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**The Loughborough ‘Mansfield Hosiery’ Strike, 1972:
Deindustrialisation, Post-war Migration, and Press Interpretation**

The Loughborough ‘Mansfield Hosiery’ Strike, 1972: Deindustrialisation, Post-war Migration, and Press Interpretation

Recent historiographical trends have ensured the continued relevance of the strike at the Mansfield Mills’ hosiery factory in Loughborough in 1972. How this dispute, one of three in the East Midlands in two years dubbed ‘race strikes’ by the press, gained notoriety and were interpreted as an exemplar of British working-class racism requires re-evaluation. The article uses sources underutilised in previous studies, including the archive of the National Union of Hosiery and Knitwear Workers (NUHKW), to better understand the industry, the traditions of the hosiery craft, and how its processes of training and promotion differed from other industries that experienced ‘race strikes’. This article relocates the dispute within the processes of deindustrialisation, demographic and social change, workplace culture, and the importance of press reportage in shaping interpretations.

Keywords: Loughborough; hosiery; locality; trade unionism; deindustrialisation; migration.

Introduction

Scholarly study of historic racial discrimination and community relations in the Midlands have traditionally focused on the migrant communities of Birmingham, the Black Country, and the City of Leicester.¹ Particular events and processes, including the

¹ West Midlands: M. Dick, ‘Locality and Diversity: Minority Ethnic Communities in the Writing of Birmingham’s Local History’ in *New Directions in Local History since Hoskins*, ed. by C. Dyer, A. Hopper, E. Lord, and N. Tringham (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2014), pp. 84-97; K. Myers and I. Grosvenor, ‘Birmingham Stories: Local Histories of Migration and Settlement and the Practice of History’, *Midland History*, 36, 2 (2011), 149-62; P. Long, ‘Representing Race and Place: Black Midlanders on Television in the 1960s and 1970s’, *Midland History*, 36, 2 (2011), 262-77; East Midlands: S. Gunn and C. Hyde, ‘Post-Industrial Place, Multicultural Space: The Transformation of Leicester, c. 1970–1990’, *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8, 2 (2013), 94-111; J. Clayton, ‘Living the Multicultural City: Acceptance, Belonging and Young Identities in the City of Leicester, England’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35, 9 (2012), 1673-93; K. Burrell, ‘Migrant Memories, Migrant Lives: Polish national identity in Leicester since 1945’, *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society [TLAHS]*, 76 (2002), 59-77. Both areas are covered in R. Yemm, ‘Immigration, Race, and Local Media in the Midlands: 1960-1985’, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Lincoln, 2018).

‘racial politics’ of Smethwick, the interaction of housing and migration in post-war Birmingham, or the rhetoric of Enoch Powell, have been explored.² Often, when there were instances of racial discrimination in the East Midlands, such as the 1958 Nottingham riots, simultaneous events in London’s Notting Hill received greater attention.³ Unsurprisingly, the latter’s nearness to national press reporters and policymakers, together with the Notting Hill riots’ role in catalysing the area’s carnival, ensured that Nottingham received comparatively limited academic interest.⁴ Yet, when all three *causes célèbres* of 1970s racialised industrial discontent took place within the East Midlands, they gained attention in some radical circles.⁵ How these strikes, at

² Yemm, ‘Local Media in the Midlands’, pp. 65-185; R. Yemm, ‘Immigration, Race and Local Media: Smethwick and the 1964 General Election’, *Contemporary British History*, 33, 1 (2019), 98-122; S. Hirsch, *In the Shadow of Enoch Powell: Race, Locality and Resistance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); A. Ephraim, ‘Urban History Group conference 2017 Paper: “I spoke to the Prime Minister of Jamaica and told him that I did not want coloured people here”: Housing, immigration and local politics in post-war Birmingham’ <<https://republicofthebrokendolls.wordpress.com/2017/04/02/uhg-2017-paper/>> [published 2/4/2017, accessed 18/12/ 2020]; E. Buettner, ‘“This is Staffordshire not Alabama”: Racial Geographies of Commonwealth Immigration in Early 1960s Britain’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 42,4 (2014), 710-40.

³ Leicester’s far right, anti-migrant politics during the 1970s are covered in Yemm, ‘Local Media’, pp. 186-248; Gunn and Hyde, 108; C. Schofield and B. Jones, “Whatever community is, this is not it”: Notting Hill and the Reconstruction of ‘Race’ in Britain after 1958’, *Journal of British Studies*, 58, 1 (2011), 142-73; M. Vaughan, ‘Commentary: Accepting the ‘D’ Word: Discrimination in 1960s’ UK academic discourse’, *Race & Class*, 61, 2 (2019), 85-95; S. Hirschler, ‘Riots in Retrospective: Immigration and the Crisis of the ‘Other’’, in *The English Riots of 2011: A Summer of Discontent*, ed. by D. Briggs (Reading: Waterside Press, 2012), pp. 65-90; R. Miles, ‘The Riots of 1958: The Ideological Construction of ‘Race Relations’ as a Political Issue in Britain’, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 3,3 (1984), 252–75.

⁴ S. Goulding, ““Neighbours are the Worst People to Live Beside” The 1958 Notting Hill Riots as Dramatic Spectacle, Drama as Analysis”, *Literary London*, 8, 1 (March 2010) <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2010/goulding.html>> [accessed on 18/12/20]; E. Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988); I. Katzelson, ‘The Politics of Racial Buffering in Nottingham, 1954-1968’, *Race & Class*, 11, 4 (1970), 431-46; R. Glass with H. Pollins, *London’s Newcomers: The West Indian Migrants* (London: UCL Centre for Urban Studies, 1961), pp. 144-8.

⁵ M. Cooper, ‘The remaking of the British working class: trade unions and black and Asian worker in Britain 1949-1984 [Historical Materialism conference paper, 7 November 2013]’, <<https://britishcontemporaryhistory.com/in-the-news/the-trade-unions-and-black-and-asian-workers/>> [18/12/20]; A. Phizacklea and R. Miles, ‘The British Trade Union Movement and Racism’ in *Racism and Antiracism: Inequalities, Opportunities and Policies*, ed. by P. Braham, A. Rattansi, and R. Skellington (London: SAGE, 1992), pp. 36-7.

Crepe Sizes in Nottingham, Mansfield Hosiery Mills in Loughborough, and Imperial Typewriters in Leicester gained such significance, but have received so little historical attention, requires further consideration.

This article examines just one strike: Loughborough's Mansfield Hosiery Mills strike of 1972. A more comprehensive analysis of this event allows for both a detailed focus on the economic and socio-cultural origins of the dispute and deeper engagement with underused, extant trade union archive holdings within a wider source base.⁶ By considering issues like global interconnections and relationships, while ensuring issues of place, locality, and belonging are not ignored, this article aims to encourage better understanding of this historic industrial dispute and its significance.⁷ As all three strikes were in different industries with diverse workplace cultures and union organisations, a comparative analysis may ignore small but significant differences. Therefore, this study places the strike within its wider social and cultural context, to understand how the traditions and practices of a specific industry, together with the process of deindustrialisation, interacted to create the strike's unique circumstances, issues, and environment.

⁶ S. Mustchin, 'From Workplace Occupation to Mass Imprisonment: the 1984 Strike at Cammell Laird Shipbuilders', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 31-2, 1 (2011), 31–61; A. Clark, "And the next thing, the chairs barricaded the door": The Lee Jeans Factory Occupation, Trade Unionism and Gender in Scotland in the 1980s', *Scottish Labour History*, 48 (2013), 116-35. See also a recent special edition, edited by A. Clark, of *Labour History Review*, 86, 1 (2021), 1-185; D. Lyddon, 'Writing Trade Union History: The case of the National Union of Public Employees', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 38 (2017), 221-254; K. Lunn, 'Editor's Note', in *Race and Labour in Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. by K. Lunn (London: Frank Cass, 1985), p. vi.

