

The Port of Bristol and the Inter-War Recession

By Frank Smith

During the interwar period, as the country's eighth largest port, Bristol was bound to be affected by national trends in the port transport industry. Bristol on the whole as an importing port did not experience the same degree of economic depression as London or Liverpool. As a result the unemployment rate was below the national level. While it is true relative unemployment was lower in Bristol, the dockworker in comparison with workers in other industries in the area, was subjected to casual employment, on a half day basis. Like other ports dockers would seek work at call-on points at the shipside at the City docks and outside the main gate at Avonmouth. A social survey undertaken by Bristol University in 1937¹ established that although Bristol was more prosperous than other towns there were 21,000 families having a 'hard struggle' and 11,000 families 'living in poverty.' The latter group represented 40,000 people, out of a total population of around 400,000. Some of those having a hard struggle or in poverty were the unemployed, including waterfront workers. There were no precise figures for dockers or shipyard workers but casual workers formed 5.6 per cent of the 32,000 families below the 'needs' standard. As dockers and shipyard workers made up a good proportion of casual workers it would be reasonable to assume that a good number came into this category. Certainly oral research indicates that dockers and shipyard workers recall the ignominy of applying for public assistance. This along with casual work implanted in their minds that the strata of society to which they belonged was to a certain extent cut off from those with regular jobs. As a result their status would be in some respects below that of a fully employed low paid railway worker.

Cargoes, Organisation and Industrial Relations.

The Docks Committee between the wars was successful in promoting trade and commerce particularly in the decade prior to the Second World War. There was some improvement in the Bristol economy in the late 1930's. Unemployment dropped between 1935-1939. Trade at the Port of Bristol increased by 50% in those five years. The Statement of Traffic report to the Docks Committee at the meeting held on 31st of March 1939² gave the following figures. The total of foreign and coastwise imports were 4,314,060 tons. This was a continuous trend throughout the latter years of the thirties. The 1935 total had been 3,367,093 tons. Exports showed a similar trend rising from 582,941 tons in 1935 to 710,017 tons in 1939. The improvement at the port reflected the publicly funded developments carried out on the infrastructure between the wars at Royal Edward Dock. For example the Oil Basin extension created extra berths resulting in the increase in petroleum products. The Eastern Arm extension too contributed, providing extra grain extraction machinery and storage facilities together with general cargo berths. A modernisation programme was carried out at O Shed and the Cold Stores which contributed to the increase in the imports of refrigerated cargoes like meat and dairy products. The Port of Bristol Authority (PBA) had negotiated contracts with the Australian and New Zealand governments to obtain these valuable imports. These improvements along with increased berthage at the City Docks, had been partially financed by the Unemployed Grants Committee (UGC) set up in 1921-2 after the collapse of the post-war boom. In addition the Docks Committee in 1933-1934 acting in conjunction with the

¹ Herbert Tout. M.A. *The Standard of Living in Bristol*, Arrowsmith. (Bristol 1938)

² City of Bristol Docks Committee Minutes and Reports 1939 (B.R.O.)

Public Assistance Committee, provided work for the unemployed. In this way the city authority could combine public finance with profit to improve the facilities at their port.

All registered dockers were members of the TGWU. The four branches in Bristol were located where dockers lived. Two branches covered the central area. The first one met in the TGWU docks office in Prince Street in the heart of the City Docks, the second at Hotwells, a mile down river. There was another branch at Bedminster in South Bristol where a large number of dockers had their homes. Their meeting place was the Dockers Hall, now demolished, where Ernest Bevin and Ben Tillett former leader of the Dockers Union, often spoke. The Kingsley Hall in Old Market Street was where dockers living in East Bristol had their branch, another venue for meetings addressed by Bevin and Tillett, being the headquarters of the labour movement in Bristol.³ At Avonmouth branches were organised in sections. Registered dockers, casual and permanent, had their own branch. Crane drivers and tally men were organised in a similar manner. The branches were constitutionally organised together in the Docks Group of the TGWU.⁴ They were serviced by the Docks Group Secretary and two other full-time officers from the docks offices in Prince St. Bristol and Meadow St., Avonmouth. The same officers looked after the non-registered dock workers. The administrative staff at the higher grades were members of the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO). Those at the lower level were members of the Administrative, Clerical, and Supervisory section of the TGWU.



The Boston City being unloaded at Bristol City Docks

The Bristol Port Labour Committee had from 1924 issued registration books. These because of their colour were henceforth known as 'black books' and registered dockers were 'black book men'. The registration books were handed in by a docker when engaged

³ Oral interviews with retired dockers.

