Britain's first migrant strike: labour militancy and racial politics at Courtaulds, Preston, 1965

Introduction

After opening in 1939, Courtaulds became one of Preston's largest textile mills. Based at Red Scar in Ribbleton, north-east Preston, Courtaulds was the first company in the world to create commercial viscose in 1905. The firm imported Scandinavian wood pulp to Preston, before transporting it to the Ribbleton works, where the pulp was converted to liquid viscose and, subsequently, artificial silk.

By 1965, Courtaulds employed 3,000 workers at Preston. Asian and Caribbean workers were concentrated in one stage of the labour process.[1] That summer, management reorganised work departments and resources, triggering an industrial dispute involving more than 1,000 workers born in Pakistan, India, and the West Indies. Initially, strikers appealed to the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) for assistance. Relationships between workers, union officials, and the broader Preston public were complicated and often turbulent, revealing multi-layered tensions and subjectivities in the crisis. For workers, union officials, and employers alike, the strike's escalation provoked far-reaching questions about social experiences of race and class.

When strategists from the Racial Adjustment Action Society (RAAS) arrived in Preston to advise the ad hoc strike committee, they framed the dispute racially and urged the strikers to disregard an apathetic union. Conversely, many local workers, union representatives, and commentators dismissed any suggestion of racial dynamics, instead representing the strike as a familiar stand-off between management and the shop-floor. Fault lines in the power struggle emerging *among* workers extended to high-profile politicians and wider publics. Drawing upon contemporary press reports, this paper will explore the complex interactions of class, race, and place during the Courtaulds dispute.

A 'migrant' strike?

The strike at Courtaulds is significant for historians, sociologists, and scholars interested in the dynamic interactions of class politics and diasporic identities. The strike's salience reflects its controversy for diverse communities historically and contemporarily. For the labour movement, chiefly constituted around the TGWU, the strike prompted questions about autonomous organisation, union authority, and racial politics. For local workers and migrants alike in this industrial area of west Lancashire, the strike problematised particular formulations of class and 'whiteness', the politics of the workplace, and the broader community. For migrants and activists more broadly, Courtaulds triggered debates about social identities, and more generally about tactics and strategy among contentious movements overlapping and connecting the politics of race and class.

The events at Courtaulds contribute to a broader conversation about the racialised politics of otherwise radical trade unionists. Militant dockers were among the most vocal supporters of Enoch Powell in 1968, striking and marching in defence of Powell and proclaiming 'back Britain, not black Britain'.[2] The tactics of the autonomous strike committee at Courtaulds, alongside the RAAS's activism, reflected parallel differences within the American Black Power movement: espousing black liberation, Eldridge Cleaver emphasised racial identities and independent organisation, whereas Huey Newton accentuated a more racially inclusive class politics.[3]

The strike began on the afternoon of 24 May 1965, when the 2pm shift workers commenced a sit-in in the tyre-cord spinning department. The dispute originated with a controversial 'speed-up' plan, by which each worker would become responsible in effect for one-and-a-half machines – a 50 percent increase in production norms per capita – for a wage rise of just 3d per hour. Workers from Pakistan, India, and the West Indies were exclusively adversely affected by this change, and within four days, 900 migrant workers – constituting almost one-third of the factory's total workforce – were on strike.

What originally appeared a straightforward dispute between workers and bosses became entangled in a public power struggle between the strikers and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). Immediately refusing to support the strikers, TGWU shop stewards complained that Indian and Pakistani workers rarely attended branch meetings. Such a criticism suggests a chasm between migrant workers and shop stewards: there was only one Indian shop steward at Courtaulds in 1965. Further distancing the union from the strikers, TGWU regional officer Bill Heywood of Manchester declared

> we are not prepared to support unofficial action. We are only prepared to lodge support if the strikers accept the union's advice and return to work under the agreement the shop stewards made on their behalf.