⁷ S. Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 1-16; C. Koller, 'Local Strikes as Transnational Events: Migration, Donations, and Organizational Cooperation in the Context of Strike in Switzerland (1860-1914)', *Labour History Review*, 74, 3 (2009), 305-18; E. P. Thompson, 'Homage to Tom Maguire' in *Essays in Labour History*, ed. by A. Briggs and J. Saville (London: Croom Helm, 1960), p. 276; Lunn, p. vi.

To best reinterpret the Mansfield Hosiery Mills dispute, this article first explores how the strike compared to other ‘race strikes’, to determine commonalities and differences. It then examines how the process of deindustrialisation affected Leicestershire more broadly and Loughborough specifically. This study then considers how labour organisations within the Midlands debated and interpreted the effect of post-war migration, while analysing the complicated nature of trade unionism within the hosiery industry. Finally, it determines how the strike was reported in local, national, and radical media, such as left-wing and campaigning periodicals, to understand how the walkout was reported. Clarifying when and how the dispute was defined as a race strike, together with the popular acceptance of the term, has not received sufficient attention, yet this played an important role in initial explanations of the dispute and still underpins some historical interpretations.

The Mansfield Hosiery Mills strike, 1972: an aberration?

The rationale for this article’s focus is three-fold. First, for the East Midlands, hosiery and knitwear equated to cotton in Lancashire and wool and worsted in Yorkshire’s West Riding, but the industry operated differently.⁸ It scaled-up to factory-level production much later and remained the domain of diverse small firms who specialised in niche products or particular parts of the process.⁹ Deeper understanding of local workplace cultures, including the very nature of the hosiery trade and its practices, and the impact of deindustrialisation need to be understood to explain the strike. Equally important was the institutional culture of the National Union of Hosiery and Knitwear Union

⁸ J. V. Beckett, ‘Review of ‘Hosier and Knitwear: Four Centuries of Small-Scale Industry in Britain, c.1589-2000’ by Stanley Chapman’, *Midland History*, 28, 1 (2003), 155-6.

⁹ S. Chapman, *Hosiery and Knitwear: Four Centuries of Small-Scale Industry in Britain, c.1589-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. xix-xi.

(NUHKW).

That the NUHKW's General Secretary described the strike as 'perhaps the most significant dispute' in the union's history further underpins its significance.¹⁰ Yet, despite this seeming acknowledgement of significance, that the strike remains unmentioned in the NUHKW's 1976 commissioned history emphasises the problems with examining the realities and contexts of post-war industrial disputes.¹¹ As the hosiery and knitwear industry transitioned to new methods, including greater mechanisation, these changes also shaped local attitudes and political choices.¹² This strike occurred at a cross-roads in this industry's history, where initial and visible signs of oncoming deindustrialisation marked the end of the industry in its historic form. Furthermore, any study of Mansfield Mills requires a greater appreciation of intersectional racial and gender discrimination, intended or otherwise.

That the workers most affected were migrant women means awareness of this factor must underpin historical interpretations of the strike.¹³ Recently, several key studies acknowledging the role of female industrial workers counter the fact that 'popular and academic accounts of the mobilisation of workers against industrial

¹⁰ Modern Records Centre (MRC), 629/18, National Union of Hosiery and Knitwear Workers (NUHKW), 'Annual Conference Report', 1973, pp. 185-6.

¹¹ R. Gurnham, *200 years: The Hosiery Unions, 1776-1976* (Leicester: NUHKW, 1976).

¹² N. Hayes, 'Heritage, Craft, and Identity: Twisthands and their Machinery in what's left of the British Lace Industry', *Labour History Review*, 83, 2 (2018), 175-7; Gunn and Hyde, 106-8. For more discussion of the interaction of economic change, migration, and extreme politics see M. Collinson, 'A 'fertile ground for poisonous doctrines'? Understanding Far-right Electoral Appeal in the South Pennine Textile Belt, c.1967-1979', *Contemporary British History*, 34, 2 (2020), 273-98.

¹³ S. Anitha, R. Pearson, and L. McDowell, 'From Grunwick to Gate Gourmet: South Asian Women's Industrial Activism and the Role of Trade Unions', *French Journal of British Studies*, 23, 1 (2018), 4; H. C. Jain and P. J. Sloane, 'Race, Sex and Minority Group Discrimination Legislation', *North America and Britain Industrial Relations Journal*, 9, 2 (1978), 49-50.

closure in Britain are dominated by...the male worker'.¹⁴ Significantly, this aspect was recognised in a government-appointed Commission of Industrial Relations inquiry, chaired by former Labour health minister Kenneth Robinson. This made recommendations on the provision of language classes for workers and undertook a wider evaluation of the strike.¹⁵ How events at Mansfield Hosiery Mills, alongside those at Crepe Sizes and Imperial Typewriters, constituted what was both contemporaneously and later defined as a 'race strike' needs further consideration.

Certainly, there were some similarities in the strike narratives. Recent migrant workers were the victims, while established and culturally 'conservative' trade unionists were deemed to be complicit in management-maintained discriminatory practices. Furthermore, the strikers were advised by activists who sought to inspire migrant consciousness, had experience from involvement in similar disputes, and were influenced by radical Marxist interpretations of industrial relations. More importantly, these activists later became the key chroniclers of the strike. This article does not argue that these factors invalidated the stories or the motives of their writers, but rather to suggest that a more complicated history lies beneath.¹⁶ The post-war race strikes originated in unique, localised instances of more complicated, national, and international processes. Various cultural changes had shaped how local societies interacted with in-migration, together with how they engaged with the economic and social realities of deindustrialisation.

¹⁴ M. Robinson and A. Clark, "We Were the Ones Really Doing Something About It": Gender and Mobilisation against Factory Closure', *Work, Employment and Society*, 33, 2 (2019), 337. This article's literature review provides an excellent outline of this historiography.

¹⁵ D. Newall, 'An Employment Project in Loughborough: The Future Role for CRCS', *New Community*, 4, 4 (1975), 436.

¹⁶ A. Sivanandan, *Catching History on the Wing: Race, Culture and Globalisation* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p. 123.

The Mansfield Mills strike was different to the other disputes. First, the walkout at the Crepe Sizes factory in May 1972, involved a group of Asian workers in a solidarity strike with fellow employees who had been poorly treated by white colleagues and made redundant.¹⁷ Only after pressure was applied by the Black Peoples Freedom Movement and a strike committee composed of family, Asian workers, and community workers, did the Transport and General Workers Union (T&GWU) support the strike and recognise the migrant workers' union rights.¹⁸ Those made redundant were taken back.¹⁹ Many of these were Pakistani immigrants or were refugees from the Kenyan Asian Crisis of 1968, and they fought hard to have their rights, pay, and conditions recognised.²⁰ Yet these events failed to catalyse either comprehensive, industry-by-industry, or union-by-union change.

A strike with a similar profile also occurred at Mansfield Hosiery's Loughborough Mill. Here, Asian workers struggled to secure skilled roles from 'auxiliary' positions. Again, the NUHKW rarely pushed for their promotion.²¹ That 28 of the striking workers were promoted once a policy of 'promotion on merit' was implemented after the strike, demonstrated there had been discrimination.²² A similar strategy and tactics employed at Crepe Sizes and refined at Mansfield Mills inspired strike activities across the East Midlands. For example, the Mansfield Hosiery Strike Committee advised fellow strikers in Courtaulds Mill (Mansfield) and E. E. Jaffee in

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ B. Simister, 'Worker's Win Strike at Crepe Sizes in Lenton', *Nottingham Worker*, 1,1 (1972), 2-3.

¹⁹ Sivanandan, *Catching History*, p. 113.

²⁰ D. Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974-1979* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 604.

²¹ C. Wrigley, *British Trade Unions Since 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 30.

²² Race Relations Board (RRB), 'Report for 1972', *House of Commons Papers*, vol. 30 (1972-3), p. 754.

Nottingham in 1973.²³ Despite initial hesitancy, the NUHKW moved to negotiate outstanding migrant worker issues later in the strike, but not from the start, and were unwilling to declare an official dispute.²⁴ Clearly, cooperation and communication between migrant workers was common between all the ‘race strikes’, even if the disputes were inspired by different institutional cultures and discriminatory practices.

