

Foreword

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HISTORY, LIKE POLITICS or any other industry, is a fiercely contested ideological space. With evidence marshalled like pieces on the chess board, the framing and interpretation of the game can radically alter our perceptions of the past and serve to either extend or to inhibit our horizons and goals in the present. History defines our sense of community and shared cultural values; it shapes our common vocabulary and even serves to forge our ideas about—and our responses to—the nature of contemporary political and industrial struggles.

History is, therefore, very much worth fighting for, and engaging with. John Tully's book is all about that battle and the sense of original archival discovery that permits the voices, actions, and ideals of long-forgotten working men and women to speak directly to us, in their own way and on their own terms. It is a considerable achievement; not least on account of the difficulties inherent in trying to reconstruct the lives and motivations of the silenced majority of Victorian Britain: the wealth creators, who were actively prohibited from sharing in their gains, and who, more often than not, had neither the leisure, nor the opportunity to record their own thoughts and feelings.

In the case of the strikers at Silvertown, in the autumn and winter of 1889, this book demonstrates their utter refusal to be broken by poverty; to be ground down by cynicism; or to be cowed by the forces arrayed against them by both their employers and the state. Moreover, this determined stance led, swiftly and surely, to the realisation that rights and freedoms—to education, to health care, to meaningful and well-paid work, to social and economic justice, and to dignity in old age—were never going to be freely conceded by the privileged few. Rather, they would have to be won

through concerted, collective action and shared principle, on the part of the many whose industry and life-blood drove the machines and fed the furnaces of the world's first industrial nation, the shock-centre of modern capitalism. Furthermore, as John Tully appreciates but many of our politicians, including some of those of the Left, would rather forget: those early socialist pioneers knew that these liberties, once won, would have to be jealously guarded and forcefully defended, each and every day, against those who would seize them back again or else seek to give them away without a struggle, a backwards glance, or second thought.

For these reasons, history is important to today's General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union, the GMB. The union which was at the centre of the storm at Silvertown welcomes this new book wholeheartedly; as it restores to prominence an important early chapter in its development. The union, like the solidarity of its members who fought so valiantly on the streets of London's East End, was founded upon a big idea. It sought to represent the underdog, the unskilled worker, and to unequivocally and unapologetically represent class as opposed to sectional interests. It was serious about redistributing power and wealth from the "haves" to the "have-nots"; appreciative of the risks it ran and of the destruction of earlier general unions; and driven by a clearly articulated Marxist vision that found its expression in the guiding objective of the union's first rule book. Thus, members were called upon to "remember that the interests of all Workers are one, and a wrong done to any kind of Labour is a wrong done to the whole of the Working Class, and that victory or defeat of any portion of the Army of Labour is a gain or a loss to the whole of that Army, which by its organisation and union is marching steadily and irresistibly forward to its ultimate goal—the Emancipation of the Working Class. That Emancipation can only be brought about by the strenuous and united efforts of the Working Class itself."

The prescience of this injunction would seem to be borne out in the pages of *Silvertown: The Lost Story of a Strike that Shook London and Helped Launch the Modern Labor Movement*, where two main factors are highlighted in the account of the defeat of the strikers. The first emphasises the sense of unity and ruthless purpose that characterised the board of management at the rubber works, which scorned any form of negotiation or compromise with their workforce. It understood, with absolute clarity, what was at stake for the capitalist system if concessions began to undermine the ability to amass private profit by any means at its disposal. Thus the ideology of the board members was more absolute, more explicitly adhered to, and more attuned to the single-minded practice

and preservation of power than anything advanced by the Fabians in the Labor Movement, or by the vast majority of unions within the Trades Union Congress. The resilience, youth, and radicalism of Will Thorne, Eleanor Marx, Pete Curran, and Frederick Ling—whose leading role in the dispute is highlighted here, for the first time—were as new, as challenging and as controversial as the form of trade unionism that they collectively espoused and inspired. As a consequence, the second reason for the collapse of the strike lay in the antipathy felt by the older, skilled craft unions towards the new general union that sought to represent and to promote unskilled labour. On this occasion, the company directors and shareholders knew better than either the executive of the ASE or the London Trades Council that unity really was strength.

