Bermondsey demonstration, August 1911: women workers at Pink’s jam factory, with their supporters. Another of their banners proclaimed 'We are not white slaves, but Pink’s slaves'.
Necessity and Rage: the Factory Women’s Strikes in Bermondsey, 1911

by Ursula de la Mare

In 1935 George Dangerfield, looking back at the industrial crisis of 1911, described the Bermondsey factory women’s strikes as encapsulating the essence of that summer’s turbulence:

The story of the Bermondsey women seems almost to have isolated – with its mingling elements of unreason and necessity and gaiety and rage – the various spirit of the whole Unrest. One stifling August morning, while the [transport workers’] strike was at its height, the women workers in a large confectionery factory, in the middle of Bermondsey, in the ‘black patch of London’,1 suddenly left work. As they went through the streets, shouting and singing, other women left their factories and workshops and came pouring out to join them... The women were underpaid and overcrowded... Yet they were oddly light-hearted, too. Many of them, dressed in all their finery, defied the phenomenal temperature with feather boas and fur tippets, as though their strike were some holiday of the soul, long overdue.2

Dangerfield was commenting on strikes that took place in the south-east London borough of Bermondsey in August 1911, when industrial action by dockers was also going on along the Bermondsey and Rotherhithe riverside. They were initiated by around 15,000 women and girls employed in local jam, biscuit, confectionery and similar food-processing factories, tin-box-making, glue and other manufactures. The strikes, which lasted for about ten days, began as a series of spontaneous demonstrations calling for improved wages and conditions, but became more structured with the intervention of National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) trade-union organizer Mary Macarthur. The factory women’s action ended successfully with wage increases estimated at a total outlay of about £7,000 per annum for all workers.3 Unionization of many of the strikers was signalled when Mary Macarthur announced the establishment of a permanent NFWW branch in the area.4

In 1915 Barbara Hutchins, a member of the Fabian Women’s Group, also described the Bermondsey strikes. According to her account:

In August 1911 came a great uprising of underpaid workers, and among them the women... The tropical heat and sunshine of that summer seemed to evoke new hopes and new desires in a class of workers usually
only too well described as ‘cheap and docile’… Most of them regarded the conditions of their lives as in the main perfectly inevitable, came out on strike to ask only 6d. or 1s. more wages and a quarter of an hour for tea, and could not formulate any more ambitious demands.\(^5\)

In contrast to Dangerfield’s rhapsodic evocation of the strikes, Barbara Hutchins’s more matter- of-fact assessment is nearer to three interpretations of the August unrest made by Sheila Lewenhak, Sarah Boston and Norbert Soldon in the 1970s and 1980s, which located the strikes in the context of the development of women’s trade unionism and the ‘forward march of labour’.\(^6\) These three accounts, like that of Hutchins, rely to a large extent on factual evidence from trade-union and press reports, whereas Dangerfield drew largely on Mary Agnes Hamilton’s admiring biography of trade-union organizer Mary Macarthur.\(^7\) Yet Dangerfield’s vivid rhetoric evokes a sense of the strikes which is not provided by the other more prosaic assessments.

These writers provide valuable retrospective views on the strikes, but there are limitations on the immediate evidence available for an examination of the unrest. The data which can be accessed is usually based on middle-class documentation. There are very few working-class sources relevant to Bermondsey in the early twentieth century; and a time gap of nearly ninety years means that it is impossible to obtain oral life histories from people directly involved with the 1911 events. Primary material is drawn mainly from official reviews and statistics, trade-union reports, press coverage, commentaries by social observers and biographical studies, which present a largely middle-class view of the events. Some of the material on the Bermondsey strikes, for instance, comes from the records of the NFWW and the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), its parent organization, both middle-class-led. Commentators on the social and economic conditions in London, or specifically in Bermondsey, include Charles Booth, Rotherhithe settlement worker Anna Martin, Martha Loane, who was a trained district nurse, and Fabian writers Maud Pember Reeves, Clementina Black, Barbara Drake and Barbara Hutchins.\(^8\) Newspaper accounts can display class hostility, as in some reports from the South London Press, or gender blindness: The Times did not cover the women’s strikes, unlike the liberal Daily News and Daily Chronicle. Official statistics have to be treated with caution, as regards under-recording of married women’s employment, for example, although Ellen Jordan considers that national census returns for girls of fifteen to nineteen employed in industry are reasonably accurate.\(^9\) Direct information on the Bermondsey women’s strikes tends to be brief or impressionistic, or both.

From the early twentieth-century observations available, a picture emerges of the social and economic conditions in Bermondsey which fuelled impoverishment and subsequently industrial militancy. Hardship, added to the industrial organization and employment patterns in the borough, shaped
the situation of women workers and provided the main motivation for the
strikes. Bermondsey, on its isolated but compact site on the south side of the
river, was part of London’s inner manufacturing area, and, although notor-
ious for poverty, was alive with industry. As such, the borough attracted
intense interest from middle-class social observers like Charles Booth and
municipal reformers like Bermondsey doctor Alfred Salter, but still retained
a sense of self-sufficiency. The women striking in August 1911 reflected
Bermondsey’s industrial character, its cohesiveness and its distinctiveness.

