

Vic Turner, one of the Pentonville Five dockers imprisoned in 1972, died late last year. He later worked for Newham Council and was then elected as a Councillor for many years before being elected Mayor. Vic Turner was also President of the United Campaign For The Repeal Of Anti-Trade Union Laws (now merged with the LCDTU to form the Campaign For Trade Union Freedom). In honour of his role in trade union history, we print this summary account of a larger work, "The Pentonville 5: Dockers In Action, Solidarity, And The Anti Union Laws" by Graham Stevenson.

National strikes of miners (twice), dockers (twice), postal workers, building workers, the occupation of ship yards, a wave of rent strikes by council house tenants, and an abortive general strike, were just part of a phase of stunningly effective militancy during the 1970 - 1974 Tory Government. The Tory plan to diminish the value of working class incomes focused on their 1971 Industrial Relations Act. This finally met its biggest test as a result of the Pentonville 5 case.

In the words of Communist Party trade union organiser, Bert Ramelson, after Pentonville, the Act simply became "inoperable".

Docks strikes then led to States of Emergency and a measure of how sensitive they were lies in the revelations from cabinet papers that Prime Minister Ted Heath got regular reports from secret agents, phone tapping and bugging. Meetings between leading Communist Party officials and dockers' shop stewards as well as internal discussions about the editorial line of the Morning Star were detailed for him, and a leading London docker, later the TGWU Chairman, was an informant for MI5.

Only 15 men handled a container ship, compared with the 150 required by a conventional ship. Job numbers were dropping drastically as dockers campaigned for a designated zone around registered docks, where container handling would be done by organised labour.

In Merseyside, a joint committee of TGWU dockers and lorry drivers obtained agreements from March 20th 1972 with 35 transport firms. But Heaton's, which moved containers to inland depots to "stuff and strip" them at half the cost, went to the special court set up by the new law, the National Industrial Relations Court, for an injunction against picketing.

In London, action focused on a ramshackle container depot in Stratford, less than two miles from the London docks, the now defunct “London International Freight Terminal”, on the site of what is now the Olympic development.

Thus, in July 1972, five shop stewards were imprisoned in Pentonville Prison for criminal contempt of court in a case now recorded as Midland Cold Storage (MCS) Limited v. Turner and Others. MCS, owned by Lord Vestey, the head of a massive meat shipping company, sought an injunction to end picketing. It was said that the Vestey did not just live off the interest of their invested capital but the interest on the interest! (Recently, the government of Venezuela forcibly nationalised his interests there.)

A private detective agency, Euro-Tec, was asked by the police Special Branch to establish the names of the rank-and-file leaders. One Euro-Tec agent later revealed that thousands of shop stewards and union officials, their families and friends were regularly monitored by them on behalf of MI5.

Thus five shop stewards were arrested and imprisoned on Friday, July 21st 1972: Conny Clancy, Tony Merrick, Bernie Steer, Vic Turner and Derek Watkins. Steer and Turner were prominent Communists and Steer was the lay secretary of the unofficial National Ports Shop Stewards Committee.

35,000 dock workers walked out on strike the day the men were sent to Pentonville prison and that weekend saw a massive mobilisation across the country, with phone lines going red hot in preparation for a total stoppage in all ports for most of the week.

At least 250,000 workers took unofficial strike action before the dockers were released on the Wednesday. There was an almost total stoppage of newspapers and public transport, some coalmines came out, customs, immigration and social security offices were severely affected.

There was almost no milk available that week, then almost exclusively delivered by employed drivers organised by the TGWU.

The Official Solicitor was then as now a fairly unknown part of the state judicial system. Unmasked, the OS applied to the Appeal Court, which

ordered their release. But the House of Lords immediately backed a counter-appeal from the haulage companies. This prompted the General Council of the TUC to call a one-day general strike on the following Monday 31st July, unless the five were released.

The Cabinet was told that the one-day protest general strike appeared to be “bound up with tactics to secure the acceptance by the dockers' Delegate Conference taking place that day of the recommendations in the Interim Report of the Joint Special Committee on the future of the dock industry”.

This was a problem since the emphasis of the Aldington/Jones report was on improved severance, mainly for unfit and older dockers, coupled with some temporary work sharing, which many saw as the thin end of the wedge.

Thus, when a delegate threw open the doors and dramatically shouted out to the hundreds of waiting dockers: "It's a national strike!", a massive roar shook the streets around Transport House. Bernie Steer was lifted on to shoulders to be paraded around to chants of "Heath Out!"

Thousands of dockers appeared from nowhere to march in an orderly fashion to Tower Hill for a rally. Tony Merrick roared out: "We were asleep for five years while they took jobs away from us. Even now, the victory has not yet been won."

42,000 registered dockers now began the quietest and most solid and successful dock strike ever from 28th July 1972. The settlement, after a three-week national strike, saw major improvements in conditions and also staved off deregulation for 15 years.

Preferring a devil they could do business with, the Containerbase Federation Ltd finally made an agreement with the TGWU Road Transport (Commercial) Trade group, opening our roads to a world of box containers.

The nation's capitalist newspapers then set to work in earnestness to portray the source of the problems in Britain's industry as being the Communist Party.

As soon as the dust settled on Pentonville, the News of the World ran a major campaign against Bert Ramelson; much more was to follow.

The National Dock Labour Scheme was eventually abolished in 1989. Although the union has regained or retained a key role, much casual work still abounds in Britain's ports.

From a pamphlet No. 7 in the new "Our History" series, obtainable from the Communist Party History Group (<http://communist-party.org.uk>) for £1.50.