
Glorious Summer, written by Ralph Darlington and Dave Lyddon, is a valuable contribution to the written history of the workers’ movement in Britain in the 1970s and deserves to be widely read. The book contains detailed accounts of industrial struggles in the single year of 1972, which was indeed a remarkable year with 26 million days of strike action. It was the high-point of trade-union struggle in the 1969–74 period – the most militant period in postwar Britain up to that time – which clocked up an average of 12.5 million strike days per year.

The book is structured around five case studies of trade-union action during 1972 with background information on the industries involved. It presents an overview of the politics of the 1969–74 period, has an introduction on the politics of 1972 itself, and a conclusion in similar vein. It reflects the politics of the Socialist Workers’ Party (SWP) and the writings of its central leader at that time, Tony Cliff.

The book highlights the three defining strikes of 1972: the national miners’ pay strike which started in January; the dock strike leading to the historic jailing and dramatic release of the Pentonville Five in June and July; and the thirteen-week building workers’ strike which spanned July, August, and September – hence the title Glorious Summer. Indeed it was.

The book also examines the work-to-rule on the railways in April 1972 when the right-wing leadership of the rail workers’ union was pushed by its membership into a pay claim and had a ‘cooling-off order’ imposed on it under the Tory Industrial Relations Act. And it provides a valuable account of important, politically advanced, actions by engineering workers during their national pay claim for improved basic rates and other benefits which was fought out in the first half of 1972 and escalated to multiple sit-ins and factory occupations, mostly in the Greater Manchester area.

The 1972 miners’ strike

The miners’ national pay strike started on 9 January. It was the first national coal strike since 1926 and closed all of the National Coal Board’s 289 pits. The book recounts the restructuring of the coal industry and the reorganisation of the Left in National Union of Miners during the 1960s, including the formation of the miners’ forum which gave Scargill his base and which laid the basis for the strike. This newly reorganised Left was able to mount heavy pressure on Joe Gormley, the right-wing president of the NUM, pressure which created the strike.

Darlington and Lyddon give a graphic account of the legendary battle of Saltley Gate, and the tremendous solidarity Midlands engineering workers gave the miners, which was to be the turning point of the strike. They look at the processes within the West Midlands trade-union movement, which resulted in thousands of car and engineering workers walking out of their factories and marching to the Saltley coking depot and closing it down. They claim a pivotal role was played by Arthur Harper, the militant if eccentric convenor of the British Leyland Tractors and Transmissions plant and chair of the engineers’ AUEW District Committee.

After six weeks, the miners won their full claim in a stunning victory. It brought them back into the centre of working-class struggle after years of decline and retreat in the industry. It
was, arguably, the most important battle of 1972. It certainly was, as far as the effect it had on the general level of confidence and militancy of the working class, and it set the benchmark for wage demands for the rest of the 1970s.

**The Pentonville Five**

The dockers' battle started as a struggle against containerisation which was threatening to destroy thousands of jobs in the industry. *Glorious Summer* chronicles the bitter struggle of the unofficial port shop stewards' committee against their own union, the TGWU, which, via the Jones/Aldington Report, had accepted containerisation and the employer's reorganisation proposals. The book details the use of the Industrial Relations Act against the dockers, followed by the jailing and release of the Pentonville Five. Their release came after the TUC called a one-day general strike in support of them – the first and last general strike since 1926. Darlington and Lyddon claim, however, that, by the time the TUC called the strike, the latter already knew that their release was imminent. The dockers' victory seriously damaged the Industrial Relations Act before it fully got off the ground. To claim that this was the decisive factor which led to its eventual demise, as the book does, is more problematic since this underestimates the role played by the strikes organised against the Act in 1973 and 1974. But the dockers certainly played an important role.

**The building workers' strike**

The building workers' strike started as a series of selective stoppages, demanding improved basic rates and the renegotiation of the national agreement for the industry. It was driven by rank-and-file pressure into an all-out strike by 270,000 workers which closed 900 building sites and saw mass picketing of cement works and other building suppliers. The strike is rightly described by Darlington and Lyddon as more of a popular revolt than a strike and it led to the jailing of militant building workers Ricky Tomlinson and Des Warren. The strike turned increasingly into a struggle against lump labour (self-employed contractors working for a lump sum) which was seriously threatening trade-union organisation in the industry. When the official leadership sought a compromise, tens of thousands of angry building workers mounted demonstrations, rallies, and protests across the country in opposition.

The book contains an interesting account of the unofficial shop stewards' structure on the building sites, as exemplified by the London Joint Sites Committee and similar organisations in Manchester, Liverpool and elsewhere. It looks at the development of the *Building Workers' Charter* magazine edited by Lou Lewis, a leading member of the Communist Party, which was by far the strongest political force in the strike. It argues that the CP was compromised by the official positions it held, and wary of the rise of the unofficial power of the shop stewards. This would certainly fit with the role the CP played in other sectors of industry but all of this is contrary to the overall view the book takes about the development and relevance of the shop stewards' movement, as I argue below.

The building workers won substantial increases on their basic rates, though short of the full claim. The skilled grades got 30 per cent – which was the full demand. Most militants were convinced that the full demands could have been won for all grades had the strike continued