The Liverpool Typists Strike 1981: “a battleground in determining equal pay and equal rights for women”

Peter Cresswell

The strike by 450 typists employed by Liverpool City Council lasted from July to December 1981. At the time it was the longest strike by white collar women workers in the UK and ended with an agreement to go to arbitration over the workers claim for regrading. The City Council at the time was run by the Liberal Party, led by Trevor Jones. The following year the strike was the subject of a musical play at the Liverpool Everyman Theatre (see Appendix B). This is the first written account of the strike, based on documents kept by NALGO activists, the typists’ trade union branch and interviews with some of the strikers. The author was the branch secretary of Liverpool NALGO, the typists’ trade union.

Origins of the dispute

Rose Dee was a member of the Strike Committee from the first day of the strike to the last and was the first person to be suspended during the work to rule that preceded the strike itself. Rose died in 2018 and at her funeral her son Robert recalled that his mum had worked in the Reprographics section of the City Solicitors Department: “Mum was well respected and popular, so much so that when the admin workers went on strike she was approached by the women strikers to become one of the leaders and negotiators. And so my Mum became one of the leaders of the team that organised the Liverpool Typists Strike...a key battleground in determining equal pay and equal rights for women”. Rose’s funeral was attended by...
Kevan Nelson, the Regional Secretary of Unison, Alan Walker, the Vice Chair of Liverpool NALGO during the strike and other members of Unison. Thirty-six years on, the Typists Strike had remained an important part of the life of Rose and many of the people who took part in it.

Helen Morgan was a typist in the Social Services Department and was also on the strike committee from the first day to the last. She recalled the background to the strike:

“I had moaned about the injustice of being the only full time admin worker in an office of 15/20 social workers along with two part time clerks who were both graded above me, though I was responsible for the most important aspects of their job, the petty cash. I did it out and had the keys to the petty cash tin in the safe but the giro (cheque) to replenish it was sent to either of them as I wasn’t deemed capable of going to the post office to collect the money once a week. So I was the most responsible and productive member of the admin staff and the lowest paid, with responsibilities way above my grade.”

Helen also recalled that, unlike clerical staff, she and her colleagues couldn’t get day release for qualifications to help advance their career.

Helen continues “From the very beginning I have always held the opinion that when typists commence work, they are productive from the very beginning, they bring their skills with them, skills that they have had to train for and exams they have had to pass to become competent in the role. The Council at that time would employ a person on a Scale 1/2 as a clerk, the same grade as typists, who brought nothing useable to the role and had to be trained in-house before they became productive, but who, were able to apply for day release, get their qualifications and progress up the ladder of employment. This was never an option for a typist. Typists couldn’t apply for day release to obtain their B.Tec qualifications and this remained denied to typists for many years. In fact it was only when I became a child care clerk that I was able to get a place on a B.Tec course.”

In 1981 most typists in local government were paid on a national scale, contained in the “Purple Book” of national conditions of service, though there was nothing to prevent individual local authorities from paying more than this, and many did so. The national scales ensured that typists paid on them were officially classified as ‘low paid’!

In October 1980 Liverpool NALGO submitted a claim for regrading of all typists, secretaries and machine operators. This was part of a national campaign, authorised by the union’s National Group Meeting (conference for local government members) to encourage local claims and, eventually, to abolish the national grade. The Liverpool claim was drawn up by typists themselves and Helen recalls how she became involved:

“Graham Burgess, the branch chair, was based in my office and he asked if I would attend a meeting of like minded people to discuss a regrading.....and to produce an application for regrading. From the first meeting... I became convinced I needed to be involved”. Like most of the strikers, Helen had no prior experience of trade union activism: “The only involvement I had previously was that of strike action when I was instructed to by the branch office.”

Another striker, Denise Knibb (then Tipping), was 20 at the time and said “I had never been involved in any kind of dispute previously and was not active in the trade union.” She did, however, come from a Labour Party supporting family ‘and my father in particular instilled in me that we should always support a strike and never cross a picket line”. Denise went on, perhaps not surprisingly, to organise the typists picketing throughout the dispute!

**The Claim**

A regrading claim was drawn up by typists and branch officers and it was submitted to the Council in October 1980. In December the claim was on the agenda of the Personnel Committee and hundreds of typists and other branch members lobbied the meeting.

To fully understand what happened in the dispute you need to be aware the political situation in the City Council (set out in Appendix A). As the claim wound its way through the Council bureaucracy the typists, losing patience, voted to take limited industrial action if the claim was rejected. Although the chair of the Council’s Personnel Committee conceded that the typists were low paid - he could hardly do otherwise - the Council refused to budge from the national typists’ pay scale.