Notably, it was Leicester’s 1974 Imperial Typewriters dispute which was considered the apotheosis of race strikes. Here, migrant workers accused the T&GWU of working together with management to block the strike, which was over the poor pay and conditions of many workers.²⁵ In all, 420 workers were dismissed by the management after ‘several hundred’ had gone on strike over bonus rates on 1 May 1974.²⁶ Yet, more significant was the clear influence of events at Mansfield Mills on those at Imperial Typewriters. Bennie Bunsee, who had advised the Mansfield Strike committee and was described by the *Leicester Mercury* as “‘Mansfield’ Strike man”, addressed a meeting of Imperial Typewriters workers during the strike and described himself as being present in an ‘advisory capacity’.²⁷ A South African-born pan-African and anti-racism activist in exile due to Apartheid, Bunsee became involved as he believed the labour movement had abandoned the Mansfield workers.²⁸ Advisory work like this was often uncoordinated and social movements like the Indian Workers

²³ A. Sivanandan, *A different hunger: writings on Black resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), p. 130.

²⁴ MRC, 547/HKW/2/4/27/135, NUHKW, ‘Minutes of a special National Executive Committee [NEC] meeting’, 3 November 1972; 547/HKW/2/4/27/131, NUHKW, ‘Minutes of a special NEC’, 27 October 1972.

²⁵ W. Sullivan, ‘Race and trade unions’, *Britain at Work online* <<http://www.unionhistory.info/britainatwork/narratedisplay.php?type=raceandtradeunions>> [Accessed 24/04/18].

²⁶ *The Times*, 17 October 1974, p. 2.

²⁷ ‘Cutting from Leicester Mercury’, 7 May 1974 in ‘Affective Digital Histories: Re-creating Britain’s De-industrial Places, 1970s to the Present’, *My Leicestershire History* <<http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p16445coll8>> [accessed 12 February 2021].

²⁸ Yemm, ‘Local Media in the Midlands’, pp. 228-9.

Association only engaged in the disputes when a clear case for equal opportunities could be made.²⁹ Therefore, advice and support for Mansfield Mills strikers was only available through activists like Bunsee.

These strikes had significant effects, but not all were intended. The Imperial Typewriters strike led not only to the plant's closure months later, but it also emphasised the significance of the City's Asian migrant community.³⁰ The strike therefore represented this as an important moment in the developing consciousness of the migrant community, recently commemorated by a recent project run by Leicester University.³¹ There were similarities, and connections linking all three 'race strikes'. While the economic social, cultural, and political realities of deindustrialisation were broad influences, clear local differences existed between the strikes and influenced their causes. As Andy Clark has argued, there were a 'multiplicity of experiences...in British labour history', and only through understanding these industry and workplace-specific experiences can we understand how and why the strike happened.³² Settlement-level economic changes, workplace traditions and trade union cultures and industry-level problems interacted with racial discrimination within longstanding hiring and promotional practices.

²⁹ 'Cutting from Leicester Mercury', 6 May 1974 in 'Affective Digital Histories' [accessed 12 February 2021].

³⁰ *The Guardian*, 18 January 1975, p. 1

³¹ E. Smith, 'Before the 'Unity' of Grunwick: 40 years since the Imperial Typewriters Strike', *New Historical Express online* <<https://hatfullofhistory.wordpress.com/2014/06/18/before-the-unity-of-grunwick-40-years-since-the-imperial-typewriters-strike/>> [Published: 18/06/14; accessed 22/01/21]; *The Strike at Imperial Typewriters* <<https://strikeatimperial.net/>> [Accessed 05/02/21].

³² A. Clark, 'Workplace Occupations in British Labour History: Rise, Fall and Historical Legacies', *Labour History Review*, 86, 1 (2021), 4; R. Pearson, S. Anitha, and L. McDowell, 'Striking Issues: From Labour Process to Industrial Dispute at Grunwick and Gate Gourmet', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 41, 5 (2010), 409.

Deindustrialisation, institutional restructuring, and skill in the Leicestershire hosiery industry

Deindustrialisation was an important factor driving concurrent socio-economic, cultural, and political changes across post-war Britain.³³ Long-term economic change in Britain's manufacturing industry had a drastic effect on employment, creating both intransigent myths of 'decline' and a large historiography around it.³⁴ In recent years, historians such as Jim Tomlinson have argued that debating measures of 'growth' and 'decline' are unhelpful in the interpretation of post-war economic change in Britain.³⁵ After all, the UK economy did not die and never recover: it realigned to shifts in global market demand and industrial responses to technological innovation.³⁶ The process both influenced the nature of work and affected workplace cultures in different ways, and attempts to generalise industry-specific concerns and change can lead to a reductionist history.³⁷ As political scientist Steve Ludlam argued, discussions over industrial relations are most sophisticated (and accurate) when scholars disaggregate beyond generalisations and consider specific institutions within their own contexts.³⁸ Those considering deindustrialisation must adhere to a similar, pluralist interpretation.

³³ S. Catterall and K. Gildart, *Keeping the Faith: A History of Northern Soul* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 5.

³⁴ D. Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (London: Penguin, 2019), pp. 389-94.

³⁵ J. Tomlinson, 'De-industrialization not Decline: A New Meta-Narrative for Post-war British History', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27, 1 (2016), 76-99; J. Tomlinson, 'Thrice Denied: 'Declinism' as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20, 2 (2009), 227-51.

³⁶ Edgerton, *Rise and Fall*, pp. 389-401.

³⁷ S. High, L. MacKinnon, and A. Perchard, 'Introduction' in *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places*, ed. by S. High, L. MacKinnon, and A. Perchard (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017), pp. 3-24.

³⁸ S. Ludlam, 'Too Much Pluralism, Not Enough Socialism' in *Interpreting the Labour Party*, ed. by J. Callaghan, S. Fielding and S. Ludlam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 152.

As with various locales across Britain and the western world, Leicestershire's hosiery and knitwear industries were affected by economic change. Leicester sat at the centre of a 'woollen hosiery manufacturing district that spread from Loughborough to Hinckley', with Nottingham the centre of the cotton-using and lace-based trade.³⁹ Locally, hosiery and footwear manufacture had a major impact and a long history. From the eighteenth century, they had supplanted extractive industries (mining and quarrying), became major employers, and influenced both local architecture and urban development.⁴⁰ In the twentieth century, they were early adopters of electric generators in factories and encouraged the growth of affiliated trades like paper, which was used in patterning.⁴¹ Far from a backward trade, hosiery had long been dynamic and innovative, and the industry had overcome difficult economic fluctuations before. After World War One hit demand, it had recovered, improved pay and conditions for its workers, and enjoyed interwar commercial success.⁴² Then, following World War Two, it underwent a further difficult economic restructuring, which affected firms in various ways, and the industry remained resilient into the post-war period.

The initial post-war years to 1951 were relatively prosperous, which was only checked by price increases of raw materials facilitated by the Korean War.⁴³ Despite

³⁹ J. Stobart, 'Regions, Localities, and Industrialisation: Evidence from the East Midlands c. 1780 – 1840', *Environment and Planning*, 33, 7 (2001), 1311 [1305-1325]; 'The City of Leicester: Hosiery manufacture', in *A History of the County of Leicester: Volume 4, the City of Leicester*, ed. by R. A. McKinley (London: Victoria County History, 1958), pp. 303-14; D. M. Smith, 'The British Hosiery Industry at the Middle of the Nineteenth Century: An Historical Study in Economic Geography', *Transactions and Papers (Institute of British Geographers)*, 32 (1963), 125-42; M. Palmer, 'Housing the Leicester Framework Knitters: History and Archaeology', *TLAHS*, Vol. 74 (2000), 59 [59-78].

⁴⁰ D. Chamberlain, 'The Paper and Board Industry in Leicestershire', *TLAHS*, Vol. 89 (2015), 223-4; Palmer, 74, 59-78.

