

The history of struggle at Avonmouth Docks

The Avonmouth Docks have been a site of dispute since opening in 1877 as detailed in these six events from 1923 to the present day.

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1923 WILDCAT STRIKE

In September 1923 around 67,000 dockers around the UK went on strike, including 5,000 workers from Avonmouth and Bristol. The strike was started because of cuts to wages and an increase in the cost of living, and was taken without official union approval. The National Committee of the Transport and General Workers Union issued instructions for all dockers to return to work immediately despite the wage cuts, though Jack Williams (a Bristol docker representing the workers in Bristol and Avonmouth) stated at the conference that the workers he represented would resist any request to return to work with a pay cut. No information could be found on the eventual resolution of this event.

1945 NATIONAL DOCK STRIKE

In Mid-October 1945, workers in Avonmouth joined an ongoing strike that had started in Birkenhead that September and spread to Glasgow, the Humber, Leith, Liverpool, London and Tyneside. The strike was about raising the wages of workers from 16 shillings per day to 25 shillings. The Labour government refused to meet the strike and instead used 21,000 conscripted troops to work the docks. At the height of the strike 43,000 workers were on the pickets and they did not return to work until November. They had not managed to win their full demands, but did gain a three shilling per day pay increase.

1949 SOLIDARITY STRIKE

In 1949, Canadian workers went on strike and were undermined by American and Canadian companies who hired 'scab' labour to work the ships. When the ships arrived at Avonmouth dock on the 22nd May, workers refused to unload any ships crewed by 'scab' sailors. Management attempted to sanction striking workers, which escalated the situation into a full lock out of the docks. Crane drivers and tugboat/canal gate workers also refused to work, in support of the Avonmouth dockers. The Canadian ships were initially rerouted to Liverpool where they met with resistance from workers who refused to unload the ships. Strikes were also taking place in London, Southampton, Leith and Newport involving some 15,000 workers. Government concerns over 'communist elements' within the strike led to troops being sent to the docks, including Avonmouth, to unload ships and restore order. Striking workers refused to cooperate with the soldiers, and only returned to work two months after the dispute started, when the Canadian workers won concessions by their own actions.

1962 RESISTANCE TO RACISM ON THE DOCKS

Not all of the actions on the docks were based on solidarity, however. Between the 10th and 12th of July 1962, workers at Avonmouth docks refused to work alongside 200 black immigrant workers from the West Indies as they were unloading ships. The response of management was to sack 60 black dockers in an attempt to get white dockers to return to work. White workers continued to racially abuse black colleagues and these actions were condemned by union representatives as racial discrimination. The racist treatment of black dockers led to a demonstration and ended in a confrontation between the West Indian workers and the foreman as well as some of the white workers. The tabloids claimed that knife fighting had taken place (though this was regarded as dubious). Although the outcome of this dispute is unclear, it shows Bristolians of West Indian origin were already organising against racist treatment, as they would again in the Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963.

1989 DOCK DISPUTE

One of the largest disputes in Avonmouth took place in 1989 after the abolition of the National Dock Labour Scheme. The end of the scheme allowed employers to hire casual, non-unionised workers for lower wages and was seen as an attempt to undermine pay and conditions on the docks. On April 7th 1989, 500 dockers walked off the job initially as a wildcat, though they returned to work on the 10th April after the union urged them to do so. Official action was then taken after a ballot, though union leaders remained nervous about the strike. They feared it would be regarded as 'political' and therefore illegal under UK laws which had been toughened since the Miners Strike, and would result in union funds being confiscated.

The workers struck again, alongside other dock workers from across the UK, on a number of occasions until August 1989. They were eventually defeated after the Labour council urged them to return to work so that the councillors would not incur personal charges for losses in profit by the port. At this time the dock was under full control of the municipality and therefore the Labour council.

Whilst the strike resulted in a defeat for workers there were some positive effects. A solidarity group had been set up to support the strikers with whatever they needed and although this was largely ignored by union bureaucrats and TUC representatives, it did have the support of the striking workers themselves. The group was run democratically and had over 100 dockers (amongst others such as local residents and families) in attendance at the first meeting where it was agreed that any action taken by the group had to be approved by striking workers first.

2014/15 BOOMECO AND A SELL-OFF

In May 2014, residents in Avonmouth began protesting against environmental pollution coming from a local Biomass waste company, Boomeco. Over the summer, environmental pollution from the site was causing swarms of flies and a 'nauseating, putrid smell' in the area. Over the next few months, residents regularly gathered and organised to confront Mayor George Ferguson directly over the issue at public events. On one occasion they disrupted a ceremony opening new wind turbines with a road block. Eventually Boomeco was fined £14,000, ordered to pay costs of £4,873.56 and stripped of its permission to operate by the Environment Agency.

On August 4th 2015, Avonmouth & Portbury Docks freehold was sold for £10 million. The council retain a 12.5% share in the dock. The effects of the sale and whether there will be any response to this from workers or the community, remain to be seen. The sale was controversial in the council, with a Labour councillor describing it as a 'smash and grab'.