

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository:<https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/105552/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Jenkins, Jean 2017. Hands not wanted: closure, and the moral economy of protest, Treorchy, South Wales. *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 38 (1) , pp. 1-36. 10.3828/hsir.2017.38.1

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.3828/hsir.2017.38.1>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



## Hands Not Wanted: Closure, and the Moral Economy of Protest, Treorchy, South Wales

Jean Jenkins

This article originated in a study of a campaign against factory closure by clothing workers employed at a plant situated in Ynyswen, Treorchy, in the Rhondda valleys of south Wales.<sup>1</sup> The factory was formally opened in March 1939, at which time it was owned by Alfred Polikoff. When his business was bought by Great Universal Stores (GUS) in 1948, the factory, known locally as 'Polikoff's', retained its original name until Burberry (also owned by GUS and a long-standing customer of the plant) took it over in 1989.<sup>2</sup> Burberry issued notice of closure on 6 September 2006. During months of research alongside the campaigning workers, whose lifetimes and those of their families had been defined by employment at the plant, it became clear that the workers regarded Burberry's departure as a betrayal of the factory's history, of them and their community. Over and above their understandable grief and resentment at the loss of their jobs, they did not feel that Burberry had a moral right to abandon the factory.

The cause of closure was made explicit: despite the factory having high levels of efficiency, high rates of productivity and being profitable,<sup>3</sup> work was to be relocated to factories in China where labour was cheaper. The polo shirt that Burberry made at Treorchy retailed in the region of £55–65, with estimated production costs of £11 per item in south Wales. The GMB's contemporaneous estimate of production costs in China was approximately £4 an item. It was, as far as workers were concerned, a decision informed entirely by the motive of corporate greed, which offended their sense of what was morally fair and just. There were perhaps echoes here of what E. P. Thompson termed the 'moral

---

<sup>1</sup> For the campaign, from September 2006 until March 2007, see P. Blyton and J. Jenkins, 'Mobilizing Resistance: The Burberry Workers' Campaign against Factory Closure', *Sociological Review* 60:1 (2012), pp. 25–45.

<sup>2</sup> Burberry took full control of the plant after its demerger from GUS in 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The GMB union estimated that in the year before closure the factory made a surplus of about £24 million. This was widely circulated during the anti-closure campaign and Burberry neither confirmed nor denied its accuracy.

economy', a concept used by Jim Phillips in his analysis of the 'moral economy of the coalfield', which positioned the objectives of the 'redistribution of wealth and esteem from middle to working class' vis-à-vis the interests of capital in post-1945 Britain.<sup>4</sup> Burberry workers, who had witnessed pit closures and deindustrialization at first hand, had a strong 'legitimizing notion' for action in defence of continued employment at their factory. This was founded in a determination to defend their local community's interests and the conviction that principles of social justice had been ignored in the closure decision: 'We didn't do anything wrong', was a common, bewildered, shocked refrain. Moral outrage as well as material loss was an important aspect of their mobilization, leading them to fight against the tide of globalization's 'common sense' even if their prospects of reversing the decision were slim. While they campaigned, they refused to stop working, despite the firm telling them, repeatedly, that they could cease production. They forced Burberry into a number of concessions, but nothing compensated for the plant's eventual closure, in March 2007.

The article reviews the local context for the establishment of the factory in the 1930s. The first two sections document the Rhondda's history as a designated 'depressed area', contextualizing the pressing need for 'new industries' in the 1930s and the provision of public funds that brought Polikoff's business to Treorchy in 1937. In contrast to the notorious reputation of the clothing industry for the sweating of labour, the third and fourth sections reflect Polikoff's positive impact as a 'good employer' and the factory's central role in the social and economic life of the community over decades. The factory was an important symbol of 'good employment' and the article's final sections illustrate how, in the eyes of workers, this history was betrayed by the manner of closure, leading them to conclude that Burberry had little involvement with them as workers, nor respect for their community, nor an understanding of its own responsibilities and status as a custodian of employment in the valley. The article concludes with a comment on the factory's history as a lens through

---

<sup>4</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present* 50 (1971), pp. 76–136, at p. 79; J. Phillips, 'Containing, Isolating and Defeating the Miners: The UK Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal and the Three Phases of the 1984–85 Strike', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations (HSIR)* 35 (2014), pp. 117–41, at p. 123.

which to view the garment industry's reversion to its earlier traditions of maximizing the exploitation of human capital across time and place.

## I

In the Rhondda, villages and small towns are strung out in ribbons along a valley that sits at the heart of what was the south Wales coalfield.<sup>5</sup> The main Rhondda valley forks into two, of twelve and ten miles long, known as Rhondda Fawr and Rhondda Fach.<sup>6</sup> Long climbs and precipitous drops have always made access challenging, particularly for heavy road haulage<sup>7</sup> and the valley's geographical isolation cannot be over-emphasized; parts of the Rhondda can be difficult to get to, even from nearby. This unforgiving landscape was to be at the heart of the development of coal mining in south Wales.

The exploitation of the coalfield proceeded very rapidly from around 1880, despite geological conditions in south Wales being more difficult than elsewhere in Britain, with much folding of seams and small spaces which made mining risk-laden and relatively expensive. It was the rich and varied nature of high-quality Welsh coal that made such mining viable in the context of a booming export market which, by the turn of the century, took around 50% of its production.<sup>8</sup> By the first decade of the twentieth century, the coalfield housed two-thirds of

---

<sup>5</sup> The coalfield was oval in shape and covered around one thousand square miles, extending from Blaenafon and Pontypool in the east, west through the former county of Glamorgan and across the old boundaries of Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire: J. F. Rees, H. A. Marquand, P. S. Thomas, C. A. Speller. B. Thomas, G. Meara, for the Board of Trade by University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, *An Industrial Survey of South Wales* (HMSO: 1932), p. 23; and W. E. Minchington, 'Industrial South Wales, 1750–1914', in *idem* (ed.), *Industrial South Wales, 1750–1914: Essays in Welsh Economic History* (Cass : 1969), pp. ix–xxx, at p. x.

<sup>6</sup> Fawr and fach are mutated forms of the Welsh words mawr and bach, which mean, respectively, big (or large) and small.

<sup>7</sup> National Industrial Development Council of Wales and Monmouthshire (NIDCW&M), *The Second Industrial Survey of South Wales, Vol. 2, Pt 2: Facilities* (University Press Board, Cardiff: 1937), p. 188.

<sup>8</sup> Board of Trade, *Industrial Survey of South Wales*, p. 26. In this period, south Wales's production accounted for more than 40% of total UK coal exports.

Wales's total population and around 60% of its heavy industrial base.<sup>9</sup> The Rhondda coal's higher carbon content made it the perfect fuel for the age of steam.<sup>10</sup> As with the rest of the coalfield, the Rhondda saw massive inward migration: the population grew from 1,636 inhabitants in 1836, 4,000 in 1861, to 127,980 in 1891, peaking around 163,000 in 1921.<sup>11</sup>

As men entered the mines, a key aspect of life in the south Wales coalfield was lack of paid employment opportunities for women.<sup>12</sup> Vic Allen stressed that 'mining families, centred around women, have functioned as vital elements in the organization of mining'. Family life was dominated by the pit routine and 'the task of social reproduction became the responsibility of women, of wives, mothers, sisters and daughters who serviced the men by washing, cleaning and cooking, who cared for the children and socialized them in the ways of mining.'<sup>13</sup> In the Rhondda's single industry community, paid employment was the preserve of men; even had women been able to escape domestic labour, there were few 'light industries' for which they would have been considered an appropriate workforce. The marriage rate fluctuated with the price of coal, due to its link to the level of a miner's income, which usually constituted the 'family' wage.<sup>14</sup> It was during this period that the construction of the unselfish but formidable 'Welsh Mam'<sup>15</sup> appeared but a married woman's 'small boundary of power' was largely defined by her domestic life, by keeping a respectable, clean and orderly house, rather than in her ability to exercise broader freedom of choice or

---

<sup>9</sup> B. Thomas, 'Post-War Expansion', in *idem* (ed.), *The Welsh Economy: Studies in Expansion* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff: 1962), pp. 30–54, at p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Board of Trade, *Industrial Survey of South Wales*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Minchington, 'Industrial South Wales, 1750–1914', p. xxviii. B. Naylor, *The Quakers in the Rhondda 1926–1986* (Maesyrfhaf Educational Trust, Chepstow: 1986), p. 11, suggests Rhondda's population peaked in 1924 at 169,000.

<sup>12</sup> Board of Trade, *Industrial Survey of South Wales*, p. 144.

<sup>13</sup> V. L. Allen, *The Militancy of British Miners* (Moor Press, Shipley: 1981), pp. 74, 75.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, 'Wales and the Atlantic Economy', in *idem*, *The Welsh Economy*, pp. 1–29, at p. 25. For the 'family wage' in relation to female and male employment, job segregation and the hidden nature of women's work, see M. Davis, *Comrade or Brother? A History of the British Labour Movement* (2nd edn; Pluto Press: 2009), p. 102.

<sup>15</sup> J. Williams, 'The Economic Structure of Wales since 1850', in G. Williams (ed.), *Crisis of Economy and Ideology: Essays on Welsh Society, 1840–1980* (British Sociology of Wales Study Group, Cardiff: 1983), p. 41.



economic independence.<sup>16</sup>

In early twentieth-century Rhondda, just 14% of females over the age of ten years were reported to be in paid employment.<sup>17</sup> For the young unmarried woman, the dearth of local opportunity meant that she would probably have to migrate to work in domestic service.<sup>18</sup> Favoured destinations lay in London, and the English south-west, north-west and midlands.<sup>19</sup> By the early 1930s, the 'small proportion of female to male workers [was still] one of the outstanding characteristics of the region' compared to the rest of Britain.<sup>20</sup> Table 1 shows the proportion of insured females to insured males for south Wales and the whole United Kingdom.

**Table 1:** Insured Females per 1,000 Insured Males. All Industries

Year	1923	1924	1927	1929	1930
South Wales	82	84	89	99.9	100
UK	348	353	354	376	384

Source: Board of Trade, *Industrial Survey of South Wales*, p. 19.