Within a week, three TGWU officers, including Heywood, were jostled and heckled at a rowdy meeting of the strikers at their adopted home, the Continental Cinema.[4]

Concomitantly, migrant strikers organised autonomously in a self-styled Action Committee under Mr A. A. Chaudhry, threatening to withdraw from the TGWU and 'fight the case on our own shoulders'. The Action Committee wrote to Courtaulds management complaining that increased workloads and new machinery had worsened conditions, but the firm's labour officer Robert Law dismissed their complaints and patronised the workers in distant terms: 'They are gentle folk, on the whole, and are good workers when they wish to work'.[5]

Responses from Prestonian workers and the local press were apathetic at best, and hostile at worst, supporting Ron Ramdin's criticisms of RAAS involvement. Reviewing Courtaulds nearly two decades later, the Race Today Collective argued that RAAS militants raised the strike's profile but 'didn't seem to the workers as capable of analysing the issue of the strike, let alone mobilising national or international support for it'.[6] Yet this assessment begs the question of how the strike could be represented among hostile commentators as a hobby-horse for racial separatists and, by implication, a deviation from the established forms of class contention.

Initially, the strikers did not organise or identify as 'migrant' strikers, or accentuate a particular ethnic or national identity; rather, they immediately, and unsuccessfully, sought union backing.[7] The strikers' status as 'coloured' workers originated among the union officials and local people who identified the strikers as such. Framing the strikers as 'migrant' workers was no mere semantic point, since it enabled the strike's opponents to represent the action as a 'racial' lobby, constituting a departure from normative labour disputes and therefore lacking the crucial legitimacy which union recognition conferred. Even in dispelling a racialised aspect of the strikers' identity, Preston South Conservative MP Alan Green's remarks after a discussion with eight members of the ad hoc committee implied a general local perception to the contrary. After talking to the men for 45 minutes at his constituency headquarters, Green told the local press he was 'absolutely convinced there isn't a colour question involved in this affair. It is a straight industrial dispute'.[8] The loaded formulation of a

'straight industrial dispute' suggests the legitimacy which was absent from a perceived 'colour question' in the workplace.[9]

The abject lack of support for, or solidarity with, strikers within Courtaulds enabled opponents to represent the strikers' motivations as the malign agenda of racial separatists: the approximately 2,000 white workers at the plant worked continuously throughout the strike, mitigating its impact on the firm's production. The union's refusal to acquiesce in strikers' calls for a mass meeting of *all* Courtaulds workers cemented this distance in practice. White workers' aloofness – and even their union officials' reported collusion with management – was not unique to the Courtaulds strike: Asian workers were similarly isolated in later disputes at Mansfield Hosiery (1972) and Imperial Typewriters (1974), as E. Ellis Cashmore has noted.[10]

The subsequent involvement of nationalists among the RAAS reinforced the image of the strikers as migrants, although for a different reason: RAAS radicals accentuated to the strikers the racial division of labour at Courtaulds to vindicate their preferred strategy of autonomous organisation independent of the white working class. The early intervention of external activists, including RAAS radicals, escalated strikers' disillusionment with the TGWU. British Guinian writer Jan Carew described himself as an adviser to the strike committee and RAAS, and accentuated the wider ramifications of the Courtaulds dispute as he implored Commonwealth governments to intervene: 'We are calling for solidarity… This is no longer a parochial affair and is now of international interest'.[11] Addressing a mass meeting one week into the strike, chairman of the Commonwealth Citizens UK Association, economist Malik Khaliq of Bradford, implored workers to repudiate union officials attempting to mediate. 'The shop stewards had no right to make an agreement behind your back', Khaliq told the crowd.[12] The Jamaican High Commission's involvement imputed sectionality on workers' concerns, since the Commission's two representatives liaised exclusively with the approximately 120 West Indian strikers.[13] In the strike's second week, in a rallying cry which the strike's opponents in the local press amplified as evidence of malign influence, Roy Sawh of the RAAS proposed forming a trade union exclusively for 'coloured' workers.[14]

The autonomous strike committee's tactics were marked by their eclecticism and maverick quality. After fruitless appeals to the TGWU, the committee first invited an American lawyer to seek an injunction against management and shop stewards. The committee's breach with the TGWU was local and not total: they next implored Labour's Minister of Technology – and TGWU General Secretary – Frank Cousins to advocate on their behalf.[15] With no resolution in sight but as many as 250 workers now back at work, the strike leaders played their final card in the strike's third week, when Khaliq and Chaudhry announced they would travel to Downing Street to commence a hunger strike. Some 110 strikers pledged to join this hunger strike.[16]