**The Work to Rule**

The typists responded by holding an official ballot for a work to rule. The ballot was won impressively by 310 votes to 63 and a seven woman strike committee - including Helen Morgan and Rose Dee - was elected. Six of the committee were to serve throughout the dispute.

The “work to rule” included refusing to correct poor grammar (!), working in strict rotation (no emergencies) and refusing correspondence with councillors or work for Council committees. Perhaps not surprisingly the Council responded by taking 18 typists off the payroll.

Robert Dee describes how his mum Rose Dee’s friend, co-striker Moira Newton, recalled the day: “She told me that my Mum was the first person to be suspended in the Liverpool Typists strike. Apparently the first day was supposed to be a work to rule, with the typists agreeing to type at a reduced number of words per minute. My Mum had different challenges in the reprographics team (Rose was a printing machine operator) and dealt with it her way. She was normally in work by around 8.50 and would start up the machines. Moira would usually get in from Southport.
around 9.00. On this day Moira got in to find the place silent and my Mum sitting at her desk drinking tea. She asked why it was so quiet and my Mum said she'd been suspended. She told Moira to get some cakes in and be quick as she was likely to be next... Apparently someone had come and asked for some copying to be done, and my Mum asked if it was council work, which of course it was. When she said she couldn't do that, the lady in question said, 'you know you'll be suspended?' and my Mum said 'yes'. Within minutes a manager appeared and told my Mum that she was suspended. They both walked down to the NALGO office to advise and as a result of their news, a strike was called immediately.

In fact a series of walk outs and protests took place, including a half day strike by all typists and a one day strike by data processors (especially sensitive as this affected wages).

At a full, packed City Council meeting a Liberal Councillor said that nobody had been suspended, evidently trying to distinguish between suspension and not being paid. A young typist bravely stood up and said "I've been suspended". As Labour councillors shouted support and pointed to her, several other typists stood up and in a Spartacus moment said "I've been suspended, too!". The Typists Strike had entered the public consciousness.

Clearly the Council could not carry on its normal business in the face of this action and, for the first time since the Second World War set up an Emergency Committee to run affairs. Trevor Jones rather fancifully claiming that NALGO was conducting a 'reign of terror' in the Council! A Council meeting called using scab workers was declared (in the terminology of the day) 'blacked' and Labour councillors refused to cross the typists' picket. Unquestionably it was the first time most of these women had stood on a picket line. In a bizarre aside, the Council was rumoured to be sending some of the typing to an agency and the Branch employed a private detective agency to find out where the agency was! Not money well spent as it happened as it proved impossible to stop the agency doing the work.

At this point the Labour Group declared that if it won power (which it eventually did in 1983) it would enforce a 'closed shop'. This was a well intended gesture but it hadn't been requested by NALGO and as we shall see it did rebound on the strikers a little later.

The union nationally was supportive of the action but there was some tension as the National Emergency Committee, which ran industrial action, was anxious about the potential cost of any future strike. The typists suspended were supported but when the strike proper began a little later the typists were the first group of NALGO strikers to be given only £20 a week strike pay. Before this strike pay had been 55% of gross pay (more or less full pay). As the union, in the face of onslaughts from the relatively new Thatcher government, anticipated more strikes, there was obviously concern for the union's funds, but the typists had every reason to feel aggrieved by being the first strikers to face this reduced rate.

There was no doubt, though, about the support of rank and file activists across the country and in June NALGO's Local Government Group Meeting (Conference) overwhelmingly passed a motion of support including a call for increased strike pay. The dispute was referred to the national joint employer and union representatives who were responsible for all national talks. In view of the fact that the national scale was by now due to be abolished, they recommended that the City Council open negotiations. The Council did no such thing.

The following month Liverpool NALGO held a special branch meeting to support the typists. Right wing members managed to put a motion condemning the IRA 'H Block' hunger strikers on the agenda in a rather convoluted attempt to get more members along who, they hoped would defeat the typists. This was to no avail and a meeting of 1,500 members overwhelmingly backed the typists. The Council did however eventually heed the advice to open negotiations and finally made an offer of
regarding. This actually offered most typists nothing at all and the Council made matters worse by wildly exaggerating the offer in press releases. They included a national annual pay deal in the figures they released to the press, enraging the typists and other NALGO members.

Under pressure from the National Emergency Committee the Branch now held a ballot on all out strike action by the typists. 90% of the typist members took part and by 258 to 90 voted for strike action.