⁴¹ P. Neaverson, 'The History of Electricity Supply in Leicestershire and Rutland up to Nationalisation in 1947', *TLAHS*, Vol. 77 (2003), 104; Chamberlain, 89, 223-4.

⁴² *Loughborough Echo*, 10 January 1919, p. 1 and 21 November 1919, p. 4.

⁴³ Gurnham, p. 167.

these problematic external influences, overall, hosiery remained fashionable, but the industry was affected by technological advances and market changes, such as the popularity of man-made fibres.⁴⁴ This clearly impacted upon the industry. During the 1950s, Loughborough delegates at the NUHKW annual conference advocated the creation of a Development Council to encourage industrial competitiveness and governmental support, but the relevant ministry, the Board of Trade, never acquiesced to this demand.⁴⁵ Yet, the industry was far from stagnant. As the 1960s and 1970s progressed, hosiery manufacturers including Mansfield Hosiery Mills continually advertised for local staff, with most posts aimed toward women.⁴⁶ Despite this, it was clear the industry was undergoing structural change.

Strike action took place when employers tried to double the number of shifts per day to aid competitiveness.⁴⁷ In the late 1960s increased foreign competition encouraged rationalisation.⁴⁸ Yet the hosiery industry seemed to embrace change, with a decrease in shop floor workers balanced by an increase in white collar work, which ensured overall employee numbers remained stable.⁴⁹ This limited the opportunities available to shop floor workers. Their access to or interest in white-collar work is unclear, though union members expressed concerns over divergences in pay and working conditions.⁵⁰ In addition, union structures reacted to change and adapted to the changing realities of the industry. In 1945, major hosiery and knitwear unions in the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 31 May 1950, p. 8.

⁴⁶ For example, see: *Leicester Chronicle (LC)*, 18 June 1971, p. 5; , 21 January 1972, p. 26; , 8 October 1971, p. 27; , 8 February 1974, p. 16; 27 September 1974, p. 14.

⁴⁷ *Leicester Evening Mail (LEM)*, 9 May 1963, p. 12.

⁴⁸ ‘NUHKW - National Union of Hosiery and Knitwear Workers’, Community The Union website, <<http://www.community-tu.org/information/100308/100310/100312/105922/nuhkw/>> [accessed 14/12/20].

⁴⁹ Gurnham, p. 169; for examples, see: *LC*, 27 September 1963, p. 23.

⁵⁰ Gurnham, pp. 174-5.

East Midlands and Scotland merged, while local districts were reorganised to economise on costs and improve their effectiveness.⁵¹ Designed to increase institutional bargaining power, this new union represented the industry countrywide and was able to enter into national-level agreements on pay affecting the whole hosiery sector.⁵²

This process continued and between 1969 and 1974, when several East Midlands craft unions catering to specialisms like trimming, finishing, dying, and scouring merged into the main NUHKW, and a 1970 national strike over continuous shifts and wages was only just avoided.⁵³ Clearly, the rapid increase in union size challenged existing management structures. Between 1970 and 1972, NUHKW member recruitment was managed by districts rather than centrally, as officials prioritised administrative modernisation through union mergers.⁵⁴ Once the Mansfield strike began, it became clear that even a single dispute, involving a small part of the overall workforce, slowed management activities and administrative processes.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, there was strategic logic in mergers, even though they distracted officials from shop-floor matters. Rather than showing an industry in trouble, mergers often reflected attempts to increase membership, elevate national-level influence, and enhance their effectiveness in negotiations.⁵⁶ Such changes affected the unions' staffing and relationships with some employers, but this had little effect in Leicestershire, which remained at the heart of the trade and the location of the NUHKW head office.

⁵¹ LEM, 23 September 1958, p. 6.

⁵² *Nottingham Evening Post*, 30 May 1950, p. 5.

⁵³ MRC, 629/17, NUHKW, 'Annual Conference Report', 1972, p. 116.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ MRC, 547/HKW/2/4/27/150, 'Minutes of Organising Committee', 17 November 1972.

⁵⁶ J. Waddington, *The Politics of Bargaining: Merger Process and British Trade Union Structural Development, 1892-1987* (London: Mansell Publishing, 1995), pp. 1-2.

In Loughborough, the NUHKW were involved in factory level pay claims, and appeared to have had a productive relationship with Mansfield's owners.⁵⁷ In many ways, the union was possessed of a more cooperative, continental-style culture, willing to work with management and support change.⁵⁸ When Michael Meacher, Labour's junior minister at the Department of Industry, addressed the 1975 NUHKW conference he observed how the union's acceptance of change and embrace of technology 'evoked the admiration of other sections of British industry'.⁵⁹ Despite this, and a willingness to engage constructively with management, the industry was in a difficult place. Increased international competition in both the developed and developing world required longer working hours and pay control for firms to remain viable.⁶⁰ Mill closures became a major problem and led to increased unemployment across the industry.

Clearly, the NUHKW were in a defensive situation in the early 1970s, having lost 6,000 members (2,000 through redundancy) through an escalating process of deindustrialisation.⁶¹ New legislation had a major impact. The Industrial Relations Act, 1971 restricted union activities and involved a new court in the dispute resolution, while the European Communities Act, 1972 brought the sector into a European Free Trade area and less protection from competitors.⁶² These factors affected a number of industries in the region, such as Dunlop Rubber, and had a significant impact on local employment.⁶³ In May 1971, the *Leicester Chronicle* headline 'How can we guard

⁵⁷ MRC, 547/HKW/2/4/26/92, NUKHW, 'Minutes of NEC', 15 April 1972; 547/HKW/2/4/26/22, NUKHW, 'Minutes arising from a meeting of the conciliation committee', 23 November 1971.

⁵⁸ Gurnham, p. 167.

⁵⁹ MRC, 629/20, NUHKW, 'Annual Conference Report', 1975, p. 109.

⁶⁰ MRC, NUHKW, 1972, pp. 117, 119-20.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 115.

⁶² Ibid., p. 118-120; R.W. Rideout, 'Statutes: The Industrial Relations Act 1971', *Modern Law Review*, 34, 6 (1971), 655-75.

⁶³ LC, 23 April 1971, p. 8.

Leicester's prosperity?' after the 'myth' of the town's 'impregnable prosperity has been exploded', reflected local concerns.⁶⁴ From January to May 1971, there were fifty factory closures and at least 2,000 redundancies.⁶⁵ While these were not all linked to the hosiery industry, they demonstrated an unstable economic situation and an increase in workers seeking employment.

The hosiery industries' twin track reliance on both casual, 'auxiliary' workers and high-skilled craftspeople became more apparent. While the 1972 strikes in Leicestershire, at Crepe Sizes and Mansfield's Loughborough hosiery mills, were linked to race to some degree, they also reflected the industry's traditions and employment structure. The NUKHW refused to accept that race was the central issue and only engaged with the Race Relations Board after legal advice was taken.⁶⁶ More significant was the issue of skill and training. As Nick Hayes has demonstrated in a study of Nottingham's lace industry, cultural assumptions of seniority based on 'skill' developed over a long, on-the-job apprenticeships, remained an important part of industrial training across Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire's textile industries.⁶⁷ Acquiring a skill took time and relied on the slow accruing of peer-acknowledgement.⁶⁸ As workers developed skills, they were regarded as specialist craftsmen, which imbued their possessor respect from and authority over colleagues through their expertise.

This culture informed union practice and procedure and explained why, in September, they prioritised unemployed 'countermen and trimmers', with 'five years

⁶⁴ LC, 14 May 1971, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ MRC, 547/HKW/2/4/27/129, NHKW, 'Minutes of NEC', 7 October 1972; 547/HKW/2/4/27/158, NHKW, 'Minutes of the NEC', 18 November 1972.

⁶⁷ Hayes, 147-9.