While coal boomed, working men, women and their families could subsist within this socio-economic structure, but the Rhondda's specialism in steam coal made it more vulnerable to market vagaries. Problems appeared around 1911, associated with 'long term changes in demand',<sup>21</sup> when steam coal, hitherto much prized, became 'most difficult to sell' as petroleum and oil were supplanting steam in shipping and rail transport. Thus, in the 1920s, with the Rhondda 'almost exclusively dependent on mining', its population found itself

---

<sup>16</sup> A. V. John, 'A Miner Struggle? Women's Protests in Welsh Mining History', *Llafur, Journal of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History* 4:1 (1984), pp. 72–90, at p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> B. Thomas, 'The Migration of Labour into the Glamorganshire Coalfield, 1861–1911', *Economica* 10 (1930), pp. 275–94, reproduced in Minchington, *Industrial South Wales*, pp. 37–56, at p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Board of Trade, *Industrial Survey of South Wales*, p. 18. See Thomas, 'Migration of Labour', p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> Board of Trade, *Industrial Survey of South Wales*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> R. Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump: The Labour Government of 1929–1931* (Macmillan: 1967), p. 2.

reliant on 'catastrophically diminished' demand.<sup>22</sup> Along with Port Talbot and Merthyr, the valley experienced some of the highest unemployment rates in the coalfield and across the UK.<sup>23</sup> Those men who could leave to find alternative work, did so, either voluntarily or through compulsory transference, but many more found it impossible to relocate.<sup>24</sup> At a time when 'normal unemployment' was regarded as around 4% and anything higher was problematic,<sup>25</sup> unemployment in the Rhondda stood at 33.9% in June 1930, rising to 37.9% by June 1931, with some pockets as high as 80%.<sup>26</sup>

The Welsh political landscape changed from Liberal to Labour in this period.<sup>27</sup> Despite claims of 'red riot' in the valleys,<sup>28</sup> the Labour Party held off the Communist challenge, even in the Rhondda where protests against unemployment became 'regular' and marches against the introduction of the household means test (in 1931) were 'almost immediate'.<sup>29</sup> Mobilization and protest gave rise, for example, to Maerdy, a Rhondda village, being labelled 'Little Moscow' by a hostile press, in reference to the international solidarity and financial support that was extended to miners and their families from Russia during the 1926 General Strike and miners' lockout.<sup>30</sup> In conditions of increasing unemployment, the 1920s saw piecemeal initiatives and public works, such as road building, which lacked centralized control or direction and were constructed

---

<sup>22</sup> Board of Trade, *An Industrial Survey of South Wales*, pp. 26, 33.

<sup>23</sup> 'Variations in Numbers Gainfully Occupied in Proportion to Population', in Political and Economic Planning (PEP), *Report on the Location of Industry* (PEP: 1939), p. 130.

<sup>24</sup> Some were forced to leave, on pain of losing unemployment benefit, by the Industrial Transference Board, which began retraining and relocating the unemployed from 1928. See *Report of the Industrial Transference Board*, Cmnd 3156 (1928), p. 15, cited in Thomas, 'Migration of Labour', p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>26</sup> S. Ward, 'Sit Down to Starve or Stand up to Live: Community, Protest and the Means Test in the Rhondda Valleys, 1931–1939', *Llafur* 9:2 (2005), pp. 27–44, at p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> K. O. Morgan, 'Welsh Politics 1918–1939', in T. Herbert and G. E. Jones (eds), *Wales between the Wars*, (University of Wales Press, Cardiff: 1988), pp. 99–127.

<sup>28</sup> L. J. Williams, 'The Road to Tonypandy', *Llafur* 1:4 (1983), pp. 41–52, at p. 41. See also Minchington, 'Industrial South Wales 1750–1914', p. xxxi.

<sup>29</sup> Ward, 'Sit Down to Starve or Stand up to Live', *Llafur*, pp. 28–9.

<sup>30</sup> H. Francis and D. Smith, *The Fed: A History of South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence and Wishart: 1980), p. 53.

in line with the 'Treasury view' that intended such programmes as temporary measures to stimulate employment while traditional industries recaptured contracted export markets.<sup>31</sup> Such interventions hardly addressed the structural problems faced by localities such as the Rhondda.

## II

In 1934, south Wales was designated a 'Special Area' under the terms of the Special Areas (Development and Improvement) Act of 1934. Under this statute, one Commissioner was appointed for Scotland, and another for England and Wales, to promote new industries and investment. The first industrial survey of south Wales had already identified women's under-employment.<sup>32</sup> In September 1935, a second survey was begun. The large surplus of female labour was given prime consideration under its terms of reference to 'ascertain the potentialities ... of the Region ... with particular relation to the Special Area, for the expansion of existing industries and the establishment of new industries'.<sup>33</sup> It reported that,

[t]here is every reason to believe that the female labour in South Wales is of very much the same character as that in other parts of Great Britain, except that it lacks industrial experience ... [and it could therefore be adapted to new industries and new employment].<sup>34</sup>

The challenge, though, was how best to encourage industrialists to relocate to such places as the Rhondda, which appeared, 'remote, inaccessible, incommodious and unsuitable for new industry. In all senses it seemed "out on a limb"'.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump*, pp. 21–6.

<sup>32</sup> Board of Trade, *Industrial Survey of South Wales*.

<sup>33</sup> National Industrial Development Council of Wales & Monmouthshire (NIDCW&M), *The Second Industrial Survey of South Wales, Vol. 1* (University Press Board, Cardiff: 1937), p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, Pt 2, pp. 81–4.

<sup>35</sup> D. Thomas, 'Economic Decline', in T. Herbert and G. E. Jones (eds), *Wales between the Wars* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff: 1988), pp. 13–51, at p. 27.



With tight budgets and many constraints, the Special Areas legislation – '[h]alf-hearted in intent and meagre in its results' – was slow to address the problems of special areas, particularly south Wales.<sup>36</sup> One trenchant criticism of the Special Areas Committee and associated bodies was that they preferred locations where alternative industries were already established and were therefore more attractive to industrialists.<sup>37</sup> G. D. H. Cole, for example, noted that many employers 'shu[n]ned the depressed areas as plague spots', it being 'bad business to have one's business address in a depressed area'.<sup>38</sup> Places such as the Rhondda were stigmatized and disadvantaged by the outward migration of younger, fitter, more skilled workers, making them 'a poor market for consumer goods, and therefore probably a bad location for a light industry, finance for which is [consequently] difficult to obtain.'<sup>39</sup> Even *within* depressed localities there existed preferred sites. In the Rhondda, the focus of investment was establishing a trading estate at Treforest, Pontypridd,<sup>40</sup> more accessible than remoter areas, such as Treorchy, where need was acute. The Rhondda Urban District Council (RUDC) fought against this trend, seeking a comprehensive approach to the locality's problems.<sup>41</sup>

Monetary incentives would be required to encourage industrialists. In December 1936, a gift of £2 million in a trust fund was made by Lord Nuffield, to

---

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> In the years 1932–1938, of the 42 new factories established in south Wales (employing more than 25 people), 'only 24 ... were within the Special Area boundaries, including 13 at the recently established trading estate at Treforest': *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> G. D. H. Cole, *The People's Front* (1937), pp. 209–12. See also, C. E. Heim, 'Industrial Organization and Regional Development in Interwar Britain', *Journal of Economic History* (JEH) 43:4 (1983), pp. 931–52, who observed that diversification of industry was not accomplished in the special areas of the 1930s.

<sup>39</sup> PEP, *The Location of Industry*, p. 74.

<sup>40</sup> The Treforest trading estate was established through a non-profit making company, the South Wales and Monmouthshire Trading Estates Limited, established by the Commissioner for the Special Areas: NIDCW&M, *Second Industrial Survey of South Wales, Vol. 2 Pt 2*, p. 80.

<sup>41</sup> For example, RUDC Minutes 1936–April 1937: Council meeting, 10 March 1937, pp. 1380–1. Letter to the Prime Minister (Stanley Baldwin), the Chancellor, the Minister for Labour and local MPs, in response to the White Paper (March 1937) on assistance for Distressed Areas, demanding action to address urgent need.

promote new industries in the special areas.<sup>42</sup> The Nuffield Trust was established to administer the fund, and its trustees charged with working alongside the Treasury and the government's Special Areas Reconstruction Association in providing investment where needed.<sup>43</sup> In 1937, Parliament empowered the Special Areas Commissioners to provide premises and other inducements to support the establishment of factories. The Treasury matched the Nuffield Trust with a fund of £2 million, administered by the Special Areas Loans Advisory Committee and the Special Areas Reconstruction Association Ltd (the latter set up in 1936). Political and Economic Planning praised the Nuffield Trust for its speed of operation and success in 'acquainting the City of London with the whereabouts of [places such as] Cyfarthfa, Bishop Auckland and Cockermouth ... and, most amazing of all, [convincing them] that they can make profits there', attributing the Trust's effectiveness to 'the broad conception of its terms of reference and the energy of its trustees'.<sup>44</sup>

The trustees' activities were important in attracting Polikoff, a London-based clothing manufacturer, to the area. He required a site of 10 to 12 acres for a factory to employ several thousand workers. Ynyswen, Treorchy, was selected, a victory for those concerned that new industries were dispersed throughout the area. In October 1937 the trustees approved, in principle, financial assistance for Polikoff's venture, specifying the conditions under which £70,000<sup>45</sup> would be made available.<sup>46</sup>

### III

Who was this man, what was the nature of this 'new' industry, and what

---

<sup>42</sup> The first trustees were Nigel Leslie Campbell, Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree and Wyndham Raymond, Baron Portal: MSS.NTSA , Nuffield College Library, Oxford.

<sup>43</sup> See Heim, 'Industrial Organization', *JEH*, for a summary of assistance provided to establishment of branch factories in the depressed areas by the Nuffield Trust.

<sup>44</sup> PEP, *Location of Industry*, p. 74.

<sup>45</sup> Over £4.5 million today.

<sup>46</sup> 'Proposed Manufacture of Clothing in Sth. Wales', letter to Alfred Polikoff , 29 October, 1937: T187/33, The National Archives, London (TNA).

attracted him to relocate to the Rhondda where his factory would play such a significant role in community life? Polikoff was a Russian Jewish emigre, a 'competent man who ha[d] in the past run a very successful business'.<sup>47</sup> His personal history was entwined with the development of the clothing industry in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century and beyond. In the period between 1851 and 1911, 'the number of tailors and tailoresses recorded as working in London rose by over 100%', due primarily to immigration of Jewish refugees from persecution. The ports of London and Hull were the main destinations for such refugees; those arriving in Hull gravitated towards Leeds, a major centre for the clothing industry, those London-bound were likely to find work in East End workshops.<sup>48</sup> Polikoff settled in London, while another refugee – a later major customer of his – David Meshe Osinsky, who became Montague Burton, 'The Tailor of Taste', settled in the north.<sup>49</sup>

The tailoring industry had a poor reputation. In common with their twenty-first century descendants, late nineteenth-century employers used the perennial excuse that in clothing, where entry barriers are low, they found it difficult to pay good wages to labour 'in the face of unlimited competition' from other manufacturers.<sup>50</sup> The trade-union response was weak. Organization in small workshops, where workers toiled alongside their employer, was difficult;<sup>51</sup> division of labour by race, religion and gender was a key feature, undermining solidarity. Where more women were entering the trade and automation was increasing, they were confined to lower-paid work defined as unskilled;<sup>52</sup> they exhibited an apparent disinclination to organize, while the men were reluctant to

---

<sup>47</sup> File note, 30 October 1937: T187/33, TNA. Polikoff's certificate of British naturalization, in 1909, shows his birthplace, on 12 April 1875, as Mariupol in the Ekaterinoslav Governate of the former Russian Empire, in what is now Ukraine: Alfred Polikoff, Certificate of Naturalization, HO/144/905/176269, TNA.

<sup>48</sup> A. J. Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors: Trade Unionism amongst the Tailoring Workers of London and Leeds, 1870–1939* (Cass, Ilford: 1995), pp. 1–24. See also M. Stewart and L. Hunter, *The Needle is Threaded: 'The History of an Industry'* (Heinemann/Newman Neame: 1964), p. 115.

<sup>49</sup> E. M. Sigsworth, *Montague Burton: The Tailor of Taste* (Manchester University Press: 1990), pp. 1–3

<sup>50</sup> C. Meyer and C. Black, *Makers of Our Clothes: A Case for Trade Boards: Being the Results of a Year's Investigation into the Work of Women in London in the Tailoring, Dressmaking and Underclothing Trades*, (Duckworth: 1909), p. 193.