The Strike
The strike began on 6 July, the same day that Liverpool literally went up in flames at the start of what the press called the "Toxteth Riots" (the area was called Liverpool 8 by the people who lived there). Striking typists could hardly compete with the dramatic pictures of a blazing south Liverpool so initially the long awaited, emotional start of the strike hardly made a ripple in the media.

This wasn’t to last though, and soon the typists were back in focus as the City Council realised that its attempts to deal with the aftermath of the riots were badly hampered by the typists’ action. The Council asked that all action to do with the riots be exempted from strike action but this was the typists’ industrial muscle and most exemptions were refused. The typists did, however, allow a special council meeting to go ahead and so it did, in unique circumstances, lobby’d by an unlikely combination of protestors from Liverpool 8 and Council typists.

So the typists settled into a routine of weekly mass meetings, picketing and for some of them, visits to other branches to gain support, spread the message and collect some much needed money. Helen Morgan looked back on her experiences:

“For me the whole six months of the strike was one long adventure, I got to do exciting things, I was interviewed for a T.V. programme, fronted by Anna Ford, called Union World, I mounted picket lines, one in the early hours of the morning at Group 4 to stop the wages being delivered. One driver tried to drive through the picket line, but we were only making a token show so we let them leave after about an hour.

I lobbied and attended the TUC meeting held in Blackpool and was invited to attend the Mayor of Blackpool’s cocktail party being held for the NALGO delegates that evening. Members there started donating money to Rose Dee and myself and eventually we had buckets full of cash for the strike fund. We also managed to get a bottle of Scotch from them plus £2 to buy mixers for the women who had come with us and were waiting outside on the coach to return home.”

Picketing was problematic as the typists weren’t trying to stop everyone going to work, - a practical impossibility. They just wanted to stop anyone scabbing on them. The manual worker unions in the Council, whilst generally supportive, found this a bit hard to understand and many of their members had, to be frank, chauvinistic attitudes to the strikers. “Only working for pin money” and so on. This also applied of course to some NALGO members and there was a series of attempts to end the branch’s support for the strike. But gradually the women won the respect of most of the workforce through their dogged persistence and the force of their arguments.

A sad blow at this time was the decision of one member of the original strike committee to return to work - the only one to do so. Denise recalls that this created tensions once the strike was over. She understood the pressures faced by other strikers who had other responsibilities - "I was willing to stay out as long as it took. However, I was only young and didn’t have the financial responsibilities of some of the older women." Other strikers came forward to serve on the strike committee.

Of course there were lighter moments too. In one strike bulletin the branch secretary reported going into the strike committee office to find Joan, one of the committee, making red, white and blue bunting for a royal wedding! (Charles and Di, I think). This incident found its way into the play Girls in the Pool but for some reason is absent from the written script.

The Liberal Party and the City Council conducted a relentless public relations offensive against the strike. At one point, when other members were starting to be threatened with suspension for refusing to do typists’ work, a leading Liberal Councillor wrote to Graham Burgess claiming that he had been approached by NALGO members “in tears”, saying they had only taken action because of the “naked threats which had been made to them about the possibility of them losing their jobs. You have threatened to throw them out of NALGO and have told them that if there is ever a labour (sic) Government and a Labour controlled council to introduce a closed shop they would be out of a job.” He went on to declare that “instead of promoting fraternal love you must resort to tactics which are the equivalent of the Hitler Youth Movement!" Needless to say, no such threats had been made and there was in any case no prospect of any Labour Government (still many years distant) introducing “closed shop” legislation. Indeed, the branch’s policy was to oppose a such an arrangement.

Despite this over-excited rhetoric the Council did eventually agree to the further negotiations and even re-packaged (slightly) its offer to the typists. ACAS, the arbitration and conciliation service, became involved but although NALGO was prepared to consider arbitration the City Council refused to contemplate it.

Meanwhile, the dispute began to escalate as other branch members became involved. When two long standing members were taken off the payroll for refusing to scab thousands of branch members staged a spontaneous walk out. The feeling began to develop that this was becoming a dispute that affected the whole future of the branch, not just the typists, and key sections such as rent and rate cashiers were successfully balloted for all out strike action. Further mass meetings continued to declare support for the typists.

The involvement of other members gave NALGO nationally a dilemma. They could hardly have two levels of strike pay, one for the typists and another for people suspended or on strike supporting them. The union dealt with this by agreeing to pay the strikers AND suspended members 55% of gross pay (in effect full pay). This was great news, of course, but there was a catch. The increase was to be time limited, to last a month (in the event it lasted rather longer). Clearly if this became public knowledge the City Council would have every incentive to sit the strike out, essentially starving the typists back to work. So the Branch and typists leadership had a difficult decision to make. Could they keep the time limit secret from the mass of strikers and
even if they could, was it right to do so? In the event they did keep it confidential though the strikers were told (accurately) that there was no doubt that if the Council agreed to arbitration, NALGO would insist that the strike ended.

