial towns and the poor and oppressed areas. According to Alderman Jarman, Chairman of the Hull Education Authority; 'They were mostly of the 'Truant class' due to the lack of parental care. The affair was almost entirely confined to the lower quarters of East Hull.'¹ Newspapers all over the country contained reports like this. For example the *Birmingham Daily Mail* carried a report about the Liverpool children's strike stating: 'The originators of the strike are mostly from the regular truant class.'² The *Times* located the Hull disturbances 'in the poorer districts' where 'women incited the children to follow the "strikers" example. Some stones were thrown at the teachers.'³ In Birkenhead, the disturbances were said to be 'in the lower parts of the town.'⁴

The majority of the boys who came out were definitely working class lads, and even within the working-class they were a particular kind of working-class. In Hull it was the children in the lower end of town who were affected by the unrest. East Hull, where it was mostly dockers' families, labourers and mill workers in the oil-crushing mills. They called it the 'Groves' area. I know it pretty well because I was born in the Groves area, and it is rough. In fact that was where the 'Silver Hatchet Gang' came from - they were the local hard cases; in the 1920s they also had a junior Silver Hatchet

1. *Hull Daily News*, 13 Sept. 1911.
2. *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 13 Sept. 1911.
3. *The Times*, 13 Sept. 1911.
4. *Liverpool Daily Post*, 14 Sept. 1911.

Gang, ready to bolster their numbers as they grew up. One old timer I spoke to told me about them. They were rough lads who were prepared to do anything for money. In the 1920s they were used by port employers to frighten away other potential employers wanting to start business on the docks.

Mrs. L.K. Phillips, a church social worker, wrote a book in 1907 about the 'ragged edge' of Hull in which she called them wastrels:

The male and female of this kind are, sad to say appallingly prolific. In every noisome city slum their children sprawl thick as summer flies upon the pavement. Their haunts always contain the same three dominating features - an all-pervading odour of stale humanity - an imposing array of blatant, shiny dramshops always doing the same roaring trade in the same time-honoured way and an innumerable company of grimed and unkempt children with pinched and pathetic faces.¹

'Groves' was always a very poor area, and in fact it was an area well known for moonlighting. 'Broken' homes were common. There was a definite housing shortage because a lot of people were coming in from the land; out of work country labourers coming into town and putting up in lodgings. The men could either get beer on the slate or they could get a job; an hour's work to buy their beer enabling them to sit in a public house for a night.

Their children, while they still attended school had part-time jobs, the boys did errands for shopkeepers or newspaper selling. They would help a grown-up - perhaps their granddad or uncle who owned a stand at a street corner. One old timer remembers working for a butcher, starting at six of a morning before going to school then working for him again at night time: sometimes he would not finish until after ten o'clock. His pay was half-a-crown a week and 'bits' (these were pieces of left-over meat). The children's lives were very mixed up with the adults - the entire family often slept in a single room and the children slept where they fell asleep with exhaustion. Bed-time came just before the old man came home from the pub.

Charlie Simpson can remember waiting outside the pub for his

1. L.K. Phillips, *The Ragged Edge*, p.7.

father so he could help him home. When he got his first job at the paint factory, his father, a docker, would wait outside for him on pay-days and take his money from him so he could go into the pub.

Another old lad remembers he never got the yellow part of an egg until he was eighteen. His Dad would slice the egg top off and give him it, and that was his breakfast, or he had to dip a slice of bread in the frying-pan after his Dad's bacon had fried.

From the photographs taken during the strike you get a good idea of the children's physical appearance. They were very thin, their eyes bulged, and they all seem to have bags underneath their eyes. Some of them had no shoes. In some cases, boys had no shoes but wore a collar and tie. In the summertime, their thicker clothes were stored away or pawned. They were generally pawned because they were safer there.

Bob Broadwell, a retired docker, recalls how he and his brother had to stay off school because they didn't have any shoes or clogs to wear.

We had clothes cos some of the lads in the class would bring us things to wear. He Headmaster sent a note round to our house for us to take to 'Cloggy Walsh's'; when we got our clogs they was marked with a circle on the toe-cap so me Mam couldn't pawn them.