<sup>51</sup> S. Blackburn, *A Fair Day's Wage, A Fair Day's Wage for a Fair Day's Work?* (Ashgate, Aldershot: 2007), p. 46.

<sup>52</sup> A. Phizacklea, *Unpacking the Fashion Industry* (Routledge: 1990), p. 22–36.

welcome them into established combinations for fear of undermining pay rates. Female clothing workers thus acquired a reputation for not being militant in defence of their interests;<sup>53</sup> meanwhile, anti-Semitic prejudice saw the 'alien' immigrant clothing worker scapegoated as victim and perpetrator in the process of undermining pay and conditions.<sup>54</sup> Rivalries and division abounded and, in this context, trade-unionism was fragmented; estimates suggest no more than 600 of the 18,000 immigrant population working in London's East-End tailoring trade were organized in 1899.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, 'sweating' thrived in the clothing trades, defined by 'unusually low rates of wages, excessive hours of labour and insanitary workplaces',<sup>56</sup> and occasioned increasing public concern and censure.<sup>57</sup> The influence of the individual employer was crucial for the conditions workers experienced, a significant factor in understanding the impact of men like Polikoff and Burton when they became factory owners. An investigation, published in 1909, into conditions of work for women in the London tailoring, dressmaking and underclothing trades found that 'in no two factories is there an identity of conditions ... a welter of persons all striving separately, this is the spectacle presented'.<sup>58</sup> Variation prevailed even after 'ready-made and wholesale bespoke tailoring' became one of four sweated trades originally covered by the Trade Boards Act of 1909,<sup>59</sup> the first modern state intervention on minimum wages.<sup>60</sup>

The trade boards are sometimes credited with beginning the process of mitigating the worst excesses of employers in the UK clothing sector after 1909,

---

<sup>53</sup> See Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*, p. 152, citing Tom Mann that 'the employment and organization of females "has nearly always a prejudicial effect on the wages of the male worker".'

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 147–8. See, also, Blackburn, *A Fair Day's Wage*, pp. 41–53.

<sup>55</sup> Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*, p. 144. Union membership was transient and unreliable: S. Lerner, *Breakaway Unions and the Small Trade Union* (Allen and Unwin: 1961), pp. 88–91.

<sup>56</sup> B. Webb, 'How to Do Away with the Sweating System', in S. and B. Webb, *Problems of Modern Industry* (Longmans: 1898), pp. 139–55, at p. 140.

<sup>57</sup> Blackburn, *A Fair Day's Wage*, pp. 91–117.

<sup>58</sup> Meyer and Black, *Makers of Our Clothes*, p. 143.

<sup>59</sup> F. J. Bayliss, *British Wages Councils* (Blackwell, Oxford: 1962), p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> The Act delegated to Boards comprising equal numbers of employers' representatives, workers' representatives and some independent members, the task of determining legal 'minimum time rates for wages and, if it wished, general minimum piece work rates': *ibid*, p. 10

but in many respects their impact was limited.<sup>61</sup> But the very existence of the trade board contributed to organization among the tailors and tailoresses. Without *some* form of regulatory body, divided clothing unions would have been hard-pressed to establish formal bargaining rights with similarly disunited employers. The trade boards encouraged some co-operation between such employers and competing unions 'drew closer together'.<sup>62</sup> After a series of mergers the United Garment Workers' Union was formed in 1915,<sup>63</sup> a major step in uniting 'Jew and Gentile, craftsman, factory worker and homemaker without distinction of age or sex'.<sup>64</sup> The union signed the first national wage agreement with the Wholesale Clothing Manufacturers' Association in 1919, setting the norm for such agreements to be submitted to the Trade Board as the basis for the legal minimum wage.<sup>65</sup> Such agreements could be undermined at workplace level,<sup>66</sup> and local bargaining and localized action continued alongside legal minima: there was an ongoing fight to be waged by 'the working class [ ... ] against vested interests' in all respects, including enforcing minimum rates.<sup>67</sup>

By the 1920s, when Polikoff Ltd was 'one of the largest clothing firms in London',<sup>68</sup> there were growing tensions among garment workers, particularly those working in London workshops where minimum rates had been eroding and a range of 'grievances [had] accumulate[d]'.<sup>69</sup> Polikoff might therefore have had a range of motivations for establishing premises outside London. The 'push'

---

<sup>61</sup> Stewart and Hunter, *The Needle is Threaded*, p. 147. The trade board initially raised wage rates only for the worst paid female workers: Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, p. 87.

<sup>62</sup> Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, p. 87; *ibid.*, pp. 96–7, notes that in the early twentieth century there were twenty-five employers' associations in the industry, 'some of which frequently bicker[ed] among themselves' and a 'vast number of employers who do not belong to any association'.

<sup>63</sup> Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*, p. 163; Stewart and Hunter, *The Needle is Threaded*, p. 171; though Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, p. 91, says 1916.

<sup>64</sup> Stewart and Hunter, *The Needle is Threaded*, p. 172.

<sup>65</sup> Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, p. 96.

<sup>66</sup> As they are throughout the present-day international garment sector.

<sup>67</sup> S. Blackburn, 'Must Low Pay Always Be with Us? The Origins of Britain's Minimum Wage Legislation', *HSIR*, 23/24 (2007), pp. 61–101, at p. 76.

<sup>68</sup> A figure of 800 employees at the time of the Polikoff strike is on record: Stewart and Hunter, *The Needle is Threaded*, p. 192.

<sup>69</sup> Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, p. 92; see also pp. 92–102.

factors might have included a desire to escape industrial conflict and vacate the city with war approaching; 'pull' factors might have been a large surplus of female labour on a greenfield site, where he could introduce new production methods, and where substantial finance was available.

Production methods in clothing manufacture were changing in the late 1920s, and London workers complained of being squeezed by the 'conveyor method'. This 'rationalized hand-cutting', passed work-in-progress from one machinist to another on a conveyor, rather than by hand, and 'encouraged employment of more female and juvenile labour'.<sup>70</sup> As management set the conveyor speed, it could influence piecework earnings and could slow work down or exert greater pressure for output. Workers were aggrieved at work intensification, the 'speed-up', and alleged that higher-paid men were replaced by lower-paid women who were 'forced into the industry' at low wages, on pain of losing unemployment benefit.<sup>71</sup>

A large body of London workers felt their interests were not best served by the Tailor and Garment Workers' Union, formed in 1920 from the United Garment Workers' Union merging with the Scottish Operative Tailors and Tailoresses' Union.<sup>72</sup> The new union was based in Leeds, where conditions differed from London, and tensions erupted in a dispute over wages and conditions at Rego Clothiers Ltd in London in 1928. Around 600 workers, 'mostly poorly paid girls', went on strike.<sup>73</sup> Dissatisfied with the Tailor and Garment Workers' Union's stance towards their dispute, a breakaway union, the Communist-led United Clothing Workers' Union (UCWU) was formed, gaining support and members in the London area.<sup>74</sup>

Supported by the *Daily Herald*, the UCWU strikers at Rego gained considerable public sympathy in winning concessions. By contrast, Polikoff had 'quite good' relations with its workers.<sup>75</sup> To succeed as a firm recognized for

---

<sup>70</sup> Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*, p. 173.

<sup>71</sup> Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, pp. 95–6. See also, *Strike Songs: Sung by the Rego and Polikoff Strikers, United Clothing Workers' Trade Union* (Facsimile; Centreprise and Stepney Books: 1983).

<sup>72</sup> Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, p. 91. See, also, Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*, p. 173.

<sup>73</sup> Foreword by A. B. Elsbury, to *Strike Songs*.

<sup>74</sup> Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, pp. 106–13.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.



being 'good employers'<sup>76</sup> was somewhat exceptional at the time,<sup>77</sup> yet Polikoff faced his own bitter conflict in 1929, soon after the Rego dispute. This strike was about union recognition: '[n]one of the workers and neither union [the Tailors' and Garment Workers' Union and the UCWU] had any quarrel with conditions in the [Polikoff] plant'.<sup>78</sup>

Polikoff had formerly recognized the Tailor and Garment Workers' Union but when, in common with Rego workers, its staff transferred allegiance to the breakaway union, Polikoff recognized the UCWU. Conflict arose when Tailor and Garment Workers' Union members applied for employment at the plant; the firm came under pressure from the Wholesale Clothiers' Federation, the Transport and General Workers' Union (which said it would not handle goods in and out of the factory)<sup>79</sup> and the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which had been 'constant in its opposition to the Communist-inspired union'.<sup>80</sup> Under pressure, in April 1929, the firm withdrew recognition from the UCWU. While Polikoff workers were divided and initially 'reluctant to strike', they stopped work in support of the UCWU in May. Strikers suffered considerable hardship as no strike pay was available.<sup>81</sup> Frustrated at being caught up in an inter-union dispute, Polikoff went on the offensive. The firm was granted sixty-seven summonses against individual strikers for breach of contract, and sued for damages; by this means the firm eventually broke the strike.<sup>82</sup> When the strikers returned, Polikoff required them to sign 'a document' (or contract) on pain of dismissal, to confirm they would only join a TUC-affiliated union. Disillusioned by unfulfilled promises of strike pay, their defeat and the inter-union dispute, London Polikoff workers were, officially at least, not to be heavily unionized again until around 1937.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Note from Messrs. Thornton and Thornton to Nuffield Trustees, 16 November 1937, T187/33, TNA.

<sup>77</sup> Polikoff was an exception, though Montague Burton had established model factories.

<sup>78</sup> Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, p. 125.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*, p. 175.

<sup>81</sup> Their inability to draw any strike pay was in part the reason for the publication of 'Strike Songs' as a booklet sold in aid of the Rego and Polikoff strikers.

<sup>82</sup> All the summonses were issued against 'cutters – the male, skilled and higher-paid workers who cut the lays of cloth – as the group of skilled workers crucial to the firm's ability to force all categories of workers back to work: Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, p. 125.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128–9.

How far all this affected Polikoff's decision to consider south Wales as an alternative site is unclear, but the dispute sheds light on the firm's industrial relations. While a 'good' employer, in that workers felt terms and conditions were acceptable, it could also be ruthless in defence of its interests. A more persuasive incentive for opening a new business in a depressed area was the opportunity of new premises, with labour fresh to industrial work, financed in large part by the state and the Nuffield Trust. Such motivation probably increased after a serious fire destroyed buildings at his London factory in 1932; the adverse effect of this was compounded by Polikoff starting construction of new premises before receiving the insurance settlement, which was far less than anticipated.<sup>84</sup> Polikoff was thus ready to look outside London for new opportunities. In 1933, the firm had expanded operations into Ireland,<sup>85</sup> and in October 1937 Polikoff visited the Nuffield trustees, to discuss the funds needed for construction of a south Wales factory.<sup>86</sup>

The attraction of a greenfield site may well have been influenced by Polikoff's drive to reorganize production methods in line with contemporary developments in the industry. Greenfield sites have been used to signal a 'break with the past', sometimes to undermine collective organization, establish unilateral managerial control or introduce new workplace regimes.<sup>87</sup> As a leading manufacturer in London, Polikoff had already begun changing production methods there. In an audit of the firm's accounts, 'considerable reorganization'

---

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Messrs Thornton and Thornton to Nuffield Trustees, 9 November 1937, p. 9: T187/33, TNA.

