

The Match Girls'

On 5th July 1888, a group of between one and two hundred girls crowded around the offices of the left-wing journal *The Link* in Fleet Street. The girls were workers at the Bryant & May match factory at Bow Road, in London's East End, and they had marched out of work in defiant protest after the unfair dismissal of several, running straight to *The Link* to seek the support of socialist Annie Besant.

In the late-19th Century, London's East End was notorious as a place of extreme deprivation. Overpopulated by a chronically poor "residuum", and characterized by depressing living conditions, sweated industries, poverty, and disease, the East End was viewed with fear and trepidation by many outsiders. It was from this depressing milieu that the Bryant & May matchworkers hailed. Mostly young girls, "pale, thin, undersized" and "ragged" – many of them only 13 – the matchworkers faced a life of hard toil for very little reward, earning a pittance while the company's shareholders received dividends of over 20%.

Outraged by this exploitation, the socialist Annie Besant decided to investigate conditions at the factory for herself. After questioning several girls, she published a shocking expose in *The Link*, likening the Bow Road factory to a "prison-house" and describing the match girls as "white wage slaves" – "undersized", "helpless" and "oppressed". The match girls worked from 6.30am (or 8am in winter) until 6pm, with just two breaks, standing all the time. "A typical case", wrote Besant, "is that of a girl of 16, a piece worker; she earns 4s a week, and lives with a sister, employed by the same firm, who 'earns good money, as much as 8s or 9s per week'. Out of the earnings 2s is paid for the rent of one room; the child lives on only bread-and-butter and tea, alike for breakfast and dinner". Their "splendid salaries" were also often reduced even further by a huge array of fines and deductions, for everything from leaving a match on the benches to paying for brushes, paints and other equipment.

Working at the factory endangered the girls' health. They were told to "never mind their fingers" when working with machinery, even if it meant them being injured, and they also suffered "occasional blows" from the foreman. Disease was another constant threat. With no separate facilities provided, workers would eat at their benches, with "disease as the seasoning to their bread". "Phossy jaw", a disfiguring and painful disease, was the possible result.



Outraged by Besant's article, Bryant & May attempted to bully the matchworkers into denying its revelations. These heavy-handed tactics set the girls alight, and on 5th July, around 200 of them downed tools and "flocked" towards the offices of *The Link* in Fleet Street, their "spirit of revolt against cruel oppression" aroused by the dismissal of one of their colleagues, who was

The Child Slaves of Britain by
Robert Sherard (1905)

Strike Of 1888

accused of being a ringleader. The action spread quickly, and soon about 1,400 workers had walked out in sympathy.

The Match Girls' Strike of 1888 was not entirely unprecedented. Previous strikes against a match tax in 1871 and the lowering of wages in 1885 had hinted at the solidarity of matchworkers and their potential for resistance. However, the action in 1888 was more lasting, as Annie Besant's bold leadership helped to give the girls organization and direction.

While Bryant & May denounced the "twaddle of Mrs. Besant and other socialists" in the press, and issued threats of legal action, Besant set about organizing a strike fund. An appeal for donations was launched in *The Link* and other sympathetic newspapers, and money rolled in from all quarters. Even the London Trades Council – a body representing skilled craftsmen, which had traditionally rejected associations with the unskilled – pledged its support.

The Match Girls' Strike brought the plight of these vulnerable unskilled workers to wider public attention. There were meetings and demonstrations, and a group of around 50 girls visited parliament, to describe their grievances to MPs "in their own words". The *Justice* reported how "the contrast between these poor 'white slaves' and their opulent sisters" as they walked along the Embankment was "a very imposing sight".

The strike fund was organized and distributed at Mile End Waste, and a Union of Women Matchmakers was also established. The union, which lasted until 1903, was extremely significant, considering that even as late as 1914, less than 10% of female workers were unionized. It also meant that the organization of the workers did not just disappear after the strike, as it had done previously.

Threatened by the bad publicity, Bryant & May's directors eventually agreed to a meeting with a deputation from the London Trades Council and the Match Girls Strike Committee. Started on Monday 16th July, by the next day an agreement had been reached, whose terms "far exceeded the expectations", and included the abolition of all deductions and fines and the provision of a breakfast room. The agreement represented a resounding success for the match girls, who returned to work the next day, victorious.

The match girls' success gave the working class a new awareness of their power, and unions sprang up in industries where unskilled workers had previously remained unorganized. The rise of "New Unionism" is now a well-established part of labor history, but we should not forget where it all started from. [www.unionhistory.info/matchworkers/matchworkers.php]

*Annie Besant and the Matchgirls
Strike Committee*