The Bermondsey area spreads for over three miles along the south bank
of the Thames, facing the City of London. The Metropolitan Borough of
Bermondsey, set up in 1900, included Rotherhithe, so that in the early
twentieth century the borough stretched from London Bridge on the western
side, bordering Southwark, to the Surrey Docks complex in the east, and as
far south as the Old Kent Road. Bermondsey’s river frontage was the basis
for its industry. Riverside docks and wharves created the primary source of
employment for male workers in Bermondsey and Rotherhithe, although
railway and construction work also provided heavy labouring jobs. River
transport for bulky raw materials fed Bermondsey’s semi-processing indus-
tries, such as leather tanneries and sawmills, and particularly the manufac-
ture and distribution of food products, which explain Bermondsey’s title at
the time of ‘London’s larder’. Tooley Street was the centre of this trade, with
the Hay’s Wharf Company, the leading dockside distributor, responsible for
handling a wide variety of foodstuffs including tea, and, after the introduc-
tion of refrigeration, which the Company helped to pioneer, an international
trade in dairy produce and meat from the 1860s.10

By the end of the nineteenth century, with the establishment of large-scale
jam, biscuit and confectionery manufacturing and of ancillary packaging
firms, such as those for tin-box making, food processing dominated
Bermondsey’s industry, overtaking older industries such as leather tanning,
and providing a major source of employment for women in the area. The
Peek Frean biscuit company, for example, had existed in Bermondsey since
1859, but jam factories were not set up by major firms like Hartley’s and
Lipton until the turn of the century. For male workers, major projects
carried out around the turn of the century (which included the world’s
first electric underground rail system, running from the City to Stockwell
via London Bridge, and the construction of Tower Bridge in 1894 and of the
Rotherhithe Tunnel in 1908) meant continuing opportunities for casual
labouring jobs. With industrialization and the expansion of the transport
system, the population of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe surged from around
65,000 in 1850 to about 126,000 in 1911.

In the mid nineteenth century Bermondsey’s demographic profile showed
that about sixty per cent of residents had London as their birthplace, with
the rest mostly recent immigrants from Ireland and southern England. But
by 1911 over eighty per cent of the population was London-born, creat-
ing a homogeneous, predominantly working-class community.11 Population
densities were high and overcrowding serious: figures for 1911 show thirty per cent of the population of Southwark, with similar conditions to Bermondsey, living in one or two-roomed tenements. Overcrowding was symptomatic of the poverty which defined Bermondsey. Charles Booth’s authoritative survey, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, provides evidence for deprivation in South London generally (in the first series, *Poverty*), and Bermondsey specifically (the third series, *Religious Influences*, included a detailed local investigation carried out around 1900). Booth had identified three levels of poverty in London: Class A represented the lowest class of casual labour, Class B the ‘very poor’ also living on ‘casual earnings’, and Classes C and D, the ‘poor’. Classes A and B subsisted on incomes below 18 shillings a week, Classes C and D on ‘intermittent’ or ‘small, regular earnings’. His survey identified ‘Central South London’, which included Bermondsey, as the London district with the highest poverty level – forty-seven per cent (the average for the metropolis as a whole was thirty-one per cent). He said, ‘I know no set of people in London who look quite so poor as those who do their marketing in Bermondsey New Road on Sunday morning... for debased poverty aggravated by drink this portion of... Bermondsey falls below any other part of London’. Although by the early twentieth century there were attempts by municipal authorities and charities to make welfare improvements in Bermondsey, these were too fragmented and small-scale to have a significant effect. In the face of housing needs, Bermondsey Borough Council, for example, demolished the equivalent of over 3,300 rooms for street improvements between 1902 and 1913, but provided only 490 new rooms to compensate. The provision of more welfare staff and baby clinics reduced the infant-mortality rate marginally by 1910, but not the scale of infectious diseases, notably tuberculosis. Educational reforms, introduced since 1870, had little success in improving the quality of life in an area where children’s work could make a significant contribution to the family income. Mrs Burgwin, headmistress of Orange Street School in the Borough High Street neighbourhood, spoke of her school as a ‘humanizing influence’ in evidence to the 1887 Cross Commission, but acknowledged that ‘the poverty, the sickness, and the home needs of the parents’ created a high rate of absenteeism. Girls suffered particularly as a result of being kept at home to look after younger siblings, while their impoverished mothers went to work in pickle factories or as cleaners. Bermondsey’s poverty was both linked to and alleviated by its industrial structure. The large pool of labour working in transport and the food-processing and packing trades was immobilized into poverty by a self-perpetuating cycle of low-paid, irregular employment. Transport workers, dockers, railwaymen and carmen formed a quarter of Bermondsey’s semi-skilled and unskilled labour force, with dockers in the majority. The dockworkers depended on a system of daily and weekly hiring for subsistence wages; in 1892 the weekly pay for London dockworkers averaged between
thirteen and seventeen shillings, and it remained at a low level into the 1900s. Female labour, as a consequence, became a source of supplementary earnings for family incomes, ‘a kind of reserve market…when the husband comes on bad time’. Booth identified the development of occupations for women outside the home with the pressures on male employment in Bermondsey, such as the increasing casualization of dock work. This resulted, he said, in ‘a great extension of employment for women in the making and packing of jam…chiefly low-class work at low pay…largely seasonal in character’. He referred specifically to the Bermondsey and Southwark riverside as areas with family economies of male dock-workers and women engaged in jam factories and similar trades, or outwork. Statistical evidence indicates that in 1911 women in the jam, confectionery and biscuit-making trades were ten per cent of the female labour force in Bermondsey, with a larger proportion, twenty-four per cent, engaged in outwork such as sackmaking and furpulling.