<sup>85</sup> In addition to the factory at Ynyswen in the Rhondda, a Polikoff factory had been opened in Kilmainhaim, Ireland, in 1933. Burton had begun establishing retail branches away from industrialized centres, including Ireland: Sigsworth, *Montague Burton*, pp. 43–4. Sean Lemass, Minister for Industry and Commerce in 1932 in Ireland, was credited with insisting that all Burton's suits sold in Ireland should be *made* in Ireland. As a supplier to Burton's, the Kilmainhaim Polikoff factory (opened by Lemass in 1933) was most likely associated with this dictum. The Irish arm of Polikoff's business (Polikoff I. F. S. Ltd) was floated on the stockmarket in 1937: letter from Messrs Thornton and Thornton to The Nuffield Trustees, 9 November 1937, p. 4: T187/33, TNA. The Kilmainhaim factory was closed in 1982: R. Rivlin, *Jewish Ireland: A Social History* (The History Press Ireland, Dublin: 2011), p. 89.

<sup>86</sup> File Note, 23 Oct 1937, T187/33, TNA.

<sup>87</sup> P. B. Beaumont, *Change in Industrial Relations* (Sage: 1990); J. W. Leopold and J. Hallier, 'Managing the Employment Relationship on Greenfield sites in Australia and New Zealand', *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 10:4 (1999), pp. 716–36.

at the London premises had occasioned 'great expense' and contributed to lower profits during 1933–37.<sup>88</sup> Immediately after the Second World War, many more large clothing manufacturers also sought 'trainable "green" labour and special building facilities' in regions ripe for development, such as south Wales.<sup>89</sup> In the new factory, Polikoff told the Nuffield Trust's auditors that he wanted to 'enter a new market' with 'no goods with a selling value greater than 37/6 [37s. 6d., £1.75]'<sup>90</sup> being made.<sup>91</sup>

Polikoff's approach appears to have been in step with the standard set by Burton (later knighted), as the latter's manufacturing and retail empire expanded into greenfield sites in Britain and Ireland.<sup>92</sup> Since the 1920s, Burton had run his company in a 'paternalistic and pragmatic' style,<sup>93</sup> exemplified by his factory at Hudson Road, Leeds, completed in 1921, already 'the largest clothing factory in Europe' by 1925,<sup>94</sup> and employing around 10,500 people by 1939.<sup>95</sup> Paternalism is a term open to wide interpretation:<sup>96</sup> in Burton's 'model' factory, workers were provided with well-ventilated, well-lit workrooms and facilities such as a works canteen,<sup>97</sup> while it is said that he recognized labour organization as 'just and reasonable' and pursued a relationship with the National Union of

---

<sup>88</sup> Report on Polikoff's London business from Messrs Thornton and Thornton to Nuffield Trustees, 9 November 1937, p. 10: T187/33, TNA.

<sup>89</sup> Phizacklea, *Unpacking the Fashion Industry*, p. 31.

<sup>90</sup> About £120 today.

<sup>91</sup> Report on Polikoff's London business from Messrs Thornton and Thornton to Nuffield Trustees, 9 November 1937, p. 12: T187/33, TNA.

<sup>92</sup> Sigsworth, *Montague Burton*.

<sup>93</sup> Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*, p. 186.

<sup>94</sup> Sigsworth, *Montague Burton*, p. 54.

<sup>95</sup> Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*, p. 186, cites 8,000, but Sigsworth, *Montague Burton*, p. 59, explains that the factory continued to expand and employed 10,500 at the outbreak of war, 'with a further 6,000 people employed in Lancashire factories'.

<sup>96</sup> P. Ackers, 'On Paternalism: Seven Observations on the Uses and Abuses of the Concept in Industrial Relations, Past and Present', *HSIR* 5 (1998), pp. 173–93.

<sup>97</sup> Sigsworth, *Montague Burton*, pp. 54–7.

Tailors and Garment Workers (NUTGW)<sup>98</sup> 'built on trust and respect'.<sup>99</sup> In Polikoff's plans for his Treorchy factory, a similar working environment was put before the Nuffield trustees. The physical organization of Burton's factories may have provided an example that Polikoff was keen to adopt, particularly since Burton was one of his biggest customers until 1935. In terms of workplace relations, Polikoff's style seems to have accorded with the definition of 'the spontaneous "primitive paternalism" of the large employer', where there exists a personal relationship between employer and worker, ties of kinship exist within the workplace and a connection is established with the wider occupational community.<sup>100</sup> That Polikoff also engaged with the NUTGW chimed not only with pragmatism but with the changing times, as part and parcel of the evolution of greater unity in clothing unions and the post-war pluralist project.

The amount of financial assistance to support the move to Treorchy was considerable. In the original estimates (which changed with a regularity that concerned the Nuffield trustees)<sup>101</sup> the factory's cost was to be £90,000,<sup>102</sup> of which £20,000<sup>103</sup> would be contributed by 'Mr Polikoff and his friends',<sup>104</sup> and the balance by the Treasury and the Nuffield Trust, while the factory was to be built by the Special Areas Commissioner.<sup>105</sup> The arrangements for the loan stipulated that Polikoff would 'undertake the management of production of this Factory for 10 years at a remuneration of 20% of the profits each year'.<sup>106</sup> Shareholdings

---

<sup>98</sup> The NUTGW was formed from a series of mergers in 1932 and then joined with the United Ladies' Tailors and Mantle Makers' Union: Lerner, *Breakaway Unions*, p. 91.

<sup>99</sup> Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors*, p. 187.

<sup>100</sup> Ackers, 'On Paternalism' *HSIR*, pp. 176–7.

<sup>101</sup> For example, his original estimate for machinery and plant increased from £10,000 to £30,071: letter from Polikoff to the Nuffield Trust, 9 November 1937, T187/33, TNA. After enquiries, the trustees were reassured that it was simply the case that 'while there was no doubt that Polikoff himself was an efficient and capable manufacturer from the point of view of his products ... his financial ability was less certain': File Note T. F. 135, 29 November 1937, T187/33, TNA.

<sup>102</sup> About £5,840,000 today.

<sup>103</sup> About £1,300,000 today.

<sup>104</sup> Report on Polikoff's London business from Messrs Thornton and Thornton to Nuffield Trustees, 9 November 1937, p. 12: T187/33 TNA.

<sup>105</sup> File note, 29 Oct 1937: *ibid*.

<sup>106</sup> Letter from Polikoff Ltd to J. A. Roney, secretary to Nuffield Trustees, 2 November, 1937: *ibid*.

were to be held by the Nuffield Trust and the firm, and there were to be 'full contributions' from the Commissioner for Special Areas in respect of rent, rates and income tax for at least two years, with a further contribution of £10,000<sup>107</sup> from the Trust.<sup>108</sup> In April 1938, it was reported that the factory's construction 'had now commenced',<sup>109</sup> with evidence of purchase of land, road building and bridge widening at Ynyswen.<sup>110</sup> Private rail-sidings were agreed by the Great Western Railway Company.<sup>111</sup>

As with other factory owners' concerns about war, safety was probably an additional factor in Polikoff's desire for relocation. He cited this in later communications with the Nuffield trustees, when testing the prospects for additional financial support for an extension to Ynyswen factory, as well as *other* sites in south Wales, just months its formal opening in 1939.<sup>112</sup> Despite Polikoff's enthusiasm for more projects, in light of the 'large amount of government work he now ha[d] in hand', there were reservations about how fast he was moving. Official correspondence expressed concerns that

finance [was] ... not a very strong point in Mr Polikoff ... [and] ... [w]hile some very good work is being done at Ynyswen it is as yet impossible to say whether this undertaking is yet on a commercial basis, and accordingly, the question of any large extension there should also be approached with considerable caution.<sup>113</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> About £650,000 today.

<sup>108</sup> File note of Meeting of Nuffield Trustees, 23 Dec 1937: T187/33 TNA.

<sup>109</sup> RUDC minutes, 6 April 1938, p. 1424.

<sup>110</sup> A contribution of £1,000, made by the Secretary of State to South Wales and Monmouthshire Trading Estates, to the total cost of £1,787 of the bridge widening, was accepted: Roads Committee, 28 June 1938, RUDC minutes 1938–1939, p. 265.

<sup>111</sup> RAIL 788/566, October 1938, TNA.

<sup>112</sup> Letter from Captain Geoffrey Crawshay, District Commissioner for the Special Areas (South Wales), 24 August 1939, regarding a visit by Polikoff to Mountain Ash and his approach for further financial support: T187/33, TNA.

<sup>113</sup> Letter from C. M. Boyd on behalf of the Commissioner for Special Areas (England and Wales) to Crawshay, 29 August 1939: *ibid.*

Funding for another factory (in Mountain Ash) would not be forthcoming despite the 'excellent not to say spectacular start' that had been made at Ynyswen.<sup>114</sup> The Ynyswen factory extension was eventually supported, but the fact that Polikoff did not proceed with the Mountain Ash project, despite having identified a site and numbers to be employed, suggests that the availability of public finance was critical. Polikoff needed the Rhondda and all that it offered quite as much as the Rhondda needed him.

#### IV

By November 1938 Polikoff's new factory was in operation. The need for training slowed the growth of the workforce and importation of labour may have been mooted.<sup>115</sup> The Chairman of the Rhondda Industrial Development Committee and the Clerk to the RUDC visited the Divisional Controller, Ministry of Labour, Cardiff, in January 1939, to counsel against this. They found him 'very anxious to avoid the difficulties which would ... arise should labour be recruited outside the area'; ultimately, labour was not 'imported'.<sup>116</sup> The factory was formally opened – when there were about a thousand persons employed – by Lord Nuffield on 6 March 1939.<sup>117</sup> Employees numbered 1,200 by August, mainly

---

<sup>114</sup> Letter to Polikoff from J. A. Roney, secretary to Nuffield Trustees, 7 September 1939: T187/33, TNA.

<sup>115</sup> Whether this labour was to come from nearby areas or elsewhere is unclear, but it was a sensitive issue. While Polikoff employed mainly women, RUDC minutes refer several times to the need for *local* men, rather than those from other valleys and districts, to be given the construction work. The RUDC adopted the same approach to the employment of local women: Minutes of the Industrial Development Committee, 11 January 1939, RUDC minutes 1938–39, p. 1174.

<sup>116</sup> RUDC minutes 1938–1939, Council meeting 8 February 1939, p. 1336.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, Council meeting 9 November 1938, p. 895, reported correspondence from Messrs Polikoff Limited, predicting that the factory's formal opening would happen in 'three to four months'. A memo from South Wales Office, Commissioner for Special Areas, states that the firm hoped to increase the workforce to 1,800 by October 1939 and to add an extension, employing another 1,500. While the declared ambitions were to employ 4,500 persons, there is no evidence that this was ever achieved. Interviews lodged at the Women's Archive of Wales, *Voices from the Factory Floor: The Experiences of Women Working in the Manufacturing Industries in Wales, 1945–1975* – [factorywomensvoices.wales](http://factorywomensvoices.wales) – suggest there were around 3,000 at points in the 1950s. The factory employed around 1,800 in the 1960s and 1,400 in the late 1970s: *South Wales Echo*, 26 May 1981.



women and girls, a profound change for this area.<sup>118</sup> For Mattie Ruddock, who left school at 14 in 1938, employment at Polikoff meant that her mother 'stopped her becoming a private maid (skivvy)' and she worked there until becoming pregnant.<sup>119</sup> Margaret Chislett, aged 15 in 1937, had already worked in Croydon for almost two years as a nanny, before returning in 1938 to work at Polikoff, first as an 'apprentice' for between two to three years' training, and then as a fully qualified machinist on a standard forty-eight-hour week.<sup>120</sup> The experiences of such young women reflected a movement away from domestic service that had been apparent wherever alternative work presented itself.<sup>121</sup>

Between 1939 and 1946 women's employment in Wales increased by 83%, compared to just 14% in the rest of Great Britain.<sup>122</sup> The Second World War brought more 'new industries' to south Wales, due to the need to transfer munitions and other factories further westward. Unemployment was largely eliminated and foundations laid for a broader manufacturing base, where automated mass-manufacture gave 'women a central role at the point of production', associated with the need for low-skilled and semi-skilled workers.<sup>123</sup> Employment opportunities for women now included a range of metal, engineering, food, electrical and vehicle manufacturing plants, as well as clothing.<sup>124</sup> In the post-war years in the Treorchy area, not only Polikoff but Sobell's, EMI and Harvin's – making electricals, precision instruments and opticals – offered employment, along with clusters of other clothing plants and furniture factories, such as those owned by Christie Tyler.

