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**Trade Union Banners and the Construction of a Working Class Presence: Notes  
From Two Labour Disputes in 1980s Glasgow and North Lanarkshire**

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## **Trade Union Banners and the Construction of a Working Class Presence: Notes From Two Labour Disputes in 1980s Glasgow and North Lanarkshire**

### **Introduction**

Between June, 1985 and 1987 workers at the Morris's furniture plant in Cowcaddens, Glasgow were involved in a protracted two-year strike. The dispute was occasioned by a shift from a 39 to 41 ¼ hour week, which was in direct contravention of a national agreement in the furniture making industry. In March of 2014, Brian McKee, the Shop Steward with the Furniture and Allied Trades Union (FTAT) during the strike, talked about his involvement in the dispute at a workshop on Banner Tales. McKee recounted his feeling on seeing banners being carried up to the picket line at Morris's by shipyard workers.

As a small amount of people as our strike was when you are standing on your picket line on the Friday and the buses start turning up and you see that banner. You just get lifted – you're no longer a boy. It's not the guys carrying the flag it is the five thousand people that are standing behind it – 'there you are, there is Govan!' And that will keep us going for weeks when you are six guys standing on the picket line. [...] it is quite emotional seeing that (McKee 2014: n.p.)

McKee's testimony emphasises the impact of seeing banners arriving from other workplaces at the Morris's picket line. It gives a clear sense of the ways such banners were integral to practices of solidarity, which were essential for breaking up the isolation of long periods spent on the picket line in a small industrial dispute. McKee's account gives a strong sense of the importance of banners in forging a "working-class presence" and relates this directly to constructions of masculinity. E.P Thompson (1968) used this evocative term to describe the formation of assertive working-class cultures and actors in the early nineteenth century. It provides a useful starting point for thinking through the ways in which working-class politics shapes, uses and transforms space through its political activity.

This paper draws on a project 'Banner Tales of Glasgow', which is the result of an ongoing collaboration between geographers, museum staff and trade unionists. The paper draws on testimonies from workers' involved in two disputes, the Morris's dispute and the 103-day occupation of the Caterpillar plant at Uddingston in North Lanarkshire in 1987. We use these testimonies to think about the use of banners in the construction of working-class solidarities. The paper situates trade union banners in relation to debates on the forms of moral economy that shaped prominent industrial disputes in the 1980s. It then explores the dynamics of territorialisation in the occupation of the Caterpillar plant, before turning to the contested politics of craft, time and community during the Morris's dispute. We conclude that a focus on the use of banners can foreground both the mutually constitutive construction of a working class presence and the moral economy and the tensioned processes through which they are articulated.

## **Moral economy and articulations of a working class presence**

In his book *Collieries, communities and the miners' strike in Scotland*, Jim Phillips draws attention to the ways in which participants in the strike invoked what he terms the 'moral economy of the Scottish coalfields' (Phillips, 2012: 10). He argues that this "coalfield moral economy" was "based on two core assumptions: changes to the industry, including closures and job losses, could only be effected legitimately with the agreement of the workforce; and economic security had to be protected, so pits could only close if miners were able to secure comparably paid alternative employment" (Phillips, 2012: 11). These 'moral economy considerations accommodated the closure from the early 1950s onwards of dozens of pits, often small or medium-size employers of between 300 and 750 or so miners, who were transferred – if they stayed in the industry in Scotland – to larger "cosmopolitan" pits' (ibid.). Through the miners' strike such a coalfield moral economy was to become mobilised as part of strong political antagonisms against ascendant neoliberal Thatcherite policies (Williams 1989). An assertive working class presence was produced through mass picketing in defiance of repressive policing and harsh use of legislation designed to attack secondary picketing.

Importantly Phillips does not position the moral economy as necessarily just associated with bounded spaces emphasising the "complex, highly contingent and fluid nature of coalfield communities" (Phillips, 2012: 11), which as Diarmaid Kelliher has emphasised, disrupts stereotypes about bounded pit communities that have dominated literatures on the strike (Kelliher 2014). Phillips instead sees these communities as dynamic and being remade through both the strike and the industrial restructuring that preceded it. This resonates with recent work on forms of protest and resistance in geography and history, which has emphasised the dynamic spatial practices through which a politics that invoked customary rights and moral economy (Griffin, 2012, Navickas 2010). This suggests that invocations of a 'moral economy' need not just regulate norms, practices and relations "within the community" (Thompson, 1991: 188), but rather can be the product of different relations and connections between differently placed workers.