Most of the children went around bare-footed during the good weather, their clogs and shoes would be cleaned and greased and then stored away probably until the month of November. The school authorities did not stipulate that footwear had to be worn. When these children entered the school they were marked down as being different from the rest of the pupils by the teachers' attitudes towards them - to the way they dressed and to their general appearance. Most of these children were suffering from all the children's ailments. 'Nits' in the hair was the most common one that straight away marked them down as something different because they had their heads shaved.

When I asked Bob Broadwell about his appearance while he was still at school, the first thing he said was 'hair-cuts'. He said they could not afford to go to the barber's shop. His parents would place a mixing bowl on his head - this gave a

straight edge to cut to - if the basin did not fit tight there would be lots of steps left, and after numerous attempts to keep a straight line he would be left with a small quiff at the front of his head.

In cases of nits the school authorities would insist that the children's heads were shaved. Poorer children lived in cramped homes and if it was a large family, they probably slept in the same bed, so if anyone of the family had any kind of head infection all the family would soon be infected.

School would begin in the morning with an inspection. This normally took place in the school play-ground. The children would assemble in their classes and the teacher would walk along the ranks inspecting the children thoroughly. The children would stand with their hands out-stretched to have their finger-nails inspected. Normally the teacher would signal the children to turn their hands over by tapping their hands. After a while the children would begin to do it automatically. At these inspections children would have to bend their heads and turn them from one side to the other, allowing the teacher to inspect their necks and heads. One boy was found to have a 'tide-mark' where he had only washed the front of his face leaving his neck dirty. The teacher dragged him out of the line and called him a 'parasite', then sent him off home to be washed.

Teachers would inspect the children as if they were some kind of animal or piece of furniture at a sale. This kind of treatment started first thing in the morning as they entered the schoolyard and continued until school finished.

Harry Burns remembers when he was a school boy, he was always singled out because his family was very poor. It was left to the teacher to notice if a child required special attention. For example, if a child needed shoes or clothing and free meals, the teacher would inform the headmaster. Then it was his decision whether or not the child received help. When children got clothes from the school authorities they were specially marked to stop them being pawned. Those children who received free meals had to go to the nearest coffee-shop; not a place where table cloths were used and waitresses served. A working man's coffee-shop, where he went for his break time from work. The boys and girls had to sit among people who would be smoking and spitting on the floor, a generally rundown place. The children received their breakfast, dinner and tea if the Head-

master thought they needed it. A book was kept by the coffee-shop owner which the child had to sign after every meal. This book was shown to the headmaster once a week and any child who had missed a meal was punished.

The teachers treated the poor kids as the dumbest pupils in the class. They usually ended up sitting in the very front desks. That was so they could keep an eye on them because if any trouble started in the class, it was usually the poorer children who started it: simply because they could not concentrate. The children had no discipline when they were reading and writing and when they got bored they would start talking amongst themselves. The teacher would walk across and hit them with whatever he had in his hands at the time or threw things, as the best way of dealing with any insurrections. Harry Burns can remember the chalk missiles coming thick and fast at times because they could reach him quicker than the teacher could cross over to him. The teacher made him into a joke: the boy who had chalk thrown at him was the 'Aunt Sally.' Can you imagine a boy with a shaved head having chalk thrown at him? It was a derisive situation for the boy and the other children would laugh at him.

Harry told me that the poor boys were always second in line if there was anything to be passed around, for example in Nature Study lessons, boards of moth and butterfly collections were given to monitors to be passed around the class and of course they would not pick one of these lads as a monitor.

Another way in which the poorer lads were singled out was in the school's sporting activities. They did not have the proper sports equipment and the school could not provide them with football boots or swimming costumes. When the children went to the swimming baths these lads went 'Bare Golly'. When it came to the time for the school's swimming gala or organised sports day, boys who did not have the right equipment could not take part. In one of the photographs taken of the Hull children's strike of 1911 you can see the children in 'Bare Golly'. Some of the children went to the river bank for a swim and the photograph shows the boys standing in groups, some with costumes but the majority naked.

Colin Hedge, a retired joiner, remembers he lived in the most densely populated street in Hull 'it had fifty-two terraces, each containing twelve houses. There were two pubs, a church and a Church Army recreation home, a bake-house, a barber's

shop, a grocer's shop and a butcher's and a school.' His school was divided into three, 'infants', 'girls' and 'boys'. 'It was made obvious they didn't want us to mix because high brick walls separated the play-yards.' He has not forgotten the inspections, 'We were all frightened when the "Nitty Nurse" came to inspect our heads.' Children who had 'general labourers' for fathers were the poorest, every day they would collect a free soup ticket from the teacher's desk then rush off to the soup kitchens on Hessle Road. Colin was the leader of a gang named the 'Black Hand Gang', whose initiation test was to climb up on to the school roof and drop paper bags, filled with water from a milk-bottle, down on to a character named drunken Jesus as he staggered back to the Church Army home.

