

# WE NEED UNIONS



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## Lesson Summary

This session examines the role of young people in developing trade unions, and their involvement in several key labour disputes. The Matchgirls' Strike of 1888 forms the central case study, and the students are encouraged to think about how and why the young strikers' involvement has been written out of history, as well as the links which can be drawn between historic and contemporary trade union activities.

## 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.

### British Council Core Skills

- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Collaboration and Communication
- Citizenship

### Curriculum Links

- Citizenship, KS 3-4
- History, KS4-5

### United Nations Sustainable Development Links

- No Poverty
- Gender Equality
- Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
- Responsible Consumption and Production



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## Activity one: Introductory Questions

*No preparation required in advance*

- Begin by writing these three questions on the board, and have the group answer them as best they can.
- What is a trade union?
- What do trade unions do?
- What is a strike?
- If students are finding it difficult to conceptualise what a trade union is, try to explain them as groups of workers who are all employed in the same business or industry, who work together to stand up for their rights in the workplace- the right to a decent wage, to work without bullying/harassment, to work in safe conditions, etc. A strike can be explained as a group decision to stop working to make sure that these rights are honoured by the company's leaders.

## Activity two: Annie Besant and 'White Slavery in London'

**Requires:** *Worksheet Source 1, Slide 2-5*

**Preparation:** *Ensure that enough copies of the worksheet are printed for the whole group, and read through the preparatory notes below.*

- Using the notes below and slides 2-4, outline the events of the London Matchgirls Strike of 1888 and the role of Annie Besant.
- Split the students into small groups of 3-4.
- Ask them to read the extracts from Annie Besant's article, 'White Slavery in London' contained in source 1.
- As they read, put the questions from slide 5 on the board.
- Have them discuss these in the small groups and then draw the whole group back together to compare answers.



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## Activity two cont.

### Slide 2

- Annie Besant was a journalist, writer, and activist born to a middle-class Irish family living in London. At a socialist meeting in 1888, she heard that the Bryant & May company, which produced matches, had made huge profits from their London factory from working their employees very hard and paying them very little.
- She decided to go and speak with some of the young women who worked there, and produced an article based on their experiences. She discovered that the use of phosphorous in the factory had led many workers to develop a condition known as 'phossy jaw'- a form of bone cancer that caused facial deformities and even death. As well as this health hazard, she found out that the young women who worked at the factory worked very long shifts for very low wages, and were regularly fined by their managers (an illegal practice). She published the story in *The Link*, a cheap newspaper which she had set up the previous year to publicise the poor living and working conditions of people in Britain.

### Slide 3

- Bryant & May were furious about the article, and threatened to sue Annie Besant for libel. They attempted to make their employees sign a statement that she had lied about the conditions they worked in, and when a group of girls refused to sign, their ringleaders were sacked. In response, 1400 employees, mainly girls and young women, went out on strike. They soon sent a delegation of 100 women to Annie Besant's office to ask for her support and advice, as well as a group to parliament to draw attention to their conditions, and met with leading figures of other trade unions to win further allies. The striking workers formed a Matchgirls' Union, and other London-based trade unions gave them funds to help the striking women while they were out of work.



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## Activity two cont.

### Slide 4

- Some very prominent journalists, authors, trade union leaders, heads of charities, and politicians offered their support to the matchgirls and condemned the conditions in the factory, making the strike a famous protest across the country.
- After three weeks, Bryant & May agreed to rehire the sacked women, end the system of fines, and bring in separate eating areas so that food would not be contaminated with phosphorous. The strike became very well-known, with many other activists claiming it had inspired them. Below is an extract from Annie Besant's article about the matchgirls

## Activity Three: The Women who went on Strike

**Requires:** *Worksheet Sources 2 and 3, Slides 6 and 7*

**Preparation:** *Ensure that enough copies of the worksheet are printed for all students*

- Ask the students to read the contemporary descriptions of the striking women contained in source 2, before posing the questions on slide 6 to the group.
- Once they have answered, ask two students to read aloud the brief biography of William Stead and the two quotes from the newspapers contained in source 3.
- Show the group the questions on slide 7, and ask them to discuss these.