It is these relations between the formation of a working class presence and moral economy in shaping particular community-making practices that we wish to explore here. We argue that the construction of a working class presence and moral economy can be read as co-constitutive as both generating, shaping and enforcing such relations. E.P. Thompson developed the notion of a "working class presence" in the final section of *The Making of the English Working Class*. He uses the term to explore how working class organising activity "constructs and facilitates accounts whereby particular organisations, working class publications, reading groups and meeting places become politically significant in their own right" (Featherstone and Griffin 2015: 8), such spaces, often being produced through particular gendered spaces and relations (Clark, 1996). A key way in which such presence was shaped, crafted and asserted was through trade union banners. The physicality of the banner acting as nodal point of assembly and belonging, conveying – through the use of colour, text and symbol -important messages and ideas designed to both cement existing solidarities and energize working people to action (Williams, 1986: 13)

This makes them important artefacts for the study of labouring cultures.<sup>1</sup> Brown and Yaffe's recent work on the geographies of the anti-apartheid movement have argued that the study of solidarity can be "enriched by paying attention to the micropolitics of the practices through which it is enacted and articulated" (Brown and Yaffe, 2014: 34). Their account of the spatial practices of the Non-Stop Picket of the South African Embassy in London (1986–1990) traces the "mundane, everyday practices through which the Picket operated' including its material culture (placards, banners and songs)" (2014: 44). This gives a key sense of the materialities and spaces through which articulations of solidarity are produced and reproduced. In drawing attention to such spatial practices and acts of territorialisation we seek to develop a conversation at the intersections of culture, politics and labour. It also enables an attention to some of the micro-spatial practices shaped through labour disputes and organising that are beginning to gain more attention in labour geography.

Thus Tufts and Savage argued in 2009 that "labour geographers have yet to engage in any sustained fashion with unpacking the complex identities of workers and the way in which those identities simultaneously are shaped by and shape the economic and cultural landscape" (Tufts and Savage, 2009: 946). Indeed Tufts' work on banners produced by Unite-Here Local 75 in Toronto made as part of the 'We Make it Work' gives an important sense of the ways such banners produce particular organising practices. He notes that the banners associated with the Local 75 campaign assert low paid tourist industry workers as more than service providers for a predominantly white middle-class clientele, instead positioning them as citizens producing the diverse and evolving cultural life of the city. Such debates have resonance with the contested politics of culture-led regeneration in Glasgow (McLay 1990). Culture-led regeneration has effaced a history of working-class presence and marginalizes an active radical political tradition in Glasgow of opposition to domination and exploitation in their various current forms –see rent-racking, displacement, further increases in the precarious labour market, land grabs and public asset stripping (Anderson et al 2013, Cumbers et al, 2010, Paton et al, 2012).

Inspired by historians and archivists working to forward the practice of participatory archiving (Flinn 2007, Stanley 2013) the 'Banner Tales of Glasgow' workshops have brought together banners held by Glasgow Museums with some of the men and women that carried and stood under them. They have drawn on the skills of professional archivists and researchers, to produce an emotive and participatory environment that has produced new insights into these under-researched objects. Through doing so the project has suggested the potential of collaborations between academics, museum staff and trade unionists to shape important ways of re-asserting struggles from the recent past in ways which relate to ongoing struggles for progressively transformative societal change. This speaks to the possibility of reconfiguring the museum as a site of 'knowledge production' in collaboration with different groups who have relations with such objects, rather than merely as a site of 'knowledge consumption' (McGonagle, 2008: n.p.). It also recognises the importance

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<sup>1</sup> As Jacques Rancière notes of links between working class activists and painters in the wake of 1968 in France, however, such linkages are rarely straightforward (Rancière 2012: 49-50). A detailed engagement with the literature on aesthetics, images and labour is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

of museums shifting beyond a concern with a ‘politics of recognition’ to one ‘that works in conjunction to produce a redistributive justice’ (Beel, 2009: 351).