Albert Green, a tally clerk, now in his sixties, remembers how his father shaved the boys' heads, a prevention against 'head nits', leaving only a pony to hang down on their foreheads.

Once my Mam made me go to school bare-footed in wintertime so I would get some boots from the Public Benefit. The boots had holes in the uppers to prevent our parents pawning them, but she would fill them with boot-blackening. My only other clothes were a woollen jersey and a pair of trousers, usually handed down from my older brothers.

There were seven children in the family and 'me Dad couldn't work, so most of the time we lived off the Parish.' They went to the National Kitchen for free meals. 'Once everybody had been served and sat down, they shouted "anyone for seconds" and in the general rush for more you had to clutch your fighting irons and plate and hope there would be some left for you.' There were plenty of eggs to eat, though, in his family:

Sometimes me Mam worked in the Egg Packing Warehouse in St. James Street, we always had plenty of eggs to eat then. Her job was to hold the eggs in front of a candle, looking to see if they were bad or not. Before she went off to work she'd lift her clothes up and push a bag underneath ready to slip the eggs in when she had a chance. Most of the women were pregnant so no one would notice another lump.

Bob Wreathall, a retired docker, attended the Lincoln Street

School and received free meals. 'I went to the Pop In coffee shop for me breakfast, two slices of bread and jam and a cup of tea.' In the summer holidays he would help his Dad: 'He was a night soil collector. This meant we had to be up very early in a morning because the cart had to be away from the city centre before the shopkeepers and office workers started work. He had a shovel and a wooden tub which he carried on his shoulder for emptying the lavvies, once he'd emptied another man poured in disinfectant. I used to lead the horse and cart. He never had any working clothes provided.'

Charles Wallace France, a retired docker remembers his school days as happy but hungry:

We always went begging after school closed and the factories were leaving, the paint factory was nearest. 'Got any bread left over from their packing-up. One day a bloke gave me a sandwich he had plastered thick with mustard. My mouth was sore for days after. Soon after that a policeman caught my brother and me begging and we were sent to industrial schools in different parts of the country and we have never seen each other since then.

IV: THE INDUSTRIAL UNREST

The immediate background to the children's strikes was the industrial unrest which had been breaking out all over the country in the months beforehand.

The summer of 1911 came in a blazing fury which was to give men thoughts of other things, as the bright sun entered their damp-dark communities. It was the seamen and firemen at Southampton who sent the first red-signal rockets high in the clear June night skies. The red glares announced the men's willingness to fight for more wages and better conditions. The strike spread rapidly to other ports, Goole, Hull and Liverpool were soon at a standstill. In Hull, the unrest broke out with a seamen's strike with the dockers joining in (they had not forgotten the way in which the seamen had supported them in 1893).

The dockers in Hull had been completely at the mercy of the dock employers. There was a mass of labourers; when they

reported for work they were simply chosen by someone calling out, 'you, you and you!' The most casual were the 'summer dockers', as they were called (my father was one). It was a derisive term for men who spent the winter working in the seed-crushing mills. In the summertime they joined the 'Gangway Enders' on the docks. They just went from one ship's gangway end to another hoping to be 'set on.' In one period there were seven thousand casual labourers seeking work on the Hull docks; even in busy boom times there was only enough work for approximately four thousand men. The dockers had had little or no organisation since their union had been smashed after the 1893 dock strikes. But now in 1911 a new leadership had emerged, younger men, eager and willing to fight and organise strikes with other sections of the transport industry. They began to realise how effective they were in such groups, but also they were becoming very individualistic. Dockers began to earn a reputation for being tough and militant. They were not just drab figures in the misty mornings on the dock-side. Their brothers in other ports had beaten the Shipping Federation, now it was their turn. They were not just beasts of burden, now they were demanding better conditions and better amenities. It was an awakening for the working man.