Against this background of economic hardship, Bermondsey women were seen by some observers as almost symbolizing the deprivation of the area. Charles Booth records the comment of a local schoolmaster on conditions in the Bermondsey and Southwark area: ‘Intermittent or casual employment; low wages; married women at work; squalid homes, dulness, disgust, drink’. But, in their waged work, Bermondsey women demonstrated a capacity for self-help which undermines any image of them as defenceless victims of economic oppression. Contemporary reports indicate their defiance and resourcefulness, foreshadowing the combative 1911 strikers. The women had an unromantic concept of marriage, and could react robustly to men who failed in what was seen to be their primary role as provider. Anna Martin, a Bermondsey settlement worker, reported the reaction of one Mrs S. when her husband was spending money needed at home: ‘I’ve gone into the public and tipped up the table where he was drinking, and once when he struck me I gave him a black eye, then and there, and he’s never touched me since’. Unmarried factory-workers were even more uninhibited: the 1900 Bermondsey parish magazine, predictably censorious, reported attempts to reform ‘wild factory girls…half-drunk, and yelling the lowest music hall songs, and dancing like wild creatures’. Married women relied on pawnbrokers and moneylenders to support fragile household budgets, Booth, for example, mentions the dependence on moneylenders of families in the Tabard Street area of Bermondsey. Cadging and begging as further expedients for survival were noted by Anna Martin as based on ‘exploiting the district visitors, the church workers, the members of care committees, the ladies of the Babies’ Institute, and the general philanthropic public’.

Sometimes pugnacious, South London women were also aware of their interdependence. Maud Pember Reeves referred to the instinctive support mechanisms created by people faced with ‘a morass of intolerable poverty’, which contributed to Bermondsey’s socially cohesive community, and help
to explain the collective action in 1911. Dick Fagan, born in 1905 into a riverside family, spoke of ‘poor and proud’ Bermondsey. As late as the 1950s, Pearl Jephcott recorded a great sense of local loyalty in Bermondsey: ‘Few want to move away, and many are proud to claim ‘We are old Bermondsey people’’. There is still a strong allegiance to Bermondsey today.

The availability of factory work for women in the food-processing industries in Bermondsey provided some relief from poverty through modest earning power, and gave the workers experience both of independence from domesticity and of collective activity. The expansion of food-processing jobs, from which they benefited, reflected the development of the consumer industries nationally in the late nineteenth century and early 1900s, as the result of a rising standard of living; in Bermondsey, for example, Hartley’s built a factory in 1901, adding to numerous existing jam-makers. By 1911 Bermondsey had the highest proportion of female food-workers in London’s inner industrial area: 358 per 10,000, compared with 286 per 10,000 in Poplar, and smaller proportions in Southwark, Stepney and Deptford. Married women formed just under half of the female workforce in the jam factories, and Clementina Black noted how they welcomed the ‘sense of partial freedom and independence’ they gained from working outside the home, a feeling shared with younger women joining the factories from other jobs, who also appreciated the livelier social life in the factories.

Factory work also represented a more attractive form of employment for Bermondsey women than the outwork in which substantial numbers of women in the borough were engaged. Clementina Black, for example, described wood chopping as a rough, seasonal trade, carried out by very poor women married to underemployed dock-labourers. Furpulling, another occupation of outworkers, was notorious for its unsanitary conditions, and exposed workers to a high risk of contracting tuberculosis. A. J. Munby, in the mid nineteenth century, had described female sackmakers from Bermondsey ‘carrying immense loads of sacking on their heads’ over London Bridge.