Providing space for people to speak about their experiences in disputes which the banners were used was also important for redressing the lack of knowledge about such artefacts. Glasgow Museums, for example, have very little information about the banners they hold bar accession information. This raises important questions not only about how a working-class presence was asserted through past struggles but also how such struggles might be presented in particular public histories, museums and archives (Bressey 2014, Stanley 2013). This is particularly significant as the mainstream or formal archive sector under-represents “the voices of the non-elites, the grassroots, [and] the marginalized” (Flinn 2007:152). The project has enabled intersections between different speakers and struggles to emerge, asserting past linkages and solidarities and linking them with the contemporary landscape of community and workplace organising in Glasgow. The material from the workshops has been supplemented with relevant material from trade union archives, records, and newspapers triangulating such material and linking it to broader historical and geographical contexts. The following sections engage with the intersections between working class presence and articulation of particular tenets of a moral economy through the Caterpillar Occupation and the Morris dispute.

### **Territorialisation and the Occupation of a ‘Community Asset’**

In 1987 workers in Uddingston, South East of Glasgow, occupied a factory owned by the US multi-national Caterpillar in protest at plans to close the plant (Foster & Woolfson 1988). The 103 day occupation was a high profile political event in Scotland. Campbell Christie, then general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), described the occupation as having shown “an important lead for the Labour Movement in Britain” (STUC, 1987: 209). The transgressing of expectations of company behaviour was particularly stark, as Caterpillar had recently accepted £62 million investment from the UK government. The factory was also built on land which had been formerly associated with coal mining and part of the moral economy of mining communities was that closures could be acceptable as long as ‘miners who had to leave the coal industry were able to find relatively well-paid work in other manual sectors’ (Perchard and Phillips, 2011: 400). The Caterpillar plant was also viewed as offering ‘better’ and ‘more stable’ employment than pit work (c.f. Gibbs, 2015a).

Bob Burrows, an active participant in the occupation, opened the discussion of the Caterpillar dispute by giving a clear sense of how important banners were to the production of ‘occupied space’:

January 14th in Glasgow 1987, the American company decided that firstly they were going to close us. And that particular night, we locked the gates [...] and we were then working and putting up a banner [...] there was a big roll of sheet from somewhere – it was about 20 metres long and it said on it ‘Thatcher and Rifkind say yes to 62 million – now a closure, why?’ (Burrows, 2014: n.p.)

The use of the banner here is articulated as central to claiming the factory during the occupation and as is part of the way the occupiers articulated the factory as a 'community asset' and not something that should be closed by a foreign multi-national at their 'whim'. There was particular resentment and anger that Malcolm Rifkind, then Conservative Scottish secretary and a key proponent of 'Thatcherite political economy' in Scotland, had sought to make political capital out of the investment in the plant (Perchard and Phillips, 2011: 400; Woolfson and Foster, 1988: 27). This intersected with the increasing unpopularity of Margaret Thatcher's government in Scotland which reached its apogee in the struggles against the Poll Tax in 1988-1990 (Gibbs, 2015b).

The occupation was framed as a justified struggle to keep plant open, whereas the closure was constructed as a clear breach of the conventions shaped by articulations of a 'moral economy'. Thus R. Wilson of Motherwell & District Trades Council who proposed a motion supporting the occupation at the 1987 STUC conference remarked that: "The occupation of the plant might be illegal in the eyes of the law but the closure of the plant with the loss of 1200 jobs in Scotland would be the crime of the century in the eyes of the people of Scotland" (STUC, 1987: 209). The folksinger Davy Steele in his powerful song 'We're No Gonnae Leave Here' sang 'They'll call us reds and anarchists, say we're outside the law, but its them that stole the tax payer's money/ and we pay tax and a'' (Steele, 1988).

This assertion of a working class presence took place in the aftermath of the severe police repression that characterised the miners' strikes including in response to attempts to blockade the Ravenscraig Steel Works in nearby Motherwell (c.f. Phillips 2012: 94-5). This context was vividly recalled during the workshop: Brannan asserted that the 'Police were battering guys with a baton during the miner's strike' noting that he called them 'the back heelers because they kicked my shins that often in a peaceful picket' (Brannan, 2014, n.p.). This drew on an important tradition of occupation of factories and other workplaces in the West of Scotland and the Central Belt, most iconically, the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders occupation of 1972. Among those who offered support and solidarity to the occupation were a host of other factory occupiers, including from British Leyland and the Plessey Factory in Bathgate (Woolfson and Foster, 1988: 38). Despite the worker's success in garnering support from those in other industries and the wider public<sup>2</sup> this tactic put the workers and their unions on a collision course with the law. John Brannan, one of the instigators of the occupation, argued that "we were fighting a battle where the rules don't count" (Brannan 2015: 7). This willingness to challenge the law was a step too far, however, for the leadership of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AEU) (Woolfson and Foster, 1988: 277).