⁶⁸ D. Collinson, *Managing the Shopfloor: Subjectivity, Masculinity and Workplace Culture* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 90,165.

and over membership of the union...before training further knitters'.⁶⁹ As would be expected, long-term union membership, length of service, and skill therefore underpinned NUHKW priorities. This industrial culture remains central to understanding the strike. Not only was skill respected, but it brought the privilege of higher wages (sometimes 50 per cent higher), which excluded other workers.⁷⁰ Opportunities for promotion were further limited by processes associated with deindustrialisation, including rationalisation, reduction in the number of higher-grade positions, and sector-wide contraction. In fact, several earlier disputes at Mansfield Mills were linked to 'piece rates', or the amount workers were paid for every 'piece' of hosiery completed.⁷¹ Firms closing, fewer skilled jobs available, and necessary cost-cutting affected shop floor workers at factories like Mansfield Mills.

These changing personnel requirements affected the recruitment and promotion of employees of different ethnic origins. As the Race Relations Board noted, workers went on strike when they realised other members of the migrant community, working at other firms, had secured comparable skilled roles to the ones they were being denied.⁷² Asian workers comprised half of the overall workforce, yet in skilled roles, all but five employees were white; in unskilled roles, all but five workers were of South Asian origin.⁷³ The strike was more consequential as it forced the government's commissioning of Kenneth Robinson's report, which blamed the company, the unions, and striking workers in equal measure, and suggested more factors were significant

⁶⁹ MRC, NHKW, 'NEC', 7 October 1972.

⁷⁰ Hayes, 148-9.

⁷¹ MRC, 629/15, NUHKW, 'Annual Conference Report', 1970, p. 27.

⁷² RRB, '1972', p. 754.

⁷³ Community Relations Commission (CRC), 'Report for 1972-1973', *House of Commons Papers*, vol. 30 (1972-3), pp. 649-50.

alongside clear-cut racial discrimination.⁷⁴ As strike leader Bennie Bunsee admitted to the *New York Times*, in few countries would such ‘a dispute...have led to a formal Government inquiry and then action’.⁷⁵ While this strike began over more general industrial grievances, focus later shifted towards the racialised exclusion of some employees from skilled posts.

These concerns were widely held among industrial workers in the 1970s. Similarly, a historic industrial culture that privileged experience, talent, and expertise was unlikely to progress at great speed integrating newer workers with less developed skills than long-term employees. Such a conservative craft culture, together with the limiting of opportunities through enforced rationalisation, created a difficult environment for newer employees of any background to gain fast promotion within the industry. The multifaceted nature of the strike created ‘considerable difficulty’ for union officials.⁷⁶ Within the post-war Midlands, the impact of large-scale economic immigration created a further complication which the industry and its venerable trade union movement were not prepared for – how traditional practices might lead to accusations of racial discrimination.

Changing institutional assumptions: xenophobia, discrimination, or disadvantage

Across the post-war Midlands, trade union adaptation to the realities of a multicultural workforce was sporadic at best. To further understand how protracted promotion

⁷⁴ Commission of Industrial Relations, *Report of a Committee of Inquiry into a Dispute between Employees of the Mansfield Hosiery Mills Ltd., Loughborough, and their Employer* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1972), pp. 2,34.

⁷⁵ *New York Times*, 27 December 1972, p. 2.

⁷⁶ MRC, 547/HKW/2/4/27/135, NUHKW, ‘Minutes of special NEC meeting’, 3 November 1972.

practices, reflective of traditional industrial cultures, risked accusations of discrimination necessitate a greater appreciation of how wider issues within working-class organisations slowed their adaption to workplace demographic changes. Some historians have argued that trade unionism in 1960s Britain struggled to represent the needs of migrant workers.⁷⁷ Furthermore, among union members and even leaders, Enoch Powell's 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech appeared to elicit greater traction than many in the Labour movement would have liked.⁷⁸ Therefore, such historiography has treated with clarity a more complicated picture.

Across the trade union movement, views on post-war migrants, and the implementation of local tactics such as colour bars and restrictions of promotion opportunities, were not comprehensive, varying from union-to-union and place-to-place.⁷⁹ As Keith Snell has argued, there was often a historical coalescence linking exclusion based on skill and apprenticeship, together with local attachments, that underpinned what he has termed 'local xenophobia'.⁸⁰ Localised union cultures linked to the hosiery and knitwear industry, with its long-developed traditions, often considered craftsmanship in terms of working lifetimes rather than incremental progressions. For example, in post-war Nottingham, an apprentice was 'indentured' for six years.⁸¹ While such processes had been plausible in the past, with stable and local employment and recruitment patterns, the post-war recruitment of migrant workers led

⁷⁷ J. Fine, 'Migrant Workers and Labour Movements in the US and UK' in *Voices at Work: Continuity and Change in the Common Law World*, ed. by A. Bogg and T. Novitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 93; Sandbrook, p. 604; Sivanandan, *Catching History*, p. 123; B. Bunsee, 'Women in Struggle: the Strike at Mansfield Hosiery', *Spare Rib*, 21 (1974), 18-19.

⁷⁸ J. Jones, *Union Man: An Autobiography* (London: Harper Collins, 1986), p. 197.

⁷⁹ D. Renton, *When We Touched the Sky: The Anti-Nazi League 1977-1981* (London: New Clarion Press, 2006), p. 15.

⁸⁰ K. D. M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 33.

⁸¹ Hayes, 167.

to debates about discrimination and the accessibility of the trades within which migrants sought employment.

As the 1960s progressed, workplace xenophobia remained a problem. Most trade union institutional policies favoured the inclusion of ‘coloured’ workers within trade unions, but activities like colour bars were often instigated at a local level.⁸² The hosiery industry in Leicestershire was not immune from this. In 1963, there was a ‘mass walkout...by white employees’ at an unnamed hosiery factory, where these workers claimed that migrant Pakistani men were being taken on to do ‘women’s work at less money’.⁸³ While the crux of the dispute was premised on undercutting the existing workforce in a language of pay and conditions, complaints were underpinned with a preference for ‘girls waiting for work.’⁸⁴ As testimony from Satish Kapur attests, this was reflective of attitudes widely prevalent in unionised occupations in 1960s and 1970s Loughborough.⁸⁵ More significantly, an all-male senior union deputation, composed of the sitting President and General Secretary and officials who would later hold these roles almost a decade later during the Mansfield Hosiery strike, emphasised the continuities in the NUHKW’s organisational culture.⁸⁶ Such attitudes were not a local peculiarity to Loughborough or Leicestershire, but reflected wider trends.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, even national-level officials publicly expressed concern at the impact of migration on members pay and conditions.⁸⁷

⁸² Renton, p. 15.

⁸³ LEM, 22 April 1963, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ J. McGrath, ‘Interview with Satish Kapur, 1986’ at *My Leicester History* <<http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p15407coll1/id/448>> [Accessed 11/02/21].

⁸⁶ LEM, 22 April 1963, p. 1; 10 May 1963, p. 7.

⁸⁷ N. Deakin, ‘The Politics of the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill’, *Political Quarterly*, 39, 1 (1968), 29; S. Patterson, *Dark Strangers: A Sociological Study of the Absorption of a Recent West Indian Migrant Group in Brixton, South London* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1965), pp. 144-6.

Nevertheless, across the trade union movement there was a mixed picture, as some unions declared their opposition to racism.⁸⁸ This second agenda reflected the activities of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), who opposed racial discrimination in their conference resolutions, although these were never enforced.⁸⁹ Due to local circumstances, leaderships, and cultures, union members' attitudes towards migrants remained complex and multi-layered.⁹⁰ How these cultures reacted to Enoch Powell's post-1968 transformation into a supposed tribune of working-class discontent further complicated matters, but did not necessarily translate into clear support for Powell or Powellism.⁹¹

On the other side of the debate, unions still focused on a policy advocating equal opportunity, but without affirmative action.⁹² New perspectives and strategies were gaining traction across some trade unions, encouraged by organisations like the Runnymede Trust.⁹³ The TUC did not engage in this debate, and strategies were left to the initiative of individual unions. While leaders of the knitwear union accepted responsibility for both their migrant and longstanding workers, this was not actively

⁸⁸ R. Miles and A. Phizacklea, 'The T.U.C and Black Workers, 1974-1976', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 16, 2 (1978), 195.