Helen reflected on the dilemma, 38 years later:

"I was in full agreement to keep the information .... from everyone. It was fast approaching Christmas and I think a lot of women would have returned to work if they had thought the strike pay could have been reduced or withdrawn. I still think it was the right decision and people still got their strike pay up until the end of the strike so there was no need for scaremongering. I agree the council would have just sat back and waited for the strike pay to stop and would have gleefully watched people crawl back into work."

In those days there was still a small rump of Conservative councillors on the Council and it was at this time that they made a fairly typical intervention, asking that the striking typists be sacked! Fortunately the local Tories were no more than a sideshow by now and even the Liberals weren’t tempted by this argument.

The Council was under some pressure by now and even agreed that all members could attend a mass rally in work time, in the hope that they would withdraw support for the strike, particularly on the non-issue of the “closed shop”. They had miscalculated. 3,500 members attended and voted overwhelmingly to continue to support the typists.

**Enter ACAS - “then we found the wine”**

Eventually the Council did agree to ACAS being called in. Helen Morgan recalls the unusual circumstances of the early meetings with ACAS:

"Another memory was after weeks of ignoring us. Trevor Jones decided he would finally meet us, but we had to travel to the ACAS offices in London to do so. We travelled down on the same train as him and Alfie Stocks (the Council’s Chief Executive). Rose Jones [a strike committee member] and I bumped into Alfie Stocks in the corridor of the train and we had a brief chat with him, where he told us that, like us, he had no idea why we couldn’t have met in Liverpool. We never did get to discuss anything as we sat in the basement of this large house, in one of the squares around by Queens Square, drinking coffee, then we found the wine. Eventually someone came to tell us that Trevor and Alfie had left to get the train back to Liverpool as Trevor had arrangements that evening."

There were a number of such false starts but eventually the City Council agreed to binding arbitration to end the strike, having withdrawn their attempts to force NALGO to accept scabs back into membership. The strikers agreed, realising there was by this time no better option available. On the 15 December the strike was over.

**The Outcome**

ACAS set up the arbitration committee, chaired by a professional conciliator, Norman Singleton; NALGO appointed a side member, NEC member Rita Donaghy (now a Labour peer); the City Council appointed the third member. NALGO’s case was drawn up by typists, branch officers and full time officials and was put to the panel by a full time official, Ken Birch.

In the event the results of arbitration were disappointing. They included a series of relatively minor pay increases, dependent on typists achieving certificates for particular typing speeds. The strikers were bitterly disappointed, so much so that many of them declined to take the tests; no other groups of staff
had to prove their worth in this way.
Helen Morgan describes her feelings and some of the missed opportunities:

"Negative aspects were having to return to work having achieved nothing. I was one of the very few who took up the Council’s offer of taking RSA exams. There were three exams and I passed all three with merit actually being regraded and getting over £1000 in back pay. I was upset more people didn’t sit these exams but the City Council didn’t make it easy for us to sit them. They were sat at Millbank College (several miles outside the city centre) at 6pm on set dates. Hard enough to get there after finishing work at 4.45 with not driving and no car but also after a full day’s work as well. I think there were only about 10 who actually took the exams. So for me there were more positives than negatives, plus my own self esteem was improved greatly."

Denise had similar feelings: "It was disappointing at the time for a lot of people who felt they had not achieved anything. However, for me it was everything as for the first time I had access to apply for posts outside the Typing Pool. You (the author) were fundamental in giving me my first real opportunity when you interviewed me for the post of Assistant Complaints Officer which in turn led me to a great job at Liverpool John Moores University as a department head."

Few of the strike committee remained involved in union activity after the strike, though one of them, May Sutton, was elected as Branch President later in the year and remained a popular and much loved figure for the remainder of her career.

Conclusion

Could the strike have achieved more?
Well, these are just the views of the author of this article and it’s fair to say that there was not much debate about it at the time. Perhaps the answer is that as long as the strike remained a dispute between Liverpool City Council and Liverpool NALGO, probably not. Some branches did achieve better agreements without the need for a strike but the Liberal administration had a particular character that made this difficult in Liverpool. If, however, NALGO had made the strike a national dispute, in effect a test case, with the typists on full pay from the start, it could have been a different story. We will never know, but one thing that was never in dispute and never will be. It was the extraordinary courage and commitment of a group of women who had hardly been involved in union activity before and showed the rest of us how it should be done. They deserved better.