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## Activity Four: McStrike

**Requires:** *Worksheet source 4, Slides 8 and 9*

**Preparation:** *Ensure that the video on slide 8 can be played, and that enough copies of the worksheet are available for all students*

- This activity will look at a contemporary strike led by young people employed by McDonalds restaurants, which aimed to win a £10 per hour living wage and an end to zero hour contracts. It asks students to think about how changing technology and conditions impact how trade unions reach out to the wider public and support their members.
- Show the students the video produced by Momentum linked on slide 8 regarding the treatment of McDonalds' workers and their plans to strike.
- Ask the students whether they think the video is effective in getting the message of the strikers out to the general public. Ask them why they think that Momentum decided to make a video to be spread on social media?
- Ask students to read source 4, and display the questions on slide 9 while they do. Ask them to go through these questions in either pairs or small groups. After they have had the chance to go through them, bring the group back together and have them share their answers with one another.

## Activity Five: Talking to your Workmates

**Requires:** *Slide 10*

**No Preparation** *Required in Advance*

- Display slide 10 which asks students to imagine that they are a striking worker at McDonalds trying to convince their fellow workers to join the industrial action.
- Ask students to split into pairs, and to take it turns playing the different roles in this situation (the striking worker and the unsure worker).
- Once students have gone through these different statements and tried to come up with responses, ask which they found most easy and most difficult, and why they think that is the case.



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## Source 1

### ***Extracts from Annie Besant's article 'White Slavery in London'***

"The hour for commencing work is 6.30 in summer and 8 in winter; work concludes at 6 p.m. Half-an-hour is allowed for breakfast and an hour for dinner. This long day of work is performed by young girls, who have to stand the whole of the time. A typical case is that of a girl of 16, a piece-worker; she earns 4s. a week, and lives with a sister, employed by the same firm, who "earns good money, as much as 8s. or 9s. per week".

Out of the earnings 2s. is paid for the rent of one room; the child lives on only bread-and-butter and tea, alike for breakfast and dinner, but related with dancing eyes that once a month she went to a meal where "you get coffee, and bread and butter, and jam, and marmalade, and lots of it"; now and then she goes to the Paragon [a music hall], someone "stands treat, you know", and that appeared to be the solitary bit of colour in her life.

The splendid salary of 4s. is subject to deductions in the shape of fines; if the feet are dirty, or the ground under the bench is left untidy, a fine of 3d. is inflicted; for putting "burnts" - matches that have caught fire during the work - on the bench 1s. has been forfeited, and one unhappy girl was once fined 2s. 6d for some unknown crime. If a girl leaves four or five matches on her bench when she goes for a fresh "frame" she is fined 3d., and in some departments a fine of 3d. is inflicted for talking. If a girl is late she is shut out for "half the day", that is for the morning six hours, and 5d. is deducted out of her day's 8d. One girl was fined 1s. for letting the web twist round a machine in the endeavour to save her fingers from being cut, and was sharply told to take care of the machine, "never mind your fingers".

Another, who carried out the instructions and lost a finger thereby, was left unsupported while she was helpless. The wage covers the duty of submitting to an occasional blow from a foreman; one, who appears to be a gentleman of variable temper, "clouts" them "when he is mad"...



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## Source 1 cont.

### *Extracts from Annie Besant's article 'White Slavery in London'*

A very bitter memory survives in the factory. Mr. Theodore Bryant, to show his admiration of Mr. Gladstone and the greatness of his own public spirit, bethought him to erect a statue to that eminent statesman. In order that his workgirls might have the privilege of contributing, he stopped 1s. each out of their wages, and further deprived them of half-a-day's work by closing the factory, "giving them a holiday". ("We don't want no holidays", said one of the girls pathetically, for - needless to say - the poorer employees of such a firm lose their wages when a holiday is "given")...

Such is a bald account of one form of white slavery as it exists in London... Born in slums, driven to work while still children, undersized because underfed, oppressed because helpless, flung aside as soon as worked out, who cares if they die or go on the streets, provided only that the Bryant and May shareholders get their 23 per cent., and Mr. Theodore Bryant can erect statues and buy parks?...