The strike ended abruptly amid considerable confusion on 11 June, when it transpired that clandestine dialogue between Courtaulds management and TGWU officials had been ongoing throughout the three-week strike, unbeknown to strike leaders. The outcome of these secretive negotiations was a putative deal to conclude the strike. Subject to gaining strikers' final approval, TGWU representatives agreed to a 30 percent increase in strikers' workload in return for a wage increase of 3d per hour. Only at the eleventh hour were four strike committee members informed. The Preston branch of the TGWU – including its district secretary, Jim Page – triumphantly declared an end to the dispute.[17]

When migrant workers were told of the agreement, they jeered the union's regional organiser. Khaliq was unequivocal in his denunciation of TGWU official Robert Davis, a 'swollen-headed trade union official'. Yet the strike leader remained hopeful that the settlement could be staging post in a longer war of attrition. Explaining the TGWU's deal to the final strike meeting at the Continental Cinema, Khaliq urged strikers to engage more actively in union politics in future, and to elect new shop stewards on their return to work. Amid a curious atmosphere combining frustration, indignation, and determination, approximately 218 workers out of 240 in attendance voted to accept the deal.[18]

For Westhoughton Labour Party leftist Ray Challinor, the strike demonstrated a crisis in unrepresentative trades unions and the disintegration of the working class along racial and ethnic lines. A member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), Challinor brought the strike to the attention of Labour activists. Challinor sympathised with the strikers, but he too considered racial separatism an unwelcome distraction from the structural inequalities within Courtaulds and the union movement's failure adequately to represent migrant workers. Reviewing the strike for *Labour Worker* in June 1965, Challinor argued the action had been the first of its kind 'to degenerate from an industrial issue into a racial one' with 'momentous significance for the whole Labour Movement'. Challinor called for 'working-class solidarity… otherwise we will see a terrifying new development – trade unions formed on a purely racial basis'. For Challinor, Courtaulds

> could easily develop into the ugliest racial issue in British history… Smethwick will smell like a fragrant lily to the racial cesspool of Preston. And what is worse, the future could contain many Prestons – for, without assistance from outside, the cold logic of events will push strikers towards the formation of separate black unions. If this calamity is to be avoided, it must be by British workers showing quite clearly that they do not believe in "white" trade unions, and that they will accept their coloured brothers as equals.[19]

While Challinor feared the potential for racialised disunity inherent in the strike, he acknowledged the racial workplace dynamic which had originally triggered the crisis. Describing Courtaulds as a 'black industrial ghetto', Challinor highlighted the lack of promotion for skilled 'coloured workers yet unskilled, white workers are doing skilled jobs simply because of the colour of their skin'.[20]

The radical, and in some cases separatist, racial politics around the strike of 1965 anticipated the subsequent effervescence of black liberation mobilisation among ethnic minorities in the post-Powell moment of 1968, not least the formation of the Black People's Alliance (BPA) in April 1968.[21] Several militants engaging in the Courtaulds dispute belonged to the wider black liberation milieux, in its various theoretical and organisational expressions. Michael de Freitas founded the RAAS earlier in 1965, and two years later he was the first non-white person to be convicted under the Race Relations Act, having advocated killing any white man who was seen 'laying hands on a black woman'. Just two years later, when arrested for his role in attacks at a commune on Holloway Road, John Lennon paid de Freitas's bail. After returning to his native Trinidad in 1971, de Freitas – by now known alternately as Michael X and Malik – he was convicted of murder. Before he was hanged in Port of Spain in 1975, Angela Davis and Kate Millett campaigned for his acquittal.