In focusing on the surplus *female* labour force, the measures taken in the special areas did not necessarily address the problems of unemployed men from heavy industry and mining. They did, however, open up the prospect of at least

---

<sup>118</sup> The gender mix of the factory workforce when it closed was 80% female to 20% male. This was typical of the industry and characteristic of the factory throughout its history.

<sup>119</sup> Women's Archive of Wales: Mattie Ruddock, VSE004.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*: Margaret Chislett, VSE012.

<sup>121</sup> M. Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-War Britain* (Routledge: 1990), p. 50.

<sup>122</sup> Thomas, 'Post War Expansion', p. 32.

<sup>123</sup> Glucksmann, *Women Assemble*, pp. 50, 199.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas, 'Post War Expansion', p. 30.

one wage in the household. Incoming industries were 'new' and many of the jobs created had not been done before by men or women in special areas such as the Rhondda.<sup>125</sup> Thus, despite the 'relative cheapness of female labour' and the increase in female employment, women did not *displace* men in manufacturing in south Wales, unlike in the distributive trades and professional services, where the employment 'ratio moved sharply in [women's] favour' and male employment was reduced.<sup>126</sup>

What did this industrial restructuring mean for women in their society in the Rhondda? This question is perhaps best answered by comparison with present-day settings. Where socio-economically disadvantaged women enter paid industrial employment in clothing manufacture at low wages, they achieve some emancipation in being a wage-earner for the first time, but this does not change social norms in any fundamental sense. Indeed, life patterns of marriage, child-bearing and women's status and domestic roles become entwined with workplace hierarchies and controls.<sup>127</sup> Across time and place, women's position in the domestic economy is inevitably linked with their labour market position.<sup>128</sup> While employment at Polikoff was a highly significant and positive change for women in the Rhondda, it did not alter their domestic role. Women went in and out of employment to accommodate childbearing and different phases in their lives; even in 2007 one of the main benefits that women cited for working at Burberry was that it had been reliable employment that accommodated their domestic chores and responsibilities.<sup>129</sup>

By the end of the 1950s manufacturing employed around a quarter of the insured population of Wales; gas and electricity industries also grew, as did the public sector. Thus, a new regional map of south Wales was drawn post-war, which mitigated the continuing, slow but steady, contraction of coal-mining, which (along with iron and steel) in 1958 still employed 22% of the insured

---

<sup>125</sup> Glucksmann, *Women Assemble*, p. 199.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas, 'Post War Expansion', pp. 44–5.

<sup>127</sup> J. Jenkins and P. Blyton, 'In Debt to the Time-Bank: The Manipulation of Working Time in Indian Garment Factories and "Working Dead Horse"', *Work Employment and Society (WES)* 31:1 (2017), pp. 90–105, at p. 97.

<sup>128</sup> Glucksmann, *Women Assemble*, p. 198.

<sup>129</sup> P. Blyton and J. Jenkins, 'Life after Burberry: Shifting Experiences of Work and Non-work Life following Redundancy', *WES* 26:1 (2012), pp. 1–16.

population in Wales (as opposed to 6% in Great Britain).<sup>130</sup> It is in this period that management of the coal industry's contraction is explained by Phillips as in line with the evolution of the 'moral economy of the coalfield', inasmuch as, under nationalization, 'workforce consultation and social justice' were made explicit values in decisions about investment and pit closures.<sup>131</sup> Such values were to be highly pertinent for the Burberry workers of 2006, where they felt no such process had been observed in the closure decision.

## V

Polikoff workers initially made clothes for men and boys but, with the onset of war, the factory turned to manufacturing of military uniforms.<sup>132</sup> Former machinists remembered the long, heavy overcoats they made for Russia, for 'Lady Churchill's Russian fund', and the day that Princess Marina came to the factory to thank them for their work.<sup>133</sup> Such elements of the plant's history lived on through family histories, handed down. Thus, redundant workers interviewed in 2008 spoke of the plant being given a Queen's Award for its contribution to the manufacture of military uniforms.<sup>134</sup> When the war ended, the factory returned to civilian clothing, making men's suits, coats and jackets, and women's coats and dresses. It also made bedding in the factory extension (operational from January 1940).<sup>135</sup> Resources were rationed, constraining ease of entry for new producers and limiting competition.<sup>136</sup> The plant prospered, providing a good physical working environment, with a large canteen, two

---

<sup>130</sup> Thomas, 'Post War Expansion', pp. 38–41.

<sup>131</sup> Phillips, 'Containing, Isolating and Defeating the Miners', *HSIR*, pp. 123–4.

<sup>132</sup> B. Morse, *A Moment in History: The Story of the American Army in the Rhondda in 1944* (Y Lloffa, Aberystwyth: 2007), p. 31.

<sup>133</sup> Women's Archive of Wales: Margaret Chislett, VSE012.

<sup>134</sup> In the run up to closure, respondents referred with resentment to the fact that Burberry had stripped the factory's walls of the plaques and records of their awards.

<sup>135</sup> An extension of 70,000 square feet to the original factory building remained in operation when the plant was closed in 2007: T187/33, OG/COPY, D.A.2290.Part III, TNA.

<sup>136</sup> M. Wray, *The Women's Outerwear Industry* (Duckworth: 1957), p. 45. Although Wray's commentary relates to the *women's* outerwear industry, it is reasonable to deduce that the context was also relevant for the production of men's civilian clothing.

nurses on site, toilets and free bus transport to work from different areas of the valley.<sup>137</sup> Polikoff was innovative; for example, the factory floor was built of specially imported Canadian Maple, yet it would be nine years later, 1947, before the heavy clothing trade was formally encouraged to use 'hard wood – such as maple – floors when building new factories' in the interests of 'cleanliness and safety'.<sup>138</sup> Polikoff died in 1943 and, in 1948, the plant was bought by GUS.<sup>139</sup> It is not clear whether the sale was connected to the agreement that Polikoff would run the factory for ten years prior to the original loan being liquidated, but the firm continued to prosper and be run on similar lines into the 1950s.

Workers interviewed during the anti-closure campaign in 2006–07 spoke of the factory as an extension of 'family' – 'we have our own family, and our Burberry family', was a phrase commonly used. The workplace had supported several generations of the same family units, many of whom had found their spouses there. Contrary to attitudes being coloured by the prospects of closure, archived oral histories of Polikoff workers from the factory's earliest decades validated the memories of workers in 2007. Margaret Tegwen John, a machinist employed from the age of 15, throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, was typical in describing the firm as 'the most excellent employers', the 'biggest employer in the Rhondda'. Her recollections of her first week illustrate how family and factory interacted:

there's a woman in Blaenrhondda, she was related to us and I always called her aunty Mary, so when I went into Polikoffs, I was lucky in a way, because ... she was the training officer, she taught you how to use the machine and how to do certain things and all that ... She could tell straight away if you was capable of doing the job ... and the first word she said to

---

<sup>137</sup> Women's Archive of Wales: interviews VSE004; VSE012; VSE014.

<sup>138</sup> Board of Trade Working Party Report, *Heavy Clothing* (HMSO: 1947), p. 53. In 2008, a former employee, with 30 years' service, spoke with pride of the provenance and continued exceptional quality of the floor, speaking with equal contempt at it being stripped out by Burberry when the factory closed.

<sup>139</sup> As was the case for Burberry, Polikoff retained its name after being purchased by GUS. Though it was officially named 'Polikoff Universal', in the locality it was always 'Polikoff's'.

me [was] don't you let me down.<sup>140</sup>

Machinists were paid by piecework, but with guaranteed minima established by collective bargaining with the recognized union, the NUTGW, under the remit of the trade board, and later the wages council agreement, until 1994.<sup>141</sup> In the garment sector more generally, allowing for exceptions, it has typically been the case that as long as workers' expectations of a 'fair day's pay' and the norms of the trade were met, clothing workers have complied with managerial *control* even if they had no real liking or regard for the line manager.<sup>142</sup> Polikoff was in all respects typical of the type of workplace regime that characterized the better, large UK clothing factories into the mid-twentieth century, in that while union density was high, union influence was relatively low. For the most part, British clothing unions mitigated the worst excesses of managerial control without challenging managerial authority in any fundamental sense.<sup>143</sup>

The factory floor was divided into sections, with several conveyORIZED production lines per section, each line with around fifty machines leading to the inspection tables.<sup>144</sup> In this regimented environment, occupations on the factory floor were gendered: an office worker employed in 1961 recalled that pressers, cutters, packers and maintenance workers were men, as were most managers and foremen, while women dominated machining and line supervision.<sup>145</sup> Though the factory contracted, the same division of labour applied in 2007. Senior factory managers were described as 'strict' by workers past and present, while line managers, such as foremen and line supervisors, and the personnel manager were responsible for training, discipline and patterns of indulgency –

---

<sup>140</sup> Women's Archive of Wales: Margaret Tegwen John, VSE014.

<sup>141</sup> After the abolition of the wages councils, the Cardiff-based officer for the NUTGW (which merged into the GMB in 1991), Mervyn Burnett, explained that most large employers did not seek to overturn the norms of long-established agreements but continued to bargain along the same lines, albeit at company level.

<sup>142</sup> T. Lupton, *On the Shop-floor: Two Studies of Workshop Organization and Output* (Pergamon Press, Oxford: 1963), p. 43.

<sup>143</sup> P. K. Edwards, *Conflict at Work: A Materialist Analysis of Workplace Relations* (Blackwell, Oxford: 1986), pp. 46–7.