⁸⁹ K. Lunn, 'Complex Encounters: Trade Unions, Immigration and Racism', in *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Volume Two*, ed. by J. McIlroy, N. Fishman and A. Campbell (Aldershot: Routledge, 1999), p. 77; Trades Union Congress (TUC), *Report of the Proceedings of the Ninetieth Annual Trade Union Congress: Bournemouth, 1958* (London, TUC, 1958), p. 378.

⁹⁰ P. Marsh, *Anatomy of a Strike: Unions, Employers and Punjabi Workers in a Southall Factory* (London: Institute for Race Relations, 1967); *New Society*, 9, 5 January 1967; *Sunday Times*, 3 December 1972, p. 53; Jones, p. 197; S. Deakin, 'Liberal Values and New Commonwealth Immigration, 1961-1981' (unpublished PhD Thesis, Warwick University, 1987), pp. 31-77.

⁹¹ F. Lindop, 'Racism and the Working Class: Strikes in Support of Enoch Powell in 1968', *Labour History Review*, 66,1 (2001), 79; London School of Economics Archives, FAULDS/4/7/4, 'Letter to Andrew Faulds from R. Hibberd', 1 July 1968; Jones, p. 197.

⁹² *Sunday Times*, 3 December 1972, p. 53.

⁹³ *The Guardian*, 1 September 1971, p. 12.

advocated to members.⁹⁴ It was believed positive discrimination would emphasise difference rather than promote harmonious relations.⁹⁵ However, racial discrimination was not the only demographic-based concern across the hosiery and knitwear industries or within specific Loughborough factories.

In 1972, the year of the Mansfield Hosiery strike, factories in Loughborough predominantly employed women workers and union membership was composed of 3,194 men and 8,316 women, a distribution which reflected the gender balance across the wider industry.⁹⁶ In a majority female employee industry, there was a gender dynamic together with a racial one. Furthermore, within the East Midlands, there was a scarcity of locally trained and available female labour. A recent increase in well-paying jobs linked to light engineering, pharmaceuticals, and tobacco in the region ensured competitive wages within the sector.⁹⁷ That many strikers at Mansfield Mills were Asian women was unsurprising, as they suffered from the double discriminations of gender and race and had limited legal protections. Despite the size of the female workforce, the union leadership was predominantly male as was the case across British industry more widely.⁹⁸ Latent or unthinking gender and racial discrimination remained a major workplace problem that required resolution.

As the 1970s progressed, opinion formers within political parties and trade unions in the UK and abroad discussed policy solutions to these issues. Interestingly, it was legal decisions in the United States that encouraged changes in attitudes towards

⁹⁴ ‘The Race Relations Board’, House of Lords Debate, 21 February 1973, vol. 339, cc. 185.

⁹⁵ J. Wrench, *Unequal Comrades: Trade Unions, Equal Opportunity, and Racism* (Warwick: Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, 1986), p. 8.

⁹⁶ MRC, NUHKW, 1973, p. 3.

⁹⁷ Gurnham, p. 170.

⁹⁸ Anitha, Pearson, and McDowell, 4; L. Dickens, ‘Gender, Race and Employment Equality in Britain: Inadequate Strategies and Role of Industrial Relations Actors’, *Industrial Relations Journal*, 28, 4 1997, 282-91.

structural racial disadvantages in education and training. In 1971, an American Supreme Court judgment widened the legal definition of discrimination from merely ‘intentional inferior treatment’ to ‘disproportionate adverse effect’.⁹⁹ Employment discrimination could be influenced by an employee’s background and lack of opportunities which thereby denied equal opportunity.¹⁰⁰ Leading British thinkers on race relations like Anthony Lester and Geoffrey Bindman, writing in 1972, suggested American approaches should become of ‘greater relevance’ if British strategies failed.¹⁰¹ Though, with the more amenable Labour party in opposition and the Conservative government unconvinced, there was no opportunity to promote this agenda or legislation to underpin the realisation of these ambitions.

The changing attitudes towards racial disadvantage encouraged new interpretations of workplace discrimination. For example, the widely discussed strike at Imperial Typewriters in Leicester was linked to post-war migration to Leicester, where new arrivals were employed in staffing roles in that factory.¹⁰² The strike at Mansfield Mills was sometimes uncritically slotted into a ‘road to Imperial Typewriters’ narrative by activists such as Ambalavaner Sivanandan, to whom Imperial was the ‘apotheosis of racism’.¹⁰³ Although such writers often credited the Mansfield Mills strike role in the formation of the ‘Conference of Trade Unions against Racism’, with Bennie Bunsee again an important force, the Mansfield strike also catalysed calls for greater

⁹⁹ L. Lustgarten, *Legal Control of Racial Discrimination* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ The *Griggs vs Duke Power* case was based around the promotional and hiring policies of the Duke Power Company. See: *Griggs vs Duke Power Co*, 401 US 424 (1971).

¹⁰¹ A. Lester and G. Bindman, *Race and Law* (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 178-9.

¹⁰² Husbands, p. 89.

¹⁰³ J. Wrench, ‘Unequal Comrades: Trade Unions, Equal Opportunity and Racism’ in *Racism and Equal Opportunity Policies in the 1980s: Second Edition*, ed. by R. Jenkins and J. Solomos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 167; Sivanandan, *Different Hunger*, pp. 35-6; MRC, 854/4/2, ‘Report Back from the Steering Committee of the Trade Unions Against Racism Conference’, 2 June 1971.

investigative powers for the Race Relations Board to look into problems in the industry.¹⁰⁴ Mansfield Hosiery played a very specific and important role in shaping the parameters of political debate to be relegated to such a supporting role.

Political leaders were central to incorporating cultural changes, and developing interpretations, into political action and parliamentary legislation. When Labour returned to office in March 1974, Lester was appointed as Home Secretary Roy Jenkins' special advisor and championed the integration of the racial disadvantage concept into British law.¹⁰⁵ This was a rare example of another nation's case law directly influencing UK legislation. The concept of racial disadvantage underpinned the Race Relations Act (1976) and informed the mission of the new Commission for Racial Equality.¹⁰⁶ These changing attitudes among leading policymakers were synonymous with similar transformations in attitudes and reasonable expectations of equal opportunities pursued by migrant workers across the East Midlands.

Even at a time of industrial contraction, employers were not resistant to change. In fact, some hosiery employers were accused of providing newer workers with more favourable terms than longer serving colleagues.¹⁰⁷ Often, it was poor union-led training that meant migrant workers were not offered any education in union procedures or advised on how to attain faster promotion.¹⁰⁸ The significance of this concern was demonstrated when the strike was ended by an agreement where a number of 'auxiliary' staff were regraded to skilled roles.¹⁰⁹ The underlying culture of trade unions was a

¹⁰⁴ *Sunday Times*, 3 December 1972, p. 53.

¹⁰⁵ For a detailed explanation of this process, see M. D. Collinson, 'Commonwealth Immigration, Policymaking, and the Labour party, c.1960-1980' (unpublished PhD thesis, Bangor University, 2018), pp. 228-33.

¹⁰⁶ A. van der Vleuten, *The Price of Gender Equality* (London: Routledge 2016), p. 91; Lustgarten, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁷ *Observer*, 3 December 1972, p. 17.

¹⁰⁸ MRC, NUHKW, 1973, pp. 39-41.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 39.

problem, which led local Labour MP Don Concanon suggesting that the Government should consider a broad review of industrial relations within the knitwear industry.¹¹⁰ Whether the NUHKW's close relations with management, so lauded in its official history, were helpful to the union's adaption to the realities of deindustrialisation and demographic changes in its membership was unclear.¹¹¹ It certainly laid the union open to charges of collusive behaviour and, despite their belated support for the strike, acceptance of discriminatory practices in recruitment and promotion.