There were drawbacks as well as benefits, however, creating tensions that help to explain the August 1911 outbreak. Factory-workers were still faced with low wages and an uneven standard of working conditions; the low earnings, in particular, fuelled grievances. Clementina Black, investigating women workers’ conditions in the jam, pickle and tea-packing industries in the early 1900s, concluded that ‘the figure of 7s.6d. a week, which Miss Mary Macarthur’s experience leads her to assign as the average wage, taking the year through of a London factory worker, seems not far out as regards this group of workers’. This amount was based on the average basic rates for jam and other food workers. Black calculated that a full-time jam-factory worker could expect to earn ten to eleven shillings a week, but this amount was subject to reductions because of the seasonal nature of the work. ‘Onioners’ and fruit bottlers could earn ten to twelve shillings in
busy seasons, but only 3s 6d in slack times.\textsuperscript{34} Black’s estimate is supported by a press report on the August 1911 strikes citing weekly wages of seven to eleven shillings for workers in the jam and pickle trades. Deductions for expenses and fines could further reduce pay. J. J. Mallon, secretary of the Anti-Sweating League, in a commentary on the August 1911 women’s strikes, reconstructs a factory worker’s grievances: ‘Threepence for ten minutes late, and 1s if you stand orf, and 1d for washing, and 2d for the dining room, which ain’t fit for a pig.’\textsuperscript{35} The inadequacy of a seven to nine shillings average wage is shown up by Booth’s estimate of a male casual labourer’s earnings of between eighteen and twenty-one shillings a week, already below his notional poverty line. Wage differentials in themselves did not become an issue in the women’s strikes, but they underline the low level of women’s wages, which did. Commentators had judged this to be the main explanation for the strikes: Mary Agnes Hamilton, for example, said the ‘cause’ was self-evident, ‘Conditions at any time were bad: 7s. to 9s. was an average wage for women, while thousands of girls earned 3s.’\textsuperscript{36}

The experience of poor working conditions was not an equivalent stimulus to the women’s action, but can still be seen as part of the background to the strikes. Barbara Hutchins’s description of the working environment of Bermondsey factory women suggests why poor conditions, linked to low pay, were the basic grievances underlying the strikes. Hutchins said that the workers’ situation was ‘almost indescribable. Many of them work ten and a half hours a day, pushed and urged to utmost speed, carrying cauldrons of boiling jam on slippery floors, standing five hours at a time, and all this often for about 8s. a week’. An 1893 inquest into a fatal accident involving a girl working at Pink’s jam factory returned a verdict of accidental death, but revealed details of long hours and inadequate facilities at the works: Pink’s workers were later in the forefront of the 1911 strikes.\textsuperscript{37} By contrast, the management of Peek Frean, biscuit manufacturers, prided themselves on the benefits provided for their employees: a nine-hour working day (introduced in 1872), medical services and recreational facilities, which included dramatic and musical societies and, for the male workers, athletics and cricket clubs. But the factory girls (Peek Frean operated a marriage bar) still went on strike to improve their pay.\textsuperscript{38}

Bermondsey factory women were on strike for around ten days in August 1911, from about 10 August to the last week in the month, against the background of the month-long male transport workers’ strike. The strikes were part of the period of widespread labour upheaval in Britain between 1910 and 1914. For Dangerfield this was essentially political in character; he connected the industrial disruption with the constitutional crisis of 1910 (the ‘Tories’ Rebellion’) and the suffragette disturbances (the ‘Women’s Rebellion’) and represented the general unrest as an attack on the Liberal ascendancy. Disagreeing, Henry Pelling contended in 1979 that the origins of the industrial conflict were economic, independent of the political and social influences affecting the other two disputes.\textsuperscript{39} In support of this view
he cited George Askwith, government industrial adviser at the time. Askwith argued that a rise in the cost of living without parallel wage rises was the root cause of the strikes, a diagnosis which is borne out for London by statistics showing a fall of about seven per cent in real wages in the capital between 1900 and 1914, and a Board of Trade estimate of an increase in food prices of eleven per cent in the period 1905 to 1912. The view that economic issues were behind both the women’s and the parallel transport workers’ strikes was shared by others at the time. The *Daily Chronicle* reported that the women went on strike after they had been ‘persuaded by the men to use this opportunity for demanding increased wages’. Barbara Hutchins considered that the ‘strike of transport workers set going a movement which caught even the women’. Barbara Drake wrote that the factory women ‘emulated the actions of the transport workers, and came out on strike’.

These comments point to the initial impetus given to the Bermondsey women strikers by the transport workers’ action, but suggest only a loose connection between the two groups of strikers. The evidence indicates that there was no direct association between the two groups during the strikes, although they took place simultaneously, in the same place, for the same reasons. The women were undoubtedly encouraged by the men’s example, but they took the initiative themselves and the two movements advanced separately, reflecting their different structures. The Bermondsey men involved in the London-wide transport workers’ strikes of July and August 1911 were operating within a tradition of unionism stretching back to the 1889 dockers’ strike and the creation of the general labour associations, the ‘new unions’, while the women were non-unionized when they went on strike. The men’s action can thus be seen as part of a continuum of industrial activism, the women’s as an individual effort, later reinforced by the women’s trade union, the NFWW.

