

Thank you to Lewisham Local History Society for having me come to your meeting and talk about the gas industry in Greenwich. I am sorry that at the end of the meeting I was asked questions about the 1889 Gas Workers strike – and my answers were, I guess, not OK. Let me explain – although there will not be space here for the whole tangled saga.

The 1889 Gas Workers Strike was my first piece of ‘proper’ research in the 1970s – originally my undergraduate dissertation and then expanded into an M. Phil.

The story ‘everybody’ has heard is that in 1889 the ‘new unions’ were set up for and by unskilled men, and Will Thorne led a strike to bring in the 8 hour day. Sadly, almost all of that statement is wrong.

The ‘new unions’ were an academic concept in the 1960s and unfortunately those academics had not done enough research. There was certainly organised industrial action in the gas industry from, probably, the 1830s and a very major and bitter strike in the early 1870s. One of the dreadful results of that strike was government legislation that made strike action among gas workers illegal. Notices were put up in gas works informing workers of the dire consequences of striking.

The group of workers this is about are retort house workers – heavy, dangerous work which was seasonal, in that many were laid off in the summer. There were also many other workers of all kinds in the works and out in the streets. In older works the retort houses were on a 12 hours on, 12 hours off shift system, but with increasing mechanisation managements were introducing a team based, 8 hour shift system. Locally we also have to take in account the extremely poor relations between gas companies north and south of the river.

Will Thorne had become the voice of the re-formed Gas Workers Union and he approached management at the north London based Gas Light and Coke Company for the ‘8 hour day’. Management called meetings with other gas companies to discuss this – and South Met’s George Livesey walked out and stayed away. It was agreed to implement the 8 hour system – which was already in place in Livesey’s South London works. Thorne then went to Manchester where another dispute was underway.

Meanwhile in South London Livesey introduced his planned profit sharing scheme – without bothering to ask his Board, who would probably have refused. It was based on his sliding scale of gas pricing, already mandatory for other gas company managements. The deal for the workforce included clauses which would have made a sudden ‘down tools’ impossible. Livesey then called big meetings of South Met. workers to explain the scheme. The unionised workers in South Met. objected saying the scheme should be withdrawn and that they should have negotiating rights.

When union recognition was not forthcoming, workers on a set date gave in their notices, withdrew their pension lump sums en masse – and then followed a bitter period with replacement workers besieged in the works, street fights, starvation and penury. After that, there was an attempt by various bodies to negotiate, all of which failed. The gas works continued to function and, presumably, the ex-workforce found other jobs.

Unions never were allowed in South Met. right up until nationalisation in the 1940s. The company instituted an elaborate and long lasting workers consultation body alongside the profit sharing scheme. In the 1970s I interviewed gas workers who described themselves as dedicated trade

unionists but who kept their membership quiet at work – and who praise the company system while saying they knew it was wrong.

I wrote all this up in a now defunct Labour history journal 'South London Record' and it is on one of my blogs as <http://greenwichindustrialhistory.blogspot.co.uk/2017/07/the-south-london-gas-workers-strike-1889.html>

I hope this is of interest – and, as I said at the meeting, I have never found any reference to Eleanor Marx in contemporary sources (apart from Will Thorne's biography). Her dodgy gentleman friend, Aveling, does appear occasionally though.