Academic research undertaken in 1974 by David Newall reinforced these concerns. Published the following year in the journal *New Community*, he argued that the Mansfield Mills strike highlighted the need for greater integrative measures. Newall claimed that the Robinson report's strength was its advocacy of job-focused language classes, which demonstrated its recognition of racial, community, and educational factors alongside industrial ones.¹¹² By the 1970s, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act was found wanting in a number of test legal and tribunal cases which explored links between racial discrimination and employment.¹¹³ As Stuart Bentley later argued, the significance of racial factors was not often taken into sufficient account in contemporaneous studies of strikes generally and those involving racial discrimination specifically.¹¹⁴ As with previous 'race strikes', the established trade union opposed the involvement of 'outside influences' upon industrial action.¹¹⁵ However, the context within which the Mansfield strike took place could not have been more different.

¹¹⁰ 'Hosiery and Knitwear Industry', House of Commons Debate, 30 January 1973, vol. 849, c. 332.

¹¹¹ Gurnham, p. 167.

¹¹² Newall, 436-42.

¹¹³ B. A. Hepple, 'Recent Cases: Singh v. British Steel Corporation', *Industrial Law Journal*, 3, 1 (1974), 166-9.

¹¹⁴ S. Bentley, 'Industrial Conflict, Strikes and Black Workers; Problems of Research Methodology', *New Community*, 5, 1-2 (1976), 127.

¹¹⁵ *The Times*, 17 October 1974, p. 2.

While in both the Imperial Typewriters and Mansfield strikes, shop floor union members expressed concerns over the impact of migrant workers on their pay and conditions, the wider political and community conditions in Leicester could not have been more different.¹¹⁶ Together with the tensions over the Imperial Typewriters strike, the presence of the National Front in Leicester politics affected parliamentary majorities in the town's Labour-leaning constituencies.¹¹⁷ While there is no evidence of the involvement of Mansfield Hosiery workers in extreme politics, a former Imperial Typewriters' supervisor was selected as the National Front's candidate in a Leicester seat.¹¹⁸ The interactions between and influences upon each other's reporting by the local, national, and radical presses led these industrial disputes to be regarded as 'race strikes'.

'Trouble at' Mill': race strikes in the press

Those familiar with the contemporaneous *Monty Python's Flying Circus* may recognise the above subtitle as the segue to their famous Spanish Inquisition sketch. This cultural reference was used in *Observer* and *Daily Mirror* articles relating to the 1972 Mansfield Hosiery Mill strike.¹¹⁹ During the early 1970s, several East Midlands' strikes caught press attention at a time when Britain was considered a hotbed of industrial discontent.¹²⁰ After all, 23,909,000 working days were lost to strikes in 1972, a year that marked the first countrywide, official miner's strike since 1926.¹²¹ Mansfield Hosiery

¹¹⁶ MRC, NUHKW, 1973, p. 189.

¹¹⁷ C. T. Husbands, *Racial Exclusionism and the City: The Urban Support of the National Front* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 89.

¹¹⁸ *The Guardian*, 24 August 1974, p. 11.

¹¹⁹ *Observer*, 3 December 1972, p. 17; *Daily Mirror* (DM), 8 December 1972, p. 12.

¹²⁰ Sandbrook, p. 604.

¹²¹ Office of National Statistics, 'The history of strikes in the UK'

<<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployee>

and the other strikes were different, as they all involved migrant workers. The significance of this aspect of the dispute was reported in pamphlets produced by local branches of the far-left International Marxist Group who blamed the ‘actively bad or passively indifferent role of the unions’.¹²² From an early stage, traditional, organised trade unionism and its perceived illiberalism formed a key narrative in how the story of the strike was reported.

Furthermore, alongside accusations of racial disadvantage, activist Bennie Bunsee developed a further theme of discrimination.¹²³ Writing in the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, he established the presence of intersectional discrimination which combined both gender and the race of migrant workers as adding further inequality.¹²⁴ A similar story was carried in a Scottish anti-racist publication, *Equality*, with a headline quoting the NUHKW General Secretary, Harold Gibson, stating ‘racism? I did not know there was a problem of racism’.¹²⁵ Discussion of ‘race strikes’ was widespread in the press focused on migrant communities and the writing of pro-immigration intellectuals in publications such as *Race Today*.¹²⁶ Similar Marxian contentions and language underpinned interpretations of Leicester’s Imperial Typewriters dispute.

[types/articles/thehistoryofstrikesintheuk/2015-09-21>](#) [Published 21 September 2015, accessed 1 January 2021].

¹²² MRC, 149/2/12/4/12, ‘The struggle at Imperial Typewriters’, 1974, p.5.

¹²³ MRC, 854/4/2, ‘Report Back from the Steering Committee of the Trade Unions Against Racism Conference’, 2 June 1971.

¹²⁴ B. Bunsee, ‘Women in Struggle: The Strike at Mansfield Hosiery’, *Spare Rib*, 21 (1974), 18-9.

¹²⁵ MRC, 854/4/2, ‘Equality - Bulletin of the Scottish Immigrant Labour Council’, no 3’, n.d. [likely 1972/3].

¹²⁶ M. Dhondy, ‘The Strike at Imperial Typewriters’, *Race Today*, July 1974, 201-5.

For example, T&GWU lead negotiator George Bromley was described as both a ‘stalwart of the Labour party’ and a ‘lieutenant of capital’.¹²⁷ That these two terms were considered complimentary as opposed to contradictory was reflective of an interpretation lacking sufficient subtlety and complexity. More problematic was Bromley’s argument suggesting ‘the majority view will prevail...[and] some people must learn how things are done’.¹²⁸ While this perspective was presented as problematic, it reflected the almost-legal procedures and the tradition of majority voting that underpinned British trade unionism. Rather, Bromley’s statement reflected accepted social-democratic terminology of industrial dispute resolution, which was ignored in some contemporary reportage. Although this coverage influenced future scholarly interpretations, what was often ignored was how such articles appeared in limited-accessibility, socialist publications with narrow immediate readerships.

Wider press coverage was less significant in creating lasting interpretations and expressed less definitive tones. Across the Midlands, major regional publications such as the *Birmingham Post* and *Coventry Evening Telegraph* covered the strike in side-columns, together with papers as far away as Torbay in Devon and Newcastle-upon-Tyne.¹²⁹ Reports were often short, the word ‘race’ or ‘discrimination’ was often placed in inverted commas, and some only reported the unofficial strikes of male workers.¹³⁰ Arbitration conducted by the NUHKG was reported positively, while refusal of terms by the migrant workers was heavily criticised.¹³¹ Still, the acknowledgement by government appointed arbitrator Kenneth Robinson that race had played a role in the

¹²⁷ R. Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (London: Gower, 1987), p. 271.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ *Birmingham Daily Post (BDP)*, 30 November 1972, p. 1; *Torbay Express and South Devon Echo*, 11 December 1972, p. 4; *Newcastle Journal*, 9 December 1972, p. 8.

¹³⁰ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 24 November 1972, p. 1; 29 December 1972, p. 1.

¹³¹ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 21 November 1972, p. 1; *BDP*, 7 December 1972, p. 8.

appointment of white workers over migrant workers, was then accepted unquestioningly.¹³² Wider realities also affected the press interpretation of the strike.

The strike took place as the British government welcomed Ugandan Asian refugees forced from their homeland by dictator Idi Amin, some of whom settled in Leicestershire, which further complicated the strike's timing and perception.¹³³ A combination of pride and concern was expressed in different articles published in the *Leicester Mercury*.¹³⁴ Loughborough's plan to temporarily house refugees in emergency accommodation previously slated for demolition in a slum clearance scheme was representative of the difficult realities of the Ugandan Asian resettlement programme.¹³⁵ National policy decisions, regional reporting, and local political debates often interacted, shaping how events were later interpreted.

Similarly, the London papers reflected assumptions, tacitly accepted by government initiatives underpinned by what Peter Shapely has defined as 'political economy' - where racial and other discriminations and inequalities were economically inefficient and required addressing.¹³⁶ The pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* reported a line from one witness to the Kenneth Robinson's inquiry about how it 'started as a wage strike, but there lay behind it a feeling that there was racial discrimination'.¹³⁷ By the strike's end, the racialised dimension was accepted as fact.¹³⁸ Even the paper's left-baiting commentator Woodrow Wyatt, accepted the reality of discrimination, all the

¹³² BDP, 20 December 1972, p. 1.