<sup>144</sup> Women's Archive of Wales: Margaret Tegwen John, VSE014.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*: Yvonne Smith VSE042.

the informal accommodations that allowed factory life to run smoothly<sup>146</sup> – and which set the tone of workplace relations and ensured that a mixture of formality and informality played out through the interaction of community and workplace. Machinists of the 1950s recalled being allowed to bring in their own material to stitch at their machines ‘in their own time’ on occasions, while in 2007 workers recalled going in to work fifteen minutes early for a chat – ‘you’d put the world to rights in the day’. Throughout the plant’s history, socializing was possible and encouraged, and employment could be initiated through informal approaches. As an interviewee explained in 2008, in his street of fourteen houses in Treorchy, ten were inhabited by workers at the factory, including the manager. This proximity of workplace and workers meant that that walking along the street and knocking on the door of a local manager’s house might result in a job the following week. An office worker employed at the plant in 1961 recalled:

one of the girls I was friendly with ... worked in Polikoff’s and she told me that Mrs Farmer who was the Personnel officer and was two streets away was looking for a new clerk ... She said go on off you go, knock on her door ... So I went and knocked on her door and ... she interviewed me and said right when can you start.<sup>147</sup>

Before the days of maternity rights, pregnancy meant the loss of employment: ‘[w]hen you got pregnant your job wasn’t kept open and you weren’t paid maternity pay or anything ... in those days you had to finish’.<sup>148</sup> Despite having factory nurses, there were no childcare facilities. As Margaret Tegwen John recalled, ‘[children] were your responsibility. ... I can’t ever, ever remember a crèche anywhere’.<sup>149</sup> Though a period of child-rearing always meant a break in service, rejoining after child-rearing – or indeed a spell of work at a different factory – was an easy, regular and routine occurrence for trained machinists, facilitated by a visit to the factory or a ‘quiet word’. This continued

---

<sup>146</sup> A. W. Gouldner, *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy: A Case Study of Modern Factory Administration* (Collier Macmillan: 1954), p. 56.

<sup>147</sup> Women’s Archive of Wales: Yvonne Smith, VSE042.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*: Margaret Tegwen John, VSE014 (first employed 1950, first child 1962).



and the plant's proximity to the local community was enormously important for access to employment, a factor that did not change, though by 2006 new entrants were waiting up to a year for a vacancy to become available.<sup>150</sup>

The tenor of the early post-war employment regime is apparent in the first issue in 1948 of Polikoff's Magazine for the Ynyswen factory.<sup>151</sup> In his introduction, Mr Luck,<sup>152</sup> a director, wrote that the publication should be seen as 'a family affair' rather than the property of one or other sections of the factory. As noted, familial relationships characterized the factory floor throughout its history. A former employee interviewed in 2008 explained that his mother had worked at Polikoff, as had her sister, his own sister and several cousins and this was fairly typical. 'It *was* like a family' was a phrase repeated by workers during and after the factory closure. Several interviewees explained they used their mother's given name when speaking to her on the factory floor, because had they called out 'Mam', 'everyone would have answered'.

The notices in the magazine highlighted the size and scale of the factory and the diversity of occupations at the factory's hey-day: box boys (unskilled workers, servicing the lines), designing and pattern making, cutting room, dress division, tailoring, pressers, post-operation, carpenters and fitters, cleaners' department, general office, and the personnel department. During their working lives, it was possible for workers to gain training and to transfer between occupations. The penultimate manager of the factory had thirty-four years' service, having started as a 'box boy'.<sup>153</sup>

The first pages of the magazine illustrate the interaction of community with workplace, being taken up with announcements of births, marriages, deaths, reports of the convalescence of sick employees, and wedding gifts of £5.

---

<sup>150</sup> Blyton and Jenkins, 'Life after Burberry', *WES*, pp. 1–16.

<sup>151</sup> A. P. (W) Polikoff's Magazine No. 1, published by the Management and Employees of Messrs Alfred Polikoff (Wales), Manufacturing Clothiers, Ynyswen, Treorchy, Glamorgan, July–August, 1948: R2 338.6, Treorchy Reference Library (TRL).

<sup>152</sup> In documents on the original loan for the factory, Mr Luck's name appears as Mr Lack.

<sup>153</sup> It was unusual for a woman to reach senior management from a start on the factory floor. Women were employed as personnel officers for the daily management of workplace issues, but in operational/production roles they were unlikely to rise above supervisor or section leader, while men sometimes went further up the hierarchy.

5s. (£5.25) from the management to four newly married couples, who had been employed for approximately five years. It also gave notice of the factory Social Club and the factory's first 'Works Outing', by two trains, stopping at all stations along the valley to collect workers on the journey to its destination, the seaside town of Porthcawl. Such outings were famous among the workers even when interviewed during the closure campaign in 2007, and over time they were not restricted to the local sea-side, visiting London on several occasions. One couple, David and Trina Pritchard, told how they had met on a works outing to London rather than while at work inside the factory as it was too big. They later married and when the factory closed they had eighty-seven years' service between them. An article by 'J. R.' entitled 'Employer and Employee: The Changing Relations', reflected on the days when workers were called 'Hands' and the employer was the 'Master'. The author highlighted the way things had been changed for workers through trade unions and bodies like the Whitley Committee, praising the fact that the days when employers could put up notices casually declaring 'Hands Not Wanted' had been consigned to history.

The seminal studies of workshop organization undertaken by Sheila Cunnison and Tom Lupton demonstrated the importance of understanding social relationships and the interaction of the external community with the social environment inside the factory.<sup>154</sup> This said, Lupton argued that the production system in clothing, which included piecework, militated against the definition of common interests vis-à-vis management.<sup>155</sup> Cunnison also found that community ties were 'not strong enough to withstand the way in which the immediate productive process set [workers] against one another'.<sup>156</sup> At the Treorchy plant, piecework and the production system were as individualizing as in other workplaces, but the circumstances of community were subtly different. In Lupton's and Cunnison's studies, ethnic and religious differences compounded the gendered division of labour. At Treorchy, there were no such divisions

---

<sup>154</sup> S. Cunnison, *Wages and Work Allocation: A Study of Social Relations in a Garment Workshop* (Tavistock: 1966); *idem*, 'The Manchester Factory Studies, the Social Context, Bureaucratic Organization, Sexual Divisions and Their Influence on Patterns of Accommodation between Workers and Management', in R. Frankenberg (ed.), *Custom and Conflict in British Society* (Manchester University Press: 1982), pp. 94–139.

<sup>155</sup> Lupton, *On the Shop-floor*, p. 73.

<sup>156</sup> Cunnison, *Wages and Work Allocation*, p. 64.

among the workforce, which, despite comprising individuals with their own trials and hopes, was the product of a geographically isolated region and an industrial working class forged by adversity, protest and the experience of coal.<sup>157</sup>

When the factory employed large numbers and had its own social life, interaction between factory and community was inevitably strong, as it was between workers' friends and family inside and outside the plant.<sup>158</sup> It was not only the quizzes, Easter Bonnet parades and dances at the Polikoff social club that persisted in local memory. Major events also informed 'historically received understandings' of work and community, justice and injustice, which were to emerge strongly at the point of closure.<sup>159</sup> For example, the firm supported people affected by serious floods in the Rhondda in 1961. When interviewed in 2017, John Evans (whose Aunt Kitty worked for Polikoff and was flooded out) vividly recalled the smell of the flood water under the wooden floors of the house, and being allowed to go to the factory, along with others similarly affected, to select new clothing at the price of £1 per item, no matter what the garment's retail value: 'I had a pair of corduroy trousers and a suit, and I wore that suit for years'. The factory also provided medical facilities when the community was affected by an isolated outbreak of smallpox in the Rhondda in 1962:

they organized for everyone who wanted an immunization against the smallpox to come and have it done within the factory ... [W]e also had a problem with TB at one particular point ... [and it was organized so that] everyone got X-rayed who wanted it ... [That was] ... most of the people within the factory ... [I]t was found that we had ... about two dozen girls with TB and some of those girls actually were in hospital for quite a long time.<sup>160</sup>

These were significant events, and thus, by the 1960s, Polikoff was a major

---

<sup>157</sup> H. Beynon, R. Davies and S. Davies, 'Sources of Variation in Trade Union Membership across the UK: The Case of Wales', *Industrial Relations Journal (IRJ)* 43:3 (2012), pp. 200–21.

<sup>158</sup> Lupton, *On the Shop-floor*, p. 72.

<sup>159</sup> Beynon *et al.*, 'Sources of Variation in Trade Union Membership', *IRJ*, p. 206.

<sup>160</sup> Women's Archive of Wales: Yvonne Smith, VSE042.

presence in the local community: its importance as an employer was only to rise as the 'established map of Wales's regional economy was ruptured' by unemployment during the 1960s and further contraction of manufacturing in the 1980s.<sup>161</sup>

## VI

Coal, steel and manufacturing still dominated the mid-twentieth-century south Wales industrial landscape but by the 1960s UK manufacturing was coming under pressure.<sup>162</sup> In the 'final quarter of the [twentieth-] century ... [that] ... *permanent* structural change' (added emphasis) defined south Wales.<sup>163</sup> Between 1960 and 1995, with the eventual abandonment of the 'post-war consensus on the objective of near-full employment',<sup>164</sup> and the onset of Thatcherism and neoliberalism, there was a loss in deep coal mining of 90,250 jobs out of 90,750. In steel the decline of 54,000 jobs amounted to 77% of the industry's workforce in Wales.<sup>165</sup> This decline was no longer mitigated by employment in manufacturing, partly explained by south Wales's reliance on 'branch' factories: 'by 1984, plants opened after 1966 were closing at a rate of 70 per year'.<sup>166</sup> Former miners and steel workers with employment in factories found themselves redundant more than once.

During the 1980s, foreign direct investment was pursued aggressively by the Welsh Development Agency (WDA), which marketed the 'low unit cost' of

---

<sup>161</sup> Beynon *et al.*, 'Sources of Variation in Trade Union Membership', *IRJ*, p. 208.

<sup>162</sup> K. D. George and L. Mainwaring (eds), *The Welsh Economy* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff: 1988), p. 8; P. Nolan and G. Slater, 'The Labour Market: History, Structure and Prospects', in P. Edwards (ed.), *Industrial Relations: Theory and Practice in Britain* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn; Blackwell, Oxford: 2003), pp. 58–80.

<sup>163</sup> L. J. Williams, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics, 1974–1996* (Government Statistical Service, Cardiff: 1998), pp. 87–93.

<sup>164</sup> K. D. George and L. Mainwaring, 'Introduction', in *idem*, *The Welsh Economy*, p. 3.

<sup>165</sup> Williams, *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics*, p. 121.

<sup>166</sup> George and Mainwaring, *The Welsh Economy*, p. 8.

Welsh workers.<sup>167</sup> Such new-starts had relatively limited impact on overall levels of unemployment,<sup>168</sup> and few new entrants were attracted to valleys like the Rhondda, preferring easier access to the M4 motorway. Incomers were comparatively short visitors. Firms in the electrical and optical equipment sector, such as Sony, Matsushita and Hitachi, were all declaring redundancies and closures by the late 1900s and early 2000s, relocating to central and eastern Europe and elsewhere. Longer-established branch plants of firms such as Bosch, Hoover, and Ford also left south Wales. In the Rhondda, in particular, it had proven very difficult to encourage new manufacturing to locate in the valley,<sup>169</sup> so Polikoff was even more important as a source of reliable employment.

However, from the early 1970s, the British clothing industry faced major decline. In the neoliberal world of free trade and liberalized markets, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), which had set the rules since the 1940s, established the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) in 1974. The MFA set quotas on exports of textiles and clothing from developing countries to mature economies, supposedly as a protectionist measure for the industry in mature economies as trade in clothing was opened up to international expansion.<sup>170</sup> Quotas applied to certain countries and not others, and this prompted global brands and their agents into what was described as the 'great garment war' of the 1980s as they chased after 'the latest cheap-labour-producing country'.<sup>171</sup> In Britain, wages and employment were squeezed in an already highly competitive sector which was becoming increasingly price-sensitive as retail values fell while costs rose. Whereas net productivity per British clothing worker increased by

---

<sup>167</sup> South Wales had a relatively cheap pool of labour, with Welsh weekly earnings around 85% of the British average: Office for National Statistics, *Regional Trends* 38 (2004), p. 81.