⁴ For a detailed outline of the constitutional structure of the TGWU see V.L. Allen. *Trade Union Leadership*, Longman Green London. (1957)

for work. The employer would stamp the book for each day or half-day worked. Every six months an exchange of books would take place. Two Port Committee members, one from each side, together with a Ministry of Labour official, carried out an examination of each docker's record for the previous six months. If a docker had a poor record of attendance he could be summoned before the sub-committee. This could be ascertained by examining his work record and the number of times he signed on the dole, supplemented by comments from employers on the occasions when he had refused an offer of work at the call-stand. Failure to give a satisfactory explanation could lead to disciplinary measures, warnings as to future conduct, suspension, and in extreme cases withdrawal of registration books.⁵

Throughout the inter-war period the register had been gradually reduced by keeping recruitment to a minimum. If however a registered dock worker retired or died his book could be handed on to his son. Nevertheless, there were still too many dockers for the amount of employment available. For example at the exchange of books in March 1936 it was shown that 2,594 men obtained an average of 69.1 % employment in the previous six months. A salient factor in this analysis was the number of older men on the register. There were 313 men in the age group 60-64 who obtained 61.5 % employment, 162 in the age group 65-70 employed 54.3 % of the time and even 55 men over 70 who worked 48.1 % of the period. These latter figures could be explained by the amount of day-work 'turning-out' (loading ex-cargo into lorries and railway trucks) in the transit sheds and warehouses. On the whole, the interwar Port of Bristol's Registration Scheme worked fairly well compared to other ports. Indeed it was commended as a model in the MacLean Committee Port Labour Enquiry Reports.⁶

Before 1939, local and national working agreements, dealing with wages and conditions, were renegotiated from time to time. These were based on the Shaw Court of Inquiry recommendations in 1920, laying down the 44 hour week and sixteen shillings (80p) per day for dockers on time work. The sixteen shillings per day award was not sustained, falling to ten shillings (50p) per day during the slump. By 1939 it had risen to twelve shillings (60p) per day.⁷

How then did the hiring of casual dock labour operate at the Port of Bristol between the wars? It was not a very edifying scene. The dockers reported twice daily at the various calling-on stands at 7.45 a.m. and 11 45 a.m.. At Avonmouth the central calling-on stand was located just outside the main docks entrance in Gloucester Road, in the open air. Superintendents and foremen from the PBA and the stevedoring firms would pick individual dockers from the hordes of men thrusting their 'black books' forward clamouring for a job. When called by name the docker would give his book to the foreman and proceed to the ship or quayside depending whether his employer was responsible for unloading or loading the ship. The employer would retain the registration book until the job was completed. Unfortunately the system of hiring labour did not necessarily lead to a fair distribution of work. This left bitter memories in the minds of dockers during the 1930's. To quote one retired docker:

'The method used for calling men off for a job was degrading and primitive. At Avonmouth there was a line of covered stands built into the outer perimeter fence, while at Bristol gangs were called off at the ship's side or outside the shed where

⁵ Bristol Port Committee Exchange of Registration Books.- September 1936. B.R.O. REF 40194/A/1.

⁶ MacLean Report(1931) paras 43-44 pp. 26-27.

⁷ City of Bristol. Docks Committee Minutes and Reports 1939. B.R.O.

the vessel was berthed. Of course this led to moral blackmail by the stevedores...by bribery (leaving a pint over the counter at the bosses (*sic*) favourite pub').⁸

Despite the recommendations of the Shaw Report and the 1924 and 1931 MacLean Reports and the constant efforts of the TGWU to bring these issues to the negotiating table there was still no established system of maintenance for unemployed dockers financed by the Port Transport Industry in the 1930's. As early as 1919 the Bristol Port Labour Committee approved a scheme for out-of-work payments, which was dropped without being put into operation when the Unemployment Insurance Scheme (UIS) was extended to the Port Transport Industry in 1920. One study has asserted that its introduction held up any further progress towards complete decasualisation between the wars.⁹ Furthermore the UIS created anomalies peculiar to the docks industry, which suffered the twin problems of unemployment and underemployment. A docker could be picked up for as short a period as half-a-day; this could spoil his record of continuous employment necessary to claim benefit. It was this unique practice which caused the difficulty of fitting the industry into the UIS. Only the ship repairing industry shared this problem.

The Bristol Port Labour Committee had reduced the number of registered dock workers from 3236 in 1925 to 2570 in 1933. At the same time daily employment had dropped to 59.2 % from 66.8 % in 1926.¹⁰ We have already noted the increased tonnage handled from 1935 -1939. Nevertheless the analysis of registration books in March 1936 indicated that the total amount of work obtained had only risen to 69.1 %. The figures illustrate the anomaly of under-employment against the background of improved trade. This apparent increase in productivity can be explained by the development of modern technology at the quayside and in the design of larger and faster ships.

Why did the UIS as applied to casual dock workers attract so much criticism, both at the time and in subsequent studies? It was the application of the continuity rule which was subject to most scrutiny.¹¹ Despite apparently overwhelming evidence of the way the UIS favoured the dockers, those who worked in the industry before 1939 emphatically deny that it presented an accurate picture.¹² The continuity rule did occasionally work to the dockers' advantage, but the over-riding impression of those who worked on the docks at that time was one of long periods of unemployment and what they perceived to be a pernicious casual system which favoured the employers. Except for timber boats and grain, most cargoes offered short-term employment, one, two or three days at most. This was particularly true at the City docks where ships, except those belonging to the Bristol City Line, were mainly coastal or short-sea traders. Indeed dockers looked forward to unloading timber boats. The entire operation was mainly manual, and could last several weeks. In most dockers' experience, the earnings quoted in the MacLean Report were obtained by a minority of the port labour force. They maintained that twelve shillings a day, the national rate, was the norm. Piecework was limited to grain porters, zinc concentrates (dirt boats), some animal-feed cargoes (pollards) and copper ingots. The first two were arduous, needing very fit dockers to unload. On the other hand pollards and

⁸ Letter from H. Gray, a retired docker.