If male trade unionism only played a supporting role in the advancement of the women factory workers’ strikes, the women’s trade-union movement made a significant contribution. But arguably this did not detract from the self-generated character of the strikes, as female unionism can be said to have acted as a mediating, rather than controlling, agency in August 1911. With no tradition of trade-union organization or industrial militancy, the initial action of the Bermondsey women strikers was taken independently, although spurred on by the transport workers. In spite of the potential for collective organization created by the large numbers of low-paid factory women, there is little evidence of any interest in unionization in Bermondsey before August 1911, apart from an abortive attempt by women at Pink’s jam factory to form a Women’s Trade Union League branch in 1897. The WTUL had been set up in the late nineteenth century, by middle-class organizers, specifically to promote trade-union activity among working-class women. Despite this, levels of female unionization were generally low in the early 1900s, and particularly in the food-processing and related industries. At the end of 1910, it was estimated that nationally
there were about 5,000 female trade unionists in the food, drink, tobacco and printing industries (the trades were amalgamated in the statistics), compared with the only large unionized group, the 183,000 textile workers. The lack of enthusiasm for trade-union organization is understandable, given the overworked and poverty-stricken nature of working women’s lives. Kathleen Woodward, in a fictionalized, semi-autobiographical account of women’s way of life in pre-1914 Bermondsey, describes the suspicion with which working women regarded attempts to recruit them into trade unions, with their accompanying subscription fees: for them, ‘even two pennies a week represented a loaf of bread that, for a time at least, would quiet a family of hungry children’.

The establishment of the NFWW in 1906, under the auspices of the WTUL, represented an effort to widen the appeal of trade-union organization for women by the development of a unit tailored closely to the needs of female workers, and therefore more attractive to them. Its success in achieving this objective can be measured by the extent of its influence on the Bermondsey women’s strikes. Mary Macarthur, secretary of the WTUL at the time, set up the organization in the belief that women’s trade unionism represented a remedy for working women’s impoverishment:

...the low standard of living may be stated to be at once the cause and consequence of women’s lack of organization. This sounds paradoxical, but it is nevertheless true that while women are badly paid because they are unorganized, they may be unorganized because they are badly paid.

Mary Macarthur’s influence on the Bermondsey strikes, her personality and the policies of the NFWW which she led were important components in the eventual success of the action. Despite Macarthur’s middle-class background, she saw the NFWW as a female version of the general labour unions, dedicated to unionizing women from unorganized trades. There was also the case for a separate, all-female union, in view of evidence of male hostility towards the organization of women into trade unions. Ben Tillett, for example, secretary of the Dockers’ Union, was later to offer support to the women strikers, using the NFWW as an intermediary, but in 1896 he had written in the WTUL journal, the Women’s Trade Union Review, that male trade unionists ‘resented the interference of “petticoats” in their organizing work’. Will Thorne, who had been leader of the Gasworkers’ and General Labourers’ Union but became the Labour MP for West Ham South in 1906, told Barbara Hutchins in 1910 that he did not think women should be organized because ‘they do not make good trade unionists’. But although a women’s union, the NFWW used the methods of male trade unionism to advance women’s welfare: the aim was to put pressure on employers to improve their female staff’s wages and conditions, with the strike weapon the main method. The union had been particularly effective in
organizing strikes amongst women factory-workers elsewhere in London between 1906 and 1914, with generally successful outcomes. In the case of Bermondsey, however, the NFWW intervention followed the women’s spontaneous protests.

In Bermondsey in August 1911, the large-scale men’s strikes, closely organized by their unions, contrasted with the smaller, less structured women’s action. The transport workers took action nationally in the summer of 1911 in a series of powerful strikes, often unofficial and sometimes violent, in the major British ports and the railway system. London workers’ demonstrations began fully at the beginning of August, and their disputes were characterized by tensions not only between unions and employers but also between the union leadership and rank-and-file members. The latter’s opposition to what they saw as the limitations of wage settlements negotiated by employers and union leaders forced the continuation of industrial action. The unrest was exacerbated by the record heat, with temperatures reaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit. In the borough itself, where the Southwark and Bermondsey Recorder described the demonstrators as influenced by an overwhelming ‘strike spirit’, the striking transport workers’ activities, pickets, marches, meetings and occasional eruptions of violence mirrored London militancy as a whole. The men’s strike activities were generally confined within a trade-union framework: on Friday 11 August, for example, the local press described the ‘excellent organization’ of the striking dockers, with pickets stationed in the main streets, ‘the usual Tower Hill meetings and the processions in the dock area’. South London dockers attended a mass meeting in Trafalgar Square with a banner reading, ‘No man to return to work unless ordered to do so by the Transport Workers’ Federation’ (NTWF: the umbrella union organization for transport employees). But there were also reports of intimidation of non-striking workers, van men outside Pink’s jam factory, for example, on the look-out for blackleg labour.

