

# Let's Break These Chains

**So what has changed for Cradley Heath since the strike of 1910? A. Denning seeks to explore the situation of our community in 2007**

**Ninety-seven years ago, seven hundred desperately poor and overworked women workers said enough is enough, stood up and took action to improve their lives. So what lesson is there for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Times have changed, our lives are much better now aren't they?**

Our New Labour rulers tell us things are getting better and better. True, we don't starve living off the crumbs from bosses table but things haven't changed in their basic nature.

When we hear the assortment of Pop stars, establishment union bureaucrats and celebrity politicians pontificating about the significance of the strike and gaining credence from their appearance we should remember a few things: *those of us with a decent job in the Black Country aren't as desperate as these women were but the fact remains if they take away our jobs we would be sunk.* This in contrast to the above clowns who would not have too much hardship if they lost their jobs, even if they were working in "proper" jobs anyway.

The next big employer in the Cradley Heath area is going to be Tesco, who are opening a giant store very soon. Four hundred people are going to be employed there, those lucky enough after the bowing and scraping to be done the 'favour' of being employed by Tesco of course. Hundreds of applicants were turned down this favour.

The work is going to be poorly paid, in unsocial hours and demanding. Unions are likely to be at best subtly discouraged and at worst crushed as is illustrated by the report in The Edinburgh News on 6.4.07

*'TESCO delivery drivers in the Lothians claim they*

*have been threatened with the sack unless they agree to controversial new contracts.*

*The drivers at the supermarket giant's distribution depot in Livingston are threatening strike action over proposed changes to their shifts and bonus payments for working unsocial hours.*

*The company has sent out letters to staff asking them to sign up to the new terms by Wednesday next week.*

*The terms are due to come into effect when it opens a new national distribution depot in the West Lothian town in July.*

*The Transport and General Workers Union (T&G) said today it had been called by at least 12 drivers saying supervisors had warned them they would face the sack unless they signed up."*

Tony Trench, Edinburgh regional officer for the T&G, said, "A huge number phoned my office yesterday saying they have been threatened with dismissal if they didn't sign these documents".

So would the new labour personalities talking at the Chainmakers festival be disapproving of this, given that their Party was established by the early trade unions? You must be joking. This from the Guardian of 28.6.07:

*"Mr Gordon Brown said he was intent on using all available talent in his government and the talent he intends to tap for business advice includes Tesco's Sir Terry Leahy, Jean-Pierre Garnier of GlaxoSmithKline, Sir John Rose of Rolls-Royce, Stuart Rose of Marks & Spencer and controversial Permira private equity boss Damon Buffini".*

So bear in mind when you hear the clowns preaching to us at the Women Chainmakers festi-

val that these people have played, and continue to play, a full and enthusiastic part in the system. The system that exploited the women chainmakers so ruthlessly, continues to exploit their descendants today.

Whereas before, working people had to be satisfied with the crumbs from the bosses table. Now we have bigger crumbs and foreign holidays; widescreen TV's and new cars to keep us happy. We still have to work for the profits of the bosses though and however many benefits we get they

are dwarfed by the boss's. Take away our 'privilege' of employment that these bosses grant us and where are we?

Even if we are better off than before, that's no reason to give up the fight. Should you put up with someone stepping on your foot because before they had their knee on your throat?

There is enough of us and enough resources for all of us to

have most of what we need. If everyone did a fair share of the necessary work, even the bosses, we would have plenty of time to pursue pleasurable activities. We could all have a place at the big table. There is no reason, given the right nurturing and encouragement why we could not all 'manage' ourselves. We don't really need bosses, for sure we need experts but do we really need bosses to tell us, the ones actually doing the job, how to do the job?

If we could manage to carry out the work by ourselves for the real benefit of everyone then work would be less of a chore, just look at those working for hours in an allotment after a full days work.

No one should be satisfied with the crumbs from the self appointed masters table. We can all have a place at the table, and take a turn at the cooking and washing up.

The 'lucky' four hundred about to be employed by Tesco, some of whom are going to be descendants of the striking chain makers, are going to be working for the minimum wage that Tesco are obliged to give them. All for the ultimate benefit, funnily enough, of some of the descendants of the bosses from 1910.

The workers institute, paid for by the proceeds of the strike fund is being rebuilt in the Black Country Museum, which some have called the 'working class theme park'. The museum will be employing proud ex industrial workers acting the part of proud industrial workers. You could vomit at the irony.

Now is the time ,again, to say enough is enough. Throw the boss off your back and think what would happen if the Worker Bees stop scurrying around fetching honey for the Queen Bee.

It must make sense to join a union or why else would the bosses, our natural predators, encourage us not to. Do Turkeys vote for Christmas? Given the example of these women and the situation of the new employees of Tesco - doesn't it make sense to join the One Big union? Fight back against the boss and take control of our lives? "Every little helps" as they say at Tesco.

**Dedicated to the memory of my Grandmother, Edith Denning, 1897- 1995, late of Oldfields Cradley Heath, Chainmaker -1909-1914**