Yet strike organisers also spanned more moderate strategists who looked to legal precedent and collective bargaining. Maliq Khaliq of the Commonwealth Citizens' UK Association (CCUKA) was close to the strike leaders, and announced in the second week that the CCUKA had flown lawyers from New York to London to advise. The CCUKA

emphasised legislative and judicial precedents rather than revolutionary politics: after approximately 60 workers had returned to work in the second week, Khaliq reassured strikers who remained on strike, and who had received sacking notices from Courtaulds management: 'We have been assured that the company has violated the Employment Act, 1963, and as such they cannot terminate the services of any employee'. Leader of the strike committee, A. A. Chaudhry was a former officer in the Indian police force, an army captain during the war, decorated for gallantry in the defence of Singapore. He had also been an executive in a large firm in the USA, and he was a skilled textile technician, having completed a three-year course at Blackburn Technical College.[22]

A 'purely industrial' dispute?

The central debate around the strike's legitimacy hinged upon diagnosing the strike as a 'traditional' strike on behalf of a supposedly monolithic working class, or a perceived deviation into sectional racial interests. Supporters and opponents of the strikers alike formulated their opinions around this dichotomy. Sympathisers such as the High Commissioner for Pakistan, Mr Sufia, and his liaison officer, Mr Baquer, were at pains to accentuate the strike's credentials as a 'purely industrial' dispute, while admitting in loaded terms that there were 'one or two hotheads' – that is to say, racial separatists – among their number.[23]

Conversely, the local press needed little encouragement to denigrate the strikers as the unthinking, easily-led puppets of alien malefactors. This sensational tone regretted Preston's newfound status as a site of supposedly racialised contestation and strife. The *Lancashire Evening Post* editorialised against the strike on its front page:

> The news of the strike has travelled round the world… Preston has become infamous as the centre of a futile struggle, which could inflame feelings wherever whites and coloureds coincide.[24]

Michael de Freitas's words at a strike meeting underpinned the newspaper's suspicion of the RAAS activists: 'We have one enemy, the white one who is oppressing us. We are now at war, a war we are losing'.[25]

Hostile portrayals of the strike as a bandwagon for radical racial politics gained some traction locally: Mrs Holden of Chorley wrote that the 'nation' would 'ruthlessly oppose' a separate union 'for coloured people', and blamed Sawh 'and his co-agitators' for 'taking advantage of a trade dispute, for political ambitions'.[26] Aside from the normalised hostility to political and social instability – residents near the strike headquarters in Deepdale complained of disturbed nights while activists held raucous meetings under the streetlights – the remarks of 59-year-old Mrs Berry, who lived nearby, suggested a fractious society in which harmony was at best superficial:

> Now that the weekend is here and the men have a few drinks it only needs one hot-head to start trouble. I have Christian principles and am not colour prejudiced. I sincerely hope nothing does happen. But people are just about at the end of their tether. They can't stand much more.[27]

Mrs Berry circulated a petition, signed by 14 residents, complaining about noise and misbehaviour among strikers. Berry said she feared a race row developing, and had even written to the Home Secretary urging intervention lest an 'ugly situation' develop.[28]

Conclusion

In a wider sense, the events at Courtaulds problematise conceptions of the intersections between class and diasporic identities. External actors including Roy Sawh introduced the

politics of racial nationalism, advocating independent, autonomous organisation among the Indian, Pakistani, and Caribbean diasporas in Preston. The Courtaulds case also suggests the salience of trade union bureaucracy and the racialised division of labour in the workplace in polarising racial groups in society more broadly. Prestonian workers' combination of indifference and hostility to the strikers do not necessarily recall W. E. B. Du Bois's explanation of the failure of radical reconstruction in the post-Civil War USA. For Du Bois, after 1865, the Marxist theory of class unity

> failed to work in the South… because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest.

Du Bois's analysis drew upon precepts from black nationalism to explain the absence of solidarity among white workers, highlighting the perceived privileges of the 'labour aristocracy' whose rivalries manifested in workplace racism:

> The wages of both classes could be kept low, the whites fearing to be supplanted by Negro labour, the Negroes always being threatened by the substitution of white labour.[29]

Representations of the strike fomenting racial divisions must be set against the backdrop of government legislation in race relations. Contestation over the Conservative government's Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962), compounded by the openly racist campaigns such as the Smethwick by-election of 1964, produced a febrile atmosphere which pervaded the political imagination. Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell attacked as 'cruel and brutal anti-colour legislation' the Conservatives' regulations on Commonwealth immigrants, whose settlement after 1962 depended on government-issued employment vouchers.