The Bermondsey factory women’s strikes, on the other hand, which began in the second week of August, were unprompted and unorganized, although there were similarities in the atmosphere of the opening stages of their action. The Daily Chronicle reported ‘strike fever’ spreading through the Bermondsey factories. Mary Agnes Hamilton, in the more literary style of her biography of Mary Macarthur, notes the oppressive heat, then describes how the ‘brittle nerves’ of the factory women, who had been supporting their striking menfolk, ‘suddenly gave way’ and they burst into action, suggesting the unrestrained nature of the women’s protest. In the same way, Fenner Brockway, recording the beginning of the dispute in his life of Alfred Salter, suggests it was the release of suppressed frustration that gave the strikers their wild enthusiasm: they ‘could not even voice their grievances, they knew nothing of how to run a strike; they just knew that the conditions of their existence were intolerable, and they would no longer
They went laughing and singing through Bermondsey, shouting ‘Are we downhearted?’ and answering the question by a shrill chorus of ‘No!’ It was noticeable that many of them had put on their ‘Sunday best’. In spite of the great heat, hundreds of them wore fur boas and tippets – the sign of self-respect.

Women working at Benjamin Edgington, tentmakers, joined by some female employees from Pearce Duff, custard makers, marched down Tooley Street ‘singing the strike marseillaise, “Fall in and follow me!”’ Women from Pink’s jam factory were in the forefront of the strikes, parading the streets of Bermondsey with a banner inscribed, ‘We are not white slaves, but Pink’s slaves.’

Besides the women from the three firms mentioned above, employees of over fifteen other firms came out on strike, including from Peek Frean biscuits and Hartley’s jam factories. A striker at Shuttleworth’s chocolate factory told a *Southwark and Bermondsey Recorder* journalist, ‘We are striking for more pay, mister, and we won’t go in till we get it’. But the *Southwark and Bermondsey Recorder*, admittedly a local newspaper more favourable to the employers than the strikers, also suggested only a ‘very few’ of the women went on strike voluntarily ‘and for the pure fun of the thing’, with the majority forced to stop work either by intimidation by their fellow employees, or because of factory lock-outs by the employers. Mr Greene of the major Bermondsey firm Peek Frean, for example, when interviewed by the paper said that he considered ninety per cent of the firm’s staff were loyal, and would not have contemplated going on strike without the ‘reign of terror’ of the militants. In his opinion, this situation applied to most workplaces in Bermondsey at the time. This view cannot be considered reliable, however, given other newspaper reports, including national coverage by the *Daily Chronicle* and *Daily News*, of widespread enthusiasm for the strikes.

The NFWW intervention came soon after the outbreak of the women’s strikes. Organizers Mary Macarthur and Marion Phillipps set up their headquarters at the Fort Road Institute, the base of the Bermondsey Independent Labour Party group led by Dr Alfred Salter. The intervention of middle-class activists in the women’s strikes provided a crucial structure to the women’s action, shaping their spontaneous withdrawal of labour into an effective lever on the employers. Nevertheless their involvement did not entail a transfer of initiative from the factory-workers to the NFWW, but gave additional momentum to an already existing campaign. The NFWW’s decision to intervene was in line with their previous policy of moving in to support factory women’s protests; once in position in Bermondsey, a mismatch between the original unorganized protest and the more formal
procedures of the NFWW was avoided by Macarthur’s tactful direction. It is easy to overestimate the importance of her role in the strikes, the *Daily Chronicle*, for example, describing her as ‘the leader of this spirit of revolt’. A more realistic definition of Macarthur’s contribution would be that of facilitator, co-ordinating activities such as negotiations with employers and the organization of demonstrations, which built on the strikers’ own actions.

Mary Macarthur arrived in Bermondsey to meet great disorder:

> In the heat, the air fetid with the mingled smell of jam and glue, biscuits and pickles, the sickly odour of jam predominating, the streets were packed with people. To find out what was going on was in itself an almost impossible task: to cope with the confusion hopeless.

The procedures that she now set in motion, forming strike committees, launching demonstrations, introducing publicity techniques, were designed to support the NFWW’s main function, transacting wage settlements with employers on behalf of the strikers. The establishment of a strike headquarters in the Fort Road Institute was followed by weeks of intense NFWW activity. The Bermondsey women received the union organizers with enthusiasm, besieging the Institute in their thousands. Female strikers assembled at the Institute from six in the morning till midnight, to have their cases reviewed by NFWW officials, in preparation for negotiations with employers.

NFWW tactics in their discussions with factory management focused on confronting them with a list of wage demands. Women workers gathered in one room at the Fort Road Institute to tabulate their grievances, while a committee in another prepared the scheme for wage claims. Employers were then presented with the list, and direct action could be recommended by the union to enforce their demands. The tactics used with the obstructive management of Peek Frean indicate NFWW methods. Peek Frean managers had closed down the factory for four days from Thursday 10 August, rather than accede to the strikers’ claims. Meetings, reinforced with picket lines, were then called by the union organizers, and the workforce urged not to return to work unless wage increases were agreed. Peek Frean employees assembled at Rotherhithe Town Hall, for example, and were addressed by Marion Philipps. Wage increases were eventually conceded.