<sup>168</sup> George and Mainwaring, *The Welsh Economy*, p. 8.

<sup>169</sup> Interview with Leighton Andrews, Member of the Welsh Assembly for Rhondda (Labour), 2003–2016.

<sup>170</sup> J. Winterton and I. M. Taplin, 'Restructuring Clothing', in I. M. Taplin and J. Winterton (eds), *Rethinking Global Production: A Comparative Analysis of Restructuring in the Clothing Industry* (Ashgate, Aldershot: 1997), pp. 1–17, at p. 10.

<sup>171</sup> D. Birnbaum, *Birnbaum's Global Guide to Winning the Great Garment War* (Third Horizon Press, Hong Kong: 2000), p. 135.

285% between 1973 and 1993, employment declined year on year, accelerating rapidly after 1988.<sup>172</sup>

Work intensification and creeping programmes of job losses in favour of relocation sometimes occasioned local protests by affected workforces (typically of short duration, ultimately defeated),<sup>173</sup> but there was little concerted action across the industry. The NUTGW had merged into the GMB in 1991, and workplace unions that had typically been more a feature of 'factory discipline'<sup>174</sup> than a serious challenge to managerial authority were powerless, particularly when closures accelerated and political allies were hard to find in the fight against the logic of globalization. By the time that closure notices were upon them, *individual* plants had virtually no bargaining leverage.

The nature of clothing's subcontracted supply chain thus allowed international relocation to facilitate the return of the worst forms of sweating in the sector, while international brands could evade liability. The search for viable and cheap manufacturing capacity set the trend for 'off-shoring' and 'outward processing' of the automated garment-assembly phase of production away from mature economies. This trend was positively encouraged by national governments and supranational bodies such as the European Union through financial grants and assistance for firms that restructured to become 'competitive' internationally.<sup>175</sup> By the 2000s, the mass manufacture of ready-made clothing had ended in high-wage economies, as jobs haemorrhaged to the global south, where labour was much cheaper, states were desperate for inward investment and lax in enforcing regulation, and trade-unionism was weak,

---

<sup>172</sup> J. Winterton and R. Winterton, 'Deregulation, Division and Decline', in I. M. Taplin and J. Winterton (eds.), *Rethinking Global Production – A Comparative Analysis of Restructuring in the Clothing Industry* (Ashgate, Aldershot: 1997), pp. 18–40, at pp. 26–8.

<sup>173</sup> For example, the occupation of the V. F. Corporation (Lee Jeans) factory at Greenock, Scotland from February 1981: N. Lorentzen, '“You Can't Fight for Jobs and Just Sit There”: The Lee Jeans Sit-in', in H. Levie, D. Gregory and N. Lorentzen (eds), *Fighting Closures. De-industrialization and the Trade Unions, 1979–1983* (Spokesman, Nottingham: 1984), pp. 43–62.

<sup>174</sup> Edwards, *Conflict at Work*, pp. 46–7.

<sup>175</sup> Winterton and Winterton, 'Deregulation, Division and Decline', p. 21. See also R. M. Jones, *The Apparel Industry* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn; Blackwell, Oxford: 2006), p. 194; Phizacklea, *Unpacking the Fashion Industry*, pp. 39–42.



fragmented and universally opposed by local employers. These were greenfield sites *chosen* for their capacity for maximum human exploitation.<sup>176</sup>

## VII

By the end of the 1970s Polikoff was showing signs of the strains evident across the industry. In June 1978, led by the NUTGW, 1,200 workers stopped work for four days, over incentive bonuses.<sup>177</sup> Job losses followed. In December 1980, 170 jobs were cut and by February 1981 there were only 700 still employed.<sup>178</sup> In May 1981 a further 120 redundancies were reported. This left a workforce of 500, and the firm was 'badly hit by a fall off in orders ... [The] workforce has shrunk steadily as the crisis in the textile industry goes on'. The union requested a meeting with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher 'but she had rejected their request'.<sup>179</sup>

When these earlier periods of contraction were discussed with workers, they saw them as distinct from the eventual closure. They recognized the widespread pressures in the garment sector, and there was a sense that the industry had been fighting for its existence. It had not been an action directed at 'the Rhondda' or 'their plant', it was 'the economy' and everyone in the industry was under threat. When in 1989, GUS passed ownership of the plant to Burberry (in which the former retained a major interest) and Polikoff took on a brand name with a reputation for being 'quintessentially British', the nature of the threat shifted somewhat. The plant was now *identified* with Burberry, part of a vertically integrated manufacturer-retailer; it exclusively manufactured goods for a distinctive high-end brand, which presented itself in terms of its British-based production and retained British manufacturing units – although it

---

<sup>176</sup> J. Jenkins, 'The Significance of Grass-Roots Organizing', in K. Newsome, P. Taylor, J. Bair and A. Rainnie (eds), *Putting Labour in Its Place: Labour Process Analysis and Global Value Chains* (Palgrave : 2015), pp. 195–212.

<sup>177</sup> *South Wales Echo*, 20 June 1978: File R2 (338), TRL.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 February 1981.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 May 1981.

outsourced some production overseas.<sup>180</sup> Jobs at Treorchy became progressively more difficult to obtain, and by 2004 the workforce was just over 300 people; even then it remained the largest private-sector employer in the valley. Working for Burberry continued to carry status locally, with respondents generally voicing their notion that, despite all the difficulties, 'once you'd got in, you felt you'd be okay, we never thought it would *close*'.

In December 2005, a demerger between GUS and Burberry, to increase shareholder value, appears to have sealed the fate of the 309 workers still employed.<sup>181</sup> Burberry took full control of the Treorchy plant and, within nine months, had given notice of closure on grounds of 'commercial viability'. With hindsight, such a prospect probably began earlier. The sudden departure of the plant manager in 2004 saw the appointment of a replacement from outside the locality and the assignment of other young managers from Burberry to the Treorchy plant. The 'strict but fair' regime changed into one where the new manager was far more informally engaged with workers. Workers nicknamed the new managers the 'dream team', and while several former workers commented on them being 'more fun', they also questioned their skill and experience. Some interviewees recalled 'giving the factory two years', worrying that this new team had been 'sent in to close us down'. Many felt that the plant's former manager would have 'fought tooth and nail' for their factory because he was 'from the Rhondda', whereas the new team had little connection to the area. At the time, negotiations over productivity and wages were to give the trade union and workers (false) confidence in the future.

Burberry initiated negotiations over wages and productivity in 2004, ostensibly in order to increase output and efficiency for the future security of the plant. The GMB (now containing the NUTGW) and Amicus (representing maintenance workers) engaged in negotiations believing that they *would* bring more security to the workforce. Under a new agreement, basic wage rates were increased by 6% while output increased by 20%, but most machinists saw little

---

<sup>180</sup> Workers dealing with quality control in Burberry Treorchy were handling products dispatched from Poland, Italy and China, for example.

<sup>181</sup> GUS demerged its 65% stake in Burberry in December 2005: *Financial Times*, 13 December 2005. See, also, 'GUS to demerge stake in Burberry', *BBC News*, 25 May 2005,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4577827.stm>

benefit in their pay packets, as this increase was offset by changes to the bonus system. At the time of closure in 2007, most earned an average of £208 per week, roughly equivalent to the national minimum wage at that time.<sup>182</sup> Burberry also introduced a new warehouse system with annualized hours for staff, which eliminated paid overtime. As the new systems bedded in, Burberry gave assurances of future security, not only to the unions, but also to local political representatives at Cardiff and Westminster, who they promised would be informed and consulted in advance if there were to be cause for concern over the factory's future.<sup>183</sup> Workers, politicians and unions took such assurances in good faith, and in 2006 they accepted Burberry's rationale for removing the manufacture of two products (the duffle coat and quilted jacket) from the plant, leaving it with just the polo shirt. Burberry argued that exclusive manufacture of polo shirts (very simple garments that in no way used the workforce's skills) would make Treorchy even more efficient. Subsequent productivity and quality levels were indeed high – in the 90% range when closure was announced – but in retrospect, some workers, including the senior shop steward, recognized that 'once we were only making one thing, we'd had it'. Another respondent with over forty years' experience at the plant said that even at the time she had felt that 'having all our eggs in one basket' had been the road to closure.

The package of changes, involving new management and the allocation of a single, comparatively low-value, product for manufacture, should have raised anxiety rather than allayed concerns. Around the turn of the century, there had been other examples of unionized clothing factories in south Wales (supplying different retailers) being assigned a smaller range of low-value products by parent firms prior to their closure.<sup>184</sup> It was to emerge during the Burberry

---

<sup>182</sup> Since the introduction of the National Minimum Wage (NMW) in 1998, workers at Burberry Treorchy had seen their bonus payments absorbed into the basic rate. For five years after 2002, the GMB had warned about the effects of a rising basic wage (linked to the NMW) and the erosion of the incentive scheme. The increase in the guaranteed minimum wage (*within* the incentive scheme) had not been matched by a rise in bonus payments. The NMW had increased by 7–7.5% per year but incentive payments by only 2–2.5%.

<sup>183</sup> The local politicians were Leighton Andrews, (Labour) Member of the Welsh Assembly for Rhondda (2003–16) and Chris Bryant, Labour MP for Rhondda (2001 to date).

<sup>184</sup> P. Blyton and J. Jenkins, 'Mobilizing Protest: Insights from Two Factory Closures', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 51:4 (2013), pp. 733–53.

workers' campaign that even though notice of closure was not announced until September 2006, the factory had been under review for (at least) twelve months.

The handling of the closure announcement itself was a tragedy that had all the trappings of farce. Two female senior executives arrived at the plant from Burberry headquarters on 6 September 2006. The GMB full-time officer was out of his office attending a training course, which began at 9.30 am. At 11.00 am he checked his mobile phone and found a message left at 9.41 am, from one of the executives asking to speak to him 'as a matter of urgency'. Meanwhile, two shocked and distressed shop stewards at the plant were pleading with the same executive for the workers to be allowed to have their morning canteen break before she told them of impending closure. Workers knew that 'people were down' from London but although some in particular operations (such as the cutting room) said later they had feared bad news on the basis of falling workload over the three previous months, the majority had no expectation of what was to come. One said later, 'we'd made their targets and I thought we were going to have more money or we'd won another award'.

Without waiting for a reply from the GMB officer, the executives went on to the factory floor at 10.20 am, where one of them stood on a work box and read out the notice of closure to confused and distressed workers who were unable to hear her clearly. People close to her *could* hear and began crying. The office staff, who had already guessed the worst from the faces of the shop stewards, had followed the executive on to the factory floor and were standing around, visibly distressed, while others further away were unable to hear. Requests for her to speak up were, said workers, met with impatience. She was forced to start the announcement again, raising her voice and asking, some felt with exasperation, 'can you hear me *now*?' After the announcement workers said that the two executives then walked around the plant, talking (and apparently laughing) on their mobile phones. Workers approached them asking whether the factory could make other products but as one worker recalled, 'all they would say was "losing money, losing money" ... it was just greed, that's what it was'.

