



Labour struggles and the formation of demands: The spatial politics of Red Clydeside



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ABSTRACT

This paper combines labour history and labour geography through an analysis of the making of labour demands in Glasgow during the early twentieth century. The paper asserts how revisiting histories such as Red Clydeside reveals complexities within labour movements and links to more recent debates within labour geography. Archival research provides a relational account of the place-based politics of Glasgow that emerged during the forty hours movement in 1919. This allows the paper to juxtapose the broader international linkages forged by Scottish workers alongside racialised hostilities within the city. In particular, the paper compares and contrasts the progressive internationalism of the strike newspaper with the Broomielaw race riot between local and foreign sailors during the same month as the strike. This comparison also raises the longer-term trajectories of labour grievances to foreground the ambivalent and contested nature of labour demands, identities and histories. In particular, the paper pays close attention to contrasting practices of labour internationalism emerging from the relevant archives. This historical approach makes a broader contribution to debates within labour geography by engaging with the complexities and tensions of labour organising and demand making.

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1. Introduction

The (Bombay) strikers number 150,000, and are giving a great lead to the downtrodden of India to secure better wages and conditions. A victory in Scotland will help our comrades in India, who are with us heart and soul.

[Glasgow Strike Bulletin, 31st January 1919]

It is absolutely certain that unless the Government steps in and regulates employment of Chinese labour, the men (in Glasgow) will take the matter into their own hands.

[British Seafarer, March 1919, pp. 3]

In January 1919, an independent Strike Committee, composed of workers' representatives and chaired by Emanuel Shinwell,¹ actively encouraged all workers on Clydeside² and throughout

¹ Emanuel Shinwell (1885–1986) was a leader of the Strike Committee, Secretary of the British Seafarers' Union and President of the Glasgow Trades and Labour Council in 1919. He was a key figure during the Red Clydeside period and went on to join the Labour party, becoming Minister for Fuel and Power (1945–7) and Secretary for State War and Minister of Defence (1950–51).

² Clydeside and Glasgow are used interchangeably in this paper. Admittedly the Clydeside catchment area stretches beyond the city of Glasgow but the place-based events considered here took place largely in Glasgow and brought together the connected workplaces of the Clydeside area, which includes the broader metropolitan area around the city.

Scotland to take strike action for a shorter working week of forty hours. The events which followed are central to the broader historical period that has become celebrated as 'Red Clydeside' (see Damer, 1990; Craig, 2011), identifying Glasgow and its surrounding towns as a radically charged working class region in early twentieth century Britain. John Foster (1990, pp. 38) has shown how during early 1919, 1¼ million working days were lost in the West of Scotland due to the strike. The strike lasted for just under two weeks with the Riot Act being read by police on January 31st in response to a gathering of the striking groups. It is estimated that between 30,000 and 60,000 (McKay, 1993; Foster, 1990) workers gathered on this date in Central Glasgow, but the day is primarily remembered for violent clashes after confrontations between workers and police on George Square, which led to the Strike Committee's *Strike Bulletin* labelling the day 'Bloody Friday'. The British military also infamously occupied parts of the city with tanks following these clashes to prevent any further unrest.

The initial quotes above are taken from contrasting sources within the Clydeside working class presence during 1919. They introduce a tension within the labour movement and illustrate the often ambiguous and contested nature of labour identities, demands and collective solidarities emerging from this period. The first quote above is representative of a connection between Scottish and Indian workers, reflecting a developing international

solidarity. In contrast, the second source intimates a hostility and racialised tension within Clydeside docks during the same month as the strike. This paper explores how these coexisting and contrasting articulations of labour movement demands, particularly the different modalities of labour connections emerging from these, unsettle more bounded understandings of labour history and working class agency and experience. To explore this understanding further, the paper engages with longer trajectories of labour communications and organising before and after the events of 1919.

Three primary contributions towards labour geography emerge from this analysis. Firstly, the research provides a more relational account of Clydeside's place-based politics to include a wider political understanding of the forty hours movement. This approach towards labour history links with recent efforts to think spatially about place-based politics. Secondly, the paper considers the ways in which labour demands are representative of broader spatial networks through a reading of Ernesto Laclau alongside geographer Geoff Mann. Their works indicate the importance of previously understated factors within and beyond the site of direct action and how these links reflect multiple grievances. This combination allows more political constructions of the essentially economic demand for a shorter working week. Thirdly, the paper considers the ways in which this combination of grievances and more relational understandings of place-based politics reveal previously understated experiences of labour histories and geographies.