The pervasiveness of emerging political debate about the morality of racial politics pervaded even the testimony of opponents of the strike, who often protested that their grievances with strikers was race-blind. Although Deepdale residents repeatedly called police to disperse strikers meeting in the streets, complaints were often prefaced with disclaimers. Former Scots Guard Bert Hendricks and his wife Kitty complained 'we are not colour prejudiced. If they were white men out there I would still complain. All we want is peace and quiet to lead a normal life'.[30]

The problem of defining the Courtaulds strike gets to the core of the issues and agendas which diverse activists sought to highlight. The strike committee and its moderate sympathisers in the labour movement were eager to frame the dispute in terms of a 'traditional' argument between employers and bosses. Although they were at odds with the recognised shop-floor authority of the TGWU, the strike committee broadly eschewed any suggestion of racial sectionality or separatism in their agenda. By contrast, the strike's conservative opponents and, coincidentally, its militant supporters – constituted especially around the RAAS – presented the strike as a microcosm for wider racialised politics: the former to undermine the dispute as the bandwagon of separatist agitators lacking political legitimacy, and the latter to underscore the need for a greater racial consciousness in the labour movement – or even an autonomous trade union organisation for ethnic minorities.

---

[1] Ron Ramdin, *The making of the black working class in Britain* (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1987), p. 269.
[2] Satnam Virdee, 'Anti-racism and the socialist left, 1968-1979', in Evan Smith & Matthew Worley (eds.), *Against the grain: the British far left from 1956* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 210.
[3] Brian Dooley, *Black and green: the fight for civil rights in Northern Ireland and black America* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 66.

[4] F. D. Porter, 'Courtaulds push back deadline', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 1 June 1965.
[5] '"Sit-in" strike at giant mill', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 25 May 1965.
[6] Race Today Collective, *The struggle of Asian workers in Britain* (London: Race Today Publications, 1983), p. 16.
[7] '"Sit-in" strike at giant mill', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 25 May 1965.
[8] '"Sunshine" for 900 textile workers', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 28 May 1965.
[9] Ibid.
[10] E. Ellis Cashmore, *United kingdom? Class, race and gender since the war* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 140.
[11] Peter Pilsbury, 'Wage war on bosses', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 10 June 1965.
[12] F. D. Porter, 'Courtaulds push back deadline', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 1 June 1965
[13] '"Sunshine" for 900 textile workers', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 28 May 1965.
[14] Peter Pilsbury, 'Courtaulds: Race, political issues denied', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 2 June 1965.
[15] 'Strike: shut down threat', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 7 June 1965.
[16] Peter Pilsbury, 'More and more volunteer for the coloured strikers' last stand in death squad', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 9 June 1965.
[17] Glen Allan, 'Union probe Preston strike: Suicide fast is off', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 11 June 1965.
[18] Peter Pilsbury, 'Sweet ending to strike at Courtaulds', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 12 June 1965.
[19] Ray Challinor, 'Coloured workers fight TGWU and ghetto conditions: Danger – racial split in union', *Labour Worker* (June 1965).
[20] Peter Pilsbury, 'We shall fast to death: Strikers' vigil on Premier's doorstep', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 8 June 1965.
[21] Peter Fryer, *Staying power: the history of black people in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 386.
[22] *Peace News*, 25 June 1965.
[23] Peter Pilsbury, 'Courtaulds: Race, political issues denied', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 2 June 1965.
[24] 'Stop this strike!', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 4 June 1965.
[25] Ibid.
[26] E. Holden, 'Disaster in a separate union', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 8 June 1965.
[27] Tom Hendry, 'Neighbours fear racial rumpus', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 11 June 1965.
[28] Ibid.
[29] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1969 [1935]), pp. 700-701.
[30] Tom Hendry, 'Neighbours fear racial rumpus', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 11 June 1965.