Once the strike had started in Hull it spread to every class of waterfront labour, the lightermen, mill workers, deal carriers, fishdock workers and men who worked in the saw-mills. Police-men were drafted in from Birmingham, Leeds and five hundred of the Metropolitan force to control crowds of strikers who besieged factories in an attempt to involve every working man and woman in the struggle for better conditions and higher wages.

Monday and Tuesday at Hull were days of comparative calm, the strikers chiefly concerned themselves with attending mass meetings and strengthening their picketting arrangements. But with Wednesday came a serious and ominous turn in the affair. The strikers in large bodies visited various works and mills, and in most cases succeeded in bringing the workers out.

In particular, Rank's flour mills were visited and eventually the men came out and the mills closed down. It might be added here that later the millers themselves demanded an increase of 2.6d per week. From Rank's large numbers of men, estimated at between 3,000 and 5,000, visited Reckitt's in Damson Lane, but failed to induce the men there to join them. Unfortunately they came in collision with the police and some injuries were sustained.¹

1. *The Daily Mail*, 1 July 1911.

When Askwith, the Board of Trade Industrial Conciliator, arrived in Hull he found the town in uproar. Local employers were unable to negotiate with the new leaders. Initial offers made by the shipowners to the seamen, were found to be inadequate by the other strikers who became indignant when it was suggested by the shipowners that the seamen return to work with a view to further negotiations. Askwith, who had been to Hull twice before over disputes with trawlers, thought he knew the men, however this is what he found:

A settlement had been achieved. It should be proclaimed to the people. It was estimated there were 15,000 people there when the leaders began their statement. They announced the settlement; and before my turn came to speak, an angry roar of 'No!' rang out- and 'Let's fire the docks!'...¹

In his book *Industrial Problems and Disputes* Askwith relates that he heard a town councillor remark he had been in Paris during the Commune and had never seen anything like this; he had not known there were such people in Hull - 'women with hair streaming and half nude, reeling through the streets, smashing and destroying.'

The women in Hull have often been prominent in strikes. I think if it were not for the women of Hull there would not have been as much change as there has been. The women always insisted their menfolk should come out on strike, whatever the reason. One old woman said, 'If he hadn't come out on strike, I'd have licked him!' She was talking about her husband.

The industrial unrest died down in July, but a second wave of it broke out in August. It was the hottest summer on record. The temperature reached 110° in some places. As in June, the strikes affected every industry. For instance at Manchester no fewer than eighteen trade unions pledged, 'No return till all were satisfied!' By the middle of August the unrest had spread to the railwaymen, whose lower paid grades revolted against the years of trade union respectability and forced the executives of the railwaymen's societies to call their first national strike. Transport workers of all kinds joined in - the carters, river boatmen and bus conductors - drawing strength from a movement representing

1. G.R. Askwith, *Industrial Problems and Disputes*, London, 1920, p.150.

the unskilled and unorganised.

By August 15th, the prime minister and the president of the Board of Trade showed signs of panic by suggesting a General Strike was imminent. The national newspapers carried banner headlines proclaiming strike after strike affecting every major port and town throughout the country. In Liverpool, street bonfires were lit to prevent the progress of the police and soldiers. Five horses belonging to the mounted police had to be destroyed owing to injuries. Ship-owners declared a lock-out and after serious clashes between strikers and police, the War Office took charge of the town.¹

However, by September people were returning to a normal way of life when suddenly the children left their classrooms and took to the streets carrying weapons and banners and saying, 'We are on Strike who will join us!'

The places where the children came out on strike were those which had been most disturbed by the industrial unrest. At Llanelly, for instance, where the children's strike first broke out, two men had been killed by troops during the August strikes. Afterwards the Chief Constable of Carmarthen-shire made a telegraphic report to the Prime Minister as follows:

Attack made on train which had passed through Llanelly Station, under military protection, at railway cutting sloping on either side to considerable height near station. Troops under Major Stuart quickly on scene, followed by three magistrates. Troopes attacked on both sides by crowd on embankment hurling stones and other missiles. One soldier carried away wounded in head and other struck. Riot Act read. Major Stuart mounted embankment and endeavoured to pacify mob. Stone throwing continued, crowd yelling defiance at troops. Shots fired as warning. [This last statement, as the inquest subsequently proved, was untrue. A rifle was discharged by mistake.] No effect, attitude of crowd threatening and determined. Other shots fired, two killed, one wounded, crowd fled.²

1. *The Star*, 15 Aug. 1911.