John Brannan recalled that the Occupation itself had 'verified every belief that I had as a socialist and the ability of working class people, given the conditions, given the right tasks, they would amaze you' (Brannan, 2014: n.p.). Indeed he linked the structure and ethos that shaped the occupation to the production of the second Joint Occupation Committee banner recalling that 'we were having a demonstration, from

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<sup>2</sup> Woolfson and Foster (1988) estimate that public collections yielded approximately £100,000 per month.



the train station I think up to the factory and it couldn't possibly be done without a banner, so one of the committees, one of the groups of the guys went away and the next thing this banner appeared.' Brannan noted that the image on banner demonstrated that workers 'had the ability to carry on without managers telling them every two minutes what you doing, usually what not to do [...] This was to show that we could build a tractor' (Brannan, 2014: n.p.).



Figure 1: Bob Burrows (back standing), John Brannan (seated left) and John Gillen (seated right) at the Banner Tales of Glasgow Workshop 2014

Picture copyright: Richard Leonard

The discussion of the decision to paint the occupation-built tractor pink relays some of the necessary humour involved in the day-to-day workings of the occupation – a humour that plays a significant role in shaping the sometimes-unconventional contours of working-class presence.

At the meeting [...] somebody said, you can't paint it yellow – it would just be another tractor then, what colour shall we paint it? So a good dearly departed comrade Davie Knight got all the lads to say who cares what colour it is, paint it pink if you want, and no one gave it another thought. A week or two later, this big-pink atrocity is trundling out to be planted outside the factory'. [...] So that was a very important symbol [...] (Brannan, 2014: n.p.).

John Gillen noted that the decision to paint the banner pink was not ‘to do with sexual equality the reason’ and ‘simply a one off line from David Knight’, but there is no indication that it was a ‘homophobic’ gesture (Gillen, 2014: n.p.). Brannan emphasises that the tractor was painted pink to differentiate it from the tractors they produced for Caterpillar before the occupation.

A further way that the occupiers differentiated their labour from the usual conditions of their factory work was by donating the tractor to War on Want who attempted to ship it to the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua in solidarity with the Sandinistas (Woolfson and Foster, 1988: 113). The workers had embraced the ‘feed the world’ slogan associated with Bob Geldof’s Live Aid which had an ‘unparalleled mobilizing power’ at that time (Hall and Jacques, 1988: 253), hanging a banner proclaiming ‘Cat workers say we can and will help to feed the world’ from the occupied factory. They had originally offered the tractor to Live Aid who turned it down after being informed by Caterpillar that ‘it would be accepting “stolen goods”’ (Woolfson and Foster, 1988: 113). The ‘Pink Panther’ was taken in procession to Glasgow city centre where after Caterpillar prevented its onward shipment it ‘remained in a legal limbo, stuck in the middle of George Square’ (Woolfson and Foster, 1988: 116). These translocal solidarities shaped an outward looking politics which pushed beyond the depoliticised narratives of Live Aid. The next section discusses the political and emotional articulation of banners during the Morris’s dispute.

### **Time, Craft and Community**

Discussing the events that sparked the Morris dispute Brian McKee recalled that he was ‘sacked for working to my contract of employment’:

Because my contract of employment was thirty nine hours and when we were leading up to the strike, a lot of the guys at the meeting said, let us take a half-day. We have got to be careful. You are contracted to thirty nine hours. We will do thirty-nine hours and we will walk out after you have done what your contract states, thirty nine hours and they still sacked us (McKee, 2014: n.p.)

As McKee notes the strike broke out over Morris’s refusal to “recognize the National Labour Agreement and the Union” (ibid). As The Furniture Timber & Allied Trades Union Record noted in 1985 “A lockout followed a dispute which surfaced three years ago when the management imposed a 41 ¼ hour week on the 80 strong work force at the same basic rate as for the 39 hour week worked elsewhere in the industry” (FTAT 1986). The management style of Robert Morris who cultivated ‘a dynamic entrepreneurial image’ represented a sharp break from the more paternalistic style of his father, who paradoxically, had been integral to the negotiation of the 39 hour week in the trade (Glasgow Herald in FTAT, 1986: 3).