Many workers were so upset they wanted to go home to digest the news, but they were forbidden to do so and found themselves locked in, with the factory surrounded by security guards bussed in for the occasion. Workers were compelled to wait at their work stations for roughly three hours while individual

notices of redundancy were printed and issued. There was no consultation with local politicians, no prior consultation with the trade union, and interviewees later said that the manner of the announcement was instrumental in their fight against the closure. 'We may not keep the place open but we want to hurt them as much as they've hurt us' was a frequent and typical response when asked about the realistic outcome of the campaign. In their disregard for workers' dignity and feelings as they walked around the plant, one shop steward said, 'we *saw* their arrogance'. This was the new order of financialized decision-making – unilateral, arbitrary and uncaring – 'they took our livelihoods and just booted us out' said a worker with over forty years' service. The prevalence of family relationships in the plant meant that in some households every person was to lose employment, compounding the trauma.

As figures emerged, it was apparent that Burberry had enjoyed a record year: its sales had increased by 22% and profits by 5.6% at the end of 2006. Workers' distress turned to anger as their ideas of justice were turned on their heads. It is difficult to convey the sense of frustrated rage that characterized their responses to what was seen as the misrepresentations of them and 'their' factory. Burberry's choice of a 'there is no alternative', market-based, rationale for closure, as the plant was 'not commercially viable', foundered. The firm refused to publish its own costings and did not challenge the GMB's figures that showed the factory's profitability.<sup>185</sup> Under pressure for an alternative justification for closure, a Burberry senior executive stated that the workers in south Wales were lacking in skills and therefore could not be assigned alternative products. Burberry workers regarded this as the final and worst insult: 'no skills? Rubbish ... we've still got trained hand-sewers here!'. Their sense of outrage was compounded by a series of *faux pas* by the firm. In the weeks after closure was announced, Treorchy workers received a company-wide letter from the chief executive, thanking them for their part in generating record profits<sup>186</sup> and looking forward to 'celebrating future success' with them. In

---

<sup>185</sup> The GMB calculated that £31 million worth of goods left the Treorchy factory in 2005–06, while manufacturing costs were £6 million. In calculating total outlay for the plant, the GMB added an estimated £1.2 million for overheads, bringing factory running costs to £7–7.25 million. Through these calculations, the union arrived at its estimate of a £24 million surplus in the year before closure.

<sup>186</sup> Burberry declared £170 million profit in 2006 .

another gaffe, when challenged by local politicians, Burberry's group secretary, responsible for the firm's committee on corporate social responsibility, was unable to give information on what Chinese workers would actually be paid.<sup>187</sup>

As a high-end, vertically integrated, manufacturer and retailer, Burberry was in a much stronger position to decide on its manufacturing strategy (including the location of its manufacturing plants) than a sub-contracted supplier factory. So Burberry workers insisted that the company *did* have a choice over whether to close or not. In a coup for the workers and an embarrassment to the company, the 'face' of Burberry at that time, Ioan Gruffudd, an actor born in Aberdare, responded to a request for support and wrote an open letter to the chief executive, asking her to reconsider. This action was the impetus for a media campaign that gained national and international coverage. When the media storm began, Burberry contradicted itself, saying that the decision to close was not final.

The workers received support from US and French trade unions but not from GMB members at other Burberry plants, who feared for their own jobs. Indeed, the GMB had a difficult job to negotiate over closure and compensation in south Wales without harming the brand name important to its members in the north-east of England. Thus, in their vocal, high-profile campaign against closure, workers relied on local politicians and widespread media attention and celebrity support, rather than collective solidarity within the UK. Nevertheless, the union used every legal measure at its disposal to demand – and win – a longer consultation period. It also drew on considerable support from the Rhondda community, as shop stewards and workers became reluctant celebrities in their own right, with regular appearances in local and national press and television, and coach trips to London to protest outside Burberry's Bond Street store. Sympathetic international protests followed outside the brand's stores in Paris and the US. Burberry was called before a Parliamentary sub-committee to explain its actions. In the media, workers took the moral high-ground, using such phrases as 'we've been kicked in the teeth' and 'stitched up',<sup>188</sup> citing their

---

<sup>187</sup> *Rhondda Leader*, 7 December 2006.

<sup>188</sup> See, for example, *Daily Mirror*, 1 February 2007.

loyalty over decades and highlighting Burberry's abandonment of their factory as based entirely upon 'corporate greed'.<sup>189</sup>

It was apparent that Burberry executives were impatient with the campaign against closure and the growing attention it received. One commented that 'the degree of media coverage for the campaign was ... "perverse ... for a polo-shirt factory".' Herein lay its miscalculation. For Burberry, it *was* 'just a polo-shirt factory'. There was little connection between disembodied capital and the workforce that had helped produce its surpluses. For the workers, the factory was an emblem of meaningful work for families and friends, in a deindustrialized region where the employment it had offered had been the outcome of political struggle and public money: this factory really did 'belong' to them. Their outrage over closure, and its manner, was not media hype, though they used the media superbly well. Viewing these events through Phillips's invocation of the moral economy of the coalfield,<sup>190</sup> we can see how the workers' ideas of what was 'right' were offended by a closure without any semblance of fair process and with a denial of social justice for workers in the Rhondda *and in Asia*, where their low cost was the main attraction. The campaign against closure succeeded in doubling redundancy payments, extending the life of the plant by three months, and secured a community fund of £150,000 per annum from Burberry for ten years, but the factory shut its gates for the last time on 31 March 2007.

## VIII

Writing of the special areas, Miriam Glucksmann commented that 'those employed in the doomed industries [mining and steel] were just discarded and provided with no alternative ... livelihood' in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>191</sup> In 2007, workers who had made one of the 'new' industries a success were similarly cast

---

<sup>189</sup> The speech by Allan Garley, GMB regional secretary, to the workers on the day of closure, reflected what they had said throughout their campaign: 'This is nothing more and nothing less than corporate greed', *Western Mail*, 31 March 2007.

<sup>190</sup> Phillips, 'Containing, Isolating and Defeating the Miners', *HSIR*, p. 123.

<sup>191</sup> Glucksmann, *Women Assemble*, p. 71.



off. Burberry claimed that most of the redundant employees secured alternative employment that matched their needs, but this was inaccurate.<sup>192</sup> The vacancies that Burberry had put on the factory notice-board in advance of closure advertised jobs all over the country but, whether local or distant, most were part-time and on minimum wage-rates. Redundant Burberry workers entered a deregulated, low-skilled labour market characterized by unpredictable, impermanent contracts, often with no guaranteed minimum hours, where retail and care jobs dominated the vacancy lists. Travelling any distance to work on these precarious contracts at low pay is impossible, particularly from the Rhondda where public transport couldn't accommodate the 24/7 structure of low paid, service sector employment.

Burberry workers had believed in their history, and relied on the understanding that, if they continued to deliver value and quality, their plant would never close. But the days when 'being profitable' was enough to ensure the survival of a workplace disappeared with the onset of 'management by financialization', particularly in the international garment sector.<sup>193</sup> In the process of international restructuring, conditions of employment achieved by unionized garment workers in the mature economies of the global north have been dismantled. Sweatshops are back,<sup>194</sup> and may be located in modern buildings employing thousands of workers just as easily as in the small backstreet rooms that characterized the industry in London and Leeds over a hundred years ago.<sup>195</sup> Today, while large factories have generally departed for the global south, the traditional image of the backstreet sweatshop is just as likely to be found in mature economies like the UK,<sup>196</sup> Europe or the US, where,

---

<sup>192</sup> Blyton and Jenkins 'Life after Burberry', *WES*, pp. 34–9.

<sup>193</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the impact of neoliberal ideas on the restructuring of the garment sector, see Winterton and Taplin, 'Restructuring Clothing'.

<sup>194</sup> See, for example, A. Hale and J. Wills (eds), *Threads of Labour: Garment Industry Supply Chains from the Workers' Perspective* (Blackwell, Oxford: 2005); E. I. Rosen, *Making Sweatshops: The Globalization of the U.S. Apparel Industry* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA: 2002).

<sup>195</sup> The tier-one garment factories that populate the various regions and localities of south and south-east Asia, for example, are likely to be large modern buildings employing many thousands of workers. The infrastructure is 'modern', while industrial relations hark back to the days of master and servant.

<sup>196</sup> For a recent study of UK clothing manufacture, see N. Hammer, R. Plugor, P. Nolan, and I. Clark, 'A New Industry on a Skewed Playing Field: Supply Chain Relations and Working Conditions in UK Garment

with deregulated labour markets and weak factory inspection, manufacturers typically target migrant communities and ethnic minorities for their labour. Suppliers to global corporations use labour as a source of value in a complex and opaque international production network and replicate low-cost production environments that were mitigated in the mid-twentieth century by state regulation and trade-unionism. Despite corporate claims to social responsibility, there is little of any moral economy to be found here.

A significant proportion of former Burberry workers entered new forms of work where they faced underemployment and lower wages, and were no longer unionized.<sup>197</sup> In the international setting, garment workers are once more engaged in struggle for the most basic of employment rights, where being an active member of an independent trade union can be hazardous. In the absence of some form of complementary regulation or supportive mechanisms (such as that provided, for example, by the trade boards and wages councils in Britain), it is rare that they 'enjoy significant bargaining power'.<sup>198</sup> Despite what the clothing industry might have us believe, the three to four decades of economic liberalization and industrial restructuring have not enriched workers in Asia where manufacturing is now concentrated, but has cut costs in a price-sensitive sector by dismantling protections and conditions that unionized workers in mature economies had secured.

On the last day of the Burberry factory's operation, workers stayed at their work stations until supervisors allowed them into the canteen for a last meeting; great care was taken to leave everything inside the factory in perfect order. The workforce, led by their union and local politicians, then marched out of the factory gates to a brass band and choir, through the streets of Treorchy which had been closed to traffic for the occasion. On that last day, perhaps more than any other, it was clear that this really had been the workers' factory. As a high-end fashion retailer and manufacturer, Burberry had the opportunity to do something different. It chose instead to serve shareholder interests and declare

---

Manufacturing' Report (University of Leicester/CSWEF, Ethical Trading Initiative: 2015), who suggest that in 2015 clothing workshops in English cities such as Leicester typically employed around eight (usually ethnic minority) people, at wages significantly below the statutory minimum.

<sup>197</sup> Blyton and Jenkins, 'Life after Burberry', *WES*, 34–9.

<sup>198</sup> Winterton and Taplin, 'Restructuring Clothing', p. 14.

'Hands Not Wanted'. It was an opportunity lost for the workers and their community, but for Burberry? When the media furore died down, it was business as usual.

Phillips ends his analysis of the 1984–85 miners' strike by saying that the primary goal of the Conservative government was the 'elimination of effective union representation and joint industrial regulation' on the coalfields 'as elsewhere'.<sup>199</sup> Clothing is a prime example of 'elsewhere'. As the Rhondda deals with underemployment and poor job quality, women across the globe in communities currently affected by poverty and deprivation seize the opportunity to work in the garment industry. They have been sought out by the very same companies, still by and large head-quartered in mature economies, which now profit from weak unionization in deregulated labour markets and weak state enforcement of employment rights, such as safety and subsistence wages. Even the paternalistic and pragmatic vision of men such as Polikoff is now devalued, as mobile capital exports 'class war from above' to new settings, and challenges the idea of the moral economy and fruits of struggle in places like the Rhondda.

---

<sup>199</sup> Phillips, 'Containing, Isolating and Defeating the Miners', *HSIR*, p. 141.