⁹ Op. cit. Whyte pp. 73-99 and MacLean paras. 81-84 pp. 47-49.

¹⁰ Ibid. Whyte Tables 1 and 2 pp. 58-59.

¹¹ Op. cit. MacLean Report. 1931. paras 90-92 pp. 50-54... also Gordon Phillips and Noel Whiteside. *Casual Labour*, Oxford University Press. (1985) pp. 176-267.

¹² Oral interviews with retired dockers.

copper ingots were by comparison easy to handle. The high earners were categorised as 'blue eyed boys', in other words men who were picked regularly for the few opportunities there were to work piecework. All dockers, whether 'blue eyed boys' or not tended to follow one employer. At Avonmouth the older dockers followed the PBA in order to work in the sheds 'turning out' on day work. Pieceworkers followed the stevedoring firms on board ship, while a few would 'freelance' seeking high paying cargoes.

Because the continuity rule affected weekly income the system stood accused of undermining dockers' work incentives. As one pre-war study on the Port of Bristol describes: 'On a recent occasion the present writer paid a visit to the call stand at Avonmouth during the morning call. It was a busy day and all the registered men who applied were engaged. After expiry of the interval during which registered are given preference, there were still some vacancies which were filled by non-registered men. While this was taking place my attention was drawn to a group of dockers who remained in the background till the call was over and proceeded to the Labour Exchange to sign as proof of unemployment and qualify for benefit.'¹³

The writer goes on to explain that the men concerned had gathered information about the type of cargo to be unloaded. They had avoided the call for several reasons. First, it was a day work job and piece work jobs were in prospect and secondly, it was a cargo they disliked as too dirty or too arduous.

Attempts to circumvent the procedures were not denied by pre-war dockers, but they point out that the secretary of the Port Committee (also the PBELA) Mr.S.C. Parkin and his assistant Mr.J.Cross, together with the manager of the Labour Exchange, were strict and thorough in their scrutiny of day to day labour requirements and the twice yearly assessment of employment records at the exchange of registration books. They also reiterate that the majority of dockers were keen to go to work during the depression to earn enough to support their families. Unemployment benefits were simply not high enough to act as a disincentive to seeking work.

There was however a paradox, both nationally and locally, which, as we shall see, explains the eventual failure to reform industrial relations on the waterfront. The daily struggle and uncertainty of their lot conditioned casual workers in the port transport and related shipping industries into fearing change. The apparent 'freedom' in which they operated made them suspicious of any attempt to discipline/regulate dock work. Few left the industry to work in factories for a more secure existence. What had happened over a long period of time was the shaping of a dockside. They would have preferred regular employment.

For their part the Bristol employers, like the employers in the other ports, had no incentive to disturb the status quo. With the possible exception of the PBA they were content to maintain the casual system. Most of the stevedoring firms being small businesses, their equipment was very basic. Some did not possess lorries, transporting gear around the docks on handcars. Indeed some of them lived in the dockside communities, sharing a social life with the dockers. While this could have led to some degree of corruption, there was an element of mutual understanding, a kind of code whereby a measure of fair play prevailed, particularly in giving employment to older dockers. But of course the main obstacle to decasualisation was that of maintenance which would have added considerably

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W.H.Whyte , 'Decasualisation of Labour at the Port of Bristol' in *Economica*. August 1932., pp. 357-364..

to their overheads and reduced the profitability of the companies engaged in the cargo-handling business. Another factor was those shipping companies like Coast Lines Ltd. who employed dockers directly and Charles Hill who operated a stevedoring business. As shipowners with a vested interest to keep costs to a minimum, they too were not anxious to take on the responsibility of maintaining a permanent labour force.

During the 1930s, both the dockers and shipyard workers assumed that the very nature of the shipping industries, with its trade fluctuations, cyclical and seasonal, and the vagaries of weather and tides, ruled out any concept of regular employment. The individual employers by and large took the same view. Curiously the politicians and the leaders of employers and unions were conscious that something ought to be done from a humane and possibly an efficiency point of view. But the vested interests of both sides of the port transport industry prevailed. Although it is difficult to obtain any evidence from pre-war dockers it is reasonable to assume that all dock workers benefited from working agreements negotiated by the TGWU. Therefore both permanent and casual dockers maintained solidarity on the issue. Perhaps the most significant factor about the 1930s was the complete absence of industrial disputes in the Port of Bristol. The lesson of the 1926 General Strike had an effect on port employers and unions. Collective bargaining seemed to be the order of the day. At this stage industrial relations were based on the sanctity of agreements with unofficial action taken by dockers or shipyard workers in Bristol completely unknown. On the other hand the demoralisation of most workers caused by mass unemployment was probably the real reason for the apparent lack of militancy in other ports. It was to take a world war to change entrenched attitudes towards casual work.