¹³³ 'Cuttings from Leicester Mercury', 8 and 11 September 1974 in 'Affective Digital Histories' [accessed 12 February 2021].

¹³⁴ 'Cuttings from Leicester Mercury', 18 September and 24 October 1972, in 'Affective Digital Histories' [accessed 12 February 2021].

¹³⁵ 'Cuttings from Leicester Mercury', 21 September 1974 in 'Affective Digital Histories' [accessed 12 February 2021].

¹³⁶ P. Shapely, *Deprivation, State Interventions and Urban Communities in Britain, 1968–79* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 325-9.

¹³⁷ DM, 15 December 1972, p. 14.

¹³⁸ DM, 22 December 1972, p. 4; 30 December 1972, p. 5.

while criticising the ‘university students, way-out left-wingers, and others’ who tried to ‘stir up’ trouble, with both management and unions encouraged to seriously consider the ‘inter-racial work problems of the future’.¹³⁹ This perspective was further advanced through mainstream, politically liberal newspapers.

For example, John Elliot, Labour Editor at the usually laissez-faire liberal *Financial Times*, reiterated the recently published Robinson report that managers should not ‘sit back’, but ‘take the initiative with their unions in formulating more positive policies’.¹⁴⁰ Much of this reflected the paper’s classical liberal outlook, advocacy of international markets and economic efficiency, but it also reflected a growing consensus across the mainstream press over how discrimination should be addressed. From early December, reports in *The Times* highlighted inequality and the antiquated pay structure of the wage system and, in an analysis informed by Stanislaus Pullé’s Runnymede Trust report, emphasised inefficient hosiery industry practices.¹⁴¹ The newspaper summarised, with large quotations, parts of both this report and Kenneth Robinson’s official review emphasised *The Times*’ underlying interpretation of the strike.¹⁴² A similar perspective was advanced by *The Guardian*’s Malcolm Dean, who described ‘an industry...badly in need of reform’.¹⁴³ Considering the wider political landscape of 1972, the framing of these white workers and their views through tropes of industrial backwardness and union intransigence was not surprising.

Interestingly, in *The Times* articles, their views were left to the ‘Leicester Correspondent’ seeking a reaction, while head office staff journalists for home affairs or

¹³⁹ DM, 8 December 1972, p. 12.

¹⁴⁰ CRC, ‘Report for 1972-1973’, p. 651.

¹⁴¹ *The Times*, 4 December 1972, p. 2.

¹⁴² Ibid.; *The Times*, 20 December 1972, p. 4.

¹⁴³ *The Guardian*, 20 December 1972, p. 11.

labour dealt with the dispute itself and subsequent inquiry.¹⁴⁴ Stories were predominantly short and summative commentaries on inquiry proceedings rather than investigatory reportage.¹⁴⁵ While there was editorial and geographic logic to this, it treated the perspective of white hosiery workers as a secondary subplot, an afterthought rather than the main event. Naturally, reports about discrimination focused on those in receipt of prejudice, yet the press appeared unwilling to understand the nature of the hosiery industry, its culture, and practices, and how this informed what was happening.

Furthermore, a more nuanced treatment of *The Guardian's* coverage is needed. On the whole, its stories integrated all perspectives within a single story.¹⁴⁶ Several pieces were reflective, written later on in the dispute, and proved more nuanced than *The Times'* running commentary approach.¹⁴⁷ These added depth and investigation to their treatment of the events and sought to contextualise the dispute in terms of its wider, community-based impact.¹⁴⁸ Again the stories focused on subsequent discrimination, and failed to examine the cultural subtleties of promotion and training within the hosiery industry.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, articles published in the *Observer*, separate from *The Guardian* at this point, advanced a progressively liberal, community-focused pluralism, which reflected agendas advocated by its long-serving proprietor-editor, David Astor, in its opposition to Apartheid.¹⁵⁰ Events at Mansfield Mills were represented as examples of open and shut discrimination, with little sympathy toward

¹⁴⁴ *The Times*, 4 December 1972, p. 2; 7 December 1972.

¹⁴⁵ *The Times*, 8 December 1972, p. 2; 20 December 1972, p. 4.

¹⁴⁶ *The Guardian*, 6 December, p. 8; 16 December 1972, p. 6; 5 January 1973, p. 6.

¹⁴⁷ *The Guardian*, 5 January 1973, p. 6; 12 March 1973, p. 9.

¹⁴⁸ *The Guardian*, 12 March 1973, p. 9.

¹⁴⁹ *The Guardian*, 20 December 1972, p. 6.

¹⁵⁰ *Observer*, 3 December 1972, p. 17; R. Cockett, *David Astor and the Observer* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991), p. 195.

and understanding of the pressures of enforced rationalisation and potential unemployment in a historically high-skilled craft industry.

Conclusion

These perspectives and experiences ensured Mansfield Mills was a ‘most significant dispute’.¹⁵¹ Undeniably, the hosiery and knitwear industry were both restrictive and selective through its requirements for skill, and that these historic and discriminatory practices disadvantaged prospective migrant workers. While these practices originated from reverence for skill and craftsmanship, they slowed the absorption of new workers and limited opportunities for advancement and promotion. This perhaps explains why wider changes within the industry, with automation and rationalisation limiting the number of skilled jobs, appeared to threaten both the pay and the living conditions of a high-skilled and loyal workforce. Just because these ‘race strikes’ often took place in locales familiar to the National Front, or featured in interpretations of them, should encourage us to be more wary of conflating assumptions or interpretative reductionism. While race clearly played a role, its significance and interaction with other realities and concerns, including the impact of deindustrialisation and demographic change within an ever-changing hosiery and knitwear industry, must be considered. Furthermore, unwillingness to allow change can be interpreted as a longstanding and local workplace xenophobia, catalysed by shifts in both technology and local demography, rather than a sudden proclivity for politicised racial discrimination.

The events at Mansfield Mills demonstrated how these wider themes and issues also affected the nature of trade union activity within Leicestershire’s hosiery and

¹⁵¹ MRC, NUHKW, 1973, pp. 185-6.

knitwear industry. Union mergers and rationalisation distracted the NUHKW from its core tasks, and to some extent the dispute caught a distracted union off-guard. Furthermore, NUHKW unwillingness to collaborate with other groups and institutions, from the Race Relations Board to the Mansfield Mills strike committee, reflected a cultural dislike of such ‘outside bodies’ intervening in industrial relations. Union members and officials operated with long-established traditions, processes, and norms. This aspect of post-war trade union culture needs to be better understood, especially when considering disputes such as Mansfield Mills. As with the more famous Grunwick Strike, historians need to pick apart simplistic narratives about trade unionism created by an intellectual framework influenced by post-1979, Thatcherite political assumptions and myths.¹⁵² Workers need to be considered in their context, together with the processes which constrained their political and social agency at the local and workplace level, to explain how the Mansfield Mills strike happened.

Only through a plurality of perspectives can the complicated social-economic, cultural, and political pressures and processes shaping these historical events be understood and explained. There were both clear divisions and obvious overlaps in the focus of the liberal national press, conflicted local newspapers, and campaigning radical publications. Centrist, national papers like *The Guardian* and *The Times* reflected political and economic assumptions that underpinned government-commissioned official inquiries investigating migrant grievances, which dovetailed with radical press interpretations seeking to expose injustices. These assumptions underpinned many interpretations and ensured the perspective, rationale, and reasoning of career hosiery

¹⁵² The importance of these myths on electoral politics are explored in a forthcoming article: M. Collinson, ‘Inevitable Results and Political Myths? Ilford North’s 1978 by-election’, *Parliamentary History*, 41,2 (2022).

workers were rarely recorded. As was often the case, press reportage often determined what underpinned some early academic evaluations. London-based news media assumptions determined how an important aspect of Midlands history was written. It decided who won and lost, cast heroes and villains, and shaped subsequent interpretation.