Notes

2 The strikers included typists, secretaries and machine operators. This latter category included some printing staff and comptometer operators. For the sake of brevity I refer to it as the 'Typists Strike' which was in fact the term generally used at the time.

NALGO (the National and Local Government Officers Association) was the typists’ union. It was a union of white collar workers which began life as a merger of local Municipal Officers Guilds. It only affiliated to the TUC in 1864 and never affiliated to the Labour Party but had a long record of fighting for equal pay and pension rights for women. NALGO’s first ever strike (in Leeds) only took place in 1970. In 1997 NALGO merged with two other public service unions, NUPE and COHSE, to form UNISON.

This was of course, not peculiar to Liverpool or indeed local government. The refusal (by men) to accept the work of ‘typing as a skilled occupation is dealt with by Linda Grant in an unpublished thesis.

Appendix A - Liverpool City Council.

Before the mid-1930s Liverpool City Council had generally been run by the Conservative Party, something which can seem hard to comprehend in view of the current politics of Liverpool. In fact this was not so unusual for big cities but in Liverpool it was complicated by the existence of a strong Protestant Party, which returned councillors for many wards in the north end of the city. As the Protestant vote moved towards the Labour Party so the Council became Labour controlled for many years albeit with a strong Tory presence. But in the 1970s Liverpool was one of the first councils to fall to the Liberal Party, led locally by Cyril Carr and later Trevor Jones (known as 'Jones The Vote'). By 1981 the Liberal Party was firmly in power. The Liberals had come to power on the basis of 'pavement politics' and weren't close at all to the unions. They were more concerned with what they saw as individual rights rather than collective ones and, perhaps more importantly, they associated trade unions in the city with the left wing Labour Party, led by the Quaker John Hamilton and his Militant Tendency deputy Derek Hatton. NALGO, of course wasn’t affiliated to the Labour Party but some of its leading activists were known as left wing activists and the Liberals saw them as much the same.

Appendix B - "The Girls in the Pool"

The Everyman Theatre in Liverpool is famous for its community links and broadly political character. After the strike, playwright Claire Luckham, most famous for ‘Trafford Tanz’, decided to write a play based on the strike. Claire and director Dave Hill met the strike committee and Helen remembers Claire visiting her home and the play The Girls In The Pool became the first production in the re-styled 'In the round' auditorium at the Everyman. Before it opened the play was already a subject of controversy. The theatre had written to Council Leader Trevor Jones and Chief Executive Alfred Strokes asking for their views. They got them in no uncertain terms. Mr Stocks wrote that “there is hardly a less suitable subject on which to base a play"- something of an overstatement if ever there was one. Trevor Jones was more specific. "For your play to be factual it must concentrate on the activities of a left wing dominated union and the manipulation of a particularly vulnerable group of workers by the activists. You would have to show the oppressive role of the Labour Party to bolster the crumbling strike by the issuing of threats both 'voiced' and 'suggested' by the militant tendency faction of that party you would then have to show how the workforce succumbed (sic) to these threats and how, mostly out of fear, did their best to grind this city to a halt.”

Incidentally, none of the branch leadership were associated in any way with the Militant Tendency.

Harry Livermore, a former Labour councillor and a solicitor told the theatre that the strike ‘had no merit” and had nearly brought the city to its knees.

Claire Luckham chose instead to rely on the direct witness of the strikers themselves and created an entertaining musical play that ran for a month from 7 October 1982. Some of the strikers attended one of the final rehearsals and persuaded Claire to change the final upbeat, optimistic number to a rather pensive song "We are the girls in the pool", This reflected their mood but perhaps didn’t improve the play’s chances of leaving its audience in a good mood. This may go some way to explaining why the play never moved on to greater things. Dramas about workers’ struggles have tended to be more popular if they have a ‘happy’ ending (such as the Dagenham strike). Still, the play drew over 2,500 customers who paid nearly £9,000 to see it.

The cast was of course all female though there were one or two walk on male parts played by the cast. At one point a man identified on the script as ‘Leader’ appears but in the original script he is identified as TJ, which is lightly crossed out! Presumably the Everyman’s lawyers had advised caution, probably wisely in view of Trevor Jones’ reputation for legal activity!

Thanks to Helen Morgan and Denise Knibb for agreeing to write about their experiences; Robert Dee for sharing his memories of his mum Rose Dee and his eulogy at her funeral; Sandra and Lorraine In the Union Branch Office for digging out the archives; Liverpool JMU for helping me to view the script and documentation of The Girls in the Pool; Alan Walker for keeping documents about the strike for 36 years; and Graham Burgess for reading the proofs.

And of course, to The Typists.