In this light, it is not difficult to understand why, until now, the Silvertown strike has not featured strongly in GMB histories. Industrial armies, like their military counterparts, usually seek to celebrate their victories, rather than to commemorate their defeats; and this was especially true as the dispute signalled the first major check by the employers to the growth of New Unionism. In its wake, the union and its leaders—who, like Thorne, had displayed an overconfidence that bordered upon hubris at Silvertown—were forced to acknowledge that the campaign for a better world would now be long and protracted, measured in months and years, rather than being the matter of a sudden, once-and-for-all clash between the forces of labour and capital, that hinged upon tactics formulated from day-to-day and from week-to-week. This repositioning would have profound consequences for the union that were still being felt in the 1970s, but before we fall back upon the old cries of betrayal and longings for what might have been, we would do well to consider the positive developments that the strike set in train.

Silvertown brought Eleanor Marx firmly into contact with both the union and with the women and men of the East End. It provided her with a new purpose and sense of comradeship, and permitted her to combine her own remarkable skills as both office administrator and as street corner orator. She appears to have been everywhere, in constant motion and creative symbiosis with her constituency—advising, heartening and finding new ways to feed the strikers and their families. Furthermore, she acted as a catalyst for the union's decision to admit women to membership, and founded the first women's branch at Silvertown, on 10 October 1889, enabling feminist, alongside Marxist, currents to course through every fibre of the new union. For the next six years, she successfully combined the roles of activist and propagandist—collecting branch donations

and dues door-to-door in Silvertown—with the duties of a national trade union official, and her position as one of the leading figures within the Second Socialist International. The union was, for its first decade, deeply influenced by her example and ideals, and it was Silvertown which provided the cornerstone for her engagement with it.

In a similar vein, the dispute also set the scene for the first meeting between Will Thorne and Pete Curran, and set the seal upon their lasting friendship. Though his contribution to the formation of the Labour Party is now largely forgotten, Curran drove the political strategy of the union for more than twenty years and was one of the first Labour MPs, serving the Jarrow constituency from 1907 to 1910. At the time of the Silvertown strike, he had only just arrived in the capital from his hometown of Glasgow, and was employed as a steam-hammer operator in the Woolwich Arsenal. Like many of the early figures in the union's development, such as J. R. Clynes, Jim Connell, and Jack Jones, he came from an Irish background and combined the themes of anti-imperialism, opposition to militarism, and the Boer War with an overtly Marxist conception of socialism and societal development. Though neither he nor Eleanor would live to see it, the election of Jack Jones as the union-sponsored MP for Silvertown, in 1918, provided a fitting tribute to the sacrifices and dedication of those who had gone on strike a generation earlier and who had first raised the red flag outside the walls of Matthew Gray's factory.

The GMB that has reemerged, since 2005, similarly exists to make life better, to seek to change the rules of the game and to positively load the dice in favour of the many rather than the few. Perhaps at no time since August 1914 has the union been closer to the vision of its founders and consequently it takes enormous pride in the course it chartered at Silvertown. John Tully's book is as committed, as passionate, and as clear-sighted as those pioneers who staked everything they had for the sake of our tomorrow. It recalls tragedies and injustices, but it also encourages us to remember the scope of the Labour Movement's advance and the simple, un-declarative heroism that saw unskilled women and men, old and the young, with no financial reserves or access to the media, and with starvation threatening, brave police truncheons, pauperisation, and the chill of the cold to wage a strike that lasted some 89 days. How many more possibilities could be achieved by the unions of today, with full-time officers, legal teams, campaign funds, and access to the Internet and the press? In this light, we hope that *Silvertown: The Lost Story of a Strike that Shook London and Helped Launch the Modern Labor Movement* gains the widest possible audience, both union and non-union, academic

and popular, and would wish to applaud his work in recovering this account of our past. It is for today's GMB to lay its own claim to shaping the future.