2. George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England, 1910-1914*, London, 1961 ed., p.269.

At Hull, the schools most affected by the children's strikes were in the East End of town - where the strikes of June and July had been most general. The children on strike were consciously imitating - or learning from - their elders.

The way I see it is, the children must have been listening at home to all the talk about strikes, all through the hot summer of 1911. Then suddenly, they were presented with the chance of striking themselves, their pent-up feelings about school collectively with their mates. As the strike spread from town to town around the country the children began to organise themselves, using pickets and mass meetings, like their elders, and attacking non-participants as 'blacklegs' and 'scabs'. They had seen the street demonstrations and obviously saw this as a way of expressing themselves. There was no authority to stop them marching about the streets carrying placards. They were quite jovial about it. The children may not have realised the seriousness of it when they saw their fathers carrying banners which had cost more than the men carrying them could earn in maybe two or three years.

V: FREEDOM IN BARE FEET

After I had finished the research at Colindale I got the impression that something was missing from the newspaper reports. It is difficult to imagine or reconstruct how these children fared during lessons. The majority came from poor households and were described simply as the 'truant classes', or children from the 'lower' parts of the town. Their lessons consisted of hours spent in monotonous repetitive chanting of numerical tables and verse. Individuality was repressed by unimaginative teachers who obviously treated the children as lesser beings simply because of their social backgrounds.

The strike was a vehicle by which they expressed their feelings in an energetic physical way, how else? Perhaps at the time it seemed that strikes could carry all before them, and only in the event did they learn how difficult a thing it was to support.

How did the children come out of it? A few hours' freedom doing exactly what they wanted to do? Seeking sensations? The photographs show happy smiling faces and obvious signs that they are enjoying themselves whatever the consequences they

would suffer on their return to school. Although the newspapers are prejudiced in their reports they did give factual reports describing the children's behaviour during the demonstrations and some of these are pretty remarkable.

In Sunderland, the children (all of whom were barefooted) carried a huge tree branch which the *Illustrated Chronicle* seemed to think had some apparently mystic significance.¹ School children in Pollokshaws, Glasgow, also paraded the streets carrying branches of trees 'and beating tin cans.'² Likewise in Airdrie the children took to the streets in their hundreds playing tin whistles and beating cans; and in Southampton children formed bands consisting of mouth organs and the beating of a large tin bath. Pupils in Manchester also took part in this way; 'A large number congregated in the vicinity of Oldham-road railway station, where a lively tattoo was kept up on the hoardings and the tin advertisement plates.'³

In the industrial areas, children used chalkwriting on the pavements and walls around the school to proclaim their grievances. They used more direct forms of agitation when other pupils refused to come out in support. In extreme cases 'loyal scholars' were beaten with sticks and police were called in to protect school property. Teachers were handed leaflets demanding no more cane. At Bray, Co. Wicklow, the teachers received an ultimatum demanding fewer school hours and more playtime. When this was refused the boys left the school and paraded the streets, singing to the accompaniment of tin whistles and mouth organs with snatches of 'Tramp, Tramp, the boys are marching' and 'Fall in and follow me' (the favourite strike song all over the country).⁴ The children's attitudes towards the school authorities in various parts of the country differed from complete surrender on the headmaster's appearance to the stoning and harrassing of anyone who remotely looked like representing authority and discipline.

Away from their classrooms the jubilant children began to express themselves in various ways. To some it would be a 'street theatre' and to others the sheer feeling of freedom would exhilarate them enough to address the crowds of boys in the manner of the factory-gate or street-corner agitator.

1. *The Illustrated Chronicle*, 15 Sept. 1911.
2. *Greenock Telegraph*, 15 Sept. 1911.
3. *The Herald*, 16 Sept. 1911.
4. *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 20 Sept. 1911.

To the newspaper columnists they were 'Dunces'; 'The Truant Class'; 'Children from the Poorer Areas'. This attitude shows how the respectable classes regarded them. Throughout the country children began to show originality and independence. The strikes were not all violent. In Hartlepool the boys walked along the sands and picnicked, taking advantage of the splendid late summer weather. In other places they went swimming or simply sat around discussing general topics; they played at being soldiers and paraded; some sang patriotic songs. In Northampton strikers went blackberrying. But more important they entertained themselves with their own music making up the words to songs. These children, despite their stifling school-monotonies of the class-room. They still retained imagination with ideas like the colours in a paint-box.

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