

ECONOMIC (IN)JUSTICE

FACTSHEET - STORY

Name	Professor Nadia Valman
Details, area of experience	Professor of Urban Literature at Queen Mary, University of London; co-Director, the Raphael Samuel History Centre
Interview date	January 2021
Issues addressed	Poverty, low pay, casual labour, employment conditions, racism, fascism.
Injustice category (linked to economic injustice)	ability <input type="checkbox"/> age <input type="checkbox"/> class <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> faith <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> gender <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> neuro-diversity <input type="checkbox"/> race <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> sexuality <input type="checkbox"/>
Dates mentioned	1889, 1912, 1936
Locations referenced	East End of London, Cable Street.
Campaigns, movements, protests	Matchgirls strike 1888; Jewish tailors and Irish dockers' strikes 1889 and 1912; 'the Battle of Cable Street' 1936.
Historical context	Migration from Ireland and Eastern Europe, escaping poverty and persecution; working-class traditions of neighbourhood mutual aid; the rise of trade unions; extreme poverty in the East End; memories of solidarity passing down generations.
Tactics	Strikes for better pay and conditions; money donations in solidarity; mutual aid – taking in and looking after strikers' children; community resistance – different communities coming together.

Key words	Strike Trade unions Immigration Solidarity Mutual aid Piecework Dockers Tailors Sweatshops Fascism
Key points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conditions of deprivation in late 19th/early 20th century East London. ● How the matchgirls' success galvanised other strikes in East London. ● Despite the shared experiences of migration and poverty, there were tensions between Irish and Jewish communities. ● Nevertheless, how understanding of common cause and led to significant actions of solidarity. ● Working-class traditions of mutual aid and community. ● The power of collective memory and shared experience of activism – stories handed down the generations. ● What can be achieved by coming together?

Story summary	<p>Professor Nadia Valman tells the story of late nineteenth and early twentieth century strikes for better pay and working conditions in the East End of London. She explores how people from Irish and Jewish communities, in spite of differences, supported each other in solidarity when facing injustice and defending their rights.</p> <hr/> <p>In the late 19th century East End of London there was terrible poverty, low levels of employment, casual work, no safety net, and overcrowded accommodation with one third of people below the poverty line. In 1888 there was a successful strike by young women at the Bryant and May match factory in London. It was the first example of people organising collectively to improve working conditions and was a trigger for many other workers to organise and take action.</p> <p>There were two strikes in 1889. One by London dockworkers, the majority of whom were Irish Catholics demanding higher pay. Another by around 6,000 Jewish immigrant tailors who were most exploited workers, afraid of losing jobs making clothes for middle-class people in West End department stores. The strikes closed both the factories and the docks, which remained shut until the employers came to negotiate better conditions. Conditions were</p>
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hard and the strikes could last a long time but there were limits to the strike pay unions could afford. The support of allies was crucial in maintaining people's ability to strike. The two communities were from similar backgrounds – immigrants coming from persecution and poverty – and there was competition for employment between them. Some of the leaders among the dockers campaigned against Jewish immigration, blaming them for economic deprivation. But attitudes shifted at the time of the strike, as they started to understand the importance of working together. The tailors were about to collapse when they received £100 from the dockers union, which was their biggest donation and a massive amount of money at the time.

Although the 1889 strike had been successful, the gains were not long lasting. Conditions deteriorated and by 1912 both dockers and tailors were again on strike. The tailors were campaigning against the practice of sweatshops – people employed in cramped, unsanitary workshops, doing casual piecework on low wages. Around 13,000 tailors went on strike and many were not in unions so got no strike pay. Helped by lots of support from other people such as local bakers who donated bread, the tailors were successful. It was now their turn to help the dockers. The dockers' strike had been going on for months and many of their children were starving. Jewish women supported them by taking in and looking after 300 dockers' children until the end of the strike. This was another kind of solidarity, built on memory of help received in 1889. These actions of solidarity were partly due to the rise of trade unions, but also to a strong tradition of mutual aid in the working poor. Neighbours would lend each other what was needed, seen as a community obligation even if they did not like each other.

October 1936 was a time of high unemployment and economic turmoil. The growing British Union of Fascists (BUF) was recruiting strongly in the East End and blaming Jews for economic troubles. The BUF announced they would march through the East End, with police protection, as one of many acts of intimidation. They tried to appeal to Irish dockers to see Jewish presence as natural enemies, but there was a strong local memory of previous solidarity. Irish dockers joined those resisting the fascists. The streets filled with thousands coming together to prevent the march which was stopped on Whitechapel Road. On Cable Street, where residents and their allies put up a barricade, there was conflict between demonstrators and police. This iconic moment in East End history brought together many communities – English Communists, Irish dockers, Jewish residents – looking back to early memories of collaboration.

Although the 1889 and 1912 strikes did not end the exploitation of workers and 1936 did not end the presence of fascism, collective action at these moments had a longterm impact which became

	<p>fruitful decades later. People came together in 1936, and again in the 1970s and 80s to defend to defend their neighbourhood against those who wanted to sow discord there because there was strong local memory of solidarity.</p> <p>There are lessons for us now in this history: firstly, it's important to continue to defend the employment rights that were established by more than a century of collective action. Secondly, find allies and overcome differences. We will achieve much more working for structural change, and by working together.</p>
Stand-out quotations	<p>"The importance of allies was enormous."</p> <p>"Solidarity is not always an easy thing."</p> <p>"What all of those moments of activism and solidarity did achieve and demonstrate was that ... there could be unity among different elements of the community and that the neighbourhood itself could be defended against those who wanted to sow discord and create conflict."</p> <p>"It is incredibly moving to hear these stories of the bonds between two communities that were in many ways very, very different but that were forged through mutual aid and care."</p> <p>"It does remind us that it is actually possible, that kind of solidarity between different groups who came together to defend their neighbourhood from racists."</p> <p>"Solidarities that are forged in activism can often outlast specific campaigns."</p>
Main themes for learners	<p>Knowledge of working and living conditions in 19th century East London.</p> <p>Understanding the concepts of solidarity and mutual aid.</p> <p>Why were there tensions between the communities? So why did they help each other in 1889 and 1912?</p> <p>Why did the fascists' march fail in 1936?</p> <p>What does Nadia mean by "Solidarities that are forged in activism can often outlast specific campaigns"?</p> <p>Are there parallels with 21st century Britain?</p>