Let us strive to touch their consciences, i.e. their pockets, and let us at least avoid being "partakers of their sins", by abstaining from using their commodities."

<http://www.mernick.org.uk/thol/thelink.html>





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## Source 2

### *Contemporary Descriptions of the Young Women Strikers*

#### **(An extract from the *East London Advertiser*, which opposed the strike)**

During the strike the principal streets and thoroughfares of East London, especially the Mile End Road, have been swarmed with the girls, who were generally accompanied by male members of the lowest orders. The [Mile End] Waste every morning has generally presented a strange spectacle of some 500 or 600 people lolling about doing nothing. Some of the girls marched up and down the streets soliciting coppers, and were quite willing to pour their tale of hardships into every sympathetic ear. On Tuesday morning, opposite the Earl Grey [public house], a vanload of pink roses drew up and it was presently surrounded by some 200 of the girls. The roses were flung into the street by the two men who had charge of the carts and it afterwards appeared that the roses had been sent down – by whom it did not transpire – to be worn by the strikers as badges.

#### **(From an anonymously-written book entitled *Toilers in London*)**

Few people could fail to be touched by the way in which the girls were determined to stand together at all costs. 'I can pawn this for you', 'I'll lend you that', in every direction girls might be seen plotting how they could help one another on until Bryant and May gave them back their pennies [the money from the fines].

#### **(From an interview with Samuel Webber, who was 14 years old when the strike occurred)**

When [the matchgirls] went on strike, they walked from Bow Road all the way up [to] Trafalgar Square, and on the way ... they used to sing ...

We'll hang Old Bryant on the sour apple tree

We'll hang Old Bryant on the sour apple tree

We'll hang Old Bryant on the sour apple tree, as we go marching on.

Glory glory hallelujah . . .

And so on. And while they were walking along the people in the offices overhead would throw coppers down and then there'd be a scramble among the girls to get these coppers up... When they picked up all the coppers on they'd go, singing and marching."

**(These sources are all taken from Louise Raw's *Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and their Place in Labour History*)**

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## Source 3

### ***Extracts from the Press after the Conclusion of the Strike***

The story is full of hope for the future, illustrating as it does the immense power that lies in mere publicity. It was the publication of the simple story of the grievances of the match girls in an obscure little halfpenny weekly paper called *The Link* which did the work.

***(This extract was written by William Stead. Stead owned several newspapers which often printed stories of the poverty and hardships faced by working-class people, women, and migrants in Britain. He died aboard the Titanic in 1912)***

#### ***William Stead, Pall Mall Gazette (July, 1888)***

The pity is that the matchgirls have not been suffered to take their own course but have been egged on to strike by irresponsible advisers. No effort has been spared by those pests of the modern industrialized world to bring this quarrel to a head.

#### ***The Times (June, 1888)***

<https://spartacus-educational.com/TUmatchgirls.htm>



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## Source 4

“Following a ballot process we can confirm that the BFAWU [Bakers, Food and Allied Workers’ Union] has indicated that a small number of our people are intending to take industrial action in five of our restaurants, with ballot results pending from a sixth restaurant – London Victoria Place.

35 of our 120,000 people, in five of our 1270 restaurants, were eligible to take part in the ballot and 21 supported industrial action. In two of these restaurants the number of people involved in the ballot totalled two individuals...

In our Cambridge and Crayford restaurants, fewer people are taking industrial action than previously did in September. The decision to take industrial action in those restaurants was made by a very small majority – with only 11 out of the eligible 21 employees voting in support...

We take the interests and wellbeing of our people very seriously and encourage anyone to speak up if they ever have any concerns. Our people can talk to our managers and raise issues informally, or more formally through our grievance procedure, and this is our preferred route to dealing with issues relating to our workforce. We remain committed to our people and their wellbeing at work.

“As promised last year, everyone has now been offered a minimum guaranteed hours contract. Despite this, around 80% of our people have selected to stay on flexible contracts because they value the opportunity to fit their work around their other commitments.”

<https://www.mcdonalds.com/gb/en-gb/misc/ballot-for-industrial-action.html>



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