Following an engagement with literature relating to labour geography and the formation of demands, the paper considers two intersecting moments relevant to Glasgow's early twentieth century working class movement. Firstly, the paper considers a previously neglected aspect of Clydeside's labour movement through an analysis of the translocal aspects of the *Strike Bulletin* newspaper and trade union records. This focus on the Clydeside strike movement is briefly compared with the 1919 Belfast strike for a shorter working week to illustrate the significance of these connections. Secondly, the paper explores the Broomielaw riot between sailors of different races and nationalities through an analysis of newspaper reports alongside more official perspectives from the relevant trade union movements. The experiences emerging from these contrasting sources reveal the importance of thinking spatially about labour demands.

2. Labour geography and the articulation of demands

Recent reviews of labour geography (Castree, 2007; Tufts and Savage, 2009; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010; Mitchell, 2011; Peck, 2013) have suggested the need for a renewed conversation on the terms on which labour agency is constructed. These engagements have critiqued labour geography's preferences for trade union forms of struggle and exposed a limited recognition of mobile workers (Lier, 2007, pp. 829). Such reviews have also argued that these trends have perhaps been at the expense of exploring more complex forms of agency and labour identities (Tufts and Savage, 2009, pp. 946). Further recognition of the 'contradictory and complex moral geographies' (Castree, 2007, pp. 860) of working class solidarity is required to counter preferences for more discrete forms of trade union agency used within labour geography. One method of achieving this is to return to labour histories through a geographical lens (Mitchell, 1996) to excavate the ambiguous nature of political identities and to expand understandings of political demands.

This paper considers how related place-based experiences and working class demands should not be considered in separation and instead suggests that their linkages reveal a more relational understanding of working class activity and experience. This

position concurs with Thompson's (1968) understanding of class as a process forged through antagonisms rather than simply viewing labour or the working class as a homogenous object of research (a problem identified by Waterman and Wills, 2001). This paper develops Thompson's (see Featherstone and Griffin, 2015) sensitivity to the diversity of experience within the working class and utilises his positioning of working class agency and internal conflicts to present alternative understandings of what constitutes labour geography. Rutherford has also raised the work of Thompson in conversation with labour geography and suggested that he illustrates how '[c]lass identity is not separate from struggles over work and the wage-relation, but is inherent to and constitutive of, such conflicts' (Rutherford, 2010, pp. 773). An explicitly geographical understanding of labour agency (Herod, 2001), emphasising connections and relationality, to these multiple trajectories reveals possibilities for revisiting the spatial politics of labour histories. This approach is transferable to the history of Red Clydeside which has traditionally been framed through more local and national perspectives (Hinton, 1973; McLean, 1983; Craig, 2011).

The paper also contributes to more recent work within Scottish labour history that has emphasised translocal connections and more relational understandings (for examples of this see Jenkinson, 2008; Domosh, 2008; Cox, 2013; Kelly, 2013). This approach can be further linked to more recent developments within labour geography that have critically constructed the spatial politics of labour's connections and revealed diverse accounts of labour experiences to include factors such as race, gender and sexuality (see Pearson et al., 2010; McDowell, 2013; Kelliher, 2014). This, aligned with a critical interpretation of the articulation of labour internationalisms (Castree, 2000; Waterman, 2001; Anderson, 2009) and a more relational understanding of place-based politics (Featherstone, 2005, 2008), provides a useful basis to reconsider Red Clydeside. These overlapping interests, of a broader notion of what constitutes labour and recognition of translocal connections, begin to reveal how the forty hours demand can be further explored beyond its current historicisations (e.g. the imagery of the iconic raising of the red flag, the riotous scenes at George square or the military occupation of the city).

In this regard, the relationship between workers' demands and populist politics becomes useful for revisiting radical histories. While the demand for a shorter working week might not seem 'populist' itself, theories of populism can help situate these demands within labour geography and history. Ernesto Laclau (2005a, 2005b) makes the demand the 'guiding thread' in his analysis of populism and understanding of collective political identities. For Laclau, the demand is 'constitutively split: on one hand it is its own particularised self; on the other it points through equivalential links, to the totality of the other demands' (2005a, pp. 37). Labour demands often rely on what Laclau (2005b, pp.72) calls an 'equivalential chain'; a single collective demand serves as the 'tip of the iceberg' containing a plurality of related demands and positions, allowing less visible grievances or political practices to become integral to their making.

This perspective recognises the plurality of experiences related to demand making and is particularly useful for rethinking labour demands within labour geography. When approached in this manner, Clydeside's forty hours demand can be seen as a signifier for a much more complex labour politics with multiple and potentially conflicting grievances. This method can be usefully linked with Geoff Mann's (2007) work on 'the politics of measure' and his analysis of worker interests through the cultural politics of the wage relation. Mann's work pays closer attention to the ways in which demands are operationalised through close readings of working class experience. He argues that the wage relation should be recognised as a 'social and economic relation' with 'politics [that] are historically generated and culturally charged' (Mann, 2007, pp.

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