

The Derby Lock Out Mural painted in mid 1980s

This mural was painted by the Derby Community Arts Project in the mid 1980s. It tells the tale (as recorded in contemporary local and national trades union press accounts), pictorially of the Derby dispute of November 1833 to April 1834.



The factory system had arrived in England to the advantage of Capital and the detriment of labour. The benefits of collective organisation and action for labour had to wait until the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1825. In the recession which followed there repeal the capitalist owners of the many factories in Derby sought to exploit their power by cutting wages and conditions. This led to the first organised action by Labour – the Silk Trades Lock Out of 1833.

Article from the Derby Evening Telegraph, December 4, 1970. "The dispute began in November, 1833, when a Mr Frost, a silk manufacturer discharged a workman who had refused to be fined for faulty work. Immediately

800 of his fellow trade unionists left work in sympathy, and the employers then took a serious view of the position. Two days after the strike began the employers held a meeting to face the challenge. The "Derby Reporter" gave a report of this meeting and stated that while the employers recognised the right of the workers to combine a union, they were prepared to resist the strike on the grounds that the trade unionists were bound by a secret oath which was illegal. The following resolution was signed by the 20 employees present. "That each will immediately cease to employ everyman who is a member of a trade union and will not take back into his service any man who continued to be a member of a trade union".

From that date the strike became a lock-out until they renounced their union. The union to which they belonged was the Grand Consolidated Union sponsored by Robert Owen, the pioneer of the co-operative movement. It had consolidated

membership among workers in all trades and in Derby, weavers, pottery workers, builders, ironworkers and those in the silk trades were involved.

The so-called secret oath was simply the form used in the initiation ceremony when a member joined the union and spoke of loyalty to one another, just as the employers joined together to fight the unions.

The workers stood firm and in January the employers took every possible step to get the factories going again. They advertised far and wide stipulating, "no trade unionists need apply". News did not travel so quickly in those days, but on March 20 the Derby newspapers reported the Dorchester trials of the Tolpuddle martyrs, and a public notice appeared in the local Press issued by the Mayor and four magistrates, warning people against joining illegal societies which admitted the oath.

The Rev. Gibson, Prebendary of Durham, wrote to say that he had grown up with the workers of Derby and he advised: "Abandon the union and never embark in another, return to your masters in the right spirit without delay".

The struggle lasted for eight months before being resolved. Its resolution can best be described as a draw as both sides lost out in the conflict. Nevertheless labour had discovered the power of collective action.