Mary Macarthur made skilful use of publicity to support the strikers, as in the very personal call for aid she made in a letter to the *Daily News*: ‘Sir, May I through your columns make an appeal for bread for the women and children in South East London? ... Many thousands of women are on strike, many more are locked out, the pawn shops are closed ...’ Describing the women’s marginal weekly wages, she ended with a direct request for bread to be sent to the Fort Road Institute. Within a week nearly £500 had been raised, which contributed to the provision of bread and sterilized milk for the strikers’ families. Mary Agnes Hamilton commented tartly on the
sudden alarming number of mothers with seven children, queuing at the Institute for their allocation of milk.62

Publicity for the women’s strikes was also gained through the NFWW’s organization of public meetings and marches, building on the impetus of the strikers’ own early demonstrations. Marion Phillipps, working out of the Fort Road Institute, planned daily processions, the strikers armed with collecting boxes. A strike rally held on 14 August, at which the speakers included Ben Tillett and Mary Macarthur, was reported to have attracted an audience of 10,000, the women marching (‘most of them hatless’) with banners flying, although another newspaper report spoke of weary-looking women, many carrying babies. The women were quoted as being determined ‘to have a bit of their own back’. A further meeting on 19 August marked the strikers’ victory. The cumulative effect of the press campaigns, relief work at the Institute, and open-air demonstrations had aroused support for the strikers from areas outside the borough, ‘infected by the Bermondsey spirit’.63

The NFWW’s mobilization of support for unionism as part of their campaign was more problematic, although this was a primary aim. Affiliation to a union was seen by Mary Macarthur as a powerful negotiating tool with employers; she considered that union membership strengthened strikers’ bargaining power. At the 19 August victory rally, she announced the establishment of twenty unions in Bermondsey, converting the borough, she said, from Charles Booth’s ‘black patch of London’ to a centre for women’s trade unionism.64 But it was only a partial conversion. Peek Frean granted wage rises, but refused to recognize the union.65 Similarly, Southwell’s, a large-scale jam maker at Dockhead, agreed after face-to-face meetings with the strikers to increase pay for their female employees, but declined to give union recognition. This refusal was, however, not contested by the NFWW officials involved.66 Perhaps there was an unspoken awareness on their part of the paramount importance of material benefits, rather than union solidarity, for the strikers.

The significance of male trade-union support for the Bermondsey women strikers can also be questioned, although it was hailed by Mary Macarthur as an example of collective action. When Ben Tillett promised to pressurize employers who reneged on wage concessions to their female employees by calling a carmen’s strike, she concluded, ‘This [trade-union] movement will win many victories for suffering womanhood’.67 In the event, Tillett was not called on to make good his offer. But Macarthur’s words were an overstatement: male unionism represented background support, rather than combined action, in the women’s dispute.

The eventual outcome of the Bermondsey women’s strikes was success in obtaining wage rises from most of the employers involved. Dr Salter said that women in nineteen factories had returned to work with increased wages and better conditions, with no improvement in only three cases.68 The NFWW, in its annual report for 1911, gave a detailed account of the
wage rises ‘obtained by the Federation’ in Bermondsey. They presented standardized rates for all the trades involved, apart from those for jam factory workers, where they reported the figure for Pink’s, presumably because it denoted a benchmark amount for jam factory employees in general. The following pay scale for workers in jam, biscuit and confectionery factories are listed in the NFWW report:

- **Pink’s jam factory**: wage increase from 9/- to 11/- a week. [Other jam factories included Hartley’s, Lipton and Southwell.]
- ‘Biscuit-makers: 1/- rise all round for time workers’ [including Peek Frean].
- ‘Cocoa-makers’ [e.g. Shuttleworth’s]: improved wages for all workers. A graded scale to be introduced, with a minimum wage for girls aged 14 of 4s 7d, rising annually to 12s 4d. at age eighteen; pieceworkers on day work to receive a rise of 3d. an hour; piece rates to be increased.\(^\text{69}\)

The Bermondsey factory women’s successful strikes were startling in their revelation of the power of unorganized, unskilled women to launch an effective campaign for betterment. But the significance claimed for them in the rhetoric of commentators at the time and by later writers like Dangerfield may be questioned. The evidence suggests that their protest was a small-scale, free-standing operation with short-term aims, rather than a standard bearer for the wider labour movement or a symbol of the development of women’s trade unionism.