McKee’s testimony evokes some of the dynamics through which a working-class presence was assembled and crafted. Thus he recalled how different artefacts, which were central to the dispute, were made: “a lot of the small stuff was done in people’s houses” (McKee 2014: n.p.). He noted:

I remember being in my mother's kitchen with my wife, who was heavily pregnant and my young brother, who worked in a design studio and we were drawing all these different posters and people are in the living room painting them in. So it was always a kind of family-community strike. [...] The day we all walked out I went home to my wife and she was due that week. We had just bought a new house; my wife was just about to give birth, so it was not the best thing I could do on a Friday (McKee, 2014: n.p.).

McKee's reference to a 'family community strike' signals how engaging with the production of banners/posters/t-shirt production can disperse agency beyond the male strikers and links to different ways of generating community. His testimony throughout the day also gave a strong sense of how solidarities across difference were interwoven in the making of banners.

Thus he recalled that Blindcraft workers in Springburn had 'heard we were in a dispute' and said 'we had made a banner and want to march it from Blindcraft [...] to you at your picket line. The only problem is we are partially blind so could we get some of your guys up here to guide us through the traffic [...] we were delighted, absolutely fantastic. There was a lot of joking: "Wait a minute somebody is making us a banner and they are all blind [laughter]. What is that going to look like?" [...] We went away up and we marched all the way down with the banner [...] it is quite emotional, it is a lovely story about that banner and that was there for the duration of the whole strike' (McKee, 2014: n.p.)

Here the intense, emotions that characterised the strike directly relate the banners to the practices of constructing solidarities (Pratt, 2008). Other emotional registers played out during the dispute, however, and McKee drew attention to the ways in which a lot of the banners 'were pointing fun at the people who were unfortunate enough to have to cross the picket line. You know, today I can feel sorry for them because I would not like to have to do it – I get quite emotional' (McKee, 2014: n.p.). This account demonstrates how the emotions and bitterness of the dispute still register in important ways and how the formation of an assertive working class presence through picketing could serve to discipline elements of a craft 'moral economy'. Such a 'moral economy' and the shaming of people involved in breaking the strike by crossing the picket lines also shaped trans-local forms of solidarity during the dispute.

Central here was the targeting of hauliers who were exporting furniture from the Morris factory. Thus McKee recalled that the details of hauliers who crossed their picket line 'their registration number, everything, every detail of them' would be 'printed up monthly' and 'sent out' (ibid). He recounted how Shop Stewards at Hull Docks had brought in an owner-driver who had been observed crossing the Morris picket line, the following conversation ensued:

And they said is that your vehicle? And the guy is going yes. He [Shop Steward] says 'well Brian here says that you have crossed the picket line?' And he could not deny it because I am sitting there right in front of him. And he said "well that's you banned from Hull docks" – now that is power. The poor guy's face, he went ashen white and the life was falling out of him and I was 'wow'. I went "wait a minute guys, I don't want to ruin this guy's life, I just don't want

him to cross my picket line.” So he humbly apologised and made a donation to the strike fund. (McKee, 2014: n.p.)

This testimony gives insight into the ways in which codes of moral economy can be enforced and policed within labour struggles. This action was part of the diverse spatial practices by which working class presence articulated. This ‘shaming’ of strike breakers and hauliers who had crossed the Morris’s picket line demonstrated that such acts would incur an ‘economic’ as well as a ‘social’ cost which was often marked in gendered terms (Phillips, 2012: 149). It also emphasises some of the disciplinary mechanisms through which such a working class presence was produced which often mobilised notions that strike breakers were less ‘manly’ than strikers.



**Figure 2: Workers at the Morris Furniture Factory dispute picket line 1985 (Brian McKee is 3<sup>rd</sup> from right standing)**

Picture copyright: Glasgow Herald and Evening Times.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has traced the ways that trade union banners were mobilised, used and crafted through two industrial disputes in the 1980s. We have used a discussion of these banners to highlight diverse elements of the formation of a working class presence- and how this shaped and articulated a ‘moral economy of labour’ in opposition to then emergent forms of neoliberal management and capital switching. This approach focuses on the ways that values associated with the moral economy were generated, shaped and enforced, but it also draw attention to some of the tensioned processes through which a working class presence was forged and articulated (Griffin, 2015: 123). In this regard while both disputes sought to defend

existing jobs they also contained challenges to existing relations of production. Through the construction of the 'Pink Panther' the Caterpillar workers demonstrated that their labour could be self-organised and produce for other ends than the profits of the Caterpillar company; after the end of their dispute the Morris strikers set up a workers co-operative. This emphasises that articulating the 'moral economy' with an assertive working class presence can forge new political identities and practices.

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