

WE NEED UNIONS



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Learn about the Matchgirls' strike, the conditions which provoked it, and the different types of protests which went alongside it.
- Think about the ways that the Matchgirls' strike has been presented as a victory of journalists, rather than a victory of organised workers, and reflect on why this is.
- Ask why using different types of historical sources might lead people to have very different interpretations of events.
- Demonstrate the role of young people in trade unionism today, and the ways that they can make change in their communities and workplaces.



Annie Besant - journalist and activist, born to a middle-class Irish family living in London.

1888 - Attends a Socialist meeting and discovers the **Bryant & May** match factory was exploiting its workers.

She speaks with some of the young women who work there and discovers that many of them are regularly fined (which is illegal), and many more develop 'phossy jaw' at work.

Publishes her story in **The Link**, a newspaper she had set up to expose poor working and living conditions in Britain.



Bryant & May are furious - attempt to sue Annie Besant, and force workers to sign a statement that she lied.

The young women refuse, and several are sacked.
1400 employees, mainly young women, walk off the job and go on strike in protest.

They send delegates to Parliament, Annie Besant, and other Trade Unions.

They form a Matchmakers' Union.

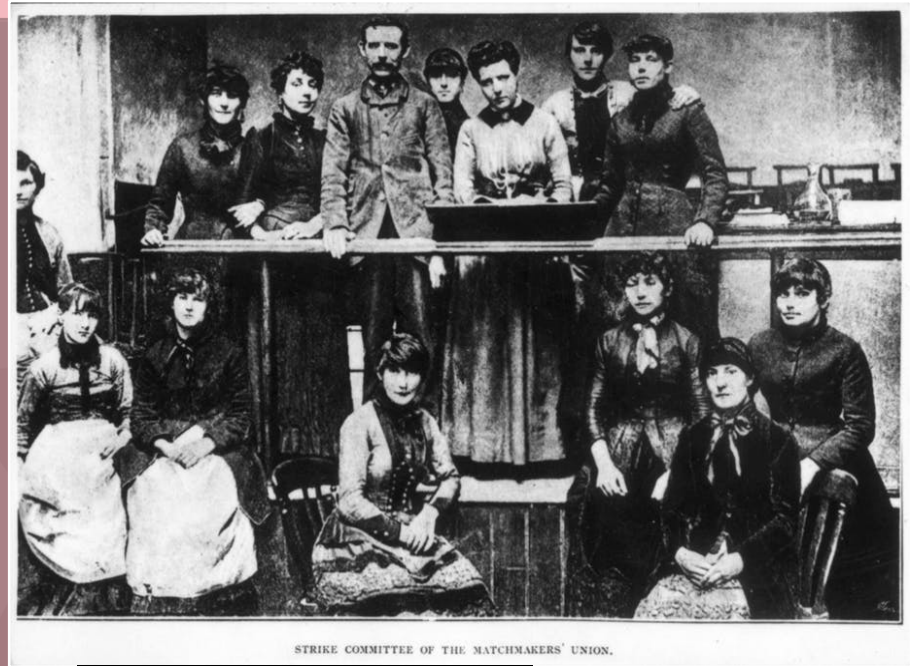


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Prominent journalists, authors, trade union leaders, heads of charities and politicians offered their support to the striking women.

These included the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, the playwright George Bernard Shaw, and Catherine Booth of the Salvation Army.

After three weeks Bryant & May backed down, and the Matchstick girls won.



TUC Library Collections

SOURCE QUESTIONS

- What impression does this source give you of the young women working in the factory?
- Which phrases and words give you this impression?
- Does it seem like Annie Besant thought that these young women had the power to end these bad conditions in the workplace?
- How does Annie Besant propose to make the employers change their minds?



SOURCE QUESTIONS

- What impression do these sources give you of the young women who were striking? Is it different to that of Annie Besant's source?
- How do you think the women on strike would have felt? What gives you this impression?



“You can tell these McDonald's workers by the burns on their arms”

BREAKING THE SILENCE



Film Link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=o49vXLoamXE



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Now that you've seen the trade unionists' video and read the company's statement:

- Do you agree with the McDonald's statement that the company is "committed to our people and their wellbeing at work"? Why / Why not?
- Does it seem like young workers' problems are taken seriously at McDonald's restaurants? Do you think this is true of other workplaces?
- Why do you think so few McDonald's staff ended up joining the strike?
- In Britain, workers on zero hour contracts are less likely to be involved in a union. Why do you think this is?



ACTIVITY QUESTIONS

Imagine that you are one of the striking McDonald's workers. You are talking to a co-worker who you are trying to convince to join the union and take strike action with you.

How would you respond to them if they said:

- "I'm not joining the strike - I don't even think we need a union. If you have a problem you can just go and talk to the manager."
- "I'm not joining the strike. I agree with what it's about but there's not enough people taking part. I'm not putting my job on the line."
- "I'm not joining the strike - I'm not planning on working here that long anyway."
- "I'm not joining the strike. I want to be a manager one day and don't want to be known as a troublemaker."



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