The Trades Union Congress passed a resolution in September 1911 congratulating the Bermondsey women trade unionists for the successes they had achieved as participants in ‘this great revolution’, the 1911 industrial militancy.\(^\text{70}\) George Dangerfield was to link the Bermondsey women’s action with the transport workers’ strike, which he said had ‘gathered up all the fragmentary grievances of a vast port. And not of a port only…’; the strikes had ‘gathered up all the spirit of the whole Unrest’. More factual, near contemporary accounts made similar interpretations. According to Barbara Hutchins the transport workers’ strike initiated ‘a movement which caught even the women’, while Barbara Drake (as we have seen) referred to the women’s strikes as part of the ‘industrial unrest’.\(^\text{71}\) But, although the Bermondsey factory women were undoubtedly influenced by the parallel transport workers’ demonstrations, in which many of their men-folk were involved, they took independent action, alongside, but not as part of, the men’s strikes. They cannot then be depicted as representing the national labour agitation.

Some recent historians have placed the Bermondsey action within the development of the women’s trade-union movement, and by inference within the advance of the labour movement as a whole, on the basis of the NFWW’s involvement in the strikes.\(^\text{72}\) The achievements of the Bermondsey strikes undoubtedly added to the advance of women’s trade
unionism, marking its success in the large-scale mobilization and co-ordination of unskilled women workers in an industrial dispute. But since the dynamic of the strikes came as much from the initial upsurge of the women themselves as from later union activity, the role of women’s trade unionism in the Bermondsey action can be overemphasized. The Bermondsey women’s strikes burst out spontaneously in August 1911, uninhibited by any tradition of industrial organization, and the NFWW’s entry into the dispute was contingent on the women’s initial agitation. The support and organizing skills of the NFWW were indeed crucial to the successful conclusion of the women’s strikes. At the same time, the evidence suggests, the strikers’ reliance on the formal women’s trade-union association was mainly expedient: they needed the experience of the union leadership to structure their protest. Once their goals had been achieved, the strikers gradually abandoned unionism. Loyalty to the NFWW collapsed after August 1911: membership of the Bermondsey branch of the WTUL, responsible for co-ordination of the strikes, shrank from 2,000 members to 40 in two years.73

Other features of the strikes further support their description as a localized, self-generated action. In the view of feminist historians, the part played by women workers’ own initiative and energy in industrial activism has been undervalued. According to Deborah Thom, the dominance of female trade-union leaders in the organization of labour disputes should be balanced against the part played by the women workers themselves; the Bermondsey action supports her contention. The boisterousness and disorganization of the initial Bermondsey demonstrations correspond to Eleanor Gordon’s identification of specific female characteristics in workplace resistance at the time – spontaneity, lack of restraint, an element of street theatre – which, she argues, differentiated women’s militancy from more formal male trade unionism.74 Evidence from 1911 also suggests that some contemporary observers were aware of the self-motivated nature of the Bermondsey women’s protest. Union leaders, for example, seemed to sense that they were dealing with a group of individuals rather than an organized membership, when commenting on the psychological, as well as material, benefits gained by the Bermondsey strikers from their action. The Women’s Trade Union Review, journal of the WTUL, referred to ‘the new sense of self-reliance, solidarity and comradeship’ amongst the strikers after August 1911. Although the Trades Union Congress resolution’s praise for the Bermondsey women as part of the ‘great revolution’ can be questioned, their resolution went on to say, ‘Perhaps the greatest joy of all is the fact that our womenfolk took part in this [revolution]; and as a consequence one of the most despised sections of the industrial population has raised itself up’.75 While Dangerfield’s vivid description of ‘the unreason and necessity and gaiety and rage’ of the Bermondsey women as a symbol of ‘the various spirit of the whole Unrest’ evokes the excitement of the strikers, it obscures
the separateness of their protest. The Bermondsey women were independent players in the arena of industrial discontent in 1911.

Ursula de la Mare was a further-education lecturer in history at Southwark College for twenty years. Teaching on a Bermondsey site aroused her interest in the area’s past. Combined with involvement with women’s history, this led to research for an MA at Birkbeck College which focused particularly on the Bermondsey women’s strikes.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

7 Hamilton, Mary Macarthur (see n. 1).


22 *Census of England and Wales, 1911*: Occupations, pp. 299–301.


28 Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week*, p. 39.


31 *Census of England and Wales, 1911*: Summary Tables, p. 237.


37 Hutchins, *Women in Modern Industry*, p. 135; *Southwark Recorder and Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Advertiser*, 8 April 1893.


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Deborah Thom (‘The Bundle of Sticks’, pp. 263, 285) has stressed the importance of working women’s own initiative in taking industrial action, suggesting that the role of female trade-union leaders in organizing these workers has been overemphasized. Eleanor Gordon (‘Women, Work and Collective Action: Dundee Jute Workers 1870–1906’, Journal of Social History 21: 1, 1987, pp. 42–4) has identified the spontaneity, disorganization and high spirits of the female Dundee jute workers on strike in the early 1900s as special features of the women’s industrial action, contrasting with the more sober tactics of male trade unionists. The Dundee women’s strikes should not then be regarded as insignificant because of their style of operation, she argues, but as a relevant form of protest.

Women’s Trades Union Review, October 1911; Trades Union Congress, 44th Annual Report, 1911, p. 227.